

## Nostalgia: Chinese Countryside from the Perspective of Emotional Embeddedness

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**Abstract:** Countryside decline is not only materially, but also spiritually. Especially in the current Chinese society, the materialization of villagers' spiritual pursuit has always been an important topic in the academic circle. From the perspective of "emotional embeddedness", this paper makes a comparative study of the countryside in the Western and Southern of Henan Province, scanning the countryside from the aspects of marriage, customs, education and so on, in order to reflect the current Chinese situation from typical individual cases. "Nostalgia" means not only the "Utopia" in which scholars place their feelings on the countryside, but also the homesickness in their hometown after observation by scholars.

### 1. Introduction

The researches carried out by scholars on a certain social problem are on the basis of truth-seeking, so as to draw conclusions. Such conclusions often contain the value judgment of the researchers. In order to make the research conclusions reasonable and enhance their credibility, researchers tend to deliberately hide their emotional judgment and strive to be objective and neutral. The perspective of "emotional embeddedness" refers to that researchers embed their own emotions into the objective knowledge system in advance when carrying out research work, so as to endow research conclusions with fairly strong subjective value orientation, which can often resonate with readers, produce public discourse space. Though the research conclusions may be controversial, attentions of more people can be attracted, and more relevant knowledge can be produced in the common discourse space, which can promote multiple thinking on such issues. This paper holds that the conclusions from all the observations and studies on countryside issues by scholars, such as Cao Jinqing, Liang Hong, Huang Deng and Liu Liantai, are from the perspective of "emotional embeddedness", and this paper also carries out research from this perspective.

Professor Liu Liantai, Doctoral Supervisor of Law School of Xiamen University, wrote an article Doctors of Arts, can you stop pretending during your hometown visits? which sharply summarized what the doctors' hometown-visiting records during their hometown visits. In his article, he thought that those hometown-visiting records were "referring to the Peach Blossom Visionary Land" and that their own countryside were "a spiritual world constructed by flashiness and vanity", but now this Utopian spiritual world was shattered by the reality of the hometown-visiting records and collapsed in an instant. The countryside is multi-faceted. For the intellectuals, on the one hand, it carries the happy memories of childhood, especially the sweet pictures imagined from the delicious food on the tip of the tongue and the warmth and affection of the family, from which the spiritual "Peach Blossom Visionary Land" is constructed. On the other hand, with the aggravation of social transformation, especially the promotion of urbanization, net outflow of rural population is taking place and the countryside inevitably shows decline and depression, which directly breaks through the hometown-visitors' imagination for the beautiful countryside scenes. What does a normal countryside look like? This paper will present a real countryside from the aspects of marriage, customs, education, etc. It has some declines, but it also has lively affections. It is not a Utopia, but also a place worthy of pursuing and construction.

The earlier survey on the countryside with relatively comprehensive and humanistic feelings was

in China by the Yellow River by Professor Cao Jinqing of East China University of Science and Technology. The survey mainly took place in the middle and late 1990s. "In May 1996, I came to Henan Province alone, wandering on the land of central China. What I saw, heard, talked about, thought and thought along the way was this China by the Yellow River."<sup>[1]</sup> These wandering places are familiar to the readers, especially those surveys related to the author's hometown has motivated the author to view the changes of his hometown from today's perspective, and many surveys have been verified by his alumni. Another "non-fictional" work, *China in Liangzhuang Village*, written by Professor Liang Hong of Renmin University of China, scanned her hometown in a documentary way with her own affection to hometown. Afterwards, another book of her - *Out of Liangzhuang Village* was published, further exploring the clues of countryside decline and paying attention to the fate of villagers. The countryside continued to get attention. Professor Huang Deng of Guangdong University of Finance wrote the *Family on the Earth: A Countryside Picture in the Eyes of a Rural Daughter-in-Law*, involved in the writing of rural issues with personal participatory emotion, which is a kind of reflection with initiative consciousness. "The death of my mother-in-law has stimulated me a lot, and this old woman suffered so many tribulations before her death. Though seemingly she has a son and daughter-in-law who have got doctor's degrees and settled down in the big city, finally she passed away in such a desolate room. This makes me reflect on my husband's practical role in the family. And the result of the reflection is that though we've tried our best, we still couldn't change the fate of the whole family. The family members have also tried our best, but we still fell into various difficulties. For the first time, I felt deeply powerless. Emotionally, I realized that for such an old woman, if I don't write down her deeds, she can't leave any traces in the public domain except for remembered by her family members. But there are tens of thousands of such ordinary senior citizens in China."<sup>[2]</sup> From Cao Jinqing who has observed the land of central China from the perspective of "the third party", to Liang Hong who has deeply described her "Liang family" of her own hometown, and to Huang Deng who has fully devoted herself into the writing of her own family, the reflective writing style of "emotional embeddedness" on countryside issues was able to draw sustained attention to the countryside.

The attentions of these scholars to the countryside is the continuation of the novels' narrative mode established by Lu Xun, i.e. *Homesickness - Return Hometown - Leave Hometown*, which has also "standardized" many intellectuals as manifested by their psychological recognition of such mode. Although Liu Liantai's writing style is slightly harsh which has been regarded as without any humanistic sentiments, the social role of "intellectuals" has already been discussed in 1990s that it was to let intellectuals give up the role of "enlightenment" subject, not to look down, educate and enlighten the general public from the perspective of morality uppermost just because of their self-esteemed knowledgeability, so as to let "Doctors of Arts" give up the role of "legislators". The author has no intention to play the role of "enlightener" or "legislator". From the perspective of "emotional embeddedness", the author observes his hometown of Southern Henan Province and his wife's hometown of Western Henan Province, and narrates in a "straightforward writing style" in terms of rural customs, education, wedding etc.

The investigation site in Southern Henan Province is also my hometown, where the *Yiyang Beggar Gangs* in Jin Yong's novel is located; and the investigation site in Western Henan Province is located in Linru, which is the hometown of my wife, as well as the place mentioned by Su Shi in his *The Stone Bell Mountain*, "On the ninth of day of June in the seventh year of Yuanfeng, I went by boat from Qi'an to Linru." It can be seen that the waterways were smooth in the Northern Song Dynasty, and the two sides of the Ruhe River must be a fertile land of fish and rice. The official porcelain made in Ru kiln ranked top among the five kilns in the Northern Song Dynasty, which witnessed the prosperity of her hometown. However, in 1990s, according to Cao Jinqing's description, the common people in the central plains of China were still striving to fill their stomachs as their main goals.

## **2. Married Daughters Are Not Allowed to Visit Their Parental Home Before January 2 of Chinese Lunar Calendar**

After nearly ten years of marriage, my wife and I finally managed to return my wife's hometown Linru of Western Henan Province to celebrate the Chinese Spring Festival. However, that first-time hometown-visit only took place after the successive passing-away of my wife's parents within 2 years. We couldn't arrange the visit to my wife's hometown while her parents were still alive. The reason was not that we were unfilial and unwilling to go back, but because of custom. According to the custom, married daughters are not to return their parental home to celebrate Spring Festival until January 2 of Chinese Lunar Calendar. Even today, I still think that only her family keeps this custom. My family normally departure for my wife's parental home in the afternoon of January 1 of Chinese Lunar Calendar, my wife normally met her best female friends in the afternoon of January 2 of Chinese Lunar Calendar, and we could only sleep in a hotel at night.

There is also such custom in my hometown Yiyang, but not many people follow that. These strict customs are gradually replaced by the new trend of family "reunion" in the new era.

### **3. The "Child" Refers to the Son Only**

In my wife's hometown, the "child" is the most impressive word. My mother-in-law was deaf before her death. Many years ago, my wife and I accompanied her to downtown to buy a pair of hearing aids. When someone asked her how many children she had, she put up one finger, and I was surprised. Until her final days, the only "child" she missed most was the one who was not around.

The "son preference" in my hometown is manifested in another extreme, i.e., it is necessary to have a "child (son)". For one of my two aunts, her third baby fulfilled her wish of having a son. The other aunt of mine still has not fulfilled her wish yet, her elder daughter was married in this January of Lunar Calendar, and her younger daughter is less than 6 years old, only 1 year older than my child. When my youngest aunt was chatting with my mother, her eldest sister, she still felt glum when talking about the marriage of her elder daughter, and she often showed a pity of having no son.

As long as I can remember, most of those families blunt in speech and bullying in behavior had more males. I used to wave a kitchen knife when I was in my teens, which was not only the advantage as a male family member, but also the basis for my family to compete and survive in the countryside. In my childhood, we used to plant rice in my hometown. Every time during the drought, there would be a mass brawl between families because of water diversion and irrigation. Nowadays, there are fewer people working in the fields, but the mass brawl is not over. In the afternoon of January 2 of Chinese Lunar Calendar, on our way of returning from the city to my wife's parental home, we passed by a village of my wife's hometown, and we witnessed a homicide. Because of the dispute between two families over the homestead, one person was stabbed to death. In rural areas, it is extremely easy to choose violence to solve problems, and the male family members are the psychological basis of such courage. The demand of rural families for "children (sons)" will continue.

### **4. Where Have the Betrothal Gifts Gone?**

Many "back home" are reporting the high price of bride price. The countryside can't afford it. In order to marry a daughter-in-law, they even lose their money. High-price betrothal gifts have been reported in many "Hometown-Visiting Records", which can't be afforded in countryside and many rural families have become bankruptcy for their sons' marriage. Where have all these betrothal gifts gone?

During our recent visit to my wife's hometown, at my wife's parental home, I asked my wife's second brother-in-law about his son's conditions. Because he had reached marriageable age in their village and my wife's eldest sister was particularly concerned about that, and she always encouraged my wife's second sister to let her son go on a blind date. Finally, the reason was found in my wife's second brother-in-law. He said that the price of marrying a daughter-in-law was increasing at a rate of RMB 50,000 every year and the price would be about RMB 450,000 this year, which might be increased to RMB 500,000 next year if no engagement was made this year, but you

might be unable to save RMB 50,000 even working as a migrant worker, so that RMB 50,000 could be saved if engaged earlier. We didn't get home until December 29 of Chinese Lunar Calendar. On the evening of December 30 of Chinese Lunar Calendar (Spring Festival Eve), my nephew still went for a blind date. My wife and I also accompanied him, and we hid in the car without getting off. Later I asked, "After spending so much money, apart from houses and cars, where have the remaining nearly RMB 200,000 of the betrothal gifts gone?" The second brother-in-law said, "The bride's parental family normally will not take these money, which will be brought back to the bridegroom's parental family on the wedding day." I said, "That means nothing lost." But the second brother-in-law said, "This money will enter into the pocket of the young couples, but the key point is that how can they understand the hardship of earning money? They just spend extravagantly after getting the money, and the money will be used up very soon." It's not only a small number of people who have used up their money and become "Neets". The most important thing is that when they have no money, there will be more conflicts between the small couples, and many will choose to divorce. Their emotional foundation is relatively weak, they basically get married by blind dating, and many parents plays a dominating role in the selection of marriage partners. In the morning of departure for my own hometown, at the railway station, my wife was still talking with her second sister about a quarrel between the daughter-in-law and her mother-in-law in our acquaintance's family. Small families with little ability of earning money have improved their consumption level of life products through marriage. Such is the case with the purchasing of cars purely for consumption.

The circumstances in my hometown are basically similar. When the eldest daughter of my youngest aunt's family got married, the bridegroom's parental family contracted a loan to buy an apartment in the county downtown. My youngest aunt also asked her daughter to take back the betrothal gifts paid by the bridegroom's parental family, saying that "Take it back to pay the debt since such a big loan has been contracted." It was said that the apartment was much cheaper because located in the suburb. In addition to the wedding banquet, the whole process would cost at least RMB 300,000. This is the most common family. For families of better conditions, the cost would certainly be higher.

## **5. Are Blind Dates Reliable in the Countryside?**

I always think that Lu Xun's novel *Regret for the Past* is the best, especially the love between Zijun and Juansheng before marriage, free love and vigorous. I always feel touched every time when reading the sentence related to the Zijun' breaking up with her family "I am my own, no one has any right to interfere with me." The ending of this novel can fairly prove the reliability of today's "blind dates". My wife and I married on the basis of romantic love, and we joked that if we got to know each other through blind date, we might despise each other, let alone getting married and having a child. Personally I prefer to marriage on the basis of romantic love. I chose by myself, I am responsible for myself, and I will not complain. I left this question to my second brother-in-law. I asked, "Is it reliable to have a blind date and get married in the countryside now?" He said definitely, "It's absolutely reliable. Which of these married young people in the peripheral of our village hasn't attended a blind date? The most important thing is that all their parental homes are not far away from each other, and their backgrounds are known." Two days ago, my nephew reported his good news to us, saying that he had engaged a girl in his hometown. He didn't go through the blind date, so he was in free love, and the whole family was very happy.

There are also unreliable blind dates. In my hometown, the first blind-dating partner of my eldest uncle's son was not so reliable. Although they got married, their marriage failed to last long. And he is now enjoying the happy marriage life with his second blind-dating partner. However, not only the marriageable youth themselves are extremely anxious, but also their parents became gray-haired when managing their children's marriage. Even their relatives and friends have been concerned about it. My cousin has been depressed for several years.

In rural areas, most of the marriageable youth seeking marriage on the basis of blind date are those migrant workers. When they return home to celebrate the Spring Festival, both those boys and girls were back. The girls working in the local area also came by the way to "inspect" the boys

working in other places to see the “career development” of those boys, so as to identify their good future husband among several excellent boys, if any. The Spring-Festival-Eve blind-dating partner of my wife’s nephew was working in the county’s hospital. It was later said that these two young people chatted fairly well, without detesting each other. But finally, my wife’s nephew married on the basis of romantic love with another girl.

## **6. Are the Incoming Wives Reliable?**

In my hometown, more young people went to work in Guangzhou in the early years. After working in the factories for a year or two, normally they would bring back girls, and these boys who were able to bring back girls were called “able men” in our hometown. When I was a child, a playmate of mine went out to work and brought back a girl. They formed a harmonious family and gave birth to two sons. There are several such examples in my hometown village. An overage youth with the surname of Wang, who also went out to work, actually also brought back a girl. It was said that she came from Guizhou Province, and she gave birth to a son and a daughter for him. On this January 5 of Lunar Calendar, I went to the mountain to burn paper money for my grandfather. When I passed by his house, the door was locked tightly. When I came back and asked my mother, she said that his wife had escaped to another village and gave birth to a son for somebody else. I know that the two villages are not so far away, and Mr. Wang had been an overage widower before. After all, Mr. Wang’s children were studying in high school, but their mother still escaped. Two years ago, similar things happened in my youngest maternal uncle’s family. It was not until this year that he reorganized his family. My cousin was also studying in high school when her mother escaped. I haven’t understood or can’t understand that when her child is about to become an adult, why such a perfect family eventually split. I can’t even use the word “seduction” because the new families composed by these escaped overage women haven’t shown better financial conditions than their previous families. The only common point of the two cases known by myself is that these wives were also incoming wives at the beginning of family establishment, without any wedding ceremonies. when I started my family, I also came here “running” without a wedding ceremony.

In my wife’s hometown, it was seldom heard about incoming wives or escaping wives. I surmise that no matter incoming wives or escaping wives, all of them are despised in my wife’s hometown; but in my hometown, the new husbands of incoming wives are “able men” while the previous husbands of escaped wives were despised. This is also a type of social concept. Therefore, up till now in my hometown, when the youth migrant workers return hometown to celebrate Spring Festival, the elders would say, “Why we haven’t seen you ‘bringing back’ a girlfriend back though you have been working in other cities for so long time?”

## **7. None of Them Asked Me How Much My Salary Was**

According to the old tradition of my hometown, I am the “commodity-grain consumer”, i.e. working in national system. The villagers used to be very concerned about my income. Several years ago during my previous hometown-visiting, occasionally some of my relatives and friends would ask me about my salary, but nobody asked the same question this year. Maybe I stayed home only for a short time and didn’t have a chance to have a deep talk with them. Since my parents-in-law had successively passed away in the past two years, when I went back to the funeral, my wife’s parental-family members would ask about my work and my income. Those elders of family might judge your responsibilities based on your income. I guess this may be the reason why the request of my wife’s grandfather was different from before.

## **8. Are All the Hometowns Declined?**

Some people say that, outwardly, although storied-houses have been built in the hometowns, however, the spiritual outlook is indeed declined. Many examples can be cited, such as stronger trend of comparison and higher betrothal gifts. Some other people also gives example that those

hometown-visiting youth migrant workers used to gamble at high stakes though having not earned much money after working outside. In my hometown, I couldn't have a deep understanding of the situation maybe because of my short stay this year, but I saw few people living in the village and most of the villagers had bought land and built new storied-houses in the town. Though the saying goes that urban houses have short lifespan which are frequently demolished and rebuilt, the styles of these new rural buildings are also changing every three or five years. My youngest maternal uncle had worked as migrant worker for many years, though having encountered domestic calamity, he managed to buy a storied-house in the town for over RMB 300,000 (including decoration). When I went to his house to pay a new year's visit, he said that his house was not "fashionable" (i.e. unable to keep up with the current trend). As far as I know, he had worked outside for many years and this is the second house he bought in the town, but the previous one was sold because of not "fashionable" enough.

Indeed, there are many dilapidated houses in the countryside. For example, my grandparents' house was made of sun-dried mud bricks, only with ruins existing at present. Every time during my hometown-visiting, my second uncle would take a group picture for us with that old house. The red-brick house of my parental family was actually built in around 1995 but even my mother couldn't remember the exact year of completion for that house, which was built by the construction team of my elder maternal uncle. Later because of poor business in hometown, even the whole family of my elder maternal uncle went to Beijing and Tianjin to sell snacks and breakfasts. Because the quality of that house is still good but just not "fashionable" enough, I made some simple refurbishment and added one roof-waterproof layer last year. That house looked conspicuous in the village during my recent hometown-visiting. In my hometown, there are many natural villages but few households, because the majority of young and middle-aged people have chosen to work as migrant workers and returned to build new houses in the town. The childhood scene of dogs and chickens in the neighborhood, farming and planting vegetables in groups no longer exists. The most significant change is that the barren mountain is covered by dense forest again, and the weeds are overgrown in the farmland where the crisscross footpaths between fields can't be distinguished any more. At present, among my three maternal uncles and two maternal aunts, only my youngest maternal aunt is still farming. And among my three uncles and one aunt, only one uncle is still farming. And in my village, there is only 1 such person. There are three uncles and one aunt. Only one uncle is still farming. In my village, among those persons of similar age as me, only one person knows how to farm. Compared with 20 years ago when people were managing to bring wasteland under cultivation, the number of abandoned fields today is astonishing.

My wife's hometown is similar to mine in building new houses, but the pursuit for new houses is far greater than that of my hometown. Tall gatehouses and spacious courtyards are better than that of my hometown. But their attitude towards land is far better than that of my hometown. Except for the land requisitioned by the government, all the cultivated land is planted with wheat and corn, and the agricultural irrigation is maintained well. However, the wells used for irrigation in her hometown are dug deeper and deeper, and the water is less and less. Only when the rainy season comes can the Ruhe River show its winding appearance

## **9. Are College Graduates Still Attractive?**

Every time during my hometown-visiting, I would visit one of my aunts. My elder cousin and I were schoolmates, and he is "having good career development" in our town. Especially in the past few years, he seized the opportunity of "The Construction of New Towns" and earned some money, and he is quite famous among our schoolmates. Now his sons are about to graduate from junior high school. Although our conversation was very short every time, regarding the education of his two sons, he still hoped that they could continue their studies and get admitted by universities. And his last option is to let them work as migrant workers or develop at hometown. But the opinions of more families in their children's education are highly different from that of over 10 or 20 years ago. When I was studying at middle school, almost all my schoolmates treat further studies as their only goal, urged by our parents at home and encouraged by our teachers in the school. But things have

changed now. About 3 or 5 years ago, I heard my neighbor Mr. Huang saying that his son had dropped out of school, few teachers are encouraging the students now, and the teachers are even advocating the theory on useless of knowledge. Especially for students with poor academic performance, the teachers encourage them to work as migrant workers. Having seen the benefits of working as migrant workers, parents has also relaxed their requirements of their children in further studies, and this son of my neighbor Mr. Wang became a daddy at the age of 19. The families of my maternal uncles and maternal aunts have attached less importance to education compared with the families of my uncles and aunts, maybe largely because of home education, that is to say, the “model power” is very important. My second uncle entered university after the resumption of university entrance examination, who is also the outstanding person in studying among youth at the same age. Even now, my third uncle is very depressed because my grandfather didn't allow him to continue studying. My grandmother was an old lady with good vision. For as long as I can remember, whenever we were together, she would tell me stories about people in the neighboring village who went out for studying and working.

In my wife's hometown, people do not pay attention to education, as can be seen from the several brothers and sisters in my wife's parental family, and their children are under free-ranging conditions. For quite a long time, the family of my wife's eldest sister has not considered the importance of studying at university, because the long-term poverty of our couples has been verifying the correctness of her empiricism. The family of my wife's second elder sister pays more attention to education, maybe because she has been closer to us. The family of my wife's elder brother has not shown attention to education. He has been running his own small business, his concept of “child (son)” is as deep as his mother's.

The education of children in rural areas is regarded as a simple investment instead of purely true education. The attention to education depends on the worthiness of investment and the return on investment, which has been a deep-rooted concept of rural families for a long time.

## **Conclusion**

In the past two decades, not to mention how great the changes in rural areas are, tremendous changes have also taken place in China, and the changes in Chinese rural areas are nothing more than a microcosm of China's changes. When an intellectual is changed from an enlightening “legislator” to an “interpreter”, whether he is a professor or a doctor, it's absolutely not pretentious to record these changes faithfully, because what an ordinary intellectual can do is to follow the top-level design of China's modernization process, and then record the trivia of those ordinary people under the macro narrations.

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