Rural Utopia Image Building in Slow Variety Show

- a Case Study of *Back to Field*

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Abstract

Back to Field is a Chinese reality show that aims to promote and showcase the concept of slow living. With little scripting and fixed plots, the daily lives and interactions of the guests become the main content of the programme, which aims to show and promote a more natural, peaceful and sustainable lifestyle to the audience.

This study takes *Back to Field* Season 5 as the object of research, and explores in depth its narrative structure, visual symbols, and utopian portrayal of rural China. Using qualitative textual and content analyses, it explores how the programme uses narratives and symbols deeply rooted in Chinese history and literature to craft an engaging utopian narrative. The narrative is also further analysed within the programme's semiotic framework in conjunction with the genre model, taking into account the choice of architecture, the cast of characters, the setting of the location and the variety of rural activities.

At the same time, this study defines the inter-generic spaces in which *Back to Field* operates, categorising the tangible and intangible, real and constructed, traditional and digital spaces presented in the programme, explaining how these spaces are intricately intertwined with social structures and realities, and discussing mediated authenticity. Innovative narrative strategies employed by *Back to Field* between these spaces-such as the manipulation of traditional Chinese food and its processing as narrative tools and cultural symbols-are highlighted.

Finally, this study examines the show's transmedia narrative marketing strategies, analysing how *Back to Field* cleverly extends its narrative beyond television and uses digital platforms to enhance its commercial value and social impact. Specific analyses of *Back to Field*'s official social media content, engagement patterns and audience responses reveal how the show uses social media platforms to amplify its brand narrative and engage audiences in innovative ways.

The positioning of this study not only analyses *Back to Field* as a reality television programme, but also reads it as a cultural text that encompasses broader socio-cultural dynamics, thus contributing to an understanding of the cultural, social and commercial impact of *Back to Field* in the contemporary Chinese media landscape.

Acknowledgement

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Introduction

Faster living has unfavourable implications since it goes along with social alienation as well as the devaluation of the environment (Milgram, 1970). People have no time to take to live sustainably and conscientiously or even to grow their own food or prepare a balanced meal (Pearson, 2011). The huge pressure of study and life in a fast-paced era and the general social anxiety have given rise to the desire for a "slow life" and the slow reality television is gradually emerging. In early 2017, slow reality television *Back to Field* went viral, standing out for its pioneering spirit and the producer's extensive production experience. *Back to Field* is an observational-style reality television set in the countryside almost without any script and plot and has aired for seven seasons so far. The main format of the show is to place a group of celebrities in rural China, living in a house called a "mushroom house", where there are almost no modern tools and they cook their own food and grow vegetables in the nearby fields. The participants are performing themselves from beginning to end as the recognizable social roles (Hill, 2015). In each episode, celebrity guests from the city come to visit the mushroom house in the countryside to do farm work with them, have fun together and live a self-sufficient life.

The original way of life presented through the medium gives the audiences an imagination of rural life. Advocating for a slower pace of life, the series invites its viewers to unwind and immerse in a constructed rural utopia. The main subject of this study, *Back to Field* Season 5, is set in Taoyuan County, China. It combines the most traditional Chinese utopian imagery of the Peach Blossom Spring(Taohuayuan), an ideal utopia where people live in isolation and harmony. The Peach Blossom Spring not only represents people's desire for a harmonious and beautiful life, but also the desire to return to nature and live a simple life, which coincides with the concept that the programme is trying to convey.

The perfection of utopia has always captured the human imagination. And the concept of utopia has evolved over time, shaped by the unique social, political, and economic circumstances of each era. From the ancient Greek concept of Elysium to More's utopia and the technocratic visions of the 20th and 21st centuries, each iteration of utopia reveals the time in which it was created and the enduring human desire for an ideal society (Manuel & Manuel, 1979). The construction of *Back to Field*'s utopia is

one of the key objectives of this research, which is situated in the context of Chinese tradition and philosophy. Before further discussing the commercial viability of its narrative, the primary aim is to understand how *Back to Field* uses the Chinese concept of utopia as a tool to bridge the gap between social needs and real life through an idealized depiction of a better society. Firstly the concept of utopia will be dissected in the unique socio-historical context of China and compared with other cultural interpretations. Then we will delve into Chinese literature to reveal the historical, social, and political fables that reflect Chinese aspirations for an ideal society and utopia, and to understand the portrayal and expression of the ideal society in the Chinese socio-cultural context, which lays the foundation for understanding the development of the Chinese utopian ideal. These threads are in turn linked to *Back to Field*, which connects the contemporary to the traditional, highlighting the positioning of the utopian ideal in the Chinese cultural imagination.

As Hermes (2008) says, popular culture offers people imagined community and belonging. The utopia presented in *Back to Field* is somehow composed of reality and imagination (Highmore, 2015). *Back to Field* combines authentic rural life experiences with fictional elements crafted for commercial purposes, offering audiences resonance and a sense of belonging to a better life. It weaves in and out of the intricacies of reality and fiction, and its creators have constructed multiple spaces for it. This study argues that there are three kinds of spaces in *Back to Field*, which moves through spaces that are tangible and intangible, real and constructed, traditional and digital. In addition to dramatic and real-world spaces, *Back to Field* is mediated through the dynamic interaction between television entertainment and social media, creating a mediated space. Moreover, as mentioned above, the show's focus on traditional Chinese food forms an integral part of its narrative, which becomes not just a nourishing product but also a vessel for cultural exchange and a catalyst for audience engagement. The narrative strategy represented by the food narrative is explored in three different spaces: the physical reality in the real world, the dramatic space in the show, and the mediated space of social media which will be described and visualized later. The programme's skilful navigation of these spaces, and the reinforcement and interplay between them, underscores the effectiveness of inter-generic spaces in expanding the narrative of *Back to Field*.

Finally, back to the commercial properties of *Back to Field*. The contemporary social world is inextricably intertwined with the media, and as Jenkins (2006) points out, contemporary society is experiencing an era of converging cultures where traditional and new media merge, and the concept of transmedia emerges when different media intertwine. The strategy of transmedia storytelling will be invoked. If the broadcast of *Back to Field*'s original video material and its circulation is the maintenance of "authorship in a transmedia world" (Jenkins, 2006, p. 101), online media providers offer a revolutionary field for ordinary people to express themselves (Andrejevic, 2004). These audiences, who actively create and participate in the *Back to Field* narrative world, will also be discussed as part of transmedia storytelling.

As Bunce (2003) suggests, with the urban industrialization in the modern world, the countryside has gained a symbolic status as an idyllic and nostalgic alternative to the urban environment. The slow reality television format of *Back to Field* captures this idyllic rural image, concretizing, contextualizing and commercialising notions of rural utopia in its own unique way. This research takes *Back to Field* out of the entertainment perspective of being a commercial product only, exploring its fundamental socio-cultural constructs in the Chinese context, placing it in the historical and philosophical context of Chinese tradition. In addition, this study illuminates how *Back to Field* utilises the power of media convergence in its marketing. By analysing the interaction between television content and social media, the understanding of narrative strategies in television media is deepened. This research aims to enrich the understanding of the cultural, social and commercial impact of *Back to Field* in the contemporary media landscape by delving into these areas.

The following three research questions will guide our critical analysis of the television programme *Back to Field*:

1. How is *Back to Field* constructing a rural utopia for its Chinese consumers?
This research question explores the conceptualisation of the rural utopia presented in *Back to Field*. The visuals, narratives and symbols used in the programme will be scrutinised through textual analysis and content analysis in order to shed light on the rural utopia envisaged by the programme. Semiotics will also be used to explain the

underlying meanings of the symbols and visuals. This contributes to an understanding of the aspirations and pursuits of contemporary Chinese society and how television programmes interpret cultural ideals and aspirations, laying the groundwork for understanding why such narratives resonate with viewers.

2. What are the inter-generic spaces of slow reality television series *Back to Field*?

The research question aims to understand the distinctive spaces in which the programme's narrative operates. Multi-modal analysis will be used to differentiate between the tangible and intangible, real and constructed, traditional and digital spaces of *Back to Field*, and may be supplemented with diagrams and examples from the episodes. This includes analysing the show's scenes, real spaces, as well as its mediated spaces in the wider media. By unravelling these spaces, the complexity of contemporary television narratives and how they are intertwined with social structures can be revealed.

3. What are the strategies of representation for reality TV branding via social media accounts?

This research question focuses on *Back to Field*'s transmedia narrative business strategy and the convergence of traditional television media with new-age digital platforms, particularly social media. The content, patterns of engagement and audience responses on official social media related to *Back to Field* are analysed. As media evolves, it is critical to understand how traditional formats such as television programmes can adapt and leverage the capabilities of new platforms. This section will provide insight into effective transmedia strategies and their role in amplifying brand narratives.

Literature Review

Before delving into the analysis part of this study, it is important to explore the relevant academic literature surrounding the related concepts. Discovering background information about *Back to Field* and identifying gaps in existing research opens the way for this study. The methodology for this study is divided into three distinct parts, each building on the others to develop a comprehensive understanding of the research questions.

In the first section of this chapter, the concept of utopia is examined in depth, with a comparative analysis of its evolution and application in Eastern and Western contexts. A comparison of utopian interpretations provides a nuanced understanding of the cultural expectations and ideologies that may have influenced the production and reception of *Back to Field*, as different cultural contexts may have influenced the way the programme created utopian rural life. This is followed by an in-depth survey of the practice of utopia in China to provide a reference for *Back to Field,* which allows us to understand the socio-cultural context where *Back to Field* is produced and consumed. Ultimately, the role of utopia in the context of nostalgia is discussed, which is an effective strategy for creating an engaging and relatable narrative.

Next, this study delves into the inter-generic space occupied by the series. Here, we analyse the unique blend of the slow and reality television genres, exploring issues related to media authenticity in this inter-generic space. This research forms a key part of understanding the unique appeal of the series. The final part of the literature review applies the theory of transmedia storytelling. It aims to reveal the representational strategies employed by *Back to Field* in the original video world, the mediated world and on its social media platforms, providing key insights into how these strategies enhance audience engagement and strengthen the show's brand identity. Overall, the study aims to provide a comprehensive understanding of the unique nature of *Back to Field*, its cultural implications and the way it is marketed as a cultural product.

Utopia and its practice in China

1. **East-West Utopia**

Utopia derives from Sir Thomas More's 1516 work Utopia, from the Greek ou-topos (no place/nowhere) and combined with eu-topos (good place) (Baker-Smith, 2000) Utopia, as a synonym for the ideal society, has inspired countless works in both Eastern and Western cultures to explore it. By understanding the cultural context of utopia, especially in Chinese society, the exploration of rural utopia in *Back to Field* is facilitated.

In the Western tradition, the idea of utopia can be traced back to the works of ancient philosophers such as Plato. In his work *The Republic*, Plato presents the concept of a perfect society ruled by a philosopher-king (375 B.C.), with its emphasis on harmony, justice, and the primacy of the collective good over the individual good. During the Renaissance, More proposed a utopia of equal distribution of goods, reflecting its shift to humanism. And by the time of the Industrial Revolution, Claeys (2010) argued that industrialization and technology reshape utopia as a critique of social structure. Eastern philosophy holds a similar concept of a utopian society. In ancient Chinese philosophy, Taoism proposed a utopian society ruled by "Tao" with an emphasis on harmony and intuition (Watts, 1997). Similarly, Tao Yuanming's Peach Blossom Spring (421 AD) depicts a reclusive utopia where people live in peace with nature and without social corruption (Davidson, 2007). The physical reality here is also the setting for the fifth season of *Back to Field*-Hunan. Contemporary Eastern thought, such as Sun Yat-sen's "Three People's Principles", advocates a utopian society based on nationalism, democracy and people's welfare (Zarrow, 2015).

All of these utopian ideas represent the inherent human desire for an ideal society and make a reflection of the values, philosophy, and social context of their respective times. However, returning to the specific utopian context in *Back to Field* requires a detailed comparison of Eastern and Western utopian concepts and a deeper excavation of Chinese literary works, which will be presented in the analysis section for the subsequent semiotic analysis to be gathered.

2. Utopia Practice in China

Nature no longer seems to be a given, pristine landscape, but can now also be seen as an object of restoration and re-creation (Doevendans et al., 2007). When it comes to the practice of utopia building in rural China, the Bishan Project (2010-2016),

initiated by artist Ou Ning, cannot be overlooked, which took an artistic approach to activating rural public life, organizing a photography festival, establishing new public spaces such as a bookstore and school, and organizing villagers to develop an Airbnb business, which has been widely discussed in China. As for *Back to Field*, it embodies a multi-dimensional return to the concept of "field". Its demonstration of the potential for rural revitalization and sustainable development in the context of China's rapid urbanization.

In Utopia in Practice (Ning, 2021), a book on the Bishan project, there is a discussion of the "failure of cities", beginning with the bankruptcy of Detroit in 2013 and extending to the contraction between the shrinking of North American and European cities and the expansion of Asian cities. *Back to Field* does not merely portray a rural utopia but also critiques the frenetic pace of urban living and offers reflections on it. The book also discusses how China's reform and opening-up policies, which began in the late 1970s, sparked a large urbanization boom that significantly redistributed social resources. There have been a lot of rural-urban conflicts sparked by this abrupt change. Furthermore, the massive infrastructural development in China has made it possible for an excess of capital to slither into smaller towns and rural regions. The ecology, agricultural production, and preservation of historical places have all been put under strain even though this has slightly reduced regional development discrepancies.

To some extent, such utopian practices can be interpreted as a response to the consequences of "geo-urbanization" suggested by Brenner and Schmid (2015). That is, urbanization today does not only refer to the development of cities, but also to the transformation of rural areas. Its focus on rural revitalization can be seen as a reaction to the trend of urbanization, seeking to create a harmonious relationship between urban and rural spaces and causing a reflection on urban-rural development. Scholars such as Wu and Zhang (2017) discuss the model of rural-urban migration in China. That is, we need to have proactively created a space that attracts people to settle, work and live a sustainable life, thus reducing the need to migrate to urban areas and returning life to the rural "fields", which coincides with the idea *Back to Field* is trying to convey.

All in all, the Bishan project's efforts to revitalize the countryside can be seen as a response to the destruction caused by rapid urbanization and industrialization, seeking to restore the balance between human beings, their culture and nature. It embodies "*Back to Field*" in the most holistic sense - social, cultural, economic and ecological.

3. Nostalgia Utopia

The concept of nostalgia first appeared in a medical treatise in 1688 and was used to translate the effects associated with the 'suffering' felt by individuals in distant homelands. In the eighteenth century, nostalgia was described as a disease when the subject's desire to see his country was transformed into a permanent psychological pain whose physical effects could lead to death. Traditionally, nostalgia has been conceptualized as a medical disease and a psychiatric disorder. Subsequent nostalgia, in turn, tends to be a predominantly positive, self-relevant and social emotion that helps to use a positive view of the past to reinforce a sense of continuity and meaning in one's life (Sedikides et al., 2008). Perspectives on nostalgia will guide the analysis of *Back to Field*, specifically examining how the show uses nostalgia to create an engaging narrative and create emotional connections with its audience.

The longing for a home that no longer exists or never existed in nostalgia (Legg, 2004) coincides to some extent with the utopia constructed out of thin air. However, works linking nostalgia to utopia are not too numerous. On the one hand, previous research has focused on demonstrating an abstract sense of belonging to a human community through heritage and commemoration (Basset & Baussant, 2018). This perspective illustrates how nostalgia operates as a social glue, forming a collective identity through shared memories and common heritage (Löfgren, 2001). Nostalgia, in its communal form, can therefore represent society's desire for a utopian past, creating a platform for community bonding and continuity (Davis, 1979). On the other hand, symbolic, imaginary and even political projects have been investigated (Lachenal & Mbodj-Pouye, 2014). These studies shed light on how elements of nostalgia or utopia have been utilised to support particular ideological or political goals. As Boym (2001) illustrates, these utopian fantasies often construct an idealised past or future, portraying a shared vision to encourage social solidarity or legitimise political action. For *Back to Field*, understanding this connection between nostalgia and a sense of community connection provides insight into how the programme constructs a sense of

shared identity among viewers, which in turn allows for the generalization of regional utopian constructs.

When nostalgia intersects with utopia, it can manifest itself as an idealization of the past, a desire for re-enchantment. The concept of re-enchantment refers to the desire to recapture the sense of wonder and romance usually associated with the past (Weber, 1946). In other words, the desire for utopia can be seen as a desire for a re-enchanted world, liberated from the disenchantment of modernity. In this context, nostalgia can serve as a buffer against the disappointment of unfulfilled expectations, providing an escape to an imagined utopian past (Davis, 1979). And this is precisely the kind of rural utopia that *Back to Field* wants to try to create. *Back to Field*'s social media derivatives as part of its brand marketing are also one of the objectives of this study. Its often can serve as an extension of the nostalgic and utopian narratives produced by the show itself. By using theories of nostalgia and utopia, it is possible to examine how the show's social media presence extends, reinforces, and even complicates the show's narrative, and how these strategies contribute to its brand identity.

"Dramatic, mediated and real"-The inter-generic spaces

As the "world space" of reality TV set in real-world locations, *Back to Field* demonstrates the concept of inter-generic space, which allows for the blending of different generic conventions and thereby leads to the emergence of new and hybrid forms of expression (Frow, 2015). Genre is a classification of programmes based on shared expectations between producers and viewers (Orlebar, 2013), and in a rapidly changing media world, new genres are constantly being created (Morney, 2022). *Back to Field* as slow reality television, is a game between familiarity and innovation, a hybrid genre of slow television and reality television, and a product of culture, creativity and media production, can be well organized and promoted through the genre study (Alacovska & O'Brien, 2021).

For *Back to Field*, its meaning and message is seen as triple. Not just singular or limited to the television screen, but divided into dramatic, mediated and real-world spaces. Through the analysis of the genre, and the discussion of the inter-generic space in *Back to Field*, it is allowed to explore the unique aesthetics, narratives or themes created in its rural utopia. In addition, the discussion in this section also

contributes to insights into its social media derivatives due to the extension of its inter-generic space in the digital realm.

1. Mixed genre

The process of genre mixing in contemporary television involves the strategic combination of different genre elements to create innovative programming formats that appeal to different viewer tastes and preferences (Jenkins, 2006). Slow reality television is no exception, as a combination of slow TV and reality TV, which has generated a new cultural mindset to penetrate the field of television entertainment with the help of the slow culture movement (see Appendix 5). The media product of slow culture has its origins in Norwegian slow television, which embodies the 'slow' element by filming a culturally significant journey, event, or activity minute by minute, and has received attention for its lack of the emotional cues, narrative guides and breathless rollercoaster editing speed we expect from television (Burton, 2019). As a product of the national broadcaster, NRK (Norwegian Broadcasting Corporation)'s slow television sought to perform and showcase Norwegianness for a domestic and increasingly international audience (Leyda & Brinch, 2020). Slow television as public service media at this time are more constrained than commercial actors, as they are expected to pursue democratic, ethical and national perceptions rather than mere market success (Puijk, 2015).

Back to Field moves away from slow television's roots in public broadcasting service's mission to uphold its national mandate (Thomson, 2017). As a hybrid genre commodity, it draws on slow television's emphasis on the non-dramatic nature of image and sound (Puijk & Urdal, 2018), using characteristics close to documentary to construct a slow culture media product through television.

The other side of *Back to Field* as a hybrid genre is reality television. In the 1990s, Western European-based companies played a key role in driving the rapid growth of the global television formatting business (Murray & Ouellette, 2008), facilitating the genre of reality TV. *Big Brother*, which originally aired in the Netherlands in 1999, was the first truly global reality show (Mathijs & Jones, 2004). Reality TV is gradually emerging as a cultural phenomenon that mixes all kinds of formats together news, soap operas, documentaries and so on (Hill, 2005).

Television is a vehicle for theories, ideas, and values that can provide a variety of stories and interpretive frameworks in an age of uncertainty (Biressi and Nunn, 2005). We cannot understand reality television in isolation, but as part of a broader social and cultural phenomenon. For Chinese audiences, it was not until the 2000s that they had access to reality TV, a new genre of television programming. As China became more open to the West and joined the World Trade Organization (WTO) in 2001, the Chinese television entertainment industry began to face many new opportunities. Franchise capitalism has replicated many brands within China, and it is growing in the television industry as well, which can be seen rightly in the production of reality television shows, game shows, and a range of lifestyle and infotainment programmes (Cheng, 2019). Chinese television stations are buying content from popular foreign reality shows to broadcast nationwide and are beginning to produce original reality programmes. Texts and television programmes are creatively appropriated and reinvented for local distribution and consumption (Keane et al., 2007). Thus, it is clear that the rise of reality television in China has been accompanied by social development and the circulation of capital.

Due to the differences in social structures, cultural traditions and viewing habits between China and the West, difficulties of acceptance are encountered, and globalization creates tensions when societies encounter ideas that are incompatible with their own cultural values and political ideologies. For *Back to Field*, its a highly contextualized and regionalized variety show. As the market for Western-imported reality shows saturates, Chinese media professionals are focusing on East Asian reality shows - regionalism is beginning to emerge. The integration of East Asian economies into the global marketplace has provided more opportunities for television production and distribution. At the same time, the increased level of trade and exchange of creative people in East Asia, and the associated technology transfer that occurred, led to the development of an emerging market. Because they share the same Confucian cultural sphere, China, Japan and Korea have cultural proximity - film and television content can be interpreted accordingly in countries with cultural traditions, values and emotional structures (Straubhaar, 1991). *Back to Field* was caught up in the scandal of copying the Korean KBS show *Two Days, One Night*, both of which placed celebrities in non-urban settings and allowed them to experience a lifestyle that is very different from their daily lives (Kim & Kim, 2016). Embracing the story of the

family unit seems to make sense in Confucian culture as opposed to a winner-takes-all, hook-up competition model, and historically based cultural proximity (Straubhaar, 1991) suggests that the two countries can be strong collaborators in media production.

2. Media Authenticity

One aspect of particular interest under the exploration of inter-generic space is the use of hybrid genres to convey a sense of authenticity. Particularly in reality television, the tension between the 'real' and the 'staged' is a recurring point of contention and fascination among both audiences and scholars (Couldry, 2004). In the digital age, the show's social media platforms. *Back to Field*s use of consistent aesthetics and narratives achieves authenticity is not only present in the television show itself, but is also echoed in cross platforms can enhance continuity and authenticity, further blurring the boundaries between the show and viewers' everyday lives (Jenkins et al., 2013), and connect with viewers in a multidimensional way (Caldwell, 2008).
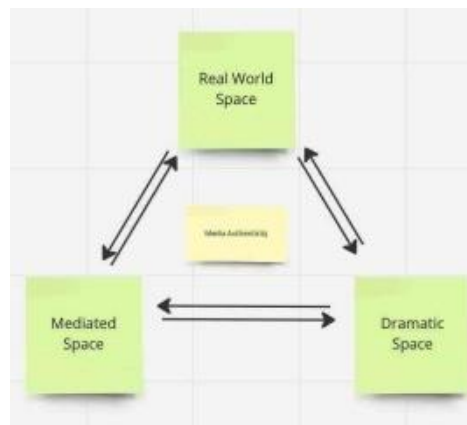

Figure 1*: The structure of inter-generic space*

Is there such a thing as authentic reality TV? The 'real' in reality television has always been tricky (Annette,2015, p.138). Media authenticity refers to the perceived truthfulness or genuineness of media content, which can be expressed in a variety of ways across genres and media (Marwick and boyd, 2011). As we navigate through the intergeneric space of mixed genres. The concept of authenticity will become more layered. This sense of authenticity is often challenged by the recognition that these programmes are edited and produced to create compelling narratives (Bruzzi, 2006) and that *Back to Field*s media presentation is an embodiment of this narrative-existing to capture the audience's attention. However, authenticity in media is not a given concept, it is a structure that relies heavily on audience perception (Couldry, 2004) and is in fact highly mediated (Marwick, 2015). When the dramatic

space and the real space are in conflict, the perceived authenticity of the user is challenged which will be reflected in the mediated space. The theoretical framework for understanding how authenticity is produced and perceived in a hybrid genre will be applied to a practical analysis of *Back to Field*, such as how the programme's producers construct authenticity and how viewers critically engage with the authenticity presented.

The Transmedia storytelling narrative

Transmedia storytelling first emerged in the media industry in the 1990s as a form of narrative and marketing technique, largely achieved in practice, and then, through scientific research and the development of conceptual structures, found its place in academia (Gürel & Tığlı, 2014). This research examines *Back to Field* not only in terms of original video material broadcast on television, alternative representations on streaming media or social media presence, but also in terms of the convergence of transmedia presence that takes place across a range of media boundaries.

1. Transmedia storytelling

Professor Marsha Kinder was the pioneer in mentioning the term transmedia in a relevant sense back in 1991. Her book Playing with Power became the starting point for extensive research and perceptive discussion of transmedia storytelling (Kim, 2020). It has been led by Professor Henry Jenkins since 2003 who subsequently contributed to the establishment of the concept of transmedia storytelling in the literary world stating that transmedia storytelling is the process of systematically distributing elements from fiction across communication platforms to create an integrated and coordinated entertainment experience. Ideally, each medium makes its own unique contribution to the unfolding of a unified story, and it must add to the understanding of the story as a whole. Jenkins refers to this characteristic as "additive understanding" (Jenkins, 2011). This point is crucial to *Back to Field*'s transmedia storytelling study. In contrast to crossmedia distributing the same product through various platforms, each channel in transmedia storytelling tells a different aspect of the story, which is the focus of the analysis part- how different channels and languages provide continuity in the creation of *Back to Field*'s transmedia utopia universe.

Scolari (2009) sees transmedia storytelling as " a particular narrative structure that is expanded through different languages (verbal, symbolic, etc.) and media (film, comics, television, video games, etc.)." Building on Henry Jenkins' work, Scolari highlights the structure of transmedia storytelling. Within this structural framework of a transmedia strategy, each narrative is part of the story and also a product, referred to as a "franchise". Overall, transmedia storytelling is a technique based on the synergy created by different media platforms, presenting stories on as many different media platforms as possible through branding or franchising practices (Bourdaa, 2014). Transmedia storytelling is used today by many companies operating in different sectors as a strategy to present their products or services to public groups or to develop their communication campaigns. By deploying transmedia technologies, brands can exploit the synergies of different media platforms to extend their narratives and engage consumers across multiple dimensions (Bourdaa, 2014). For the analysis of *Back to Field*'s marketing strategy, in addition to the original text, the products of the 'franchise' deserve attention and will be analysed. As by-products they can both gain strength from and contribute to the main story (Important 2014). The primary and secondary aspects of transmedia products relate to the stage of the story world, and a well-designed world can reproduce more than one character and its narratives, and pave the way for the success of many 'franchise' products (Jenkins, 2003).

2. 'Canon', 'Apocrypha' and 'Fanon'

Gürel and Tığlı (2014) categorise storyworld products in a threefold way, referred to as 'Canon', 'Apocrypha' and 'Fanon'.Canon is the original world that constitutes the primary story and the primary product and the first step in transmedia storytelling. Apocrypha is the expanded world and by-product, which is not a completely separate creation, but an expansion parallel to Canon. Notably, in order to maintain the legitimacy and original character of the story world, Apocrypha's by-products are still produced by the creators of the story world. And finally, Fanon, a fan-produced product independent of the main product and the third stage of the storyworld, G's framework provides a clear framework for *Back to Field* to explore, helping us to clarify *Back to Field*'s original storyworld, the straying of the digital realm, and the blurred parts in between.

When diving into *Back to Field*'s transmedia storytelling strategy on top of G's framework, the three basic concepts of integration, collective intelligence and participation are important. The process of the emergence of transmedia storytelling is closely related to the intersection of different media platforms. The intersection of different communication technologies and platforms has enabled the creation of new products and services (Çakır & Gülnar, 2008), leading to a redesign of socio-cultural practices and media consumption. and consumption: the flow of media products across media platforms, collaborative production between traditional and online media companies, and the evolution of a participatory consumer culture (Jenkins, 2006). The imagined boundary of everyday reality can be regionally constructed in an era of media convergence. *Back to Field*'s circulation in networked media will be explored.

In terms of collective intelligence, on the one hand, transmedia storytelling is a strategy for courting and mobilizing audiences behind media franchises in which media practitioners aim to deepen audience engagement with media texts (Jenkins et al., 2013, p. 45). Creators work in concert with multiple platforms, and those media professionals who only work in TV enter the online media world, forming a brand of transmedia entertainment with local boundaries that disrupt the traditional rituals of reality-based storytelling. Media-content providers are developing texts across several technological platforms, thus taking advantage of each platform's specific qualities and abilities" (Bölin, 2010). *Back to Field*'s crew, as content providers, tell their overall stories with what ranges from raw video texts, to secondary creations on streaming platforms, to taking advantage of the opportunities offered by social media platforms. On the other hand, "storytelling" refers to the process of telling a story to a specific audience, preferably in an interactive manner that allows for dialogue with the public rather than mere disclosure (Quesenbery and Brooks, 2010). The profoundly reinvented, collaborative and interdependent relationship with consumers in the age of convergence culture needs to be recognized. Increasingly interactive and engaged viewers are willing to create and change the content offered (Jenkins, 2009).

Finally, transmedia storytelling texts do not only disseminate information; they also make stories have a place in consumers' daily lives by showcasing products. Although a focus on audience research is not a priority in this study, creating transmedia

storyworlds is the process of "understanding how to appeal to migratory audiences" (Jenkins, 2008). *Back to Field*'s storyworlds cannot be constructed in isolation from audience and fan participation. Among Fanon, consumers should be both hunters and gatherers in order to experience any fictional world as a whole. Transmedia texts have something missing in their creation, and audiences can shape the content they want by creating a deep, participatory plot. And audience-led creations will be analysed later as part of the *Back to Field* storyworld.

Methodology

This thesis examines the video material of *Back to Field* Season 5(12 episodes) as the main research object to demonstrate the unique fusion of traditional Chinese culture and contemporary media practices. On the one hand, it explores the process of constructing a rural utopia based on the Chinese socio-cultural context, and on the other hand, it focuses on the implementation of its marketing strategy. This fusion can be seen as a market segmentation strategy. By constructing a rural utopia based on the Chinese social and cultural context, the programme becomes a unique product in the marketplace that is different from other programmes. In order to gain a deeper understanding of this process, a combination of textual and semiotic analysis is used, which enables an in-depth exploration of the multiple layers of meaning embedded in media content and allows for a detailed and in-depth understanding of media texts.

Qualitative Textual Analysis

As mentioned above. this research primarily aims to dissect the construction of the rural utopia as portrayed in *Back to Field*. Qualitative textual analysis will be employed, a method that offers a comprehensive view of events or units and holistically considers contextual information, an advantage it holds over quantitative research (King, Verba and Keohane, 1994). In addition, *Back to Field* immerses the audience in its narrative through the utopian lifestyle presented by the medium. The programme echoes the pattern of culture in the community, which can be perceived in a sense as a holistic way of life (Highmore, 2015). And by focusing on observing, interpreting, describing, and analyzing people's experiences and their surroundings (Bazely, 2013), qualitative research allows us to interpret information in its inherent context, thereby providing a more complete and nuanced understanding.

Furthermore, It's important to note that relegating case studies to a secondary role compared to large samples, or viewing them as traditional experimental methods, is a narrow perspective. Case studies can be highly beneficial in research that emphasizes depth over breadth in the exploration of a situation (Flyvbjerg, 2001). The qualitative research approach aligns well with the sampling strategy for this study (which will be analysed later). Instead of dealing with large amounts of data, this study opts for a focus on "thick descriptions" (Geertz, 1973), which can go beyond factual and superficial observations to interpret the deeper meanings, contexts, emotions and symbols embedded in the observed behaviours, contributing to the understanding of the meanings of the characters' behaviours in *Back to Field* in the specific cultural context of China, and it involves an in-depth analysis of a smaller selection of cases (King, Verba and Keohane, 1994).

As we delve into the study of the sociocultural context of Chinese utopias, textual research is valuable, allowing researchers to dig beneath the surface understanding of the texts to gain insight into the deeper thematic, ideological, or sociocultural aspects represented in the texts (Kuckartz, 2014). Textual analysis not only analyses the content of the text itself, but also looks at how the text constructs and conveys particular meanings and values, and can be broadly construed as anything that generates meaning, including written language, spoken language, visual images, audio, multimedia content, and so on. Chinese cultural books and masterpieces related to Utopia, as well as programme scripts or dialogues, and programme description materials will be selectively textually analysed. Additionally, The commercial aspect of "*Back to Field*" is also a facet that this research aims to explore. In the process of conducting the marketing strategy analysis, relevant textual data will be sampled and scrutinized. This includes selectively analyzing material such as viewer comments and content creation on social media.

Semiotics

In *Back to Field*'s fifth season narrative, the show's producers endeavour to construct a utopia of rural life. This utopia is not merely a physical space but also a collection of semiotic resources situated within this physical realm. The process of constructing this utopia is actually a semiotic practice (Chandler, 2017). The various objects in it-such as buildings, people, and natural environments-all act as symbols and carry a

variety of meanings (Barthes, 1977). According to Saussure's (1916) semiotic theory, these symbols are not merely objects; they are signs that embody the interplay between the signifier (the physical form of the symbol) and the signified (the concept or meaning the symbol represents). Moreover, the show's crew does not merely use objects as symbols; there is a layer of cultural mythology associated with the symbols on top of them, contributing to their richness and depth. The crew intentionally manipulates and recombines these symbols to portray an idealized rural environment.

The process of producing and broadcasting a programme is a process of symbolizing. The various materials used in the programme are transformed into symbols that are subsequently absorbed by the audience. These symbols produced during the creation process combined with the corresponding marketing strategies contribute significantly to the overall and commercial narrative of the programme. Social semiotics will be applied considering the broader social nature of this study, whose "social" nature has much to do with the maker of the sign, and which better emphasizes the human agency in the signification process. Because it shifts from the "semiotics of competence" (product) to the "semiotics of design" (practice) (Kress, 2010), it examines both the symbolic and social contexts. Rather than just a pure analysis of signs, this perspective promotes a comprehensive analysis that seeks to integrate the signs in *Back to Field* with the broader Chinese social and production context, and it emphasizes the importance of signs in conveying information and constructing meaning, as well as the close connection between signs and the social and cultural contexts in which they are embedded.

In conducting the semiotic analysis in this study, it is important to consider not only what each of these symbols means, but also to explore how they interact with each other and together construct the utopia presented in the programme. In addition, we will consider how these symbols function in the production, broadcast, and viewing processes of the programme, and how they interact with the social and cultural context of the audience through these processes. Eco's theory of semiotics proposes a broad definition of semiotics that goes beyond the narrow linguistic category. Anything that can be interpreted as a meaning can be regarded as a sign, which includes various forms such as language, image and behaviour. It provides a flexible and comprehensive framework for analysing various cultural and social phenomena in

Back to Field (Eco, 1997). This in-depth semiotic analysis will allow us to more fully understand how *Back to Field* constructs and disseminates utopian imaginaries in Chinese society. The specific ways of semiotic use will be explained later in the piloting section.

Abductive research

The abductive approach allows for the exploration of how *Back to Field* reflects and shapes contemporary Chinese society's understanding of rural life and traditional values. It usually involves trying to understand real-world phenomena as they occur, such as the kinds of rural activities among *Back to Field*, rather than trying to fit them into predetermined theoretical models, which can lead to more practical and applicable research findings (Andrade, 2009). At the same time, the abductive approach allows researchers to move between theoretical and empirical data, providing more flexibility to explain unexpected or unusual findings (Kovács & Spens, 2005). This flexibility is crucial, resulting in a more comprehensive understanding of *Back to Field* as a cultural text and its associated branding strategies, contributing to a broader discussion of media representation, cultural production and consumption in contemporary China (Kovács & Spens, 2005).

Research design and sampling

As mentioned earlier, the research design of this study is qualitative, combining semiotic, textual analysis and abductive methods that allow for a deeper, more nuanced understanding of *Back to Field*, while allowing the researcher to interpret the data in the context of broader social, cultural and historical factors that are important to the production and reception of *Back to Field* (Creswell, 2013). The images, videos, and texts designed in this study needed to be carefully analysed. The sampling for this study was purpose-driven, which allowed the researcher to select specific episodes and social media derivatives that are most likely to provide insights into the research question (Palinkas et al., 2015). The sample for this study consisted of a total of 14 episodes from *Back to Field*'s fifth season (2021) and their associated social media derivatives which are derived from the original show and used on various social media platforms. This derivative content can be produced by the show itself (such as official promotional videos or material from official accounts) or by fans (such as

reaction videos or fan-made recipes). The sampling process was conducted based on the research questions, and the inclusion/exclusion criteria were based on the availability and accessibility of the episodes and social media spin-offs (Appendix 2). This means that it is those episodes that best represent the theme of the programme based on the genre model (which will be described in more detail later), as well as the social media content that generates the most interaction (likes, shares, comments) on the selected social media platforms, such as images, videos, text, etc. Collect samples of social media posts in a manual manner, which may involve crawling specific hashtags, keywords, or users. The usability and accessibility criteria could be that the episodes and their social media derivatives are publicly available and can be accessed without undue difficulty or cost.

On the one hand, in order to explore the construction of rural utopia in *Back to Field*, the original video material was analysed as a sample, and the exploration of themes addressing narrative themes, characters, and practices of rural life will allow for a different selection of samples. On the other hand, the marketing strategy of *Back to Field* as a commercial product is also the focus of analysis in this study, and its derivatives in different social media are selected within the larger framework of its marketing strategy-transmedia storytelling. These derivatives are free from *Back to Field*'s original video material and are mediated into real life (Appendix 2).
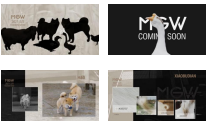
Sample category/ Platform	Youtube	Red	The Kitchen	Bilibili	Weibo
Videos	Original video material	Recipe Videos 今天吃什么？《向往的生活》同款腌笃…		Reaction Videos 【综艺reaction】《向往的生活》"算命"源	处爆笑现场！杨紫副业其实是算命的？	Official original videos and vlogs
Texts	Subtitles from Videos		Recipes 记录第一次做腌笃鲜！鲜到掉眉毛的春日限定		Official promotional copywriting
Pictures	Screenshots	Cuisine Pictures	Cuisine Pictures		

Table 1: *Sample-Social Media Derivatives Overview*

Analyzing the data & Piloting

Following the collection of the data, the method of processing the data is crucial. The data analysis in this study was conducted using a thematic coding approach, a form of qualitative analysis that involves identifying, analysing and reporting themes in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Genres are a great tool to use when specifically exploring the utopia in *Back to Field*. As a set of accepted patterns that evolve over the course of media production, genre is a dynamic system that connects producers, texts, and consumption behaviours. *Back to Field* as slow variety is a hybrid genre of slow television, which can be better analysed through Hill's (2019) genre model, where she divides genres into six dimensions, and since audience analysis is not the focus of this study, style, context, values, definitions and themes from the genre model will be used. This approach allows for the translation of qualitative research (Boyatzis, 1998), and the process of inductive and deductive coding will be demonstrated in conjunction with the mind map sorting that precedes the genre model (Appendix 3).

The first step was to familiarize oneself with the data, which involved multiple viewings of episodes from *Back to Field* Season 5, along with multiple readings of social media posts to gain an understanding of the content, where informal notes and ideas were jotted down. Next, coding was initially performed and its rules were defined among the coding manual (Appendix 3), a process of assigning meaningful and descriptive labels to the data (Saldana, 2016). After the initial categorization, it was divided into potential themes, and such themes capture what is important about the data related to the research question (Joffe & Yardley, 2004). As in the case of the thematic categorization of the physical world, there are also classifications involving the Inter-generic space and transmedia storytelling analysis sections. Finally, these themes were reviewed and refined. This involved checking these themes against the coded data and the entire dataset to ensure that they accurately represented the data. During this process, some themes were merged, separated, or discarded (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). As for the analysis of social media content outside of the original episodes, textual analysis was used for descriptive and interpretive analysis after data collection. The text content of the posts, the types of images used, and the hashtags were recorded and analysed to see how these constructed and conveyed meaning. For example, analyzing the use of language (such as rhetoric and tone) and the use of

images (such as colour and composition).

The piloting for this study selected the opening credits section of the first episode because of its role in introducing and summarizing the entire season, and used it for pretesting to ensure a smooth formal research process and data collection. First, key scenes and symbols from the credits were screenshotted and converted into images. Second, the picture scenes were transcribed. The content and symbols in the pictures were described as textual representations, using text to describe the key elements in each picture in detail and incorporating the unseen audio. Third, a preliminary genre analysis was conducted using Annette Hill's genre model, and five dimensions of Definition, Values, Theme, Style and Content were provided for the credits set to understand the features and expressions of the credits set. Fourth, the final five thematic categories of Landscape and Nature, Architecture and Design, Food and Cuisine, Tools and Implements, and Animals were identified based on the research questions and the analysis results of the Genre model. These categories will be decentralized and applied in the subsequent analysis sections. In the follow-up process, new entries for rural activities were added based on research questions and findings (Appendix 3).

Ethical considerations

Ethical considerations when conducting research are crucial. In this study, several ethical considerations were taken into account to ensure the integrity and transparency of the research process. Transparency of the study was firstly maintained throughout the research process. The study design, sampling methods, data collection process, and data analysis procedures were clearly outlined and documented. This transparency allowed for replication of the study and contributed to the credibility of the findings (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008). Next, the methodology was piloted to ensure its appropriateness and validity. The piloting process consisted of a small-scale study of the official *Back to Field* Season 5 introductory video. This process helped to identify any potential problems or biases in the research methods and allowed for necessary adjustments to be made (van Teijlingen & Hundley, 2001).

The content we post on social media can be seen as being somewhere between private and public (Waskul, 1996) and just because digital data can be accessed does not

mean they can be used at will (Boyd & Crawford, 2011). The official *Back to Field* texts and visual materials involved in this study, as well as their corresponding comments and images featuring other users as individuals. Obtaining the consent of all creators and users is almost impossible, and the data collected in this study will be used only for the purposes of this research, without harming any "social actor to whom the data belong or refer" (Caliandro & Gandini, 2017, p. 27). Furthermore, in the interest of privacy, the personal information of the reviewers will be anonymised. Finally, when conducting research on *Back to Field*, which is rooted in a specific cultural context, it is crucial to ensure translation accuracy. Translations from Chinese to English should be meticulously done to maintain the original meaning, context, and cultural nuances of the dialogue or text (Newmark, 1988), and cultural sensitivity must be upheld in the interpretation and analysis of the content (Smith, 2004).

Analysis

Peach Blossom Spring: China's Secular Utopia

An in-depth exploration of the idea of utopia in China's unique socio-cultural context provides us with the necessary conditions to analyse the reality show *Back to Field*. This section, the first of the analysis chapters, will trace its origins back to the concept of utopia in traditional Chinese literature and philosophy, providing a context for the subsequent interpretation of the show's multiple layers of symbolism and imagery, which also reveals how the show's production team used these deeply rooted cultural narratives to evoke utopian ideals in the audience, and in the process created a commercially attractive cultural product.

Utopia is a social construct, a response to the gap between the needs and aspirations of a given society and reality, which implies a general desire for a better way of being. And at its most basic level, the concept of utopia suggests a vision of a better society beyond reality, which implies a certain degree of dissatisfaction and critique of the status quo. The Chinese utopian vision is mostly presented as a social commentary, an allegory for the desire for change and transformation (Zhang, 2002). The Chinese notion of utopia is represented by the location of the fifth season of *Back to Field*, which is set in Taoyuan (Peach Blossom Spring) County, Hunan Province, China. The

imagery of 'peach blossom' in this case, derived from Tao Qian's 'The Peach Blossom Spring', is a symbol of the utopian ideal in traditional Chinese culture. This imagination of a peach blossom paradise is deeply rooted in the hearts of Chinese people who seek such an ideal life when they are oppressed by social obligations, responsibilities and expectations.

To understand how *Back to Field* shapes utopia as a commercial product, one must first understand the uniqueness of the Chinese concept of utopia, which requires an in-depth study of the Chinese socio-historical context. On the one hand, different cultures have different socio-historical contexts, and the uniqueness of Chinese utopia needs to be narrowed down in comparison first. On the other hand, the depiction and expression of the ideal society in traditional Chinese literature will be explored to help us gain a deeper understanding of the formation and development of Chinese utopia. the popularity and influence of *Back to Field* is largely attributed to its invocation and shaping of the concept of utopia, which has deep roots in Chinese culture.

Chinese Utopia under Secularism

Some scholars in the field of utopian studies insist that utopia is a unique product of Renaissance secularism and that non-Western cultures do not produce utopias (Chiang, 2009). This is countered by Zhang (2002), who insists that Chinese society under the influence of Confucianism was precisely a society that was not dominated by any religious system of thought, and that secularism was a distinct and prominent feature of Chinese culture as a whole.

From the classic of Chinese Confucian culture, the Analects, one can see the attitude of its author, Confucius, towards gods and religion. His disciple, Ji Lu, asked how to properly serve the gods. Confucius quickly dismissed the whole question by saying, "How can you serve the gods when you can't even serve humans?" Ji Lu goes on to ask about death, but Confucius replies, "You do not even understand life, how can you understand death?" (Dawson, 2003). The central issue for most religions, death, is not taken seriously by Confucius, who is more concerned with the here-and-now. The Chinese philosopher Feng Youlan (2017) also discusses religious thought in Confucius' time, claiming that Confucius was already sceptical about the existence of ghosts and gods. However, traditional Chinese dynasties did not abandon religion in

its ritualistic form, but rather induced respect for the ancient kings through ancestor worship and sacrifices to heaven and earth, such as convincing the people of the divine right of kings. For Confucius, the best virtue was humanity. "If Confucius' first aim was to restore a paradise on this earth, there would be little room for religion" (Dawson, 2003). Confucius admired the ancient Chinese society under the reign of King Wen of the Zhou, free from original sin and religious influence, and idealised it as a perfect example of a traditional society.

In his view, the construction of a perfect ancient society was not through divine intervention, but relied on the virtue of each individual and active human endeavour. This is perhaps where the Confucian vision differs from the Western longing for heaven or the Greek nostalgia for an ancient golden age (Zhang, 2002). Certainly, Confucius' frequent references to the mandate of heaven suggest the presence of religious and transcendental ideas in Confucian thought, but in general the Confucian tradition is certainly more concerned with the social and ethical issues of the human world than with the realm of the divine. Under the influence of this tradition, Chinese culture has been open and tolerant of different religious beliefs and in many ways can be regarded as uniquely secular compared to many other cultures in the world. In Confucianism, therefore, the exemplary past is not just a golden age that one can only remember and admire, and never hope to recover, but can be used as a yardstick against which to judge and criticise the present. If secularism is a prerequisite for utopia, then the Chinese tradition under the influence of Confucianism offers a completely different model of secular culture from that of medieval Europe.

It is this philosophy that finds resonance in *Back to Field*. In the programme, celebrities pursue a utopia that is far removed from the realities of society, aiming to return to nature and embrace a simple way of life. They leave the city and venture into the countryside, seeking a rustic lifestyle that fosters a close connection with nature. This way of life does not rely on religion or supernatural forces; instead, it emphasizes friendship among people, harmonious coexistence with nature, and self-sufficiency. *Back to Field* delves into the psychological needs and expectations of Chinese audiences by shaping a secular utopian perspective. The desired way of life depicted in the show is, in fact, a secular utopia.

Utopian Fantasies in Chinese Literature

In Chinese literature, the poem "Big Mouse" (Shuo shu) from the Book of Songs is probably the earliest poetic expression of the desire for a happy state or ideal society, grounded in "the expression and exploration of what is desired", even if it lacks a description of the ideal state (Mou, 2005, p.361).

Big rat, big rat, don't eat my grain. I have fed you for three years and have not gained anything. I will leave you and go to a happy place. Oh, that happy, happy land is where I long to rest.

This simple poem does express dissatisfaction with the status quo and, according to traditional critics, is a political satire on 'greed' and 'heavy taxation'. Traditionally interpreted as a social and political allegory expressing the desire for a better way of life, the poem has occupied an important place in the Chinese utopian literary imagination.

With the consolidation of Chinese civilisation in the surrounding cultivated lands and the expansion of Qin Shi Huang's imperial hegemony, the realm of mystery and purity was pushed further away from the borders of the known world. China's first emperor, Qin Shi Huang, sent a naval expedition to capture the mythical 'Island of the Beyond' in search of the elixir of immortality. Clearly, even Qin Shi Huang was unable to violate the sanctity of the spiritual realms, which were surrounded and protected by vast seas, cliffs and craggy mountains. There is a transcendence and independence in the Chinese utopia, and the road to it is always winding and difficult.

In the Tao Te Ching, written in the sixth century BC, Laozi describes an ancient utopia village and the barking of dogs in neighbouring villages could be clearly heard. In Chapter 80, Lao Zi presents his model of the 'ideal state' - a small state with few people (Ryden, 2008, p.224)

The state is small and the people are few. Even if there are various instruments, they are not used, so that the people value death and do not migrate to distant places. Although there are boats and vehicles, there is no need to travel in them; although there are weapons and equipment, there is no opportunity to fight in battle; the people are returned to the natural state of the ancient knotted rope.

Locked in a grid of obligations, duties, responsibilities and expectations to which he has been subjected all his life, the Chinese literati can only find relief in nature or in madness (Bauer, 1976). Tao Qian lived and worked in the unstable and violent Eastern Jin dynasty (317-420) and returned to farming after giving up his political career in anger. The pursuit of eternity through intimacy with nature is particularly celebrated in Chinese poetry, painting and gardens. To enter these gardens is to become aware of entering a different world, a concept that implies not only leaving the world of social, political and family structures, but also achieving a transformed state (Barnhart, 1983). After preferring the 'poverty and hardship' of the farm to the repressive atmosphere of imperial bureaucracy, he wrote his famous The Peach Blossom Spring.

> *A fisherman stumbles upon a secluded village in Wuling, where the inhabitants live in harmony and isolation from the outside world. Their ancestors escaped the tyranny of the Qin Dynasty, choosing to live in anarchy, maintaining economic self-sufficiency and developing a strong sense of social harmony. When the fisherman reveals their isolated world, the villagers are taken aback. They ask the fisherman to keep their community a secret while he is away. Despite attempts by a local judge and a hermit to find the village, no one is able to find their way.*

The community behind the cave enjoys a life clearly rooted in a profoundly mythical past, but they are still secular human beings, and their lives are not free from secular material life and labour: they work in the fields, their clothes are plain, and they slaughter chickens and ducks. The Peach Blossom Spring celebrates an egalitarian, utopian worldview based on community autonomy and individual enlightenment, without the aid of religious ritual or textual knowledge. The Peach Blossom Spring represents true anarchy, for in this utopia there is no need for a saintly king, or even a repudiation of Chinese imperialism, which began with Qin Shi Huang.

When it comes to the spaces of the Peach Blossom Spring, they are not formal, beautifully ornamental gardens arranged by elaborate designers for aesthetic pleasure; rather, they are a patchwork of working farmland pruned and cultivated by the common people for production (Walker, 2013). This is both a utopia and a paradise, as it is both a human community and a mystical state of mind. In Tao Qian's story, the

Peach Blossom Spring is an idealised place where people can never return. But with the advent of global consumer culture and China's modern age, the idea of those idealised places can be materialised through cultural representations such as films, novels and other media images, as well as being real places that can be visited and experienced with the mind and body (Gao, 2010). Meanwhile, In countries where most people are city dwellers, the 'countryside' is another place, one that is spatially, temporally and symbolically distant from everyday ways of life. While the city has become the main place where people live in modern society, the countryside is seen as a place away from the urban way of life. Within the mystical Tao Yuan County, the distance between the countryside and the city enhances the difference, while the imagination is able to inspire and sustain the construction of the apotheosis of place, giving it a visceral, glorified identity. *Back to Field* directly connects the utopian classic "The Peach Blossom Spring" with the location of the show, this direct geographical connection creates strong cultural associations for the programme, allowing viewers to associate the utopian ideals of "The Peach Blossom Spring" while watching the show.

Through the production team's deep understanding and keen grasp of traditional Chinese culture, viewers are able to see and feel the existence of a utopian ideal society in the programme. *Back to Field* creates a utopian space through cultural products, allowing viewers to enjoy the entertainment value of the show while feeling the lure of the utopian ideal. By combining traditional utopian ideas with a modern reality show format, a unique synthesis is created that both celebrates and critically examines contemporary Chinese society. By grounding the utopian vision in a tangible, realistic setting - a picturesque rural environment - the show demonstrates that a modernized utopia is no longer an unattainable ideal, but a goal that can be practised and pursued in real life.

The programme's reinterpretation of the utopian ideal in the context of modern society is also significant. By showing that utopia is not a static, perfect society, but rather a constant struggle to achieve betterment and harmony, the play emphasizes the importance of active participation in the utopian ideal in our daily lives.   The success of *Back to Field* as a utopian commercial product demonstrates the deep roots of utopian ideals in traditional Chinese culture and the potential for innovative and

culturally relevant interpretations of these ideals in contemporary media (to be elaborated in the next section).

Utopian Narratives in *Back to Field*

Analyzing *Back to Field*s approaches to the construction of a Chinese rural utopia is one of the main goals of this study. The analysis of the original video material from the 12 episodes of *Back to Field*s fifth season, and the corresponding original textual content, allows for an extensive study of the case. In order to understand how the construction process of this utopia takes place, we need to shift our attention from emotions to materials and locations. This allows us the possibility to explore emotions using the existing tools of linguistic landscape, to reveal how utopia is sorted, narrated, and accomplished through artefacts located in the semiotics of materiality, and how places, as important semiotic resources, assist in the expression of emotions.

Narrative Scene

If the public praise of Peach Blossom Spring by the ancients stemmed from a love of the natural landscape and a desire to share it with others, place marketing is a more recent development. Place promotion is the conscious use of publicity and marketing to convey a selective image of a particular geographical area or region to a target audience (Gold & Ward, 1995). The fifth season of *Back to Field* is located in Taoyuan County, Hunan Province, China. Tao Qian's The Peach Blossom Spring mentions fishermen as "people from Wuling", so it is likely that the location of Taoyuan is located in Wuling, a place that has been documented in Chinese literature for many generations (e.g. The Book of Han - Geography): "Wuling County was established by Emperor Gao, and was called Jianping by Mang. It belonged to Jingzhou. Peach Blossom Spring is located in present-day Hunan Province, and is set up on the model of Tao Qian's writing, planting peach blossoms everywhere.

Figure 2: *Taoyuan County planted with peach blossoms(S5E1)*

The mushroom house is constructed as an escape from the hustle and bustle of the city in a rural area with limited transportation. In Taoyuan County, an artificially constructed location that symbolises the physical presence of the utopia that *Back to Field* is intended to convey, everything is commodified in this symbolic space. This is a calculated and conscious attempt to convey a specific image about a place to a specific group of consumers (Ashworth & Voogd, 1994).

Using a combination of anime special effects and live action, the *Back to Field* season 5 credits build a rich picture of rural life in the Peach Blossom, from the discovery of the utopia to its construction, with each character's division of labour and characteristics being introduced in turn, and geographical features related to the environment not being left out. (Appendix 2) This introductory video analysis will not only deepen our understanding of the utopian narrative presented in the programme, but also provide the basis for the analysis of the main episodes, thus establishing an insightful link between the overall narrative and its various components. The tools of visual and semiotic analysis will be used to decode the signs, symbols and images interwoven throughout the video, transforming them into interpretable components of the utopian narrative.

Category	Symbol	Myth
Landscape and Nature	Wooden houses in Hunan rural style	Regional architectural characteristics of southern China, representing the uniqueness of the local culture in contrast to the northern regions
Architecture and Design	Peach Blossom Land, trees, river	The utopian ideal of a harmonious and peaceful rural life, inspired by Tao Yuanming's "Peach Blossom Spring"
Food and Cuisine	chilli peppers	The distinctive and strong culinary culture of the Hunan region, emphasizing the locals' passion for spicy flavours
Tools and Implements	Tractor, shovel, hoe	Hard work and simple rural values rooted in traditional agricultural practices

Animals	Chickens, ducks, geese	The significance of poultry in rural life, symbolizing sustenance, prosperity, and connection to nature

Table2： *Semiotic analysis of the credits*

The mushroom house was set directly on the island within the scenic area, requiring a boat to cross the river. Then, before reaching the mushroom house (the main body of the utopia), a muddy, path surrounded by peach trees is walked through to show how difficult it is to reach the utopia.

Figure 3: *On the way to the mushroom house(S5E1)*

Stuart Hall argues that the masses perceive the world and feel the life they have experienced or read through media-constructed knowledge and images (1973). If the beautiful living environment is a projection of the viewer's attachment to the countryside, the spatial relations presented in the mushroom house are full of the viewer's expectation and social imagination of the meaning of family. The "mushroom house" in the programme remains stable: firstly, as a space with clear characteristics, it provides a protected and bodily place for the programme's resident guests and visitors. Denotatively, it represents a unique and whimsical abode. Secondly, its connotations run deeper, evoking a sense of warmth, protection, and safety for the programme's resident guests. Beyond this, it plays into the myth of an idealized home, as conceived in the viewer's social imagination, serving as a space of belonging, dialogue, and emotional exchange.   It can be said that the programme team has completed the imaginative construction of modern people's space of "home" by laying out the relationship between the characters and using a series of symbols.

Figure 4:*The Mushroom House in Season 5 (E1)*

The programme team chose to strip away the modern elements in shaping the image space, replacing the "non-regional" reinforced concrete houses in the modern society with the natural wooden houses. In the Chinese tradition, the five elements, including gold, wood, water, fire and earth, represent five different elements and attributes, which is an ancient Chinese philosophical concept (Kommonen, 2011). The Five Elements doctrine holds that these five elements constrain and generate each other and work together to maintain a harmonious balance in nature and society. Among the five materials represented by the five elements, only earth and wood are the most suitable for building houses for human habitation, and the basic material of ancient Chinese architecture is "earth and wood". People lived in a space carried by "earth" (foundation) and surrounded by wood (pillars and beams). In ancient China, wood was one of the most important building materials, with abundant resources and easy processing. Especially in southern China, where Taoyuan County is located, the climate is humid, trees are abundant, and timber resources are more abundant than in the north, where the climate is dry. The extended connotation herein is a simpler, more rustic way of life, connected to nature and the elements. This not only echoes the philosophy of the five elements, but also further enhances the programme team's understanding and appreciation of the traditional way of life depicted, which contrasts with the modern, fast-paced, technology-driven lifestyle.
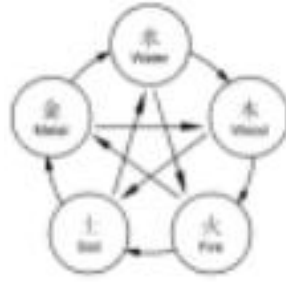
Figure 14: *Wuxing, describing the mutual generative order (outer arrows) and mutual destructive order (inner arrows) of the five natural elements.*

Figure 5: *Mushroom house kitchen and stove (E4)*

The kitchen in "*Back to Field*" is built separate from the main house. On one hand, traditional rural kitchens in China primarily use firewood as fuel, and coupled with houses being made of wood, it's easy for fires to occur. If the kitchen is connected to the main house, in case of a fire, the flames could easily spread to the main house (the show's team has abandoned modern natural gas fuel, and instead use a traditional stove, with firewood as the energy source). On the other hand, separating the kitchen from the main house can reduce the risk of fire spread. Since Hunan cuisine is famous for stir-frying with chilli peppers and the combustion of wood creates ashes, the kitchen continually produces smoke and odors during the cooking process. If the kitchen and the main house are connected, these fumes and smells could impact the air quality of the main house. A standalone kitchen can confine these fumes and smells within a small space, making it easier to clean. The separate kitchen further emphasizes the   traditional Chinese philosophy . Its traditional design and use of wood as fuel provides a denotation of the element of wood. The smoke and the heat from the cooking process represent the element of fire, which is another key aspect of the Five Elements philosophy. Both the choice of building materials and the design of the kitchen serve as physical, visual representations of the traditional Chinese lifestyle.

Characters

In the characterization within the show's fictional space, the five resident guest

celebrities' words, actions and behaviors refer to different family roles and social relationships with connotations of Chinese family culture, which subtly reflects the roles and functions of the traditional Chinese family structure, while also providing the audience with a rosy vision of an ideal family life - free from quarrels, with a clear division of labour. The characters in *Back to Field* benefit from each of the individual hosts' real personalities and their roles in the programme, thereby creating a vivid and infectious scenario of family life. The symbols they represent do not exist in isolation, but form a network of symbols that interact with each other to create a beautiful, harmonious and welcoming family atmosphere. Each resident celebrity guest is a 'sign' in a semiotic framework, consisting of the 'signifier' - the actions and behaviours of the celebrity - and the 'signified' - the family role or social archetype they represent. Huang Lei is the symbolic embodiment of the role of the "strict father" in Chinese society, representing the center and stability of the family due to his mastery of life skills and negotiation skills. He Jiong, on the other hand, often resolves disputes and takes care of other members, and can be seen as a symbol of reconciliation and harmony in the family, a symbolic "loving dad" or "loving mom". Zhang Yixing, Peng Yuchang and Zhang Zifeng, on the other hand, play the role of the children, and they present the younger generation with a young, lively and curious image. Their energy and spirit of exploration make the show full of vitality and vigor.

Figure 6: *The official poster for the fifth season of Back to Field from left to right, features Zhang Yixing, Peng Yuchang, Zhang Zifeng, Huang Lei, and He Jiong.*

Narrative Themes

Connerton (2007) divides the social practices of collective memory into embodied practices and inscribed practices. *Back to Field* uses a large number of symbolic

inscriptions of rural life practices to summon the audience's collective memory and realize the audience's communal identity. The presentation of narrative symbols such as agricultural labour is one of the main narrative methods of *Back to Field.*

Planting vegetables (E2)

Drawing water by traditional methods(E4)

Foot soak (E2)

Plowing the Fields (E3)

Building the Greenhouse (E3)

Tree Planting (E5)

Figure 7: *Rural life practices*

Activity	Denotation	*Connotation*	*Myth*
Planting vegetables	Sowing and nurturing plants.	Hard work, diligence, resilience	Traditional chinese values and the ideal of self-sufficiency.
Drawing water by traditional methods	Getting water using non-mechanized means.	Connection between human endeavor and natural resources, appreciation and respect for nature.	A shared cultural memory before modern conveniences
Foot soak	Soaking their feet in hot water	Comfort, self-care and wellness.	The slower-paced rural lifestyle between work and

			relaxation in rural
Plowing the fields	Turning and breaking up soil.	Hard work and traditional agricultural labor.	The importance of labor in acient time and traditional farming skills in rural life.
Building the greenhouse	Constructing a shelter for plants.	Growth and sustainability.	Hosts' efforts to build a utopia and live in harmony with nature.
Planting trees	Putting tree seedlings into the ground.	Growth, development, and sustainability.	Investment in the future and care for the environment.

Table3: *Semiotic analysis of rural activities*

Each symbol provides a narrative about rural lifestyles that invites viewers to identify with these practices, thereby creating a shared, collective memory. Through these narratives, *Back to Field* reflects not only the physical labor required for rural life, but also the mindsets, values, and philosophies that form its backbone. Rural symbols they carry a shared cultural memory that evokes a collective rural history, allowing viewers to form a shared identity. *Back to Field*'s nuanced use of objects allows viewers to engage more deeply, creating a sense of identity through shared memories and experiences. (Memory of Chinese nostalgia and the rural areas will be introduced in the next section).

Narrative style

Back to Field extends the dimension of the scenes and images through the arrangement of time and space through post editing. Slow reality shows want to show the unadorned and natural slow life, so the camera placement and shooting angles are very limited. Most cameras are fixed to stationary objects, while handheld camera operators avoid getting close to actors to prevent damaging the scene. These restrictions may result in a narrower range of shots and scenes being filmed, and do not record a wide enough range of material and scenes, so slow reality shows tend to tell stories by editing key events and incorporating guest speakers, using multiple scenes and time spans to tell stories that do not show intense conflict, but rather

provide calm, soothing, and entertaining narratives.

Chinese painting has an artistic expression, known as 'liu bai' or 'leaving blank', conveys deeper meaning through the aesthetically intentional use of empty space. In the editing of the programme, "blankness" is mainly reflected through empty shots. As mentioned earlier, the location choices of slow reality shows are always distinctive and scenic. In slow reality shows, a lot of "blanks" are used in the form of aerial locations and time-lapse photography. This avoids the fast pace that comes with a fast narrative, thus creating a slow-paced atmosphere that provides viewers with a mental pause to watch, allowing more room for reflection and reminiscing, and making the show's pace more relaxed. This also reflects the characteristics of slow reality TV footage, i.e. the footage is less informative, gentler, less intense, and focuses on the beauty and the little things.

Figure 8: *Aerial photography " leaving blank " (E1)*

While the visual elements have a direct visual impact on the audience, the auditory elements have an imperceptible impact on the audience, unconsciously giving them a sense of excitement, exhilaration and empathy. The music fits with the plot, making the uninteresting images come alive and adding to the laughs. In addition to the character voices and post-production sound effects common in reality shows in China, the natural sounds in slow reality shows are more distinctive. The frogs chirping from inside the nearby fields while guests chatted in the courtyard after dinner, the sound of chickens crowing and birds chirping that woke up the guests every morning, the sound of rain falling on the tiles, the bustle of the market, crops pulling up, puppies patting the ground, raindrops falling from the empty camera, etc., all made the audience feel like they were there and the immersion became extraordinary. Furthermore, the theme song *An Ordinary Day* lyrically encapsulates the essence of the show, adding another layer to the auditory landscape and encapsulating the soothing, slow-paced reality TV approach (Appendix 5).

Activity	Denotation	*Connotation*	*Myth*
Frogs chirping, chickens crowing, market bustling, rain falling	Natural sounds one could hear in a rural setting.	Tranquility, Peace.	The romanticized view of rural life.
Theme song "An Ordinary day"	Music accompanying the programme.	Calm, contentment, simplicity.	The celebration of "ordinary" days as the key to contentment.
Sounds of crops being pulled, dogs patting the ground	Sounds associated with rural life.	Connection with nature.	A narrative that close to the relationship to nature,leads to a more authentic existence.

Table 4: *Semiotic analysis of audiovisual style*

Back to Field utilizes myths to create a utopia rooted in the Chinese rural landscape and traditional values. Through the use of unique locations, architecture, and connections to local culture and lifestyle, it creates a unique audiovisual experience for its audience. Meanwhile, nostalgia has been the emotional thread running through *Back to Field*, attempting to create a strong emotional connection with its audience and evoking memories of an idealized past, which will be analysed in the next section.

The Power of Nostalgia in *Back to Field*

Among *Back to Field*, nostalgia has been the emotional thread running through it, with its ability to evoke positive emotions and help individuals find meaning in their lives by increasing self-continuity and triggering a longing for a simpler past (Sedikides and Wildschut, 2018). This longing manifests itself in various forms, such as recalling childhood, longing for a utopia (Fattahi, 2014), or, as in this case, a longing to return to rural life. This longing is brilliantly exploited by *Back to Field* for more than just entertainment; its attempts to create a strong emotional connection with the viewer by telling the story of a celebrity returning to rural life. Through the visual presentation of rural life in order to evoke an idealized past, it provides an emotional rest stop for the audience.

The idea of nostalgia is often intertwined with the spirit of some Chinese cultures. It is noteworthy that the Chinese nostalgic term "Xiang Chou (nostalgia)" originally implied a longing for the countryside or homeland. This connection between nostalgia and the rural realm remains relevant in contemporary China because of the country's socioeconomic situation, where rural areas lag behind the cities. The countryside has become the former residence of the vast majority of the population, and its also a symbol of the underdeveloped past and, therefore, a subject of nostalgia.

Back to Field subtly exploits this cultural spirit, as the team establishes a physical space of a people's commune in the programme. The celebrities can work or complete tasks in exchange for food in the commune. This is a parody of the life model of the people's communes in rural China in the last century, when they had both administrative and economic functions, had administrative power equivalent to that of a county or higher, and owned The model of life of the people's communes in rural China in the last century, when they had both administrative and economic functions, had administrative power equivalent to that of a county or higher, and owned all the land, forests, mountains, lakes and other means of agricultural production, as well as the right to supply food and necessities for the Inhabitants (Shue, 1980). On the one hand, in this idealized rural living space, whose inherent community relations and cooperative labour become its main constituent elements (Levitas, 1990), the programme group acts as a supplier of resources, while the stars displace resources through their labour.

Figure 9: *People's Commune in Back to Field*

On the other hand, this can be also understood as a nostalgia creation that draws on the audience's nostalgic feelings for the past way of life (Davis, 1979). The representations of rural life in Chinese television have been evolving. Earlier portrayals often revolved around dichotomies of the noble rural versus the corrupt urban, reflecting societal anxieties about the city as a destructive force. However, with

the economic reform in the 1980s, urban values began to be represented positively by strong, intelligent, independent characters, while rural characters seemed to lose the stability and distinctive values embedded in traditional culture. By the 1990s, the nostalgia for rural life, especially among China's educated youth or the 'Zhiqing' generation, became a form of cultural resistance against modernity (Yang, 2003). In the face of increasing inequalities and identity crises in contemporary life, nostalgia served as a bridge connecting individuals to their past, helping them make sense of their experiences, and contrasting a past imbued with beautiful meanings against a present dominated by economic inequalities. Through the medium of mass communication, the show constructs a utopian refuge that provides viewers a sense of belonging and a mental escape from their mundane realities. This idea echoes the spirit of utopia in Chinese literature, which is often depicted as a paradise removed from the confines of real society. It's in this context that the show's depiction of the rural life acquires significance, for it resonates with a collective yearning and dissatisfaction with contemporary life situations.

Finally, it is worth noting that feelings of nostalgia, although tied to human memory, can be directed and shaped by public images and discourses (Kim, 2005; Stern, 1992). This aspect is evident in the way nostalgia changes over time, influenced by social values and environmental changes. However, most discourses on nostalgia have focused on its psychological construction, neglecting its spatial narrative or its representation in the physical environment (Yao, 2020). In this regard, *Back to Field* presents an interesting case study as it embodies this spatial representation of nostalgia through its representation of rural life. In addition, the programme spans multiple spaces, crossing the boundaries between real life and constructed realities, engaging the audience in an interactive narrative across the confines of the television screen, *Back to Field*'s inter-generic space will be analysed in the next section.

The inter-generic spaces of *Back to Field*

Back to Field, as a reality show with numerous intangible and tangible spaces within it, offers the possibility to manipulate and negotiate narratives of reality. running across the real world, television-constructed reality and the mediated spaces of social media, *Back to Field* fuses genres (Mittell, 2004) and facilitates a more interaction between television programmes and their viewers (Bolter & Grusin, 2000), allowing

for an extended dialogue between the programme and the audience. Furthermore, the notion of mediated authenticity emphasises the fragile balance between reality and constructed reality, and the exploration of generic spaces provides a complex exploration of truth and fiction in the field of media practice (Andrejevic, 2004).

Back to Field attempts to bring the viewer into a space where the boundaries between reality and constructed reality are constantly shrinking. Since its broadcast, the programme has shown us a picture of rural life in different parts of China, and its presentation of traditional Chinese culture and rural values has grounded it in real-world practices, allowing viewers to connect the practical activities in the programme to their daily lives or memories. In this case, the perfect rural life constructed by the programme is set on top of a physical location, where the message and meaning of real objects are mediated in the digital realm and crosses out of the space of television production into the real world. However, the difference between the rural activities in the real world space and the rural utopia attempted in the *Back to Field* dramatic space is also open to question. This section will examine *Back to Field* from an inter-generic perspective, looking at how it uses the inter-generic space to balance the construction of entertainment.

Figure 10: *Back to Field's dishes(E5, E2,E4, E3)*

The original recipe from the show: Yanduxian is a cuisine made from a duo of cured pork and fresh pork with fresh winter bamboo shoots.
1. Blanch the fresh meat, fresh pork and bamboo shoots separately
1. Stir-fry the blanched meat with the ginger to thicken the soup
2. Add the right amount of boiling water
3. Add the bamboo shoots and simmer for one hour

Traditional Chinese cuisine plays an important role in showcasing Chinese culture, art and reality. Its purpose is not just to satisfy hunger, but to promote health, treat illness and, most importantly, to build relationships between people and enhance family values (Li & Hsieh, 2004). A major part of *Back to Field* is the preparation of food,

that is, three meals a day. A lot of footage is shown in the show, where the guests order, the host prepares, cooks and tastes the food, and recipes are prepared among the regional specialities for viewers' reference.

Figure 11: *Audience-created recipes*〝*Yanduxian*〞*from Back to Field*

After the show aired, social media users imitated and improved the "Yanduxian" recipe in text, image or video form. By focusing on the complex process of food preparation and consumption, *Back to Field* encapsulates traditional Chinese cooking culture and extends it into the digital realm of the audience, connecting three distinct spaces - the real world, the dramatic space of the TV show and the mediated space of social media. The dramatic space of *Back to Field* is a carefully crafted environment where guest characters are placed in elaborate scenarios, enacting both scripted and unscripted moments. The space, while structured, draws heavily on real-life experiences, as reflected in the food culture presented, the meals prepared, and the overall depiction of rural kitchen life. It inspires viewers to recreate these dishes, to share their culinary experiences, and to further engage with the show beyond airtime. This transformation marks a leap from real to dramatic space to mediated space, essentially blending the boundaries between the constructed reality of television and the digital interaction of the viewer.
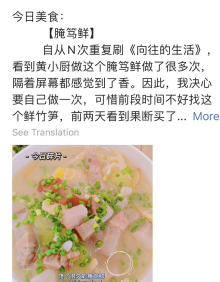
Figure 12: *Homemade Yanduxian shown by audience on Weibo*

Today's food: Yanduxian.

I've watched *Back to Field* many times and seen Huang Lei make this Yanduxian so many times that I could feel the aroma from across the screen. So I was determined to try making it myself once.

The narrative texts from the dramatic space of the TV show are enriched and expanded in the mediated space of social media, effectively amplifying real-world spaces such as recipes to the show's fans. In this context, the 'real world' becomes the tangible reality of the audience, creating a unique interaction between these inter-generic spaces. Yanduxian starts in the dramatic space, where it is introduced and prepared in the programme. It then migrates into the mediated space as viewers share their adaptations, elaborations and experiences on social media. Finally, as viewers recreate the dish in their kitchens at home, it permeates real-world spaces as well. This process represents the interweaving of these spaces as elements from the real spaces, dramatic spaces (the show) inspire action in the mediated space (social media), which then stimulates activity in the real world (the kitchen), facilitating audience participation and enabling viewers to bring the narrative into their real-world kitchens. Each space borrows, influences and reinforces the other, demonstrating the efficacy of inter-generic spaces in expanding the narrative of *Back to Field*. As the boundaries between these spaces blur, the inter-generic space emerges, illustrating the complex dynamics of transmedia storytelling (will be analysed in the next section).

Does reality television exist? The question of 'reality' in reality television has always been a tricky one (Hill, 2019). Behind the food sources lies a broader problem. On the one hand, due to the filming schedule limitations, the food grown by the celebrities in the garden cannot sustain self-sufficiency, thus it becomes merely symbolic. On the other hand, the origin of most of the food is not really explained. A small portion is obtained through hard work (tractor plowing, rice planting, tree planting) or by completing tasks assigned by the production team, while the vast majority is not accounted for. *Back to Field*'s producers play with the notion of authenticity, trying to construct a mediated authenticity in the show where hard work pays off (Elin, 2015). However, as the show progressed, it was revealed to be a 'staged reality', and the later seasons began to seem formulaic. Viewers gradually engaged critically with the demands for authenticity.

Figure 13: The vegetable garden containing different varieties (E2)

The show, as part of the reality TV genre, faces the inherent challenge of balancing the presentation of 'reality' with the demands of television production and entertainment. The show attempts to present celebrities growing fruits and vegetables for their own consumption - a kind of self-sufficient utopian 'constructed' reality. However, due to a number of constraints (schedules, climatic factors, agricultural knowledge, etc.), these efforts are just symbolic. This constructed dramatised reality extends to the programme's mediated space. The producers attempt to bridge the gap between the constructed and the real by introducing a representation of authenticity. For example, they show a small portion of visible food (e.g. eggs) obtained through hard work, creating the impression of authenticity. However, the disconnect between constructed reality and real-world practices is obvious to the discerning viewer, as the origin of most of the food remains unexplained. This disconnect illustrates the friction between the idealised rural life portrayed in the programme and the real world. As *Back to Field* navigates these spaces, it reveals the tension between the constructed reality of entertainment and the reality of rural life.

Food	Denotation	Connotation	Myth
Chilli	A spicy fruit used as a seasoning	Excitement, boldness	Spiciness representing bold and passionate character traits
Chinese Cabbage	A common leafy green vegetable	Humility, hardiness	Often used in winter dishes, symbolizing endurance and survival through tough times
Bamboo	Edible bamboo growths	Rapid growth, resilience	Symbol of strength and fast

Shoots			growth like bamboo
Eggs	a natural product of poultry, specifically chickens in many cases	Life, fertility, and renewal, particularly in a rural context.	Images of a self-sustaining, wholesome lifestyle that is often romanticized

Table 5: *Semiotic analysis of food*

Back to Field skillfully navigates the space across genres, blending dramatic, mediated and real-world realities to create an immersive viewing experience. Food spills off the television screen and jumps into the viewer's kitchen via social media, and the viewer is propelled to recreate the culinary narrative within their personal sphere, thus moving the narrative from the television realm to the digital realm and ultimately to real-world spaces. This transition from drama to mediation to real world space not only extends the narrative of the show, but also highlights the concept of "mediated authenticity". It brings attention to the fragile balance between reality and constructed reality, which is evident in the symbolic self-sufficiency and unidentified food sources. As Banet-Weiser's (2013) suggests, reality TV plays with the notion of authenticity while suggesting to viewers that it is a branding strategy. *Back to Field*'s brand strategy - transmedia storytelling will be scrutinized in the next section.

Transmedia storytelling in *Back to Field*

According to China's largest market research institute - CSM, all 14 episodes of *Back to Field* ranked No. 1 in national ratings and share of all Friday night variety shows during its fifth season (2021),. In just two days of its launch, it has accumulated over 100 million streams. The show's official social media accounts have accumulated over 4 million followers on Weibo, one of the most popular social media platforms in China. The personalised social accounts created by the show's team for the show's domestic animals have also become popular (dogs (Little H and Little O), ducks (Caideng), sheep (Dot), etc.) and have accumulated over two million followers. These numbers prove the impressive reach of the product and its spin-offs.

Its success is due in large part to a transmedia storytelling strategy that goes beyond the traditional broadcast television model. Television serves as the primary narrative medium, while websites provide complementary behind-the-scenes information. At

the same time, social media platforms allow for interaction and exploration. Viewers share and create conversations about the show on social media, fully immersing themselves in the story world (Jenkins, 2006). This section will delve into how *Back to Field* utilizes transmedia storytelling strategies, focusing on the implementation of the "franchise" concept and showing how the animal account with the largest following - *Little H is so popular* with 983k followers (June 2023) contributes to the constructed utopianised world.

More loosely structured variety shows like *Back to Field* are different from films in that they need to create expansive story worlds that weave together different characters, scenes and story arcs. These story worlds need to be strong enough to sustain multiple seasons of storytelling. In *Back to Field*, the showrunners weave the stories of multi-season story worlds through transmedia storytelling strategies that encompass a wide range of media and platforms. Each episode, each narrative arc, and even each character's journey, including the show's livestock, forms part of a wider narrative and becomes a product within an overarching transmedia strategy. This strategy is a fusion of textual forms, where stories unfold across multiple platforms with each contributing uniquely to our understanding of the storytelling world (Jenkins, 2006), extending beyond the simple flow of content across media platforms (Freeman, 2014) to amplify the immersive narrative experience.

From 'Canon' (Original World) **to 'Apocrypha'** (Enlarged World)
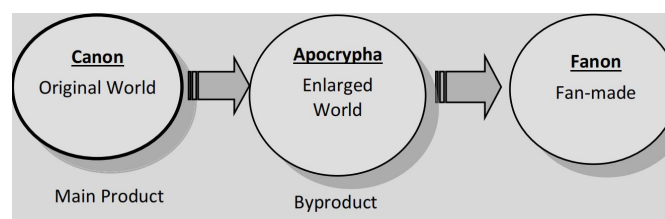
Figure14: *Product of storyworld*

Source: Gürel & Tığlı, 2014

Traditional media is changing under the impact of new media, with the Internet diverting audiences from channels and dividing markets from advertising. While *Back to Field* came to be in the form of a satellite TV show, it immediately unfolded on streaming and social media. As stories are expanded to multiple platforms, specific content needs to be created for each platform in order to provide a satisfying user

experience through each content and platform. As defined by the Producers Guild of America, a transmedia project must include at least three storylines that belong to the same fictional universe and are developed through different platforms (film, television, comics, mobile devices, etc.) (Costa-Sánchez, 2014). In this, the integration of the Internet and television is not simply additive, but rather a re-creation of television content for the internet, adding interactive features that greatly increase audience engagement and motivation. The show's exclusive online platform, Mango TV, edits each episode twice, adding details and jokes to ensure the uniqueness of the content available to internet audiences, while adding a comment section to receive feedback from viewers, overturning the traditional production process and distribution of TV programmes that only use the audience as the recipient. The internet and social media provide power and authority to fans and turn the relationship between creator and target group into a real-time dialogue (Gürel & Tığlı, 2014).

Back to Field, broadcast on television and in streaming media, exists as the original story world, the 'Canon'. Set against the backdrop of the celebrity guests and their real lives, it depicts a peaceful, comfortable and welcoming world of storytelling by showing their days spent in the idyllic countryside. The celebrity guests leave the busy city life and go to a cottage in the idyllic countryside to experience the real rural life, engaging in various idyllic activities such as farming, breeding animals, cooking, etc. and feeling the beauty and purity of nature. That is, it is the original world and the main product that constitutes the main story, the first step in transmedia storytelling, which embodying the fundamental step in the process of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006), and the text that is a legitimate part of the franchise world and plays a role in the commentary, discussion, creation and development of the story.

In *Back to Field*, the 'franchise' is not a repetition of narratives, but an extension, each narrative being a separate story that forms part of a larger one by serving a larger story (Nedelcheva, 2016). Indeed, with narratives delivered through different channels, it helps both to build the story world and to reach different consumer groups. Since 2017, *Back to Field* has gone through six seasons of the show. In addition to the show's main guests, the various animals featured in the show have their own names and close-ups, and the show's launch was accompanied by the creation of official Weibo accounts for each animal, each with a first-person voice to promote the show.

Name	Followers	Animal breeds
Little H is so popular	969.7k	Dog(Akita)
Little O's Growth Diary	243.4k	Dog(Akita)
Nicholas "Caideng"	260.3k	Duck
Mushroom house - pots, pans, bowls and pots	118.4k	Dog(Akita)
Is Susu better today?	24.5k	Dairy cattle
Chicken Coop Three Sisters	25.9k	Chicken
"The old point" next door loves to eavesdrop	64.4k	Sheep

Table 6: *Weibo followers of each animal in the show*

Each animal is assigned a distinctive human personality, contributing to a vivid narrative tableau (Pearson, 2010). Little H is a lively and mischievous character and is portrayed as a couple with Little O. The duck is always teased by Huang Lei about stewing it, so it is always in a depressed mood and looks away in contemplation; and Dot, the sheep, is portrayed at the beginning of the programme as the oldest animal in the house who likes to listen to other people's conversations. Each of the animals in the programme is given a human character. They are known as the HFamily, and of the official accounts of these animals, Little H is the most popular, with almost a million followers on his official account-he is known as the 'first male' of the HFamily. During the creation and operation of Little H's account, it was dispersed across social media as part of the *Back to Field* element. And it has been extended with new content that enriches the narrative universe, showcasing how transmedia storytelling can expand and diversify narrative elements (Freeman, 2016).
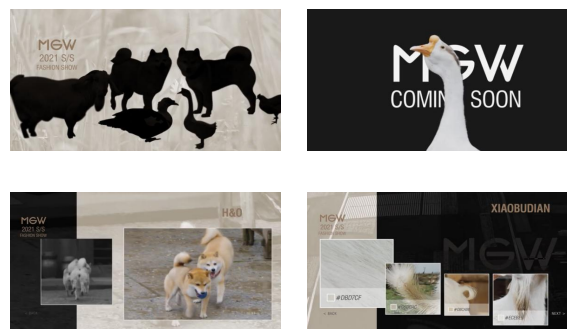
Figure 15: *Animal-themed promotional video*

"What is this year's 'trendy item' at Mushroom House?

"It's the low-key luxury of classic vintage patterns？ " (duck feathers)

"A warm, imaginative white?" (sheep's wool)

"The lovey-dovey earthy colours?" (Little H and Little O the dog)

"Which are you most excited about?"

For the fifth season of the show, *Back to Field*'s official account has created a tailor-made "fashion campaign" video featuring their patterns and feathers. The animals were reintroduced to the audience as fashion trendsetters on the catwalk. In this fashion campaign video, the team uses a variety of visual effects and creative elements to turn the cute little animals into unique fashion icons and showcase their charms. This not only keeps up with the trend in terms of format (short videos), but also introduces new ideas in the content as an extension and overall makes for a richer experience for the user. By this point, the video, which is an animal promo, has been separated from the original story world-Canon (video content for TV and streaming), but is still a social media spinoff produced by *Back to Field* officials and falls under the Apocrypha umbrella.
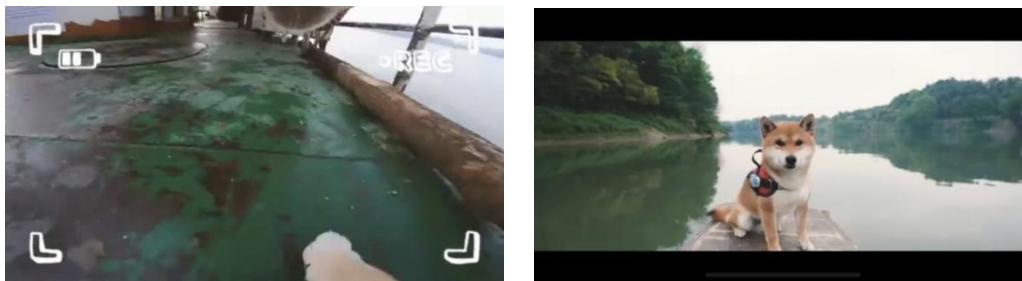
Figure 16: *Vlog by "photographer" Little H*

Among the posts on Little H's account, there are also vlogs with his perspective as the main image to take viewers on boat rides and runs. By strapping the camera installation to the dog, it provides the viewer with a more realistic, close-to-nature perspective of country life. This unique perspective provides a non-human perspective that deepens the narrative of village life and also constitutes a form of transmedia storytelling as it creates new narrative threads within the same story world (Jenkins, 2006). This perspective can show how the animals act and feel on the farm, giving the audience a sense of personal involvement. A distinct and vivid image of the dogs is created, expanding the diversity of content while maintaining the original story world,

which can attract and retain audiences and contribute to the development and prosperity of the entire story world.

Figure 17: *animal-themed campaigns*

- Celebrate #the debut of HFamily#. Follow this account and retweet this post to draw ten friends to give away a matching mackintosh by Caideng (the duck).
- Little H: This dog gets an extra duck keychain. HFamily has sent @Nicholas. Deng is here to give you the keyword. And we have a wish from our good friend Zhang Yixing (one of the five fixed guests in Season 5).
- Happy birthday to HFamily's No.1 male lead @Little H is so popular! Follow and retweet to send your best wishes to Little H. Two people will be selected to receive a Little H mackintosh and a Little H steam eye mask respectively!

The content under the "Little H is so popular" account is the expanded world of *Back to Field* and its by-products, as Gray (2010) discusses additional materials and media that provide further depth to the core media product. It presents different aspects of the main story, rather than a completely separate creation, which is the second stage. In this stage, different aspects of the story world (the animal branches) are transferred through different channels (social media) and form a new product (the HFamily and the anthropomorphic animals). The image of a dog being cute, loyal and understanding can give franchise more affinity and warmth. Anthropomorphic characters can have human characteristics and emotions, making it easier for audiences to have emotional resonance and interactive engagement. This approach as franchise brings more attention and social media exposure, providing more expansion and interactivity to the original world. This franchise strategy not only produces more attention and social media exposure, but also adds further extension and involvement to the original universe, which is consistent with Jenkins' (2006) address on building emotional resonance for consumers in transmedia storytelling.

From Apocrypha (Enlarged World) **to Fanon** (Fan-made World)

In addition to telling different types of stories on different platforms, a true transmedia storytelling should also involve the audience as a participant in the story. The term "storytelling" in transmedia storytelling refers to the process of telling a story to a specific audience. It is done in an interactive manner that allows for a dialogue with the public rather than mere disclosure of information (Quesenbery & Brooks, 2010).

In Scolari's (2009) view, there are three types of media consumers. The first type of media consumer is a single-text consumer. These people only consume a single product, for example, some viewers only watch *Back to Field*, a specific variety show. People in the second type are users of a particular medium. These consumers consume every text that is transmitted through a channel. For example, some viewers watch *Back to Field*, which is broadcast weekly on television, or only stream it online. Transmedia consumers, on the other hand, fall into a third category. Transmedia consumers move between the channels and platforms that present the story, and they do not limit themselves to one part of the story, but try to capture all the narratives and texts in order to explore the world of the story, and the focus of the analysis that needs to follow.
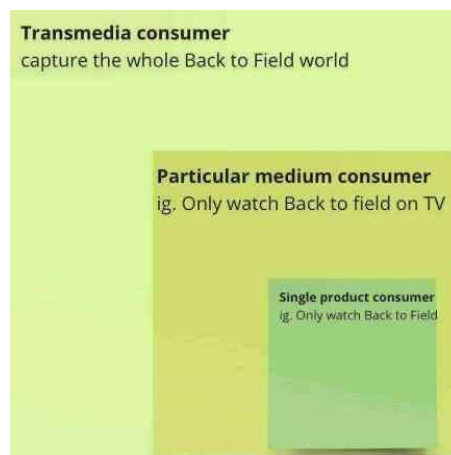
Figure 18: *Types of Media Consumer and Transmedia Consumer*

As Jenkins (2009) argues, the digital age has redesigned the relationship between content, producers and audiences, allowing ordinary people to create and share content, giving them an active role in content development, an expression of user desires and information that takes form in online discussions and media crossings.

Comments under The Little H account

- "H, the pendant is blocking your handsome and charming face (in the *Back to Field* poster)."
- "Just a reminder to your wife (Xiao O), the actress should pay attention to their image in public and avoid any inappropriate behaviour. Thank you."
- "Full of on-screen charisma."
- "Waiting for you, H"

The power of social media in transmedia storytelling cannot be ignored, and its power lies in its ability to create temporary fan communities. Social media has created a foundational engine for fan engagement that makes everyone a fan (Hassler-Forest, 2016), and redefined fan engagement and created spaces where fans can flourish. Here, *Back to Field*'s fans, as the third consumer of transmedia storytelling, do not limit themselves to one part of the story, but rather try to engage in multi-platform capture and self-exploration. Social media allows fans to interact directly with their favourite shows, characters and creators, thus enhancing their engagement and connection. An example of this can be seen in *Back to Field*'s anthropomorphic animal character's Twitter account as a channel for fan interaction, strengthening community and engagement. When these Weibo accounts are created, the fan base grows around them. The animals act as the resident guests for each season, linking up each season of the show. Firstly, the presence of the animal accounts allows viewers to interact with the characters and follow their 'lives' beyond the show itself, further increasing their engagement and emotional involvement. Secondly, these animal accounts also act as a compelling storyline, helping to build and sustain the entire *Back to Field* story line. Each season of the show is subtly linked through the interaction and development of these accounts to form a coherent narrative. For example, one season's animals may be mentioned in a Weibo post about the next season's animals, or show how they have adapted to new environments and challenges. The presence of animal accounts also creates a lasting community of fans among viewers. These accounts become rallying points for fans to exchange ideas, share insights and look forward to new seasons.

In transmedia storytelling, the role of the consumer is as important as the role of the producer. In this sense, consumers should be both hunters and gatherers in order to

experience any fictional world as a whole (Gürel & Tığlı, 2014). If the above interactions are part of the 'Enlarged World', which is dependent on the story world created and controlled by the producer, the rest of the story is 'Fanon'. That is, it is completely independent of the main product and the producer, and includes products produced by fans of the original product. What is more obvious in this is that the independent narrative, related to the story world but produced by the fans and not controlled by the producer, is the third stage of the fiction world.

Figure 19: '*Fanon*' content

- *Back to Field*s "Reaction Video". The main format is to record the process of the video producer watching the show and adding their own thoughts to it. "Reaction video" is the output of a "reaction".
- Self-made animated opening for *Back to Field*.
- Excerpts of some lines from the reaction video: "With the camouflage of the slow-paced variety show, whether the content is hollow and boring, or the show lacks innovation and coasts on past success, it will become a programme attitude. Watching celebrities go on paid vacations and end up doing sloppy work, this is not the life I aspire to." (The Chinese name for *Back to Field* translates as 'Life of Aspiration'.

*Back to Field*s reaction video can provide researchers with a unique perspective on how viewers actively engage with the programme's transmedia narrative. This reaction video format shows that viewers are not just passive receivers, but they are also actively involved in the marketing and storytelling process of the programme by sharing their own viewing experiences, become interveners in the creation and sharing of new content (Jenkins, 2009), adopting a more productive and social stance. At the same time, reaction videos can reveal the way viewers interpret the programme's content and their perspectives, which is of great value in understanding the programme's impact. The importance of fan-made content in transmedia narratives cannot be underestimated. By blurring the lines between original and fictional narratives, fans breathe life into stories, circulating this new content into sub-narratives and thus redefining the field of entertainment. Social networks and

internet applications allow for the narration of stories to be personalised and shared with others. As a result, it has led to the emergence of a transmedia culture that is broader, more dynamic and participatory than in the past.

The anthropomorphization of the show's animals is a unique element of this strategy. The unique initiative of creating separate social media accounts for these animals expands the scope of the show's narrative. Each animal takes on human characteristics and becomes a unique entity within the narrative, and these efforts succeed in building a rich and diverse story world while maintaining continuity with the original narrative. They also serve as a catalyst for ongoing audience engagement and dialogue, generating momentum and anticipation even beyond the show's run. In addition, this strategy highlights the changing power dynamics brought about by the emergence of new media. The Internet and social media platforms have given a degree of power and authority to fans, and viewers' role in this transmedia narrative approach is not limited to consumption. They actively participate in the expansion of the programme universe by creating "fan-made" content, from reaction videos to animations. Transforming the relationship between creators and target groups into an active dialogue. This is a key factor in the success of *Back to Field*'s marketing strategy.

Conclusion

Starting with a case study of *Back to Field*s fifth season, this thesis seeks to dig deeper into the programme's narrative structure and visual symbols to explore a powerful narrative about the utopia of the Chinese countryside and the inter-generic spaces within it, as well as how they interact with broader social and cultural contexts. It also considers its marketing strategy as a complex, multi-layered commercial cultural product. Through qualitative textual analysis, it is found that *Back to Field* utilizes narratives deeply rooted in Chinese history and literature, as well as the manipulation of symbols, such as material and practical activities, to present an engaging utopian vision. Meanwhile, through a combination of social semiotics and data analysis, it is shown that *Back to Field* skillfully adapts the TV programme into a more commercially appealing cultural product through a transmedia narrative marketing strategy, effectively enhancing the commercial value and social impact of this reality show. Reality TV programmes can adopt complex narrative strategies that extend far beyond the screen, inviting viewers to establish a dynamic and interactive relationship with the programme and its cultural content. This study reveals the strategies and effects of contemporary Chinese reality TV programmes in constructing and disseminating utopian imagery, while also providing new perspectives and understandings of how media products interact with broader social and cultural phenomena.

Back to Field crafts a fascinating and intricate utopian narrative that is deeply intertwined with the cultural and historical imagination of China. The Peach Blossom Spring is a legendary place in Chinese literature that symbolizes a utopian vision of nature and humanity living in harmony - a theme echoed in *Back to Field*s fifth season. The findings suggest that the programme strategically chose and used a physical setting with significant cultural and historical connotations-Taoyuan County-to carefully construct a rural utopia through a rich set of semiotic resources, including visual, narrative, and material elements, which resonates with Tao Qian's utopian Peach Blossom Spring in conjunction with deeply rooted cultural narratives and establishes a tangible connection to the ancient Chinese utopian vision.

Using social semiotics, one can understand the social and cultural phenomenon of *Back to Field* based on its Chinese context by analyzing the text, images, and other

materials to the original video. Taoyuan is commodified as a symbolic space, distinct from the hustle and bustle of contemporary city life. This is exemplified by the architectural design of the specific main situated mushroom house. It employs traditional Chinese elements to symbolize a simpler, more integrated lifestyle with nature. The building materials used are soil and wood, in line with the Chinese philosophy of the five elements. The characters in the programme are carefully designed to embody different family roles and social relationships, reflecting traditional Chinese family culture. The stars of the programme are also "symbols" in a semiotic framework, attracting viewers into a harmonious, idealized vision of family life. Second, the narrative theme evokes collective memory through the portrayal of rural life practices. The crew actively engages the celebrities in a type of labour and lifestyle, growing vegetables in an environment without modern conveniences. These activities are combined with traditional Chinese values - hard work, industriousness, sustainability and respect for nature. *Back to Field* also skillfully combines historical and social contexts to create a physical space reminiscent of a Chinese people's commune, thus making it a conduit for memories and emotions, allowing nostalgia to transcend the psychological and emotional dimensions and enter into spatial and environmental narratives. It creates a bridge between individual memory and collective cultural longing.

Furthermore, when talking about *Back to Field*s utopian culture, this analysis emphasizes the unique secular nature of Chinese culture, which is heavily influenced by Confucianism, and stresses human virtues and secular issues. Utopia can be created by one's own hands without relying on the intervention of God or religion. This emphasizes the importance of considering cultural and historical contexts when exploring the concept of utopia, highlighting the diversity and richness of utopian thought outside the Western canon. By skillfully blending a variety of semiotic tools - geographical and architectural choices, character roles, depicted activities, and even editing styles - together to create a strong sense of nostalgia and idealized rural life, *Back to Field*s rural utopia has been built.

The inter-generic space of *Back to Field* is a dynamic space of representation that allows for complex narrative manipulation and negotiation. As mentioned in the literature review section, analytical studies on mix genres have been implemented,

and the results of this study further expand this concept by placing it in the unique context of China. This slow reality television seamlessly blurs the boundaries between the tangible realities of the real world and the intangible realities constructed by television, using social media as a connective tissue to mediate these spaces. This space, while designed, draws heavily on real-life experiences reflected in food culture, daily meals, and overall depictions of life in rural China. First, *Back to Field* draws on real-world spaces of occupational labour, people, and everyday life, and is rooted in real-world practices, showing picturesque rural life in different parts of China and the daily activities of the countryside, which form the basis of its inter-generic space's real-world and its subsequent extensions. Secondly, a key aspect emphasized in this programme is the traditional Chinese cuisine that reflects Chinese culture and art, and its complex portrayal of Chinese culinary traditions is not only a simple elaboration but also a narrative strategy. The vast array of culinary practices depicted in *Back to Field* reaches the viewer on a multi-sensory level, inviting them not only to watch but also to cook through the programme's text, thus transforming the viewers into participants. By demonstrating the preparation and consumption of food, the programme extends this component of Chinese life into the digital realm of the viewer. The dishes go from being presented on television to being reproduced in the home and shared on social platforms, symbolizing the dialogic interaction between the programme and the viewers. The semiotic analysis of the ingredients further evidences this dynamic, whereby the choice of ingredients carries its own narrative, mythologizing certain cultural values, such as toughness and boldness, symbolized by bamboo shoots and chilli peppers, respectively. This narrative technique creates a connection between the real world, the dramatic space of the programme, and the mediated space of social media. Narrative communication from television to the digital realm of social media platforms expands the space of the real world. The complex interplay between these inter-generic spaces allows viewers to engage with narratives in their own real-world kitchens, and this study's discussion of inter-generic spaces exemplifies their power to amplify narratives and facilitate audience participation.

Back to Field exemplifies an effective transmedia narrative that engages viewers through a multifaceted narrative that spans a variety of platforms, including television

broadcasts, streaming services, and social media channels. In this strategy, narratives are constructed, deconstructed, and reconstructed across multiple platforms to engage viewers in new and interactive ways. The boundaries between television programmes and social media content become blurred, promoting a new, participatory culture of television viewing. Analyzing *Back to Field* from a transmedia narrative perspective reveals the strategic importance of not only the main product (Canon), but also the spinoff that extends the story world (Apocrypha) and fan-created content (Fanon). These three stages form a multi-layered narrative universe in which the audience can interact and participate. Taking advantage of different media platforms, this multi-dimensional approach makes the audience experience richer and proves to be a powerful marketing strategy. Canon is the producer-created and controlled world, the original story world, in which the main storylines and characters are created and presented. In *Back to Field*, the production team creates the entire story outline, including the setting of the family-like characters, the invitation of guests, and the development of the plot, among other things. This world is at the heart of the transmedia story, where its construction and details are critical to shaping the overall viewing experience for the audience. The anthropomorphic animal characters in Apocrypha are not only a unique narrative element, but also a focal point for audience involvement and emotional engagement. These characters have distinct personalities and storylines that greatly enhance the broad appeal of the show, becoming objects that fans are eager to follow and interact with on social media platforms. The show's social media accounts extend the utopian narrative beyond the television episodes, allowing viewers to continually engage with and explore the rural utopian ideals portrayed in *Back to Field*. *Back to Field* is more than just a television show; it is a vibrant, evolving narrative ecosystem that demonstrates the powerful potential of transmedia narratives in contemporary media consumption. An analysis of *Back to Field*'s marketing strategy provides a glimpse into how the variety show skillfully combines traditional cultural themes with the modern reality television format to create a product that is both commercially appealing and culturally rich.

This study's exploration of *Back to Field* illustrates how the media can be effectively used to engage contemporary society with the richness and variety of past cultures while presenting an idealized, yet deeply resonant vision of a potential future. Reality television has the potential to be more than just entertainment; it can also be a site

where culture, identity, and values are actively negotiated, providing a multifaceted lens through which to explore broader media practices and the question of the ever-blurring line between what is real and what is constructed in reality television. Reality TV's claim to "authenticity" is a complex one. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the constructed reality of the show is fraught with tension as it attempts to portray idealized rural life while acknowledging its own artificiality as a commercial product, and the need to balance an authentic portrayal of rural life with the constraints and demands of television production.

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Appendices

Appendix 1: Links

Back to Field **Season 5**

Episode 1	https://youtu.be/OnUhiJKnpYQ
Episode 2	https://youtu.be/S85JMIGc4vo
Episode 3	https://youtu.be/SnbOZqGUsjY
Episode 4	https://youtu.be/Zp-Sx-BJQMw
Episode 5	https://youtu.be/LDnkdxet940
Episode 6	https://youtu.be/8Tp_uFUCcQM
Episode 7	https://youtu.be/7fm6Dj3_Zvg
Episode 8	https://youtu.be/gBlgcOQHU7I
Episode 9	https://youtu.be/FO56WL7n6ao
Episode 10	https://youtu.be/lkMLtESaD1Q
Episode 11	https://youtu.be/_4kXiF7Wtwc
Episode 12	https://youtu.be/Ldi9quNfx7A
Episode 13	https://youtu.be/VAVFJqeOh_E
Episode 14	https://youtu.be/W7YASh96qMw

Official Weibo Website

Back to Field	https://weibo.com/u/5984601062
Little H is so popular	https://weibo.com/u/6020940457

Appendix 2: Sampling

This section presents a sample of the research section, divided into two main parts, one from the original material of *Back to Field* Season 5 and the other from related social media derivatives. Some of these samples have been analysed in the analysis section.

- Samples from the original videos of *Back to Field* Season 5
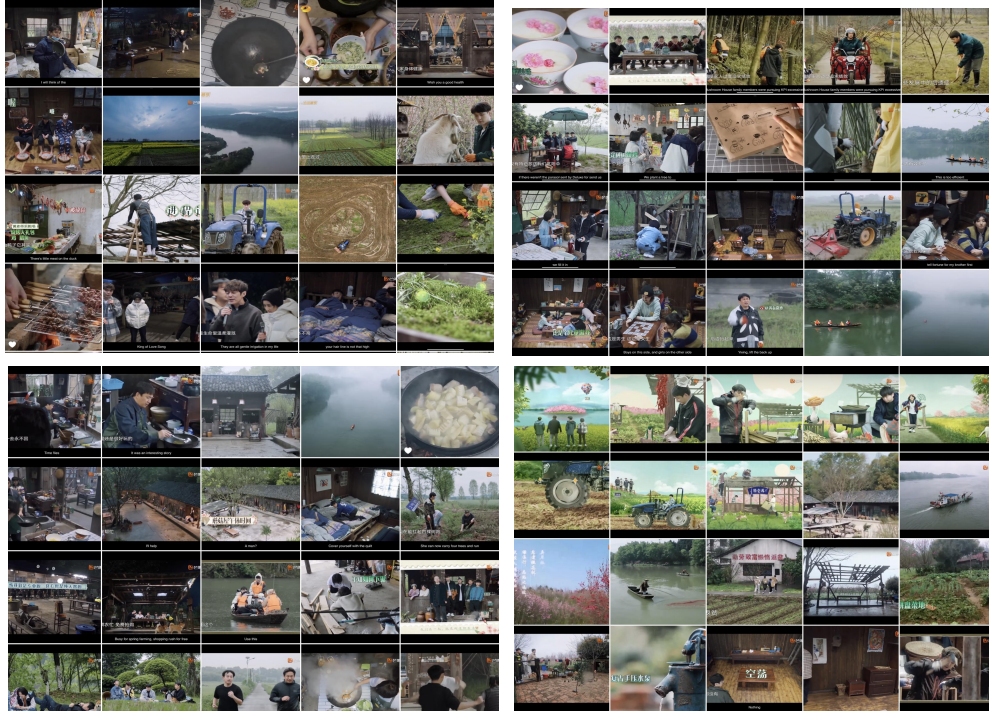
- Samples from social media derivatives included in the study
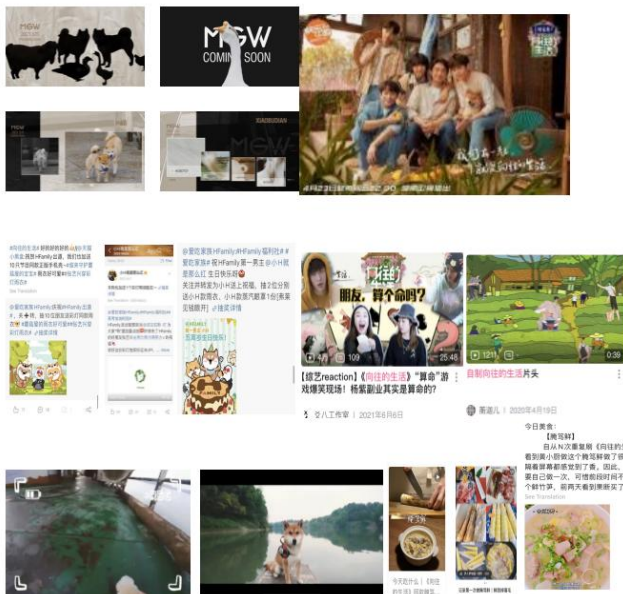
Appendix 3: Piloting

- Surrounded by greenery, the four protagonists went ahead and found a pink peach forest island in the center of the river in front of them, a balloon tied to a small house was about to float down to the island, which seemed to be the house they were about to move into.

- A close-up of the four men's busts, with He pointing into the distance, with an animation effect of an exclamation point above their heads, illustrating their "found" movements and surprised expressions

- Huang Lei, one of the show's main characters, has a chef's hat on his head and is chopping vegetables, with peppers (the Hunan region is used to eating spicy food), intentions and corn hanging around the beams of the house. Huang Lei is the first on stage guest. He is also responsible for cooking for everyone, surrounded by the family pets set up by the crew, sheep and dogs. The crew also gave them names.

- He Jiong, is preparing to build the house of wood . Also in the background are ducks (the ducks' names are colored lights) and a dilapidated wood-paneled house to be built. He is the second to appear, taking on the role of mother and livening up the atmosphere.

- Peng Yu Chang, one of the roles of children in the family, is taking a fan to start a fire to heat the traditional stove, which is cooking soup. Around the chickens walking was made by CG animation into a chick pushing a small cart of firewood, and duck colored lights, was anthropomorphized, with a moving cartoon up the arm holding the corn.

- Zhang Zifeng, holding the wood came happily from the distance, that is the entrance path of the mushroom house, she is the smallest of the children in the family.The last character,

- Zhang Yixing, makes an appearance, and he is driving a tractor to plow the field, while animals in the near distance and four other people in the distance are watching him with farming tools such as hoes and spades.
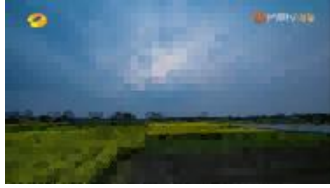

- Five people build houses together on a small island of peach blossoms, and the little animals run around happily.
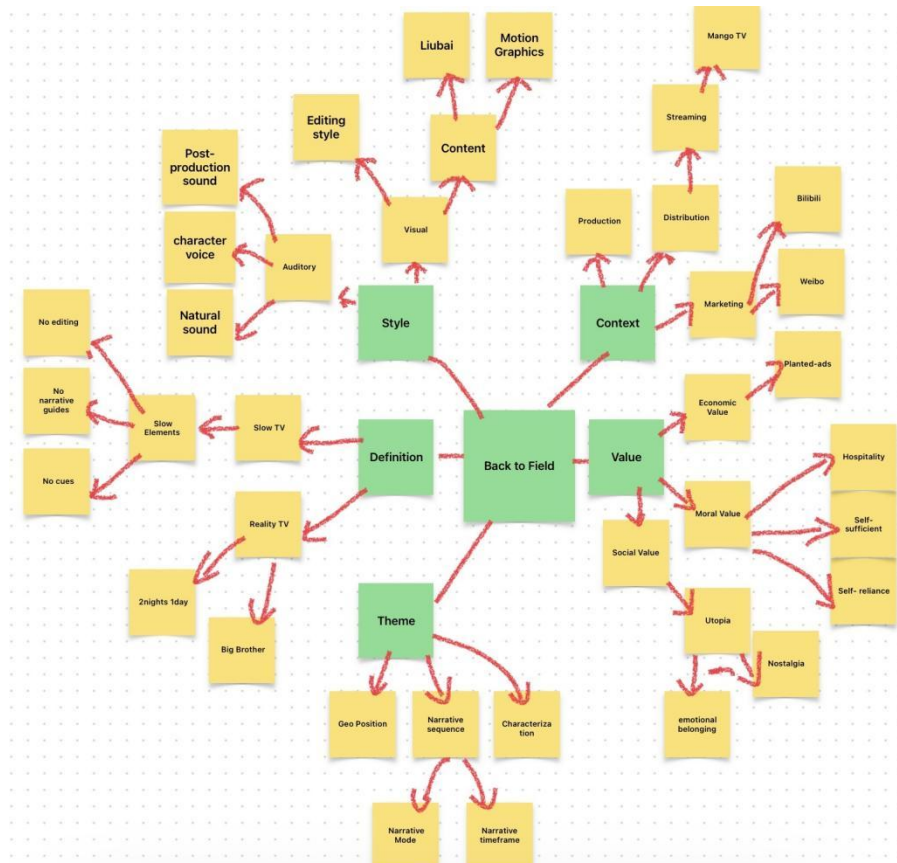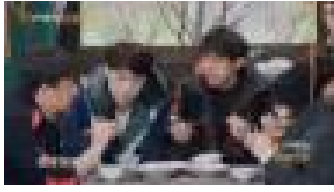
Main codes:

Category	Definition	Symbol	Myth	Example
Landscape and Nature	Shot that shows the natural environment or landscapes.	Peach Blossom Land, trees, river	The utopian ideal of a harmonious and peaceful rural life, inspired by Tao Yuanming's "Peach Blossom Spring".	
Architecture and Design	Shot that shows architectural design.	Wooden houses in Hunan rural style	Regional architectural characteristics of southern China, showing the uniqueness of local culture compared to northern regions.	
Food and Cuisine	Shot that shows food and cooking	chilli peppers	Emphasizes the distinctive and strong culinary culture of the Hunan region	
Tools and Implements	Shot showing the use of tools or implements.	Tractor, shovel, hoe	Hard work and simple rural values rooted in traditional agricultural practices.	
Animals	Shot that shows animals	Chickens, ducks, geese	The significance of poultry in rural life, symbolizing sustenance, prosperity, and connection to nature.	
Rural Activities	Tasks common in non-urban environments, often related to agriculture, etc.	Planting trees, growing vegetables	A way of life that is closely tied to nature and the land.	

Appendix 4: Code Book

Code	Definition	Example
Landscape and Nature	Shot that shows the natural environment or landscapes.	
Forests/Woods	Shots that show forests or woods	
Water Bodies	Shots of lakes, rivers, streams and oceans	
Sky/Weather	Shots showing weather phenomena	
Plant Life	Shots showing plant life	
Architecture and Design	Shot that shows architectural design.	
Roofs	Shots of roofs.	
Earth Tone Interiors	Shots marked to show interiors that use mainly natural tones	
Kitchen	Shots that shows the kitchen area	

Greenhouse	Shot that shows the greenhouse area.	
Pathway	Shots used to mark stone paths or walkways that may be located around or leading to buildings.	
Handcrafted Details	Shots marked to show handcrafted details or decorations.	
Courtyard Houses	Shots showing traditional Chinese architecture.	
Food and Cuisine	Shot that shows food and cooking	
Raw Ingredients Cooking Process	Shots showing unprocessed ingredients	
Finished Dishes	The finished dishes	
Eating and Tasting	Scenes showing food tasting	
Food Sharing	Shots showing food sharing	

Commentary on Food	Shots that show characters commenting or discussing food.	
Tools and Implements	Shot showing the use of tools or implements.	
Agricultural Tools	Shots showing the use of agricultural tools	
Cooking Tools	Shots showing the use of cooking tools	
Modern Tools	Shots showing the use of modern tools	
Handicraft Tools	Shots showing the use of handicraft tools	
Natural Implements	Shots showing the use of natural implementations	
Animals	Shot that shows animals	
Livestock	Shots showing farmed animals	
Pets	Shots showing pets	

Wild Animals	Shots showing wild animals	
Rural activities	**Shots showing rural activities**	
Tree planting	Footage surrounding the tree planting event	
Plowing	Shots of plowing	
Repairing the house	Shots related to house construction and repair	

Appendix 5

- **Slow culture movement**

The rise of a global 'slow' culture began in the 20th century with the Italian Slow Food Movement, which swept the world and prompted people to reflect on the hazards of speed, and the resulting 'Slow Life' concept began to permeate many fields, influencing and guiding reflection and thought in other areas, and forming a series of slow cultural concepts including slow travel, slow sport, slow design, slow fashion and slow art.

The Slow Food Movement, introduced by the Italian Carlo Petrini, is a movement that calls for the rejection of monotonous fast food, such as burgers, which are produced according to standards and specifications, and the promotion of traditional food with individuality and nutritional balance, with the aim of "preserving the inalienable right of human beings to pleasure through the preservation of good food, while resisting the impact of fast food culture and supermarkets on life".

The campaign began in 1986. In front of the McDonald's in Rome's "Piazza di Spagna", dozens of students lined up and sat on the floor munching on burgers, their enjoyment of junk food witnessed by Italian food columnist and social activist Carlo Petrini, who was passing by and was shocked. Soon afterwards, he appealed to the world: "Even in the busiest of times, don't forget the food of your hometown." He took up the cause of raising awareness against fast food, and the Slow Food movement against fast food was born.

- **Lyrics for Theme Song - An Ordinary Day**

Every morning I wake up at 7:30 a.m.
The wind chimes are ringing and the clouds are light.
The smell of sun-dried clothes is so reassuring
Everything is soft and peaceful

Flowers bloom in the sunshine at every intersection
A beautiful love song is heard in front of a small store.
It doesn't take long to get to your destination
The people are full of kindness

It's the most ordinary day
Do you miss it too?
Walking home slowly, not chasing, not rushing.
Just wasting my time, no worries.
Just the evening breeze on my cheeks.

The sun melted into the river before it set.
I'm happy with the evening market. I'm happy with the evening market.
A friend called to say he's waiting for you
We've got a lot to talk about.

The table is set in a courtyard full of flowers.
A little bit of wine, a little bit of laughter.
I never think about where I'm going tomorrow
Because the wind is too warm tonight

It's the most ordinary day
Do you miss it too?
Walking home slowly, not chasing, not rushing
I'm just wasting my time with no cares.
Just the evening breeze on your cheeks

It's the most perfect day.
Do you want it too?
Life could be less complicated
Just a wasted day with no cares.
With only the evening breeze on our cheeks.
Someday we'll find her.