

A Study on the Image of Chinese Local Life in Food Documentaries

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1. Introduction

1.1 Background and Aim

The local life has always been recognized as the foundation of the system of our society, especially in China, which has long history and vast territory relating to many cultures. However, the influence of globalization and rapid urbanization since the late 20th century has resulted in a decline of diversity of local life. From 2012¹⁾, Chinese government has launched several series of food documentaries on the theme of traditional food culture all over the country, which promotes the value in local life, aiming to evoke nostalgia and local identity. These food documentaries show spatial contents of natural, rural, and urban areas with diverse activities related to food culture, which represent close relationships between people, communities, and environment. Through the analysis of scenic contents and their networks in food documentaries, this research aims to clarify the image of Chinese local life providing an understanding of local identity formation in contemporary Chinese society.

1.2 Methodology

6 series of food documentaries that were launched on the China Central Television (CCTV) from 2012 to 2024 are selected as research materials. The series contain several stories, each centered around a region in the country, usually with a specific character, which is treated as an analysis object (hereafter Story) in the following chapters (Tab.1).

2. Scene and Its Content in Food Documentaries

2.1 Definition of Scene

A Story is composed of several scenes. Each scene consists of continuous shots that are filmed in the same area or contain the same activity. A scene usually shows certain characters doing specific activities in a specific space, or shows a depiction or transition of the environment. Therefore, scenes are divided into three types: Background, Moving, and Aim (Fig.1). Because the Moving scenes mainly show the transportation of characters from one area to another, they are excluded from the content analysis. The main content occupying over 50% of each Scene is extracted from the following three aspects: the main spatial features as **Scenic Content**, the relationships between characters as **Character**, and their activities as **Activity Content** (Fig.2).

2.2 Classification of Scenic Content

Scenic Content is categorized into two perspectives: Scenic Area and Scenic Element (Fig.3). Scenic Area is divided into two: Indoor (I) and Outdoor, including Urban (U) with infrastructure that supports high population density and various services, Rural (R) that is closely connected to agricultural or undeveloped land, and Nature (N) with landscapes or man-made nature such as fields and canals. Within Urban, Downtown means Stories filmed in the downtown area of a megacity. Specific spatial contents in Scenes are extracted as Scenic Element.

Region Name	num. of Story											
NC North China	12											
NE Northeast China	28											
EC East China	65											
CC Central China	8											
SC South China	34											
SW Southwest China	34											
NW Northwest China	13											
XJ Xinjiang	4											
XZ Tibet	2											
Inner Mongolia	5											
Total num.	205											
Definition of Scene(1733)	containing shots filmed in the same Area or shots with the same Activity											
① Background (258)	Without showing Activity											
② Moving (154)	Character moving from one area to another											
③ Aim (132)	Character doing Activity											
SW-2 Southwest China, Yunnan_A Bite of China Season 1	Start	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	End
		f-2-1		f-2-7		f-2-8		f-2-9			f-2-10	
Scenic Content		Nature: N nature element (ne)		Nature: N nature element (ne)		Urban: U street(st)					Rural: R semi-outdoor (so)	
Activity Content						Food Industry: F agricultural production (ag)		Food Industry: F business (bu)			Food Industry: F agricultural production (ag)	
Character						Individual: In		Family: Fa			Family: Fa	

Fig. 1 Definition of Scene Fig. 2 Analysis Example

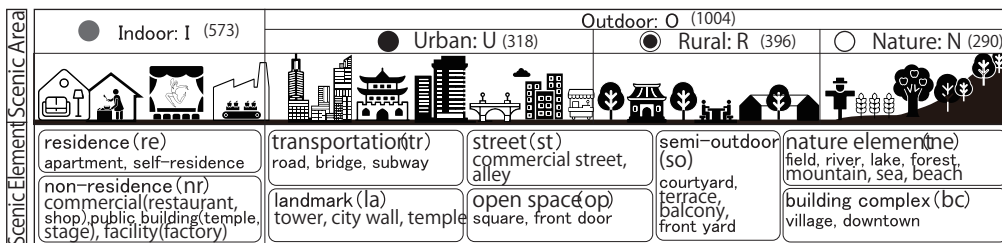


Fig. 3 Classification of Scenic Content

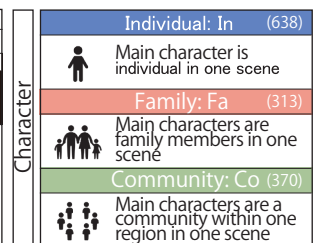


Fig. 4 Classification of Character

Activity Content	Ordinary: Or (966)		Extraordinary: Ex (353)		
	◇ Food Industry: F (461)	□ Daily Routine: D (505)	○ Folk Culture: C (353)		
agricultural production (ag) (253) farming, fishing, grazing, byproduct making	business (bu) (176) sell and buy, business management	food making (fm) (246) preparation, cooking, pickled, fermentation	personal life (pl) (259) consumption, family meal, resting, studying, office work	ceremony preparation (pre) (143) food preparation	performance (pe) (26) sacrificial ceremony (sc) (27) god worship, ancestor worship
tool making (tm) (32)					celebration (ce) (157) family reunion, festival, wedding ceremony, birthday banquet, full month ceremony

Fig.5 Classification of Activity Content

2.3 Classification of Character and Activity Content

Perspective of **Character** is further classified into three based on film captions showing their information and social relationships between characters: Individual (In), Family (Fa), and Community (Co) (Fig.4). The main food-related activities are divided into Ordinary (Or) and Extraordinary (Ex). Ordinary is further separated into two: Food Industry (F) and Daily Routine (D). Extraordinary consists of Folk culture (C) (Fig.5).

2.4 Analysis of Content of Scene

In Fig.6, since the Indoor Area can be determined by the Outdoor Area in the same Story, all Stories are divided into three main groups based on the Main Outdoor Area, which refers to the Outdoor Area with the largest number of Scenes in a Story. Within each main group, the combination types of Outdoor Areas in each Story are further divided. The left side of the table lists the distribution of Scenic Areas in each type. The middle part of the table shows the **Activity Content** of each type, ordered by the proportion of Ordinary Scenes from highest to lowest in each main group. The right side of the table shows the **Character** of each type.

Considering the **Scenic Content**, *Rural oriented* occupies over 42% of all Stories, followed by *Urban oriented* with 38%, which could reflect that Urban also takes part in the formation of local image. In *Rural oriented*, the combination of Rural × Nature × Indoor has the largest proportion(36/87), that could indicate that agricultural production and daily living still forms the principal image of Rural life. In contrast, *Urban oriented* is dominated by the combination of Urban × Indoor, in which the majority consists of Downtown areas, probably due to the trend toward atomization in Urban life. Regarding **Activity Content**, *Rural oriented* has the highest proportion of Extraordinary, suggesting that

folk activities are highly related with the local image of Rural life. In *Urban oriented*, the proportion of business (bu) is the highest, that could indicate on consumption and commerce being closely related to the local image of Urban life. Regarding **Character**, the two types of combination of Urban × Rural has the highest proportion of Individual and the lowest proportion of Family, that might suggest the Activities across urban and rural areas is highly individualized.

3. Network of Content

In this Chapter, the relationships between people, communities, and environments shown in Stories are analyzed from the connections between **Scenic Content**, **Character** and **Activity Content**.

3.1 Network Diagram

As shown in Fig.7, firstly, the Scenic Area and Activity of each Scene are marked with different symbols and colors. Each Scene forms a mark containing **Scenic Content** and **Activity Content** as symbols, while **Character** is shown by color. Following a Network Diagram for each Story is created. The frequency of the same Area and Activity within a Story is represented by the size of the symbol. Moving Scenes between different areas are marked with black arrows, while the connections between Areas and Activities are marked with red arrows. The thicknesses of these arrows represent the frequency. Fig.8 illustrates the three patterns of connections between Areas and Activities consisting of: Single Connection, Area as Connecting Element, and Activity as Connecting Element. In this way, each Story is represented by a combination of connection symbols.

3.2 Relationship Between Character and Activity

In this section, the **Character** and **Activity Content** are analyzed at the level of Story (Fig.9). The vertical

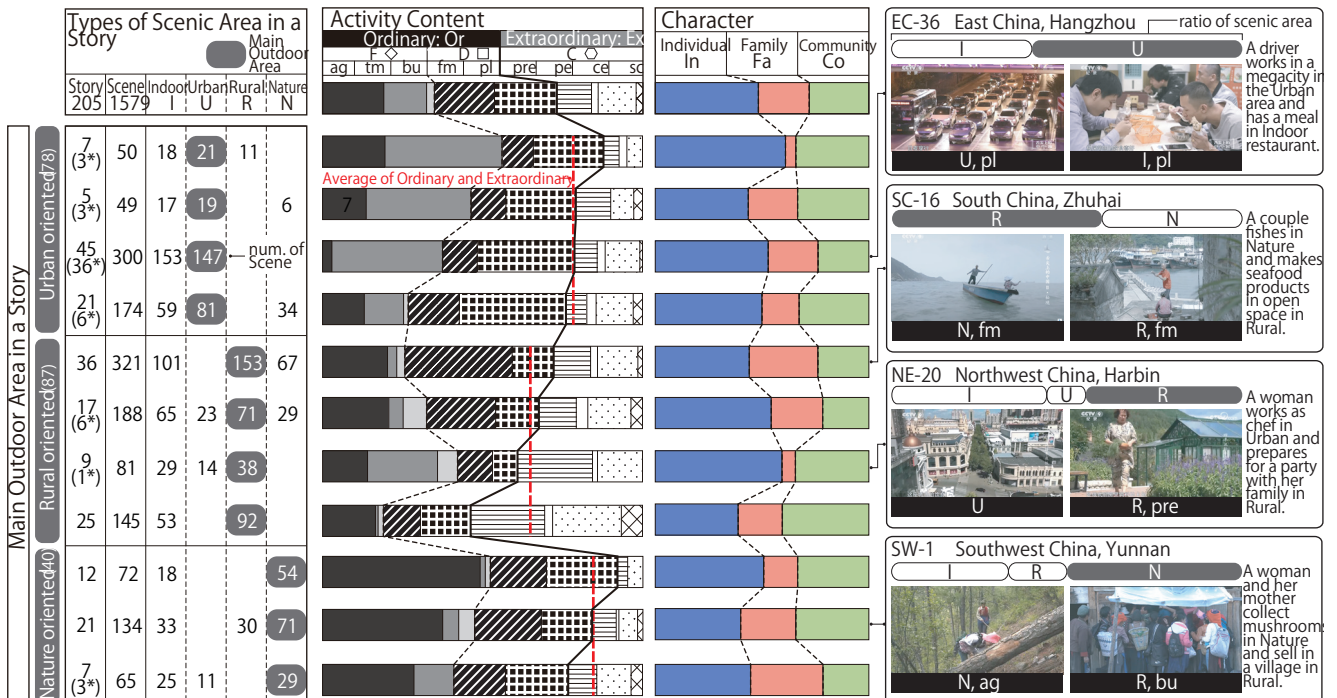


Fig. 6 Analysis of Content of Scene

(*) Number of Stories containing Downtown

axis describes the Main Activity, which stands for the most shown Activity in a Story. The horizontal axis describes the Character relations classified into two modes: *Mode of Association without Family*, which refers to Organizational Mode of Association, a social structure where individuals belong to organizations with distinct boundaries and rules; and *Mode of Association with Family*, which refers to Differential Mode of Association, where relationships are like concentric circles with individuals at the center, expanding outward from close family to distant acquaintances²⁾.

As a result, the *with Family* mode has a slightly larger proportion, which might point out that while the traditional family-centered system still remain appealing, while Food Industry (F) *without Family* is higher, suggesting food production activities have a stronger connotation of being individualisation. As for the specific relationship types, the combination of In × Fa × Co is the most common one, which could be indicating that food documentaries tend to create a local image with multi-layered social relationships. Followed by In × Co, suggests that cooperation within communities is equally important as family structure.

4. Image of Local Identity

Based on the previous chapters, this section analyzes the Image of Local Identity. Fig 10 uses the two modes of Character relations from Chapter 3 on the horizontal axis. The Main Outdoor Area on the vertical axis, divides all Stories into eight types. Following, Main Activity, Area Connection, and Connection between Area and Activity of each Story are compared. Each type is then further divided into three subgroups based on the dominating pattern of Connection between Area and Activity.

As a result, Type V has the largest number of Stories, followed by Type I, IV, and II, which are weighted equally. Type V tends to depict complex connections between Areas and rural spaces that serve as the stage for activities. Type I is mainly characterised by cases

with single Activity as the connecting element, which could suggest that individual connection between urban areas and other regions is based on a same type of activity. Type IV tends to show the connections between individuals and their families between Urban and various areas.

Finally, the regional distribution of Network types is analyzed (Fig.11), showing clear differences between regions. For example, regions in northern part of China such as NE, NC, XJ and NM have more ratio towards *with Family* mode; NW and CC have more in *without Family* mode; while EC, SW and SC are balanced. In terms of the Main Outdoor Area, NE and SC are strongly focused on Rural and Urban respectively, while other regions are equally focused on urban and rural aspects, which reflects that Urban life is as much an integral part of the image of local life as in Rural. This balance indicates the interdependence and mutual influence between urban and rural areas. Considering **Activity Content**, NW and SW focus on food production, EC and SC tends to show daily routine, while NC and NE seem to show more cultural aspects.

5. Conclusion

By analyzing the contents and their networks in food documentaries, this study clarifies the formation of the image of local life in contemporary Chinese society. Overall, the meaning of local is not only limited to rural areas, but is also richly manifested in urban settings, as well as expressed by the networks of different areas. This study also shows that Chinese local life can be understood beyond the traditional family-centered structure, with multi-layered relationships. Thus, food documentaries can provide a framework for us to understand the image of local life rooted in place.

Note:

- 1) Starting from the 18th Party Congress in 2012, China began to propose the strategy of rural revitalization. By the same year, one of the most famous food documentaries “A Bite of China” is premiered.
- 2) Xiaotong Fei: From the Soil: The foundations of Chinese society, 1992, in which Fei indicates the two main types of social relations in China.

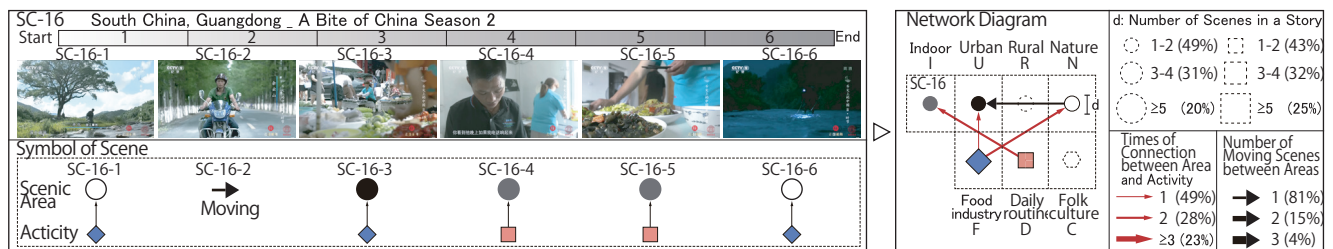


Fig. 7 Analysis Example of Chapter 4

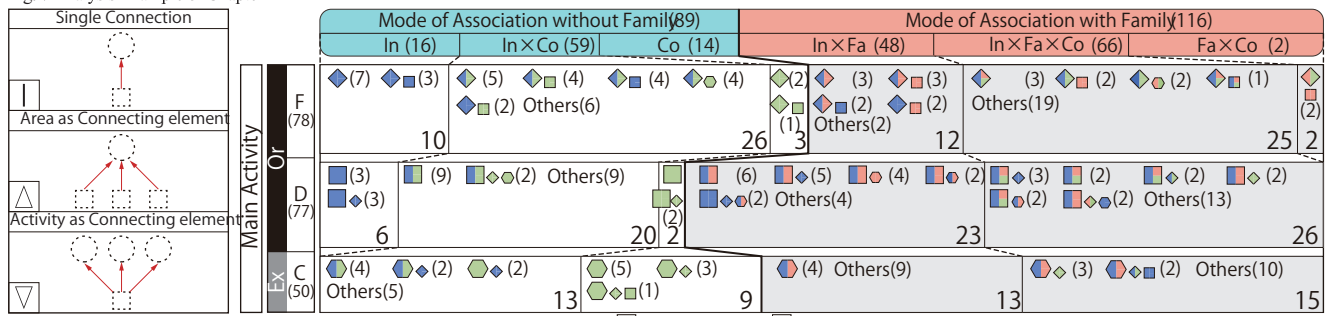


Fig. 8 Connection between Area and Activity

Fig. 9 Relationship between Character and Activity □=Main Activity () Sub Activity () Main Activity: the most shown activity in one Story Sub Activity: other shown activities in one Story

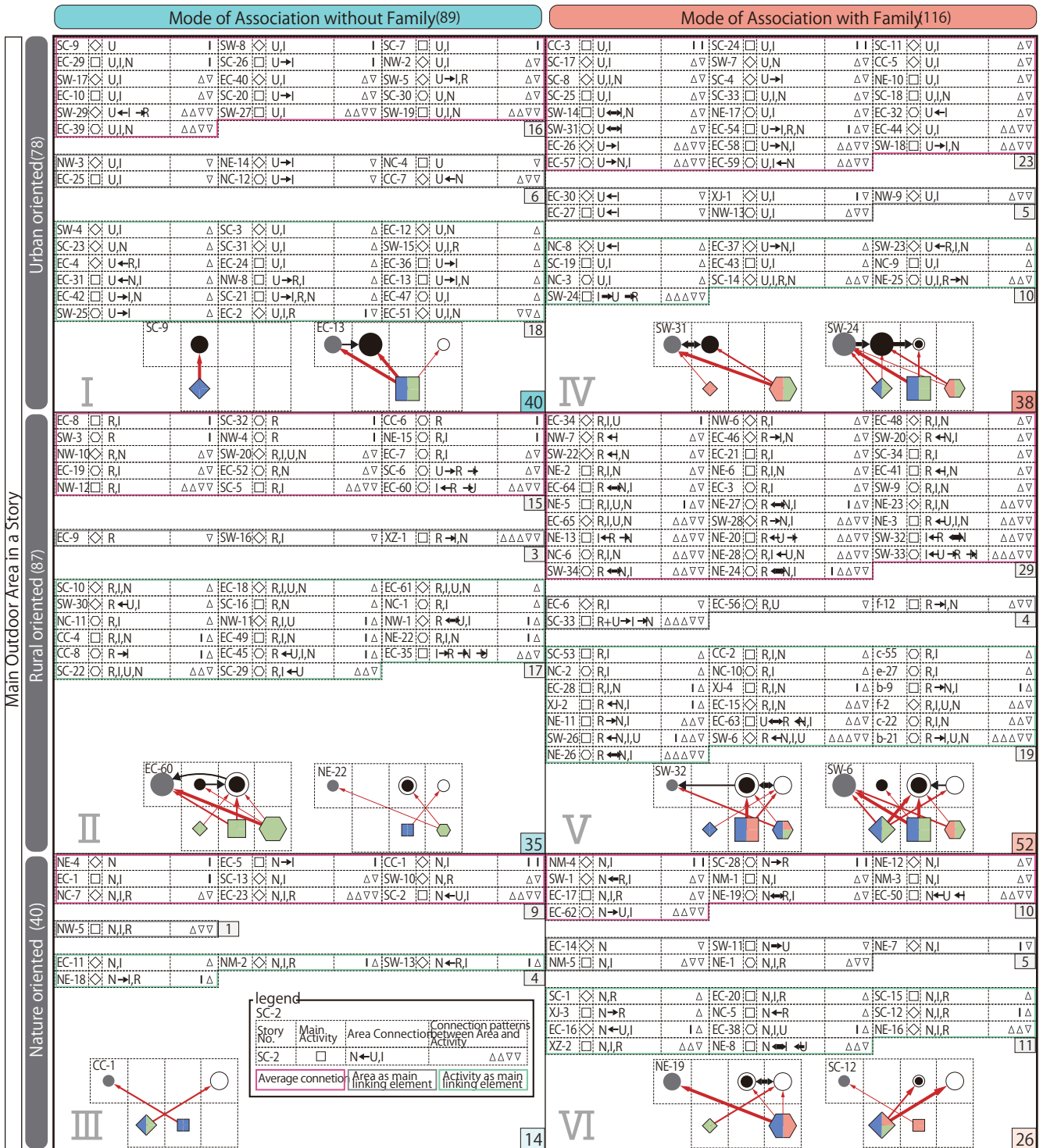


Fig. 10 Image of Local Identity

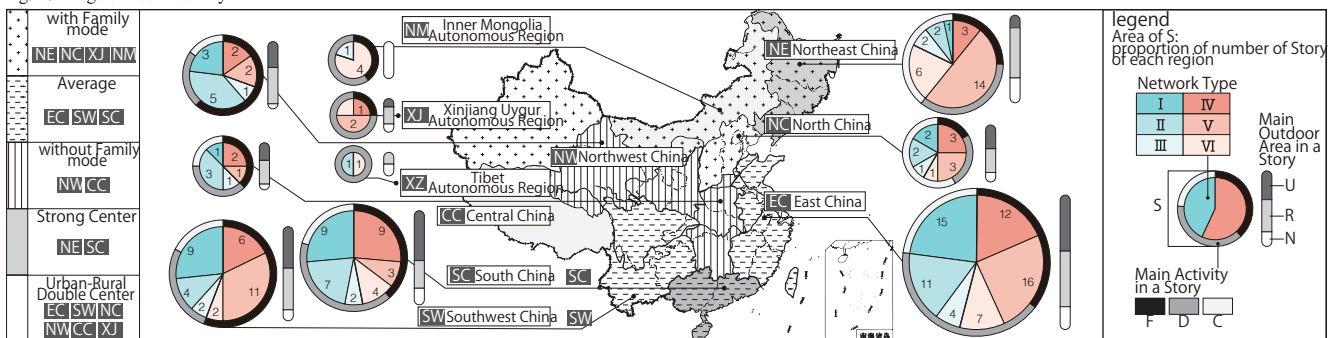


Fig. 11 Region Analysis