

Research on the cultural representation and international narrative process of Chinese rural images

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Abstract: As an important form of artistic expression, film plays a key role in guiding and disseminating values. In recent years, Chinese films have consistently assumed the crucial function of "going out" and representing Chinese culture. In the new era, they have entered a stage of robust development, achieving leapfrog progress in various aspects. However, amid the increasingly fierce competition in the international film industry, Chinese films are confronted with a communication status of being "cold outside and hot inside." In this context, the rural image, as a significant genre representative of Chinese films, has been somewhat neglected in both the internationalization of its creative techniques and its importance in the process of cross-cultural communication. Like a cultural gene flowing in the blood of the Chinese nation, rural images traverse the changing times and social development, gradually becoming a collective memory and cultural representation. Contemporary rural image creation not only continues and reforms Chinese local culture but also adeptly utilizes international narrative means in terms of image creation techniques. This forms an image style with both the atmosphere of Chinese local culture and the distinctive characteristics of Oriental living. This paper explores the history of rural image formation, the evolution of rural image forms in the new century, and the internationalization of contemporary rural images. It analyzes the representation connotation of Chinese rural image culture and the international narrative process, re-examining the value of rural images in the cross-cultural communication process of Chinese films "going out."

1. Introduction

Most of the creative forms depicting Chinese rural life focus on local collective discourse, using the cultural context shaped by the times and economic trends. They delve into the life experiences of both groups and individuals, providing a micro-level perspective to reflect on the genuine living conditions and social challenges faced by protagonists within a rural backdrop. During the period of social transformation, modern China served as a rich source of cultural materials for the early creation of rural images. The rapidly developing economic and social environment in China also provided fertile ground for the widespread dissemination of these rural depictions. In this context, the contemporary rural image on the one hand has become the record and witness of the changes of The Times, and on the other hand, it also carries the continuation and reform of Chinese local

culture.^[1]

In the process of continuous exploration and development, under the guidance of adhering to integrity and innovation and people-centered creation, Chinese rural images have organically integrated the process of social transformation and urban and rural reform into the process of local regional culture and image creation, forming the unique cultural characteristics of Chinese rural images. This unique Oriental culture of Chinese rural image not only realized the Chinese traditional local culture rethink and examine, also promote the local image creation evolution and international narrative change, make Chinese rural image through rural landscape and the masses in response to social reality at the same time, also to write the local regional culture, build up the historical subjectivity of the local people, and under the cultural representation promoted the internationalization of Chinese rural image itself.^[2]

2. Tracing back: the historical creation form and internationalization process of Chinese rural images

In the vast eastern land, the countryside occupies half of China's territory, giving birth to a unique national character and cultural roots. Generation after generation of directors were born and raised in China, and the countryside has become a cultural memory that they can never erase. The image creation with "local" as the cultural root, just like the cultural gene flowing in the blood of the Chinese nation, runs through the development process of Chinese society. Chinese rural image in rural society as the basic background, in the traditional and modern, urban and rural, individual and social multiple relations and facing the image of the Chinese local narrative, in the generations of local social landscape records, Chinese rural image has become a collective memory and cultural representation, but also become the symbolic symbol of Chinese local culture to internationalization.^[3]

2.1. Self-examination and the historical creation form of rural images under complex emotions

The fourth generation of directors and contemporary Chinese artists concentrate on portraying "ancient China," subtly critiquing the conflicting negative aspects—referring to the oblivious world. During this period, they grapple with a unique social environment. On one hand, they are influenced by foreign cultures and maintain a critical stance toward traditional ideas. Simultaneously, they feel a sense of unease amidst the rapid changes of modernization, harboring nostalgia and a lingering appreciation for historical culture and national heritage.

Therefore, in this process of self-examination and complex emotions, the depiction of Chinese rural life often constructs a complex image of the countryside, portraying it as backward, simple, ignorant, and sincere. In these representative images of rural China during this period, directors not only highlight the harsh rural environment but also celebrate the resilient and straightforward lives of the people born in these areas. In this complex and contradictory emotion, they write the complex and contradictory image of rural China.^[4]

Wang Jin's "Widow Village" narrates the story of antiquated marriage customs in the rural areas of southern Fujian. In this setting, wives are allowed to visit their husbands' homes only on Tomb-sweeping Day, Mid-Autumn Festival, and New Year's Eve. Additionally, societal norms dictate that if a sister gives birth before her elder sister, she becomes the subject of ridicule throughout the entire village. While critiquing these outdated customs, the director also portrays the inherent goodness of the villagers, revealing a complex and contradictory emotional landscape. On the other hand, Wu Tianming's "Life" and "Old Well" serve as more representative works. In these films, Gao Jialin endeavors to fulfill his ambitions in a remote countryside but faces failure. His

talent remains unacknowledged and finds no outlet, serving as a perpetual source of anguish in his life. Despite the simplicity, kindness, and open-mindedness of Liu Qiaozhen and Grandpa Deshun in the village, they are unable to offer the spiritual nourishment sought by Gogarin. Despite being laden with memories and attachments from their youth, Gogarin perceives the homeland and countryside as oppressive and suffocating. "Old Well" symbolizes the harsh environment and fate that constrain the people of the western region. "Laojing Village" grapples with geographical drought and resource scarcity, leading generations to sacrifice their lives while drilling for water. Tragically, Gogarin's father perished while drilling a well, trapped underground. As a young man, Gogarin witnesses the valiant struggle of the villagers in Laojing against nature, but their limited resources, poverty, and ignorance exact a toll on countless lives. In this place, people are born and die, caught in the relentless cycle of life. In these two representative rural images, the director not only shouts and loses the harsh rural environment, but also praises the tenacious and simple life of the people who were born here. In this complex and antagonistic emotions, he writes the unique image of Chinese countryside.^[5]

If the fourth generation of directors focuses on showing the restraint and restraint of the living environment in the countryside, the fifth generation of directors more delicately and profoundly metaphor the director's profound reflection and complex feelings on the rural society in the further self-examination. For example, the villagers in "Qiuju Litigation" have a weak legal concept, and they do not know how to use the law to safeguard their own interests. They choose "collective aphasia" in the face of injustice. As the first person to "speak out", Qiuju has the courage to fight, which forms a sharp contrast with the villagers who stand idly by. "Ju Dou" shows a strong concept of patriarchal clan, several generations of Yang men are deeply constrained by the patriarchal clan concept and rural feudal customs, and the root of the film tragedy also comes from this—Yang Tianqing fear of clan rules and the villagers' gossip, his cowardice and pedantry pushed himself and Ju Dou to death. "No one can be Less" focuses on rural education in China in the 1990s. The extremely lack of cultural resources and the teaching environment is relatively backward. The film is like a documentary showing the current situation of rural development in the early stage.

Or the protagonists of this period resist, engraved in the handbook of national fables, or obedient, disappear in the gaps of the great history, and show the darkness, ignorance, tenacity and complexity of the human nature in the backward civilization. "We want to express the vastness of the sky, the strength of the earth; the flow of the Yellow River, the feelings of the human love, the love, hate, toughness, vulnerability, the desire and pursuit of the ignorance and goodness..." So in their works, there is both love and singing for the vast land, and the sigh for the backwardness. Under self-examination, the fourth and fifth generations of film directors show a variety of rural images with delicate emotions. These images not only symbolize the complex and contradictory inner feelings of the creators, but also gradually constitute the early creative form of Chinese rural images.^[6]

2.2. The internationalization of other posture and western gaze into rural images

Subject to the social process and the development of history, early film director focus on the rural suffering, physical disability, mental containment and the natural environment of the bad structure of early rural memory, and rural image is always built in these elements of narrative text consciousness. The early Chinese rural images completed the reshaping of the ancient Chinese civilization, and completed the position construction of the "seeing and being seen" of the ontological culture in the post-colonial context, catering to the curiosity psychology of the West, and also presented an "image in the mirror" in the imagination of others.^[7]

"Disease is the language that consciousness articulates through contemplation; it is an expression

of an individual's will, a linguistic manifestation of the inner world." In the realm of image creation, the presence of disease as a narrative symbol transcends its literal significance and takes on a metaphorical representation. This metaphor was also present in early rural images: "Warm" depicts a hero who becomes paralyzed due to his pursuit of warmth and swings; "Chrysanthemum Beans" portrays Yang Jinshan accidentally paralyzed; "Love" explores the avoidance of fever infection.

"In the final analysis, health depends on morality. Improper lifestyle is the root cause of personal illness, and individual immorality is the product of social disorder. Individual illness is closely linked to the mismanagement and disorder of the social body." In rural images, the metaphorical representation of disease is intricately woven into the film narrative, implying notions of backwardness, ignorance, and neglect in rural areas. When disease and poverty coincide, it serves the director's intention of character characterization and fate building, emphasizing the marginalized groups that are scrutinized and focused upon.

In early rural images, when depicting and constructing the rural landscape, inherent stereotypes are often employed to cater to the gaze and curiosity of the audience, aligning with Western perceptions of early China. Consequently, these films frequently spark heated discussions and receive awards overseas. For instance, "The Yellow Land" won the Silver Leopard Award at the 38th Locarno International Film Festival in Switzerland; "Red Sorghum" secured the Golden Bear at the 38th Berlin International Film Festival, becoming the first Asian film to achieve this honor; "The Old Well" clinched the Best Film award at the second Tokyo International Film Festival; "Chrysanthemum Bean" garnered numerous awards at Cannes and other film festivals; "Not One Less" claimed four awards at the 56th Venice International Film Festival.

At the completion of these films, with their construction of a colonial cultural gaze, as Jin-Hua Dai mentioned, it is not a mere acceptance but a form of intervention in European Western culture—a conscious selection at the periphery. It represents a discourse and historical subject knowledge objectification process, a yielding to the perspectives of others.^[8]

3. Change: an analysis of the form evolution and international narrative of rural images in the new century

Since the beginning of the new century, Chinese rural imagery has achieved significant advancements, building upon the groundwork laid by its predecessors. This progress is not solely technological but also involves a shift in the perspective of narrative themes. During this period, the representation of the country's image no longer submits to external influences and no longer solely caters to Western curiosity. Instead, it inherits an international vision creatively and strives for the fusion of national culture and universal values. Consequently, this era of Chinese rural imagery contributes to both the inheritance and breakthroughs within the international film industry.

The inheritance and breakthroughs of Chinese rural imagery in the new century are mainly reflected in three aspects. First, there is a change in the narrative focus of rural imagery. While the natural landscape remains the foundational narrative background, there is a notable breakthrough and transformation in the overall narrative style of these films. This shift is apparent not only in the innovation of narrative structures but also in the presentation of the natural landscape and the poetic expression of the countryside. In the new century, rural imagery is intricately intertwined with local culture. Through this cultural exchange, the values of excellent traditional Chinese culture are effectively conveyed, contributing to the continuous expansion of the identity and influence of regional characteristic cultures. This, in turn, encourages both domestic and international audiences to pay greater attention to cultural and spiritual heritages that have long been neglected.

3.1. Change of the key points of rural images in the new century

The change in the focus of rural imagery in the new century primarily involves shifting the narrative focus to the attention and contemplation of the relationship between urban and rural areas against the backdrop of the larger era. Among these, the more notable representatives are director Jia Zhangke's films, such as "Heaven is Destiny," "Mountains May Depart," and "Rivers and Rivers Children."

In "Days Doomed," four storylines revolve around the city and countryside, with the heroes navigating the complex relationship between urban and rural areas. The director concentrates on the characters' psychological states in this urban-rural dynamic, offering an artistic reflection on the relationship. This underlying reflection earned recognition at the 66th Cannes International Film Festival for the best script and other international awards. On the other hand, "Was Dead" spans nearly 30 years in its narrative timeline, refining the social structural dynamics between urban and rural areas to the individual level. The film delves into the ordinary citizen's family perspective, providing a window into societal and temporal changes, summarizing the inner sentiments of ordinary people during era shifts. The film's local and emotionally rich expression garnered acclaim, winning the 63rd San Sebastian International Film Festival Public Award, among others.

In "Jianghu Children," the exploration of the relationship between urban and rural performance is more apparent. The film uses a narrative approach that directly highlights the hero's inner situation through a series of urban and rural landscape images. This approach also implies the emotional relationships between characters and the transformations in social culture. The film skillfully writes the inner scars and pain points of characters within the urban and rural space landscape. As a symbolic image, the urban and rural space itself represents the psychological changes of the protagonist amidst the evolving times. The innovative writing style and exploration of urban and rural spaces contributed to the film's success at the 54th Chicago International Film Festival and the 25th Minsk International Film Festival.

In addition, during this period, a large number of Chinese rural images reflecting the relationship between urban and rural areas in the process of social changes emerged, such as Shidong Village, Relocation and Shaoguan. New century rural image narrative focus also gradually transferred from the criticism of the backward countryside to the relationship between urban and rural thinking, and in the relationship between the two domain with time change, social development, discourse flow, the urban and rural economic development since the new century, also more in line with the current era development picture, with the basic orientation of the new era of literary and artistic creation, show more local humanistic care.

3.2. Breakthrough and transformation of rural image style in the new century

The breakthrough and transformation of rural image style in the new century are primarily evident in two aspects: narrative structure and visual presentation. Firstly, there is a breakthrough in the narrative structure. Both "Labyrinth of the Heart" and "Chasing the Man" center on rural style and narrative background, but they daringly break away from conventional narrative structures.

In the case of the former, a non-linear narrative structure is employed, with the rural enigma serving as the main narrative thread. Through cross-narrative structures, each character stands independently yet is interconnected. Additionally, fragmented editing disrupts the chronological timeline, creating a powerful mysterious and suspenseful atmosphere. The latter, on the other hand, has garnered acclaim for its black comedy narrative style. Presented in a chapter structure, the film delves deep into the evolving moral psychology of marginal characters in the village, captivating the audience by offering perspectives rooted in limited knowledge.

Secondly, there is a change in visual presentation observed in the process of rural image creation.

There is an increased focus on the poetic style and the handling of unique Oriental aesthetics, as well as the presentation and processing of blank frames. In "Roadside Picnic," director Bi Gan crafts a distinct image of time and space. The film seamlessly transitions between the reality and memories of time and space, where the hero exists in a perpetual half-dream, half-awake blurred state. The hazy imagery and the emotions of solitude vividly convey the special sentiment of the local environment, imbued with a strong local poetic style that invites contemplation. The director's use of a unique space-time narrative innovatively imparts a hazy and locally poetic dimension to rural image storytelling.

In the TV series "Hello! Mr. Tree," the director explores the story of the rural youth through abstract psychological changes in characters. The film effectively mobilizes the audience's thinking through the excessively abstract plot contradictions between the trees and the villagers. However, prolonged plot contemplation requires strategic visual engagement, creating a balanced atmosphere that counteracts the film's inherent obscurity. Consequently, the film incorporates ample blank spaces and extended periods of silence. This visual and linguistic approach, akin to the internal surge of a grand narrative, not only prompts viewers to explore the loss and melancholy of ordinary people within the confines of local culture but also introduces a sense of blank artistry. While showcasing the natural features of the countryside, it further metaphorically represents the protagonist's emotional changes. The artistic concept of blank space allows the appreciative subject to navigate the information storm, ^[9]simultaneously embodying a unique Oriental traditional aesthetic implication. Both films, while adopting internationalized visual expressions, pay attention to the rural hazy image and the poetic narrative processing of blank discourse. However, due to the abstraction and artistic expression, catering to a broader audience remains a challenge. Despite their recognition at international film festivals, the films struggle to achieve success at the box office, indicating a need for further exploration and consideration in their creative forms.

3.3. Bridge of rural images and rural regional culture in the new century

In the process of narrating rural images internationally in the new century, there is a heightened focus on connecting with local regional cultural characteristics. Representative films in this category include "The Marriage of Tuya," "Kailash Pozi," "Talo," "A Knife in Clear Water," and "Killing a Sheep." These films skillfully bridge the narrative itself with the relatively marginalized local regional culture, illustrating the intertwining and impact of humanity, the natural world, and folk culture.

In the film "The Marriage of Tuya," the director adeptly merges the natural style and regional culture of Chinese Mongolians, extracting universal humanistic sentiments and female care in the emotional choices of the heroine. The Mongolian prairie style and local flavor provide the film with a unique regional charm. This distinctive regional atmosphere, combined with the film's conveyance of universal emotions and female care, contributed to its success in the international film industry, culminating in the Best Film Golden Bear at the 57th Berlin Film Festival.

The film "Kailash Pozi" achieved international distribution in the United States, Japan, Canada, Austria, and other countries, setting an example for the internationalization narrative of Chinese rural imagery. This film, employing a blend of documentary and feature narrative styles, centers on a pilgrimage. The hero's journey unfolds against the backdrop of a magnificent natural environment and the fusion of national regional culture, presenting unique image characteristics. It delves into the themes of the Chinese nation, culture, traditional folk beliefs, and local emotions, achieving further thematic sublimation.

Similarly, films like "Talo," "A Knife in Clear Water," and "Killing a Sheep" utilize the hero's solitary life course, contemplation on life and death, and discussions of traditional folk beliefs to

portray and present the traditional national style and rural landscapes of western China. The distinctive expression and presentation of local regional culture and folk customs contribute to the widespread popularity of these films globally. Notable achievements include "Talo" winning the Gold Tricycle Award at the 22nd France Visur Asia International Film Festival, "A Knife in Clear Water" receiving the Best Cinematography Special Award and the Asian Film Promotion Award at the 36th Hawaii International Film Festival, and "Killing a Sheep" securing the Best Horizon Screenplay Award at the 75th Venice International Film Festival.

These rural images exemplify the fusion of Chinese national culture and rural regional characteristics, serving as typical representatives of the internationalization of Chinese rural imagery. To a considerable extent, they showcase the unique rural style with Chinese characteristics to overseas audiences, conveying the rich traditional culture of China and holding significant cultural communication significance.

4. Docking: an analysis of the international communication and development status of contemporary rural images

The internationalization of Chinese film spread relatively early, since the founding of the Chinese film market has emerged a large number of high quality rural images, these images not only have a certain influence at home, more place in the international market, three-dimensional and truly show to the overseas audience and spread of China's local culture and cultural amorous feelings. This paper mainly reviews the evolution process of the international narrative of Chinese rural images, and takes this as the starting point, analyzes the international communication and development trend of Chinese rural images, in order to re-understand and consider the meaning of the cultural representation of Chinese rural images and the path of international communication.

4.1. The international communication status of contemporary rural images

Since the beginning of the new century, Chinese films have evolved from their early experiences, elevating the international dissemination of rural images to a higher level. The international film industry now showcases highly representative images of rural China, achieving notable recognition. For instance, "Egg and Stone" clinched the Golden Tiger Award at the 41st Rotterdam International Film Festival; "Nojjima" secured the Best Film award at the 33rd Iran International Film Festival; "I Am Not Madame Bovary" earned the 41st Toronto International Film Festival-International Film Critics accolade; "There is a Horse over the Mountain" received the "Best Foreign Outstanding Feature Film" award at the 52nd Korea Grand Bell Award; "TabYuan" was honored with the St George Gold Award at the 39th Moscow International Film Festival; "Relocation" attained the Best Creative Screenplay award at the first Saipan International Film Festival; "Red Flower and Green Leaves" claimed the Silver Sparrow Best International Feature Award at the 1st Diorama International Film Festival in New Delhi, India; "Stupid Bird" was bestowed the "Special Jury Award" in the "New Generation" competition at the 67th Berlin International Film Festival; and the film emerged victorious as the Best Film at the 2019 South African International Film Festival, among others.

Further, exceptional films set against rural narrative backgrounds like "Lost with the Wind" and "Hidden into the Dust" were selected into the main competition units of the 37th Munich International Film Festival, the 17th Rome International Film Festival, and the 72nd Berlin International Film Festival. These rural images emphasize the application of international narrative techniques and prioritize establishing connections with global audiences throughout the creation, promotion, and conceptual dissemination processes. This genre of rural imagery serves as a model for the international dissemination of Chinese films, carrying influence both domestically and

abroad, collectively contributing to the current landscape of the internationalization of China's rural images.

4.2. The application of international narrative and "common" emotion of rural images

At present, the international narrative realm of Chinese rural images increasingly prioritizes the exploration and presentation of local regional culture. There is a growing emphasis on incorporating universal values and common emotions in the international narrative process, contributing to its increasing brilliance in the global film industry. As Elena Sisu once expressed, "How to write about the people who do not write." Writing about rural images involves capturing the essence of "others," those individuals who genuinely inhabit the local landscape. It goes beyond documenting the director's personal sentiments about the locale. To shift the narrative focus from the director to the "others," it is imperative to identify a form of "commonality." This common thread not only facilitates the film's resonance within the local cultural environment but also allows its spiritual essence to transcend national, regional, and cultural boundaries, thereby evoking emotional responses from audiences across the globe.

Through meticulous observation of rural society and narratives centered around the personal lives, emotions, and fate changes of protagonists in rural settings, Chinese rural images establish an emotional commonality. This shared emotional ground enables audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds to experience direct emotional resonance. Whether portrayed in films such as "Blind Mountain," which reflects the authentic humanity of the countryside, or in works like "Forever Forever and Ever" and "Sweet Potato and Rice," showcasing simple folk customs and a return to nature, these instances exemplify the expression of unique emotional commonalities in the Eastern region. The poignant or gentle transmission of emotions reflects filmmakers' appreciation for local culture through rural imagery. More significantly, this narrative approach breaks free from the confines of local culture and identifies an internal emotional commonality with a more universally relevant backdrop of the times and character development.

Contemporary rural images consciously avoid relying heavily on regional culture or presenting abstract Oriental stories. Instead, they strategically lower the threshold of appreciation, delicately portraying universal human nature and emotions through the micro-experiences of ordinary individuals amidst the changing times. This narrative strategy minimizes the potential for an obscure viewing experience in international communication. It unveils the unique cultural characteristics of the East and establishes a more universal emotional connection in international communication. This creative approach allows films not only to thrive within the local background of Oriental culture but also to deeply resonate with the inner world of overseas audiences, attaining influential cross-cultural communication through a narrative style that returns to simplicity.

4.3. International communication trend of rural images supported by the state and the introduction of multinational filmmakers

On the other hand, the process of international communication for rural images is evident in the country's increasing attention to supporting rural images, aligning with international standards of "reputation quality" and "content output." This entails boosting the international influence of films through the endorsement of relevant policies and participation in film festivals. In recent years, a wave of rural image film festivals has emerged, focusing on the survival status of farmers and prioritizing the artistic quality and reputation of film output. These festivals serve as platforms that adhere to high standards, supporting the development of rural images and thereby expanding their international influence. This, in turn, contributes to the continued internationalization of rural images.

While China's rural film festivals may not attract as much attention or exude the same opulence as international film festivals, they possess a simpler essence. These festivals delve into the heart of rural life, addressing social realities, and, despite their relatively modest attention and influence, maintain stringent evaluation criteria. Their focus lies on film content, thematic expression, and output, striving to meet international standards through a more compact and rigorous approach.

Simultaneously, Chinese rural images are increasingly tapping into overseas talent, aligning with international production modes and enhancing the film's transnational influence. For instance, film producers like Xiaojiang Gao, Shishan, Bin Jia, Sichuan City, and Shi collaborate with talents such as Matthieu Laclau as an editor for "Mountains May Depart," Matt Hodgkinson as an assistant director, Natana Kiz as a producer, and Yokihiko Hanano for the score. "Shting Mountain" features French music master Nicholas Irrila, "Egg and Stone" selects Ryuji Otsuka as the photographer, "Balloon" opts for Peiman Jazian for the film's score, Jov Moore as colorist, and so on. Through the absorption and reference of overseas film industry talents, the internationalization trend of Chinese rural images becomes increasingly apparent. This narrative expression and innovative application from an international perspective constitute crucial steps for the internationalization of Chinese rural films in the new century and represent the sole path for the future development of Chinese rural images on the global stage.

5. Conclusion

In the ongoing process of urbanization in China, the challenge for creators lies in how to shape the individual forms of life within rural image creation. It involves reflecting philosophical perspectives on local culture and modernity, showcasing regional characteristics and local humanistic care, and advancing its own internationalization. This remains a proposition that Chinese domestic film creators are actively exploring. Given the current scenario of "cold outside and hot inside" in the cross-cultural communication of Chinese films, heightened attention is warranted for the value of rural images in the cross-cultural communication process of "going out." The evolving landscape of Chinese regional culture and the concept of a shared human destiny community align well with the characteristics displayed in rural images. These characteristics are increasingly capable of meeting market demands and contributing to narrative discourse. Serving as a bridge between traditional culture and universal values, modern civilization, local regional landscapes, and international artistic expression, rural images play a vital role in effectively conveying the distinctive concepts of local culture. Consequently, as Chinese films continue their journey of "going out," they hold the potential to further elevate traditional Chinese excellence in culture beyond national boundaries and traverse regional and cultural divides.

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