

Affective Realism and Rural Regeneration: Documentary Storytelling and Cinematic Citizenship in Shepherds on the Divide

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Abstract

This paper examines how contemporary Chinese documentary cinema participates in the discourse of rural revitalization through affective realism and narrative micro-politics. Taking *Shepherds on the Divide* as a case study, the research analyzes how personal hardship, ecological transformation, and emotional endurance are woven into a cinematic narrative that mediates between state policy and lived rural experience. Rather than functioning as ideological illustration, the documentary constructs a form of emotional realism in which national development is articulated through individual vulnerability and resilience. Drawing upon scholarship on Chinese documentary realism, rural imaginaries, and affective ethics, this study argues that *Shepherds on the Divide* exemplifies a post-poverty documentary mode that shifts realism from oppositional witnessing toward relational and participatory storytelling. Through understated narration, observational camerawork, and pastoral visual poetics, the film transforms policy discourse into a shared moral experience. The analysis demonstrates that contemporary rural documentaries function as sites of cinematic citizenship, where empathy becomes a mode of political engagement and visual storytelling mediates between individual destiny and collective imagination. By reframing rural revitalization as an affective process rather than a didactic message, *Shepherds on the Divide* contributes to a new ethical paradigm in Chinese documentary practice.

Keywords

Chinese documentary, Rural revitalization, Affective realism, Cinematic citizenship, Rural imaginaries

Introduction

Over the past decade, China's Rural Revitalization Strategy has reshaped not only the material conditions of the countryside but also its visual and cultural representations. Beyond poverty alleviation and infrastructural development, rural revitalization has become a discursive field in which images and narratives actively participate in the construction of national meaning. Within this context, documentary cinema functions as a crucial medium for mediating between macro-level policy discourse and lived rural experience, translating development agendas into emotionally intelligible stories rooted in everyday life.

Chinese documentary filmmaking has long been characterized by tensions between political ideology and social reality. Since the New Documentary Movement of the 1990s, realism has operated less as a neutral aesthetic than as an ethical practice of public witnessing and social recognition [1]. While earlier documentary realism often

adopted a critical or oppositional stance toward official narratives, subsequent scholarship has emphasized its evolving relational and participatory dimensions, particularly in representations of marginalized rural subjects [2]. In the post-poverty era, realism has further shifted toward emotionally grounded, human-centered storytelling that engages with development discourse without relying on direct critique.

Recent studies suggest that contemporary rural documentaries increasingly render structural transformation through affective narratives. Lei et al. describe this tendency as a "moral narrative of development", in which policy-driven change is made meaningful through personal hardship, endurance, and everyday labor [3]. Similarly, Zhen et al. conceptualize such representations as "rural imaginaries", cinematic constructions that reframe the countryside as a site of ethical renewal rather than historical backwardness [4].

Together, these approaches point to a reconfiguration of how rural development is visually imagined and morally evaluated.

Shepherds on the Divide exemplifies this emerging documentary mode. Set in Qingfengling Village, Anhui Province, the film follows Shen Guanggui, a rural villager whose trajectory - from illness and economic collapse to gradual recovery through ecological livestock farming - mirrors broader processes of rural transformation. Through restrained narration, observational camerawork, and recurring scenes of pastoral labor, the documentary constructs a form of affective micro-realism that situates national development within the emotional texture of individual experience. Rather than presenting rural revitalization as a completed achievement, the film emphasizes endurance, uncertainty, and continuity.

Importantly, *Shepherds on the Divide* neither functions as propaganda nor adopts an explicitly oppositional stance. Instead, it occupies an intermediate position described by Wang et al. as the “subaltern narrative paradox”, in which rural subjects gain narrative visibility while remaining embedded within development discourse [5]. The film navigates this tension by privileging affective authenticity over explicit ideological messaging, allowing emotion to mediate between personal suffering and collective aspiration.

This article examines *Shepherds on the Divide* through an integrated perspective combining affective realism and cinematic citizenship, focusing on how documentary mediates between policy, experience, and emotion. It addresses three questions:

- (1) How the film constructs an affective narrative linking individual hardship to rural transformation?
- (2) How its visual and narrative strategies articulate an ethical realism suited to the post-poverty context?
- (3) How it contributes to broader reconfigurations of realism and citizenship in contemporary Chinese documentary cinema?

Theoretical framework: Realism, affect, and rural documentary

Realism as an ethical practice in Chinese documentary

Realism in Chinese documentary cinema has evolved from oppositional witnessing to an ethically embedded

practice. Early documentary realism, as identified by Wu, emphasized political aesthetics and ethnology as a response to official representation [6]. However, Sun argues that realism also functioned as a politics of recognition, granting dignity and visibility to marginalized rural subjects [7].

With the emergence of participatory practices, realism increasingly shifted toward relational engagement. Mello demonstrates that participatory documentary redefines realism as collaboration rather than distance. More recently, these researchers conceptualize contemporary realism as an ontological practice, grounded in duration, bodily presence, and shared vulnerability [8,9]. Within this trajectory, realism in post-poverty rural documentaries can be understood as embedded realism, situated within development discourse yet anchored in lived experience.

Rural imaginaries and post-poverty representation

Contemporary documentaries reconfigure rural China through what Zhen et al. term “rural imaginaries” - cinematic constructions that shape how the countryside is emotionally and morally understood. Rather than depicting rural space solely through deprivation, recent documentaries align with the Rural Revitalization discourse by framing the countryside as a site of resilience and renewal.

These rural imaginaries mediate between state policy and personal narrative. In this framework, rural transformation is not presented as abstract progress but as an experiential process grounded in everyday labor and emotional endurance.

Affective realism and documentary ethics

Affective realism positions emotion as a mode of truth and ethical engagement. Pernin demonstrates how emotional narratives enable empathy to function as a form of moral participation [10]. Building on this, Lei et al. emphasize that affective storytelling allows documentaries to translate development discourse into human-scale experience.

In contemporary Chinese rural documentary, emotion replaces confrontation as the dominant ethical strategy. It highlights embodied empathy, where the camera remains with subjects over time, allowing emotion to emerge through restraint rather than spectacle. Affective realism thus transforms documentary ethics from exposure to coexistence [11].

Documentary as development communication

Documentary cinema increasingly operates as a form of development communication, mediating between policy frameworks and rural lived experience. Mello argues that participatory documentary enables grassroots voices to engage with broader social narratives. Lei et al. further suggest that documentary translates macro-level policy into emotionally intelligible stories.

However, this mediation remains constrained. Wang et al. identify a “subaltern narrative paradox”, in which rural voices are amplified within development discourse yet remain structurally bounded. Contemporary rural documentaries negotiate this tension by prioritizing personal agency and emotional authenticity over explicit policy narration.

Cinematic citizenship

The convergence of realism, affect, and rural imaginaries produces what Berry et al. describe as cinematic citizenship. Through affective engagement rather than political instruction, documentary spectatorship becomes a form of ethical participation. As Sun notes, recognition itself constitutes a political act for marginalized rural subjects.

In post-poverty rural documentaries, cinematic citizenship emerges through emotional proximity, patience, and shared temporality, enabling audiences to engage with rural transformation as a collective moral experience.

Narrative structure and character construction in Shepherds on the Divide

Micro-narrative structure and temporal

Design Shepherds on the Divide adopts a micro-narrative structure that organizes national transformation through individual experience. Rather than constructing a linear success story, the film unfolds through episodic fragments of everyday life, emphasizing duration, repetition, and gradual change. This narrative strategy aligns with what these researchers describe as documentary realism grounded in ordinary temporality rather than dramatic causality.

The film’s temporal design resists acceleration. Long takes of daily labor - feeding livestock, tending enclosures, walking across fields - slow down narrative rhythm and foreground process over outcome. Such pacing reflects rural temporality and avoids reducing

revitalization to instantaneous progress. As researcher notes, this attention to duration transforms realism into an embodied experience shared by subject and viewer. By structuring the narrative around routine rather than event, the film situates rural regeneration as a lived process rather than a completed achievement.

The protagonist as narrative anchor

The film’s narrative coherence is sustained through its focus on Shen Guanggui, whose personal trajectory functions as a microcosm of broader rural transformation. Shen is not presented as a heroic figure or exemplary model but as an ordinary villager navigating illness, family disruption, and economic uncertainty. This characterization aligns with Sun’s argument that documentary realism in China often operates through recognition rather than idealization.

Shen’s story unfolds through restrained self-narration and observational scenes rather than explanatory commentary. His voice does not interpret policy or development; instead, it articulates fatigue, hesitation, and cautious hope. This narrative positioning avoids ventriloquism and reflects what Wang et al. identify as an attempt to negotiate the subaltern narrative paradox - allowing the rural subject to speak while remaining within development discourse.

Importantly, Shen’s transformation is incomplete and non-triumphant. The film does not conclude with absolute success but with stability and continuity, reinforcing the ethical realism.

Illness, loss, and emotional continuity

Illness functions as a central narrative motif in Shepherds on the Divide. Shen’s cancer diagnosis and subsequent physical decline are not dramatized but integrated into the rhythm of daily life. This understated representation aligns with Pernin’s conception of affective realism, where emotional truth emerges through accumulation rather than spectacle.

Family separation, particularly the departure of Shen’s wife during his period of vulnerability, introduces emotional rupture without narrative exaggeration. The absence of confrontational dialogue or melodramatic framing allows loss to remain implicit, encouraging empathetic engagement rather than emotional manipulation.

Through this approach, the film constructs emotional continuity between suffering and recovery, presenting

hardship as a condition of rural life rather than an exceptional crisis. Emotion thus becomes a connective element linking personal trauma to collective endurance.

Labor as narrative and moral practice

Labor in the film operates as both narrative structure and moral expression. Scenes of livestock breeding, feeding, and enclosure maintenance recur throughout the film, functioning as temporal markers that replace conventional plot progression. As Lei et al. argue, contemporary rural documentaries often frame labor as a site where policy discourse is translated into embodied practice.

In *Shepherds on the Divide*, labor is depicted without didactic explanation. Training sessions and cooperative activities appear briefly, embedded within Shen's routine rather than highlighted as institutional intervention. This narrative choice emphasizes agency and minimizes overt ideological framing.

By foregrounding labor as repetitive and physically demanding, the film situates revitalization within the ethics of persistence. Work becomes both survival strategy and moral anchor, reinforcing a vision of rural regeneration grounded in endurance rather than transformation spectacle.

Narrative positioning and viewer engagement

The film's narrative perspective remains consistently intimate and non-authoritative. The absence of an external narrator positions the viewer alongside the protagonist rather than above him. This strategy aligns with Mello's discussion of participatory and relational documentary practices, where meaning emerges through proximity rather than instruction.

Viewer engagement is produced through patience and attentiveness. The narrative invites the audience to inhabit rural temporality, fostering ethical spectatorship - a mode of viewing grounded in recognition and responsibility.

Through its narrative restraint, *Shepherds on the Divide* avoids framing rural revitalization as either propaganda or critique. Instead, it offers a shared experiential space in which viewers emotionally participate in the gradual reconstruction of rural life.

Visual language and the politics of image in Shepherds on the Divide

Cinematography and the ethics of looking

The visual language of *Shepherds on the Divide* is

grounded in an observational aesthetic that privileges proximity, duration, and restraint. Handheld camerawork, natural lighting, and medium-to-long shots align the film with the realist tradition of Chinese independent documentary. Rather than asserting visual mastery, the camera remains physically and ethically close to the protagonist, reinforcing a politics of looking based on coexistence rather than surveillance.

This strategy resists spectacle and pity. The camera neither aestheticizes poverty nor dramatizes suffering, maintaining a respectful distance that allows the subject to occupy the frame with autonomy. As Sun argues, such visual restraint constitutes a politics of recognition, granting visibility without symbolic domination. Cinematography thus functions as an ethical stance toward the rural subject.

Framing, space, and rural subjectivity

Framing plays a central role in constructing rural subjectivity. Shen Guanggui is frequently positioned in open landscapes - fields, hillsides, and village paths, rather than in enclosed interiors. This places him within an ecological and social environment and underscores relational existence over individual isolation.

Recurring wide shots of grazing sheep and sloping terrain integrate human labor with natural rhythm. According to Zhen et al., such spatial representation contributes to rural imaginaries that frame the countryside as a space of continuity and regeneration. Interior spaces, when shown, remain modest and functional. Kitchens, bedrooms, and livestock enclosures are filmed without stylization, reinforcing material realism and mapping the tension between vulnerability and endurance central to the film's emotional economy.

Duration, rhythm, and visual temporality

One of the film's most distinctive features is its duration. Extended takes of repetitive labor - feeding animals, repairing fences, walking along paths - slow visual rhythm and resist narrative acceleration. This temporal strategy aligns with what Pollacchi describes as duration-based realism, in which time itself becomes a political element.

By avoiding rapid montage or dramatic editing, the film positions rural life outside urban temporal regimes of efficiency and productivity. Time is experienced as cyclical rather than linear, reinforcing an ethics of patience. As Pernin suggests, such temporal realism

allows affect to accumulate gradually, producing emotional depth without narrative coercion.

Color, light, and affective atmosphere

Color and lighting function as subtle affective devices within the film's visual language. Early sequences are characterized by muted tones - grays, browns, and subdued greens - that echo illness, uncertainty, and emotional withdrawal. As the narrative progresses, warmer hues and softer light increasingly appear, particularly in scenes of pastoral labor.

This chromatic shift operates as an atmospheric transition rather than a symbolic victory arc. Rather than signaling success, light registers emotional stabilization. As Lei et al. note, contemporary rural documentaries often deploy affective atmospheres to translate development discourse into sensory experience. The film's reliance on natural light reinforces authenticity while resisting visual idealization.

The politics of absence: What the camera does not show

Equally significant is what the film chooses not to show. Explicit policy slogans, governmental symbols, and authoritative voiceovers are largely absent. Institutional presence is implied through everyday practices - training sessions, cooperative labor, and infrastructural changes, rather than foregrounded as visual spectacle.

This strategy reflects what Wang et al. describe as the negotiation of the subaltern narrative paradox. By minimizing overt political imagery, the film avoids transforming the protagonist into a symbolic representative of policy success, allowing policy to operate as a background condition rather than a narrative driver.

The politics of absence also extend to moments of crisis. Illness, financial hardship, and family separation are never sensationalized. The camera withdraws at moments of vulnerability, allowing silence and off-screen space to preserve dignity and reinforce ethical realism.

Visual language as cinematic citizenship

Through its visual strategies, *Shepherds on the Divide* constructs a form of cinematic citizenship grounded in affective participation. The camera invites viewers to share space and time with the rural subject, fostering ethical engagement rather than ideological alignment. As researchers argue, documentary spectatorship becomes a civic act when viewers are positioned as witnesses rather

than consumers of meaning.

Visual language thus operates politically through orientation rather than persuasion, shaping recognition and emotional response. In this framework, the image becomes a site where rural experience is encountered rather than explained.

Conclusion

This study has examined *Shepherds on the Divide* as a case of contemporary Chinese rural documentary in the post-poverty era, focusing on how cinematic language mediates between individual experience and national development discourse. Through narrative and visual analysis, the paper argues that the film exemplifies a shift from oppositional realism toward an affective and embedded mode of documentary practice.

First, the analysis shows that contemporary rural documentaries increasingly move beyond exposure or critique as their primary political strategy. In *Shepherds on the Divide*, realism is constructed through emotional proximity, duration, and restraint. By anchoring national transformation in the everyday life of an ordinary villager, the film translates abstract development discourse into lived experience, supporting Lei et al.'s argument that affect has become central to rural revitalization storytelling.

Second, the film reconfigures rural representation through what Zhen et al. describe as rural imaginaries. Rather than depicting the countryside as a space of deprivation or nostalgia, it presents rural life as ethically dense and temporally meaningful. Landscape, labor, and routine frame regeneration as a gradual and embodied process rather than a completed achievement.

Third, the study highlights the ethical significance of affective realism. Emotion in *Shepherds on the Divide* functions not as sentimentality but as a mode of truth, aligning with Pernin's emphasis on empathy as moral participation. Visual restraint and narrative modesty preserve the dignity of the rural subject while fostering viewer engagement grounded in recognition rather than instruction.

These findings contribute to debates on Chinese documentary realism by extending the concept beyond resistance and critique. This study suggests that contemporary realism operates as embedded engagement, acknowledging structural frameworks while privileging lived experience. In this sense, the film participates in

what can be understood as cinematic citizenship - a mode of ethical spectatorship in which viewers engage with social change through affective alignment rather than ideological persuasion.

More broadly, *Shepherds on the Divide* demonstrates how post-poverty Chinese documentary cinema contributes to discussions on development, ethics, and visual representation by offering a human-scale narrative of endurance and coexistence. Contemporary rural documentary thus no longer seeks to frame reality primarily as conflict or critique, but to inhabit social transformation as shared experience marked by patience, proximity, and moral presence.

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Conflict of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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