Alienation of Development Subjects, Decline of Community, and Stigmatization of Farmers: Roots of the Weakening Rural Identity among Chinese Farmers

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Abstract: Humans are pivotal to rural revitalization and sustainable development. In recent years, numerous studies have noted that issues severely constraining the sustainable development of rural China—such as farmland abandonment, inefficient land use, village hollowing, population aging, and ineffective rural governance—are, to a considerable extent, associated with the declining rural identity of farmers. However, few have conducted an in-depth analysis of the roots of this decline or explored strategies to address it. Using methods such as in-depth interviews and fieldwork, this study discovered three cultural roots of the diminishing rural identity among Chinese farmers: (1) the alienation of development subjects resulting from prioritizing economic growth as the sole goal of rural development; (2) the erosion of village communities due to marketization and modernization; and (3) the stigmatization of farmers under developmentalist ideologies. In response, this paper proposes three strategies to enhance farmers' rural identity. These strategies aim to foster positive rural identity, encourage active farmer participation in rural construction, thereby providing continuous momentum for the sustainable development of rural areas.
Keywords: Urban-Rural Identity; Farmer; Rural Identity; Culture Root; Rural Revitalization; Rural Sustainable Development.

1. INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950s, the concept of identity has emerged as a central issue in various academic disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, sociology,

and political science. It addresses profound theoretical questions related to modernity, globalization, power, authenticity, and the relationship between the individual and society (Branje et al., 2021; Erikson, 1994; Grosser, 1996). Scholars have extensively explored key issues such as the essence of identity (Gleason, 1983; Sandström, 2023), the significance and value of identity (Appiah, 2010; Castells, 2010), the various forms of identity (including gender, racial, religious, political, and ethnic identities) and the contradictions and conflicts among them (Huntington, 2004; Sen, 2007; SHAHAM - MAYMON et al., 2024). In China, there exists a distinct and undeniable form of identity—rural-urban identity . On one hand, since the inception of Chinese civilization, rural areas have served as the foundation and core of Chinese society. China's culture, legal system, etiquette, commerce, and industry all "originate from the rural and are designed with the rural in mind" (Liang, 2006). On the other hand, China's transition from a traditional agrarian society to a modern industrial society is, in essence, a dynamic tableau of evolving and contested rural-urban relations. Whether it was the introduction of Western science and technology, political systems, economic models, and cultural ideologies in the 19th century, or the implementation of planned economy policies and the household registration (hukou) system since the founding of the People's Republic of China, these developments have continuously exacerbated the economic, cultural, and lifestyle disparities between urban and rural areas. These dual factors have contributed to the formation of a rural-urban relationship in China that is fundamentally different from that of developed countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom (Wu, 2011). In China, urban and rural areas are not merely geographic concepts defined by function, land use, or population size/density (Halfacree, 1995); rather, they are social and cultural constructs. There exist significant disparities and unequal relationships between China's urban and rural areas in terms of economic development, industrial structure, lifestyle, and cultural traditions (Whyte, 2010). The urban areas symbolize privilege, modernity, and progress, while the rural areas are associated with sacrifice, tradition, and backwardness. Both urban and rural spaces, in their respective ways, reflect and shape the personal and collective values of their inhabitants. The term 'farmer' (nongmin) in China has thus acquired unique connotations and extensions. It is not merely a professional designation referring to agricultural producers but a concept encompassing household registration, culture, and social status, positioned in opposition to the urban citizen. In China, the term 'farmer' is widely used to describe all individuals

with rural household registration, regardless of whether they are engaged in agricultural production (Xue et al., 2017) (this paper adopts the term 'farmer' in this sense). To distinguish agricultural producers from those engaged in non-agricultural labor in urban areas, a particularly distinctive term, 'nongmingong' (this word is commonly translated as 'migrant worker'), was coined. In contemporary Chinese society, the differences between urban and rural areas—or between citizens and farmers—have increasingly replaced factors such as region, clan, and gender as the central framework for the formation of identity among modern Chinese people. In the process of China's gradual industrialization, modernization, and urbanization, a small portion of individuals have successfully transitioned from rural areas to urban centers, shifting from rural to urban household registration. As they reflect on the issues of materialism, consumerism, instrumental rationality, and alienation in urban development, they increasingly yearn for and nostalgically recall their original rural lifestyles (Sandström, 2023), thereby strengthening their rural identity. In contrast, the vast majority of farmers in China, particularly the new generation of farmers born after 1980, have experienced the opposite trend. The majority of them now more readily embrace and aspire to urban modes of production and lifestyle, leading to a gradual weakening of their rural identity (Zhang, 2014). As a profound psychological indicator of individual perception, identity determines one's capacity to engage in productive and practical activities (Appiah, 2010; Basu, 2013). Consequently, scholars have observed that several critical issues constraining the sustainable development of rural China—such as the abandonment of farmland, inefficient land use (Peng et al., 2020), increasing village hollowing (Shen & Chou, 2022), rural population aging, and ineffective rural governance — are, to varying degrees, linked to the decline in rural identity among farmers. However, there remains a notable lack of in-depth and systematic analysis regarding the underlying causes of this decline in rural identity among Chinese farmers, as well as strategies to address this issue. This gap in the literature forms the central impetus for our research inquiry. This paper adopts a combination of in-depth interviews and field surveys to conduct a comprehensive analysis of the cultural roots underlying the decline of rural identity among Chinese farmers. The remainder of the paper is divided into four sections. Section 2 reviews relevant theories of identity and proposes an analytical framework to explain the formation of rural identity among Chinese farmers and the underlying causes of its transformation. Section 3 outlines the research methods and empirical data. Section 4 elaborates on three key causes of the weakening of rural identity

among Chinese farmers:

(1) the alienation of development subjects caused by the exclusive focus on economic growth as the sole objective of rural development;

(2) the decline of village communities brought about by marketization and modernization;

(3) the stigmatization of farmers under the developmentalist ideology. Finally, Section 5 tentatively proposes several feasible paths for enhancing farmers' rural identity.

2. THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS AND ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

'Identity' is an expansive and complex concept. Semantically, the term identity originates from the Latin root idem, meaning "same". During the Enlightenment, the concept of identity became intertwined with the philosophical question of the 'mind-body relationship', addressing inquiries such as:

(1) What is the nature of a person?

(2) What makes a person at two different times one and the same person?

What is necessarily involved in the continued existence of each person over time? (Parfit, 1984). In the 1960s, Erikson's reflections on the relationship between large-scale historical movements and individual personality development shifted focus toward the issue of self-identity. He pointed out that self-identity is the self-awareness and self-definition that an individual forms through participation in society, the internalization of cultural norms, the acquisition of different statuses, and the enactment of various roles (Gleason, 1983). This self-awareness and self-definition encompass significant life aspects such as career, values, and beliefs. However, Castells cautioned that individuals often conflate identity with roles during the process of self-definition. Roles, such as being a worker, a mother, or a vegetarian, are defined by the rules constructed by the institutions and organizations of society. In contrast, identity is actively constructed by individuals as agents; it can only be considered self-identity when actors internalize the socially defined content through self-reflection and construct their meaning around this internalization process (Castells, 2010). In this sense, identity, like social roles, is inherently diverse. It may be ascriptive, territorial, economic, cultural, political, social, and national. The relative salience of these identities to the individual can change from time to time and situation to situation, as can the extent to which these

identities complement or conflict with each other (Huntington, 2004). The formation and transformation of an individual's self-identity is an exceedingly complex process. Following an analysis of Erikson's theory of identity, Gleason observed that identity emerges from the interplay between the internal evolution of individual personality, understood in terms derived from the Freudian id-ego-superego model, and the cultivation of a sense of selfhood that arises from participating in society, internalizing its cultural norms, acquiring different statuses, and playing different roles. It can be argued that an individual's identity in terms of gender, nationality, occupation, and other aspects encompasses multiple dimensions, including the individual self, the groups to which they belong, and the cultural traditions of their broader society. The rural identity of Chinese farmers is no exception. This paper systematically reviews identity theory and develops a theoretical framework encompassing three dimensions—individual, group, and societal—to analyze the formation of rural identity among Chinese farmers and its variations in strength and intensity. First, from the individual dimension, the formation of rural identity among Chinese farmers depends on whether they perceive themselves as being respected as active agents in rural development. Identity is a conscious activity of seeking and reflecting on the self, described as a selective acceptance or affiliation grounded in self-reflection and self-interpretation of the external environment . The philosophical inquiry 'Who am I?' pervades the entirety of human existence. Giddens notes that in pre-modern societies, lineage, gender, social status, and other identity-related characteristics were relatively fixed. Transformations in such attributes required long periods and were constrained by institutionalized processes, wherein the individual's role was relatively passive (Giddens, 2023). In contrast, in modern societies, influenced by Enlightenment philosophy and significant post-Reformation movements emphasizing subjectivity, self-sustenance, and moral introspection, human subjectivity gradually emerged as a key feature. Individuals evolved into beings with intrinsic depth, capable of self-assessment and self-interpretation. Consequently, identity, under the guidance of subjective consciousness, transitions from passive acceptance to active selection and construction. The answer to 'Who am I?' is no longer necessarily dictated or assigned by society but instead reflects the individual's self-reflection and self-determination. This reflexively formed self-definition and self-planning centers on the individual's understanding of a "good life". As Taylor posits, modern identity—essentially the question of 'Who am I?'—cannot necessarily be answered merely by giving name and genealogy. For

us, answering this question involves understanding what holds crucial importance for us (Taylor, 1989). Therefore, an individual's self-identity is a concentrated reflection of their ethical relationship with themselves, expressed through questions such as 'What is important to me?' and 'What constitutes a good life for me?' In other words, individuals in modern society, based on their understanding of the 'good life' they seek, freely choose among various identities and the lifestyles they represent, thereby forming their self-identities—such as identifying as a woman, an agricultural worker, a vegetarian, or a philosopher. At the same time, the formation and variability of these identities are closely tied to social institutions.

Specifically, when individuals participate in social life as women, agricultural workers, or vegetarians and tangibly perceive that institutional designs and policy formulations recognize them as central societal subjects rather than marginal figures—when these systems prioritize the pursuit of the good life they envision—their identities as women, agricultural workers, or vegetarians are continually reinforced; conversely, when such recognition is absent, these identities weaken. In summary, from the perspective of the individual, identity is the result of the interplay between the 'objective institutions' of society and the 'subjective construction' of the self. Thus, we can assert that the formation and variability of Chinese farmers' rural identity are closely tied to whether rural development policies sufficiently respect individual farmers, recognizing them as central subjects of rural construction and prioritizing the realization of their envisioned 'good life'. When farmers have the opportunity to participate as active subjects in rural development, and the pathways of rural progress fully respect the aspirations of the broader farming community as primary agents, enabling them to achieve the good life they desire, farmers develop a strong sense of rural identity. Conversely, when such respect and opportunities are lacking, their sense of rural identity diminishes. Second, from the group dimension, elements such as cultural traditions, customary practices, and moral values within the rural community to which farmers belong constitute the foundational conditions for the formation of their rural identity. Hall points out that the formation of identity must also be grounded in an individual's cognitive recognition of the common origins or shared characteristics of the group to which they belong. An individual is always part of a role group (such as ethnicity, nation, class, political party, etc.) composed of others who share similar characteristics. Identity, as the confirmation of an individual's attributes, involves extending oneself into

various role groups and deriving from them a sense of emotional and value significance conferred by membership within these groups (Grosser, 1996). In this sense, an individual's self-identity entails an affirmation of the 'sameness' within the group they belong to and the 'difference' from external groups. Individuals invariably base their identification on shared characteristics with a particular group, integrating themselves into it and thereby obtaining a sense of belonging and recognition. These shared characteristics not only demarcate the boundaries between different role groups but also serve as a vital force in fostering cohesion and reinforcing identity. Sen points out that not all shared characteristics—such as appearance or birthplace—can serve as the plausible basis for the construction of identity. For example, all the people in the world born between 9:00 and 10:00 a.m. local time form a clearly defined and well-specified group. Yet, it is hard to imagine them feeling excited about achieving solidarity within this group or deriving a sense of identity from it. Similarly, people who wear size 8 shoes typically do not develop a strong sense of identification based on shoe size (Sen, 2007). The shared characteristics that genuinely enable individuals to affiliate with a specific group and form a sense of identity are those that emerge through face-to-face interactions and direct relationships among group members. The shared characteristics that truly enable an individual to belong to a specific group and thus form an identity are the cultural, ideological, preferences, rituals, customs, practices, and memories—spiritual elements—developed through face-to-face interactions and direct connections among group members (Geertz, 1973). These spiritual elements reflect the substantial ethical relationships among group members and can evoke an individual's sense of attachment, belonging, and loyalty to the group, thus facilitating the formation of a specific form of identity. Without these shared values, ideals, lifestyles, and customary practices, even if individuals live in the same area, it is difficult for them to form substantial ethical relationships with others in the area, thereby hindering the development of their own identity. For example, Indian immigrants newly arrived in the United States may live in the same territory as other Americans, but due to differences in values, they may find it difficult to immediately identify as Americans. The village is the fundamental unit of rural society in China. The small-scale, self-sufficient peasant economy organized around the household, confines the scope of farmers' production, livelihood, and social relations within certain natural boundaries, thereby giving rise to a succession of villages as spaces of shared existence. Farmers living in the same village naturally

develop shared emotional preferences within a common geographical environment and landscape, form common customs and practices through cooperative labor and daily life, and establish mutual value judgments and moral norms through face-to-face interactions. These spiritual elements—preferences, customs, practices, beliefs, and memories—formed in rural life not only create substantial ethical relationships among villagers but also demarcate the boundary between farmers and other groups (especially urban dwellers), thus maintaining farmers' rural identity. In this sense, the rural identity of farmers is essentially a form of local identity based on the village, with the common cultural traditions, values, customs, and practices formed over long-term communal living serving as the foundation for the formation of rural identity. The more these shared cultural traditions, values, and customs are preserved, the stronger the rural identity of farmers. Conversely, if these shared cultural traditions, values, and customs gradually disappear, farmers' rural identity will gradually weaken. Third, from a social dimension, the formation of farmers' rural identity is inseparable from the recognition they receive from society. The formation of identity is inevitably shaped by the recognition granted by society. Recognition has been proposed as a fundamental requirement of social justice.

With the rapid development of new social movements, the demands for social justice have shifted from being confined to the economic redistribution of resources and wealth to a cultural recognition of the uniqueness and social value of oppressed, excluded, and marginalized groups. Fraser argues that social recognition, like redistribution, is one of the 'folk paradigms of justice'. These paradigms correspond to 'identity' and 'class' respectively. First, in the redistribution paradigm, the subjects of injustice are class-like or class-based collectivities, such as the working class described by Marx, and racially marginalized minorities who can be defined economically. These groups are defined through their unique relationship to markets or modes of production. They are viewed as a pool of low-paid menial laborers or as an 'underclass' largely excluded from regular waged work, deemed 'superfluous' and not worth exploiting. In contrast, in the recognition paradigm, the victims of injustice are low-status groups who receive lesser respect, esteem, and prestige in society. Within mainstream cultural values, they are considered of lesser worth and face significant barriers to gaining societal respect. Second, in terms of the manifestations of injustice, the paradigm of redistribution highlights that injustice is rooted in socioeconomic structures and is expressed through forms such as

exploitation (appropriating one's labor for the benefit of others), economic marginalization (confined to low-income work or excluded from income-generating labor entirely), and deprivation (denial of adequate material living standards). The paradigm of recognition, by contrast, emphasizes that injustice occurs at the cultural level, embedded in societal patterns of communication and representation. Its manifestations include cultural domination, nonrecognition, and disrespect. Cultural domination refers to subjugation to the communicative and interpretative norms of another culture. Nonrecognition entails the denial of authoritative representation and communication of one's culture. Disrespect is reflected in the devaluation, defamation, and stigmatization of a group within public cultural narratives and daily interactions. (Fraser & Honneth, 2003). The form of injustice emphasized within the recognition paradigm exerts a significant influence on individuals' identity. If the people or society around an individual or group mirror back to them a confining, demeaning, or contemptible picture of them, it generates a sense of shame. In other words, a lack of recognition or distorted recognition can cause profound harm, constituting a form of oppression that imprisons individuals in a false, distorted, and diminished mode of existence. (Taylor, 1994). For Chinese farmers, with the advancement of agricultural modernization, the integration of urban and rural industries, poverty alleviation, and targeted poverty reduction efforts, the economic injustices they once faced have gradually diminished. They now have increased opportunities to freely participate in socio-economic activities, and their material living standards have greatly improved. As a result, cultural injustice has become a crucial dimension for understanding the rural identity of Chinese farmers and its variations in strength. If agriculture, rural areas, and farmers are stigmatized in public cultural representations or frequently subjected to denigration in daily life, it will inevitably have a negative impact on farmers' sense of rural identity.

3. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In terms of data collection and overall approach, we employed a well-established qualitative methodology combining literature analysis and field research, which included in-depth interviews and participant observation. In the summers of 2022 and 2023, we conducted semi-structured in-depth interviews with 43 farmers from four villages: HT Village in Guangxi Province, JB Village in Yunnan Province, QXZ Village in Beijing, and LGT

Village in Tianjin. The purpose was to obtain first-hand information on the authentic lives and value systems of Chinese farmers. The selection of interview participants took into account key demographic variables, such as age, gender, occupation, and income, and was assisted by local village committee staff in making initial contact. The interviews were carried out by a team of two to three researchers, with interview questions tailored to the specific circumstances of each participant. The process was designed to explore their life experiences, including personal histories and social contexts, in order to better understand their situations, actions, and attitudes through their lived experiences and the patterns of meaning they construct. We selected four villages from different regions of China to ensure the generalizability of the research findings through comparison, synthesis, and inductive reasoning. Given China's vast geographical expanse, there are significant differences among regions in terms of natural resources, levels of economic development, and cultural traditions, with rich and diverse regional and local characteristics. Therefore, by conducting field research in a variety of representative villages from different regions, and correlating and comparing the findings, we aim to gain a deeper understanding of the root causes behind the weakening of rural identity among Chinese farmers. Based on this, we seek to provide more universally applicable methodological resources for rural construction and sustainable rural development. In addition to the in-depth interviews, we also conducted detailed participant observation of local villagers' everyday lives, which served as a supplementary method to the interviews. Researchers were well-prepared in advance, familiar with the specific goals of the study and the areas to be observed, so as to systematically record and observe relevant phenomena. During the field observations in each village, research team members closely observed local villagers' daily habits, behaviors, interpersonal relationships, and psychological states at all times and in all locations. At the same time, during the observation process, efforts were made to maintain a level of emotional detachment to ensure that the phenomena observed were analyzed with objectivity and rationality.

4. THE ROOT CAUSES OF THE WEAKENING OF RURAL IDENTITY AMONG CHINESE FARMERS

Authors should discuss the results and how they can be interpreted from the perspective of previous studies and of the working hypotheses. The findings and their implications should be discussed in the broadest context

possible. Future research directions may also be highlighted.

4.1. The Alienation of Development Subjects Resulting from Prioritizing Economic Growth as the Sole Goal

For an extended period, economic growth was regarded as the sole objective of rural development in China, leading to the alienation of the rural development subject. Farmers, who were once the central agents of rural development, were relegated to mere instruments for achieving economic growth, with their needs and subjective well-being largely overlooked. This constitutes the first root cause of the weakening of rural identity among Chinese farmers. On the one hand, the pursuit of economic growth has led policymakers, whether consciously or unconsciously, to equate the farmers' vision of a good life with the accumulation of material wealth, neglecting their needs for security, environment, equality, and justice. For instance, in order to achieve rapid rural economic growth, local governments have largely adopted large-scale operations led by industrial and commercial enterprises (Geng et al., 2022). To maximize profits through scale, these enterprises require vast, contiguous tracts of land. Such large-scale land consolidation often results in rural land transfers being implemented in an integrated manner across entire villages or village groups, meaning that the vast majority, if not all, of the arable land in the affected areas is transferred as a unified whole. However, not all farmers are willing to transfer their land. Unlike merchants, farmers tend to prioritize a 'safety-first' survival ethic in their decision-making. They do not seek to maximize income but rather aim for lower risk distribution and greater security in their livelihoods (Scott, 1977). Currently, pure farming households and part-time farming households constitute the vast majority of all households in China. For pure farming households, most are constrained by factors such as age, education level, and physical condition, making it impossible for them to seek work outside their villages. Cultivating their contracted land becomes their only means of securing the basic necessities of life and accumulating funds for family development, such as children's education, building homes, or family expansion through marriage and childbirth. For part-time farming households, although cultivating land is no longer the sole source of family income, it serves as the minimum safeguard for their livelihood. After all, temporary jobs in cities are fraught with risks and uncertainties, and migrant workers often face the threat of unemployment due to injuries, low education levels, inadequate skills, or policy changes. In such circumstances, retaining a

portion of land for cultivation becomes the best strategy for farmers to mitigate market risks. When they cannot find work in the city, returning to rural areas to farm provides basic subsistence and secures their and their family's survival. However, the centralized transfer of land may expose farmers to the risk of land being difficult to restore for cultivation. For instance, if the transferred farmland is used for concentrated cultivation of fruits, vegetables, or other cash crops, it can result in reduced soil fertility and increased susceptibility to pests and diseases. When the land transfer contract expires, the reclaimed farmland may no longer be suitable for cultivating economic crops, significantly reducing farmers' income and making it difficult for them to sustain their basic livelihoods. If the transferred farmland is repurposed for constructing factory buildings or other infrastructure, even though enterprises and governments may promise to restore the land after the lease expires, land covered with concrete is challenging to rehabilitate for farming. Zhu (Female, 28 years old, interviewed on August 15, 2022), a farmer from JB Village expressed that her mother was one of the staunch opponents of centralized land transfers. She said:

Compared to villages in other places, our village's development mainly relies on land acquisition and continuous expansion. When the village consulted everyone about whether we agreed to lease the land to developers to build factories, I was really happy because it meant I wouldn't have to dig up sweet potatoes or pull peanuts anymore. But my mom was strongly opposed to it. She believed that once the land was taken, it would never come back. Without land, she felt like she had nothing to do. She wouldn't be able to take up other kinds of work, and without land, she had no sense of security. She thought that in the future, she'd have to rely on us, her children, to support her.

Through the above analysis, it becomes evident that a conflict exists in rural China between farmers' need to retain arable land for risk mitigation and basic survival, and local governments' objectives of driving economic growth through large-scale agricultural operations. In addressing this conflict, local governments often prioritize economic growth, leveraging their political authority, social influence, and administrative power to compel unwilling farmers to transfer their land. This approach neglects farmers' 'safety-first' needs, which are central to their livelihoods and sense of security. During interviews, Luo (Male, 71 years old, interviewed on July 29, 2022) from HT Village highlighted the lack of respect for farmers' opinions and needs in land acquisition processes. He stated:

As far as I know, land acquisition is a significant point of contention among villagers. I'm not sure about the state's specific plans, but some villagers have had all their land expropriated, leaving them with no private plots. They are also dissatisfied with the

compensation arrangements. Villagers have raised these concerns for a long time, but nothing has been resolved.

On the other hand, given the relatively low economic income of farmers, measures aimed at stimulating rural consumption as a means of driving rural economic development have, in practice, exacerbated farmers' (particularly low-income farmers) sense of lagging behind others, thereby reducing their sense of happiness and satisfaction. The 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China emphasized the need to firmly grasp the strategic basis of expanding domestic demand, accelerate the establishment of long-term mechanisms for increasing consumption, and unlock the consumption potential of residents. The 19th National Congress further stipulated the need to enhance the fundamental role of consumption in economic development. As an agricultural nation, the state of rural consumption is directly linked to the broader national economic landscape. Thus, expanding domestic demand—particularly rural consumption demand—and leveraging farmers' consumption to drive economic growth have become central aspects of China's current rural economic and social development strategy. It is undeniable that farmers, based on their genuine needs, have a certain level of consumption desire (referred to as 'authentic desire'). However, this desire is often inflated by external influences such as social systems, culture, and the environment, transforming into greed. This greed goes beyond the objective needs and conditions necessary for farmers' survival and development, becoming a false sense of scarcity stemming from subjective desire, termed 'false need', as illustrated in Figure 1.

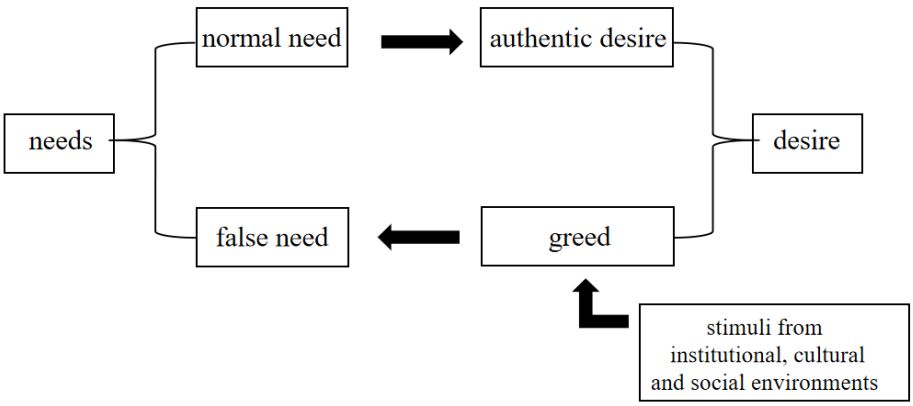

Figure 1: Structural Relationship Diagram of Needs and Desires.

As a result, unrestrained stimulative consumption policies and the market economy have led farmers' consumption tendencies to shift from fulfilling practical and survival needs, and even from enjoying life, toward conspicuous consumption. This trend focuses on showcasing financial

power, social status, and prestige to evoke envy, respect, or jealousy from others. Field research conducted in QXZ Village, corroborates this phenomenon. Several villagers such as Zhao (Female, 50 years old, interviewed on July 10, 2023) shared the experiences of their life:

Nowadays, people in the village hold wedding banquets, celebrate childbirth, or host birthday parties in urban venues because everyone thinks having such events in the village is not prestigious enough. If someone holds their event in the village, it means their family has no money or capability, which is considered shameful. The bride price for weddings is also rising—previously it was 10,000 yuan, but now it's 66,000 or 88,000 yuan. In some cases, the bride's family even requires the groom's family to buy a house and a car, with total expenses running into hundreds of thousands of yuan. Additionally, birthday celebrations are becoming more elaborate, including events for 60th, 66th, 80th, and 88th birthdays. Many families don't actually have much money and cannot afford these weddings or banquets, so they borrow or take out loans, which creates significant financial pressure. In my opinion, this is irrational, vain, and wasteful—it has gone too far.

In this competitive and ostentatious consumption culture, farmers are unable to experience a genuine sense of achievement, happiness, or security as the main stakeholders of rural development. Instead, they often feel like tools being exploited to fuel economic growth, perpetually "forced" into consumption. In summary, under this rural development model driven by an exclusive focus on economic growth, farmers have been gradually excluded from being the central agents of rural development. The goals of rural development are no longer designed to serve the interests of farmers, with the ultimate outcome being that farmers are unable to achieve their vision of a good life through the development and construction of their villages. Consequently, as farmers' subjectivity becomes increasingly established, they find it difficult to cultivate a strong sense of rural identity. This is reflected in their actions, as they strive to escape rural life through avenues such as pursuing higher education, enlisting in the military, migrating to urban areas for work, or purchasing property in towns and cities.

4.2. The Decline of Village Communities Under the Forces of Marketization and Modernization

The second reason for the weakening of rural identity among Chinese farmers is the decline of village communities caused by rural marketization and modernization. This decline refers to the gradual erosion of shared traditions, customs, conventions, and moral values formed through the 'face-to-face' interactions and communal living of farmers in the same

village. As discussed in the second section of this paper, in traditional society, Chinese farmers, living in close-knit villages on the foundation of a self-sufficient natural economy with minimal mobility, formed village communities characterized by geographical proximity and direct social interactions. These communities integrated production, daily life, reproduction, socializing, and entertainment. Through long-term, stable communal production and living, coupled with oral transmission and direct interpersonal communication, villagers developed highly unified collective memories, cultural traditions, customs, conventions, and values. These intangible elements formed the spiritual foundation that fostered farmers' strong sense of rural identity. However, during the historical transition from traditional to modern society, the natural economy that served as the foundation for rural communities was gradually replaced by the market economy. Under the influence of market forces, initiatives such as land transfers, rural-to-urban labor migration, and the conversion of rural villages into urban neighborhoods (village-to-residence reform) have been implemented. These changes have significantly disrupted the close, face-to-face connections among farmers, directly dismantling the natural and ethical boundaries of traditional rural communities. As a result, farmers' sense of rural identity has been significantly weakened. First, with the development of the market economy, an increasing number of farmers are actively or passively participating in market transactions. The small-scale farming model, which is based on family units, has severely restricted the development of agriculture and farmers. Therefore, measures to promote rural land transfers, accelerate the development of agricultural cooperatives, promote the scale of agricultural production, improve agricultural mechanization, and reduce labor input have become the mainstream direction of agricultural development in China under the market economy. The development of agricultural mechanization has resulted in a significant release of agricultural labor, with many farmers being freed from agricultural production and subsequently migrating in large numbers to industrial enterprises and surrounding cities. These long-term migrant workers have been separated from rural spaces and rural life for extended periods. They lack face-to-face interactions with fellow villagers, making them increasingly unfamiliar with local knowledge, cultural traditions, customs, and practices that were once passed down orally. Over time, cities have gradually replaced rural areas as the 'spiritual homeland' that modern farmers aspire to. As a result, it has become more difficult for them to develop an emotional attachment to the land, a sense of belonging to the village, or an identification with rural identity. During

the interviews, many farmers expressed that, compared to the older generation, young people born after the 1980s are increasingly unlikely to return to rural life. Although their household registration remains in the village, they no longer show interest in village affairs and may not even recognize the villagers. They feel little sense of belonging or identity with the countryside. Secondly, the market economy and the modernization of villages have led to a gradual decline in the public spaces for interaction among residents within the village. Farmers who remain in the village have fewer opportunities to engage with each other, which makes it increasingly difficult for villagers to maintain or form new moral norms, customs, and practices that could foster a sense of rural identity. For example, when the market economy was less developed, activities such as well-digging, house-building, and hosting weddings or funerals were commonly carried out with the mutual help of fellow villagers. If your family was building a house, I would help carry bricks and beams; the next time my family was digging a well, you would come to help. These were informal, customary practices based on mutual cooperation. In this process of collaboration and mutual assistance, the bonds among farmers became stronger, creating a sense of mutual dependence and a deeper sense of belonging and identification with the village as a collective. However, with the marketization and professionalization of activities such as house-building, well-digging, and weddings and funerals in rural areas, various companies, including construction firms, wedding planners, and funeral service providers, now offer specialized and efficient services. As a result, these tasks no longer require the collective participation and assistance of fellow villagers, which has significantly reduced the opportunities for mutual help and interaction among villagers. Jiang (Male, 18 years old, interviewed on July 10, 2023), an interviewee from QXZ Village said:

In the past, whenever someone in the village had something going on, like building a house or getting married, people would just show up to help, without being asked. They came to give a hand, not for your food or to get paid. But now, that's very rare. Nowadays, building a house is often contracted out to outside workers or small subcontractors. They charge a set rate per square meter, and people don't help each other as much anymore. Mainly because now, with more opportunities to work outside and earn money, no one wants to waste their time helping others instead of earning their own. It's an economic society now, and everyone calculates the cost of helping others.

Another example is that the modernization of rural areas has led to the widespread adoption of modern communication technologies such as television, mobile phones, and the internet. As a result, farmers' social interactions are no longer confined to their villages. During their free time,

people rarely choose to chat in the fields; instead, they prefer to stay at home, browsing the internet, watching television, or playing games. Wang (Male, 21 years old, interviewed on August 15, 2022), a resident of JB Village, shared that the internet now occupies most of the villagers' leisure time. He said,

Before the village had internet, older people would gather to chat or visit each other. But since every household got wireless internet, people have become less willing to go outside. Now, everyone stays at home watching Douyin (TikTok) or watching TV. Also, our village doesn't have a public square or community activity rooms, so there are few opportunities for villagers to interact.

It can be observed that in the process of marketization and modernization of rural China, traditional specific places, spaces, or activities that once brought villagers together for communication (such as riversides, ancestral halls, and house-building activities) are gradually disappearing. Meanwhile, new public activities and platforms for villagers to interact have yet to be established. As a result, the shared values, moral standards, customs, and cultural memories that were once formed through collective living and socializing are also fading, leading to a gradual weakening of farmers' rural identity. Among the farmers we interviewed, many expressed the view that they are merely defined as farmers by their household registration and occupation. In reality, they no longer have any substantial spiritual or ethical connection with the village or other farmers. Consequently, they often find it difficult to emotionally perceive themselves as part of the village and are unable to develop a positive sense of rural identity.

4.3. The Stigmatization of Farmers Under the Developmentalist Ideology

The third major reason for the decline in rural identity among Chinese farmers lies in the stigmatization of farmers under the developmentalist ideology. Developmentalism is a discourse and ideology rooted in modernity, with its core premise being that economic growth is a prerequisite for social progress. It equates development with 'economic growth' and further equates 'economic growth' with a good life. Since industrialization and urbanization are the primary pathways for achieving economic growth, developmentalism inherently promotes and glorifies urbanization and industrialization in its discourse. (Hong & Ngok, 2022) As a result, the prevalence of developmentalist discourse in China has created a 'web of truth', wherein everything that facilitates economic growth and development (such as industrialization, urbanization, economic

rationality, and the market economy) is deemed good and worthy of pursuit. Conversely, anything that hinders economic growth or runs counter to development (such as agriculture, rural areas, and farmers) is viewed as needing transformation or negation. This has resulted in Chinese farmers experiencing injustices within the "paradigm of recognition" at the socio-cultural level, specifically in the form of disrespect, as discussed in the second section of the article. The contempt experienced by Chinese farmers is primarily manifested through their stigmatization. The term 'stigma' refers to a label originally created to expose individuals who bear it as having unusual and disgraceful moral standing (Goffman, 2009), carrying connotations of degradation, discrimination, and insult. In pre-modern societies, the identity labels attached to farmers were mostly positive, such as being diligent, simple, wise, and kind. However, since the Opium War, influenced by Western social Darwinism, many Chinese intellectuals began to view industrialization, urbanization, and modernization as the reasons behind the West's dominance at the center of the world, while agriculture, rural areas, and farmers were seen as the root causes of China's poverty and backwardness. During this period, China witnessed the emergence of a "rural construction" movement aimed at transforming rural areas and farmers, with the goal of achieving Western-style urbanization and modernization. For instance, Shuming Liang, aiming to integrate governance, education, and economic improvement, established schools in places like Zouping, Shandong, attempting to use culture and education to transform farmers, with the hope of enhancing their cultural literacy and subsequently revitalizing rural areas. Similarly, James Yen identified four major issues among Chinese farmers—ignorance, poverty, weakness, and selfishness—and proposed that these could be addressed through the 'Four Big Educational Programs': literacy, livelihood, health, and civic education. Later, Mao Zedong and the Chinese Communists emphasized the importance of educating farmers. During the land reform in Communist-controlled areas, rural cultural programs were implemented, including night schools, literacy classes, lectures, and new plays aimed at building a socialist ideological foundation and transforming the backward thoughts and feudal customs of the peasant masses. While these movements contributed to the modernization of rural areas and farmers, they also fostered a societal consensus that gradually stigmatized the identity of farmers. The characteristics of farmers came to be increasingly described as backward, undesirable, and uncivilized. (Cohen, 1993). In the early years after the founding of the People's Republic of

China, the Chinese government implemented a household registration system that divided rural and urban residents into two entirely distinct types of household registration. This system granted urban residents numerous privileges that rural residents could not enjoy, such as in employment, housing, healthcare, and education. The government imposed strict restrictions on rural residents moving to cities in order to control the urban population. For example, on November 26, 1952, *People's Daily* reported that many areas had recently found it necessary to discourage farmers from migrating blindly to cities. On April 17, 1953, the State Council issued a directive to "discourage the blind migration of farmers to urban areas," marking the first time the government took official action to prevent farmers from moving to cities. On January 9, 1958, the *Regulations on Household Registration of the People's Republic of China* further stipulated that citizens wishing to move from rural areas to cities must possess an employment certificate from the urban labor department, an admission letter from a school, or a permit to transfer their household registration from the urban registration office. For those farmers who entered cities without proper registration, both central and local governments would periodically encourage them to return to rural areas. According to Whyte, this periodic repatriation of migrant workers from cities to rural areas became a form of punishment for both rural and urban residents, exacerbating the devaluation of rural life and reinforcing the notion that farmers were 'second-class citizens' (Whyte, 1996). It can be said that the implementation of the aforementioned policies and the practice of encouraging farmers to return to their villages led to the belief that only those with the ability, skills, talent, or connections could transition from being farmers to urbanites. Consequently, farmers were labeled as incapable, unskilled, and inferior. The response of a respondent Hu (Male, 63 years old, interviewed on August 3, 2022) from LGT village further corroborates this reality. He said:

We in LGT village all believed that studying was useful. In the 1950s and 1960s, not to mention getting into university, even if one was admitted to a vocational school, one could be assigned a job in the city after graduation. Many of my classmates really saw their fate change overnight. Yesterday, they were working in the fields with a hoe, sweating in the rural lands. After the exams, they received their admission letters, and their household registrations were immediately transferred to the city, making them urban residents. They got stable jobs and enjoyed various benefits. The identity of an urban resident was a great temptation for us farmers, so our village developed a strong culture of studying. The children performed well academically, and everyone wanted to change

their fate through education and become urbanites.

After the reform and opening-up, the Chinese government implemented large-scale policy adjustments, leading to a loosening of its control over farmers. Farmers gained the freedom to migrate between urban and rural areas, and an increasing number of them began working in cities. However, with the increased interaction and contact between urban and rural residents, the stigmatization of farmers became more severe. The long-term rural lifestyle and agricultural labor left many distinctive marks on farmers' bodies and behaviors, such as dark skin, loud voices, habits of spitting and relieving themselves in public, and wearing outdated or dirty clothes. These traits were incompatible with the urban lifestyle and habits. The differences in lifestyles led to misunderstandings and even conflicts between urban and rural residents as they interacted more frequently. Dominant urban culture, through media reports and other channels, attached negative labels such as uncivilized, uneducated and backward to the rural physical traits exhibited by farmers, creating a 'group bias'. It can be said that under the developmentalist ideology, farmers are portrayed as "others" in a subordinate and marginalized social position—poor, vulnerable, and backward, in need of assistance. The labels of being incapable, unproductive, and without a future became stigmas that farmers found difficult to shake off. From the perspective of identity and social recognition theory, this insult and discrimination against farmers effectively deprives them of the opportunity to gain recognition and respect based on their abilities and intrinsic value. The direct consequence of this is that farmers cannot view themselves as meaningful and valuable members of society. They are unable to achieve positive self-understanding and identity recognition through mutual recognition and respect. Farmers themselves also perceive farming as a sign of personal inability, while they see working as a laborer or engaging in business as symbols of capability and competence, essential ways to gain social and others' recognition and respect. In our interviews, when we asked the respondents what their ideal profession was, the overwhelming majority answered that it was public servant, corporate manager, teacher, doctor, or other high-status, respected professions. Only three respondents answered that being a farmer was their ideal profession. However, when we further asked these three why they considered farming to be an ideal job, they explained, 'I can't do anything else but farming, I can only be a farmer, I can only live in the countryside.' When we asked if they would want their children to continue being farmers, all of them answered negatively.

5. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

With the increasing flow and exchange of populations between urban and rural areas, the traditional binary oppositions between the urban and the rural have been disrupted (Bhabha, 2012). Consequently, Chinese farmers' self-identity has begun to exhibit fluid and hybrid characteristics. As long as Chinese farmers adopt a 'semi-agricultural, semi-labor' mode of production and lifestyle, their self-identity remains a continuous and evolving process (Xue et al., 2017). However, on one hand, restrictions imposed by the dual urban-rural household registration system and discriminatory policies by local governments regarding migrant farmers' access to employment, education, healthcare, and other social security services hinder many migrant farmers from gaining confidence in urban social life. This significantly limits their ability to penetrate the identity boundary of urban residents (Shi et al., 2017). On the other hand, as argued in this paper, rural development has overlooked the core needs of farmers; the gradual reduction of spiritual elements that solidify rural identity; and the social and cultural contempt faced by farmers. These three factors have contributed to the weakening of farmers' rural identity. It can be said that Chinese farmers are experiencing an identity crisis characterized by 'dual-ambiguity' 'space-time dislocation' and 'aspirations-drifting'. This crisis has severely impacted their enthusiasm for participating in social production and daily life. It is undeniable that for a considerable period in the foreseeable future, Chinese cities will be unable to provide decent employment opportunities and adequate living conditions for all rural households. Agriculture and rural areas will continue to serve as a fallback for many farmers, particularly those who fail to establish themselves in urban settings and are compelled to return to the countryside. Moreover, returning farmers who possess urban production and life experiences, higher educational qualifications, and advanced skills constitute a crucial driving force for rural development and construction. Therefore, fostering a positive rural identity among farmers and encouraging them to engage actively in rural life are essential for the sustainable development of rural areas. Based on the cultural roots of the weakening rural identity among Chinese farmers as pointed in this paper, we can focus on the following three aspects to strategically guide farmers toward forming a positive rural identity. First, it is essential to position farmers as the central driving force of rural development and to align rural construction and development with farmers' aspirations for a better life. Specifically, the ultimate goal of rural development should be to fulfill the vision of a desirable life as anticipated

by farmers. Capital, technology, economic growth, and environmental improvement should be regarded as the means and driving forces for rural development, subordinated to the overarching aim of realizing farmers' well-being and their free and comprehensive development. As Zhang (Male, 53 years old, interviewed on July 29, 2022) from HT Village, remarked：

For future rural revitalization, I hope that rural construction and governance projects will be implemented pragmatically. Superficial or image-focused projects should be minimized. Instead, efforts should address the practical problems faced by farmers, such as enhancing water conservancy projects, improving drainage and flood control systems, reducing flood risks, and preventing homes from being submerged. These measures can help villagers lead normal lives.

Only when rural development prioritizes the realization of farmers' aspirations for a better life can farmers genuinely feel respected as the principal agents of rural development, thereby fostering a positive rural identity. Simultaneously, a critical reassessment of the metrics used to evaluate rural development is necessary. In evaluating the outcomes of rural development, it is imperative to break away from a GDP-centric approach. Instead, farmers' subjective sense of fulfillment and happiness should be established as the ultimate standard for assessing rural development, while recognizing the instrumental value of productivity growth and social progress as complementary criteria. Second, it is essential to create new public interaction spaces and activity platforms such as village cultural plazas, moral lecture halls, recreational activity rooms, and village WeChat accounts. These platforms can foster spiritual elements—preferences, customs, habits, and memories—that sustain rural identity within the farmer community. Notably, the processes of agricultural modernization and urban-rural integration have diversified the industrial structures and population compositions of Chinese villages, leading to significant changes in farmers' production methods, lifestyles, and residential patterns. The traditional rural communities built on small-scale agricultural economies, where everyone knew each other, are no longer attainable. Similarly, the shared experiences of farmers engaging in the same occupations, listening to the same broadcasts, singing the same songs, watching the same movies, and attending the same schools are a thing of the past. In this context, constructing new public interaction spaces and activity platforms cannot rely on mechanically restoring traditional spaces and channels of rural interaction. Modern farmers can no longer return to fields, wells, or riversides for direct face-to-face interaction to establish

close-knit relationships. Moreover, it is unrealistic to expect that rigid, traditional customs, habits, and memories, which are often incompatible with modern life, can serve as effective ties to consolidate rural identity. Therefore, the construction of new public interaction spaces and activity platforms must fully mobilize farmers' agency, encouraging them to spontaneously create public interaction platforms and spaces that align with their new production methods, lifestyles, and residential forms. Field research has revealed that, compared to top-down, government-organized collective activities such as 'song dianying xia xiang' (movie screenings in rural areas) or 'song shu xia xiang' (government-led initiatives to distribute books and establish reading rooms in rural areas), activities created by farmers themselves, rooted in their traditional culture and tailored to their lifestyles, interests, and habits, are far more popular. For instance, during a 2018 field study in HH Village, Wuxi, Jiangsu Province, it was observed that the village had completed its residential centralization with the establishment of the 'HH shijiyuan' (one Modern residential community) in 2005. Each building in the community had an identical design, with the ground floor designated as a garage. However, in practice, villagers spontaneously converted these garages into kitchens and dining rooms. Meals were typically enjoyed on the ground floor, and some families even placed dining tables outside to share dinner while chatting with neighbors. This transformation of garages into kitchens exemplifies the innovative wisdom of contemporary Chinese farmers in creating new public interaction platforms. Through regular communication and interaction, villagers in HH developed strong internal cohesion and a shared rural identity (Figure 2).

Figure 2: A Photo of the HH Village Garage Conversion

Similarly, in LGT Village, local officials discovered villagers' interests in calligraphy and painting, organizing regular events such as the 'guxiangqing

shuhuazhan' (calligraphy and painting exhibition expressing hometown affection) and 'nongmin xie jinju' (the farmers writing good phrases) activity. These events received enthusiastic participation and have become key platforms for social interaction among villagers. Additionally, the village committee embraced the digital era by establishing a WeChat account to regularly share information about community events and development achievements. One village official, Wei (Male, 25 years old, interviewed on August 3, 2022), noted during an interview that a significant number of villagers actively share WeChat posts, often adding proud comments. Even villagers who have lived away from the village for an extended period express feelings of happiness and pride when they see these updates. These initiatives not only stimulate a sense of pride, belonging, and identity among villagers but also encourage active participation. As farmers engage in these activities, they strengthen their connections with one another, creating new customs, values, and cultural memories that sustain their emotional attachment to the village and reinforce their rural identity (Figure 3).

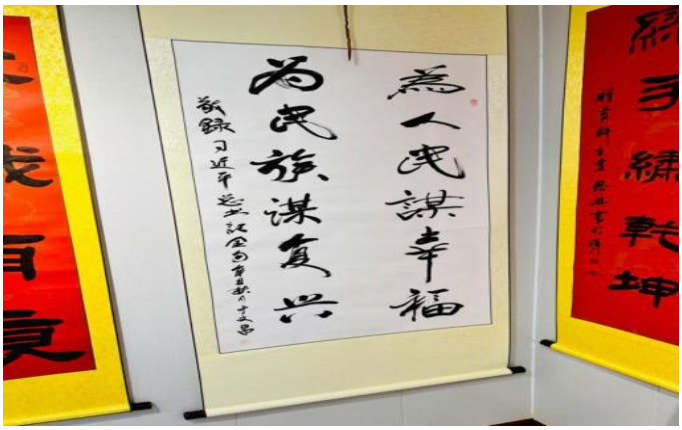

Figure 3: LGT Village 'Nongmin Xie Jinju' (the Farmers Writing Good Phrases) Activity

Finally, a thorough critique of the modern logic that prioritizes cities and industry should be conducted, with efforts to eliminate the stigmatizing labels attached to farmers. This can be approached from two main aspects: First, the establishment of a professional certification and access mechanism for farmers is essential. In contemporary Chinese society, agricultural production is often viewed as a simple labor requiring only physical strength and basic experience, with minimal professional knowledge or skills involved. This perception contributes to the negative labels applied to farmers, such as backward, clumsy, or incapable. The creation of a professional certification and access mechanism for farmers would mean that only those who have undergone professional training and

obtained qualifications would be allowed to engage in agricultural production. This would elevate the status of farmers to that of other professionals such as teachers, doctors, and lawyers, allowing them to break free from these negative and stigmatizing labels. Second, leveraging new digital media platforms can grant farmers greater voice and offer opportunities to reshape the image of agriculture and rural life. In recent years, short video platforms such as 'Douyin' (Tik Tok), Worker and Little Red Book have provided farmers with opportunities to reframe their image and showcase excellent rural culture. The government can encourage farmers to live stream real rural life, agricultural production, and rural culture by improving rural internet infrastructure, providing equipment support, and offering technical training. These efforts would allow farmers to present the new socialist modern countryside and the new farmer to the public, thereby changing the stereotype of agriculture, rural areas, and farmers. In the conclusion of this paper, we would like to emphasize that the exploration of the cultural roots of the weakening rural identity among farmers and the discussion of feasible paths to guide farmers toward forming a positive rural identity is not intended to bind farmers to the land or to villages, nor to limit their opportunities and rights to pursue diverse lifestyles. Rather, the goal is to ensure that farmers can live a life of reunion, prosperity, happiness, and modernization in the villages where they have lived for generations. It is to enable them to enjoy social security, health insurance, housing subsidies, and to receive respect from society, thus gaining dignity, meaning, and value in their lives. More importantly, when farmers develop a positive self-identity and gain the dignity, meaning, and value of being human through their farmer identity, they will be more actively engaged in rural construction and development. This will inject the main driving force into rural revitalization and sustainable development.

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