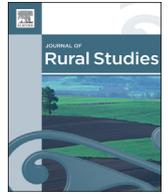


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# My dream life in a rural world: A nonfiction media representation of rural idyll in Taiwan<sup>☆</sup>

Ho-chia Chueh<sup>\*</sup>, Yi-Hua Lu

Department of Bio-Industry Communication and Development, National Taiwan University, Taiwan

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## ABSTRACT

While the 'nonfiction entertainment' television programme is a popular genre in this postmodern and media-saturated age, there is as yet no research in rural studies that have shown interest in the media's new discourse on rural idyll. This paper involves an empirical study that critically analyses Taiker Etude's representations of the rural environment and lifestyles - Taiker Etude is a Taiwanese nonfiction entertainment television programme. Our focus in this paper is Taiker Etude's role as the mediator of taste that governs the manner in which an ever-increasing number of people establish new lives in Taiwan's countryside. We adopt Norman Fairclough's critical discourse in analysing Taiker Etude's representation of the rural idyll. Taiker Etude presents the ideal lifestyle in rural areas as including the building of themed dream-houses and the joy of gardening as a physical experience in the rural life. This representation of the rural idyll not only over idealises and romanticises rural life, but it also reflects a middle class perspective. In this way, Taiker Etude contributes to the reaffirmation of established classes and other structures in the rural setting. Furthermore, we argue that the significance of contemporary meaning of the rural idyll is not only reflected in audience-driven lifestyle media, but more importantly is reflected in discussions related to new social media. This reminds researchers that this new media genre will be an important field of study in the future for exploring the meaning of the rural idyll.

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## 1. Introduction

The aim of realising the rural idyll is, in the literature of urban-rural migration, one of the most documented reasons why people are driven to move to rural areas. In recent years, the term 'lifestyle migration' has been used to refer to the increasing number of people who are motivated to search for a better way of life (Benson and O'Reilly, 2009). In addition, a number of researchers have reported that lifestyle migration to the countryside is related to a proliferation of rural lifestyle magazines, media reports, television shows and so on (Gustafson, 2002; Buller and Hoggart, 1994; Provan, 2006). The idea of migration being influenced by mediated rural idylls has gradually received more and more attention from rural studies' scholars in the international arena. In Taiwan, lifestyle migration to rural areas has become fashionable during the last 20 years. This phenomenon has received significant attention in the

media, including television, the press and magazine coverage, which both reflects and constructs the phenomenon. However, there has been a scarcity of research on the mediated rural idyll in Taiwan. Hence, in order to fill this research lacuna, this paper provides a critical analysis of a Taiwanese nonfiction entertainment TV programme, 'Taiker Etude',<sup>1</sup> which presents the experiences of urban dwellers who have moved to the countryside to realise their dreams. This paper will look at 'Taiker Etude', with the intention of examining how this particular media presents the discourses relating to the ideal rural lifestyle and supports communities of interest related to lifestyle migration. Although much has been written regarding the rural idyll, this analysis in a cultural context outside US and Northern Europe will contribute to expanding global research on the subject at a time when traditional Western

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<sup>\*</sup> Corresponding author.

E-mail address: [hchueh@ntu.edu.tw](mailto:hchueh@ntu.edu.tw) (H.-c. Chueh).

<sup>1</sup> 'Taiker' (台客) is a phrase that originally meant 'redneck', which has more recently come to encompass a youth-focused lifestyle. 'Taiker' culture has been gradually developed by television programmes to mean the dreams and struggles, and to represent the spirit of the Taiwanese people. In the television programme we examined, 'Taiker Etude' was to refer to the experiences of first time urban-rural immigrants who appear in this programme.

notions of 'The Good Life' are under increasing pressure.

Nonfiction entertainment is an increasingly popular 'mixed genre' that blurs the boundaries between information and entertainment by 'softening' the hard news tradition in order to create a more relaxed and consumer-driven format (Fürsich, 2003). This is also called lifestyle media (Bell and Hollows, 2005; Fish, 2005) or lifestyle journalism (Fürsich, 2003, 2012) in the context of providing audiences with reviews and advice regarding ways of living. With an information-based style of production, these entertainment programmes not only attract large audiences but may make an ideological impact, altering perceptions of rural living. Although some studies have documented that lifestyle migrants were influenced by media images of a "rural lifestyle" when they chose their destination (Åkerlund, 2012; Eimermann, 2013), we could find no research in rural studies that has focussed on this particular form of media coverage when investigating media discourses on the rural idyll. This paper presents an empirical study that critically analyses Taiker Etude's representations of the rural environment and lifestyles, and examines its role as a mediator of tastes in relation to the increasing number of people interested in living in the Taiwanese countryside.

We have two main aims in this paper. Firstly, we investigate the critical function of lifestyle media in providing audiences with judgments on questions of 'taste'. Etrillard (2014), in a study of memoirs of British lifestyle migrants to France, investigates the discursive production of the rural idyll laced with metaphors of an already established middle-class habitus, which highlight the attraction to French architecture and its rural surroundings. Such writings reflect the reader's desire, inspiration and dreams to move to rural France, suggesting that the action of choosing to live in the countryside reflects the individual migrant's taste. Lifestyle media may act as the arbiter of 'taste cultures', and so functions to mediate between elite and mass cultures by negotiating the establishment of status positions (Bourdieu, 1984). We therefore evaluate how 'Taiker Etude' contributes to the reaffirmation or deconstruction of established class boundaries in the rural setting.

The second focus of our study is to locate 'Taiker Etude' within a context of a consumer society. Giddens (1991) and Bauman (2008) argue that consumerism and lifestyle are linked in ways that illustrate an individual's self-reflexivity. Lifestyle media may promote the significance of particular 'lifestyles' in order to facilitate consumer identification with them (du Gay et al., 1997; Giddens, 1991). This way of constructing the consumer and provoking the development of particular tastes, desires and (perceived) needs has been described as "consumption as manipulation", where the consumer is designated a passive role with a limited range of individual free choice (Storey, 1999). However, most contemporary theorists of consumption argue for the recognition of the active and creative role of consumers (De Certeau, 1984; Fiske, 1989). The consumer can be seen as a subject who constructs his/her social identity through consumption, in this way participating in the formation of a new social community. Accordingly, lifestyle media may not only function to create particular tastes, but also act to support specific types of cultural community. In light of the fact that there are already cultural communities pursuing this new rural lifestyle in Taiwan, we are interested in how 'Taiker Etude' may be contributing to the formation of these communities.

This study analyses 'Taiker Etude', which is the first and only television series reflecting the experiences of urban migrants living in the Taiwanese countryside. This programme was initially broadcast in 2007 and 2008, and has had several repeat screenings since then. The article begins by situation our study within the literature on the rural idyll, followed by an explanation of the research method. A critical examination of how the rural idyll is presented in 'Taiker Etude' is presented, engaging three aspects of

this experience: 'my dream house', interaction with the land and nature, and the social networks of country living. Lastly, we demonstrate the ways in which a television programme can create a new ideology of the rural idyll which cuts across traditional class boundaries and contributes to the development of new social formations, communities who desire to live in a certain way in the countryside.

## 2. Literature review

### 2.1. The rural idyll and the restructuring of Taiwan's villages

The concept of the rural idyll, a classic idea in European and American rural studies, often encompasses three dimensions: landscape, social environment, and rural activities (Vepsäläinen and Pitkänen, 2010). The dimension of landscape in rural areas can encompass both the natural landscape and the farmscape (O'Reilly, 2000; King et al., 2000). 'Social environment' is used to refer to social relationships between members of rural communities (Williams and White, 2002), and to family relationships (Baylina and Berg, 2010; Little and Austin, 1996). 'Rural activities' are traditional activities performed in rural areas—including recreational and sporting activities (Vepsäläinen and Pitkänen, 2010)—such as cultivation, harvesting, fishing, nature walks, picnicking, driving all-terrain vehicles, playing survival games, hang gliding and so on.

As the agricultural productivist function of the past decreases in some rural areas, the rural idyll becomes the mainstream idea that increasingly underpins both rural economic growth and the socio-revitalisation of villages. These social and economic changes in rural communities are, to a large degree, a consequence of in-migration and the re-purposing of land for tourism. The rural idyll can be said to be constructed by its social and economic context (Dixon, 2003; Reed, 2003), while the substance of the rural idyll is conditioned by its dependence on time, place, and culture (Panelli et al., 2008). It is our intention in this paper to understand the meaning of rural idyll that is specific to modern Taiwanese society.

The concept of the rural idyll began to be influential in Taiwan in the 1990s with the emergence of the phenomenon of recreational agriculture. In the 1990s, the Taiwanese Government attempted on several occasions to participate in the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) negotiations. As part of a GATT agreement, the Government was required to decrease financial support to agriculture. Accordingly, the Council of Agriculture of Taiwan introduced the Leisure Farm Management Act (1992) as an adjustment strategy for overcoming agricultural production and marketing problems caused by participation in GATT (Tsai, 2007). The concept of leisure agriculture was developed at this time and the use of farm lands for recreational purposes was encouraged. In 2002, Taiwan joined the World Trade Organisation (WTO) which increased limitations on agricultural exports. As a consequence, tourism in rural areas was further developed, conceptually changing into 'rural tourism', which focused on the wider 'rural area' than on farming per se.

Two other important acts of the Legislative Yuan (Taiwan's parliament) that have contributed to the evolution of the rural idyll in Taiwan are The Agricultural Development Act (2000) and The Hostel Management Regulations (2001). The Agricultural Development Act lifted the restriction that prohibited non-farmers from purchasing or selling farmland. This attracted many urban residents to invest in properties in scenic rural areas, which resulted in in-migration and rural gentrification (Lee et al., 2010; Liu, 2008). We argue this signalled a new phase in the evolution of thinking about Taiwanese rural villages. A new notion of 'the living village' as

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