

Exploring the Folk Meanings of Online Fiction: A Case Study of Farming Novels

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Abstract

Unlike epic genres such as martial arts and fantasy, farming novels have become popular for their realistic depictions of everyday life. This study explores the folk meanings embedded in Chinese online farming novels, with an emphasis on their narrative structure, central motifs, and cultural values. Through motif analysis, this paper identifies two core themes: getting rich and finding love. Typically, narratives feature ordinary female protagonists overcoming hardships through wisdom and diligence to achieve happiness and prosperity. Labor and culinary themes play crucial roles, highlighting traditional virtues such as diligence and simplicity, while providing emotional comfort and psychological relief. Farming novels consistently follow a stable narrative pattern, offering emotional catharsis and moral reassurance by contrasting rural tranquility with modern urban pressures. Ultimately, farming novels reflect a shift toward realistic, grassroots storytelling in Chinese online fiction, resonating with contemporary desires for everyday success and domestic contentment. The study concludes by proposing avenues for innovating narrative motifs to sustain the genre's appeal and relevance.

Keywords

Farming novels; online fiction; motifs; culinary themes; emotional catharsis

1. Introduction

Since their emergence, online novels have reached heights in the number of writers and works that traditional literature has never achieved. According to the 2020 China Online Literature Development Report, in 2020 the market for online literature in China reached 24.98 billion yuan, with 460 million users and about 7.58 million daily active users. That year saw a cumulative 29.059 million online literary works created and over 21.3 million authors in total. The themes and genres of online novels are far richer than those of traditional fiction, with genres such as martial arts, harem, fantasy, xianxia (immortal hero), time travel, tomb-raiding, and urban stories appearing in large numbers. On major sites like 17K and Qidian, the top-ranking categories are martial arts, xianxia, and fantasy. Martial arts – fantasy novels have become the most representative type of contemporary Chinese online

fiction—some readers even use these terms synonymously with “online literature.” These works feature vast world-building, grand scenes, and extravagant imagination, attracting huge readerships.

However, as online fiction developed, stories focusing on ordinary people’s daily lives began to emerge. Some readers dubbed these works “farming novels” (zhongtianwen, literally “planting field” fiction). The earliest farming novels appeared around 2008, initially as women’s fiction. The protagonists were typically ordinary farm girls, widows, and so on—unlike previous online heroines who were empresses, noble concubines, or legitimate daughters. They were not born wealthy, had no refined cultural skills, and carried no great mission. Instead, they wanted to achieve a modest, well-off life through their own hard work. Such female protagonists are more down-to-earth. Their pursuits of power, love, and a simple life all take place in the realm of “private life,” depicting the ordinary happiness that comes from a humble person’s success through hard work.

2. Background

At present, some scholars have conducted preliminary research on farming novels from different perspectives.

The term “farming” originated from a poem by the Tang Dynasty poet Dugu Ji:

种田 不 遇岁，策名 不 遭时。

Zhongtian bu yusui, ceming bu zaoshi.

Farming meets no good harvest; official examinations come at the wrong time.

Farming novels developed as a distinct genre on this cultural foundation. In the early stages of farming novel development, some scholars offered initial categorization and summary, analyzing their types, characteristics, and language. For example, Li Hao (2013) classified farming novels into transmigration, alternate history, ancient, and modern subgenres. He also summarized their language and stylistic features, arguing that farming novels reflect cultural traits such as the pursuit of a simple life, concern for interpersonal relationships, and understanding of marriage and family. By contrast, Zhang Xiaoke (2013) provided a much briefer discussion. He categorized farming novels from two dimensions: the time setting (modern, ancient, or alternate history) and the protagonist’s origin (transmigration or non-transmigration).

With the further development and diversification of farming novels, research on them has also become more varied and in-depth. Some scholars have adopted a feminist approach, analyzing the psychological traits of female-focused farming novels. For example, Liu Yunxia, Zhang Lihua, and Xing Man (2018) explored the psychological appeals and ethical aesthetics expressed in these works. They argued that depictions of women’s struggles reveal their demands and awakening, while portrayals of extreme relatives and dramatic plot twists reflect women’s moral confusion. In contrast, Wu Xiaoling and Zhang Xiao (2018) offered the opposite view.

They argued that although female characters in farming novels succeed through their own efforts, this “awakening” is superficial and actually represents an accommodation to patriarchal norms. Other scholars have analyzed the popularity of these novels from a communication studies perspective. Zhang Xiao (2017) examined psychological and communicative factors, concluding that farming novels cater to readers’ desire for “爽” (shuang, a sense of vicarious satisfaction or catharsis). Some scholars have argued that the rise of farming novels aligns with trends in 21st-century online literature. Wei Xiaotong (2017) suggested that farming novels reflect a shift in literary creation from elite perspectives to popular viewpoints. Wang Zihan (2016) treated farming novels as a representative genre of women’s online fiction, marking the trend of online literature toward secular, everyday themes.

Overall, research on agrarian fiction remains limited. These research papers are generally short and superficial. There are still many problems in defining the genres of farming novels, classifying subgenres, analyzing narrative patterns, and predicting future directions. Nonetheless, farming novels remain highly popular on major Chinese online fiction platforms. As a genre clearly distinct from grand fantasy and martial arts works, it deserves greater scholarly attention.

Currently, farming novels can be categorized in various ways:(1)Based on the protagonist’s origin: transmigration farming novels vs. non-transmigration farming novels. (Transmigration farming novels feature protagonists who travel from the past, present, or future into the story’s world.);(2)Based on the story’s setting: urban farming novels vs. domestic intrigue (宅斗) farming novels;(3)Based on main content: culinary farming novels vs. infrastructure-building farming novels. Infrastructure-building stories are more common in male-targeted fiction, while female-targeted farming novels typically focus on culinary themes, where the heroine makes money by creating delicious dishes, improves her family’s life, eventually opens restaurants or shops, achieves personal value, and finds love. Additionally, many farming novel heroines possess a “system” or “space” that assigns them tasks. Completing these tasks yields rewards and drives the plot forward.

3. Narrative Structure of Online Farming Novels

As an important subgenre of today’s online fiction, farming novels are often taught by experienced authors and site editors who share writing guides on major platforms.

By examining these guides and outlines provided by writers and editors, the author of this paper has summarized the basic framework of a typical farming novel:① Early stage: the heroine outsmarts difficult relatives, establishes her fortune, and experiences budding romance;②Middle stage: the main plot escalates, the heroine’s business expands, and the romance grows sweeter;③Final stage: the plot reaches its climax, the heroine achieves her personal goals, and lives happily with the male lead

Comparison with most female-oriented farming novels shows that they generally follow this pattern. For example, *Rebirth as a Little Landlord* narrates the rise and fall of the Lian family. The heroine, Lian Man'er, was betrayed and killed in her previous life. She is reborn into the Lian family as the fourth daughter in a rural household. Facing shameless and unreasonable relatives and her own weak-willed family members, she does not give up. Instead, she vows to reform her family and life, eventually becoming a prosperous landlord. Throughout the story, she solves problem after problem, gradually accumulates wealth, and ultimately finds both love and friendship, ending in a happy life.

Such novels are too numerous to count, proving that farming fiction follows certain well-established formulas with relatively consistent narrative structures.

The core of farming novels tells the story of a protagonist going from nothing to achieving success in both career and love—a narrative movement from lack to fulfillment. This paper focuses particularly on the plot dimension.

The motif of encountering difficulties and overcoming them runs through the two core themes of getting rich and finding love. The heroine typically faces obstructive, malicious relatives or petty, envious villains who sabotage her efforts. But she always manages to solve these problems through her intelligence and ingenuity. Similarly, in her romantic life with the male lead, she may face rivals or meddling outsiders but ultimately defends her love through her own abilities.

The dual themes of getting rich and finding love, as well as the encounter–resolution pattern, closely resemble the concept of motifs and motifemes in folk narratives. American folklorist Stith Thompson (1991) argued that a tale type is an independent traditional story that can be told as a complete narrative, whose meaning does not rely on other stories. Such a tale type can be made up of one or several motifs. A motif is the smallest, enduring unit in the tradition that carries striking or moving narrative power. Motifs are generally categorized as characters, settings, or single events.

In farming novels, the primary narrative events are getting rich and finding love, which can be identified as the genre's two main motifs. Meanwhile, the encounter–resolution structure resembles what Alan Dundes called motifemes. Dundes defined motifeme as the function a motif serves in the entire story structure and its corresponding position in the sequence—essentially equivalent to Vladimir Propp's concept of narrative functions. According to folklorist Qi Lingyun's research on narrative structure, folktales have three structural levels: motifeme→motif→motif variant. Motifs are defined as events or actions affecting the protagonist's fate, since folktales usually have single-stranded plots.

Narrative functions such as lack–removal of lack, tests, difficulties, conflicts, and weddings are all motifemes that revolve around the protagonist's destiny. Motifs link motifemes and their variations. Scholar Kang Li (2005) first used the term motif variant, which, although not precisely defined, refers to how a motif is concretely

presented in the story text. Thus, in farming novels, motif variants might include: (1) Outwitting malicious relatives; (2) Battling scheming women; (3) Rescuing a fallen prince; (4) Giving birth to children, etc.

By applying the concepts of motifs and motifemes, we can identify deep structural patterns in the narrative development of farming novels. As mentioned earlier, the heroine repeatedly encounters difficulties but always finds ways to overcome them—whether in getting rich or in her romantic journey. Therefore, the core motifeme of farming novels is encountering and resolving difficulties. Beyond this, there are other recurring motifemes such as: (1) Lack – removal of lack; (2) Harm – victimization; (3) Task – completion of task; (4) Deception – being deceived; (5) Conflict – victory; (6) Test or challenge – passing the test.

The lack-removal of lack motifeme is especially important. Imbalance represents a state of lack or deficiency; balance implies that excess can be reduced, or that stolen things can be recovered. For example, when the heroine faces malicious relatives, there will always be kind neighbors who help, or parents who choose to firmly defend the family. This also aligns with Orlik's 13 narrative principles, including the contrast principle, where characters with opposing traits appear in the story. Moreover, the heroine's lack of familial love is made up for by the male lead. If she lacks the right social status to match him, she will either make great contributions and be ennobled, or be revealed to have been abandoned by a high-ranking family and finally regain her noble identity through physical resemblance or other evidence. Unlike other online genres, female-oriented farming novels often showcase this lack in an especially thorough way: (1) The heroine lacks a good family background; (2) lacks wealth; (3) Lacks high social status; (4) Lacks strong family protection; (5) Lacks genuine emotional bonds. And the novel's two core motifs are both devoted to eliminating these lacks.

Other motifemes such as harm-victimization, task-completion, deception-being deceived, conflict-victory, and test-passing the test are all interwoven within the core encounter-resolution structure. The heroine might be sabotaged by jealous rivals as her business grows, but she always finds ways to recover her losses and gain compensation. She might be assigned special tasks, like preparing banquets, which she completes with skill—enhancing her image as clever and capable, while laying the groundwork for further success. She might be tricked by unscrupulous merchants or provoked into conflict with the male lead, but ultimately defends her interests and often deepens the romantic bond in the process. Sometimes, thanks to her exceptional abilities, she represents her country in competitions against foreign powers, always emerging victorious and improving her social standing.

From this analysis, it is clear that the heroine in female-focused farming novels repeatedly falls into crises only to escape them again and again. Each crisis she overcomes increases her status or wealth. And these crises nearly always arise from her pursuit of wealth and love.

By applying narratological tools such as motif and motifeme analysis, we can better clarify farming novels' structures. This does not "disenchant" the stories but rather offers new pathways for innovating them. While motifs and motifemes cannot change, motif variants are virtually limitless in their possibilities.

4. Narrative Subjects in Online Farming Novels

The narrative subjects of farming novels can be broadly divided into two main parts: labor and food.

4.1. The Myth of Labor and the Spirit of Struggle

The core motif of farming novels is getting rich. The heroine relies on her own efforts to lead her family—even an entire village—to a happy, prosperous life. In the process of accumulating wealth, labor is indispensable.

Farming novels depict an idealized economic model. The heroine can always find the necessary ingredients for cooking (sometimes discovered by chance), or discover substitutes for materials missing in the production of modern goods. She can use limited ingredients to produce endless varieties of exquisite dishes, and invest all her profits into improving her family's living conditions. The American sociologist Charles Wright Mills, in *White Collar*, noted that in crafts that deal directly with material objects, "the psychological possibility of establishing a link between the product and the producer" is vital.

In these novels, products are entirely made by the heroine, the result of her labor. She also derives great psychological satisfaction from making and selling these goods. In culinary-focused farming novels, the heroine can earn money by cooking and, through her exceptional culinary skills, win the favor of those around her. People who once looked down on her flock to her for her cooking. Through food, the heroine achieves upward social mobility. After achieving prosperity, she often gains leadership both within her family and in the broader community, becoming the core pillar of the household or even the entire area.

Thus, in the process of labor, the farming novel's heroine fully claims agency over her life. She leverages her skills and knowledge to make her mark in a new social environment, gaining complete control over her destiny. Today, there is widespread affection for protagonists who are passionate about "building a career" and "being beautiful on their own terms." The heroine's journey to wealth in farming novels is essentially a story of "building a career." Compared to stories where a woman travels back in time to become a noble consort or is born into a family that has already completed its primitive capital accumulation, the tale of an ordinary farm girl starting from nothing is far more relatable.

Thus, the heroine's effort represents a myth of labor: immediate rewards, steady accumulation, transforming from a poor farm girl to a prosperous business owner. This delivers the two key pleasures of these novels: a sense of gain and a sense of

reward:(1)Sense of gain comes from the process of accumulating money, growing from weak to strong, upgrading from a small house to a grand home;(2)Sense of reward lies in the promise that every bit of effort will be repaid with tangible benefits and peace in this life.The labor portrayed in these novels resonates deeply with young readers, soothing their anxieties.

Although the heroine's experience can't be directly imitated, it offers an ethical model: hard work can achieve dreams; seeking unearned rewards leads nowhere.

From this perspective, farming novels not only comfort readers' anxieties but also provide moral education.They showcase the deeply rooted Chinese virtues of diligence and perseverance.

4.2. Culinary Wealth and Psychological Therapy

Based on online analyses, the ways in which heroines achieve prosperity can be summarized in the following table.

Table 1. Industries Through Which the Protagonist Gains Wealth

Industry	Products
Agriculture	Standard crops, medicinal herbs, fruit trees, mushrooms, flowers
Animal husbandry	Pigs, cattle, sheep, chickens, fish farming, hunting
Handicrafts	Sewing, embroidery, woodworking, crafts, tofu making, brewing, oil pressing
Food & Beverage	Selling recipes, noodles, dumplings, wontons, opening restaurants, selling desserts
Beauty industry	Inventing soap, face cream, rouge, perfumes

According to this table, most heroines choose culinary production as the first step toward wealth.Some heroines begin in handicrafts or agriculture but eventually connect their work to food.

Why has culinary-themed fiction become the largest subcategory of farming novels? Georg Simmel, in *The Philosophy of Fashion*, said: "Of all things people share in common, the most universal is that they must eat and drink." Eating is an instinctive human need, buried deep in our evolutionary psychology.People are naturally drawn to food and eager for sensory pleasure in their daily lives.As the old Chinese saying goes: "Food is the first necessity of the people." For thousands of years in agrarian societies, eating enough was always a top concern.In ancient rural life, limited productivity and natural disasters made food insecurity a constant threat.Food held extraordinary significance in the countryside.Villagers led lives of dawn-to-dusk labor with limited entertainment.Food not only replenished energy after hard work but also offered one of the few sources of pleasure and stress relief.Thus, people naturally cherished it.Choosing food as the starting point for farming novels aligns with both Chinese tastes and cultural traditions.

Culinary farming novels also function as social therapy.Readers have an internal need for this content, rooted in the pressures of modern life.Fast-paced modern living often means people can't properly enjoy their meals, let alone eat with family.

Takeout, instant food, and fast food dominate people's daily routines.In stark contrast, the farming novel's heroine carefully prepares every meal for herself and her

loved ones. Food becomes the bond that connects people in the story, helping the heroine achieve personal value and find love. The heroine's daily life represents readers' ideal lifestyle—readers naturally project themselves into the narrative. Food in these novels satisfies more than just taste buds; it meets emotional needs. Reading farming novels is an excellent way to transfer and soothe emotional pressures.

From this perspective, food in these stories is no longer just “delicious dishes,” but becomes a spiritual consumption with symbolic meaning. Farming novels turn food into a literary medium that directly feeds the reader's psyche, offering them “spiritual nourishment.”

5. Story Patterns in Online Farming Novels

Compared to male protagonists in other types of fiction, the male leads in farming novels are often portrayed as “fallen princes”. This is similar to the structure seen in the fairy tale *The Little Mermaid*. Typically, the mermaid princess and the prince would never have met if not for the prince nearly drowning—this crisis creates their encounter. Likewise, male protagonists in farming novels often have hidden identities or talents waiting to be revealed. For example: Some male leads possess exceptional life skills but are waiting for the opportunity to leave their rural village and make their mark; Some were generals who, after being wounded and disabled on the battlefield, return to live in a small village; Others achieved a certain level of professional success but, due to political struggles, are forced to live in hiding in the countryside under assumed identities.

In female-oriented farming novels, other female characters such as the heroine's malicious sisters or female rivals are also common. Initially, these characters reject the male lead because they see him as poor and unworthy. But after the heroine nurses the male lead back to health or helps him reclaim his true status, these women often try to rekindle the relationship. However, their calculating, status-obsessed personalities usually ensure they meet an unhappy end in the narrative.

All of this shows that the romantic storyline in female-focused farming novels resembles a kind of folk fairy tale. This structure is shaped by the rural setting itself.

Male protagonists in these novels are typically endowed with talents and abilities that set them apart—even if they appear to be simple farmers on the surface. Only these kinds of “hidden princes” can truly match the heroine.

Because these stories are structured like folk tales, they are almost always designed to have happy endings. Qing-dynasty playwright Li Yu described the appeal of “the joy of reunion”—meaning that no matter how many hardships or twists a story contains, readers can rest assured that it will end well for the protagonists. The pleasure and charm of such stories lies in their dramatic events, in how the characters turn danger into safety, and in how misfortune becomes an opportunity to

climb to a higher social status. In many other genres—such as *xianxia* (immortal cultivation fiction)—the heroine often pays a significant personal price for a happy ending. But farming novels are different. Their endings are almost always complete happy reunions, including both the fulfillment of romantic love and the heroine's personal achievements. Farming novels don't reject marriage and family life. The natural outcome of the couple's love is having adorable children, which becomes a standard feature of the genre. Many readers are drawn precisely to this ordinary, peaceful, domestic charm. They want less flashy spectacle and more grounded, heartfelt stories about ordinary people striving to build a good life. "Ordinary" here means relatively free from tragedy or major disruptions. An unhappy ending would be the biggest "twist" of all—and the genre specifically avoids that. While imperfect endings can have their own beauty, they tend to be gut-wrenching and are unsuited to the gentle, comforting tone that farming novels aim to deliver.

6. Conclusion

This paper has explored the folk meanings embodied in online farming novels, with a particular focus on their folk character. The heroine in these stories constantly encounters difficulties and overcomes them. These challenges are woven into the two central motifs of getting rich and finding love. Through these two core themes, farming novels create a vivid image of a clever, resourceful folk heroine, celebrate the spirit of diligence and labor, showcase the appeal of traditional cuisine, and tell many warm, everyday love stories. As a highly popular, grassroots form of writing, online fiction will continue to attract new authors into the field in the future. While the genre's stable, formulaic structure has proven itself in the market, truly captivating works will require continuous thought and innovation. Based on the previous analysis, the main motif variants in farming novels are: (1) Outwitting malicious relatives; (2) Rescuing fallen princes. But beyond these, there is plenty of room for new motif variants. If authors can expand on the existing motifs while preserving the core structure, farming fiction will undoubtedly take on new and richer forms.

Female-focused farming fiction has a highly patterned, game-like structure: Readers want each "game" (the heroine's journey to prosperity) to be different in its details.

But they don't want to change the rules themselves (the familiar encounter – resolution narrative structure that delivers catharsis and a sense of realism). This balance between consistent structure and varied detail is both the reason for the genre's enduring popularity and the key to its continued market success.

Many traditional folk stories are so formulaic that you can often guess the ending from the very beginning. Yet people still love reading and retelling them. That is because even within a predictable framework, there are countless paths the story can take. Even if the ending remains the same, readers can enjoy the unique scenery along the way.

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