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Implications of NIE Project to Development of Newspapers about Agriculture, Countryside and Farmers

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Abstract Through analyzing current situations of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers and problems impairing development of these newspapers, this paper presents constructive recommendations for combination with NIE project at operational level. In China, NIE project should not copy foreign experience, but should proceed from rural realities, expend its intension and enrich its extension, and extend coverage of newspaper to all levels in rural areas. In addition, it is recommended to explore new approaches and find a new development road of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers through transforming the publishing mode.

Key words Newspapers about agriculture, Countryside and farmers, NIE project, Rural readers, New socialist countryside

In development pattern of Chinese newspaper industry, newspaper about agriculture, countryside and farmers lies in weak position. After the Fifth Plenary Session of the Sixteenth Central Committee of the Party called for new socialist countryside construction, new socialist countryside construction becomes a hot issue. However, the development of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers is not accelerated accordingly. On the contrary, the weakening trend is worse. In the new trend of rapid development of rural economy, newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers should be provided with new ideas in newspaper concept, means of publishing, and readers.

1 Current situations of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers

According to statistics of *Survey of Current Rural Newspaper Situations in the Whole Country and Countermeasures*, there are only 61 types of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers (including comprehensive and professional types), accounting for only 3.17% of the total national newspapers, and there are only 17 types of rural and farmer newspapers, accounting for only 1% of the total national newspapers. Newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers had been brilliant in the 1980s. Since the Farmers Daily was launched by the central government in 1980, provinces and cities started to restore or run farmer newspapers (or countryside edition, and countryside newspaper) in succession. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, the development of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers reached the peak, the quantity of *Farmers Daily* and *Liaoning Farmer News* issued reached one million, and many other such newspapers also issued more than hundreds of thousands^[1]. Now, such brilliance has become history. Newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers are in a nationwide predicament. Even in relatively devel-

oped eastern rural areas, such predicament also impairs development of these newspapers. *Rural Information Newspaper* is the sole newspaper serving agriculture, countryside and farmers in Zhejiang Province. As early as 1998, *Rural Information Newspaper* issued electronic edition and became the first professional electronic newspaper in Zhejiang Province. In western regions of China, the development of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers lags far behind. A survey in Majiang County of Guizhou Province indicates that only 50.79% people have read newspapers. Nearly no one has read newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers, and only few government workers know and have read such newspapers. Those respondents can list only several agricultural newspapers^[2]. To change current development situation of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers, in the *Eleventh Five – year Development Outline for National Newspaper Publication Industry*, the Press and Publications Administration called for preferentially developing newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers, promoting publication of rural newspapers, increasing government input, adjusting publication resources, energetically supporting newspapers oriented towards agriculture, countryside and farmers, increasing popularity of rural newspapers, and promoting newspaper publication serving new socialist countryside construction.

2 Problems in the development of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers

2.1 Fuzzy functional orientation Most newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers orient towards comprehensive newspaper covering news, production and supplement, hoping to attract more readers with rich information and huge information volume. Such change reduces proportion of agricultural production and life in newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers. Pure agricultural production, life, scientific and technological, and commercial information has to give way to supplement focusing on political affairs, social news, literature, amusement and rec-

reation. Some newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers deviate from rural realities and rural development, but only increase quantity issued, focus on blind development, and keep up with evening newspapers and urban newspapers. In addition, to guarantee development of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers, many regions are changing edition of these newspapers and some incorporate them into the Party newspaper issuing system. This solves the problem of survival of these newspapers, but dims their individualities. The simple professional newspapers in the past become Party newspapers with agricultural features. In news interview and writing, especially in important meetings and decisions, the news release lacks innovation and breakthrough.

2.2 Unclear orientation of readers Due to inherent features of media, newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers have special characteristics in reader orientation. As to attribute, newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers are mainly oriented towards farmers. Nevertheless, in recent two or three decades, with development of market economy, constant progress in new socialist countryside construction and urbanization construction of small and medium-sized cities, farmer structure is decomposed into multiple levels, form of farmers is changed, the present countryside is no longer the rural area in traditional sense, and the present farmers are no longer farmers in traditional sense, and industries they deal with are numerous and diverse. Those include farmers leaving the farmland but not one's hometown, migrant workers, individual workers and private entrepreneurs. Even if farmers engaged in agricultural production, the production and management types are varied. Most newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers are neither about current political news nor daily newspapers. Readers are mainly rural cadres, farmers, professional large planting and breeding households, rural teachers, and workers related to agriculture. As a result, newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers report too many policies, but too little practical information, so it is impossible to satisfy basic demands of readers for time effectiveness, pertinence and practicality of rural sci-tech information.

2.3 Difficult advertising operation At present, newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers are depressed, especially in comprehensive newspapers. This situation is mainly resulted from relatively small quantity issued. Rural newspapers with the quantity issued reaching 10 000 – 30 000 take up 95%, and some newspapers only issue several thousand copies^[3]. With low market share, weak influence power, and being situated in remote areas, these newspapers have little attraction to advertisers. According to survey and statistics of Chinese Farmer's Newspaper Association (CFNA), only *Farmers Daily*, *Southern Rural Newspaper*, and *Rural Dazhong Daily* have the annual amount of advertising operation above 3 million yuan. Major advertisements supporting development of urban newspapers and evening newspapers, such as real estate, automobile and medical care, basically have no connection with newspapers about agriculture, countryside and

farmers. Difficult operation of these newspapers directly leads to their cost remaining high.

2.4 Separate issue and delivery Newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers mainly depend on post issue, because market of these newspapers is separate, organizational level is low, legal system is not perfect, even the feudal separationist market^[1]. In consequence, delivery cost of newspapers gets higher. In addition to no timely delivery, when newspapers come to farmers, daily newspapers become weekly, weekly newspapers become monthly, which greatly dampens enthusiasm of farmers for subscription.

2.5 Diverse information sources Popularization of Internet, telephone, and mobile phone short message business in rural areas breaks monopoly of television and newspapers over information resources. Rapid and powerful search functions of Internet form distinct comparison with drawbacks of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers in lagging of issue and long cycle of publication. What's more, in recent years, telecommunication companies launched many businesses for rural market. Farmers can obtain agricultural sci-tech service and weather forecast information, or even political policies at less than 10 yuan monthly^[4].

3 Significance of implementing NIE project

NIE (News In Education) project is a long-term project launched by newspaper groups of the United States and other countries in universities, middle and primary schools for cultivating future readers and dealing with constant reduction of sales volume. As early as the 1960s, The New York Times had carried out NIE project in universities and middle schools. By now, about 1 000 American newspapers carry out NIE project periodically. Extension of NIE project helps American newspaper industry cultivate numerous loyal readers. Even in highly developed Internet and cable TV, these readers are still the most loyal supporters of newspapers.

Japan is the country with the highest popularity of newspapers. In Japan, each household owns 1.2 copies of newspapers and the per capita quantity of newspapers reaches 0.5. According to statistics of World Association of Newspapers in quantity issued, the top five newspapers are all Japanese newspapers. Success of Japanese newspaper industry should give the credit to high attention to NIE project. Specifically speaking, they take newspapers as teaching materials to let readers obtain more knowledge, broaden field of vision of readers, and promote improvement of readers' individual quality and ability^[5].

To develop newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers in China and get rid of existing difficulties, it can learn experience of the USA and Japan, so as to find out a suitable way for developing these newspapers in accordance with rural conditions of China. For different people, NIE project in rural areas should take different measures in specific purpose, method and means. In foreign countries, NIE project is mainly oriented toward students, especially primary and middle school students. By comparison, to extend NIE project for newspapers about agriculture,

countryside and farmers, China must enrich coverage of the project. Firstly, China still has more than 85.07 million illiterates, about 20 million of whom are 15–50 years old and 90% of whom live in rural areas. Illiteracy and semiliteracy in rural areas seriously influence the construction of new socialist countryside. Secondly, educational level of rural residents is generally low. Thus, the expansion of NIE project coverage can help rural residents to understand and receive information, which is favorable for newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers participating in new socialist countryside construction in more positive and active image. Thirdly, through implementing NIE project in rural areas, it is able to improve media quality of rural residents. Compared with cities, rural areas lack enough resources and opportunities to let rural residents experience information brought by various types of media. Hot sale urban newspapers and evening newspapers have rich information, but the content deviates from rural residents. Only information close to them may give them real experience and feeling. Implementing NIE project for newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers is favorable for improving rural residents' understanding and selection of news and advertisement, improving their discerning and analyzing ability, and helping them to choose, understand and arrange increasingly diversified information.

4 Countermeasures and suggestions

4.1 Reorienting NIE project to actively contribute to rural social education Implementing NIE project for newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers will firstly consider rural teenagers. For example, it is recommended to include "teenager reading newspapers" into class discussion, to cultivate rural teenagers' ability of correctly handling media information through opinion communication and proper guidance. The discussion topics may be selected from news related to their living environment or their parents' working environment in newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers. Besides, it is recommended to provide many types of lectures to deepen understanding of middle and primary students about these newspapers, and set up work-study fund and scholarship to increase popularity of these newspapers.

In addition, NIE project should take part in social education of rural adult readers. These readers have formed world outlook and value outlook, so it is easy to carry out NIE project for newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers. For example, it can provide lectures on agricultural technology through night schools, or have discussion of a certain edition or some content. It is recommended to encourage readers to set discussion topic boldly

and attract adult readers to participate in NIE project.

4.2 Transforming the issuing mode and learning marketing strategy of NIE project to find new expansion space of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers For transforming the issuing mode of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers, it is recommended to learn the "contributor" system adopted in foreign NIE project. In other words, an education-spirited contributor buys the newspaper or part of it. In this way, newspaper agency can get profit, and it also can increase the quantity issued^[6]. Most newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers belong to public welfare. If both advertising and issuing are not satisfactory, local governments and these newspapers agencies can cooperate with large local private enterprises or state-owned enterprises to attract rural readers. This not only reflects enthusiasm of some enterprises for public welfare, but also satisfies demands of rural residents for information, and solves the difficulty of newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers in issuing.

4.3 Exploring new ideas of newspaper running and innovating upon interactive newspaper running mode Compared with evening newspapers and urban newspapers, newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers are different in purpose and guiding policy. This does not mean that newspapers about agriculture, countryside and farmers should not pay attention to quality. In fact, these newspapers have higher requirements for quality. To increase pertinence of contents, modern communication tools can be utilized, so as to provide favorable conditions for editors and rural readers. Besides, it is proposed to set up hot line and question and answer column to timely know demands of rural readers and invite agricultural experts and scholars to answer.

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