

Strategies for Promoting Chinese Documentaries in International Communication

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Abstract

As reflections of reality, documentary films can effectively expand the international influence of a culture, shape a country's image and strengthen people's cultural confidence. Therefore, documentaries of great strategic importance in international communication are an important part of China's strategies for international communication. However, Chinese documentaries have limited and vague discourses. Misunderstandings of Chinese culture resulting from the stereotyped Western narrative of Othering and people's prejudices caused by cultural discount make it hard for Chinese documentaries to flourish. Hence, Chinese documentary filmmakers need to think creatively, adjust their international communication strategies, expand their thematic choices, promote cultural exchanges in collaboration with filmmakers from other countries, and make good use of personal stories that evoke empathy to give full play to the advantages of Chinese documentaries in international communication.

Keywords

Documentary films; International communication; Cultural characteristics; Cultural discount; Othering.

1. Introduction

Reflecting social reality, documentaries present real people, objects and events, in an artistic way. Unlike the primitive recording and presenting featured in early films, documentaries have evolved into an important art form that uses reality to provoke thinking, transmit values, and expand cultural influence. Besides, as an important vehicle for cultural exchanges with foreign countries in international communication, documentaries help spread national culture and improve national image. The Communist Party-, Chinese government- and traditional TV media-controlled investment in and production of Chinese documentaries for a long time caused low quality content, lack of thematic diversity and an underdeveloped market. Since the beginning of the 21st century, the documentary industry in China has undergone radical changes, and has gradually grown into an emerging force with some impact on international film festivals. The author will explore strategies for promoting Chinese documentaries in international communication from three perspectives: importance, dilemma and future, and provide theoretical guidance and practical suggestions for Chinese documentaries going abroad.

2. Strategic Importance: A Critical Period of Promoting Chinese Documentaries Abroad

Fast-changing political landscape, economic globalization and rapid development of modern technology together have led to unprecedented changes in this century, and competition for

soft power between countries has become intense. Improving China's capacity for international communication has become strategically important, and the strategic importance of documentaries in this critical period of international communication has increased.

2.1. Expanding China's Cultural Influence on International Audience

Since the 21st century, as China's national strength continues to grow, its economy size expands rapidly and its political influence reaches various fields, China is playing an increasingly important role in the international arena, and the international community is gradually attaching more importance to China. The world is eager to understand Chinese culture and China is keen to promote Chinese culture abroad, which includes not only tangible cultural products, but also intangible ideology, ethics, values, aesthetic consciousness, etc. As an important part of Chinese culture's overseas influence, intangible culture contains cultural genes and codes, and thus plays a central role in delivering Chinese culture to the world and presenting its characteristics [1].

Featuring realness, documentaries are so easily accepted by overseas audiences in international communication that they act as an important channel for the outside world to understand China and a useful tool to expand the international influence of Chinese culture. In addition, considering how well Chinese films and media products are received by foreign audience, documentaries which can reflect cultural phenomena and social issues in a visual and graphic way are a widely advocated and effective means of international communication in recent years, easily bridging psychological distance, triggering emotional resonance and facilitating understanding and mutual trust. Vivid and engaging Chinese stories are more likely to interest overseas audiences and to help them understand the rich and diverse connotations of Chinese culture.

2.2. Shaping China's Image

Against the background of information globalization, the old information barriers between countries are gradually broken down, and international communication is becoming more and more frequent. Topics related to country images have become more and more popular. To the public, country images are a direct, unprocessed, intuitive reflection of the common perceptions and attitudes held in foreign countries. As for communication professionals, their aim is to improve country images. How well they can improve China's image determines the quality of their works in the field of international communication. Constructing a positive country image is important for contemporary China faced with increasingly fierce international competition. Image-shaping requires attention to different factors, a holistic perspective and a systematic approach, which should be reflected in actual practices, such as production of films and TV shows.

With themes ranging from politics, economy, society, culture, nature, geography, and human history, documentaries can effectively shape and convey a positive country image and bring viewers a rich sensory experience through multimedia presentation of images, sounds, and texts and through rhetorical devices of metaphor and metonymy [2]. When used in international communication, documentaries can broaden the spatial and temporal scope of country images and facilitate deep interaction between audience and content. As a medium, documentaries create a meaningful space for individuals to shape a country's image, where audience can encounter, maintain and participate in construction of images of other countries and eventually have emotional understanding and recognition of other countries so that country images can become clearer and more comprehensive in international communication.

2.3. Building Cultural Confidence

General Secretary of CPC Xi Jinping added a fourth confidence of socialism with Chinese characteristics, confidence in Chinese culture, in his speech on July 1, 2016, at the celebration

of the 95th anniversary of the founding of the CPC. Cultural self-confidence is the full affirmation and active practice of the cultural value of a nation, the bloodline of a nation and the spiritual home of its people. In the context of cultural globalization, different cultures are constantly interacting and communicating along with economic and cultural exchanges and media innovation, which creates a new cultural landscape accompanied by problems such as cultural imperialism. Cultural hegemony shatters the cultural sovereignty of some countries, and their people's cultural confidence is eroded by other cultural values. As a result, self-doubting their own culture, these people are less enthusiastic about promoting their own cultures abroad.

As an important form of cultural and artistic products that displays history and culture accurately, documentaries shoulder the important mission of recording and spreading China's excellent traditional culture, and play a pivotal role in constructing discourse systems of cultural confidence with Chinese characteristics, Chinese style and Chinese spirits [3], not only for overseas audiences to develop understanding of China's national conditions and culture, but also for Chinese audience to deepen their understanding of their own culture and build cultural confidence. Culturally confident Chinese audience promote documentaries through word-of-mouth publicity to expand Chinese documentaries' scope of influence and increase their impact on the international arena, and also help documentaries stand out among other films genres in China.

3. Dilemma: Different Value Systems

Against the current international background, China's comprehensive development and expansion of its international influence require high quality and highly effective international communication. Market-oriented cultural companies and state-owned cultural enterprises are both valued and encouraged to expand Chinese culture's scope of influence and consolidate China's positive image through various films, television shows, literary works and media products. As an important art form and media product, documentaries are given high expectations to enhance the effectiveness of international communication, but due to differences in mechanisms of content production, value systems and cultural concepts between China and the West, gaps between images and between cultures prevent Chinese documentaries film from going out of the country and into the world to some extent.

3.1. Restrictions on China's Discursive Power

Production mechanisms of Chinese documentaries differ greatly from those in Europe and the United States where privately-owned companies are the main documentary producers. For a long time, traditionally, state-owned television stations were the only main actor in China's documentary industry. With high barriers to entry, projects are hard to get the necessary approval from National Radio and Television Administration. Besides, documentaries have a long production cycle, require large investment, and Chinese producers and distributors have a weak sense of competition [4]. As a result, production mechanism of Chinese documentaries is not effectively transformed by the competition in China's cultural market, unable to go through effective marketization. Chinese documentaries are forced to focus on superficial expression instead of deep discussion. Some phenomenal documentaries, such as *A Bite of China* and *Master in Forbidden City*, are only isolated and occasional successes in the current China's documentary industry, far from being a norm.

With Chinese documentaries keen on "going out", the problems of discursive power which is wielded by political elites representing China's mainstream political ideology and cultural elites, such as scholars and intellectuals, are causing limited thematic choices. Abstracts discussed in Chinese documentaries are confined to political frameworks and appear vague.

Misunderstanding of the nature of documentaries and inadequate production mechanism create a distance between documentaries and people's daily life. Shared cultural foundation with overseas audience is nowhere to be found so they, from a different cultural background, have a problem understanding, learning about the meaning behind Chinese documentaries, leading to the marginalization of Chinese documentaries in international communication.

3.2. Othering by Western Countries With No Understanding of China

In global competition, Western industrial countries, mainly those in Europe and the US, have the upper hand in discourse and international influence thanks to their extraordinary cultural strength. As a result, China's image and portrayal in international documentaries are mostly based on stereotypes and narratives of Othering. Since Marco Polo's imagination of the Far East, Western people have mixed feelings about China, such as yearning, jealousy, arrogance, bigotry. Negative feelings about China are represented by the biased narratives of Othering. Othering does not create an ideal communication situation with sincere, realistic, comprehensible content and appropriate expression, but rather the imaginary narrative leads to a blind spot in the public's understanding of Chinese concepts and the powerful influence of Western documentaries constructs an alternate reality.

Othering stems from Western countries' long-standing superiority complex and their deep-rooted contempt for Eastern peoples, which have gradually become collective unconscious [5]. Misunderstandings about China are permanent in overseas audience's perception. In *Secrets of China* and *Are Our Kids Tough Enough? Chinese School*, the narratives of Othering are evident. The narrator looks at China arrogantly, and the discourse is full of preconceived superiority mixed with wariness of China, blind to China's strength with a dichotomy of superiority and inferiority. Faced with Othering in arrogant and prejudiced Western documentaries about China, Chinese documentaries with a confused self-image and identity problems are unable to give powerful counterresponses.

3.3. Personal Prejudices From Cultural Discount

Based on real people, objects and events, documentaries, after presenting, expressing, disseminating and interpreting the reality, face the problem of cultural discount in communication with countries from different cultural backgrounds. Documentary filmmakers' perceptions and beliefs determine their choice of characters, narrative perspectives, the way they present the theme and their use of cameras, etc., which directly affect the overall narrative structure of their work. Audience's perspectives and convictions influence how they interpret, think about and evaluate the work, and even their subconscious attitudes towards the documentary. The perceptual differences between filmmakers and audience from different cultural backgrounds lead to cultural discount, which makes it difficult to decode information and results in audience's biases and pose challenges to international communication of Chinese documentaries.

Originating from Chinese culture, Chinese documentaries contain Chinese philosophy, ethics and values, so it is difficult to avoid cultural discount when reaching audience from different cultural backgrounds in international communication. In addition, due to the influence of the long-standing Western narrative of Othering, biased views of China are commonly held overseas audience. Cultural differences represented by specific cultural elements and symbols, lead to misperceptions and misinterpretations of China among overseas audiences. They see China's social and cultural reality as spectacles and have a tendency to judge positive social events as abnormal, unusual and irregular.

4. Future: Suggestions for Promoting Chinese Documentaries Abroad

Facing irreversible globalization and drawing inspiration from cultural exchanges, Chinese documentaries should seize opportunities and overcome obstacles to enhance China's soft power, strengthen its cultural attractiveness and improve its country image, based on China's development and conditions. Learning from successful experiences of Western documentaries in production and marketing can help China win the market-oriented international competition and give full play to its documentary industry in international communication.

4.1. More Than Propaganda

Promoting their works in foreign markets effectively require China's documentary filmmakers to heed the uniqueness of the socialist market economy with Chinese characteristics, take advantage of market dynamics under the control, support and supervision of the Chinese government, build a market-oriented operation mechanism, and invest the potential profits in future undertakings to create a virtuous circle for international communication. With strong policy support from the government, reasonable laws and regulations to protect the growth environment of documentaries, interest parties should stimulate the development potential of China's documentary market and facilitate its normalization, standardization and diversification. Documentaries should keep a distance from propaganda, break free from political discourse and ideologies, specific themes and self-censorship and reflect on China's development. Focused on overseas audience's interests and more attuned to popular culture and everyday life, documentaries should have an open-end political discussion, delve into details that can evoke emotional responses and sympathy from foreign audience, so as to continuously expand the common ground shared by people from different cultural backgrounds.

4.2. Collaboration with Other Countries to Create An Outsider Perspective

Culturally dominant Western countries have long used Othering to present China in a biased and distorted way, and their "reality-based" documentaries also tarnish China's image and construct an alternate reality. However, Chinese documentaries can also make use of the outsider viewpoints to provide opportunities for self-representation, and interaction with overseas media's narratives can help form a meaningful intersection of China's images from different perspectives and give voice to China intentionally or unintentionally. Sino-foreign co-production or cooperation avoids the suspicions of China bragging about itself and shaping its own image for its own gains. Foreigners telling China's stories truthfully is an important form of combining the insider perspective and the outsider perspective.

For example, *The Silk Road*, a documentary television series produced by a Japanese media corporation, *Confucius*, a 90-min documentary produced by CCTV in cooperation with a British company, and *China: Time of Xi*, a documentary television series jointly presented by an American channel and a Chinese TV station, etc., have a third-party perspective characterized by neutrality and objectivity regardless of competing ideologies, effectively reduce the negative impact of cultural discount. Therefore, actively using foreign media is like borrowing others' boats to transport goods across the sea. Moreover, in recent years, China has also made efforts to cultivate domestic actors for international communication, such as flagship media targeting foreign audience, and enhanced China's influence on foreign media. However, compared with developed media industries in European and American countries, China's media still have a long way to go. It's necessary to air Chinese documentaries not only on domestic channels but also on foreign platforms, take advantage of international media to expand their reach of influence and facilitate cultural exchanges and overseas dissemination.

4.3. Stories That Can Evoke Empathy

Compared with films and TV shows, documentaries are a very persuasive and expressive vehicle for cultural exchanges between civilizations and communication between different ideas due to their realness. Documentaries also play an important role in spreading Chinese culture and shaping China's image. It's worth nothing that cultural discount and overseas audience's prejudices force more rules on documentary ideas. Documentaries have to portray more empathetic characters and personal stories from a humanistic perspective. It is necessary for filmmakers to focus on universally interesting and valuable topics with consideration of foreign viewers' habits and preferences, present unique Chinese history, culture, social customs, lifestyle and thinking to the international community, reduce political propaganda and ideological persuasion, change the old way of cultural self-representation and tone down the fawning praise for Chinese culture. For example, stories about ordinary people during the COVID-19 pandemic from the perspective of humanity and value of life in *The lockdown: One month in Wuhan* seek commonalities between stories from different cultures. With its highly empathetic expression, it has been received well by the overseas audience. Stories about ordinary individuals help overseas audience resonate with characters. Universal discussions about humanity and emotions add depth to documentaries, making up for overseas audience's prejudices.

5. Conclusion

In the midst of radical global changes, China needs to take a more active role in the international community, enhance its cultural soft power and international influence through the well-accepted communication tool of documentaries which should aim to tell vivid and interesting Chinese stories to the world and show China's rapid development. Counteracting the negative effects of long-lived misinterpretation and misunderstanding by Western countries, Chinese documentaries should satisfy overseas audience's curiosity, answer their questions about China, and minimize cultural discount in international communication. With rich and diverse skillsets of communication, more professional and sophisticated filmmakers, focused on common destiny shared by human beings, will popularize Chinese documentaries around the world, present an objective and real image of China and give full play to the unique charm of Chinese culture and values.

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