

Interpreting the Cultural Symbols in Chinese Documentaries: Taking a Bite of China and Beautiful China as Examples

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ABSTRACT. *Against the backdrop of accelerated globalization, cross-cultural communication has become unprecedentedly frequent. Since the turn of the century, China has announced a “going-out” strategy that aims to deepen connections with the world. In particular, documentary, as an important medium for cultural exchange, is utilized as a propaganda tool to introduce China to the world. Although distribution of Chinese documentaries is not quite satisfactory at the beginning, recent years have marked success of several documentaries. To provide implications for Chinese documentaries’ entry in overseas markets, this paper analyzes two popular documentary series “A Bite of China” and “Beautiful China” from perspectives of Roland Barthes’s theory of two-level signifying system, language style, audiovisual effects, as well as emotional integration, and outlines their success factors.*

KEYWORDS: *Cultural symbols, Language style, Audiovisual effects, Emotional integration, Chinese documentaries*

1. Introduction

Integrating authenticity and entertainment, documentary is an important medium for cross-cultural communication and a useful tool of shaping images of countries. For a long time, distribution of Chinese documentaries in international markets has not been quite satisfactory, leaving China at a disadvantage in the process of globalization. However, Chinese documentaries have been catching up to promote their values, lifestyles and cultures to other countries, and some have made huge success in overseas markets. For example, “*Beautiful China*” was honoured with many prizes of the 30th Emmy Awards for Journalism and Documentary, and “*A Bite of China*” was exported to 30 countries. As cultural symbols embodied in those documentaries play a vital role in the dialogue with the world, it is worth studying how Chinese documentaries transmit cultural symbols to the world.

The purpose of this essay is to interpret the role of cultural symbols in documentaries and explore how to use cultural symbols for effective cultural output and cross-cultural communication. Especially, this essay selects “*Beautiful China*” and “*A bite of China*” as two cases for analysis, from perspectives of Roland

Barthes's (1915-1980) theory of two-level signifying system, language style, audiovisual effects, as well as emotional integration. The remainder of this essay is structured as follows. First, it introduces the two-level signifying system and other important components of successful documentaries. Second, it analyses the two documentaries via multiple aspects. Finally, it summarizes key success factors of two documentaries and provides implications for Chinese documentaries to successfully enter overseas markets.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Symbols and Cultural Symbols

Symbols serve as the foundation of culture and they are often utilized to study culture. Charles Sanders Peirce defined symbols as words, sentences and actions that link to corresponding objectives by social agreement and convention^[1]. Cultural symbols are referred to as conventionally accepted “signs” that stand for something else. For example, the Great Wall, Forbidden City, Confucius are cultural symbols for China; Buckingham Palace, Big Ben, Oxford University are cultural symbols for UK; Japanese, Mount Fuji, Judo are cultural symbols for Japan. It can be seen that the cultural symbols can be a building, a generation of legends, a brand or a skill, which has deeply rooted in people’s hearts.

Symbols can hardly exist or function in isolation. In films and television works, people pay special attention to cultural symbols with attempts to figure out the underlying national spirits and national characteristics. With needed information conveyed by cultural symbols, people can get a better understanding of other countries. Otherwise, cultural exchange may not be feasible. Roland Barthes further claimed in the book “Principles of Semiotics” that two participants will interact with each other and build “shared world” merely after their have adequate perceptions of images of each other.

2.2 Cultural Symbols in Documentaries

Roland Barthes proposed a two-level signifying system (denotation and connotation) to explain how cultural practices and beliefs are made to appear natural. At denotative level (first level), people not only can be evoked with the mental image of a signifier (mouse) but also other associations (eg. cowardness and thief)^[1]. This means that extended meanings can be acquired. At connotative level (second level), connotative meaning of the symbol vary dramatically across cultures. For example, dogs can be regarded as pests, food, family members, companion or luck connotatively in different cultures. If misunderstood in other cultures, some conflicts may be triggered. This theory further indicates how important cultural symbols are in terms of cross-cultural communication.

For documentaries, the same signifying system applies. Specifically, a documentary film can be deemed as a symbol system. By exposing to images and

pictures in the documentaries (signifiers), audience can obtain mental image and related extended meanings of that signifiers (level one), and further derive connotative meanings of symbols with previous symbols as new signifiers. Thus, it can be useful to analyse documentaries contents from perspectives of denotation and connotation on cultural symbols, especially as content is crucial to the popularity of documentaries.

2.3 Important Components of Documentaries

Apart from embodied cultural symbols, the following components are also pivotal to the success of documentaries:

(1) Language style: Adopting initiative image and a simple narrative language style is conducive to the storytelling in documentaries by presenting audience with clear and vivid images of animals, plants, food. In particular for overseas audience, translated subtitles of simple language are easy for them to understand the content and obtain meanings from cultural symbols.

(2) Audiovisual effects: audiovisual factors have become important elements in films and documentaries. By combining images and sounds, audiovisual symbols help capture audiences' attention and support their understanding of situation, characters and narratives ^[2]. In particular, figurative audiovisual symbols in documentaries can represent and convey implied cultural connotations more deeply and accurately.

(3) Emotional integration: Different communicative strategies in documentaries are not only used to reason but also used to trigger audiences' feelings and promote sensual dimensions of reality. This means that emotional structures are important for audiences' experience with documentaries. Notably, much evidence can be found pertaining to the effect of emotional intensity and narrative structures on presence in consciousness ^[3]. Those emotional factors contribute to forming social and cultural imagination in documentaries.

3. Case Analysis

3.1 "A Bite of China"

Since the initial lunch in 2012, "A Bite of China" has produced three seasons to show unique Chinese eating habits, food culture and food aesthetics to Chinese and overseas audiences. The whole series, by using delicate and exquisite pictures and local dialects to tell food stories, have proven the proverb (food comes first to people) in Chinese culture and demonstrated how eating practices facilitated the construction of national cohesion ^[4]. Specifically, the focus of "A bite of China" is not cooking but food production, including gathering, harvesting, and collection of unique ingredients in different natural settings ^[5]. Such food production practices have been passed down through generations, embodying traditional customs of food

and specific memories that will be retained and inherited by Chinese. Throughout the documentaries, food and dialects are taken as main cultural symbols, and they are used not only to demonstrate food culture of China but also to present country lifestyle, people's values, life attitudes, and national spirits in a subtle way. For example, bamboo shoots are filmed to be preserved by being covered with earth, which shows Chinese wisdom of preservation food in unfavourable weather conditions ^[4]. Moreover, the film appraised hardship of Chinese to collect food ingredients like pine mushrooms, which stunningly reflects ways of life in modern China. Those symbols have conveyed a positive image of Chinese to the world as supporters of harmonious relationship between human and nature.

Viewed from language style, "*A Bite of China*" has deployed standardized storytelling narrative to showcase cultural differences between China and the world. Notably, the opening phrases like "China has billions of population and the world's most abundant and diverse natural landscapes" sets the "national" narrative tone for the series. The narratives of different flavours have better portrayed cultural symbols, such as linking "sweet" with "joy and happiness", which can arouse audience's empathy. As for audiovisual effects, the series has used various colours to shot natural surroundings and food, which helps to stimulate taste buds and ignite physical and mental pleasure of audiences. In particular, the inclusion of natural sounds (sounds like harvesting wheat and collecting bamboo shoots) and Chinese music (played by instruments like Chinese lute and Chinese bamboo flute) has cooperated well and vividly presented a special image of rural life in China ^[6]. What's more, by recording moments of laughter and tears as authentic experience of ordinary people in documentaries, the series shows a non-political and attractive way of Chinese to pursue happiness via food and food ways. Both narrative style and audiovisual effects are aimed for conveying a nostalgia, including culinary nostalgia, to audiences, based on their shared memories of hometowns, families, food and traditions. The series have touched audiences' hearts by respecting labouring people and highlighting homeland sentiment, as well as demonstrating gratitude and love for nature.

3.2 "*Beautiful China*"

"*Beautiful China*" is first large-scale documentary jointly produced by CCTV and BBC to present Chinese wildlife and natural humanities and landscapes. This documentary has introduced natural and cultural landscapes of various regions in China, from sweltering rain forest in Xishuangbanna to extremely cold Mount Everest, from rice field in south of the Yangtze River to the Great Wall of China, from Yellow River Basin, the birthplace of Chinese culture, to meandering beautiful coastlines. Those animals, plants, and natural landscapes serve as major cultural symbols in the documentary, so that audiences in the world can understand and enjoy China's rare species and natural environment without leaving home. However, "*Beautiful China*", by showing how people get along with animals, focuses more on expressing human spirits and conveying a "reverence for life" philosophy, so that people can make self-reflections on their relations with nature and animals.

Viewed from language style, this series has applied multiple rhetorical devices for telling nature and human stories, such as metaphor and personalization. Narratives therefore are designed to arouse audiences' imagination, artistic conception and speculation, and transmit warmth and humanistic spirits that are attractive to audiences^[7]. By doing so, audiences no longer feel bored when watching the film and its translated subtitles. In addition, during the four-year filming process, the use of advanced photography techniques for the documentaries such as aerial photography, infrared, time-lapse, and underwater photography has provided audiences with many precious moments that are not usually seen. The unique rhythm produced by Chinese instruments has added values to the documentaries, making China, a mysterious country with long history, a desirable place for audiences in the world to visit. Overall, the series has successfully integrated natural settings and national spirits like frugality, environment protection and etiquettes, and promoted equal and harmonious human-nature relationship, which are easy to win over audiences due to shared belief.

4. Discussion and Implications

In summary, "*A Bite of China*" and "*Beautiful China*" have made some achievements in cross-cultural communication and become successful cultural output that helps to shape positive national image of China to the world. Both of them have certain advantages in the selection of cultural symbols. Specifically, the pictures, images and sounds constitute the first-level signifier, which helps audience to build up their perceptions about Chinese food, food production, natural surroundings or labouring people's rural life. Combined with audiovisual language, mental images and extended meanings have been obtained by audiences. However, the underlying stories about people and food or people and nature further added audiences' cultural insights, and they have derived connotative meanings as in this second-level signifying system. Notably, narrative style and audiovisual effects are great facilitators of conveying cultural symbols to audience. In other words, cultural symbols are only used as the carrier of the plot in the film, it must be supported by technology and combined with audiovisual symbols to make the story vivid and alive.

However, compared with Marvel movies that has high box office in China and huge reputation in the world, Chinese documentaries still have much room to be improved. This is because that Chinese culture, as a high-context culture compared with low-context cultures in U.S or Europe, remains relatively static in absorption of foreign cultures. However, if Chinese documentaries intend to grasp overseas market, they can learn from John Bailey's cultural adaptation theory to formulate cross-cultural communication strategies, such as selecting local cultural symbols that are easier to be accepted by foreign audiences to avoid cultural misunderstandings. More importantly, the core idea of such documentaries shall be strengthening collision and integration of international cultures and demonstrating unique Chinese cultures via attractive storytelling styles and multiple audiovisual techniques. The content is always the king for introducing Chinese stories to the world.

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