

The Construction of Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies Amid the Interaction of Narrative Subject ——the identification of the other and the telling of the self in A Long Cherished Dream

Fenglin Xing¹, Yi Li^{2,a*}

^{1,2}Nanjing Normal University, Nanjing, Jiangsu, China

Abstract: *A Long Cherished Dream*, a documentary centered on the poverty alleviation campaign in China, differs from other documentaries on the same subject in that it was shot by Malcolm Clarke, a British director. Therefore, this documentary is featured by the engagement of *the other* into the Chinese context. Condensed in its cross-cultural communication strategy were the identification of *the other* and storytelling of *the self*, constructing a third-dimension Chinese story and Chinese culture amid the interaction between different subjects. This paper, taking *A Long Cherished Dream* as an example, analyzes the narrative strategies of the text from the perspectives of different subjects in hopes that certain references and reflections could be provided for the cross-cultural narrative exchange of documentaries.

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1. Background

The progress of media technology has provided new opportunities for the exchange and sharing of human civilizations. However, it is undeniable that Western countries still enjoy a dominant place in today's global cultural communication context, and at the same time, China's efforts for cross-cultural communication have been regarded as rigid due to the ideological gap between China and the West.

As film art brings people all-round sensory satisfaction of both images and audio, the language of film, with no clear boundaries of ethnic and culture, distinguishes itself from ordinary language. Therefore, it is easier to stimulate people's emotions and trigger their in-depth thinking via image communication. Documentary, as one form of film art, is more speculative and philosophical than other forms of images in addition to its function of recording the real world.

Amid the progress of documentaries on China, their narrative subjects have seen a diachronic change from subjective narration to narration by the other and then the mixed narration of the two. In recent years, the emergence of co-production documentaries has gradually broken the previous division between the subject and the object. The director teams with renowned foreign directors as the mainstay focus on ordinary Chinese and let them tell Chinese stories that belong to the self. Such construction as breaks the dual narration, combining sensibility and

rationality, and emotional and rational thinking, has objectively produced a positive interaction with Chinese culture and thus can be seen as a new attempt for the cross-cultural communication of Chinese culture.

The co-production of documentaries on Chinese themes has attracted the attention of many a scholar. Starting from individual cases, they have analyzed these documentaries from text narration to communication context, attempting to summarize the strategies and key points for the success of cross-cultural communication of such documentaries. For example, it is due to the creative breakthroughs in narration, themes, and characters that *Chinese Restaurant*, the first domestic food documentary centered on overseas *Chinese restaurants*, has realized the connection between national culture and world culture.^[1] In addition to the content, the construction of the transmission path is equally important. To further enhance the cross-cultural communication capacity of Chinese documentaries, it is necessary to take the international audience as the base and place equal emphasis on "go out to sea by borrowing ships" and "go out to sea by building ships". Also, certain adjustments must be made to the discourse game strategy and a framework featured by shared culture and cognition needs to be developed. By doing these, we can further enhance the cross-cultural communication ability of Chinese documentaries.^[2]

1.2. Significance

As a typical co-production documentary, *A Long Cherished Dream*, filmed by Oscar-winner, British

* Corresponding author: a792878600@qq.com

director Malcolm Clarke, focuses on the stories of ordinary people in China in the new era. From remote imagination to close observation, from interpretation to dialogue, this paper will take this documentary as an example to analyze the characteristics of documentary communication strategies constructed amid the interaction of subjects so that certain references and reflections might be provided for more cross-cultural image practice in the future.

2. BEYOND IMAGE: FROM THE GAZE OF THE OTHER TO THE PRESENCE OF THE OTHER, MUTUAL REFERENCE PROVIDING MULTI-DIMENSION THINKING

The narrators in cross-cultural images can be subdivided into the main character within the image text and the story builder outside the image. Since the discussions here are held from the perspective of cultural communication of China, the main character within the image text could be regarded as *the self*, and the story builder outside the image, *the other*.

Generally, the story builders mentioned in this paper refer to foreigners telling Chinese stories. The forms of images are ever changing with the development of information technology. From the perspective of diachronic changes, the group characteristics of foreigners telling Chinese stories show a trend of diversification and decentralization. From professional film directors to foreign Internet celebrities and KOL (Key opinion leader) in the era of short video and we-media, the continuous enrichment of the identity of the other has exerted a certain impact on the telling of Chinese stories. Also, the difference of the identity of *the other* contributes to the difference of the telling of Chinese stories. Edward Twitchell Hall Jr divides the environment in which human languages exist and are used, namely the context, into high context and low context to study the differences between cultures. According to Hall, the culture of the US and Europe belongs to the low-context culture: a lot of information needs to be clearly encoded so that it could be transmitted. Therefore, information exists in language rather than context. Chinese culture, however, belongs to high-context culture where the transmission of information exists in the context or is internalized by individual doers. That means language plays much a smaller role in terms of high-context culture.^[3] According to this synchronic perspective, the identity of *the other* telling Chinese stories can be roughly divided into Westerners from low-context culture, Easterners from high-context culture, and overseas Chinese. The notion "identity" itself comes from the symbolic representation system and hence contains certain significance. Identity has always been an important topic in cultural studies. Different or multiple identity identification provides a presupposition and premise for the cross-cultural communication of images.

Malcolm Clarke, the story builder of *A Long Cherished Dream*, is first of all a British from a low-context

background while the stories took place in China, a country of high-context environment. The ensuing difference and collision give the image the gene of interaction and fusion. Secondly, Malcolm Clarke is a world-renowned director whose works have won many international awards, including an Oscar, in his 40-year career. Therefore, his identity as the other is blessed with "halo effect", providing enough topic heat and credibility for *A Long Cherished Dream*.

Presence means that the body is in the place where things happen and go on. *Presence* firstly observes the subject, namely the other analyzed above. It also observes *the situation*. In sociology, social situations make up the environment in which people live and act. In the study of communication, Meyrowitz believes that the media information network has produced new social situations. The combination of sites, props, dialogue, and music in the image forms the situation in time and space, which provides the background for the characters' behaviors.^[4]

Based on this, the *presence of the other* in *A Long Cherished Dream* has two meanings. First, Malcolm Clarke, a Westerner holding filming activities in the Chinese social scene, can have the most direct understanding of Chinese society as he goes deep into the realities of life and to the scene. Both poverty alleviation campaign and progress in the new era are social issues within Chinese ideology. That means only when one gets to know real social stories can he better eliminate the strangeness and stereotypes brought by cultural separation. Aside from that, as the director of this film appears in the image and faces the audience in the way of physical presence, telling his perception in the shooting process and understanding of these stories.

A Long Cherished Dream has four episodes, each of which focuses on a Chinese man who has worked his way out of poverty. At the end of each episode, Malcolm Clarke will sit in front of the camera for a few minutes, during which his opinion of the main character is given. Yet the monologue of the director is interspersed with relevant images of the characters in the story. Such comparisons present us with "Chinese impressions" generated amid the mutual care of the subject and object. The main characters are usually not good at direct expression as the Chinese of high-context culture show more actions, body language, and meaningful silence in front of the camera. But the director's monologue is a direct expression of praise and reflection. This collision of high and low contexts not only constructs a multidimensional space beyond the subject and object, but also arouses the audience's thinking in different contexts. The director's "presence of *the other*" satisfies the imaginative presence of people in the same context as him, evoking sympathy.

3. WITHIN THE IMAGE: DELEGATE THE RIGHT TO SPEAK AND FOCUS ON DAILY LIFE

In Chinese documentaries, the connotation of "foreigners telling Chinese stories" can be seen as composed of

“foreigners in the state of nature telling Chinese stories” and “foreigners from the perspective of construction telling Chinese stories” . [5] These two narrative perspectives can be understood as the game of ideological discourse power between China and the Western world. The former takes the Western world as the center and the Chinese stories it tells are merely based on its own interests. Yet the latter tries to incorporate *the other* into *the self*, thus spreading the macro image of a nation. Both narrative modes, however, build images with grand discourse. Even in the Chinese stories told from the perspective of construction, *the self* mentioned in them is not *the self* of subjectivity. In the case of *A Long Cherished Dream*, what we see is more of a narrative pattern centered on narration of daily life, which refers to a kind of imaginative expression based on individual life experience, a small narration of daily trifles, and a real self-elaboration of living individuals. For documentaries, the narration of daily life in the image world is a kind of constructed text. [6] It is different from the previous narrative pattern in that people in the image no longer exist as symbols or backgrounds of the overall representation structure. Neither do they serve the defined meaning in the structure. Instead, they construct their own daily existence with their life of triviality and human touch.

But different from the daily life in the objective world, the daily life in the image world is organized with certain narrative logic, which is derived from the in-depth description technique of anthropology. The four stories in *A Long Cherished Dream* are all titled after the names of their main characters: Kai Yong, Lin Bao, Huai Fu and Zi Xu. Although every Chinese character has its corresponding explanation in the dictionary, the director Malcolm Clarke let them present their own meaning via images. From the “poverty alleviation cadre” Kai Yong to Lin Bao and Huai Fu, who strive to move from the countryside to the city, and to the rural entrepreneur Zi Xu who has been fighting for his career for many years, many ordinary people like them have jointly shaped the local image of China and, at the same time, carried out their own life practice.

In addition, the telling of *the self* is also reflected in the lines -- the personal emotion is expressed in dialogue and monologue rather than commentary. Living in a high-context culture, Chinese people always find emotional expression implicit. Due to the arduous task of poverty alleviation, village official Kai Yong often fails to take care of his own family, burdening his wife a lot. In the documentary, there are few scenes of his wife and all her support for her husband's work is condensed into a single sentence: “I wish I were the poverty-stricken family assigned to him.” When it comes to the core of the documentary, Malcolm Clarke, even facing possible conflicts between high-context narrative subjects and low-context audience subjects, still uses blank narration with no intervention. This design precisely leaves space for the imagination of the audience and enables *the self* who are narrating to truly express himself.

4. AFTER THE IMAGE: REALIZING THE SYMPATHETIC COMMUNICATION AMID CLOSE RELATIONSHIP AND RURAL CHINA

Co-production of the documentary itself, aiming at the audience at home and abroad at the same time, carries the responsibility of cross-cultural communication. In this context, an obvious problem faced by creators is how to minimize the cultural image discount caused by secondary encoding and decoding. Michael Wood, the director of BBC who has completed several co-produced documentaries, bypasses the problem of translation by adopting all-English dialogues coupled with body language. In doing this, he tries to realize the discourse extension from China to the rest of the world with this “cultural proximity” . [7] Distinguished from Wood's cultural proximity strategy, Malcolm Clarke pays more attention to the expression of original Chinese image and relies on emotional proximity to realize the extension of communication discourse.

A Long Cherished Dream, though themed on the poverty alleviation efforts in China, has in its narration an emotional tone not affected by time and space. First, the four episodes of this documentary are invariably presented in the simplest way of communication -- intimate interpersonal communication. Modern society is filled with onerous interpersonal communication, but in the documentary, Malcolm Clarke only shows the most intimate interpersonal communication of the main characters, which may be between people: father and son, husband and wife, and different generations; or between people and space: Lin Bao and the truck she spends her days with, Huai Fu and the performance venue he relies on. Even if the media extends people's senses, the communication between “bodies”, scarce in today's fast-paced society, remains the most primitive and intimate of all. Once the emotional resonance is captured, relationships of intimacy could unleash tremendous power that goes beyond time and space to connect the other side of the globe.

Secondly, the presentation of “hometown” and “homesickness” in the documentary. Whether it is the poverty alleviation campaign or the establishment of a well-off society, the pace of urban modernization emphasizes “moving forward”. However, from the old people who refuse to be relocated in the first episode Kai Yong, to Lin Bao's and Huai Fu's returning home after their success, to the last episode of Zi Xu, where the successful entrepreneur attends his farmland, they all show a feeling of nostalgia for returning to their native land. As a developing country, China retains many rural features, which is a kind of tradition from the past, a response to the question “where am I from?”, and in a sense, a representation of a fading pastoral utopia. As a man living in a developed country, Malcolm Clarke sees more urban civilization homogenized by globalization. However, it seems that we can also see the “pastoral time” described by the British in the history books. Therefore,

this kind of inquiry and recollection can be shared by all mankind. What it reflects is that people have doubts and thinking about the industrial civilization which develops at an unusually fast speed. It is precisely because the film contains more profound human emotional issues in addition to the Chinese context that the topics belonging to China have more possibilities to be expanded.

5. ENLIGHTENMENT: CHINESE DOCUMENTARIES SHOULD CONSTRUCT A THIRD-DIMENSION IMAGE DIALOGUE STRUCTURE

Bakhtin proposes the theory of intrinsic dialogue and divides the intrinsic dialogue of discourse as the object of interpretation into three tiers, of which the third-tier dialogue refers to the dialogue between the speaker (author) and the super addressee (also known as the third party and the comprehender) in the long term. [8] Bakhtin believes that this third-party position is a completely special one as it is an absolutely just responsive understanding. The anticipation should be in the mysterious distance, or in the distant historical time. And the author of the expression can consciously predict the existence of the highest "superaddressee" to varied degrees. [9] In the narrative logic of *A Long Cherished Dream*, there is a "responsive understanding of absolute justice", which exists in a "text calling structure" that is based on the integration of "the perspective of the other" and "the perspective of the other" yet transcends the two. If Chinese documentaries are to achieve a new breakthrough in cross-cultural communication, they should draw more narrative strategies from the dialogue theory so as to establish a brand-new image of China. [10]

First, the construction of a space where Chinese themes and Western themes can communicate. Subject is the prerequisite of image construction, and the determination of subject is the concretization of the purpose of dialogue. Documentaries with cross-cultural communication as the core task should have both the cultural characteristics of "the self" and the cultural synesthesia of "the other" in the selection of subject, strike a balance between the normalization and defamiliarization, and provide a premise space of the third dimension for dialogue.

Second, the construction of a space where high context and low context can communicate. In constructing image narrative language, a narrative chain with multiple discursive features should be formed as far as possible. By doing this, different identities and perspectives can be presented simultaneously, so that Chinese appeals from the perspective of "the self" and foreign appeals from the perspective of "the other" can be responded and play their roles simultaneously, thus forming a third position of "intersubjectivity".

Third, the construction of a space where implications can communicate. The ultimate purpose of image presentation is to convey a certain point of view or a certain spirit or image. However, such communication,

once led by "hegemony", will backfire more often than not. Chinese spirit belongs to the national spirit, but it also represents a kind of human spirit, which can be shared and enriched by human civilization. When refining the implication of images, we should learn to leave blank space for more comments, so as to form a real dialogism and inclusiveness of great country culture.

6. CONCLUSION

In a word, against the background of globalization, the narration of Chinese stories is undergoing the transformation from "the telling by the self" to "the identification of the other". However, in order to give full play to the cross-cultural value of Chinese stories, image narration should achieve a telling between the host and the guest jointly built by the two. The co-production documentaries represented by *A Long Cherished Dream* provide a new way of telling stories. We should learn from the strategies and apply them in the narrative construction of more documentaries, facilitating the Chinese stories' going global.

References

1. Zhang Yifei, Cui Hongtu. Cross-cultural Narration and Communication Strategies of the Documentary Chinese Restaurant[J]. Contemporary TV, 2020, (12): 81-83.
2. Chen Bilong, Tang Ning, Ju Huilin. On the Cross-cultural Communication Strategies of China Documentary[J]. China Television, 2022, (04): 70-76.
3. Hall T. Beyond C. Garden City[M]. New York: Doubleday, 1976: 10.
4. Meyrowitz, J., No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior, Beijing, Tsinghua University Press, 2002: 16. (in Chinese)
5. Meyrowitz, J., No Sense of Place: The Impact of Electronic Media on Social Behavior, Beijing, Tsinghua University Press, 2002: 16. (in Chinese)
6. Zhang Xiaoqin, Liang Junjian, From Daily Life to Audio-visual Narrative Text: Practice and Exploration of Documentary Image Narration[J]. Modern Communication (Journal of Communication University of China), 2018, 40(02): 112-116.
7. Wang Hengqian, Shao Zhenqi. Cross-cultural Narration of Michael Wood's China Documentary[J]. TV Research, 2022, (06): 92-94.
8. Zhao Yanhong. Theoretical Exploration and Realistic Focus of Dialogue Communication [J]. Southeast Communication, 2018, (07): 49-52.
9. Ling Jianhou. Linguistic Thought in Bakhtin's Discourse Theory [J]. Russian Teaching in China, 2001.
10. Jiefei Zhao. Interpreting the Cultural Symbols in

Chinese Documentaries: Taking a Bite of China and Beautiful China as Examples. *Frontiers in Educational Research* (2020) Vol. 3 Issue 11: 41-46.