

The Intercultural Communication Analysis of Chinese Documentary Films from the Perspective of Empathy

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Abstract: The New Year is the most solemn traditional festival of the Chinese nation, not only carrying the collective consciousness and spiritual world of the Chinese nation, but also an important symbol for the external dissemination of Chinese culture, with a wide influence worldwide. Using Python to obtain and analyze barrage comments of the documentary *Chinese New Year* in Bilibili with a focus on Chinese themes. Through text analysis of the barrage comments, it is essential to investigate its dissemination effectiveness, uncover successful cross-cultural communication experiences within the realm of empathy, and provide insights for effectively telling the Chinese story through documentaries, fostering empathy between Chinese culture and the world.

1. Introduction

The documentary *Chinese New Year* premiered on BBC 2, which attracted public resonance both locally and globally. *Chinese New Year* not only includes the social life such as food, clothing, housing and transportation, which shows the modernization and internationalization of contemporary China; but also contains rich Chinese cultural symbols about traditional culture and custom, implicating the profound core of Chinese culture.

Empathy is a psychological concept that refers to an individual's ability to accurately understand the emotions of others and respond appropriately in specific situations^[1]. The generation of empathy includes three stages: "emotional contagion", "perspective-taking" and "empathic concern". "Love" serves as the foundation of empathy, and communication can facilitate empathy. Empathy varies depending on the object and context^[2]. The process of empathy involves emotional communication, dialogue, and dissemination, making it an integral part of communication. In the context of documentary filmmaking, empathy plays a crucial role as both the goal of creation and a specific strategy adopted during filming.

The subject of a documentary can be divided into self-construction, other-construction and co-construction. In international communication of the Chinese image, there has been a historical reliance on self-construction, where China shapes its own image without much regard for empathizing with the foreign audience. This approach often lacks emotional resonance and persuasive power. To improve the international perception of China's image, it's essential to balance self-assertion with other-assertion,

where outsiders contribute to shaping China's narrative^[3]. By incorporating both self-construction and other-construction, a co-constructed image can emerge, leading to more effective communication.

2. Methods

Barrage comments (also known as danmu, danmaku, barrage subtitles, bullet comments) possess characteristics such as high interactivity, real-time feedback, originality, and authenticity. They can reflect the audience's real-time emotional perception while watching documentaries and showcase emotional interactions among the audience themselves. The barrage comments left by viewers while watching *Chinese New Year* serve as an excellent means to reflect the documentary's communication effectiveness.

Among numerous online platforms, Bilibili is a domestically popular barrage-style interactive communication platform which is open to the public for free. It boasts a large user base and high user engagement. The audiences, as users of Bilibili, are not passive recipients but active participants. They demonstrate initiative and creativity by generating topics, thereby adding vigor to the dissemination of culture. Moreover, Bilibili has created a section especially for video-based educational lectures, including Learning Advanced Mathematics, Learning Basic Japanese, and Perfect Pronunciation of American English, as examples^[4]. As of May 2023, the documentary *Chinese New Year* has accumulated 4.249 million views on Bilibili documentary channel. Conducting a detailed analysis of this will help us understand the documentary's communication

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effectiveness and, consequently, deduce the logical methods behind its successful dissemination. The framework for this study incorporated the Uses and Gratifications (UGT) theory model by Blumler, and Gurevitch (1973)^[5].

3. Results and Discussion

By utilizing Python to crawl barrage comments, the barrage text information of the documentary *Chinese New Year* on Bilibili was obtained. The data was collected on May 5, 2023. To ensure research accuracy, preliminary processing of the barrage text was conducted, removing meaningless characters, numbers, punctuation, and other irrelevant content, and retaining valid barrage text. The resulting data is as follows (for specific information, refer to Table 1).

TABLE 1 The Number of Barrage Comments in *Chinese New Year*

<i>Chinese New Year</i>	<i>Homecoming</i>	<i>Reunion</i>	<i>Celebration</i>	in total
number	8,290	3,023	2,143	13,456

3.1. Invoking Cultural Identity

In terms of emotional identification in *Chinese New Year*, barrage comments can express real-time emotions, and the audience, while watching the documentary, doesn't merely receive emotions passively; they consciously generate a sense of identification as individuals. To examine the emotions of the audience while watching, the author conducted emotion analysis of the barrage content using values of emotion analysis as a starting point. Simultaneously, high-frequency emotional words were extracted, resulting in a distribution of high-frequency emotional words (Figure 1) and an overall emotional analysis chart (Figure 2). When categorizing high-frequency emotional words, the emotional characteristics of the term "go home" were taken into full consideration, as it carries rich emotions associated with the Chinese New Year. Therefore, it was included in the category of high-frequency emotional words. From the chart, it can be observed that 85% of the feedback expresses positive emotions, 7.8% express negative emotions, and the rest of 7.2% express neutral emotions. Overall, the positive emotions in the barrage content far outweigh the negative emotions. Words like 'envy', 'like', 'good-looking', 'beautiful', and 'impressive' frequently appear in the positive emotion category, demonstrating the audience's interest and admiration for the content of the documentary and their emotional attitude of identification with the Chinese culture portrayed in *Chinese New Year*. The word 'cute' appears 157 times, showcasing the adorable aspect of Chinese New Year culture in the documentary. The word 'cute', as a form of empathetic communication, has the power to touch the softest corners of one's heart^[6]. The dissemination of 'cute' content has moved the audience, evoking positive emotions and fostering emotional identification.

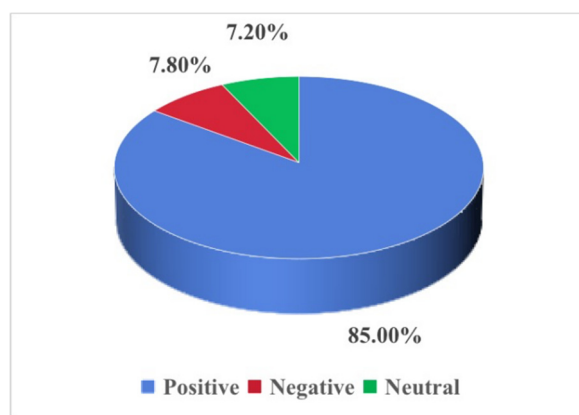


Figure 1: Distribution of High-Frequency Emotional Words

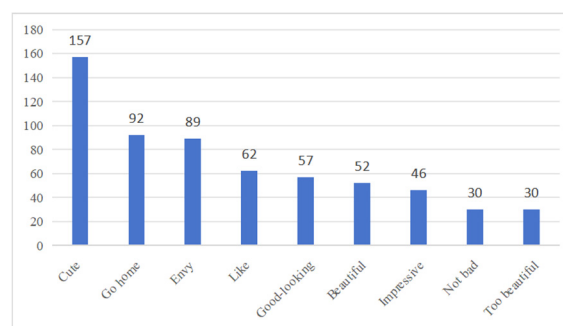


Figure 2: Emotional Analysis Chart

As for cultural value identification in *Chinese New Year*, the documentary has aroused the audience's identification with outstanding culture, especially the core socialist values. When witnessing scenes of family reunions during the Spring Festival travel rush, barrage comments were flooded with expressions like "I want to go home", reflecting the audience's identification with the values of family and collectivism. Many barrage comments praised the volunteers who enthusiastically offered assistance to travelers on their way home, aligning with the traditional Chinese values of "benevolence" and "valuing righteousness over personal gain". Many barrage comments were charmed by the adorable Yunnan snub-nosed monkeys, endorsing the concept of "harmony between man and nature". Many barrage comments paid tribute to the workers who steadfastly held their posts during the Spring Festival, writing phrases and sentences like "you've worked hard", showing their identification with a sense of willingness to contribute to the greater good and a sense of responsibility towards the collective.

With regard to cultural identity in *Chinese New Year*, the audience expressed sentiments while watching the documentary such as "I feel that the Chinese people are truly great", "This is the resilience of the Chinese", "We have confidence, why fear others' opinions", "This is the unique charm that belongs to our China", "People who have experienced the struggles in China are all remarkable; we should work even harder". These remarks reflect the audience's contemplation and exploration of cultural identity related to "self", "self in relation to others" and "self in relation to the nation." Through self-expression, they established individual cultural identity and cultural belonging. Apart from evoking individual cultural identity, the documentary also fully utilized the uniqueness and

autonomy of regional cultures, stimulating the initiative of local audiences. Barrage interactions revolved around discussions of "community", engaging in identity dialogues within the context of cultural amalgamation. Within a space of inclusivity and dialogue, they moved toward a collective cultural identity. In the barrage comments, some audiences questioned the documentary's portrayal of ice lanterns, Yunnan snub-nosed monkeys, and flower market visits as symbols of the Chinese New Year, feeling that these elements were off-topic. They expressed doubts like, "How come the program seems off-topic?" suggesting that some contemporary cultural symbols do not belong to the Chinese New Year tradition. However, others countered these claims, stating, "It's not off-topic, Harbin people celebrate the New Year with ice lanterns and snow activities; these are inseparable parts of our tradition." or "Isn't this about the Year of the Monkey? It's not off-topic." Different regional cultures ignited the enthusiasm of diverse local audiences, leading to extensive discussions on related topics. In this positive interaction, they moved toward cultural identity through mutual understanding, embracing the idea of "you are a part of me, and I am a part of you."

The development of economic globalization has led to the development of cultural globalization, where global cultures continuously merge amidst competition. However, it has also brought about an uneven state of affairs, resulting in varying degrees of identity anxiety and identity crises in different ethnic nations. In the face of this crisis of multiple identities, *Chinese New Year* has, in the process of its dissemination, provided answers to the question of "who am I" internally, explained "who we are" externally, invoked cultural identity internally, and shaped a positive national image externally, thus achieving a favorable communication effect.

3.2. Shaping the national image through empathetic connections between Chinese and Western culture

Chinese New Year explores the similarities between Chinese culture and Western culture in terms of perception association, scene association, behavior association, and significance association. This evokes a sense of familiarity among the audience and triggers a shared imagination, bridging the gap between the documentary and the audience, and eliciting empathy from Western audiences as well.

TABLE 2 Associations of Chinese and Western Culture in *Chinese New Year*

The forms of Association	Chinese culture	Western culture
Perception	conge	pudding
	Beijing hot pot	Chinese-style cheese hot pot
	International Commerce Centre	Nelson's Column, The Shard
	Harbin Ice and Snow Festival architecture	fairy tale castles
	Chagan Lake	Glasgow City
	Baijiu	Pear liqueur or Mamete

	sweet Fenjiu	blue cheese flavor
	longevity noodles	spaghetti
Scene	the scene of Spring Festival shopping	the preparations before Christmas on December 25th
	Kunming Flower Auction	Dutch-style Auction
	cooking on New Year's Eve	cook their Christmas dinner
	Temple Fair in Beijing	take a walk
	Flower Car Parade	Bond Street
Behavior	buying large cabbages	British people eating pies
	putting coins inside dumplings	English Christmas pudding
	lion dance	pantomime horse
Significance	Spring festival	Christmas
	family reunion dinner on the New Year's Eve	Christmas dinner
	Bell Tower in Beijing	Big Ben
	chinese dragon	western dragon
	fireworks designers repaired the Liuyang Temple	building a temple for Brunel

In terms of perception association (See Table 2), the documentary establishes connections between Chinese and Western cultures, reducing cultural barriers and facilitating audience understanding and experience. For example, the comparison between "congee" and "pudding" helps the audience perceive the similarity between the two. The description of "Beijing hot pot" as resembling "Chinese-style cheese hot pot" makes it easier for audiences familiar with cheese hot pot to imagine the deliciousness of Beijing hot pot. Visual associations are made between Harbin Ice and Snow Festival architecture and fairy tale castles, Chagan Lake and Glasgow City, and Baijiu and Pear liqueur or Mamete. Associations are also made between sweet Fenjiu and blue cheese flavor, and longevity noodles and spaghetti.

Scene association creates a more vivid understanding of the depicted scenes. The comparison between the scene of Spring Festival shopping and the preparations before Christmas on December 25th helps the audience better visualize the lively atmosphere of buying New Year goods. The description of cooking on New Year's Eve as similar to how British families cook their Christmas dinner allows the audience to directly immerse themselves in the cooking scene on New Year's Eve.

The presence of behavior association enables Western audiences to directly understand certain Chinese practices. For example, the tradition of Chinese people buying large cabbages during the Spring Festival because the pronunciation of "cabbage" sounds similar to "wealth", resulting in associating with British people eating pies, as the pronunciation of "pies" sounds similar to "wealth". The tradition of putting coins inside dumplings for good luck is related to the tradition of putting a coin in English Christmas pudding, both symbolizing good luck.

The rich significance association allows Western audiences to cross cultural barriers and intuitively understand the meaning behind New Year customs. For example, the statement that family reunion dinner on the New Year's Eve is the most important meal of the year and is somewhat similar to a Christmas feast helps the audience grasp the importance of the New Year's Eve dinner. The significance of the Bell Tower in Beijing striking at midnight is described as similar to the Big Ben announcing the arrival of the New Year, allowing the audience to understand the role of the striking clock. "Fireworks designers repaired the Liuyang Temple to pay their respects to their master-Li Tian " is equivalent to "building a temple for Brunel who built the railway in our UK", embodying the connection between Li Tian and Liuyang Temple.

Through these associations, *Chinese New Year* effectively compares and integrates Chinese and Western cultures, reinterprets Chinese cultural symbols, and creates similarities, making it easier for international audiences to receive, understand, and empathize with Chinese culture. Overseas viewers learn about Chinese culture through *Chinese New Year* and construct their perception of China. A study conducted by Guo Zhenzhi et al. (2016) surveyed students from two universities using questionnaires and interviews after they watched *Chinese New Year*. The results showed that the film resonated with foreign students by capturing universal human emotions and left a profound impression on them^[7]. From the perspective of content analysis, emotions are essential in evoking emotions. *Chinese New Year* chose to emphasize emotions, which resulted in the generation of more emotions and achieved positive communication effects. In a cross-cultural context, incorporating universally relatable emotional themes in cultural communication helps provide a close experience for audiences from different cultural backgrounds, thus generating empathy and achieving better communication outcomes.

In *Chinese New Year*, the creators subtly convey Chinese culture, gradually shaping an image of a rising, endearing and respectable nation. They use a rich array of cultural symbols to showcase China's multicultural and diverse characteristics to the world. With the passage of time, China has moved beyond the traditional image held by Westerners and has integrated into the global economic development trend with its modern capabilities that can support the migration of hundreds of millions of people. The documentary, through authentic footage, enhances and shapes a positive national image. While cleverly incorporating Chinese cultural symbols, it also presents the contemporary China – a China that is rising peacefully, a China with many endearing people and things, and a China that bridges the gap between tradition and modern development^[8].

3.3.The Empathetic Selection of Content: Universal Global Values and Ethical Morality

Chinese New Year has achieved a positive communication effect. It has not only strengthened cultural confidence among Chinese people but has also promoted the cultural

dissemination of "telling the story of Chinese New Year" to the world. The success of its communication can be attributed to the shared human emotional foundation: the universal global values and ethical principles found in "human-to-human".

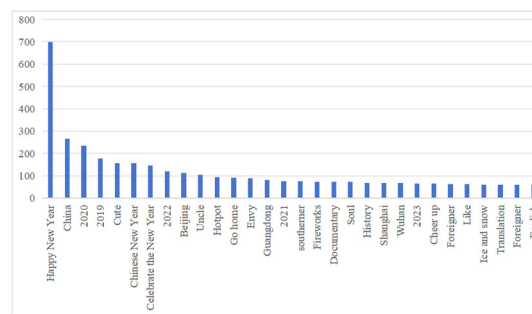


Figure 3: Distribution of High-Frequency Words

According to the analysis of high-frequency words (refer to Figure 3), among the top 30 high-frequency barrage comments, a total of four personal pronouns appeared, namely: 'uncle', 'southerner', 'foreigner', and 'foreigner'. If barrage comments indicating time (e.g., '2022,' '2021,' etc.) and location (e.g., 'China', 'Guangdong', etc.) are excluded, these personal pronouns occupy a significant proportion. It can be seen that *Chinese New Year* focuses on the joys and sorrows of individuals in their daily lives, showcasing the genuine emotions of the general public and possessing a mass appeal.

This documentary portrays ordinary Chinese people from various professions and industries, such as passengers and porters with red caps at Beijing West Railway Station, ice harvesters and carving masters, and golden monkey conservationists in *Homecoming*; the Yang family and performers for Spring Festival Gala in *Reunion*; fishermen, temple emperor impersonators, noodle chefs, and fireworks designers in *Celebration*. These individuals represent the ordinary people of China, who dedicated to their roles in all walks of life. *Chinese New Year* showcases the diverse social life of Chinese people, including food culture such as hot pot, street stalls, and noodles; travel experiences during the Spring Festival rush, including aviation and railway transportation; leisure activities such as ice sports and square dancing; and consumer experiences at markets like Beijing Xinfadi and Kunming flower farms. The emotional narrative on a daily basis serves as a direct window into social interaction between people^[9], capturing the audience's hearts with the documentary's portrayal of ordinary yet heartwarming details. The five hosts directly interact with local people, allowing ordinary Chinese citizens to share their own lives and cultural traditions through the lens, enabling audiences to truly experience social life in China in a more authentic and touching way. These values have been understood and embraced by audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds. This documentary showcases common human emotions such as love, kindness, hope, resilience, and self-improvement, which transcend ethnic and geographical boundaries and facilitate cross-cultural understanding. *Chinese New Year* taps into these universal emotions, breaking down cognitive barriers and enabling people from different cultural and ethnic backgrounds to

collectively experience the "human emotions" of the Chinese New Year. *Chinese New Year* incorporates the category of globally applicable values and moral ethics: "human-to-human". Even audience members from different cultural backgrounds with diverse personal experiences can be affected by universal emotions shared by humans. Viewers may be moved by the dedicated volunteers serving the returning home fleet or by the moments of family reunion and expressions of longing. Such typical and warm details become the points of empathy in the documentary, attracting and influencing the audience, enhancing the appeal and penetration of Chinese New Year culture.

4. Conclusion

Through the analysis of the barrage comments in the documentary *Chinese New Year* in Bilibili, the following conclusions are discovered and reached: documentaries serve as an excellent medium to enhance the world's understanding and recognition of China. Chinese cultural dissemination can utilize documentaries as a vehicle. When reaching out to audiences from diverse cultural backgrounds, by showcasing the rich cultural content and diverse emotions of China, it can evoke the audience's sense of identification with Chinese culture. This plays a positive role in disseminating Chinese culture and shaping China's international image. When exploring the content and methods of empathetic communication, it is important to promote the fusion of Chinese and Western cultures. Connecting these two cultural spheres can greatly facilitate empathetic communication in international contexts. Furthermore, selecting universally empathetic communication content between people can better enable the telling of the Chinese story.

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