

Research on the Way of Explaining Civilization in the Documentary Film *The Mysterious People of the Silk Road**

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Abstract—The Japanese-edited documentary "The Mysterious People of the Silk Road", produced jointly by China and Japan, intentionally enlarges the mysterious elements of the Takla Makan Desert. The film uses the questions, contrasts, and interviews to depict the folk culture and living conditions of the Daliyabuyi in the Takla Makan Desert hinterland. The film tries to reveal the origin and development of this oasis civilization from a bystander's perspective, as well as the real problems they are facing on civilization, environmental degradation, homeland complex, etc.

Keywords—*The Mysterious People of the Silk Road*; documentary; Daliyabuyi

I. INTRODUCTION

The Mysterious People of the Silk Road (2017) is the Japanese version of the documentary film The Keriya, co-produced by China and Japan in 4K ultra-high definition. The film tells about the life and folk culture of the mysterious Keriya people living in the oasis of Daliyabuyi in the hinterland of the Takla Makan Desert. Daliyabuyi is 1300 kilometers away from Urumqi and 240 kilometers away from Tianxian County. It is a "secret land" and "the Peach Garden" located deep in the desert. The production team is the first television production group to visit the oasis in the world. This film is like the tribal album of the Keriya people, which has important significance in visual anthropology and ethnography. Among them, the Chinese version of The Keriya has aroused widespread concern among the people and academia since it was broadcast on Sino-Japanese TV. It has been collected by the "China Memory Project" of the National Library of China. The Japanese version did not attract the attention of the Chinese people. Although the film was co-produced by the Sino-Japanese program group, due to the differences in cultural perspectives, the two editions of the film differ in image connotation and expression. As far as the attention and filming of the ancient and modern civilization along the Silk Road are concerned, the Sino-Japanese program group co-

produced the Silk Road series as early as 1980s and the New Silk Road series again in 2005. However, the two sides have edited slightly different versions from different cultural standpoints. This is no exception. The Chinese version of The Keriya intentionally breaks away the mysterious elements of Xinjiang culture, focusing on the ordinary people living in oasis in desert. By a civilian perspective, the film devotes itself to the inhabitants' simple and plain life, feelings and stories. By contrast, the Japanese version of The Mysterious People of the Silk Road intentionally enlarges its mysterious elements, and tries to trace the origin of oasis civilization in a long time context, showing the unique folk culture and living conditions of oasis civilization and the future of Keriya people in oasis. This paper attempts to explain the way Japanese production team interprets the oasis civilization, that is, how to interpret the mysterious oasis civilization from the perspective of an outsider of civilization.

II. SKILLFULLY QUESTIONING THE ORIGIN OF THE OASIS CIVILIZATION

According to Chinese director Ji Lin, Japan is interested in the mystery of Daliyabuyi and "their interest lies in the curiosity about Loulan, which is an ancient city in Xinjiang. They want to dig out many details." [1] Daliyabuyi, located in the center of the desert, is indeed a mystery. Its mystery lies not only in its unique geographical conditions, but also in its inhabitants' primitive way of life, which is almost isolated from the city. So where did this mysterious civilization come from? The film begins with a romantic speculation about the oasis civilization, linking the inhabitants of the secret land with the excavated female mummies living in 4,000 years ago at the site of Loulan Ancient Kingdom and believing that they may be Loulan's descendants. Can this suspenseful conjecture be confirmed?

In order to test the conjecture, the film first set up a first-person commentator Shinnosuke Mitsushima (actor), who is like a leader who breaks into the mysterious territory, sometimes awed, sometimes curious, slowly introducing the mysterious oasis in a low and cordial tone and leading us into the depths of the desert. The film mainly relies on his commentary to complete the introduction of Daliyabuyi,

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which repeatedly highlights the mystery of the oasis, for example, "here is called the last mysterious place in China"; "Loulan, surrounded by beautiful poplar, is a God-given oasis"; Hu Yang, which is called "the Tree King of the Desert" is endowed with a thousand years of life; "Sea of Death" and "Secret Land". This intention to explore mysterious places is more evident in the first few scenes of the film. At the beginning of the film, Shinnosuke Mitsushima is walking in the depths of the endless desert. In a panoramic picture, he stands on the high hill of the sand sea, opens his arms and looks up at the sky, followed by a close-range lens. He could not help but comment: "There are sentences that can describe the vastness of Takla Makan, which are 'the endless yellow sand stretches into the sky' and 'the sea of death'. Next, his voiceover commentary comes: "Takla Makan, also known as the Sea of Death", describes this desert as a place where everything comes here can never return." This expression of "I'll talk to you about them" [2] is not intended to express the opinions of filmmakers through narrators, not to express a "voice of God" and "voice of authority", because the audience not only hear voice-over narratives, but also see the image of narrators. This expression closes the gap between the filmmaker, the filming subjects and the audience. Unlike Western civilization's indifference to the Eskimos in *Nanook of the North* (1922) created by Flahadi, the film is not a simple, mechanical record, but an attempt to intervene, interpret and explore in the record, which can be proved by Shinnosuke Mitsushima's introduction, a brief evaluation of what he see and hear, and his positive interaction with the characters in the film.

Secondly, the film verifies the conjecture by looking for archaeological evidence. Where did the inhabitants of the secret land come to this oasis? Local residents, Keriya people said that they have had a history of 400-500 years, and their ancestors seemed to migrate to the oasis collectively from Yutian County, but there were still earlier urban relics here, and no one knows the origin of the oasis now. For this reason, Shinnosuke Mitsushima visited the first archaeologist of the Silk Road, the director of the Xinjiang Institute of Cultural Relics and Archaeology. The Archaeological Institute's underground warehouse contains 150 mummies unearthed from the Takla Makan Desert, the most amazing of which is the female mummies unearthed from strata about 4,000 years ago. The beauty of Loulan has complete body, vivid facial expression and well-dressed clothes. She wore cowhide boots and caps made of wool decorated with bird feathers and a straw-woven handbag with wheat in it. The body retains its posture as if it were not death, but a long sleep. In Shinnosuke Mitsushima's words, "even now, it's beautiful and pleasing to the eye". The mummy was found at the eastern end of the desert 600 kilometers from Dalibuyi, the site of Loulan Kingdom, which flourished about 2000 years ago due to the Silk Road trade. There is also a male mummy unearthed in Daliyabuyi in 2008. According to their appearances, it can be inferred that they belong to Europa, that is, Europeans. They migrated from Siberia to the surrounding Takla Makan Desert along the Black Sea coast about 4,000 years ago and lived along the Tarim River near the lakes downstream. Now people in Daliyabuyi are

connected with mummies in the desert through the Kriya River 4,000 years ago, which confirms the speculation at the beginning of the film that Daliyabuyi is the descendant of the Loulans.

III. TALKING ABOUT THE INHERITANCE OF OASIS CIVILIZATION BY ANCIENT AND MODERN CONTRAST

From Loulan Ancient Kingdom more than 4000 years ago to Daliyabuyi today, dynasties and civilizations have changed more than one time. It's unknown that how many once prosperous kingdoms and towns have been buried under the yellow sand. Now there are scattered urban debris in the Takla Makan Desert, which seems to be telling people about the prosperity and decline of the ancient Silk Road. The ruined city relics witness the change and the continuation of civilization. In fact, it is not totally isolated from the city and it is naturally receiving the nourishment of modern civilization, but the residents here still adhere to the traditional way of life and customs and culture. From birth to death, from weddings to funerals, from the traditional production of Kumaiqi to shepherds, textiles and other ways of subsistence, from living clothes to the graves of the deceased, all kinds of cultural customs have lasted for thousands of years and have never changed. The film uses the way of comparison between ancient and modern to make civilizations of different time and space talk to each other and explain the continuation and inheritance of civilization.

The oasis has a special kind of food called Kumaiqi. The key to making it is the well water and yellow sand with salt in the area. For thousands of years, people have continued to eat the same food with the same taste. When the special day comes, mothers will show their skills and make Kumaiqi cakes. They bake Kumaiqi cakes wrapped with mutton fillings in hot ash mixed with yellow sand. Mothers pass on the way of making bread to their daughters. It is not only a way of making bread, but also a sense of ritual of culture. Whether a girl can make or not is a sign of whether she steps into maturity. Gulubanhani, a 21-year-old female student in the film, made a Kumaiqi for the whole family before the end of the summer vacation. Unfortunately, it was not very successful. This kind of bread with sandy taste seems to have the flavor inherited from generation to generation for thousands of years. As for sticking to the traditional way of life, there are also shepherds in Daliyabuyi. Nurku Alban, 64, lives as a shepherd and sells sheep once a year in the city to support his daily livelihood. Although sheep can now be trucked, he insists on hiking in the desert, which takes 10 days. The yellow sands accompany him with the sun set and the stars every day. The landscape every day seems different, but in fact it is the same yellow sand and the same stars.

Here, funeral and marriage also continue the traditional customs. The film chronicles a traditional wedding of 500 people, a celebration of the birth of 64-year-old Nurku Alban's 14th grandson with relatives gathered and a funeral after one person's death. The day before yesterday was a new birth, and the next day was death. Old people will die, and new life will come; life will start again and again, and the cycle will continue. They sing and dance at the wedding to celebrate the couple's independence; they come to their

relatives' graves and plant poplar branches in the graveyard to pray for the dead. Putting poplar branches on the graveyard is similar to that of Loulan more than 4000 years ago. Archaeological findings show that *Populus euphratica* is also embedded in the tomb of Loulan female mummy. Residents here say that inserting fresh poplar branches can alleviate the guilt of death and restore the deceased in another world. This consistent custom has lasted for 4000 years. In addition, the method of preservation of mummies is also a common custom for ancient and modern times. The key is the coffin made of poplar wood. A mummy of *Populus euphratica* has been formed by its millennial immortality combined with local dry sand and rainless climate. In this oasis, *Populus euphratica*, which cannot fall for thousands of years, is like a god, raising the living and protecting the dead. This is not only the home of the living, but also the paradise for the deceased to feel at ease after their death. The so-called "sea of death" may mean that.

IV. INTERVIEWING RESIDENTS AND EXPECTING THE FUTURE OF OASIS CIVILIZATION

The film focuses on the three seasons of summer, autumn and spring in Daliyabuyi. With the change of seasons, the Kriya River flows from being plentiful to being sparse. The name of the oasis is Daliyabuyi, which means the adjacent river. Civilization here is closely related to rivers. The Takla Makan Desert was once home to many rivers, ancient prosperous oasis cities, but later, because of climate change, rivers dried up, and those cities gradually disappeared in the dust. Today, due to climate change and population growth, the Kriya River is gradually drying up, and even *Populus euphratica*, which is immortal for thousands of years, is slowly dying. Even if the trees are shady here, it is difficult to grow crops and fruit. Obviously, Daliyabuyi is no longer suitable for human habitation. Will it disappear as completely as the once prosperous cities? The local government has mobilized residents of Daliyabuyi to move to the town, and 40% of the residents have moved out. The question of leaving or staying is a realistic choice for the Kriya people.

The film uses a lot of interviews to learn about the attitude of the local people towards the homeland. Contrast with the traditional adults, children have taken the first step to go out. Gurubanhani, a 21-year-old female college student studying economics in a university at Urumqi, was the first university student in Daliyabuyi. She worked hard at school and gradually changed her destiny. Urinixiuban, a fourth grade primary school student, studies in Tianxian County dependent on her blind father, named as Jacob who earns a small income by planting and digging Dayun (a nourishing and precious Chinese herbal medicine) in the red willow forest. As one of Daliyabuyi's children going out to study, she hopes to grow up as a doctor to cure her blind father. Jacob, his father, also had high hopes for his daughter. Although earning money is extremely hard, he still hopes that his daughter can continue to study, enter college, and to go where she wants to live the life she wants. There is only one school in Daliyabuyi. Students in grades 1-3 study here. Students in grades 4 and above will go to the county. In fact,

it is equally difficult to study in a county town. In the film, there is footage of parents seeing their children off to study in the county. The children are reluctant to leave and their parents are full of concern. However, the children have to sit in trucks facing the wind and sand to jolt in the desert for a long time before they reach the county town. In a noisy and chaotic scene, father Jacob gropes up the truck and ask if the car have been covered by the blanket and insists that the children should sit on the blanket. Although it is not easy to go out, the people of Daliyabuyi have taken the primary step. Different from the senior students who go out to study, the children who stay in the local Grade 1-3 show more attachment to their hometown. When the filmmakers ask, "those who like Daliyabuyi, please stand up." Without hesitation, thirteen students stand up at the same time. When they ask, "When grow up, those who want to leave Daliyabuyi for urban life, please stand up", they are only four students who standing up indecisively. It is obvious that they have a deep love for their home.

In contrast with children, adults tend to have more worries and contradictions about sticking to or leaving their homes. At the government mobilization conference, the Kriyas were silent, blank-faced and without any response. Jacob, a blind man, worried about his survival after moving to a town. Although he hopes his daughter can go out, he prefers to stay. He said, "If I can see with your eyes, I want to see this place where my parents lived." "I would stay here forever." "In this land where our ancestors slept eternally, as long as there are still people, our homeland would never be covered by sand and dust." At this time, the camera moved slowly from the ground to the sky along a cluster of *Populus euphratica*, whose branches planted in the sand dune graveyard, as if to say that the Kriya people and these yellow sands have been integrated and inseparable. The last scene of the film contrasts with the first one, which begins with the narrator Shinnosuke Mitsushima walking from the depth of the desert to lead us into a mysterious civilization. At the end of the film, the blind Jacob walks into the depth of the camera, fixing the frame with a big vision. The thin figure of Jacob slowly melts into the twilight of Daliyabuyi Oasis, a place he loves deeply and the homeland he wants to protect. The film ends with a spring of hope. With the arrival of spring in Daliyabuyi, the snow in Kunlun Mountains begins to melt and poplar trees begin to sprout. Residents here are building dams to try to change the direction of the river and lead the snow to where the oasis is drying up. They are also making last-ditch efforts to protect their homes.

V. CONCLUSION

Unlike Flahadi's "playback" record that intentionally excludes the intervention of modern civilization on the Eskimos and tries to restore their original appearance, *The Mysterious People of the Silk Road* faithfully records the real state of existence and national customs of Daliyabuyi under the influence of modern civilization, and attempts to outline the origin and development of a civilization in the context of history. The social value of a documentary is not only to preserve an anthropological image file, but also to give us enlightenment and reflection on the future by

recording the original ecological life of another ethnic group. With the gradual drying up of the Takla Makan Desert, Daliyabuyi has to face many challenges such as civilization and inheritance, man and nature, leaving and staying. Actually, the people out of the desert also need to think about the future.

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