

Analysis of Strategies for Cross-Cultural Narration in BBC Chinese Theme Documentaries — A Case Study of *Du Fu, China's Greatest Poet*

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ABSTRACT

BBC Chinese theme documentaries view China from the other's perspective and introduce China to the world. Since the target audiences are from different cultural backgrounds, documentary producers need to employ certain strategies to overcome linguistic, cultural and cognitive obstacles, thus ensuring the global reception of documentaries. This paper, based on the BBC documentary *Du Fu, China's Greatest Poet*, focuses on strategies adopted for cross-cultural narration. This documentary considers about the integration of Chinese cultural information and the international interpretation, balancing between the local and the global. It is found that the successful cross-cultural reception can be attributed to strategies such as clarifying the poet's identities in narrative, the well-arranged narrative structure, the use of cross-cultural analogy and adopting different narrative perspectives. The present study can be useful for the conveying of cultural information through documentaries and the enhancement of cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: *documentary, cross-cultural communication, narration*

I. INTRODUCTION

Under the trend of globalization, cross-cultural communication plays an important role in sharing information, building relationship and improving national images. Documentaries, as non-fictional production, convey information about the world outside films.[1] Based on real life, documentaries record events as well as deliver historical, cultural and social information. However, documentaries that introduce one culture to people from other cultural backgrounds will encounter obstacles, misunderstandings or even conflicts due to linguistic, cultural and cognitive differences. The present study aims to analyze strategies employed in Chinese theme documentaries by British Broadcasting Corporation (BBC) and reveal the way by which Chinese culture is narrated.

BBC documentaries have gained international popularity for their wide range of subjects and professional techniques. With the strengthening of China's soft power and the increasing influence of China on the world stage, BBC documentaries tend to spotlight Chinese themes that involve politics, economy, history, culture as well as science and technology.[2] In recent years, the theme of culture attracts more attention and a number of

documentaries are made to introduce Chinese culture worldwide, such as *The Story of China* (2016), *Chinese New Year: The Biggest Celebration on Earth* (2016) and *Du Fu, China's Greatest Poet* (2020). These documentaries explore the history of China, present Chinese festivals and customs, or introduces famous Chinese figures such as Du Fu to the target audience.

This paper will take the newly-produced documentary *Du Fu, China's Greatest Poet* as an example to analyze its narrative strategies from the cross-cultural perspective. It will cover the identity built in narrative, the structure of narration, the use of cross-cultural analogy and the combination of various narrative perspectives. *Du Fu, China's Greatest Poet* is the first English-language documentary featuring about the Chinese poet-sage Du Fu (712-770 CE). Although Du Fu is as important as Dante and Shakespeare according to Sinologists, he has remained largely unknown in the world, especially in Western countries. Inspired by William Hung's 1952 eponymous book, BBC introduces Du Fu to the world through the documentary written and presented by the historian Michael Wood, who has also helmed other Chinese theme docuseries including *The Story of China* and been quite familiar with the Chinese culture.

II. IDENTITY IN NARRATIVE

As a documentary centering around a historical figure, *Du Fu, China's Greatest Poet* clarifies the identity of Du Fu first. Although revered in China and East Asia as one of greatest poets, Du Fu is relatively unknown in other parts of the world. The documentary recognizes his identity as a poet, but it holds that he is more than a poet.

A. Identity as a poet

As suggested by the title of the documentary and mentioned in the very beginning, the most significant identity of Du Fu is a poet who lived in the Tang Dynasty (618-907 CE), a time of extraordinary cultural accomplishment that ended in horrendous warfare and the death of millions.

As a poet, Du Fu masters the essence of Chinese poetry to record or reflect history as well as express true feelings. He belongs to the group of poets who create the values by which poetry is judged. As narrated in the documentary, Du Fu is one of the immortals in the East and the greatest poet in China.

B. Other identities

Apart from the identity of the greatest poet, the documentary unveils more about the life of Du Fu and his masterpieces, historical backgrounds, and the traditional Chinese culture. Du Fu embodies both the morally committed statesman and the artist, which gains him the title of poet-historian.

Du Fu's identity is shaped through the narration of different stages of his life. In his whole life, Du Fu followed the guiding principles of Confucianism: virtue, benevolence, and service to the state. He can be seen as a cultural monument or a guardian of the moral conscience. When he was young, he expected to be a government official to get into the civil service. Unfortunately, he was not enough of a bureaucrat because he failed the imperial examinations. Therefore, Du Fu was helpless and not successful in his career. Although he finally had a job at the court, he couldn't fit in and became disillusioned.

Later, Du Fu suffered from the An Lushan Rebellion (755 CE) and his identity changed from the confident poet and the noble son to a common man struggling with countless hardships and tribulations. He was a sufferer caught in famine and a lone traveler looking for a safe shelter. He was a father who lost his infant child for lack of food and he was ashamed of being a father. Du Fu became a poor unaccommodated man, living a bitter life and showing concern for the pain of ordinary people caught up in famine and the war after the rebellion. He became a captive and did forced labor as a porter under rebel rule in the ruined capital.

Interpersonal relationship also helps shape a person's identity. Du Fu's identity is narrated in his love to his wife and his friendship with the brilliant poet Li Bai. During the war, Du Fu was separated from his family and wrote lines such as "In her chamber, she watches alone. Her cloud-like hair sweet with mist, her jade arms cold in the clear moonlight" to express that he missed his wife. As for the creative relationship between Du Fu and Li Bai, the two greatest poets in China, lines like "I love him like a brother", "We only thought of otherworldly things", and "But you've been in my dreams as if you know how much I miss you" are presented.

Through detailed narration in the documentary, the vivid image of Du Fu is molded, including one of the greatest poets, a patriot, an ordinary man, a sufferer, a loving husband and a great friend.

III. THE STRUCTURE OF NARRATION

The one-hour documentary is structured with poems stringing pieces of information together, events arranged according to time order and place order, and highlighted key events.

A. The structure arranged through poems

Since Du Fu's poems are famous for their reflection of the history as well as the record of his own life, the documentary strings its narration with carefully chosen poems. He wrote a number of recollection poems which can be further divided into autobiographical recollection ones and social recollection ones. Through them, we can follow the poet's footprints and thoughts as well as understand the social context. In other words, Du Fu wrote poems with the thought of "epic thinking".[3]

First, Du Fu's poems record the historical events in Tang Dynasty. They represent not only the flourishing period of this great dynasty but also the miserable period of corruption, famine and natural disasters after the An Lushan Rebellion. The poem "Spring Scene" includes lines of "The state is destroyed, but the country remains. In the city in spring, grass and weeds grow everywhere", which not only depict the disaster of the state but also show the poet's grief for the war-torn state. Other examples such as lines of "Behind the red lacquered gates, wine is left to sour, meat to rot. Outside the gates lie the bones of the frozen and the starved" record the miserable life of common people and reflect the poet's sympathy.

Poems can also serve as an autobiography that depicts the poet's life. For instance, in the poem of "My Brave Adventures", several lines are created to retrospect the poet's experience, including "When I was still only in my seventh year, my mind was already full of heroic deeds. My first poem was

about the Phoenix, the harbinger of a sagacious reign, a new age of wisdom. When I was in my ninth year, I had already written enough poems to fill a satchel. At 14, I first began to read my poems in public. The literary masters compared me to the great writers of the past..." These lines conform to the structure of the documentary and the arrangement of details.

B. Time order and place order

The documentary is mainly structured on the basis of time order and place order. As for time, the narration roughly follows the order from Du Fu's birth until his death although scenes may shift between modern times and the Tang dynasty. Although centering around the ancient Chinese poet, the documentary also explores his influence in modern China.

As for the place order, the producer Michael Wood starts from today's Xi'an, which is called Chang'an in the Tang Dynasty, the capital. The documentary highlights the important status of the city and its characteristics of being rich, powerful, and open to the world. Then, Wood follows Du Fu's footprints and embarks on a pilgrimage to places that have played significant roles in Du Fu's life, including his birthplace Gongyi in Henan Province, Qufu, the birthplace of Confucius, the capital Chang'an or today's Xi'an, Du Fu's Thatched Cottage in Chengdu and his shelter in Changsha. In every place, the historical background, the life experience of the poet and his masterpieces are narrated. Cities carefully chosen in the documentary conform to the chronological order of Du Fu's whole life.

C. Highlighted key events

Apart from the role of poems as well as the time and place order, certain events, including mysteries, are highlighted to draw the audience's attention and arouse their interest.

For instance, the first mystery highlighted in the documentary is the sorceress' prophecy when Du Fu was still a baby. Another mystery is the reason why Du Fu failed the imperial examinations. Key events also include Du Fu's recalling of the great dancer Gongsun, the An Lushan rebellion, etc.

IV. THE USE OF CROSS-CULTURAL ANALOGY

One of the biggest challenges for BBC Chinese theme documentaries is to bridge cultural and cognitive differences between the Chinese culture and that of the target audience. Documentaries need to locate something in common to enhance recognition of the audience from other cultural backgrounds. *Du Fu, China's Greatest Poet* is rich

in cross-cultural analogies that combine Chinese culture with global elements.

When introducing Du Fu, the documentary regards him as the same category with Dante and Shakespeare. Meanwhile, it is mentioned that the poet lived in the eighth century, the age of *Beowulf* in Britain.

To show the long history of Chinese poems, Homer's epic is listed for a comparison. It is stated that China boasts its oldest living tradition of poetry, more than 3,000 years old, older than *Iliad* and *Odyssey*.

Since the target audience are not familiar with Du Fu and Li Bai, the two greatest poets in Chinese culture, the analogy of Dionysian versus Apollonian in Greek is adopted to show their differences. In this way, the audience can easily grasp that Li Bai was keen on ability to be at one with nature, while Du Fu was much more concerned with people unto people.

The documentary also introduces Chang'an together with Constantinople and Baghdad, all of them being the symbols of human civilization and world-famous cities in the 8th century. In order to show the importance of Changsha in Du Fu's life after the horrendous warfare, the city is compared with Casablanca in France after the Second World War. Similarly, the rebellion in the Tang Dynasty is mentioned as deadly as the First World War.

Cross-cultural analogy is one of the ways to enhance cultural proximity and clarify the consensus, which can help the target audience better understand the narration.

V. THE PERSPECTIVE OF NARRATION

A successful documentary tends to be narrated from different perspectives, including at least the presenter's perspective and those of the interviewees. In *Du Fu, China's Greatest Poet*, the theme is presented with Michael Wood's narration, Ian McKellen's reading of Du Fu's masterpieces, as well as opinions from well-known scholars and the ordinary people interviewed.

To well present the theme of the greatest poet along with the Chinese culture, Michael Wood's narration covers the core values as well as the outer levels of culture. According to Hofstede, culture forms an onion diagram with the invisible core values standing in the center, manifested through cultural practices that cut across the outer levels of symbols, heroes and rituals.[4] For instance, Wood directly narrates the core values of Confucianism and practices of Du Fu as well as explains the ritual by which students show their respect to Du Fu on Tomb-sweeping Day. Wood performs the main task

of introducing the poet and his poetry, scenes changing constantly along with his introduction.

The famous British actor Ian Mckellen's elegant, meditative recital of Du Fu's masterpieces can be seen as another perspective to present the theme. The reading of poems is combined with scenes and performances for a full presentation. For example, while Ian Mckellen is reading the poem about the five-year-old boy Du Fu enjoying the great dancer Gongsun's sword dance, a dancer's performance is shown on the screen. The performance adds vividness and attraction to the documentary, fulfilling the target audience's aesthetic needs. Here, the art of dance is an important component of the cross-cultural narration.

Interviews are adopted in documentaries to add professional opinions and feelings of the ordinary people. In this documentary, Wood interviews researchers of Chinese culture and talks to ordinary Chinese people to reveal the enchanting story of the poet and the charm of his masterpieces.

Interviews with well-known scholars specializing in Chinese literature, especially Chinese poems, help present a professional interpretation of Du Fu's masterpieces, his life experiences, and his significant status in Chinese literature. Harvard professor Stephen Owen, who has translated 1400 poems of Du Fu into English, emphasizes his high status by saying he is one of the poets who create the very values by which poetry is judged. Professor Zeng Xiangbo from Renmin University of China, the translator of William Hung's eponymous work, holds that historical events are mirrored in Du Fu's life and his spiritual journey. Other scholars, including Doctor Liu Taotao from Harvard University and Professor Yang Yu from Central South University, focus on topics like Du Fu's friendship with Li Bai, the style change of Du Fu's poetry, and the influence of his poetry in modern China.

The ordinary people are also interviewed to express their feelings and understanding of Du Fu and his poems. In Chinese theme documentaries, it will be effective to interview ordinary Chinese who share their own stories with the target audience.[5] A 7-year-old girl, a tourist in Du Fu's Thatched Cottage in Chengdu, recites his poems. Her mother, a poetry lover, expresses her hope that the little girl can be influenced by ancient Chinese culture. Other tourists, such as an elderly man who visits the Thatched Cottage every week, also express their love to the poet.

VI. CONCLUSION

Du Fu, China's Greatest Poet proves to be a well-received documentary among Western viewers since they have written to the documentary team

and expressed their willingness to explore Chinese poetry.[6] Techniques adopted in the documentary help narrate Chinese stories and the Chinese culture with global expression.

In the documentary, Du Fu's identity is clarified to help the target audience know who he is. He is not only China's greatest poet but also a poet-historian, a patriot, a guardian of the moral conscience, a sufferer, an ordinary man, etc. As for the structure of the documentary, poems serve as the string that pull together the narration, which is mainly arranged on the basis of time order and place order with key events highlighted. Cross-cultural analogies are employed to achieve proximity among people from different cultural backgrounds. Wood's narration, Ian Mckellen's reading of poems, and interviews all contribute to the full presentation of the poet and the Chinese culture. It is found that cross-cultural documentaries need to strike a balance between the local theme and the international presentation, grasping core elements of the local culture and enhancing the effect of global narration for humanistic appeal.

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