

# Presentation of China's Stories in Sino-foreign Joint Documentaries

## —A Case Study of Two Typical Documentaries

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### ABSTRACT

Under the background of continuous international communication, documentary as a popular form of video communication, has increasingly become an important way to promote cultural exchange from nation to nation. As representative documentaries about the story of China's change, *How China Works* and *How China Made It* use clever narrative strategies and produces different responses in video platforms in China as well as abroad. This paper adopted case analysis to study the narrative strategy, communication effect and audience feedback of the two documentaries. At the end of the study, some suggestions were put forward on how to tell the Chinese story well, shape more welcomed Chinese image and gain better popularity. It is concluded that in order to tell China's stories overseas more effectively under the intercultural context, sino-foreign joint documentaries should continue to actively explore the mixed interests of Chinese and foreign audiences, strengthen international cooperation, and tell China's stories from multiple perspectives and international ways.

**Keywords:** sino-foreign joint documentaries, China's stories, narrative strategy, intercultural communication

## 1. INTRODUCTION

In the past five years, sino-foreign joint documentaries have been in full swing in the times when China's development process is accelerating and cross-cultural exchanges are deepening. In 2015, under the impetus of the Information Office of the State Council, Intercontinental Communication Center (CICC) signed cooperation agreements with American Discovery Channel and National Geographic Channels International(NGCI), and opened special documentaries about Chinese stories on the two channels respectively.[1]As a representative of sino-foreign joint documentaries, *How China Made It* and *How China Works* was broadcast on American Discovery Channel and CCTV Record Channel in 2015, they were simultaneously launched on American Discovery Channel and Youku.com (a prevalent Chinese video platform) in 2018. Sino-foreign joint documentaries is a visual expression of culture and thought. Its broadcast promotes the wide spread of Chinese stories around the world and becomes an important canal for overseas

groups to understand China.

Taking the above two documentaries as the research objects, this paper explores their narrative strategies from three aspects: narrative subject, narrative object and narrative mode. In addition to trying to analyze the broadcast volume of the two documentaries on Youku and YouTube video platforms, the author also analyzed the comments of netizens. The author explores the reasons for the success and deficiencies of the two documentaries from a cross-cultural perspective. Besides, this article also proposes an optimization strategy to improve the dissemination effect of Chinese stories.

## 2. ANALYSIS OF NARRATIVE STRATEGIES

### 2.1 Narrative subject: Multi-subject Common Narrative

Narrative subject refers to "voice or speaker" in the narrative process, and narrates events as the party in the

documentary.[2]The narration of any event can't leave the narrative subject. "Who is telling the story" is of vital significance to the documentary film, and plays a guiding and controlling role in its narrative presentation. Narrative subject is a compound concept, including author, implied author and narrator, etc. [3]According to the needs of narrative, one or more narrative subjects can appear in documentary.The two documentaries, *How China Works* and *How China Made It* both adopt the way of multi-narrative subjects, mixing narrative with video voiceovers, interviewees and other narrative subjects.

People who have personally experienced the development of events often have deep memories of certain events and have formed their own judgments about them. It is for this reason that these people have natural advantages in the narration of the story and can become narrators who experience the story of the documentary. Both documentaries selected representative individuals or groups to interview, and asked interviewees to tell their own personal experiences in front of the camera.For example, *How China Made It* tells the changes brought by the reform and opening up to the countryside, and interviews the villagers in Getou Village, Guizhou Province.Through the villagers' introduction to the changes in road repair and tourism development, the story is intuitively and vividly told to the audience.

Different from the other documentary, *How China Works* has a host role played by American architect Danny Foster. As the author narrator who tells the story directly in front of the camera, the host personally experiences the rapid development of China in the documentary, and introduces what he has seen and heard to the audience. Hence, the audience can follow his footsteps closely and feel the development of China. In a word, telling stories in the tone of a host can enhance narrative intimacy and resonance, and give viewers a better viewing experience.

## ***2.2 Narrative Object: China's Development Under the Process of the Times***

Narrative object is the content narrated in documentary film.[4] It is the most important content that constitutes and influences documentary film. From a macro point of view, the common narrative objects of the two documentaries *How China Works* and *How China Made It* are the development of China under the process of the times, and they all tell the stories of China's changes and development.

Microscopically, the emphasis and concrete examples of the two documentaries are different. *How China Works* focuses on the great changes that have taken place in China in the new century, and feels the cultural and artistic life of Chinese people from Harbin

Opera House, Evergrande Football School, online literature and ultraviolet restaurants. It also concentrate on the development of e-commerce, efficient agricultural planting mode, virtual reality technology, live broadcast and other technologies. Based on these specific examples, the audience will be guided to appreciate the innovation of China's infrastructures and technologies. *How China Made It* tells about the change of China's economy and society, the improvement of people's living standards in the past 40 years of reform and opening-up, selecting township enterprises as typical stories.The film also focuses on the struggle and development of Chinese enterprises and entrepreneurs. By concentrating on specific instances of private enterprises and state-owned enterprises, this film successfully illustrates the great changes happened in rural areas during the whole reform and opening-up period.

## ***2.3 Narrative Style: the Presentation of Small Stories in the Big Context***

The two documentaries select plenty of life segments to show the prosperity of China through small figures, stories and details. Documentaries are laid out from a small angle, as in the process of presentation, information description of Chinese history or current situation is inserted while historical information is flexibly deconstructed.

In *How China Works*, the host Danny Foster introduced the social outlook and development of China in detail in the process of traveling, presented the living conditions of Chinese people, and gave the audience a more direct understanding and feeling of China's development. Danny Foster guided the audience to watch with his own experience and conveyed his true feelings to them with all the kindness and naturalness, enhancing the attractiveness of the documentary. In addition, the host is very good at observing the details in the program, and often asks questions from the perspective of Westerners to Chinese locals, the answers to these questions later turn out to be another important contents of the documentary.

In *How China Made it*, the documentary focuses on a series of typical characters'stories emerging in the process of China's reform and opening-up from an international perspective. The documentary restores the details of the story at the time through interviews with typical characters and their descendants. This film form vividly reflects the characteristics of the era of reform and opening up, narrows the gap between the audience and the times, and enhances the audience's appreciation.

## **3. ANALYSIS OF PROPAGATION EFFECT**

In order to explore the communication effects of the two sino-foreign joint documentaries, *How China Works*

and How China Made It back in China and abroad, this paper selects Youku and YouTube as two video platforms to analyze the broadcasting popularity, view volume and feedback from netizens of the documentaries, and compare the feedback from users at home and abroad to explore the reception of documentaries by different audiences, as well as the communication effects in cross-cultural context.[5]

### ***3.1 The Number of Audience Feedback is Limited and the Content is Similar***

On YouTube video platform, the two documentaries all reflect the situation that the broadcast volume is considerable but the number of likes and comments is relatively small. For example, the first episode of How China Made It was played more than 10,000 times, but the number of users participating in the discussion in the comment area was only single digit. The second episode and the third episode were broadcast nearly 5,000 times, but the number of comments was less than ten. When the discussion in the comment area is not hot enough, such frosty reception will generate a potential thrust to the platform users, reduce the enthusiasm of users to participate in the discussion and reduce the stimulation of thinking. It can be seen from this that on YouTube platform, when overseas users watch the above two documentaries about Chinese stories, they are less active in giving feedback in the comment area.

Besides, the audience's feedback of the two documentaries has an overall trend of "similarity". When many audiences participate in the discussion in the comment area, they often evaluate the documentary or express their praise to the motherland and the people. In the comment area, there are many messages such as "great editing, good program", "tribute to Chinese people, I love China" and "our tomorrow will be better", and there are not a few users who simply publish words and maps as well as encouraging praise such as "thumbs" and "smiles", all leading to great similarity in comment messages.

### ***3.2 A Huge Gap between Domestic and Foreign Audience Feedback Intensity***

The study of the two documentaries on YouTube and Youku video platform illustrates that the feedback intensity of users in China and abroad is quite different as well.

In terms of broadcast volume and praise number, the broadcast volume of two documentaries and related videos on YouTube platform is generally range from hundreds to thousands of times, but there is a big disparity in the broadcast volume of videos searched in Chinese and English. For example, when searching for How China Made It on YouTube in Chinese, the videos of the three episodes of this documentary have been

played thousands of times, even close to 10,000 times, while the videos searched in English have only played less than 100 times. Based on the fact that most foreign audiences log in and search videos on YouTube platform in English, [6] assumption can be made that facing foreign audiences, each episode of How China Made It plays less. This tendency also explains the reasons why foreign audiences in the comment area are less motivated to participate in the discussion.

Comparatively speaking, the audience feedback of Youku platform is significantly higher than that of YouTube in both quantity and quality. Since the narrative objects of the two documentaries are Chinese stories, it is reasonable that the response generated in overseas video platforms is not strong enough. However, as a documentary co-produced by China and foreign countries, its target audience includes overseas groups. Therefore, in the process of cross-cultural communication, how to better balance the communication effect of documentary at home and abroad deserves more in-depth consideration[7].

## **4. HOW TO NARRATE CHINESE STORIES EFFECTIVELY**

Comparing and analyzing the delivery effects of the two documentaries How China Works and How China Made It on YouTube and Youku video platform, it is not difficult to find that the audience's feedback of the two documentaries varied in China and abroad. In the process of cross-cultural communication, due to cultural conflicts, differences in ideology and thinking mode[8], it is actually understandable that Chinese and foreign co-produced documentaries are similarly "coldly welcomed". How to draw lessons from narrative strategies with good communication effect on the basis of existing understanding, how to make sino-foreign joint documentaries better cut into the international context, and how to let international audiences have a deeper understanding of Chinese stories and Chinese images are all the aspects that such documentaries should focus on.

### ***4.1 Explore the Intersection of Domestic and Foreign Audiences' Interests***

In order to consolidate the domestic audience's watching interest base and attract more international audience's attention as much as possible, it is the key to explore the effective intersection of domestic and foreign audience's interests and to keep the balance between them.

Influenced by patriotism and national pride, domestic audiences tend to have a positive interest in watching similar documentaries, and have a special liking for entertaining and living content.[9] In contrast, the international audience is more inclined to

de-ideological, real and objective, “authentic” expression. Thus, despite the inevitable ideological differences and differences in thinking patterns, the intersection of interests between domestic and international audiences exists objectively, that is, both of them have a certain degree of emotional resonance with the real expression of life and detail. Therefore, the shooting method of focusing on mining the details of stories from the perspective of small to large can effectively enhance the effect of cross-cultural communication.

#### ***4.2 Strengthen International Cooperation: Tell China’s Stories in an International Way***

In the long run, Chinese media should learn to express their own stories to the international community. It unifies the topic selection with international vision, the narrative angle of balancing audiences’ needs, and the audio-visual language art. At the same time, it should accurately grasp the needs of international audiences and constructs a wide communication network through international cooperation.

People need to face up to the differences in discourse expression, seek the commonality of values, and truly control the documentary in terms of topic selection, shooting, editing, and dissemination. On this premise, it satisfies the requirements of international cross-cultural exchanges, and adheres to the original appearance of the Chinese story and the inheritance of the Chinese spirit in the documentary. Only by adapting measures to local conditions without losing the original intention, giving full play to the good cross-cultural effects of documentaries, and effectively promoting cultural exchanges between countries.

### **5. CONCLUSION**

Under the background of globalization, documentaries shoulder the responsibility of connecting China with the world. The two sino-foreign joint documentaries *How China Works* and *How China Made* are important practices for China to tell the story of China’s changes overseas. Through the all-round analysis of the two documentaries, it is concluded that there is still a long way to go for sino-foreign joint documentaries. In terms of narrative strategy, sino-foreign joint documentaries need to adopt diversified narrative subjects and contents to enrich narrative effects. In the perspective of communication effect, film practitioners need to actively explore the intersection of interests of domestic and foreign audiences, strengthen cooperation between China and foreign countries. Only by doing this can sino-foreign joint documentaries attain self-development, thus effectively promote the cross-cultural communication of Chinese stories in the world. Due to the limitations of

research methods and samples, this study also has unavoidable shortcomings such as insufficient scientific reference and incomplete quantitative statistics. The narrative mode and communication effect of sino-foreign joint documentaries need to be explored in depth while analysis of detailed cases and grasp of the overall research direction are both indispensable.

### **ACKNOWLEDGMENT**

First of all, I would like to show my deepest gratitude to my teachers and professors in my university. Without your careful guidance and help in academic and writing, this paper could not be successfully completed. Secondly, I would like to thank my roommates and friends, who provided warm companionship and encouragement during my struggle to write my thesis, and supported me all the way to the present. Sincerely thank and wish you all !

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