



The Construction of Rituals in Chinese Humanities Documentaries from the Perspective of Ritual Communication:

The Documentary *The Firsts in Life* as an Example

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Abstract. With the advent of the new media era, the constant innovation of media technology has transformed documentaries from theatrical distribution to the new media era, forming a new pattern of documentary production and distribution. *The Firsts in Life* is one of the best Chinese humanities documentaries in recent years and has been considered as “one of the best documentaries to watch in 2020”. The documentary has attracted a lot of attention and discussion in China and around the world. At the same time, the success of *The Firsts in Life* has also attracted attention in the academic circle. However, most of the studies on *The Firsts in Life* are still at the level of its narrative content, while there are still some gaps in transmission path. This paper will explore the ritual construction logic and process of *The Firsts in Life* based on the perspective of ritualized communication, using two research methods: case study and virtual ethnography. In view of this, the author will further explore its cultural significance and aim to play an active role in the future research of Chinese humanities documentaries.

Keywords: Ritualized Communication, Humanities Documentaries, *The Firsts in Life*

1 Introduction

The Firsts in Life is a 12-episode series of Chinese humanities documentary produced by CNTV (China Network Television) in collaboration with Shanghai Media Group Documentary Centre and Bilibili. By crouching to shoot, observe the “first time” of different Chinese people at important points in their lives, and reflect the current philosophy of Chinese people's survival by taking fan out from point to area approach. The documentary is based on the timeline of a person's life, running through 12 different stages of life, including birth, school, military, work, marriage, buying a house, retirement and so on.

Filming of the documentary officially begins at the end of 2019. 12 directors go around China for an initial sampling of the documentary at the same time. In post-production, the production team invited 12 art workers with distinctive voices as storytellers to enrich the content of the film, each with their own experience linked to the core of the corresponding story. Each storyteller's experience is linked to the story. They use their voices to introduce the themes of each episode and record narration for the episodes.

The Firsts in Life has over 500 million views in the whole world by the time filming begins on Second Life in August 2020. As of July, 2022, *The Firsts in Life* has over 34 million views on Bilibili, with over 380,000 total pop-ups. In addition, *The Firsts in Life* has received a super high score of 9.0 on several Chinese video sites, such as Tencent Video and website of the CCTV. At the same time, *The Firsts in Life* has attracted lots of attention and discussion on multiple social media platforms in China. By the end of July 2022, the phrase #Documentary *The Firsts in Life*# was read more than 300 million times and discussed more than 150,000 times in Weibo platform, the most influential social media platform in China. *The Firsts in Life* has a 9.0 rating on Douban, and over 60,000 people have commented on the documentary.

2 Literature Review

In the 1870s, the famous American journalist and educator James Carey introduced two important concepts: a transmission view of communication and a ritual view of communication. The main core components are outlined from James Carey's theory proposing a ritual view of communication: communication, ritual, culture, and dialogue [1]. First, understanding the ritualized communication needs to begin with grasping the connection between communication and ritual, both of which appear as everyday acts in human society. Ritual is a symbolic representation presented in the process of communication, and all communication is a concrete manifestation of the existence of various types of symbols as a carrier. Secondly, the role of language, as the most basic component of the ritual view of communication, is shown mainly in the fact that communication is a process of linguistic interaction and conversation, and expression of ideas. Carey believes that interaction and communication in society is an important way to achieve the gathering of a community of like-minded people. And it is in the process of interaction and communication that the meaning and effect of communication can be truly presented. In addition, in *Communication as Culture: Essays on Media and Society*, besides emphasizing the relationship between communication and ritual, Carey also highlights and understands the influence of media technology. Influenced by Innis, Carey argues that communication technology is not only a spatial delivery of information, but also has the ability to maintain order in time and enhance the cultural and moral quality of the public.

The study of Chinese documentaries from the perspective of communication rituals has been established. As television programs are given the function of cultural orientation while entertaining the public. Therefore, a ritual view of communication is increas-

ingly integrated into the communication of media content, and this is also true for documentaries. Most of the practical research on documentaries in Chinese academia is currently applied to aspects such as mass communication paths and strategies. In addition, most of the research cases are based on food documentaries and Chinese history documentaries. For example, Hou Yisong analyzed the ritual representation of scenes, characters and voices in *Breakfast in China* to explore more possibilities of food documentary communication [2]. Mi Yalu and Yuan Wenli start from the dual path of TV media ritual construction in the new media context, and reveal the model innovation and dissemination mechanism of cultural and museum documentaries by analysing *Every Treasure Tells a Story* [3]. Jiang Yuxi and Liu Yongfeng take *Flavour of the Earth* as a research case, and dig into the global localization and IP construction of Chinese documentaries today to bring useful inspiration and reference to the documentary industry and video marketing industry [4].

The case of the current study, *The Firsts in Life*, has attracted some attention in the Chinese academic community. In terms of narrative techniques, it is generally agreed that *The Firsts in Life* uses micro-narratives to position the narrative subjects as ordinary Chinese people. Compared with the traditional grand narrative documentary, the micro-narrative transformation of the documentary is closer to the society and life, more realistic and more attractive to the audience. He Ziqi believes that for *The Firsts in Life*, the civilian narrative perspective brings the documentary content closer to the audience, establishes an emotional connection between the two, and triggers the audience's emotional resonance [5]. In Liu Yi's study, *The Firsts in Life* precisely covers the daily lives of ordinary Chinese people in terms of time, place, and material, making it easy for audiences to generate a sense of immersion, and then associate it with similar memories of life nodes, triggering empathy [6]. At the same time, the multiple narrative lines expand the dimensions of perspectives under the same topic, making the documentary objectively reflect the original form and complete process of the life of a class of people. The diversified narrative perspective makes the characterization in the documentary more full and vivid [7].

In addition, some scholars believe that *The Firsts in Life* responds to social hotspots as the main reason for its success. According to Gao Jie's study, *The Firsts in Life* focuses on the current hot social topics in China, and through the mutual reflection of the story and social reality, the content of the documentary is highly compatible with the real life of the audience. The documentary uses storytelling narrative to highlight the national spirit of Chinese people, and cleverly uses audio-visual art to build a documentary symbol system, thus arousing viewers' cultural identity and sense of belonging to the group [8].

From the perspective of communication strategy, the success of *The Firsts in Life* cannot be separated from multi-dimensional interaction. Whether it is the documentary derivative content or the communication channels, *The Firsts in Life* has achieved a strong integration with the media convergence environment. In the view of Wu Xuejing and Wang Yongqi, the real-time pop-up discussion of *The Firsts in Life* in the Bilibili website realizes the information exchange in the online world and enhances the audience's participation in watching the movie [9]. And the special section with content for follow-up reports gives back the opinions raised by viewers and effectively meets the

actual needs of viewers. This link is a two-way interaction mechanism with the audience, which enriches the content and maintains the word of mouth at the same time [10]. In addition, there are multiple interactive methods such as director's appearance and online interaction of the production team, all of which reflect the innovative exploration of *The Firsts in Life* in the era of media convergence.

Based on the above literature, it can be found that there is still a lack of theoretical analysis of humanities documentary studies, especially humanities documentaries with micro-narratives, in the current Chinese academia using the ritual view of communication. In addition, *The Firsts in Life*, as an excellent representative work of humanities documentaries with micro-narratives, has been discussed, but there is a gap in the analysis based on the ritual perspective. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze and study *The Firsts in Life* through the lens of ritual perspective of communication and provide some reference for other scholars.

3 Methodology

3.1 Case study

According to the researcher's preliminary findings, the case study method allows for a more attention focus of the article. *The Firsts in Life*, a leading Chinese humanities documentary, has become a phenomenal documentary on websites and has attracted the attention of several authoritative Chinese media outlets for discussion. The social reputation of the documentary is extremely good and has been well received by the general audience. Such a successful documentary should be considered a classic of Chinese documentaries and be discussed and analyzed.

In addition, *The Firsts in Life* is currently broadcasted on several Chinese media platforms. However, through preliminary understanding and data investigation, the Bilibili website, as a cultural community and video platform with a high concentration of young generations, has a large sample of pop-up and comment section interaction that can be analyzed to achieve the research objectives. Therefore, the study was limited to content related to *The Firsts in Life* on the Bilibili. In addition, the twelve episodes of *The Firsts in Life*, the original content of the second episode *Joys and Tears of the Childhood* and eighth episode of *Owning a Home with pop-ups* is more typical of the most typical expression of the media ritual view. Therefore, the researcher will focus on the analysis of the second and eighth episodes while the whole documentary.

3.2 Virtual ethnographies

Virtual ethnography is a research method based on participant observation in online fieldwork, in which the researcher is immersed in the research field and interacts and dialogues with the research subjects. Bilibili, as a cultural community and video platform where Chinese young generations are highly gathered, *The Firsts in Life* has generated a lot of pop-up discussions and comments. Therefore, the authors mainly used the Bilibili website as the main investigation site and actively participated in the interaction of *The Firsts in Life*, watching as a user, trying to express their own views and

opinions and interacting with other users to better experience each process of the interactive ritual and the emotional energy in it to ensure a more convincing study.

4 Results

Ritual is essentially a large symbolic system. Each symbol has its own “Signifier” and “Signified”, and by combining the most typical symbols and constructing a multi-level symbol system, it can build up a sense of ritual of communication content [11]. After a certain observation of *The Firsts in Life*'s videos and related content on the Bilibili website, the researcher believes that there is a certain logic in the path of ritual construction. In the following, the author will analyze the paths of ritual construction in *The Firsts in Life*, starting from the two main dimensions of ritual construction in television media, namely the subjects of ritual construction and the objects of ritual construction.

4.1 Subjects of ritual construction

Under the perspective of the ritual view of communication, the subjectivity of the information receiver is greatly enhanced. This is very different from the Laswell 5W communication model. The receiver of information and the initiator of communication are regarded as equal participants. Both the receiver and the initiator jointly construct the ritual. In *The Firsts in Life*, the real content of the record, the storytellers and the receiver of information jointly construct the media ritual. The following is an example of the eighth episode of *Owning a Home*, in which the three subjects that constitute the ritual are described in chunks.

First, the real content of the record plays an important role in the construction of the ritual as the witness. From the content of the stories, *The Firsts in Life* uses small people and stories as the cut-off point to connect the macro social background behind the micro life through individual expressions, which brings the distance between them and the recipients of the information closer. The series of on-camera records and interviews with the main character as the core reflect the civilian narrative perspective of the documentary. The documentary is a series of interviews with the protagonists, which are a reflection of the civilian narrative perspective of the documentary, which is free from the grand narrative of previous humanities documentaries and weakens the official expressions and is recorded in the original voice as an equal. *Owning a Home* documents the process of buying a home in Beijing for several young Chinese adults as they go about their personal development and family life. The main characters of this episode are Huang Kunlun, a real estate agent, and several of his clients. All the scenes show the real life of ordinary Chinese people struggling to make a living, reflecting the life of the grassroots in China's current society. *The Firsts in Life*'s main content and core highlights are the record of the most ordinary people's lives, as opposed to the grand narrative of the spectacle. Under the perspective of micro-narratives, the rich and colourful life experiences and scenes are presented, allowing the recipients of the infor-

mation to glimpse their own times through the characters in the film. Individual memories and narratives are intertwined within the framework of social memory, and a close connection between individual nodes and social group memories is created in a complementary and imaginative way.

Second, the storytellers is the third point of view to supplement the story content in the documentary, collaborating with the main character of the documentary to share the story. Most documentaries are told in an objective way, so the narration and prompts from a “third-party” perspective are indispensable to allow the audience to fully immerse themselves in the story. At the beginning of each episode, there is a video of the storytellers' reactions when they first see the original footage of the documentary, as well as their respective voice-over scenes. The presence of these images in the recording studio thus clarifies, to some extent, the identity of the storytellers: that is, as auxiliary supplements to the main character of the story, and as accompaniment of the audience - participants in the ritual. At the beginning of the eighth episode, the storyteller Wang Renjun uses house of various animals such as the weaver birds of the Namibian plains, the bowerbirds, and the hermit crabs to introduce the central theme of mankind's long-standing distress and happiness about houses. During the course, the storyteller provides voiceover for the images. The relationships between the characters are linked through indirect language. For example, the relationship between the agents and the buyers: “they sell home for a living” and “they buy homes to have a life”. The storyteller also adds basic information about the main character through language, such as the fact that the buyer, Yan Jing, is an English teacher. Such basic information is added as if introducing a friend, thus weakening the strangeness of the protagonist. It brings her closer to the receiver of the information. In addition, the storyteller also translates the main character's inner thoughts and unspoken words into more straightforward language, such as “The first viewing is a pass” “She told us that no matter how many dumplings she's had, without a home of her own, it would be still cold”. The storyteller's addition of details to the documentary's story process largely enhances the efficiency of sharing and makes information dissemination faster and more effective. Therefore, the storyteller's setting plays a supplementary role in the sharing of the main character's story.

Third, the receiver of information added to the ceremony after information processing. Compared with the traditional communication paradigm, ritualized communication places more emphasis on group association. Instead of being connected by simple information transmission, the transmitters and receivers participate in the construction of rituals together in the form of cultural sharing and eventually achieve the mobilization of cultural identity for the participants. The typical pop-ups in episode eight can be roughly divided into two categories: one is the feedback and evaluation made by the receiver of information in response to the content of the documentary. For example, when one of the main characters gives a tutorial to a student, the pop-ups show “the fear of being dominated by online classes” “I remember the days of online classes”. Most of these comments are related to personal and collective memories. At the same time, some receivers of information will respond to the pop-ups that have appeared, such as “the one about the horror of online classes” and “as a teacher, thank you for your comfort”. At the end of the movie, when the main character chooses to quit her

job and look for another one, the pop-ups show blessings such as “I wish you a bright future,” “Happy quitting”. This kind of feedback and evaluation of pop-ups can be regarded as the interaction between the information receiver and the information sender after receiving the information. Information sharing is achieved through such non-instant interaction.

Another type of pop-ups is the information receiver's expectation of self in response to the selected topic. At the beginning and end of the movie, there are a lot of pop-up messages about the information receiver's desire and expectation to buy a house, such as “I will definitely have my house in Beijing” “Chen and Huang will definitely have her own house in the future”. This kind of pop-up information can be regarded as the spontaneous ritual words of information recipients. Just like making a wish on a birthday or making a promise on a wedding. This kind of ritual discourse further promotes information sharing and realizes the ritual.

4.2 Objects of ritual construction

In the construction of rituals, some symbols with strong cultural intention and metaphor are usually set as important carriers of rituals. Researchers have suggested that all the signifiers in *The Firsts in Life* are highly related to the collective memory of Chinese people. The concept of “collective memory” was first introduced by French sociologist Habwach in 1925, which refers to the things shared, passed down, and constructed by people in a group or modern society [12]. In movie viewing, the information receiver is regarded as a closed communication field in the process of watching a movie, and the ritualistic act of watching the movie at the same time can stimulate the collective memory of the discouraged group in the field. The information interactivity of pop-up websites simulates the domain of a movie theatre to a certain extent and is a virtual ritual sharing space. The viewing behavior in pop-up websites can easily evoke collective memory, and thus assume the role of value carrier and cultural identity in the construction of rituals. According to the researcher, the collective memory symbols in *The Firsts in Life* include the identity of the storyteller and the music symbols. In the following, the researcher will take the second episode *Joys and Tears of the Childhood* as an example to analyze the construction.

First, the identity of the storyteller is closely related to the content of the corresponding video. Take Gao Yalin, the storyteller of the second episode of *Joys and Tears of the Childhood*, for example. Gao Yalin acted in the classic Chinese sitcom *Home With Kids* in the early 21st century, in which he portrayed a classic, amiable father, Xia Donghai. Family With Children largely restores the reality of life in the 21st century, illustrating the family life of three school-aged children. Classic films and television can serve as a carrier of collective memory, awakening the vague memories of a specific group's past, and the symbolic symbols in the drama play a larger role in the construction process. The symbolic characters in the drama gradually clarify the audience's inner memories during their ritualized viewing, and eventually reach collective resonance and identification. Gao Yalin's image and voice as the symbol of the era stimulate the collective memory of the message recipients. In the pop-ups, the researcher found a large number of pop-ups related to *The Firsts in Life*, such as “I always thought his

name was Xia Donghai” and “Your childhood and my childhood seem to be the same” (lyrics of the theme song of Home With Kids). The recipients of the information are linked to each other through the storyteller and their own national memory, triggering collective resonance and identity, and achieving ritual construction.

Second, in addition to visual symbols, the atmospheric rendering of musical symbols also further stimulates collective memory and promotes the construction of rituals. For Chinese director Wang Jiawei, “Music is not only necessary for creating atmosphere, but also reminds people of a certain era. “Each era has its own representative music, which is one of the most contagious energies. In the second episode, various versions of the song Childhood written by Luo Dayou appear several times. The piano version of Childhood appears in the shot of the storyteller. The school scene at the beginning of the story is a children's version of Childhood. The harmonica version of Childhood appears in the final interview. The single song repeatedly makes many pop-ups such as “I cry when I hear this song” and “The bgm touches me”. Such musical symbols with collective memory properties are not uncommon in *The Firsts in Life*, where each song is selected based on the memories of young Chinese adults. The appropriate combination of audio-visual symbols enhances the efficiency of ritual construction and advances the possibility of information sharing and interaction.

5 Discussion

According to the above analysis, it can be found that ritual construction is related to multiple elements. Subjects and objects are influenced by rituals while constructing them. The following will discuss the cultural significance of *The Firsts in Life* for the humanities documentary.

5.1 Memory recall

One of the effects of the ritualized communication activities is the awakening of collective memory, through the ritualistic activities that rally the audience's emotions and recall the memories of the past; *The Firsts in Life*, a documentary film about ordinary Chinese people, shows images of migrant workers, family reunions and farmers farming, which rally the audience's heart and evoke collective memory. Likewise, the overall film has a positive and upward trend, and the content is linked to the people it loves and memories of childhood, evoking memories and emotional power. *The Firsts in Life*, for example, deals with the memories of migration and nostalgia. *The Firsts in Life*, through its presentation of different lives, brings the “past” to life. *The Firsts in Life* vividly presents the “past” to the audience, creating a connection between the “past” and the “present” and evoking the audience's memory.

The Firsts in Life as a whole is structured on the memory of the Chinese people's daily life, which is the point of memory recall. In other words, memory recall is the production intention of *The Firsts in Life*, and it is also the production function point. The cultural symbols in the film have an immediate memory recall effect on the audience during the documentary's broadcast. And the authors found that since the length

of text in the comments section is not limited, it is possible to see that a large number of audiences, after watching the video, will voluntarily achieve further ritual engagement in the comments section by evoking memories of their own experiences or those of those around them.

5.2 Group maintenance

With the promotion and broadcasting of documentaries and the carnival-like participation of audiences, the content disseminated in documentaries is no longer the primary concern, but more importantly, the common participation in the act of watching the program makes the group have a common perception of the cultural meaning and value implied in the program. The British scholar Anthony Smith believes that cultural identity can be constructed, and it relies on the cultural symbols, historical experiences and collective memories shared by the group to realize, reflecting certain individual value orientation and group values [14]. French sociologist Charles Turgot also pointed out that individuals' common feelings and beliefs about the group are the basis for the group to be maintained, and the values and moral norms shared by group members are the core of social solidarity [15]. One-way content output tends to reduce the sense of involvement of the information receiver, and the impression and understanding of the output content of the documentary is superficial.

In contrast, in the process of ritualized interaction with human exploration, information is transformed from one-way output to information sharing. By actively participating in the construction of the framework of communication rituals through the production of pop-up texts, the online discourse system built in the pop-up field connects the content of the program with the communication rituals-establishing an imaginary and homogeneous relationship between them.

The online discourse system built in the pop-up field connects the content of the program with the communication ritual - establishing an imaginary homogeneous body and thus creating emotional resonance with the program content. In this process, netizens construct online narrative discourse systems in the form of textual carnivals and form group relationships defined by symbolic cognitive identity through frequent symbolic interactions with others [16].

The Firsts in Life itself takes as its subject matter several first acts that ordinary Chinese people need to experience in the course of their lives, such as going to school, getting married, and giving birth to a child, etc. The content of its records is highly "ritualistic" in China itself. The symbolic rituals can easily awaken the collective memory of the information recipients. In the pop-up field, the reverse propagation of information recipients' memories in the rituals promotes the symbolic interaction of all individuals in the rituals. In the process of interaction, the group resonates with similar or identical common memories, and the sense of closeness will be enhanced, and the group relationship will be more compact as a result.

5.3 Cultural identity and reconstruction

The portrayal of traditional Chinese culture in *The Firsts in Life* permeates almost every story. In addition to this, the new age culture is also incorporated. Firstly, the construction of traditional culture is reflected in the presentation of traditional anniversaries, such as the Chinese and Western weddings portrayed in detail in the sixth episode of *Yes, I Do*, in which both the taboos in the preparation for the wedding and the procedures in the wedding ceremony are portrayed. Secondly, the traditional Chinese virtues are also reflected in the documentary. For example, in the fifth episode of *Toward the Other Shore*, the “resilience” of the Chinese people is shown in the job search of the disabled, as well as the warmth and love of the boss who recruits the disabled. Whether it's a festival or a virtue, behind it all is the Chinese way of dealing with people and the world, presenting the history, culture and wisdom that is uniquely Chinese. According to Connaughton, “the utility of rituals is not limited to ceremonial occasions. It is true that rituals tend to take place at specific events, in specific places. But what is displayed in rituals also permeates non-ritualistic behavior and psychology. Although rituals have their own scope in time and space, they also seem to be pervasive. “When the meanings given by rituals are internalized into the culture and into the hearts of people, people who want to achieve a particular purpose of communication are bound to adopt the same or similar ways as rituals so that their spiritual meanings can be better conveyed. Therefore, in the process of constructing *The Firsts in Life* ritual, the new culture will also be reconstructed along with the interaction of pop-ups and comments.

6 Conclusion

Using *The Firsts in Life* as a case study, this paper explores the mechanisms of ritual transmission in Chinese humanities documentaries. The communication logic of *The Firsts in Life* is documented and dissected using virtual ethnography. Based on results, the cultural value of ritualized communication is proposed. The study concludes that the logical construction of *The Firsts in Life* can be divided into a subject and an object. Among them, the subject of the ritual construction consists of the real content of the record, the storytellers and the receiver of information. In the ritual communication of *The Firsts in Life*, the real content of the record is the fundamental source of information. The storytellers stand in the perspective of the receiver to add explanations to the real content. The receiver of information initiates the reverse communication by means of pop-ups and comments. *The Firsts in Life* also uses the identity of the storytellers and the symbolic music as auxiliary ritual components to gather the audience's emotions and further improve the ritual construction. Based on results, paper also examines the cultural significance of ritual communication. The different memories that belong to the audience are awakened by the documentary; culture identity is formed on the basis of collective memory; finally, all participants deepen their cultural identity in the mechanism, while culture is reproduced in the highly interactive ritual process. However, many questions remain to be explored. For example, whether the embellishment of audio-visual language affects the cultural role of ritual communication. Whether the power relations between the various subjects in communication affect the

sharing of information in the ritual. Due to the limitation of the study, there are still many remaining questions in this study that deserve attention and exploration.

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