

Types, Subjects, and Practices: An Analysis of Performative Elements in Chinese Documentaries

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Abstract: From politically oriented documentaries driven by didactic purposes, to the rise of realism and the subsequent prevalence of cultural documentaries, and more recently to the emergence of personal documentaries, performative elements have been prominently present throughout the development history of Chinese documentaries. This study employs Elizabeth Marquis's "three-level model" as a research framework to investigate the performative elements and the practical subjects in Chinese documentaries. These elements recur across various types of Chinese documentaries, not only consciously presenting different modes of performance, but also further demonstrating that documentary filmmaking has been an artistically constructed process since its inception.

Keywords: Documentary; Performance; Realism; Cultural Documentary; Private Images

1. Introduction: An Overview of Academic Discussions on Performance in Documentary Film

In *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, the Canadian sociologist Erving Goffman regarded all social interaction behaviors as performances. Scholar Elizabeth Marquis believes that the core of performative elements in documentary is "the way of consciously or unconsciously achieving certain practical effects." [1] She divides the non-fictional performative characteristics into three levels: daily performance (the first level), cinematic performance (the second level), and documentary performance (the third level). Thomas Waugh regards performance as a foundational element of early classical documentaries, and categorizes it into three types: representational performance (natural behavior with hidden cameras), expressive performance (self-aware behavior with camera consciousness), and a hybrid of representational

and expressive performance. [2] Moreover, Stella Bruzzi refers to documentaries with distinct performance dimensions as "performative documentaries." She identifies several key elements of this documentary: the differences between on- and off-screen personas, the application of reconstruction techniques aimed at reshaping or reproducing history, and the focus on the various performative behaviors of documentary subjects. [3]

Therefore, performance is evident not only in fictional films but also in documentaries. Performance functions both as a means of shaping characters within the documentary text and as a form of subjective expression by the director in constructing the narrative. Nick Broomfield describes the performances in documentaries as follows: "I am a filmmaker, but sometimes I have to be in front of the camera rather than just filming from behind. I do this simply because the final effect benefits the film and helps tell a good story, helping the audience make sense of things—not because I desire to perform in front of the camera." [4] Therefore, performance has consistently existed as an integral element across different types of documentaries. It is one of the ways through which documentaries are constructed, embedded within the creative practice of documentary filmmaking. Performance does not equal hypocrisy. In a sense, a person's growth is a process of suppressing the ID, building the self, and performing the superego. [5]

The main elements presented to the audience within the documentary to achieve communicative effect are the performative subjects of the documentary. The performative subject plays a vital role in shaping the performative style of the documentary, enriching its performance types, strengthening its performative significance, and improving its expression modes.

Based on the director's selection of the performative subjects, the performative subjects in documentaries can be categorized into the

following categories:

- 1). Professional actors: Commonly appear in reenactments (staged scenes, impersonations, or dramatized reconstructions), such as the historical actors in *The Warring States Period*.
- 2). Non-professional actors: Mainly include actual participants (e.g., the executioners in *The Act of Killing*) and other non-professional actors who were cast by the director (e.g., the director's friends performing in *Regarding Lambs in the City* by Zhao Xu).
- 3). Filmmakers: Mainly the directors or other documentary production personnel, commonly seen in personal or activist documentaries.
- 4). Other performative subjects: Mainly included subjects such as animated characters or animals, utilized to create a specific dramatic effect.

This article focuses primarily on the first three types of performative subjects. With the continuous changes in creative concepts and aesthetics of Chinese documentary filmmaking, the performative subjects in Chinese documentaries have also undergone significant transformations. These transformations reflect the changes in documentary types, the nature of performative subjects, and the creative practices in Chinese documentary production.

In Elizabeth Marquis's "Three-Level Model," the documentary performative is divided into the following levels:

- 1). Daily performance: The subject's daily behaviors, including both verbal and non-verbal symbols;
- 2). Cinematic performance: Influenced, shaped, or adjusted through the process of filming;
- 3). Documentary performance: Framed and presented within the specific context of a non-fiction film.

2. Distortedly Realistic Characteristic Performances: The Collective Performance Mode in Political Documentaries

China's unique historical and cultural context has led to a markedly different documentary tradition from that of the West, presenting an inherent aesthetic imbalance. "Before the widespread use of television, the history of Chinese news documentary film was basically the history of the Central Newsreel and Documentary Film Studio." [6] Undeniably, the development of Chinese documentaries has been greatly influenced and restricted by the historical environment, giving rise to documentary images with distinct local characteristics.

In 1950, *Pobeda kitayskogo naroda* (co-produced by Beijing Film Studio and the Soviet Union) and *Liberated China* were two typical large-scale documentary films that emerged to serve propaganda needs under the nationwide system. At a time when China was still learning the filmmaking model from the Soviet Union, a group of top domestic film creators was gathered, and all available resources were mobilized to complete the production. The large-scale battle scenes, such as the People's Liberation Army crossing the Yangtze River, were filmed at the original historical locations, using actual participating military units. This near-obsessive production approach aligns with Suzhou University scholar Ni Xiangbao's definition of reenactment as involving "the original personnel, original process, and original setting," though such a standard is difficult to achieve in the actual production. The success of *Pobeda kitayskogo naroda* is a rare performative spectacle in the history of documentary film in China, made possible by the centralized system. In *Pobeda kitayskogo naroda*, classic battles, large-scale meetings, and land reform denunciation scenes were all organized as "reenactments." The visuals are filled with a sense of ceremony, grandeur, and the lingering momentum of revolutionary fervor, reminiscent of *Triumph of the Will*. This highly coordinated collective performance drew significant attention, with the underlying state ideology being invoked and transformed into passionate national construction motivation. However, some performative scenes may have appeared somewhat unpolished to international documentary peers at that time. For example, the anger of the peasant actor toward the landlord actor is conveyed only by a "casual poke" in the land reform denunciation scene. This kind of unnatural performance — something Joris Ivens tried hard to enhance — reflects the underdeveloped reenactment techniques in Chinese documentary filmmaking, even though the film significantly influenced the subsequent Chinese documentary creators.

3. Daily Performance: Presentation of Daily Life under Realism

Erving Goffman explains individuals' self-presentation in daily life using the term "performance." He believes that the presentation of everyday life is an active performance and role-playing. Individual expression implies "the

ability to create an impression on others.” Performance is defined as “all the activities of a specific participant in a given occasion that influence the impressions of other participants.” [7] In other words, individuals use language, facial expressions, voice, gestures, and body postures to shape a role image that meets their own needs.

Influenced by direct cinema directors Wiseman and Shinsuke Ogawa, since the 1990s, the main creators of Chinese documentaries have been deeply immersed in the ideal of direct films’ “faithful reproduction of reality.” Realism has become an ideal way for Chinese independent documentary makers to counter the institutional discourse and seek self-expression. In such documentary creations, filmmakers adopt the principle of being like “flies on the wall,” refraining from interfering with the subjects and the filming process. Even to this day, this kind of observational realism remains a commonly used creative approach by many documentary creators. Through relatively closed and static records, the language used by the subjects (including dialects) and nonverbal cues such as body details complete the display of character images and the conveyance of personality traits. In *Odyssey of the Great Wall*, the working details and shooting locations of the production team clearly reflect the distinct characteristics of the era. As one of the earliest documentaries in China to practice realism, the use of a single camera angle, synchronized sound, handheld filming, and interactions that now seem somewhat clumsy, encapsulates the creative approach of the documentary makers who initially attempted this style. In *Hancheng*, Shaanxi Province, an old cobbler who was repairing shoes while being interviewed questions the host—who failed to hear and understand one of his proverbs—by asking, “If you cannot even remember this, how can you make TV?” The old man believed that everything recorded by the camera was “TV” and regarded the host as unprofessional. This scene fully captures the cobbler’s proud and passionate character, alongside the host’s slightly embarrassed expression after being questioned. Through his “local knowledge,” the old man presents himself before the camera as superior to the host’s “professional understanding.”

In the reality show *X-change*, Gao Zhanxi is a rare, clear-headed child, demonstrating maturity

and self-control that are uncommon among his peers: the casual spending of city parents makes him feel tense and uneasy; holding money easily earned, he budgets and even bargains; upon returning to the countryside, he exchanges his clothes and luggage. In various situations, the subjects’ conflicted but resolute minds and their confusion and discomfort mixed with purity leave a deep impression on the audience. In *Chinese Mayors*, Mayor Geng Yanbo appears as a decisive and busy official who harshly criticizes and scolds opportunistic contractors, shaping the image of a Chinese official with a strong sense of justice. In the later part of the film, he opens up to the director and sheds tears during farewells with the people, presenting a complex and multifaceted image of an official.

In documentaries, “characters” are treated as social rather than professional actors. Social actors continue their lives, which remain largely consistent with how they live when not being filmed. Therefore, documentary creators prefer subjects whose unpolished behavior conveys a complexity and depth similar to professional actors’ performances.[8] This shows that filmmakers are willing to film people with dramatic qualities in real life. Such drama arises from changes in life circumstances and, more likely, from the complexity of the subjects’ personalities and images. For the subjects, the camera presents their daily life and multiple facets of their individuality, which audiences are more eager to see.

In Chinese documentaries pursuing realism, represented by direct cinema, the performance subjects and elements focus primarily on the protagonists on screen. Meanwhile, the creators are largely hidden, making their ideological intentions difficult to discern. This approach “very simplistically exploits the relationship between documentary and science. The commitment to ‘non-intervention’ actually provides legitimacy for the filmmaker as an observer without mediation.” [9]

4. Filmic Performance: Reenactments in Cultural Documentaries

Elizabeth Marquess argues that editing, cinematography, and sound control have transcended the scope of performance and undergone adjustments and influences the lens, either enhancing their complexity or weakening them.[1] This shows that the staging techniques used by the creators during filming also affect

the characters' on-screen image. Although it borrows from narrative film techniques, the reenactment (commonly referred to as "scene reproduction" in China) has already become one of the performance methods in documentaries. In narrative films, such performance is entirely fictional, allowing actors to freely create and interpret the characters and content. However, in documentaries, the characters and content actors portray are limited by the reasonable imagination based on real situations. Considering the three variables of characters, events, and locations, reenactments can be categorized into three types: specific events occurring in specific times and places; typical states lacking eyewitnesses; and historically plausible imaginings by the creators.[10]

In reenactments, the performance subjects can be either professional or non-professional actors, which are common in China's historical and cultural documentaries. However, many reenactments lack dialogue and do not require professional acting skills, so both types of actors can perform adequately, and it is difficult for the audience to distinguish whether the performers are professionals. In Zhou Bing's *The Palace Museum*, the scene of Zhu Di discussing affairs with his ministers features no dialogue, with lead and supporting actors shown in silhouette or without clear close-ups, and the historical setting is unclear. The performances in these documentary scenes mainly serve a symbolic function to convey the plot without the rigorous acting design of narrative films. The Brechtian distancing effect constantly reminds the audience that this performance is a fictionalized recreation of the historical scene and an imaginative creation by the director.

In the documentary film *The Bund*, two actors portray the role of Du Yuesheng in his youth and middle age. The actors deliver simple lines and require a certain level of acting skill. Therefore, the director invited Jin Shijie to play the middle-aged Du Yuesheng. The professional actor, with makeup, closely resembles the historical photos of Du Yuesheng in appearance and performance. When Zhou Xuan appeared in the documentary, the actor delivered a monologue on the street: "I am a lonely woman. I do not know where I was born." Through the professional actor's performance, the character's tragic sense and fate are vividly presented on screen. Regarding reenactments in documentaries, director Zhou Bing admits that most of the plot in the film is

based on facts and consultation with many industry scholars, with only some creative elements to portray the characters' inner feelings.[11] In subsequent documentary productions, Chinese documentary directors gradually gained more freedom, with reenactments becoming bolder and more innovative. In Jin Tiemu's docudrama *The Warring States Period*, professional actors portray historical figures, with dialogue nearly as extensive as in narrative films. The performance content has evolved from simple scene reenactments to complete dramatic recreations, making these documentaries more accurately described as "docudramas." By utilizing historical events, famous actors, and cinematic performances, they authentically restore historical details and recreate historical scenes. Documentary dramas focus on the "visual imagination" of the real world. Through the construction of scenes and "visual imagination", they bring people back to the temporal and spatial framework of historical events, forming a kind of perceptual belief. [12]

5. Documentary "Performances": The "Performative Self" in Personal Documentaries

Since 2000, the mainstream documentary aesthetics in China have shown no outstanding highlights. However, the development of the subgenre represented by personal documentaries gradually became an essential creative phenomenon in independent documentaries. From Wang Fen's *More Than One Is Unhappy*, Yang Tianyi's *Family Video Tape*, Wu Wenguang's *Fuck Cinema* (2005), to Hu Xinyu's *Man* (2004) and *Sister* (2006), Lin Xin's *San Li Dong*, and more recently, personal documentaries gaining greater attention at film festivals—such as Wei Xiaobo's *The Days*, Lu Qingyi's *Four Springs*, Liu Xiaolei's *A True Believer*, and Tan Zhenbang's *The Couple Is Not the Same Birds*, these films turn the camera on themselves and their families, openly exposing their personal lives and private states. This generates a documentary image practice that combines fragmented individual life experiences.

Thomas Waugh classifies documentary performances into three types: denial of the camera's presence (representational), the recognition of the camera's presence (expressive), and the combination of both. Unlike

documentary realism, which deliberately creates the illusion that the camera is absent, private images feature an interplay of representational and expressive shots. "Privacy" is practiced as a story about an individual's private space. This inevitably brings about an ethical predicament based on the desire for voyeurism during dissemination. [13] For example, in Lu Qingyi's *Four Springs*, the director's parents are familiar with the filmmaker, so they often ignore the camera's presence, revealing "natural performances." In the early overhead shots of the courtyard, Lu Qingyi's mother is wiping a table outside, and later, a shot from behind captures her dancing inside the house. The camera adopts a voyeuristic perspective: these shots record an authentic side of the subjects, presenting a natural expression without being affected by the camera.

Moreover, *Four Springs* includes shots where the subjects are fully aware of the camera's presence and respond. For example, the parents directly speak to the director before setting off on a hike, with the director arranging them into various poses; or the sister makes playful faces at her filming brother while lying in bed. These "representational" scenes enhance the camera's authenticity and sense of presence. In *Four Springs*, family members have a tradition and hobby of recording their family life, so they are generally accustomed to the camera's presence and willing to honestly and openly present themselves, making their performances natural and endearing. Sometimes the director also places himself in the camera, participating in this self-performance.

In Liu Xiaolei's *A True Believer*, the director directly points the camera at himself, combining third-person narration with first-person voiceover to present his personal image through on-the-spot shots. The work reveals the creator's strong desire to explore documentary form: mixing social reflection into personal private images, with highly stylized personal performances continuously taking on an interrogative tone.

The French documentary film holds that "to capture the deep and hidden truth of things, the filmmaker must actively engage with the passage of time and the environment." [14] In Tan Zhenbang's *The Couple Is Not the Same Birds*, the director places himself in the camera, tearfully drunk and nearly forgetting the camera's presence, showing his true feelings to

the audience and his parents who have remarried. When the camera switched to the father in the new family of the mother and his son, the half-brother is noticeably more alert and maintains a sense of distance from the camera. The father once dreamed of being an actor in his youth, and in old age, remains absorbed in his inventions and self-entertainment. Regarding the natural expressions of the father in the camera shots, the director said in an interview, "When filming, my dad said no script was needed. He has a strong desire for acting." [15] In the old footage, the young, avant-garde father left behind many self-presentational performances; in new interview shots, the middle-aged father speaks candidly with his son about his youth and understanding of marriage. "When an individual is in front of others, various symbols are often injected into their behavior, dramatically highlighting and vividly outlining certain originally ambiguous facts." [16] These two distinct and separate segments are both "expressive performances" supporting the entire film. Meanwhile, the old footage and the new interviews echo each other, creating a dramatic effect that offers the audience new reflections on marriage. The director refrains from judging his parents' family values and life choices. Instead, a framework is constructed through editing, allowing the footage to acquire new meanings.

6. Conclusion

Performance has always been an element in documentaries. It refers to the spontaneous behavior of individuals captured on camera or the subjects' conscious act of role-playing or presentation. This article discusses that documentaries and their corresponding performance elements are not the only mode of performance in the case films, but rather a relatively prominent pattern within this genre. In a single work, the performance elements may not be clearly identifiable. However, there is no doubt that our attempt to discuss whether "performance" exists in documentaries aims to observe whether the creation and expression of documentaries are breaking through the traditional boundaries and concepts. Documentary production has been constantly evolving under the influence of various creative concepts and technological developments.

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