

Thematic Exploration and Evolution in China's Ecological Documentaries

Yu Liu

Chongqing University of Posts and Telecommunications, Chongqing, China

Abstract: Against the dual backdrop of global ecological crisis and ecological construction, as an important practical direction of ecocinema, Chinese ecological documentaries, grounded in local practice, have evolved towards a development status characterized by diverse themes and varied genres through continuous exploration. The creation of Chinese ecological documentaries has undergone a process of change: from presenting Eastern ecological landscapes, to forming ecological critique and reflection, and then to striving to construct an Eastern ecological discourse. Behind this change lies both a search process for creative concepts and ecological thinking, as well as influences from top-level design and state discourse: In terms of topic setting, Chinese ecological documentaries cover a wide range of themes such as the display of ecological culture, the criticism of ecological crises, and the exploration and dissemination of ecological thoughts. In terms of content, it has undergone a transformation from showcasing the ecological environment to disseminating the achievements of ecological construction to the outside world. In terms of form, it has completed a visual upgrade from dull and monotonous camera work to technology-assisted expression.

Keywords: China; Ecological Documentary; Thematic Exploration; Creation Evolution

1. Introduction: Ecocinema and Ecological Documentary

Ecology was originally a natural science. The publication of American writer Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* integrated ecology into various modern human environments, initiating the discipline's humanistic turn. However, human reflection on ecology has always existed. Lu Shuyuan classified ecology into three categories: natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology (2000). Ecocinema explores the

relationship between humans and their surrounding environment; it is cinema with ecological consciousness. Around the turn of the century, research on "ecocinema" gradually formed, its ideological concepts deriving from ecological literature and ecocriticism. In 2004, in his article "Toward an Eco-Cinema," American film scholar Scott MacDonald first proposed the concept of "eco-cinema", marking the formal establishment of the relationship between ecological thought, film studies, and image production.^[1]

Ecocinema can be divided into fictional feature films and documentaries. Compared to feature films, documentaries possess a more objective and accurate narrative mode. Ecological documentaries are a type of documentary that "view nature and humans from the perspective of ecological philosophy, interpret and disseminate ecological philosophical thought, containing profound ecological and humanistic care."^[2] That is, ecological documentaries primarily explore the relationship between humans and nature, reject anthropocentrism, and are documentaries that express human ecological issues.

Professor Gong Haomin of Lingnan University Hong Kong defined "Chinese ecocinema" as "Chinese cinema with ecological consciousness."

^[3] Sheldon H. Lu classified Chinese ecocinema into 6 categories: (1)How the lives of ordinary people are affected by the destruction and degradation of the natural environment during the processes of revolution, modernization, and industrialization; (2)The consequences of urban planning and demolition, the relocation of ordinary residents' lives, the fate of migrants in the city; (3)The lives and struggles of people with physical or intellectual disabilities; (4)The relationship between humans and animals; (5)The projection and depiction of communal life modes in villages far from urban civilization; (6)The attempt to return to a religious holistic thought and practice in a commercialized society and the difficulties encountered.^[4] Some

scholars define ecocinema as: “Film art based on ecological holism as its ideological foundation, considering the overall interest of the ecosystem as the highest value, examining the relationship between nature and humans, exploring the social roots of the ecological crisis, and expressing unique ecological aesthetics.”^[5]In 2017, the Chinese essay collection *Essays on Chinese Ecocinema* edited by Gong Haomin and Sheldon H. Lu was published, and ecocritical studies on Chinese cinema have increasingly grown. He believes that, specifically regarding Chinese ecocinema, on one hand we need to emphasize its Chineseness, excavating ecological consciousness and aesthetics with Chinese characteristics from China's reality and tradition; on the other hand, we maintain a global perspective, examining ecological issues in Chinese cinema within a global or cosmic horizon. These are the two layers of connotation he gives to “Chinese ecocinema.”

Based on their preconceived discursive influence and visual communication technology, ecological documentaries enrich and extend human ecological perception and aesthetic experience, becoming an important path for shaping and constructing ecological civilization. In China, ecological documentaries have undergone a diverse and mature creative process from simply exploring the relationship between humans and nature to confidently displaying China's ecological environment: *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (2008), *Cotton* (2014), and *Under the Dome* (2015) boldly confronted domestic ecological and environmental issues; *Wild China* (2012), *Roof of the World* (2015), and *Aerial China* (2017) reflected Chinese ecological consciousness and aesthetics; *Snow Leopard* (2015), *Born in China* (2016), and *Force of Nature* (2016) showcased rare wild animal species; *The National Parks of China* (2023) and *Song of The Rainforest* (2023) enhanced the production technology and experience of domestic ecological documentaries.

2. Thematic Construction in Chinese Ecological Documentaries

The selection and presentation of themes in Chinese ecological documentaries are deeply constrained by the era's development and influenced by creative concepts, evolving from initially focusing on presenting the ecological

environment to integrating diverse themes such as ecological philosophy, national strategy, and global concern.

2.1 Ecological Culture: Presentation of Natural Wonders and Landscapes

Early Chinese ecological documentaries were basically primarily nature documentaries, often using a style of “poetic” and “beauty of nature” to showcase China's ecological environment. “Nature documentaries closely link the microscopic structure of animals with the macroscopic condition of the environment, enabling people to deeply recognize the ubiquitous and inseparable relationship between the two.”^[6]For example, *Balance* (2000) focused on presenting the features of the world's third-largest uninhabited area, using little music and mostly natural sounds. Many documentaries also explored the relationship between humans and nature, emphasizing the importance of harmonious coexistence. By displaying traditional ecological wisdom alongside modern lifestyles, documentaries attempt to guide audiences to reflect on humanity's place in nature. *Song of The Rainforest* delves into the rainforest, not only recording the natural scenery but also revealing the little-known ecological secrets of the Hainan rainforest in China. *The Signature of Flowers* (2020) traced the origins and development of Chinese flower appreciation, love, and cultivation culture; *The Blue World* (2020) was the first comprehensive and systematic filming of the story of the ocean, with the crew's footprints covering all the most representative sea areas of China's oceans. As new creative entities continuously joined, Chinese ecological documentaries presented richer and more diverse ecological cultures: encompassing all regions of the country, involving various landforms such as parks and forests, lakes and marshes, famous mountains and great rivers, deserts and Gobi, collectively constructing a flowing visual record of China's ecological civilization construction.

In *The Journey of Chinese Plants* (2019), the creative team started from the canyon forests of the Yarlung Zangbo River all the way to the ancient source of Chinese tea trees, presenting the life journeys of 28 plant species from 21 families in China. In the film, plants far from human habitation like *Saussurea medusa Maxim.*, *Barringtonia fusicarpa H. H. Hu.*, and *Meconopsis rudis (Prain) Prain* were

meticulously captured by the photographers; rice, tea trees, mulberry trees, soybeans, and bamboo, as the most representative native plants, were each given an independent episode; on mountains over 4,000 meters above sea level, the crew spent 3 months capturing the giant rhubarb (*Rheum nobile* Hook. f. & Thomson) in various survival environments like sunlight, fog, rain scenes, rainbows, and hail.

Through extensive use of special photography techniques, *The Journey of Chinese Plants* created scene after scene of ecological cultural landscapes, a kind of defamiliarized ecological cultural spectacle. In the film, various wallpaper-like shots are over the film: the combination of the azure sky and pure white snow-capped mountains of the Qinghai-Tibet Plateau; the awe and astonishment contained beneath the king of apple trees under a wide-angle low-angle shot; the aesthetic experience of “giant objects” presented by flowers and roots in macro photography. The application of these visual expressions showcased the natural wonders of the plants themselves and the stunning landscapes of their growth environments, with the design of composition and light and shadow completing the depiction of the natural aesthetics of the plants themselves.

2.2 Ecological Crisis: Ecological Critique and Environmental Reflection

In the thematic construction of Chinese ecological documentaries, natural environmental protection and ecological crisis are core themes. Many documentaries reveal the destruction of the natural environment by human activities by showcasing issues such as deforestation, water pollution, and air pollution. When the intensification of global ecological imbalance and the deterioration of species' living conditions occur, the gaze of some ecological documentaries closely watches this destruction and strives to transform it into the power of image action: this sense of mission stems from the inherent consistency between ecologism and the documentary form itself, as well as a rational judgment of the pluralistic world.

In the documentary *Beijing Besieged by Waste* (2008), director Wang Jiuliang turned his shot to garbage as a product of contemporary urbanization. The film visually displays hundreds of large and small landfills around Beijing, creating a strong sense of space for the

audience. “*Beijing Besieged by Waste* can be said to be an ecological documentary about ‘position,’ or ‘displacement’ and ‘misplacement’.” [7] The director constantly reminds the audience: the people and garbage in the film are all in an absurd space that truly exists and occurs on the Earth we have inhabit together—in the film, a newlywed couple takes wedding photos by the polluted Wenyu River, the lamb in their arms forming a sharply contrasting and ironic effect with the filthy river. However, the ambition of the documentary *Beijing Besieged by Waste* far exceeds simply presenting ecological destruction; at the end of the film, the lens gazes at the Beijing Olympic slogan “One World, One Dream” on a garbage truck, a meaningful shot reminding us that the impact of garbage on humans is not just the garbage itself, but will extend to other aspects. After the film was broadcast, relevant departments did solve part of the problem. From this perspective, the significance of the intervention effect brought by the film has far exceeded the quality of the film itself.

Under the Dome, released in 2015, used extensive data visualization techniques to transform boring scientific data and complex causes of pollution into charts and animations that ordinary audiences could directly understand. 3D animations demonstrated how haze and dust particles enter human pulmonary alveoli and cause harm, making abstract concepts tangible and perceptible. The production team presented their investigative perspective from multiple dimensions, avoiding oversimplifying the problem. The documentary not only pointed out the haze problem but also, by visiting Western countries and drawing on their governance experiences and lessons, attempted to explore feasible solutions for China's haze governance. The work successfully transformed haze from an environmental issue into a public safety issue concerning everyone's life and health, thereby garnering widespread recognition and discussion.

2.3 Ecological Governance and Ecological Concepts: Showcasing Ecological Construction and Disseminating Ecological Thought

Some ecological documentaries showcase China's efforts and achievements in ecological civilization construction by recording ecological protection projects and sustainable development

practices. These documentaries represent the direction of mainstream ecological documentaries, actively constructing and disseminating China's green image. The series *Ecologic China* (2016) conveyed the concept of ecological civilization by telling stories of China's afforestation, wetland protection, etc. *Beautiful China On the Move* systematically displayed China's explorations and achievements in ecological civilization construction, pollution prevention and control, ecological restoration and protection in recent years. *green hills and clear water* (2025) focuses on the topic of rural revitalization, recording ecological restoration cases in places like Lingshui, Hainan, and Ordos through on-camera oral accounts from hundreds of individuals, showcasing the process of transforming local ecological value into economic benefits.

It can be seen that these documentaries not only record facts but also strive to disseminate deep ecological concepts from traditional Chinese culture such as "Nature and humanity." "The ecological thought value system needs to confront the crisis of modernity. The 'disenchantment' of nature by industrial civilization has led to the expand of instrumental rationality and the institutionalization of ecological exploitation, while film and television media, as carriers of modern discourse, just become the battlefield for critique and reconstruction."^[8] *Beautiful China On the Move* (2024) consciously integrates ancient Chinese ecological thought, for example, using ink-wash visual elements, telling stories of rangers rescuing wildlife, interpreting the ecological idea that humans and all things are interconnected and share a common fate. When creators proceed from an intersubjective perspective, they realize that humans and nature should be mutually integrated. This type of ecological documentary, which upgrades from simply recording natural scenery or reflecting on ecological crises, rejects anthropocentrism, regards humans and nature as a common whole, and continuously practices the expression of ecological concepts and the dissemination of ecological thought. The current discourse system of Chinese ecological documentaries contains both traditional Chinese ecological cultural thought and the officially promoted ecological civilization thought for external dissemination. On August 15, 2023, China

celebrated its first National Ecology Day. On December 27, 2023, The government issued an announcement. *Opinions on Comprehensively Promoting the Construction of a Beautiful China*, continuing to enhance the systemic diversity and stability of ecosystems. *The beautiful Saihanba* (2023) truly recorded China's ecological security issues, representing the difficulties and challenges faced by Chinese society alongside rapid development. Through three chapters, the film tells the story of China's achievements in ecological civilization construction over more than sixty years and the contemporary connotation of the Saihanba spirit. This green miracle rising from the desert represents the great aspiration of the Chinese people regarding ecological construction and their efforts to practice ecological thinking. It not only reflects the effective results of China's implementation of national ecological strategies but also conveys a positive image of China's role in ecological construction to the international community.

3. Creative Evolution of Chinese Ecological Documentaries

From around 1949 to 1990, Chinese ecological documentaries consisted mainly of educational films, supplemented by imported foreign documentaries. During this period, domestically produced ecological documentaries were primarily simple popularization of introductions, with some having relatively obvious ecological overtones; after the 1990s, ecological documentary creation entered an era of individual recording. At that time, Chinese documentaries entered a new era of independent presentation, taking a path distinctly different from mainstream documentary creation. The independent documentary movement emerged, with some documentary directors possessing institutional resources beginning to seek more independent content creation spaces; after 2000, Chinese ecological documentaries began to move from simply recording natural ecology towards environmental critique and reflection, with a large number of documentaries presenting ecological crises constantly emerging, reflecting the creators' observation and concern for the ecological environment; in 2012, China ushered in the era of commercial documentaries, and ecological documentary creation entered a new period characterized by diverse themes gradually, aesthetic passion, and technically

polished expression.

3.1 Content: From Presenting the Ecological Environment to Disseminating Ecological Value

“From a historical trajectory, Chinese ecological documentary video has gone through three stages: natural landscape documentaries, human-power reflective documentaries, and eco-centric documentaries, showcasing the complex interactive configuration between technology, nature, humans, and diffusion.”^[9] According to this rough three-stage division, the development of Chinese ecological documentaries is closely related to changes in the times environment and creative concepts. The first stage was the early stage of Chinese ecological documentaries (roughly from the 1980s to the early 21st century), whose core content was the display of natural wonders and magnificent landscapes. Although not entirely ecological in theme, it established the tone of using images to record the country's mountains and rivers, with representative works such as *Story of the Yangtze River* (1983), *Story of the Beijing-Hangzhou Grand Canal* (1986), *The Allure of Xizang* (1988), etc. Subsequently, the emergence of *Story of the Forest* (2007) marked the maturity of Chinese nature documentaries. In this stage, nature was essentially an object to be viewed and admired. Ecological documentaries of this period mainly depicted China's ecological and natural environment, featuring the creation of artistic conception and the portrayal of nature as characteristics, showcasing the serene charm and vast space of China's ecology. Thematic content focused on “spectacularized” and “de-humanized” nature, presenting a pure, mysterious, and charming natural world. In terms of narrative mode, it was characterized by authoritative voice-over and poetic expression. The narration in this stage often adopted the authoritative “Voice of God” mode, accompanied by grand symphonic music. The commentary assume the main function of information transmission and emotional rendering. It constructed a one-way, inculcation communication relationship, with the audience in a passive receiving position. The relationship between nature and humans was distant, one of appreciation and being appreciated. In terms of value dissemination, it was highly didactic, with hazy ecological consciousness, and not yet forming conscious ecological critique.

The second stage of ecological documentaries focused on reflection and critique of nature. The reason was that in the late first decade of the 21st century, with the concentrated outbreak of China's environmental problems and the awakening of public environmental awareness, ecological documentaries underwent a profound shift. The lens pulled back from “distant places” to “our surroundings,” directly confronting shocking environmental pollution and ecological destruction. Nature was no longer scenery to be praised, but a victim bearing the birth pains of human development, scarred and in ruins. The content of documentaries shifted from “spectacle” to “problem,” focusing on severe realities such as water pollution, air pollution, garbage-besieged cities, land desertification, etc. The films boldly presented the visual impact of pollution sites and delved into the social and economic roots behind them, such as extensive development models, the proliferation of consumerism, and failures in environmental regulation. The narrative mode shifted from “poetic commentary” to “investigative reporting.” Creators played the role of investigative journalists or social activists, building a strong chain of argument through data, expert interviews, and victim accounts. Individualized, emotional narrative get involved greatly enhanced the realistic power of critique and the audience's sense of immersion, transforming the grand ecological crisis into a keenly felt pain closely related to everyone. The core value dissemination of ecological documentaries was profound reflection on modernity, developmentalism, and unrestrained consumption. It clearly pointed out that human activities are the root cause of the ecological crisis and strongly called for social responsibility and policy change.

The third stage of ecological documentaries regards nature as a community of life and a value in itself, attempting to construct a new narrative paradigm, namely, from an “eco-centric perspective,” viewing nature as a community of life with intrinsic value and its own laws. In terms of content, it explores holism, wisdom, and harmonious coexistence. Documentary content no longer presents beauty or ugliness in isolation, but is committed to revealing the complex network of interdependence and symbiotic cycles within the ecosystem. In terms of narrative mode, it forms decentralized narratives and constructs

ecological aesthetics, abandoning the dominant human commentary perspective and attempting to adopt a “decentralized” or “multi-centric” narrative. The shot treats every life form equally; the human perspective is no longer the sole measure. In terms of value dissemination, ecological thoughts from traditional Chinese culture and officially promoted ecological construction concepts are repeatedly injected into documentaries, then displayed and communicated domestically and internationally, guiding people towards a state of poetic dwelling in harmony with nature.

3.2 Form: Ecologism and Technological Spectacle Polishing Expression

Early Chinese ecological documentaries focused on recording, with shot deliberately magnifying and poeticizing nature; nature was a sublime and grand aesthetic object. After entering the era of digital and lightweight filming equipment, documentaries were able to directly face reality and intervene in the transformed society; technology became the producer's scalpel to expose ecological crises and construct critical discourse.

With the popularization and advancement of technology, Chinese ecological documentaries have significantly improved in filming technology and visual effects. “Production technology and equipment have an important impact on highlighting the vitality and kinetic energy of natural matter.”^[10] The use of high definition, aerial photography, macro photography, and other technologies has made documentary visuals more exquisite, better able to showcase the grandeur and delicacy of nature. For example, the second season of *The Isle of the Yellow River* (2022) used macro lenses to reveal the details of the Reed Parrotbill's nest, while simultaneously using aerial shots to show the wetland panorama, creating an effect of interwoven micro and macro perspectives; *Perceive the changes in the ecosystem* used satellite comparison images to present the transformation of the Kubuqi Desert from wasteland to “PV ocean,” creating data visualization effects. Most importantly, in some filming, by adjusting equipment, interference and impact on animals and plants were reduced, reflecting a balance between technical rationality and ecological care. Ecological documentaries overall shape an “immersive” visual experience, even introducing “soundscape

ecology” to weave visual richness.

4. Conclusion

After years of development, Chinese ecological documentaries have forged a mature system characterized by “three-dimensional thematic construction, diversified creative techniques, and complex communication value.” In terms of themes, they have moved from natural aesthetics to ecological critique, and expanded from national image building to global responsibility. In terms of creation, they have moved from technical flaunt to ethical consciousness, and from one-way didacticism to symbiotic narrative. In the future, Chinese ecological documentaries will not only become visual footnotes for ecological civilization construction but also gradually construct an ecological discourse system integrating Eastern philosophical thought and global concern.

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