

HeXi Corridor: The Disconnection between Expression and Communication in a Cross-cultural Context

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Abstract: It has been ten years since the large-scale CCTV documentary “*Hexi Corridor*” was launched in China, creating a certain level of influence. Beyond factors like its omnimedia marketing approach, this is also due to its subject matter resonating with the social context of national cultural promotion – following the comprehensive initiation of the Silk Road revival plan, positioning, organizing, integrating, and promoting Silk Road culture has become a key theme for officially guided artistic creation. However, numerous fractures in the process from expression to communication cause “*Hexi Corridor*” to slide towards traditional approaches, seemingly struggling to shoulder the task of international cultural communication for the Silk Road.

Keywords: *Hexi Corridor*; Documentary; Expression; Communication; Cross-cultural Context

1. Introduction

In the current era of prevalent visual culture communication, documentaries, as a cultural form within mass media, have endowed the construction of a healthy, diverse documentary ecology and the dissemination of national cultural characteristics with contemporary significance. Utilizing documentaries for cultural storytelling and fostering psychological identification and emotional resonance among international audiences is particularly important. “*Hexi Corridor*,” with its spiritual core centered on “national strategy,” employs the approach of historical-geographical evolution, connecting dozens of independent thematic segments to narrate a previously untold story of the Hexi Corridor. However, the domestic success of “*Hexi Corridor*” cannot conceal its failure in overseas dissemination. Whether in its narrative methods or communicative content, it still fails to break free from the constraints of traditional historical documentary genres. This article

intends to analyze the reasons for the failure of “*The Hexi Corridor*” from the perspectives of narrative mode and cultural dissemination.

2. Omniscient Narrative Perspective and Monotonous Narrative Content

The primary issue with “*Hexi Corridor*” lies in its singular narrative perspective. For audiences, history is not entirely narrative, yet narrative is crucial to history because it is through narrative that audiences understand historical stories. How to transform real events into “stories” is directly linked to the narrative perspective, which influences the documentary's style, genre, and other formal characteristics. “Whenever events are described, they are always described from a certain ‘visual’ range. A point of view must be chosen, that is, a certain way of seeing things, a certain angle.”^[1] “*Hexi Corridor*” adopts the traditional omniscient narrative perspective of “images plus commentary,” where “the narrator is both inside and outside the characters; he knows everything that happens within the characters' minds, and he never identifies with any character.”^[2] This highly ideological narrative perspective presents a holistic and centralized narration. The narrative subject freely traverses time and space, and the voice-over, filled with emotional analysis, arbitrarily links different spatiotemporal contexts, inevitably trapping the documentary in a solipsistic predicament. It is precisely the narrator's freedom that leaves little room for psychological dialogue between the audience and the text, forcing the audience to passively accept the judgments of the narrative subject. Examining internationally successful Chinese-themed documentaries, most employ mature internationalized narrative perspectives.”*The Old Summer Palace*” views the history of Yuanmingyuan through the eyes of a foreign missionary; “*Yasukuni*” (directed by Li Ying) abandons traditional hostile mindsets, choosing perspectives such as a veteran who served in the Japanese army and an American

supporting Koizumi's visits, exploring the deep-seated reasons behind historical issues through attitudes rooted in Japanese daily logic. Its balanced and comprehensive narrative approach made the film acceptable even to Japanese audiences; Bill Guttentag's documentary on the Nanjing Massacre, "*Nanking*," portrays ordinary victims from a Western perspective; in "*A Year in Tibet*" (directed by Sun Shuyun), the thick description narrative within an interpretative anthropological framework, showcasing the joys and sorrows of Tibetans from various social strata, strives to avoid the possibility of stereotyped, symbolic misinterpretations by Western audiences. Comparing the Chinese CCTV documentary "*1405 Zheng He's Voyages*" with the National Geographic Channel's "*Treasure Fleet: The Epic Voyage of Zheng He*," both dealing with the same subject matter, the differences in equipment, technology, and production techniques are minimal. However, the former is permeated with a strong mainstream culture under a dominant ideology, emphasizing China's long history; the latter pursues pure knowledge and a humanistic attitude, reflecting Zheng He's historical influence on the places he visited.

The lengthy commentary in "*Hexi Corridor*" restricts the audience's perspective. Using commentary to interpret characters beyond the historical context not only limits the documentary's own conveyance of thought but also makes it difficult for the audience to engage in complex and interesting dialogue. Historical documentaries in China almost invariably feature commentary, easily falling into a poetic, lyrical, broadcast-style mode, with excessive emotional analysis and insufficient attention to the intrinsic connection between the narrator and the documentary itself. In contrast, in the BBC documentary "*Simon Schama's Power of Art*," the famous host Simon Schama, while playing an omniscient role, does not participate in the narration of events within the documentary; instead, he adds content comparing ancient and modern times from his perspective as a modern person, thereby enriching the documentary's perspective and content horizon.

Secondly, the narrative content of "*Hexi Corridor*" tends towards monotony. "*Hexi Corridor*" draws on the narrative strategies of feature films, similar to documentaries like the BBC's "*Simon Schama's Power of Art*" or National Geographic's "*The Great Wall*."

Narrative elements primarily include visuals, music, sound effects, and commentary. Unlike many historical and cultural documentaries from the BBC and National Geographic, "*Hexi Corridor*" forgoes expert interviews and also lacks presenter appearances, relying solely on commentary to string together each independent thematic segment.

Hayden White believes that history itself is a form of encoding on a temporal sequence, aimed at plotting, at weaving stories. "Dramatized reconstruction" mainly serves two functions: one is a narrative function, where, locally or even for the entire film's narrative, justified "fictional" audiovisual means are used to achieve visual storytelling; the other is an expressive function, fully utilizing the role of internal and external montage in accumulating emotional impact to evoke audience reflection.^[3] "*Hexi Corridor*" incorporates performance into its documentary narrative. This approach, aimed at catering to international narrative techniques, is understandable. Cinematic editing not only enhances the documentary's appeal but also helps construct suspense to attract audiences with fatigued aesthetic vision. Unfortunately, the elaborate "dramatized reconstruction" scenes, painstakingly built by the director, consist mainly of actors' nearly "silent performances" and extensive commentary. The monotonous narrative elements prevent shifts in narrative modality, reducing the interest of the narration.

Throughout the 12 episodes of "*Hexi Corridor*", the chief director required to "grasp the most important figures at each historical node, unfold their stories, exhaustively explore the contingencies and necessities within those complex and profound character stories." The director chose to interpret history through specific historical figures but visually resorted to a relatively pure, imagistic treatment. In individual episodes, cinematic footage occupies an absolute majority, overused and nearly uniform in form. "Historical documentaries generally place characters within the spiritual genealogy of ethnic history, integrating individual life fragments into the long-term historical context of the ethnicity, constructing a value framework and narrative script with consistency and continuity for the audience, thereby establishing and consolidating stable and enduring identity."^[4]

For example, in the second episode "*The Passage*", the segment where Zhang Qian is

detained by the Xiongnu consists of numerous historical plots, either real or deduced from historical facts, composed of visuals, sound effects, commentary, and background music. Live-action performance becomes a simple shaping of artistic archetypes, lacking the diverse perspective supplements found in “*Simon Schama's Power of Art*.” The “plot-driven” expression of historical characters' emotions is squeezed between tedious commentary and background music, weakening the audience's historical experience of entering the characters' inner worlds.

Furthermore, “*Hexi Corridor*” follows previous macro-narrative models, single-mindedly pursuing historical and cultural propaganda. All ten episodes focus entirely on the reenactment of historical figures, lacking observation of contemporary reality. “The humanistic concern of documentaries is achieved through the objective, calm interpretation of the life conditions of an individual or a group, or by embracing specific life individuals (e.g., marginal subjects) with complex emotions mixed with compassion, sympathy, scrutiny, and respect, using imagery to accomplish genuine care and communication for people.”^[5] In the post-information age, communication has moved beyond the whole to the individual; the individual has become both the starting and ending point of communication. The absence of contemporary humanistic presentation results only in the formation of regional cultural identity, making it difficult to evoke psychological identification from audiences along the Silk Road and globally. This also reflects common bottlenecks in current Chinese documentary creation: high production costs, excessive enthusiasm for excavating historical materials, and monotonous repetition in content expression. “Only by establishing the subjective status of people, depicting the specific objects through which creators and audiences perceive, experience, and understand history, can ‘dialogue’ unfold within the realm of art.”^[6]

The co-produced Sino-Japanese documentaries “*China and Silk*”(1980) and “*Silk Road*” (2006) received vastly different receptions after being broadcast in Japan. Analyzing the reason, TBS Vice President Amashiro Katsuhiko stated that “now people around the world are concerned with vibrant governments, not history.” Michel Noll, Chairman and CEO of Guadelatin Media Company in London, UK, and a judge at the

Shanghai TV Festival, is particularly interested in the ever-changing modern history of the world. He said: “Given the interests of foreign audiences, Chinese documentaries should pay special attention to new ‘people’ and new ‘events’, producing works with unique cultural color and strong storytelling.

Therefore, when social hotspots become the main subject choices for documentaries worldwide, and the fate of individuals in reality and popular culture are undergoing dramatic transformations, those subjects rich in historical depth and highlighting social development significance are more likely to resonate with heterogeneous cultures within the “Other's” horizon, accomplishing cultural identification and output within the pattern of multi-subject communication.

3. Cultural Discount: The Pursuit of “Academic Authenticity” and Ideological Output

The term “cultural discount” originates from Canadian scholar Hoskins. He believed that cultural discount occurs when “a television program, film, or video rooted in one culture, being attractive in the domestic market because the audience shares the same common sense and lifestyle; but its attractiveness diminishes elsewhere because audiences there have difficulty identifying with that style, values, beliefs, history, myths, social systems, natural environment, and behavior patterns.”^[7] Hoskins and another scholar, Mirus, concluded that cultural discount varies by product type and media type; audiovisual products can reduce cultural discount during re-production and communication processes.

Cultural discount directly causes obstacles to cultural communication. The deep-seated differences in the vast cultural structures between China and the West are the main factors leading to cultural discount. The cultural discount for documentaries may stem from textual factors at the encoding level, such as aesthetic narrative and discourse systems, and communicative factors at the decoding level, such as overcoming differences in audience cultural capital and audience identity perception. The involvement of international renowned musician Yanni, an Emmy Award-winning British photographer, and cinematic narrative techniques in “*Hexi Corridor*” are all strategies to eliminate cultural discount. “The phenomenon

of cultural discount is ubiquitous in cross-cultural communication works, especially for cultural symbols with Eastern characteristics appearing in documentaries. International audiences may find them unfamiliar, profound, and difficult to understand, leading to lower acceptance.”^[8]

Documentaries take past events as their object of expression but cannot collect material from the “present” occurrence of the event. They mainly rely on the interpretation of history to pursue truth, and this truth is a deeper truth reached through surface appearance. “This includes existing historical cultural documentaries, theoretical documentary films, etc.”^[9] Particularly historical-cultural documentaries almost represent the mainstream genre in current domestic documentary production. Whether this type of documentary should primarily have serious historical value or market considerations under “representing history” has always been a dilemma for creators.

The hundreds of thousands of words in the academic script during the initial creation of “*Hexi Corridor*” indicate that the film places the authority of academia in a very important position. To ensure the academic authority of the film, over 20 experts and scholars spent one and a half years completing a 430,000-word academic script for “*Hexi Corridor*.” Strictly adhering to “academic authenticity” over “visual recreation” makes the documentary overly academic. This excessive pursuit of one-sided “academic authenticity” is not conducive to the wider dissemination of the documentary. In fact, one of the original significances of the birth of imagery was to grant upon image makers the power to share historical discourse rights with historians. Admittedly, “historical documentaries create relatively specific, visualized historical contexts and situations through imaginative imagery, aiding the visual representation of history.”^[10] However, it is debatable whether the creative team should treat academic authenticity as the highest standard for creation.

The pursuit of academic authenticity first confines “*Hexi Corridor*” to elite audiences. The strong, pure historical-cultural perspective inevitably filters out many audiences who cannot form a connection in thinking. After all, the concept of the Hexi Corridor is not like food, which can directly eliminate multiple barriers such as region, language, and cultural identity. The reason why the “*A Bite of China*” series

could attract widespread attention and discussion domestically and internationally lies in its carrier – food – which almost eliminates all obstacles to cultural interpretation, minimizes the loss of cultural meaning, and achieves the purpose of spectacular narrative consumption. The strong academic atmosphere is not conducive to generating clear and directly encoded information. When Chinese audiences are already struggling to parse the history and culture of the Hexi Corridor, Western audiences from low-context cultures find it even more difficult to become interested and digest the historical and cultural content in the documentary.

Additionally, the overt ideological attributes in “*Hexi Corridor*” make it difficult for the film to shed the shadow of the “propaganda/educational tone” characteristic of traditional historical documentaries. The end of the tenth episode features a commentary passage: “The light of Confucianism and Buddhism shone from here, illuminating all of East Asia. The blending and collision of Eastern and Western cultures also made the Hexi region broad and tolerant... On this magical Hexi Corridor, generations of travelers traversed time... connecting distant countries into a grander pattern – All-under-Heaven. Today, we have never been closer to the Chinese Dream of the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation...” This commentary is paired with ritualized shots, amplifying the intricate connection between the documentary and ideology.

Under such circumstances, to eliminate the influence of ideological diagramming of history, only relatively independent exploration for more suitable modes of expression can be conducted. Cultures with readability that transcend religion, nation, and ideology are undoubtedly easier to understand and accept. Otherwise, cultural communication bound by an ideological view of history will only achieve the opposite effect, significantly reducing the communication impact.

4. Reflection

In the process of cross-cultural communication, documentaries, as relatively implicit cultural carriers, must strive to reduce cultural differences and eliminate cultural barriers to enhance communication effectiveness. Internationalized narrative models and transcending cultural discount are key points of

convergence for reflecting on the expression and communication of domestic documentaries. The tendency towards storytelling in Western documentaries, along with drama and conflict, contradiction and resolution, where creators often prefer multiple parallel and interweaving plotlines, is precisely one of the creative concepts adapting to the pressure of mass communication to emphasize viewer appeal. Unlike the omniscient narrative perspective, the limited narrative perspective is suitable for creating dramatic scenes and constructing suspense, drawing the audience into the process of events. Therefore, documentary creators need to utilize narrative strategies more suitable for international communication, transparently conveying socially advocated themes and the universal value of self-realization that are common to East and West.

In the process of cross-cultural communication, the encoder's identity is inseparable from their specific historical and cultural environment; they construct information based on their own cultural experiences. Historical documentaries inevitably include relatively complex historical and cultural information, which can enhance the cultural discount during external communication. Incorporating "redundant information" into the text is one way to reduce cultural complexity. The approach of the 2005 National Geographic Channel's *"Treasure Fleet: The Epic Voyage of Zheng He"* is undoubtedly instructive in this regard: the producers used a dual narrative structure, avoiding the excavation of profound history and culture, instead using a modern perspective to search for the historical influence of Zheng He in the places he visited. According to the explanation of "redundant information" in the *"Dictionary of Communication and Cultural Studies"*, "reducing text complexity" requires producers to start from the audience's perspective, strive to reduce differences in the audience's own knowledge capacity and individuality, and create a "text with high readability."

If the broad cultural value and significance of documentaries lie in their adaptation to the needs of cultural communication strategies in the current cross-cultural communication context,

then to effectively promote Silk Road culture, besides internationalized audiovisual language and mature domestic and overseas marketing models, how to eliminate obstacles to cultural identification and transcend the cultural discount in the cross-cultural communication context are important factors that a documentary must consider before going international.

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