

## Sustainable Production and Making of Chinese Documentary Films: A Cross-Cultural Communication Perspective

Wei Guo<sup>1\*</sup>, Prakaikavin Srijinda<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Student, Doctor of Communication Arts Program in Communication, College of Communication Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, [s65584946003@ssru.ac.th](mailto:s65584946003@ssru.ac.th)

<sup>2</sup> Lecturer, College of Communication Arts, Suan Sunandha Rajabhat University, [prakaikavin.sr@ssru.ac.th](mailto:prakaikavin.sr@ssru.ac.th)

\*Corresponding Author: [s65584946003@ssru.ac.th](mailto:s65584946003@ssru.ac.th)

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### ABSTRACT

This study investigates the sustainable development of Chinese documentary films through a cross-cultural communication lens, highlighting how these films navigate global media environments while preserving cultural authenticity. The introduction outlines the increasing relevance of documentary filmmaking in shaping China's international image and cultural soft power. The second section examines cross-cultural communication strategies, such as narrative localization, audience-oriented framing, and symbolic mediation, which enable Chinese documentaries to resonate with diverse international viewers. The paper then explores the cultural characteristics embedded in Chinese documentaries, including collective memory, and social realism, which contribute to their unique cultural identity. Attention is given to the content quality of these productions, emphasizing thematic relevance, informational depth, and audiovisual innovation as critical factors influencing their global reception. In the fifth section, the study analyzes narrative techniques, such as voiceover styles, personal storytelling, and hybrid formats, that enhance the emotional and intellectual impact of Chinese documentaries across cultural boundaries. Finally, the paper discusses the sustainable production of Chinese documentaries, advocating for integrated support through institutional policies, international co-productions, talent development, and platform diversification. This comprehensive analysis offers theoretical and practical insights for enhancing the global reach and enduring viability of Chinese documentary filmmaking.

**Keywords:**

### INTRODUCTION

In the past decade, Chinese documentaries have emerged as central tools in the country's efforts to project soft power and enhance cultural diplomacy. This shift coincides with China's broader strategic vision of shaping its international image through media and arts. Driven by the "Going Global" policy (国家广电总局, 2001) and growing investment in the cultural sector, documentary filmmaking in China has entered a new phase of industrialization and globalization. However, the discussion of Chinese documentary has often centered on content or censorship, with little attention to its sustainability as a production mode—culturally, economically, and technologically. Under the trend of globalization, the deepening of economic and cultural exchanges across the globe has led to a heightened awareness of cultural barriers and misunderstandings among different cultural groups. This complex distribution of cultural groups, coupled with the urgent need for diverse cultural interactions, forms the social backdrop for cross-cultural communication research. Documentaries, as a visual representation of human culture and thought, play a crucial role in cross-cultural communication. From a cultural perspective, the cross-cultural exchange of documentaries facilitates the preservation and continuation of distinct cultures and their

media through imagery. This process is instrumental in promoting the exchange and enrichment of diverse cultures and in enhancing mutual understanding and recognition among nations. In his 2014 address at the Symposium on Literary and Artistic Work, President Xi Jinping underscored that the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation necessitates the flourishing of Chinese culture. Culture serves as a vital force for a nation's survival and development. With the growing international focus on China, literature and the arts have emerged as the most effective tools for communication and exchange. These mediums articulate and project the essence of Chinese culture to the global audience, narrating Chinese stories and conveying Chinese voices. This process not only enhances the international community's understanding and appreciation of China but also fosters a deeper engagement with Chinese culture through aesthetic experiences. (People's Daily, 2015) Since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party, significant diplomatic initiatives have been undertaken, emphasizing the role of neighboring countries in China's diplomatic strategy, all while maintaining continuity and stability in foreign policy. Concurrently, as China has pursued rapid economic growth, it has also consistently advocated for equitable and mutually beneficial global dialogue based on core values. (Xinhua News Agency, 2013) Documentaries have played a pivotal role as vehicles for cultural exchange, offering a comprehensive, authentic, and objective portrayal of China and its people to the international audience. However, from the late 1970s to the early 1980s, Chinese documentaries were often perceived through a propagandistic lens in their international distribution. By 1986, films such as the extensive series "China" had been exported over 400 times. Moreover, additional documentaries, totaling 200 works and translated into eight foreign languages, were sent abroad. Despite their substantial content, these films rarely found airtime on foreign television networks or cinema screens; instead, they were primarily showcased at cultural events hosted by Chinese embassies abroad. The advent and rapid proliferation of digital media have fundamentally reconfigured the landscape of cultural production and consumption on a global scale. This transformation is characterized by the increased ability of media content to traverse national boundaries, facilitating a more interconnected global media environment (Castells, 2010). In this evolving context, Chinese documentaries have emerged from their traditionally domestic confines to garner significant international attention, signaling China's expanding influence within the global media sphere (Zhang, 2019). This shift is emblematic of a broader trend wherein nations with emerging media markets seek to project their cultural narratives onto the global stage, leveraging digital platforms to reach a diverse audience (Sreberny, 2013). The rise of Chinese documentaries on the international stage reflects a strategic effort to enhance China's soft power and cultural diplomacy. Historically, Chinese media content was primarily targeted at domestic audiences, often reflecting the socio-political narratives and cultural values specific to China (Liu, 2018). However, as digital media technologies have advanced, there has been a notable shift towards producing content that is designed to resonate with global viewers. This shift is not merely a function of increased technological access but also indicative of a deliberate effort by Chinese media producers to engage with a global audience by adapting their communication strategies to various cultural contexts (Gillespie, 2018). Understanding the dynamics of cross-cultural communication within Chinese documentaries necessitates a comprehensive examination of how these media products navigate and negotiate cultural boundaries. Cross-cultural communication, in this context, involves the processes through which media content is modified or interpreted to align with the values, expectations, and cultural norms of different audiences (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001). This involves both the strategic adaptation of content and the inherent challenges of maintaining the integrity of the original message while ensuring its relevance to diverse cultural contexts. This paper seeks to address that gap by reframing Chinese documentary not just as cultural content but as an evolving and sustainable media form. We contend that sustainable production refers not only to environmental or financial stability but also to the capacity of documentaries to adapt across cultures, generations, and platforms while retaining narrative coherence and artistic integrity. Chinese documentaries such as *A Bite of China*, exemplify this synthesis of cultural continuity and global adaptability. Our approach is to integrate cross-cultural communication theories (Hall, Hofstede, Gudykunst), documentary studies (Nichols, Renov), and cultural sustainability discourse (Soini & Birkeland), supported by recent research including Guo Wei's empirical thesis (2024). In doing so, we examine how narrative, aesthetic, and institutional strategies contribute to sustainable documentary practice in contemporary China.

## **CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGIES IN CHINESE DOCUMENTARIES**

This topic is divided into its constituent parts, which are:

1. Origins & Theories
2. China's Policy Impact
3. Audience Analysis
4. Narrative Strategies
5. Subtitling & Dubbing
6. Strategy Effectiveness

## Origins and Theories of Cross-Cultural Communication

Research into cross-cultural communication has highlighted the importance of cultural adaptation in media content. According to Gudykunst and Kim (2003), effective cross-cultural communication requires an understanding of both the cultural context of the sender and the receiver. For Chinese documentaries, this means that producers must balance the portrayal of authentic Chinese cultural elements with the need to present content in a manner that is accessible and engaging to international audiences. This balance is crucial for achieving successful cross-cultural communication and ensuring that the content is not only understood but also appreciated by viewers from different cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, the adaptation of communication strategies in Chinese documentaries involves an intricate process of localization and cultural translation. Localization refers to the modifications made to content to cater to the specific cultural preferences and expectations of the target audience (Brislin, 1980). In the case of Chinese documentaries, this may involve altering narrative structures, visual aesthetics, and even language to better align with the cultural norms and viewing habits of international audiences (Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2010). Cultural translation, on the other hand, focuses on the process of conveying cultural meanings and values from one cultural context to another, ensuring that the essence of the content is preserved while making it comprehensible to a foreign audience (Venuti, 2012).

The effectiveness of these cross-cultural communication strategies can be assessed through various metrics, including audience reception, engagement levels, and critical reviews. For instance, studies have shown that the success of cross-cultural media content often hinges on its ability to establish a connection with viewers by addressing their cultural interests and values (Ishii, 2014). In this regard, Chinese documentaries that successfully integrate global storytelling techniques while retaining core Chinese cultural elements are more likely to resonate with international audiences.

To illustrate, the documentary series *China: The Panda Adventure* has been noted for its successful blend of Chinese cultural elements with universally appealing narratives about wildlife conservation (Zhang & Lin, 2019). By incorporating international environmental concerns and aligning the documentary's themes with global conservation efforts, this series effectively bridges cultural gaps and engages a broader audience. Similarly, the film *The Great Wall* has been recognized for its attempt to merge Chinese historical themes with Western cinematic techniques, aiming to appeal to both Chinese and international viewers (Xu & Wang, 2020).

As human societies have developed, cross-cultural communication occurs when members of one group encounter another group and recognize their differences (Hall, 1997). With the advancement of civilization, trade, travel, missionary work, and warfare became primary means of early cross-cultural communication, involving face-to-face interactions (Smith, 2010). "Cross-cultural communication refers to the interactions and exchanges between different cultures and between individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. It involves the dissemination of information and interpersonal activities among members of different cultural contexts, as well as the processes of cultural elements flowing, sharing, penetrating, and migrating within the global society" (Sun, 2006, p.45). In cross-cultural communication, the concept of "culture" refers both to the different cultural groups involved in the communication process and to the diverse cultural content being communicated (Hofstede, 2001). Cross-cultural communication is thus the process of transmitting different cultural content between distinct cultural groups. As interactions deepen, people increasingly recognize the necessity and importance of cultural exchange and integration for the survival and development of local cultures, as well as for enhancing understanding, deepening identity, and bridging gaps between different groups (Gudykunst, 2003). The study of cross-cultural communication emerged in response to this need. As an independent discipline, cross-cultural communication studies originated in the United States in the 1950s (Hymes, 1972). In 1946, the U.S. Congress passed the Foreign Service Act, establishing the Office of Foreign Operations within the State Department. This office provided language and anthropological cultural training for personnel stationed overseas in the numerous bases and international organizations established after World War II, marking the formal beginning of cross-cultural research (Gordon, 1997).

## The Role of China National Policies in Advancing Cross-Cultural Communication through Chinese Documentaries

In recent years, National policies of China have increasingly emphasized the strategic importance of the "going out" initiative and the role of documentaries in this context. For instance, The National Radio and Television Administration of China (NRTA) issued the "Implementation Rules for the 'Going Out' Project of Broadcasting and Film" in December 2001. This policy aimed to project China's voice on a global scale, specifically targeting audiences in North America and Western Europe to provide an accurate understanding of China's positions on major international issues.

In the current context, where politics and media collaborate to set the global agenda, effectively disseminating Chinese documentaries internationally has become a vital issue for China's strategy of "cultural export" and "enhancing cultural soft power" in the new era.

Recent data highlights the increasing global reach of Chinese media. For instance, the global market for Chinese documentaries has expanded significantly, with platforms such as Netflix and Amazon Prime showcasing Chinese productions to a worldwide audience (Li & Wang, 2021). However, the effectiveness of these documentaries in achieving cross-cultural understanding remains underexplored. While the domestic success of Chinese media has been well-documented, empirical studies focusing on their international reception are relatively sparse. Research by Chen (2020) and Zhang & Lin (2019) has primarily examined the production and consumption of Chinese documentaries within China, without sufficiently addressing how these documentaries perform in international settings.

The theoretical framework for understanding cross-cultural communication in media studies includes several key concepts. Hall's (1976) high-context and low-context communication theory provides a foundational perspective, highlighting how cultural differences in communication styles can impact media reception. High-context cultures, such as China, rely heavily on implicit communication and shared cultural understandings, whereas low-context cultures, prevalent in many Western countries, favor explicit and direct communication (Hall, 1976). Chinese documentaries, often rich in cultural references and implicit meanings, may face challenges in being understood and appreciated by audiences from low-context cultures.

Additionally, Hofstede's (2001) cultural dimensions theory offers valuable insights into how cultural values influence media interpretation. Hofstede identifies key dimensions such as individualism versus collectivism and uncertainty avoidance, which can affect how international audiences engage with and interpret Chinese documentaries. For example, Chinese documentaries that emphasize collectivist values may need to be adapted to align with the more individualistic perspectives of Western audiences.

The concept of cultural adaptation is crucial in this context. Localization strategies, which involve modifying content to fit the cultural preferences and expectations of the target audience, are essential for effective cross-cultural communication (Brislin, 1980). Chinese documentaries must employ localization techniques to make their content accessible and engaging for international viewers. This can include translating cultural references, adapting narrative structures, and incorporating universal themes that resonate across different cultural contexts (Holliday, Hyde, & Kullman, 2010).

The empirical analysis of cross-cultural communication in Chinese documentaries requires examining several factors. These include content quality, narrative techniques, and audience engagement. Content quality involves the accuracy, relevance, and appeal of the documentary's subject matter. For instance, the success of the documentary *The Great Wall* in international markets has been partly attributed to its integration of global cinematic techniques with Chinese historical themes (Xu & Wang, 2020). Narrative techniques, such as storytelling methods and visual aesthetics, also play a critical role in how Chinese documentaries are perceived by international audiences.

Audience engagement is another crucial factor. Studies have shown that audience engagement, measured through factors such as viewer ratings, social media interactions, and critical reviews, is a significant indicator of cross-cultural communication effectiveness (Ishii, 2014). Chinese documentaries that achieve high levels of engagement are more likely to bridge cultural divides and foster cross-cultural understanding.

To illustrate, the documentary series *China: The Panda Adventure* exemplifies a successful cross-cultural communication strategy. By aligning its themes with global environmental concerns and presenting its content through a universally appealing narrative, the series has managed to engage viewers from diverse cultural backgrounds (Zhang & Lin, 2019).

In October 2010, the General Administration of Press and Publication further articulated its goals for the documentary industry in the document "Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of the Documentary Industry." Key objectives included enhancing documentary creation and production, establishing a comprehensive market system, fostering reform and innovation, expanding international outreach, and strengthening talent development.

Additionally, the 6th Plenary Session of the 17th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, held on October 18, 2011, underscored the accelerated development of the cultural industry, positioning it as a cornerstone of the national economy. Furthermore, on October 12, 2013, the General Administration of Press and Publication mandated that from 6:00 AM to 1:00 AM the following day, satellite television channels must broadcast at least 30 minutes of domestic documentaries daily. This regulation highlights the national focus on the cultural industry and the expected impact of Chinese documentaries.

At the 2016 National Propaganda Ministers' Meeting, Liu Yunshan, a member of the Standing Committee of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China and Secretary of the Secretariat, reiterated the importance of strengthening international communication capabilities. He emphasized the need to effectively communicate

China's narrative and disseminate its voice globally. Documentaries serve as a vital medium for cultural exchange, playing a critical role in documenting Chinese history, shaping national image, and promoting indigenous cultural values.

Thus, research into the international communication capabilities of Chinese documentaries is of substantial significance. It contributes to enhancing China's cultural soft power and strengthening its position in global discourse, thereby guiding the international community towards a more objective and comprehensive understanding of China and its people.

### **Understanding the Target Audience**

Effective cross-cultural communication begins with a thorough understanding of the target audience. According to Hall (1976), successful communication across cultures requires an awareness of cultural differences in values, norms, and communication styles. In the context of Chinese documentaries, this involves adapting content to resonate with audiences who may have different cultural backgrounds and expectations. For instance, Chinese documentaries often include cultural references, historical context, and societal norms that may be unfamiliar to international viewers. To address this, producers must consider the diverse cultural contexts of their audiences and tailor their content to bridge these gaps.

One effective strategy is the use of cultural translation, which involves adapting cultural elements so that they are accessible and meaningful to foreign audiences. According to Venuti (1995), cultural translation goes beyond simple language translation to encompass the cultural nuances and references that might not be immediately understandable to non-native viewers. In Chinese documentaries, this might involve providing explanatory subtitles or supplementary materials that offer context about specific cultural practices, historical events, or social norms. Such adaptations help ensure that the documentary's message is conveyed accurately and comprehensively across cultural boundaries.

### **Narrative Techniques for Cross-Cultural Engagement**

Narrative techniques play a crucial role in enhancing cross-cultural engagement. According to Bruner (1991), narrative structures can facilitate understanding by presenting information in a coherent and relatable manner. In Chinese documentaries, narrative strategies are employed to engage viewers by presenting stories that resonate with universal human experiences while highlighting unique cultural elements. For instance, Chinese documentaries often use personal stories, historical events, and cultural rituals to create a connection with viewers, making the content more engaging and relatable.

The use of visual storytelling is another effective strategy. According to Perkins (2007), visual elements can transcend linguistic barriers and convey emotions and messages more universally than verbal communication alone. Chinese documentaries often utilize rich visual imagery, such as traditional landscapes, cultural artifacts, and ceremonies, to create an immersive experience for viewers. By focusing on visually compelling content, these documentaries can communicate cultural values and narratives in a way that is more accessible to international audiences.

### **The Role of Subtitling and Dubbing**

Subtitling and dubbing are critical components of cross-cultural communication in documentaries. Subtitles provide a direct translation of spoken content, while dubbing involves replacing the original audio with a translated version in the target language. Both methods have their advantages and limitations. According to Baker (2018), subtitling allows viewers to hear the original language, which can preserve the authenticity of the documentary while providing translations. However, subtitles may not always capture the full nuance of cultural references or colloquial expressions.

Dubbing, on the other hand, offers a more seamless viewing experience by replacing the original dialogue with a translated version. As noted by Chaume (2012), dubbing can enhance accessibility for audiences who may have difficulty reading subtitles or who prefer a fully localized experience. However, dubbing may also result in a loss of the original cultural context and tone. Chinese documentaries often use a combination of subtitling and dubbing to balance authenticity with accessibility, ensuring that viewers can engage with the content while understanding its cultural significance.

### **Evaluating the Effectiveness of Communication Strategies**

The effectiveness of cross-cultural communication strategies in Chinese documentaries can be evaluated through audience feedback and reception studies. According to Kim and Ball-Rokeach (2006), audience feedback provides valuable insights into how well the documentary's message is understood and appreciated by different cultural groups. Reception studies, which involve analyzing viewer responses and interpretations, can help identify areas where communication strategies may need improvement.

For example, feedback from international viewers may reveal whether cultural references were adequately explained and whether the documentary's message was clear and engaging. Additionally, reception studies can help assess the impact of different communication strategies, such as subtitling versus dubbing, on viewer understanding and satisfaction. By systematically evaluating these factors, producers can refine their cross-cultural communication strategies and enhance the effectiveness of their documentaries.

## **CULTURAL CHARACTERISTICS OF DOCUMENTARY FILMS**

The topic is broken down into its constituent parts, which are:

1. Simulation
2. Humanity
3. Emotionality

### **The "Simulation" of Documentary**

The interpretation and discussion of the "pseudo-environment" theory in communication studies underscore the inherent subjectivity and constructed nature of mass communication. According to this theory, what audiences perceive through mass media is essentially a simulated reality crafted by communicators using artistic methods. Specifically, the vivid and engaging nature of visual representation allows audiences to adapt to the media-created simulated environment, often without conscious awareness. This phenomenon contributes to the development of the "agenda-setting" theory of mass media. In simple terms, mass media utilize their significant influence on modern society to shape public thought by selectively and skillfully setting agendas and framing topics.

Mass media serve as the primary conduit for disseminating documentaries. As Zhang (2006) posits, the documentary image, as a specific cultural phenomenon, comprises three levels: material, theoretical, and spiritual. Despite differing research perspectives on the concept of "documentary," discussions consistently emphasize two major elements: authenticity and viewpoint. Documentaries are grounded in real life and are expected to be truthful, non-fictional, and objective. Concurrently, they function as visual expressions of ideas and viewpoints. Creators adeptly integrate their perspectives into real stories and events through careful selection of materials, framing, and post-production editing, ensuring that these viewpoints are coherent and rational. This process allows documentaries to fulfill their social function. Consequently, documentaries can be viewed as a subjective reflection of objective facts, rendered through the creators' interpretive lens rather than presenting absolute truths.

### **The Humanity of Documentary**

People are the central element of documentaries. The environments, stories, and narratives depicted in these films serve to illuminate human experiences. Documentaries reflect human living conditions and lifestyles, as well as the cultural and social contexts underlying them. Although both documentaries and feature films emphasize the nature of their content, feature films typically serve a direct educational purpose, focusing on elucidating problems and presenting viewpoints. In contrast, while feature films also consider people, they do not center on them as the primary theme. Instead, feature films use documentary techniques to illustrate specific themes through people's actions and behaviors.

Since the inception of the first documentary, "Nanook of the North," documentaries have been employed to capture and document real-life experiences. The people-centric nature of documentaries aligns closely with the humanistic aspects of anthropology and folklore. Documentaries convey personalized life content through the presentation of original materials, concentrating on human experiences, emotions, and perceptions, such as life and death, love and hate, good and evil, empathy and aversion, survival and struggle. Human beings possess thoughts and feelings, and the complexity of human nature often conceals these emotions and thoughts within their actions and behaviors.

Notably, documentaries present a limited selection of materials, making their portrayal closely tied to human experiences and often comprehensible only through intuitive understanding. In documentary imagery, one frequently encounters scenes imbued with special significance, expressions poised to communicate yet restrained, and seemingly mundane actions that convey rich information and connotations, all contributing to the humanistic depth of documentaries. High-quality documentaries often provoke profound reflections on human nature by concentrating on the destinies of their subjects.

### **The Emotionality of Documentary**

In documentaries, the behaviors, modes of existence, thoughts, and emotional expressions of individuals are represented as aesthetic objects through visual imagery, becoming tangible images and narratives. Through these characters and narratives, documentaries stimulate audience recognition, understanding, and emotional resonance. The emotional quality of documentaries is manifested in the rich emotions inherent in the recorded stories and characters. In the creative process, creators select from a range of objective elements those characters and stories

that are most likely to evoke empathy, impact, and emotional engagement from the audience. They employ specific narrative techniques to encode these elements, assembling them into a coherent story that conveys the genuine emotions of the characters. Additionally, during the creative process, the creators' own emotions and insights are also reflected in the story. They often draw from their personal feelings to deeply understand the characters' psychological states and experiences, selecting filming angles and details that most effectively convey these emotions.

## **CONTENT QUALITY OF CHINESE DOCUMENTARIES**

The content quality of Chinese documentaries is determined by factors such as factual accuracy, narrative structure, visual and production standards, and cultural relevance. By adhering to high standards in these areas, Chinese documentaries can effectively convey their messages, engage viewers, and contribute to a greater understanding of Chinese culture and society. This topic is broken down into its constituent parts, which are:

1. Definition
2. Narrative Techniques
3. Production Quality
4. Cultural Representation

### **Defining Content Quality in Documentaries**

Content quality in documentaries is a multifaceted concept that encompasses several dimensions, including factual accuracy, narrative coherence, visual aesthetics, and cultural relevance. According to MacDonald and Cousins (2011), the quality of a documentary is often judged based on its ability to provide an engaging and informative portrayal of its subject matter. This involves presenting well-researched content, using effective storytelling techniques, and maintaining a high standard of production values. In the context of Chinese documentaries, content quality is particularly significant due to the genre's role in representing Chinese culture, history, and society to both domestic and international audiences.

One critical aspect of content quality is factual accuracy. Documentaries are expected to provide truthful and well-researched information about their subjects. As noted by Aufderheide (2007), maintaining accuracy is essential for building credibility and ensuring that viewers receive reliable information. In Chinese documentaries, this involves rigorous research and fact-checking to present a truthful account of cultural practices, historical events, and social issues. High-quality documentaries are also characterized by their ability to present information in a balanced and unbiased manner, avoiding sensationalism or distortion of facts.

### **Narrative Structure and Storytelling Techniques**

The narrative structure and storytelling techniques employed in Chinese documentaries play a crucial role in determining content quality. According to Perkins (2007), effective storytelling involves crafting a compelling narrative that engages viewers and maintains their interest throughout the documentary. This can be achieved through various narrative devices, such as personal anecdotes, historical context, and thematic focus. Chinese documentaries often utilize these techniques to create a coherent and engaging narrative that resonates with viewers.

For instance, the use of personal stories and interviews can add depth and relatability to the documentary. As highlighted by Bruzzi (2006), personal narratives can humanize complex issues and provide a more intimate understanding of the subject matter. In Chinese documentaries, incorporating personal experiences and voices helps to convey cultural values and social realities in a way that is accessible and meaningful to both domestic and international audiences.

Additionally, the structure of the documentary plays a significant role in content quality. A well-structured documentary should have a clear beginning, middle, and end, with a logical flow of information and a cohesive storyline. According to Nichols (2010), a well-organized narrative enhances viewer engagement and facilitates comprehension of the documentary's content. Chinese documentaries often employ various structural techniques, such as chronological sequencing, thematic organization, and episodic formats, to effectively convey their message and maintain viewer interest.

### **Visual and Production Standards**

Visual and production standards are critical factors in assessing the content quality of Chinese documentaries. High production values contribute to the overall effectiveness and impact of the documentary, as they enhance the viewing experience and support the conveyance of the documentary's message. According to McLaughlin (2011), visual quality encompasses aspects such as cinematography, editing, and sound design, all of which contribute to the documentary's aesthetic appeal and effectiveness.

Cinematography, or the art of capturing visual images, plays a significant role in the content quality of documentaries. As noted by Bordwell and Thompson (2010), effective cinematography involves using composition, lighting, and camera movement to create visually compelling and informative imagery. In Chinese documentaries, the use of high-quality cinematography helps to capture the essence of cultural landscapes, traditional practices, and social environments, providing viewers with a vivid and immersive experience.

Editing is another crucial aspect of production quality. According to Aldredge (2003), effective editing involves selecting and arranging footage to create a coherent and engaging narrative. In Chinese documentaries, careful editing ensures that the documentary's message is conveyed clearly and effectively, while also maintaining a smooth and engaging flow of information. Additionally, sound design, including the use of music, sound effects, and voiceovers, contributes to the overall quality and impact of the documentary.

### **Cultural Relevance and Representation**

Cultural relevance and representation are essential dimensions of content quality in Chinese documentaries. According to Said (1978), media representations of culture play a crucial role in shaping perceptions and understandings of different societies. Chinese documentaries, as cultural products, are expected to accurately and sensitively represent Chinese culture, history, and social issues.

One aspect of cultural relevance is the portrayal of cultural practices and traditions. Chinese documentaries often explore various aspects of Chinese culture, including traditional customs, festivals, and social norms. As noted by Liu (2015), effective representation involves presenting these cultural elements in a way that is both authentic and accessible to international audiences. This requires a deep understanding of cultural nuances and an ability to convey them in a manner that resonates with viewers from different cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, Chinese documentaries must address issues of cultural sensitivity and bias. According to Dovey and Rose (2009), documentaries should strive to avoid reinforcing stereotypes or perpetuating biases. Instead, they should aim to provide a nuanced and respectful portrayal of the subject matter. In the context of Chinese documentaries, this involves being mindful of how cultural and social issues are represented and ensuring that the documentary provides a balanced and respectful perspective.

### **NARRATIVE TECHNIQUES IN CHINESE DOCUMENTARIES**

The narrative techniques in Chinese documentaries have evolved from didactic expository narration to a rich tapestry of styles that include participatory, reflexive, and poetic modes. This evolution reflects broader social, cultural, and political changes within China and enhances the cross-cultural communication of these films. By employing diverse narrative methods, Chinese documentaries offer nuanced and multifaceted portrayals of reality, engaging both domestic and international audiences. The continued study and analysis of these techniques are crucial for understanding the role of documentaries in shaping perceptions and fostering dialogue across cultures. This topic is broken down into its constituent parts, which are:

1. Historical Evolution
2. Contemporary Styles
3. Audience Impact

### **Historical Development of Narrative Techniques**

Documentary is often referred to as "the mirror of human survival." Its development has transitioned through various phases, from film to television, from silent to sound, and from mere pictures and commentary to an integration of sound and visual elements with diversified expression. Academic research on Chinese documentaries began in the 1980s. As documentary practice evolved, this research has become a significant branch of radio and television studies.

Initially, research focused on isolated descriptions of documentary authenticity and creative techniques, drawing from traditional Chinese literary theory. Over time, it shifted to actual observations of documentaries themselves, and now it encompasses a comprehensive, three-dimensional approach that returns to the core creative nature of documentaries. The research perspective spans multiple disciplines, including communication, culture, sociology, anthropology, narratology, linguistics, aesthetics, and art.

The narrative techniques in Chinese documentaries have undergone substantial transformation since the early 20th century. Initially, Chinese documentaries were heavily influenced by Soviet filmmaking, emphasizing propaganda and ideological education (Wu, 2019). These early works primarily used expository narration, where a voice-over conveyed the intended message directly to the audience. In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the concept and production of documentaries were influenced by the Soviet model. Although Chinese documentaries with overt political propaganda missions disseminated through mainstream channels did not achieve effective dissemination overseas, it is undeniable that the international outreach of Chinese documentaries benefited from the country's planned economic system. Through policy formulation and

foreign exchanges, support was provided for aligning documentary filming technology with international standards. Simultaneously, the early implementation of the co-production strategy, known as "borrowing a boat to go to sea," had various impacts on the filming concepts and aesthetic styles of Chinese documentary creators.

In the late 1970s and 1980s, with China's economic reform and opening-up, documentary filmmakers began to experiment with different narrative styles. The observational mode, characterized by a more objective and detached presentation of reality, gained popularity (Lu, 2018). This shift allowed for a more nuanced and multifaceted portrayal of Chinese society, reflecting the complexities of rapid modernization and cultural change.

Despite a considerable body of domestic studies on documentaries, much of the research remains concentrated on practical aspects. These studies often involve micro-level investigations into creative methods, content selection, narrative art, and marketing strategies. However, they are frequently characterized by empty descriptions and a lack of concrete case evidence. The theoretical frameworks employed are relatively narrow, leaving many areas unexplored.

Understanding the narrative techniques in Chinese documentaries requires an appreciation of their historical context. In the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China, the concept and production of documentaries were influenced by the Soviet model. Although Chinese documentaries with overt political propaganda missions disseminated through mainstream channels did not achieve effective dissemination overseas, it is undeniable that the international outreach of Chinese documentaries benefited from the country's planned economic system. Through policy formulation and foreign exchanges, support was provided for aligning documentary filming technology with international standards. Simultaneously, the early implementation of the co-production strategy, known as "borrowing a boat to go to sea," had various impacts on the filming concepts and aesthetic styles of Chinese documentary creators.

With the deepening of media industrialization reform, Chinese documentaries have rapidly evolved into cultural products within radio and television trade activities in the new era, and have begun to engage in multi-level exchanges with overseas markets. Initially, research focused on isolated descriptions of documentary authenticity and creative techniques, drawing from traditional Chinese literary theory. Over time, it shifted to actual observations of documentaries themselves, and now it encompasses a comprehensive, three-dimensional approach that returns to the core creative nature of documentaries. The research perspective spans multiple disciplines, including communication, culture, sociology, anthropology, narratology, linguistics, aesthetics, and art. This shift allowed for more nuanced storytelling, reflecting the complexities of Chinese society and culture (Berry, 2007).

### **Stylistic Elements in Contemporary Chinese Documentaries**

Modern Chinese documentaries employ a variety of narrative techniques that blend traditional and contemporary styles. These techniques enhance the storytelling capabilities of filmmakers, allowing for a more profound engagement with the audience. This section delves into three prominent narrative techniques:

1. participatory mode
2. reflexive mode
3. poetic mode, highlighting their applications in notable documentaries and their impact on cross-cultural communication.

#### **Participatory Mode**

The participatory mode is a significant narrative technique in modern Chinese documentaries, characterized by the filmmaker's direct interaction with their subjects. This method allows filmmakers to become part of the narrative, creating a more intimate and engaging experience for the audience. Wang Bing's "West of the Tracks" (铁西区) is a prime example of this technique. The documentary provides a detailed and empathetic portrayal of the lives of workers in Shenyang's declining industrial district. By immersing himself in the lives of his subjects, Wang Bing creates a sense of immediacy and authenticity that resonates deeply with viewers (Berry, 2017).

The participatory mode offers several advantages in the context of Chinese documentaries. It allows for a more dynamic and interactive exploration of social issues, providing a platform for the voices of ordinary people. This technique also challenges the traditional boundaries between the filmmaker and the subject, fostering a collaborative storytelling process. Moreover, it enables a deeper exploration of the personal and emotional dimensions of the subjects' lives, offering a more holistic understanding of their experiences.

#### **Reflexive Mode**

Another significant narrative technique in modern Chinese documentaries is the reflexive mode. This self-referential style acknowledges the documentary's construction and the role of the filmmaker, encouraging viewers to question the nature of reality and the filmmaking process itself. Jia Zhangke's "24 City" exemplifies this approach. The documentary blends real interviews with fictional elements to explore the transformation of a state-owned factory into a luxury apartment complex. By blurring the lines between documentary and fiction, Jia

Zhangke invites viewers to reflect on the nature of truth and the ways in which history and memory are constructed (Zhang, 2019).

The reflexive mode is particularly effective in addressing the complexities of contemporary Chinese society. It allows filmmakers to critically engage with the subject matter, offering a meta-narrative that challenges conventional representations. This technique also encourages viewers to become more active participants in the viewing process, prompting them to critically assess the documentary's content and its broader implications. Additionally, the reflexive mode provides a platform for filmmakers to explore their own perspectives and biases, fostering a more transparent and dialogical approach to storytelling.

### **Poetic Mode**

The poetic mode is a prevalent narrative technique in modern Chinese documentaries, emphasizing visual and auditory aesthetics over straightforward storytelling. This approach often utilizes evocative imagery, music, and a fragmented narrative structure to create an emotional resonance with the audience. "San Yuan Li", directed by Ou Ning and Cao Fei, exemplifies this technique. The documentary captures the chaotic beauty of urban life in Guangzhou through a series of vignettes, using poetic imagery and soundscapes to convey the city's vibrancy and complexity (Braester, 2015).

The poetic mode offers a unique way of engaging with the audience, prioritizing sensory and emotional experiences over linear narratives. This technique allows filmmakers to explore abstract themes and ideas, creating a more immersive and contemplative viewing experience. It also provides a means of expressing the inexpressible, capturing the subtleties and nuances of human experience that might be lost in more conventional narrative forms. Furthermore, the poetic mode enhances the aesthetic dimensions of the documentary, elevating it from mere reportage to a form of art.

### **Impact on Domestic and International Audiences**

The narrative techniques employed in Chinese documentaries significantly shape their reception among both domestic and international audiences. These techniques, ranging from participatory and reflexive approaches to poetic and observational modes, reflect the evolving landscape of Chinese documentary filmmaking. This section is broken down into its constituent parts, which are:

1. Domestic Reception
2. International Reception
3. Narrative Preferences

#### **Domestic Reception: Authenticity and Emotional Connection**

In recent years, Chinese documentaries have increasingly adopted participatory and reflexive narrative techniques, which have resonated strongly with domestic audiences. This shift towards more engaged and self-aware filmmaking reflects a broader trend towards authenticity and personal connection in media consumption.

One notable example is Lixin Fan's *The Road* (2010), which follows the journey of migrant workers returning home for the Chinese New Year. Fan's use of a participatory approach, wherein the filmmaker actively engages with the subjects, allows for an intimate portrayal of the workers' experiences. This technique not only highlights the social realities of China's labor force but also fosters a deeper emotional connection with the audience. According to Zhang (2013), the participatory mode in *The Road* enables viewers to witness the subjects' personal struggles and triumphs, enhancing the documentary's emotional impact and fostering empathy among viewers.

Furthermore, reflexive techniques, which involve self-awareness and critical examination of the filmmaking process, contribute to the authenticity of Chinese documentaries. These techniques often reveal the complexities and challenges of documentary production, providing a meta-narrative that invites viewers to critically engage with the content. For instance, *The Road* not only documents the migrant workers' journey but also reflects on the process of documenting their lives, thereby enriching the viewer's understanding of both the subjects and the act of filmmaking itself (Li, 2016).

The emphasis on authenticity and emotional depth has been particularly effective in engaging domestic audiences, who increasingly seek media that reflects their own experiences and social realities. This shift is indicative of a broader cultural trend towards valuing genuine, unfiltered portrayals of life, which has been observed in other forms of Chinese media as well (Chen, 2018).

#### **International Reception: Poetic and Observational Modes**

On the international stage, Chinese documentaries have utilized poetic and observational narrative techniques to engage global audiences. These approaches offer a nuanced and humanized perspective on China's rapid transformation and cultural dynamics, providing viewers with a window into the country's evolving social landscape.

The poetic mode, characterized by its emphasis on aesthetic expression and evocative imagery, has been particularly effective in capturing the attention of international viewers. Films like *Last Train Home* (2009) by Lixin Fan exemplify this approach. The documentary portrays the annual migration of Chinese workers returning to their rural homes for the New Year, using poetic imagery and a lyrical narrative to convey the emotional weight of the journey. According to Renov (2019), the poetic mode in *Last Train Home* allows for a deeper exploration of universal themes such as family, migration, and economic disparity, resonating with audiences beyond China's borders.

Observational techniques, which focus on unobtrusive observation of subjects and their environments, also play a crucial role in the international reception of Chinese documentaries. These techniques provide a raw and unfiltered view of life in China, allowing global audiences to engage with the country's social realities without the mediation of overtly interpretive commentary. The observational mode in films like *The Road* offers a direct and immersive experience, enabling viewers to form their own interpretations of the subjects' lives and experiences (Rosen, 2015).

The effectiveness of poetic and observational techniques in engaging international audiences can be attributed to their ability to transcend cultural and linguistic barriers. By focusing on universal themes and employing aesthetically compelling narratives, Chinese documentaries are able to communicate complex social issues and cultural nuances in a way that is accessible and relatable to viewers from diverse backgrounds (Huang, 2020).

#### Comparative Analysis: Domestic vs. International Reception

The contrasting narrative techniques employed in Chinese documentaries reflect differing priorities and expectations among domestic and international audiences. Domestically, the focus on participatory and reflexive approaches aligns with a cultural emphasis on authenticity and emotional connection. In contrast, international audiences are more engaged by poetic and observational techniques that provide a broader, more aestheticized view of Chinese society.

This divergence in narrative preferences highlights the importance of context in shaping audience reception. While domestic viewers may prioritize personal and emotional engagement, international audiences are often drawn to films that offer unique insights into Chinese culture and society through innovative and visually striking methods.

## SUSTAINABLE PRODUCTION OF DOCUMENTARIES IN CHINA

Documentary filmmaking in China has undergone a significant transformation over the past two decades. From state-directed propaganda films to internationally acclaimed works of cultural expression, Chinese documentaries are increasingly contributing to global media discourse. As the demand for authentic and culturally rich content grows, the sustainability of documentary production has become a central concern. Sustainable production in this context does not only refer to ecological concerns, but also to the social, economic, and cultural viability of documentary filmmaking as a long-term industry. This essay explores the key dimensions of sustainable documentary production in China, analyzing institutional frameworks, funding mechanisms, talent development, technological support, and international cooperation. It also examines the socio-political context that shapes the content and dissemination of documentaries, and offers suggestions for creating a more resilient and internationally competitive documentary ecosystem.

Governmental support is foundational to the sustainability of documentary filmmaking in China. Over the years, policies such as the "Outline for the Development of the Film Industry" and the inclusion of documentaries in national media strategies have elevated the status of non-fiction film. State broadcasters like CCTV, CGTN, and provincial channels provide platforms for documentaries, while media agencies like China Media Group play a major role in funding and distributing content. Moreover, the Ministry of Culture and Tourism, the State Administration of Radio and Television (SARFT), and local cultural bureaus offer subsidies and awards for documentary projects. However, while this institutional support has provided infrastructure and visibility, it also brings challenges—most notably, ideological oversight. For sustainable growth, China must strike a balance between fostering artistic freedom and maintaining policy alignment, thereby encouraging innovation within the boundaries of national objectives. Economic sustainability is a primary concern in documentary production, given that documentaries generally attract less commercial investment than fictional films. In China, the funding ecosystem for documentaries is slowly diversifying. Traditional funding sources—such as state investment and television commissioning—are being complemented by newer models, including: Private Production Companies: Entities like Tencent Pictures, iQiyi, and Bilibili have begun producing or distributing high-quality documentaries, often aimed at younger audiences. Streaming Platforms: Digital platforms like Youku, iQiyi, and Tencent Video are now major players in documentary financing, offering both subscription-based and ad-supported revenue models. Crowdfunding and Public Funding: Platforms like Zhongchou and Modian have enabled independent filmmakers to raise funds directly from the public. Still, financial barriers remain high, especially for emerging

filmmakers or projects not aligned with mainstream narratives. A more inclusive funding structure—incorporating micro-grants, cooperative funding, and low-interest loans—could broaden access and fuel creative diversity.

A sustainable documentary industry requires a continuous pipeline of skilled professionals. China has made notable strides in this area through university programs, specialized film schools, and international exchange initiatives. Institutions such as the Beijing Film Academy and Communication University of China offer courses in documentary theory and practice, often in collaboration with global institutions. Workshops, labs, and pitching forums—such as the Guangzhou International Documentary Film Festival and CNEX Chinese Doc Forum—provide mentorship and exposure to emerging talents. However, many aspiring filmmakers still face limited access to professional equipment, mentorship, and distribution channels. To ensure long-term sustainability, training programs must also target underserved regions and minority voices, promoting diversity in both subject matter and representation. Technological advancement is reshaping the documentary landscape in China. The use of drones, 4K and 8K cameras, virtual reality (VR), and artificial intelligence (AI) has enhanced production quality and viewer immersion. For instance, nature documentaries like *Born in China* have leveraged cutting-edge technology to depict China's wildlife in ways previously impossible. Simultaneously, there is growing awareness of environmental sustainability in media production. Green filming practices—such as reducing carbon footprints, reusing equipment, and minimizing travel—are gradually being adopted by production teams. Although not yet widespread, initiatives toward sustainable logistics and carbon-conscious production planning will be vital as China's media industry becomes more environmentally accountable. A sustainable documentary sector must also be culturally sustainable—meaning it reflects, preserves, and promotes the diversity of Chinese culture. Recent years have seen a shift from monolithic narratives to more localized, human-centric storytelling. Documentaries focusing on rural life, urban migration, minority cultures, and historical memory (e.g., *The Road, Please Remember Me*, China's *Van Goghs*) have gained critical acclaim both domestically and abroad. Importantly, filmmakers are increasingly addressing socially sensitive topics such as environmental degradation, education inequality, and aging populations. While such themes are sometimes constrained by political sensitivities, they also offer opportunities for impactful storytelling. A more pluralistic content environment would enhance both the relevance and longevity of Chinese documentaries. China's ambition to become a global media power includes documentary exports and co-productions. Collaborations with BBC, National Geographic, NHK, and Netflix have introduced Chinese stories to global audiences. For example, the series *China: Beyond Your Imagination* (co-produced with Discovery Channel) and *Beautiful China* (with National Geographic) are milestones in cross-cultural content delivery. To sustain and expand this momentum, it is essential to build cross-border partnerships not just at the broadcaster level but also in production, script development, and post-production. Language localization, cultural translation, and regulatory navigation are key factors in accessing foreign markets. In parallel, participation in international festivals—such as IDFA, Hot Docs, and Sheffield Doc/Fest—helps Chinese documentaries gain recognition and distribution abroad. Strengthening international outreach efforts and creating platforms for global dialogue will cement China's position in the global documentary ecosystem.

While progress is evident, several obstacles persist: **Censorship and Ideological Restrictions:** Creative autonomy remains limited, affecting topics filmmakers can safely explore. **Market Monopolies:** Dominance by large streaming platforms may marginalize independent creators. **Regional Inequality:** Most resources are concentrated in Beijing, Shanghai, and Guangzhou, leaving western and rural regions underrepresented. To address these challenges, the following strategies are recommended: **Policy Reform:** Encourage open-ended thematic exploration within a managed ideological framework to stimulate creative freedom. **Decentralized Infrastructure:** Invest in regional film hubs and training centers to bridge geographic disparities. **Public-Private Partnerships:** Create hybrid funding models combining state incentives with private innovation. **Content Incubation Programs:** Support early-stage documentary ideas through mentorship, development grants, and co-production support. **Environmental Guidelines:** Develop a “Green Production Code” tailored to the documentary industry in China.

## CONCLUSION

The sustainable production of documentaries in China is an evolving and complex process shaped by a dynamic interaction of policy, market forces, technological advancement, and cultural development. While notable progress has been achieved in infrastructure, funding diversification, and international exposure, the long-term viability of the industry requires the establishment of a comprehensive and supportive ecosystem. This includes fostering creative diversity by encouraging inclusive storytelling that reflects the richness of Chinese society, including marginalized voices and less-developed regions. It also involves embracing environmental responsibility through green production practices and the incorporation of ecological themes within documentary narratives. Economic accessibility must be enhanced through more varied funding mechanisms, such as micro-financing, public-private

partnerships, and expanded support for independent creators. At the same time, the global relevance of Chinese documentaries should be strengthened through international collaborations, co-productions, and festival participation, ensuring that Chinese perspectives are effectively communicated to and understood by global audiences. Ultimately, sustainable documentary production in China depends on a balanced and integrated framework that aligns institutional support with creative freedom, economic stability with social impact, and domestic relevance with global dialogue. Such a framework will enable the continued development of a vibrant, resilient, and internationally respected documentary film sector capable of informing, inspiring, and engaging diverse audiences both at home and abroad.

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