

From Traditional to Digital: An Analysis of New Media Documentary and Its Effects on Domestic Communication in China

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Abstract: In response to the burgeoning Chinese Internet and mobile Internet landscape, new media has consistently undergone rapid evolution, subsequently ushering in a novel era for Chinese documentary filmmaking. As the documentary genre coalesces with new media, the emergent works, specifically designed for audiences in the digital age, are termed ‘new media documentaries’. These productions distinguish themselves from conventional documentaries in several ways, including investment and production by Internet companies, utilisation of innovative broadcasting techniques, and adoption of unconventional narrative structures. Moreover, new media documentaries strive to expand their business models and audience reach, as well as actively promote Chinese culture and values domestically. In this article, we examine and deliberate the influence of Chinese new media documentaries on the nation’s cultural landscape.

Keywords: new media documentary, Chinese culture, spread internally

1. Introduction

Prior to the Internet era, China’s documentary production largely relied on traditional media, particularly official media channels, with traditional television and cinemas serving as the primary broadcasting platforms. Traditional Chinese documentaries typically featured thematic content, a slower narrative pace, and a focus on educational value. However, as the Internet and new media platforms experienced rapid growth, documentary creation transitioned into a new phase, markedly distinct from its traditional counterpart.

The emergence of online video platforms engendered a novel form of documentary creation - the ‘net documentary’. In recent years, a series of net documentaries have been released, garnering considerable popularity and stimulating discourse, thereby elevating the documentary art form. New media documentaries are defined as those that embody internet-based elements and rely on new media video platforms [1]. In comparison to traditional documentaries, new media documentaries exhibit unique characteristics in terms of content, form, and business models, which are specifically tailored to the dissemination and appreciation requirements of the new media era.

Owing to the development of networked and information-based systems, access to information is no longer constrained by geographical or temporal barriers, simplifying information reception. Confronted with the impact of Western culture and values, Chinese traditional media and

documentaries encounter challenges when attempting to disseminate culture and values domestically. The rise of new media documentaries effectively addresses this issue, amplifying the influence of Chinese culture in internal communication. Consequently, this article primarily explores the impact of Chinese new media documentaries on Chinese culture and values in the Internet era, and assesses their role in facilitating internal communication.

2. The History of Chinese New Media Documentary

Chinese documentary filmmaking has a rich history dating back to the early 20th century. Prior to the advent of the internet, Chinese documentaries were largely limited to news programming with a focus on official propaganda and a strong political tone [2]. However, the true evolution of Chinese documentaries began in the 1990s with the rise and popularity of television. This period saw a short-lived boom in the industry, with notable works such as “The Yangtze River” achieving record-breaking viewership ratings of up to 40%. This success was due in part to the high production value of the work and the limited communication channels available at the time.

Despite these early achievements, the Chinese documentary industry soon found itself struggling to compete for ratings in a highly competitive media landscape. This pressure to produce commercially viable content had a negative impact on the industry, leading to a lack of innovation and creativity. Despite policy support and a number of notable works, the Chinese documentary industry has struggled to achieve lasting success, and its impact has been limited.

While the Chinese documentary industry has faced significant challenges, there have been notable achievements. For example, filmmakers have explored a range of important social and cultural issues, providing a platform for marginalized voices and highlighting important social and political issues. Additionally, technological advancements have enabled filmmakers to experiment with new formats and distribution channels, which have expanded the reach and influence of Chinese documentaries.

With the advent and widespread adoption of computer and internet technologies, China entered the new media era, and traditional media quickly transitioned into the online space [3]. The first Chinese documentary website, “Liangyou Record,” opened in July 2008, marking the start of Chinese documentaries’ transformation into new media. In 2011, Sohu.com launched the “Sohu Great Vision” self-made documentary column, initiating the birth and budding development of new media documentaries in China. Since then, many popular portals and video websites have opened online documentary channels, including Youku, Tencent, iQiyi, and Bilibili. These major online video platforms have scrambled to explore new business models and joint production ventures, making the new media platform a critical force in documentary broadcasting, in addition to traditional TV platforms.

This shift has blurred the line between online and television media, and Chinese documentaries are entering a new era that reflects the combination of industry, creation, and content networking. This new era caters to younger audiences and has restructured the Chinese documentary industry in the internet context. The documentary “I Repair Cultural Relics in the Forbidden City,” which found success on Bilibili before being broadcast on television, is a typical example of how online popularity can lead to television exposure [4]. Although the history of Chinese new media documentaries is only over a decade, it has exhibited a booming trend, laying the groundwork for the cultural dissemination of new media documentaries.

In 2019, China’s internet documentary industry exhibited strong development momentum and contributed significantly to the growth of the entire documentary industry. From a production and creative perspective, the proportion of new media documentaries increased significantly, resulting in a rapid increase in the number of broadcasts. According to data from Merront, of the nearly 200 documentary films premiered from January to November 2019, those launched on new media

platforms exhibited notable improvements. Leading network media gained an advantage in terms of quantity. The “China Documentary Development Research Report 2020” indicated that, according to incomplete statistics, the total investment in China’s documentary production in 2019 was 5.036 billion yuan, of which new media invested approximately 1.3 billion yuan in documentary production, representing an 18.2% year-on-year increase. The diversification of broadcast platforms and creative content has expanded the documentary’s broadcast channels beyond TV stations, providing more opportunities and competition for the prosperity and development of documentary and cultural communication.

3. Features of Chinese New Media Documentary

Chinese new media documentaries possess unique characteristics that distinguish them from traditional documentaries and impact their role in cultural communication. These characteristics arise from the ways in which new media technology shapes the creation, distribution, and reception of documentaries.

3.1. Break Through the Limitations of Time and Space

Prior to the new media era, China’s documentary industry was predominantly controlled by large state-owned television organizations. These television stations acted as primary investors and producers of documentaries, and professional writers and directors affiliated with these stations were responsible for most of the documentary production. However, due to the imperfect market system and operation mechanisms, it was difficult for small and medium-sized enterprises and independent documentary makers to enter the field, leaving the public with limited access to documentaries made by independent filmmakers.

With the growth of the internet and new media in China, prominent video websites such as Youku, iQiyi, Tencent, and Bilibili have established documentary channels and production teams dedicated to documentary creation. This has led to a gradual breakdown of the monopoly of traditional state-run television stations on documentary broadcasting platforms. Many innovative and creative documentary makers have found a platform on the internet to showcase their work.

For example, “China in the Countryside,” produced by China Central New Film Group, follows three peasant families in Pyanyu Village, Zhongzhuang Town, Yiyuan County, Shandong Province, China, over the course of a year, taking the 24 solar terms as a reference point. The film depicts the most ordinary rural life in China’s social transformation and has won numerous awards. However, it was not aired until 2016 when Tencent’s documentary channel broadcasted it.

According to the supervision center of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television, there was a year-on-year increase of over 70% in the number of online documentaries launched in 2020, reaching a total of 259. New media documentaries possess the capacity to increase communication efficiency, expand audience reach, and specialize in vertical content positioning, occupying a significant share in the network literature and art that utilize non-fictional images.

Overall, the rise of new media has brought significant changes to China’s documentary industry, allowing for greater diversity and accessibility of content, as well as the emergence of new opportunities for independent filmmakers. This transition has demonstrated the potential of new media in transforming the landscape of cultural communication in China.

3.2. Strong Interaction

New media has brought about an interactive function that traditional media lacks, allowing audiences to actively participate in the development of information content and express their own views. New media documentaries are created in a way that conforms to this trend, catering to the

fast-paced characteristics of the internet era in terms of topic planning, shooting cycle, and broadcast speed [5]. Using the internet platform, creators can quickly receive broadcast feedback through audience comments, messages, bullet screens, and other forms. This enables them to analyze audience portraits and needs and make timely and targeted adjustments to the content and publicity methods, leading to more attention and interaction and improving interactive stickiness.

For example, “Guarding the Liberation of the West,” a reality TV show featuring documentary police observation launched by Bilibili, a popular video website, made a bold breakthrough by incorporating a large number of elements of variety shows. By changing the seriousness and heaviness of traditional legal documentaries, it presented the working state of police officers in the Liberation of the West Business District in Changsha, China, through content that is close to life and a relaxed and novel form of expression. The creative team behind the show targeted young people as the primary audience group after researching the market situation. In post-production, special effects such as floral characters, video effects, soundtrack, and sound effects were used flexibly for variety editing and packaging to enhance the enjoyment of documentary programs. In this community interactive platform dominated by young users, “Guarding the Liberation of the West” is consistent with the audience positioning and the expression of the program at a younger age. Moreover, the bullet screen features of Bilibili further enhance the audience’s interaction, thus promoting the further spread of the program content.

The creative team also makes full use of the characteristics of Bilibili user content production, giving play to the advantages of its platform and linking with several well-known up masters to help promote the program. Viewers can also share their views and questions at any time through messages, bullet screens, and other means while watching the program. The chief director of the program pays close attention to the bullet screen and feedback of netizens, and he replies to some reasonable suggestions in the subsequent content of the program.

According to statistics, the three seasons of “Guarding the Liberation of the West” have been played 450 million times, with more than 5.26 million bullet screens and over 3.53 million followers. It ranks first in the documentary channel on Bilibili for a long time and has been on the hot search list of Weibo many times. The program with several vivid cases educates the audience on law imperceptibly, guiding their values and views of the rule of law.

In summary, new media documentaries incorporate an interactive element that traditional documentaries lack, allowing for greater audience participation, feedback, and adjustment of content. This approach has led to the emergence of innovative and creative documentaries that cater to the needs and interests of audiences. “Guarding the Liberation of the West” is an example of a successful new media documentary that has gained a large following and helped to educate the public on the rule of law.

3.3. Audience as Younger Generation

In the era of traditional media, despite exploring commercialization, documentaries have not gained high audience ratings and have always been regarded as a form of minority culture. Documentaries are typically popular among highly educated and high-income groups. However, in the era of new media, documentaries are attracting more and more young people’s attention by leveraging strong and youthful online audiences [6]. Major new media video websites in China offer a new way for documentaries to spread, expand, and cultivate a relatively stable, young audience for documentaries. This lays a foundation for the development of new media documentaries.

According to Ad Master, 76 percent of the documentary audience comes from first-tier cities, with 55 percent earning a monthly income of between 7,000 and 20,000 yuan. 82 percent of the audience is between 18 and 35 years old, and 74 percent hold a bachelor’s degree or above. Tencent Video reports that 70% of its documentary audience is comprised of young people between the ages

of 18 and 29. On iqi yi, more than 50% of documentary viewers are aged between 19 and 30, with 14% being under 18. According to Bilibili's prospectus for listing, 81.7 percent of its users were born between 1990 and 2009. Additionally, the China Documentary Development Research Report 2020 highlights that the mainstream video subscription users of Tencent video in China are 123 million, mostly composed of high-tech enthusiasts. The growth rate of young users is fast, with post-90s users accounting for 66%. Iqi yi has 101.7 million subscribers, with 80.78% being 35 years old and below. The majority of Youku users are also under 39 years old, and the average daily paying users are continuing to grow, up about 30% year on year. In the fourth quarter of 2020, Bilibili users reached 202 million, with 78% being in the young group aged 18-35 who grew up in the internet environment. They have a stronger curiosity about current times and the world. The authenticity and high quality of documentaries meet this demand, and they are becoming increasingly popular among young people with high education, stable income, and a desire for a sense of gain and empathy.

3.4. Diversified Expression Techniques

At the beginning of the transfer of documentaries to new media platforms, most of the documentaries broadcast on major video websites are traditional documentaries directly transferred to the internet for broadcast. These documentaries are created according to the creation concept of television. Their topic selection is grand, their narrative pace is slow, and they are full of didactic meaning. However, the traditional program length of about 50 minutes is not in line with the viewing habits of young audiences in the internet era.

Fragmentation, flatness, openness, and interactivity are important characteristics of the internet and new media era. These characteristics provide greater possibilities for the personalized expression of documentaries. Documentaries created for the dissemination of new media must be closer to the needs of audiences and provide personalized, niche, and diversified services. When planning the topic selection of documentaries, it is also necessary to consider big data of mentions of documentaries on social media, video clicks, and other aspects to meet the personalized needs of different groups [7]. Unlike traditional documentaries that prefer grand narration and group narration, new media documentaries tend to prefer personalized narration. To adapt to the viewing needs of network groups, the concept of topic selection of documentaries also begins to show a trend of de-elitism, and planning is carried out according to the preferences of young audiences. Documentaries are no longer limited to the standard length of 30 or 45 minutes of TV programs. To adapt to the trend of fragmented attention in the era of mobile internet, new media documentaries are becoming shorter and shorter, with more emphasis on a fast pace and suspense.

For example, in 2018, Bilibili, a new media video site, released an original documentary titled "A String of Life," which was based on China's barbecue culture. With the theme of showing the unique barbecue culture across China, the series involves more than 500 legendary barbecue stalls in nearly 30 cities. Unlike "A Bite of China," "A String of Life" does not cover the extensive and profound food culture of the Chinese people. Instead, it focuses on the ordinary barbecue stalls on the streets of China, which are mixed with the variety of life in the streets and the eating routines of ordinary people. The reason why barbecue was chosen as the core content is that it is a kind of food in China with the atmosphere of market and common people, which is different from high-end restaurants and the atmosphere of formal dining in front of daily tables. It shows the difference between Chinese street table culture and formal banquet culture and is a natural resolution of high-end.

The organization of "A String of Life" is based on the main theme of barbecue. Each episode is arranged in the order of eating barbecue, such as "No Meat" for meat, "Darker Than the Sky" for heavy food, and "Some Antidote" for vegetarian dishes. This topic selection and framework cater to

the personalized and niche discourse characteristics of new media. The needs of specific audiences can be fully considered in the process of communication, rather than the pursuit of grand and comprehensive coverage of topics, as in traditional television documentaries. Each episode lasts 45 minutes and can be divided into five independent parts according to different cities and types of barbecue. These parts can be connected as a whole or presented separately as short and long videos.

By March 2020, the first season of the show had been viewed over 73.07 million times, with 1.27 million bullet screens, and the second season had been viewed over 90.46 million times, with 987,000 bullet screens. The series' success is attributed to its ability to inspire audience identification. It portrays ordinary street stalls and diners with human interest and fireworks. The iconic sentence "Without fireworks, life is a lonely journey" vividly reflects the status of barbecue in the eyes of Chinese people and the purest breath of life that barbecue brings, and points out the overall voice and core concept of this documentary.

3.5. Innovative Development Model

In the age of traditional media, despite the development of documentaries in China for many years, the path to commercializing the genre has remained unclear. According to a survey by the Southern Metropolis Daily, the profit ratio of the documentary industry as a whole is only about 5%-10%, and the high cost and low bargaining power of a single film are the two major problems faced by the traditional documentary industry. However, in the new media era of the internet, it is not uncommon for serious subjects to be presented in an entertaining way, and the commercial model of documentaries has undergone many changes [8]. In addition to traditional advertising investment, copyright sales, paid memberships, commercial IP, derivatives, linkage with e-commerce, cross-border offline exhibition, and other methods make the commercialization of documentaries more feasible.

"A Bite of China" is a documentary about traditional Chinese food produced by China Central Television in 2012. It has become a benchmark in Chinese food and culture documentaries since its broadcast, by telling stories about food and culture in different parts of China with specific characters. In 2017, part of the team behind "A Bite of China" established Inailai Media and cooperated with Tencent Video to continue cultivating commercial documentaries, such as those about food. In 2018, the food and culture documentary "Flavor of the World," created by Daolai Media and produced by Tencent Video, was broadcast simultaneously on Tencent Video and Zhejiang Satellite TV. The film generated up to 1.2 billion views and ranked first among domestic dramas during the broadcast period, representing the success of a niche documentary becoming a popular work. In 2020, the second season of "Flavor of the World" was aired on Tencent Video, and the total number of views for the first two seasons was nearly 2 billion.

The success of "Flavor of the World" not only represents a new peak for the food documentary category but also explores a new commercial production mode. The production team has a strong and professional team with a mature production process that can systematically conduct training, literature review, topic selection, outline writing, and field research. Additionally, the team has both the ability and experience of producing traditional media content and strong adaptability, enabling them to adapt to the needs of audiences and the characteristics of the platform in the market environment. The team is also using commercial models to create a series of spin-off documentaries. Tencent Video has launched Flavor Lab, which focuses on the topics behind food, short videos highlighting local products, Origin of Flavor, and Flavor Lab's Spring Festival special, Chinese New Year Dinner. The film received a warm response on various platforms, and its spin-off program "Origin of Flavor" entered overseas markets, becoming the first Chinese original documentary series to be available on Netflix. The series aims to explore the culture behind food

and bring food lovers around the world together by presenting food and humanity from different perspectives.

4. Influence of New Media Documentaries on Internal Communication of Chinese Culture

4.1. Rely on the Advantages of the Internet to Enrich the Internal Communication of Chinese Culture

In the era of the Internet, traditional media's influence is diminishing. New media has become the primary way for many people to obtain information, thanks to the high utilization rate of fragmented time. New media completely subverts the single information transmission mode of traditional media, forming a communication mode in which audiences can receive information anytime and anywhere, actively choose the kind of information they receive, and can also comment, forward and share the information. There is a good interaction between the information spreader and the receiver, enabling the information spreader to better spread information according to the needs of the audience. In this context, the communication mode of new media documentary has several advantages. Audiences can watch documentaries anytime and anywhere, and comment, forward and share the content. The audience's opinions can be fed back to the documentary producer in real-time. On the one hand, the producer can adjust the documentary content according to the audience's response. On the other hand, a large number of user surveys can be conducted to understand and predict users' demands for documentary viewing, encouraging producers to create works that better align with users' preferences, forming a virtuous circle.

At the end of 2018, Bilibili released a documentary called "Those Things in History". As an experimental historical and cultural documentary, it innovated the discourse and expression methods, adapting historical stories to historical facts through traditional documentaries combined with creative intercalation. This made the historical stories more in line with the network cultural context [9]. "But There Are Still Books", a humanistic documentary produced by Bilibili, takes books as its theme to tell wonderful stories related to them. In 2020, Youku released a documentary called "Childhood in a Faraway Place" that compares education in China with that in other countries, triggering people to think about the current problems facing education in China. Tencent Video focuses on the trend culture and life attitude of young people. The documentary film "Electric Shock in China" tells the 30-year history of Chinese electronic music. On the other hand, Mango TV focuses on the youth expression of its main theme documentaries, producing works such as "No Youth, No Village" and "My Youth on the Silk Road" while reducing the length of programs to cater to the fragmented video viewing habits of young groups. Chinese internet platforms aim to combine Chinese culture, customs, history and social phenomena to produce documentaries that meet the preferences of young audiences. The goal is to let young people enjoy the works to achieve the purpose of cultural communication.

4.2. Promote the Degree of Cultural Exchange

Joseph Nye argues that in the information age, the winner is the country that can tell the best story, not the one with the strongest military [10]. New media documentaries are popular among audiences for their novel and topical content, which will help in the extensive dissemination of Chinese culture and values in China. For instance, Tencent Video's food documentary "Flavor of the World" covers more than 20 countries across six continents and the filming is done across the whole of China. The film is not limited to a local or national narrative frame, but instead, it uses a global perspective to compare and present the characteristics, similarities, and differences between Chinese and other countries' diet and culture. It examines the uniqueness of Chinese food from a global perspective, explores the evolution of Chinese food throughout history, delves deep into the

relationship between Chinese people and food, and reflects on the national personality of the Chinese people through food. The film showcases different regional food cultures and emphasizes their differences, not only in different regions of China but also in the world, creating a natural contrast between the different regional cultures. The creator combines identity with nostalgia in the comparison of food from different regions, endowing food with personal memory. This comparison reflects the uniqueness of Chinese food and generates a sense of self-identity from the understanding of dietary differences.

Another Chinese food documentary, “A String of Life”, uses barbecue as a vehicle to depict the lives of ordinary Chinese citizens. Unlike “Flavor of the World”, which focuses on a macroscopic theme, this documentary concentrates on the portrayal of food and people in the barbecue stall, revealing the daily life and circumstances of the cooks and diners. The film does not have a dramatic storyline, nor does the narration deliberately elevate to major life philosophies or national historical and cultural themes. Instead, it captures the diligence and dedication of ordinary people in Chinese society who work behind the barbecue stalls, as well as the joys and hardships of life from a level viewpoint. It shows how urban Chinese street barbecue stalls are where people make and enjoy food. The diners at the barbecue stand are everyday people, the majority of the group. Through the presentation of these anonymous people, the series conveys the most common philosophy of life, “life is flat, and there are not many ups and downs, but there is always the unknown sour, sweet, bitter, and hot behind it”, thus promoting the audience’s broader understanding of the characters’ life status in the film and evoking the audience’s resonance.

4.3. The Effect of Novel Business Models on the Internal Communication of Chinese Culture

The commercial development of China’s new media documentaries is closely tied to the rise of mobile internet. These documentaries have significant economic, cross-platform, and sustainable development value. For instance, Tencent Video’s “Flavor series” includes various programs such as “Flavor World,” “Flavor Lab,” “Origin of Flavor,” and “Flavor New Year’s Eve Dinner” all of which have gained widespread popularity. The company has also organized a “food roundtable forum” with chief director Chen Xiaoqing and invited celebrities to discuss the series. Similarly, Citic Press has released a book that shares detailed information on the ingredients and delicacies featured in the documentary.

After the show aired, many shops on Chinese shopping website Taobao began selling products and ingredients such as bald butter, smoked horse sausage, and ham, which were featured on the program. The production team of “Taste of the World” and real estate developer Wanda Group jointly created “Wanda Flavor Food Season,” which successfully translated the commercial influence of the documentary into the traffic of the commercial plaza, allowing consumers to experience the domestic and foreign flavors of the show offline.

Through these various programs, from long documentaries to micro documentaries and books, the cultural connotation and commercial value of the “Flavor series” have been fully explored to promote the influence of Chinese food culture in China.

Bilibili, a video site that produces its own food documentaries, is also exploring the commercial potential of the genre. In August 2019, it opened the first “A String of Life” barbecue experience store in Shanghai, which has since welcomed over 400,000 customers and become a leading catering brand with its own customer base. In 2021, the commercial brand license for “A String of Life” was extended to the whole of China. Bilibili’s other food documentaries, such as “Life is Boiling”, which focuses on hot pot, and “I Fan You”, which focuses on rice noodles, have also licensed their brands to offline restaurants.

The warm response of online audiences and offline consumers suggests that commercial documentary catering, which combines food culture with entertainment, has a broad and diverse

audience and high growth potential. Bilibili has capitalized on this by launching a series of restaurants around its documentaries, such as the Life Barbecue Restaurant, the Life is Boiling Hot Pot Restaurant, and the Me Fan You Rice Noodle Restaurant. These restaurants offer not only the brands of the documentaries, but also the delicious food featured in them. According to customers in Wuhan on the opening day, more than 70% of them were familiar with “A String of Life”, and many young people were drawn to the food in the documentary, driving demand for offline consumption and experiences.

The popularity of these food documentaries has also brought a significant customer flow to many of the shops featured in the films. Chinese new media documentaries have great commercial potential and rich cultural significance. By building online and offline connections, they are able to extend their cultural impact and reach.

5. Conclusion

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in manpower and funding invested in self-made documentaries. As a result, the business model of Chinese new media documentaries has become increasingly clear, with diversified content and forms that cater to a younger audience, further distancing themselves from traditional documentaries. Additionally, Chinese new media documentaries are actively exporting their works to TV, cinemas, and different overseas channels. The diverse communication modes available in the new media era have overcome the communication difficulties faced by traditional documentaries, thereby enhancing the internal communication ability of Chinese culture and values.

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