

# ***Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies of Documentary Films on the Subject of Tibet: A Case Study of the New Media Documentary "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet"***

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**Abstract:** This paper focuses on the crucial role of documentary films as significant cultural carriers and communication media in disseminating the voice of China to the world and shaping a positive media image of Tibet. It investigates how documentaries can actively engage in constructing a Tibet that the world can identify with, examining the three dimensions of cross-cultural communicative ability: emotion, cognition, and behavior. By analyzing and studying the creation of the new media documentary "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" from the Visual Action Training Camp of the Communication University of China, this paper proposes a documentary cross-cultural communication strategy that promotes a dialogue, fostering an ethos of "equal coexistence" and "unlimited dissemination."

**Keywords:** documentary films on Tibet, cross-cultural communication, new media documentary

## **1. Introduction**

Cross-cultural communication, also known as intercultural communication, is a vital field in communication research that focuses on the exchange of information among individuals, organizations, or countries with different cultural backgrounds, concerning the impacts of different cultures and civilizations on communication [1]. The concept of cross-cultural communication was initially proposed by American anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his work "The Silent Language" and has gradually evolved into a significant direction in communication studies. Documentary films, as cultural communicative mediums accommodating diverse elements, possess a unique value in cross-cultural communication [2]. Given the responsibility of documentary films as essential cultural carriers and communicative media in disseminating the voice of China to the world and shaping a positive media image of Tibet, it becomes imperative to explore how these films can actively participate in this process, constructing a Tibet that can be acknowledged by the global audience. However, this engagement necessitates careful consideration to accurately represent and display Chinese cultural values while avoiding subjective self-centered imaginings. Moreover,

enhancing the cross-cultural communicative ability of documentary films in the complex and noisy international environment is essential. This is especially pertinent for documentary films on the subject of Tibet, which face numerous challenges and obstacles in cross-cultural communication.

In recent years, China has witnessed the emergence of a series of documentary films on the subject of Tibet, such as "Polar," "Entering Tibet," "One Year in Tibet," "The Third Pole," and "Himalayan Ladder," all of which actively contribute to the construction of Tibet's media image. In July 2021, the "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" initiative, initiated by the Communication University of China, successfully organized a "Visual Action Training Camp" comprising 16 students from different countries, who embarked on a one-week journey to Tibet for new media creation. The "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" series has produced 160 new media documentary videos. As of September 11, 2021, the series has garnered over 1 million views on international media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, with over 30,000 likes and comments, achieving significant international communicative effects and providing a new and noteworthy sample for the research and reference of documentary films on the subject of Tibet. The study of the "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" series of new media documentaries not only holds theoretical value for cross-cultural communication research but also bears crucial practical significance in enhancing the global recognition of China's Tibet media image.

## **2. Deficiencies and Challenges in Cross-Cultural Communication of Documentary Films on the Subject of Tibet**

Currently, documentary films on the subject of Tibet have achieved a certain level of communicative effectiveness and influence. However, they also face several issues in cross-cultural communication, primarily manifested in three aspects: communicative discourse authority, communication channels, and communication strategies.

### **2.1. Communicative Discourse Authority: Stereotypical Impressions and Negative Interpretations**

The discourse authority of the international media regarding the image of Tibet has long been in the hands of Western countries. Some foreign media have maintained serious stereotypical impressions of Tibet's media image, often presenting a negative interpretation of Tibet. Many foreign documentary films on Tibet rely primarily on Western literature in English, utilizing the works of exiled Tibetans and firsthand accounts to shape a traditional image of Tibet while speculating about its current state. Such impressions are often imbued with strong stereotypical colors [3]. Scholarly analyses based on big data have revealed that media representations, particularly by Western outlets such as The New York Times, portray an extremely negative image of Tibet [4]. Even the English term "Tibet" itself embodies the cultural imagination and biases of the Western world toward Tibet.

Documentary films on the subject of Tibet face challenges in cross-cultural communication involving multiple countries and cultural diversities. The task of ensuring that audiences with different cultural backgrounds can identify with the content of the films itself presents a challenging issue. Moreover, the complex and ever-changing international communication environment, along with some countries' ingrained prejudices against China, subjects documentary films on Tibet to various forms of interference and noise. Changing the international audience's stereotypical impressions of Tibet and dismantling the cultural imagination with biases attached to Tibet are the primary challenges faced by documentary films on the subject of Tibet.

### **2.2. Communication Channels: Overly Singular and Lack of Interaction**

The issue of communication channels for documentary films on the subject of Tibet primarily

manifests as an overly singular traditional documentary transmission channel and a lack of effective interaction with international audiences. In his lecture "The Order of Discourse," Foucault proposed that discourse is not only a tool for thought and communication but also a carrier of power, through which people bestow power upon themselves [5]. The lack of external discourse authority in documentary films is, to a large extent, due to the inadequate flow of communication channels.

An overview of the major documentary films on the subject of Tibet in recent years reveals a problem of relatively limited dimensions in communication and unsatisfactory communication effects, with a smaller proportion aimed at international audiences. These documentary films are primarily broadcast on domestic television stations and media, targeting domestic audiences, making it almost impossible for most international viewers to watch them. Even if some foreign viewers manage to access these films, linguistic and cultural barriers often hinder their sense of identification. Furthermore, the absence of participation by foreign individuals as "others" in the filming process of documentaries can also affect the precision and effectiveness of cross-cultural communication in these films. This issue remains one of the primary challenges faced by contemporary documentary films on the subject of Tibet in their cross-cultural communication efforts.

### **2.3. Communication Approach: Self-Centered Narratives and Excessive Subjectivity**

The "2017 Research Report on the Development of Chinese Documentary Films" proposed that documentary films, in the context of building a positive national image, often emphasize grand narratives and excessively promote the "rigid" image of the national government. This tendency leads to inadequate attention to social issues that are of general concern to the domestic populace and a lack of consideration for the degree of acceptance of the narrative content of Chinese documentary films by foreign audiences [6]. It is essential for documentary films on the subject of Tibet to construct their cultural discourse system, present the authentic face of Tibet, and shape a positive media image of Tibet. However, some of these films have exhibited a phenomenon of "self-indulgence, self-speaking, and self-narration" in cross-cultural communication. Although some documentaries present subtle stories closely related to people's livelihoods, from the perspective of cross-cultural communication, the strong purpose and condescending attitude are prone to make local audiences uncomfortable and prevent the generation of a sense of identification.

In cross-cultural communication, when people perceive a threat to their own cultural identity from the cultural identity of an external group, the orientation of self-identification tends to become closed and defensive [8]. People desire to highlight their own cultural identity among numerous cultural identities, leading to a bias towards the internal group, often resulting in discrimination against members of the external group and hindering the open acceptance of new cultures. Due to the creators' high familiarity and recognition of their own culture, some documentary films on the subject of Tibet often unconsciously fall into a self-centered subjective imagination, leading to a sense of rejection among foreign audiences. These various challenges clearly indicate the urgent need to enhance the cross-cultural communicative ability of documentaries and develop wise and effective cross-cultural communication strategies.

### **3. Analysis of the New Media Documentary "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet"**

The concept of communicative ability was first proposed by Dell in 1972. He believed that communicative ability involves the way of constructing complete social relationships, encompassing not only the knowledge of language and the ability to use language but also judgmental abilities in psychological and socio-cultural aspects [9]. Brian Spitzberg identified that

interpersonal communicative ability involves three elements at the cognitive level: knowledge, motivation at the emotional level, and skills at the behavioral level, summarizing the basic elements of interpersonal communicative ability and providing a fundamental conceptual framework for understanding cross-cultural communicative ability [9]. Guoming Chen divides cross-cultural communication ability into three dimensions: emotion, cognition, and behavior, representing sensitivity in cross-cultural communication, cross-cultural awareness, and the dexterity of cross-cultural communication [10]. According to this theory, the study of the communicative ability of documentaries can be explored from three levels: the behavioral level, the cognitive level, and the emotional level, subsequently analyzing the creative characteristics of the "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" series.

### **3.1. Behavioral Level: International Perspective and Multichannel Communication**

Behavior refers to the dexterity of cross-cultural communication, which includes the communicator's skills in implementing communicative actions and achieving communicative goals [9]. Reflected in the cross-cultural communication of documentaries, this primarily involves the ability to construct communication channels, collaborate with international audiences interactively, and maintain an open cultural identity.

From the perspective of behavior, "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" employs the subjective perspective of foreigners, multi-channel communication, and the exploration of interesting topics. The creators of the film momentarily set aside any historical or cultural knowledge about Tibet in the traditional sense and mainly captured the stories of international students from Yemen, Egypt, Nigeria, and other countries, seeking the most interesting aspects of their experiences in Tibet from the perspective of foreigners. For instance, singing with Tibetan people, dancing in the Potala Palace square, and teaching Tibetan children Arabic. In terms of channels, the content of the film was not released through official platforms but through the personal accounts of these students, simultaneously posted on multiple platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram, emphasizing the self-expression of foreigners "on-site," reducing the psychological distance between foreign audiences and the film.

From the perspective of communication channels, another documentary film on Tibet, "One Year in Tibet," also provides us with a case worth studying. Produced independently by a British Chinese living in the UK, "One Year in Tibet" premiered on Channel 4 in the UK, followed by coverage in various UK media outlets such as The Times and The Guardian. Subsequently, "One Year in Tibet" was ordered and broadcast by mainstream television stations in over 40 countries and regions, including developed countries such as the United States, France, Germany, as well as television broadcasting unions in Africa and Latin America, and the Discovery Channel [3]. This illustrates that an international perspective and multi-country, multi-platform communication have become important strategies for the cross-cultural communication of documentary films on Tibet.

### **3.2. Cognitive Level: Proximity to the Audience and Non-Evaluative Narration**

Cognition refers to the individual's understanding and views formed through the processing and transformation of acquired information [9]. The cognitive aspect of cross-cultural communication in documentaries is reflected in the filmmakers' selection of subjects, the chosen filming perspective, and the narrative methods.

In terms of subject selection, "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" focuses on finding commonalities among different cultures. In one of the works, "An and Baima," the authors emphasize the emotional changes of Baima Yangji, a girl from Lhasa, and An Lüxi, a Yemeni student, during their journey, from acquaintances to becoming good friends. In "Encounter with

Hometown in Lhasa," the author, from the perspective of Zhao Xinlan, a Nigerian girl, shows how Tibet evokes her homesickness and how she seeks common ground between Lhasa and Nigeria, resonating with the audience. Through these universally cherished emotions in our daily lives, "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" forms a strong resonance with audiences from different countries and cultural backgrounds, making the audience feel as if they are experiencing the empathy of the protagonists in the film.

From the perspective of filming, "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" adopts the straight-on perspective of foreigners, starting from their own firsthand experiences. It combines vlogs with new media documentaries, and the videos that viewers see come from the social accounts of the students themselves, allowing foreign audiences to interact with the students at any time, enhancing the authenticity and interactivity of the film.

From a narrative perspective, "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" adopts a descriptive and non-evaluative narrative style, emphasizing the rational and natural integration of the image of Tibet into the story. For example, the film depicts the scene of the students visiting the newly opened Lalin Railway. However, rather than rigidly showcasing the unsuitability of the Tibetan high-speed rail and the advanced technology of Chinese high-speed trains through commentary, the film naturally conveys knowledge about the Lalin Railway through the dialogues of students such as Baima, An Lüxi, and Bart.

### **3.3. Emotional Level: Appropriate and Moderate Empathy**

The emotional aspect of the cross-cultural communicative ability of documentaries refers to the sensitivity in cross-cultural communication, including the sensitivity to different cultural rhetoric and the ability to empathize [7]. The definition of empathy was first proposed by Theodor Lipps in the 19th century, who viewed empathy as a fact established by people when observing external things. Bahkin believes that the first factor in aesthetic activity is empathy, which means that I should experience what others experience and stand in their shoes [10].

In the "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" series, "emotion" is one of the important cores. For example, "An and Baima" focuses on the emotional changes between Baima, a girl from Lhasa, and An Lüxi, a foreign student, during their journey, from initial acquaintance to becoming close friends. In "Encounter with Hometown in Lhasa," the author portrays how Tibet evokes the homesickness of Zhao Xinlan, a Nigerian girl, and how she seeks common ground between Lhasa and Nigeria, triggering resonance among the audience. Through these commonly cherished and valuable emotions in our daily lives, "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" establishes a strong resonance with audiences from different countries and cultural backgrounds, making the audience feel as if they are experiencing the empathetic experience of the protagonists in the film.

## **4. Conclusion**

The new media documentary "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" provides a valuable research sample, constructing an egalitarian, interactive, and inclusive communication model from the perspectives of emotion, cognition, and behavior, offering valuable lessons for enhancing the cross-cultural communicative ability of documentaries. In the practice of cross-cultural communication, dialogue is seen as a more advanced and ideal communication strategy. In the practice and capacity-building of cross-cultural communication, dialogue is considered an advanced and ideal communication strategy. In the field of communication, dialogue is seen as synonymous with communication and relationships. Dialogue in cross-cultural communication practice is an ideal and effective way of communication, emphasizing that cross-cultural communicators should have an awareness of equal coexistence and infinite communication. The awareness of equal

coexistence requires that all parties in the dialogue enjoy equal status, while the awareness of infinite communication aims to achieve mutual understanding and profound insights to explore the deeper meanings of the world and life. Through the creative and communicative practices of the "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" documentary series, we can draw the following insights:

Foreign perspectives and multi-country, multi-platform communication are important strategies for cross-cultural communication in documentary films on Tibet. By adopting the perspective of foreigners and starting from the standpoint of foreign audiences, the sense of closeness and resonance among international audiences can be increased, thereby enhancing cross-cultural communicative ability.

At the cognitive level, proximity to the audience and the adoption of a non-evaluative narrative style are effective communication strategies. Choosing common ground with the audience as an entry point and presenting cultural information in an egalitarian and interactive manner helps to establish resonance and understanding.

The reasonable and moderate empathy in the emotional aspect is crucial for cross-cultural communication. By portraying emotional connections between characters and finding points of emotional resonance, the audience can better understand and accept cultural information.

In cross-cultural communication, dialogue is seen as an ideal and effective communication method. The awareness of equal coexistence and infinite communication is an essential skill for cross-cultural communicators, helping to establish relationships based on mutual respect and understanding.

Overall, the new media documentary "Overseas Students' Journey in Tibet" provides us with a successful case, demonstrating how to build a positive image in cross-cultural communication and offering valuable lessons. However, it also exposes some issues, such as the need to better handle specific contexts and the needs of the audience. In the current complex international communication environment, continuously exploring and improving the cross-cultural communicative ability of documentary films on Tibet remains necessary.

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