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FROM TV TO THE INTERNET: EXPLORATION ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF CHINESE DOCUMENTARY

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Abstract. In the era of Chinese traditional media, documentaries mainly use TV and movies as media. With the development of Internet technology, documentaries gradually take network communication as the main communication channel. The communication channel of documentary has changed from a single traditional form of media to a multi-media system with the web as the core. Apart from propaganda and education as the basic functions, documentary also began to be entertaining. Taking the police documentary "Guarding Jiefang West" produced by bilibili, one of the most important media platforms in China, as an example, this paper analyzes the development of Chinese documentaries from TV to the Internet over recent years and the characteristics of web documentary.

Key words: *documentary, TV, internet, Guarding Jiefang West*

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Научная статья

ОТ ТЕЛЕВИДЕНИЯ К ИНТЕРНЕТУ: ИССЛЕДОВАНИЕ РАЗВИТИЯ КИТАЙСКОГО ДОКУМЕНТАЛЬНОГО КИНО

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Аннотация. В эпоху, предшествовавшую появлению Интернета, основными каналами распространения документальных фильмов в Китае выступали телевидение и кино. С развитием интернет-технологий произошёл постепенный переход от традиционных способов их распространения, ограниченных рамками одного медиа, к мультимедийным формам, основанным на технологиях World-Wide-Web. Помимо пропаганды и просвещения, к основным функциям документальных фильмов добавилась ещё одна – развлекательная. Используя в качестве примера документальный сериал «Охраняя Цзефан-Вест», выпущенный одной из ведущих интернет-платформ Китая, bilibili, в настоящей статье анализируется трансформация характеристик документальных фильмов в процессе перехода от телевидения к Интернету.

Ключевые слова: *документальный фильм, телевидение, Интернет, Охраняя Цзефан-Вест*

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Development of Chinese TV Documentary

Chinese TV documentary first appeared in 1958, and its early development was very slow. Its essence was no different from newsreel. In fact, the early TV documentary was a documentary film with TV as its channel, which was very backward in technology and greatly interfered by the political ideology. Documentary became the political tool of China government at that time, because it had great advantages in inculcating ideas and beliefs. Documentaries are films which “use plans” – culturally determined norms for appreciation – are primarily to enable audiences to form a particular kind of perceptual belief, namely a pictorial belief. This means “endorsing what one perceives in a picture” [Friend, 2021, p. 153]. At that time, the main task of documentaries was to report all kinds of new things and achievements in the construction of social justice in New China, and to publicize the party's major principles and policies. Therefore, the early TV documentaries were actually long newsreels with propaganda and reporting as their duty [Hongsheng, 2010, p. 15]. “In a documentary, the filmed material rises to a status that exceeds the mere conception of the archive” [Rosas, Dittus, 2020, p. 204]. It was not only a simple record of an event, but was also responsible for spreading information and publicizing policies.

In 1978, the reform and opening-up policy gave China unprecedented vitality, and also pictured TV documentaries as a good creative environment. Documentaries gradually broke through the previous simplification and formulaic mode and became more innovative both in content and form. At that time, this effect was to enhance the national pride and vitality of the audience, and to direct their full enthusiasm to the rapid development of society construction. It can be seen from the popular documentaries of those years, such as *Journey to the Minjiang River*, *Legend of the Three Gorges*, *Story of the Yangtze River*, *Silk Road*, *Talking about the Canal*, *Let History Tell the Future*, etc. The documentary production teams generally tended to choose the themes with greater depth and stronger national consciousness, and seldom involved the themes of mundane life.

In the 1990s, the cultural attributes of documentaries were highlighted, and the theme choices went beyond the limited subjects of landscapes and scenery, and extended to all aspects of ordinary people's life [Hongsheng, 2010, p. 32]. Chinese TV documentaries gradually became life-oriented and personalized, trying to reflect the lives and needs of common people. However, traditional documentaries could not be separated from the country's great history and from many years of grand narrative of national ideology in its content. So it was always difficult for documentaries to make greater breakthroughs and developments.

Since the 21st century, the development of market economy, technology and new media have injected vitality into documentary industry. In 2010, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (hereinafter referred to as SARFT) issued *Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Documentary Industry*, supported by the state power, making the development momentum of Chinese documentary stronger. The state discourse and market discourse in the interactive games jointly shaped the content ecology and industrial structure of Chinese documentary;

and Chinese documentary entered a new era of industrialization and type development [Lei, 2021, p. 8]. Since then, Chinese web documentary has been developing rapidly.

Development of Chinese web Documentary

In 2019, Research Report on the Development of China's Online Documentary pointed out that Chinese documentaries have entered the "Internet Age" [Tongdao, Zhifeng, 2020, p. 52]. The emergence of new communication technology has not only changed the external form and internal structure of media, but also promoted the reshaping of the whole industry [Lei, Yue, 2020, p. 47]. With the development of new media, documentary industry has entered in a new environment for the transformation and development of new and old media. The uniqueness of web documentaries lies in their specific capacities for organizing the meaning of a story narrated in multiple media, even simultaneously, in an effort to structure it as a multifarious narrative open to user participation and interpretation [Gifreu, 2010]. Documentary has changed from a single media like TV to multi-media forms, the driving force of the platform has been strengthened, and the content ecology has been continuously upgraded by the impact of new Internet technologies. In recent years, documentaries have been developed on the platform of several major video websites such as SOHU, bilibili, iQiyi, Youku, Tencent, etc.

SOHU Video established its first professional documentary channel in August 2009, and then all major video websites have organised their documentary channels. Tencent has created Penguin Film and Television Documentary Studio, bilibili has launched a project "Documentary Search Plan", and Youku's documentary cinema has been built, all of which prove the arrival of the era of web documentary. In December 2012, the online trading platform of China (Guangzhou), International Documentary Festival, became the first online trading platform for documentaries in China. On January 23rd, 2013, the documentary industry service platform "China Documentary Web" sponsored by SARFT was officially launched, with the goal to improve the documentary industry level with the help of online media. The openness and convenience of the Internet has broken the monopoly of traditional media on documentary production, made documentary creators more diversified, and documentary has changed from the national propaganda machine to a personal expression tool.

At first, SARFT stipulated that major video websites could only show documentaries via TV stations. Later, with the continuous enrichment of the content and sources of online videos, in 2009, SARFT issued the Notice of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television on Strengthening the Content Management of Internet Audiovisual Programs, but there is no mandatory requirement for this provision. In 2010, SARFT issued Several Opinions on Accelerating the Development of Documentary Industry. "Since 2011, the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television has implemented the policy of selecting and increasing the support for excellent domestic documentaries and invested RMB 5 million every year to reward excellent domestic documentaries, with the amount of each item being tens of thousands and hundreds of thousands" [Yanming, 2013, p. 51].

In 2019, the number of mobile video users was about 774 million, and the number of web documentaries broadcast was as high as 3 billion times [Tongdao, 2019, p.110]. Within the frame of "internet plus", that is, the economic model in which the innovations of the Internet are integrated into various fields of society in China, the appearance of web documentary can be said to symbolize the beginning of a new wave of documentary [Zhengmao, 2020, p. 72]. Since then, the number of web documentaries has increased rapidly, and such documentaries as Guarding Jiefang West, The Story of Chuaner, I Repair Cultural Relics in the Forbidden City, and Once Upon a Bite have been warmly welcomed by the audience. Moreover, the network video platform began to provide web documentaries for TV stations. For example, the Great Shokunin was successfully broadcast by CCTV.

Bilibili and Guarding Jiefang West

Bilibili was founded on June 26th, 2009, and its content composition mode is "PGC+UGC", that is, Professionally-produced Content and User-Generated Content. It is the most popular cultural community and video platform for the younger generation in China. In 2018, bilibili's new online documentaries such as Guarding Jiefang West, The Story of Chuaner, Those Things in History, were launched and it stirred a sensation in China's documentary circle.

Guarding Jiefang West is a police documentary, with the core of the characters represented by a group of policemen from Pozi Street Police Station in Changsha City, Hunan Province. Throughout the documentary, the documentary team follows the policemen day and night, and records the whole process of the policemen's working in Pozi Street from multiple positions, multiple scenes and multiple angles. Compared with other police documentaries, the biggest feature of Guarding Jiefang West is its strong sense of variety. In the past few police programmes, the image of the police always tends to be serious and tense, which makes the audience feel estranged and distant [Mingyu, 2022, p. 158]. Guarding Jiefang West has been played for three seasons so far. According to the data published on bilibili official website, the audience rating of this documentary reaches an average of 9.7 points per season, with a total show broadcasts of 540 million times, thus ranking it first among all documentaries. This documentary is a very successful case, through which the characteristics of today's web documentary can be analyzed.

(1) Entertainment of documentary

For a long time, China's documentaries have always tended to spread the image of a great country and heroism. The grand narrative strategy of traditional documentaries has always had the dominant voice in documentary creation. These documentaries have a strong subjective preaching meaning and are disconnected from real life, so they are not easily accepted by the audience directly [Yingying, 2015, p. 19]. However, with the increasing pressure of life in modern times, the audience hopes to release the pressure of life through the Internet, and entertainment is becoming more and more important. It can be seen from the documentaries which are the most popular among the audience in recent ten years that people prefer relaxing and cheerful documentaries, with a strong sense of variety, and popular Internet elements. To attract Chinese viewers, it is helpful to use witty utterances and wordings

characteristic of contemporary discourse, such as neologisms or familiar media buzzwords.

There is a good example of *A Bite of China*, a TV documentary produced by CCTV in 2012, which is a documentary about food in various parts of China. Once broadcast, it was warmly accepted by people all over the country. Different from the traditional documentary style, this documentary is very close to ordinary people's life and very vivid. As Chen Ting, a scholar, said in her paper, *A Bite of China* shows a vivid topographic map of food through the stories of food and people, and its range of sentiments varies from patriotism with strong political meaning to food and people with blood and affection [Ting, 2016, p. 116].

Guarding Jiefang West balances correctly the ideological attributes with the market attributes; and elements commonly used in variety shows often appear in it. Comic elements are interspersed at the end of each episode to increase its interest, and daily police stories are very vivid. The images of police officers are not only professional, but also cute, interesting and humorous, which is different from the serious police images in other police programmes. For example, Peng Zhang, a policeman, suffered from a severe hair loss due to long-term work intensity, too much stress and staying up late. In an interview, he was asked a netizen question: "Will you use hair growth products?" Peng Zhang replied very seriously: "Not yet. I once consulted a doctor, and he said that (hair growth) requires good work and rest as support, which is a very difficult thing for me and for all the people in this profession." This slightly teasing question forms a contrast with his overly serious answer, which not only makes the audience feel the hard work of the police, but also makes people feel funny.

(2) *Bullet screen*

Bullet screen is the characteristic of bilibili. Bullet screen refers to subtitles that pop up when watching videos on the Internet. Bullet screen can give viewers the illusion of real-time interaction, and they feel like communicating with other viewers at the same time when leaving comments. With the help of the bullet screen technology, the second creation of characters was realized, the most representative of which is the creation of many interesting network terms because of the bullet screen, such as "YYDS" which means eternal god, "XSWL" which means I'm dying of laughter and so on. Through the interaction and participation of bullet screen, self-analysis was deeply integrated with the connotation of the programme, and the text content of *Guarding Jiefang West* was reinterpreted and constructed. Audiences not only have their own understanding of the content of the documentary, but also accept the thoughts of other audiences through bullet screen, so that they can trigger new thinking in this kind of communication. Although some of the cases in this documentary are bizarre or funny, more cases are things that people encounter in their lives, so it resonates with the viewers.

The Bullet screen provides an outlet for everyone to express their feelings, discuss topics and encourage each other. For example, in one case, a girl was raped, she bravely chose to call the police and tried to provide evidence. At this time, a lot of encouraging words such as "this girl is brave", "distressed little sister" and "be strong" flashed on the bullet screen. The bullet screen full of support for the victim helps the programme to build a benign platform for public opinion and strengthen

its value recognition in the process of communication. The production team can also observe the ideological trend through the bullet screen and conduct public opinion guidance in time [Fangjian, 2022, p. 96]. For example, in response to the audience's doubts or different opinions about the police handling the case, the programme group will ask a police officer to explain it in an interview.



(3) Rich narrative skills

Although the documentary has become more and more popular among the audience in recent years, people's traditional impression of it is still "boring", which is related to the nature and audio-visual language of documentaries. It concerns a theme, which in turn is expressive of a definite purpose, thus demanding from an audience a scope of attention quite different from that of a fictional story [Rotha, Paul, 1939].

However, in the content arrangement of *Guarding Jiefang West*, the creators adopted diversified narrative structures according to the characteristics of the contents and materials of each episode, and achieved good narrative results [Guanjun, 2021, p. 106]. First of all, the content of *Guarding Jiefang West* consists of a large number of real cases, and most of the cases selected by the creative staff are highly dramatic. On this basis, they used diversified narrative methods to enrich the content of the drama conflicts. On the whole, *Guarding Jiefang West* adopted a segmented narrative structure, but at the same time, it also often used flashback linear narrative and multi-linear narrative structures to increase suspense and interest. *Guarding Jiefang West* is rich in narrative skills and uses a lot of cinematic lens language, which makes the content attractive and the audience do not feel bored.

Conclusions

Now that the Internet platform is becoming more and more perfect, in order to realize the branding and sustainable development of documentaries, it is necessary to stimulate the innovation vitality, constantly spread new ideas and open up new paths. *Guarding Jiefang West* not only vividly interprets the image of Chinese police, but also constantly innovates in topics, styles and narratives, thus setting a positive example for web documentaries, which is worth following by documentary makers.

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