

Research on the Relationship Between Independent Documentary Films and The Construction of Non-genetic Heritage in The Context of Cultural Memory

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Abstract: Documentaries focusing on Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), henceforth referred to as 'ICH documentaries,' possess an inherent thematic advantage in enhancing cultural memory and shaping national identity. The filmic documentation that characterizes these documentaries plays a crucial role to varying degrees in the imaging, narration, and creative approach of the 'ICH' culture, whose primary objective is preservation and inheritance. Among these, the independent documentary series 'In Search of Craftsmanship,' which records the traditional crafts of 199 Chinese artisans, distinctly exemplifies the characteristics and dynamic interplay between independent documentaries and the construction of ICH continuity.

Keywords: Independent Documentary, Cultural Memory, Non-Foreign Heritage Documentary, In Search of Craftsmanship.

1. Introduction

'In Search of Craftsmanship' is a singular independent documentary, crafted through the collaborative efforts of the non-professional director Zhang Jing and two collaborators, both devoid of any prior cinematographic experience (Guenther, 2011). Despite its origins as a 'triple-zero production'—lacking financial backing, a professional team, and the resources of a production company—this documentary remarkably ascended to recognition as the 'Most Influential Documentary of the Year' in 2018. When viewed through the lens of traditional expectations for 'ICH documentaries,' 'In Search of Craftsmanship' notably fulfills the audience's imaginative anticipations for personal aesthetics, cultural reminiscence, and national identity. Simultaneously, it manifests its idiosyncratic features in the edification of traditional culture through its distinctly personal recording style, while exposing both the limitations and tensions inherent in its relationship with the construction of ICH continuity. The distinguished French historian Pierre Nora (1931-) in his work 'Memory Field' postulates that the concept of 'site' encapsulates three facets—tangible, symbolic, and functional. With this perspective in mind, this scholarly discourse will employ cultural memory as its analytical prism. It will intertwine this with Nora's cultural theory of 'Memory Field,' examining the constructive interplay between independent documentaries and ICH continuity through the tripartite 'meanings of site': tangible, symbolic, and functional (Celi & Moore, 2015).

2. Visual Documentation: Tangible Representation of Intangible Cultural Heritage Entities

The notion of "intangible cultural heritage" (ICH) of ethnic minorities, a term that refers to the traditions of China's 55 ethnic minority groups, encapsulates an array of practices, from rudimentary hunting cultures to pastoral and agrarian societies, and even modern agricultural communities. These

traditions are intertwined with the life of these communities and have been passed down through generations, manifesting in folk activities, performing arts, traditional knowledge, skills competitions, and related tools, artifacts, handcrafted items, cultural spaces, and integrated cultural systems. In the documentary "In Search of Craftsmanship," the artistry of 199 craftspeople across China is captured, focusing on three aspects of ICH: craft, adornment, and artistry. Concerning the "craft," the tangible aspects of ICH, such as handmade tools and artifacts, are brought to life in the documentary (Zheng, 2023). The film's title, "In Search of Craftsmanship," attests to its in-depth portrayal of the creative process, exemplified by the meticulous documentation of an elderly craftsman named Kan Wen, who crafts oil-paper umbrellas. The film meticulously captures the process of creating an umbrella, from sawing the umbrella head, winding the thread, spinning the umbrella framework, to applying oil and color. Other regional crafts, such as the bamboo-splitting technique from Zhongfang County, Hunan, the thread-breaking technique from Shidong Town, Guizhou, the weighing technique from the director's hometown Dongkou, and the craft of bamboo weaving from Xiaoling Village, are also documented in great detail (Borrego et al., 2012).

Regarding "adornment," the film emphasizes the aesthetic dimensions of ICH, focusing on how these cultural elements serve as visual rhetoric in body adornment and lifestyle decoration. In Baixing Village, "maple fragrance dyeing" involves the creation of colored dyes from a mixture of maple fragrance oil and butter, used to create beautiful patterns on clothing and everyday objects. Although the process of creating the dye is unique to this ICH, the documentary primarily highlights the beauty and splendor of the hand-painted and embroidered items. Similarly, the Xinjiang flower felt, Fengxiang clay sculptures, and indigo-dyed cloth all focus on the visual representation of the craft, encapsulating culture within "adornment." In terms of "artistry," the folk activities and performing arts of ICH form a diverse, intricate, and culturally rich corpus that becomes the primary subject of the documentary. The complex and diverse art forms, with

their rich cultural dimensions, are captured through the activities and performances of the "ICH practitioners," thus showcasing the vitality of ICH art. For instance, Li Shaowei's sky zither performance implicitly reveals his shamanic identity, while his blessings for local babies embody the aesthetic and cultural connotations of ICH "art." The creation and performance of Liang Anhua's tall reed pipe, Li Labu's De'ang water drum dance, and the creation process of numerous Buddha statues in Tibet are other examples of this. The ICH is documented in the midst of artistic activities, and this process, unfolding over time and space, crystallizes its representation as a cultural entity, entering the national memory of ICH in the "field of cultural memory." As a documentary characterized by its truthful depiction, "In Search of Craftsmanship" introduces ICH in the forms of "craft," "adornment," and "art" into the tangible field of cultural memory. The process of "searching for craftsmanship" is also a journey to discover cultural subjects and entities, constructing a genuine portrayal of ICH through the lens of the documentary, laying the foundation for subsequent symbolic and functional significance in the relationship between the documentary and ICH (Skublewska et al., 2022).

3. Narrative Approach: Shaping the Symbolic Representation of Intangible Cultural Heritage

In the context of documentaries about intangible cultural heritage, the construction of symbolic national icons serves as the leitmotif representing the memory of national culture. Whether it is the "Forbidden City Series" or the "Chinese Craftsmanship Series", such documentaries employ diverse narrative techniques to simulate and shape a sense of "national presence". They interweave individual ethnic stories and visual symbols within the narrative, forging a memory field infused with ethnic sentiment and prompting the integration of individual memory into collective memory. Pierre Nora, in his work "Memory Field", contends that "The weaker the internal experience of memory, the more it requires external support and tangible markers for its existence, which can only continue through these markers." Once these tangible markers acquire their intended meaning, intangible cultural heritage, with its attributes of heritage and ethnicity, enters the symbolic field, transmitting ethnic memory and becoming symbols of cultural memory. In the documentary "Seeking Craftsmanship", such symbolic national icons are created (Chen et al., 2020).

The utopian imagination of Tao Yuanming's "Peach Blossom Spring" is a paradigm of China's national memory, and the narrative consciousness of "Peach Blossom Spring" has unconsciously permeated the narratives of Chinese documentaries and even art films. "Seeking Craftsmanship" constructs a rich symbolic system within the framework of national, geographical, and historical dimensions through its "Peach Blossom Spring" narrative. The story of the location, Mai Su, is a quintessential symbol of an idyllic utopia. The locals, due to the long-standing Buddhist traditions of the "Zongsa Temple", abstain from smoking and drinking, and the industrial structure remains that of family workshops, devoid of any traces of industrialization and modernization. Even the Tibetan doctor in Mai Su, Luo Re Peng Cuo, treats locals virtually free of charge. The creators of "Seeking Craftsmanship" not only filmed this paradigmatic location but

also unconsciously constructed the documentary's Peach Blossom Spring narrative by combining various shots of different provinces and locations, babbling brooks, green waters and hills, sparse human habitation, and so forth, all integrated with commentary. Within the Peach Blossom Spring narrative, the construction of ethnic symbols underscores the multi-ethnic features of the intangible cultural heritage, and these multi-ethnic characteristics resonate with the emotional identification of the mainstream values of multi-ethnicity. Examples include Tibetan Tu Dan's Buddhist statue symbol and Yi nationality's Rong Jing cultural symbol. The most typical instance is the exotic script of the 65-year-old Hu Da Bayir in the Xinjiang desert. As a classic form of symbol, the meaning of the name "Hu Da Bayir" in the local language of Xinjiang is "falling from the sky", and the place where Hu Da Bayir lives is a location that the documentary crew found after walking several kilometers in the desert. Hu Da Bayir, living in geographical isolation from worldly affairs, creates the "last musical instrument", Baraman, in the desert and plays music with a distinctly exotic character. When the musical symbol and exotic imagination are fused, and the frame switches to the desert flock of sheep that seem to have "fallen from the sky", the artistic aesthetic emotion interweaves individual ethnic stories with visual symbols, creating a memory field that encapsulates ethnic sentiment.

Simultaneously, the Sichuan laborer's chant, as a musical symbol, and the paper-making techniques represented by Tibetan paper, Dong nationality, and "the world's first Xuan paper", and the representation of the compass, printing, etc., are abstract symbols of the "Four Great Inventions" intangible cultural heritage, which are endowed with meaning in their historicity. In documentaries on intangible cultural heritage, although the personal stories of ethnic memory are changing, the symbolic characteristics they represent remain consistent. As carriers of meaning and cultural identification, these symbols have become almost the exclusive standard within the symbolic field. Indeed, the narratives of intangible cultural heritage are like rich tapestries woven with symbols, each thread embodying a piece of collective memory and cultural identity. Whether it is the echoes of an ancient chant or the tactile familiarity of traditional craftsmanship, these symbols are the lexicon of our shared heritage, serving as bridges connecting the past and present, the individual and collective, the tangible and intangible. They are vibrant testimonies to the dynamic and enduring nature of our culture, underscoring the need for preserving and celebrating our diverse and shared human heritage.

4. Creative Approach: Tension in the Functional Domain of Intangible Cultural Heritage Transmission

As the bearer of cultural expressions, the goal of practicing intangible cultural heritage (ICH) is to foster cultural identity through various media forms and discursive systems, thereby enhancing cultural memory and shaping nationalistic sentiments. On the other hand, when viewed as a historical discourse, the objective of ICH practice is to ameliorate the "endangered environment" of ICH through various methods, thereby achieving its preservation and inheritance. The unique aims of ICH practice influence the communication strategies of documentary images, which in turn affect the creative paradigms and strategies of ICH documentaries on a

theoretical level. In terms of creative paradigms, the majority of ICH documentaries center around the excellence and refinement of ICH, constructing aesthetic characteristics of "poetic ICH" with eloquent narration (Pecquet & Zevaco, 2014). The creative strategies, however, are more reliant on the objectives of ICH and individual viewpoints, demonstrating distinct personal creative traits, as exemplified by independent documentaries. As a representative of independent documentaries, "In Search of Craftsmanship" is characterized by conspicuous personal subjectivity due to budgetary constraints, as the series is almost entirely written, directed, and produced by the same person (Shankar, 2010).

With an extremely subjective creative approach, the director embarked on a "tour around China," starting from Beijing and passing through Xinjiang, Tibet, Yunnan, Hainan, and Shandong, before returning to Beijing, forming a unique comprehensive cultural field. The choice of ICH filming locations was generally decided on the spot by Yu Pan, who was responsible for external liaison and sound recording in the team. Due to the latency of online information and the remote nature of the shooting locations, the content and method of filming were always subject to spontaneous change. Inability to scout the location beforehand often led to scenarios where the ICH was lost or the inheritors refused to be filmed, a point the director, Zhang Jing, frequently grumbled about in the documentary narration. Yet this very challenge enabled "In Search of Craftsmanship" to incorporate the personal team's process of "seeking craftsmanship" into the documentary from a subjective viewpoint (Chen et al., 2020). The difficulties and hardships encountered during the search for craftsmanship often became sources of humor, liberating the originally refined and sophisticated "ICH documentary" from grand narratives and leading it towards a more commonplace, life-oriented, and minor narrative. In "In Search of Craftsmanship," viewers might laugh at Yu Pan's gregarious personality, random bloopers, the departure of the cinematographer at the start of the journey, or Yu Pan's broken foot from climbing coconut trees. These behind-the-scenes stories became distinctive features of the independent documentary. At the same time, the implications of a minor narrative are not confined to a breakthrough in creative strategies, but also indicate a paradigm shift in the documentary from showcasing "ICH" to portraying "ICH personas". (Silva & Roders, 2012)

"ICH personas," from a humanistic perspective, not only supplement insufficient ICH information, but also respond to how ICH inheritors might explore potential paths for ICH transmission within their mundane lives. In fact, most of the ICH inheritors in "In Search of Craftsmanship" face various predicaments, such as financial difficulties, imminent loss of craftsmanship, and cultural inheritance challenges. In the movie version of "In Search of Craftsmanship," when the team revisits the craftsmen from the first season, their initial hope to use the documentary as a "recruitment advertisement" results in a "naive disillusionment." The highly successful first season of the documentary provided negligible help to the craftsmen's survival and inheritance difficulties. Pan Cun's straw hat cooperative turned into a police station, and he voluntarily sold his house to local disabled people, moving into a government-assigned residence. In the first season of the documentary, aired four years prior, Pan Cun had apprentices, but in the movie, he laments that he has "lost his house and his apprentices have run away." The elderly craftsman who made weighing scales was diagnosed with a

tumor, and his family no longer allowed him to continue the craft. The craftsman known for making mulberry paper, Zhen Yang, has stopped his work and revealed in the documentary that his son has never returned. The film version of "In Search of Craftsmanship" exposes the tension in the preservation of ICH in the independent documentary, set in the context of "post-ICH imagery." The subjectivity of an independent documentary strikes a balance between the seriousness of ICH and the aesthetic interest of the audience. However, it lacks the broad influence and substantial funding of mainstream documentaries, which results in insufficient effort post-production and a conspicuous tension between the reality and the goals of ICH preservation in independent documentaries. Yet, on a functional level, such documentaries play an important role in showcasing culture, archiving historical heritage, and transmitting educational knowledge about cultural memory, exerting a largely positive influence. But the constraints of independent documentaries also highlight the realistic tension in preserving ICH (Yang, 2015).

5. Conclusion

Despite its deficiencies in actualizing the aims of intangible cultural heritage (ICH) preservation, "In Search of Craftsmanship", as an independent documentary, serves as a crucial pillar and bedrock in constructing cultural memory, given its immense value as a visual resource in folkloric studies, documentary research, and anthropological inquiry. "As long as this history continues to be passed down and remembered, the ruins become a pillar and a cornerstone of memory." The interdependent relationship between ICH and the construction of cultural memory and national sentiments is reliant on the imagery of ICH. The visual elements, narratives, and modes of production in documentaries are consequently transformed to accommodate the unique needs of ICH.

For ICH documentaries, a four-step process comprising documentary research, practice filming, fieldwork, and follow-up interviews is necessary. This process aims to preserve the cultural integrity of ICH while simultaneously considering the objective of ICH preservation in terms of its communicative impact. Independent documentaries, in particular, need to make breakthroughs in these areas to push ICH documentaries into a richer cultural context and to promote the dissemination of ethnic culture in a global context.

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