

Narrative Perspective, Strategy and Transcultural Empathy Communication in the Documentary “the Reason I Live Here”

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Abstract: Empathy can aid in transcultural communication and is required when telling Chinese stories and developing Chinese narrative systems. This paper analyzes the video text of the documentary “The Reason I Live Here” and concludes that the documentary elicits empathy primarily through the narrative perspective of “seeing the big with the small” and the participation of the “other” in the narrative; it also elicits cognitive and attitudinal empathy through the depiction of public social hotspots and character inner emotions. By depicting public social hotspots and characters' inner emotions, it also evokes cognitive and attitudinal empathy in overseas audiences, promoting the dissemination of Chinese culture and the shaping of the Chinese national image while also achieving transcultural understanding.

1. Introduction

Documentaries, because of their fluidity and intuitiveness, can frequently create a sense of “presence” among audiences, making them an important medium for intercultural communication. Empathy, as an important means of bringing civilizations closer together and achieving empathetic interaction, can frequently open up the mechanism of transcultural communication and play a key role in telling Chinese stories and building Chinese narrative systems. “The Reason I Live Here” (hereafter referred to as “I Live”), a travel documentary produced in China by Japanese director Ryo Takeuchi and his team, has become one of the most successful examples of transcultural communication through the skillful use of empathetic narrative. The documentary has received positive feedback since its initial broadcast, receiving a 9.2 Douban rating for the first season in 2015 and a 9.1 rating for the second season, and it has now been updated to the fourth season in 2022. Using text analysis as a research method, this paper summarizes the documentary's narrative perspective and narrative strategy. It analyzes the empathy-triggering mechanism and the promotion of transcultural communication in it. It also summarizes the empathy-triggering mechanisms of narrative perspective and narrative strategy, as well as the path of transcultural communication. Finally, it can offer creative ideas for realizing transcultural empathy communication in the new international documentary film context.

2. Theoretical Basis

2.1 Empathy

Empathy stems from a psychological concept. The definition of empathy is still being debated in the field of communication. However, it is widely accepted that empathy is humans' innate ability to understand the emotions of others[1]. The digital age has altered people's perceptions of the world and their ability to express themselves. In communication, nationality, and regionalism tend to fade while human emotions become more prominent, resulting in a situation of multiple coexistence and cultural intermingling. According to popular belief, there are three different kinds of empathy: cognitive empathy, emotional empathy, and action empathy[2]. “I Live” places a strong emphasis on individual cognitive and attitudinal empathy in the narrative, which is intricately linked to the communication impact.

2.2 Transcultural Communication

Transcultural communication, as opposed to intercultural communication, which emphasizes a Western-centered “modernization” discourse system, refers to the concept of cultural development that promotes equal exchange and mutual appreciation among civilizations, as well as the common development of all countries around the world, by constructing a community of human destiny and empowerment[3]. The cultures of various countries have become increasingly intertwined, particularly in an era of rapid development in new media.

The internalization aspect of global cultural communication is emphasized in transcultural communication. On an epistemological level, various individuals transcend their initial cultural patterns by discovering, examining, filtering, and absorbing external cultures and thus continuously transcending and transforming themselves[4]. Documentaries, for example, play an important role in shaping new ideals, cultural experiences, and lifestyles. The documentary “I Live” depicts a cultural exchange between China and Japan, with the two countries' cultural interaction and exchange based on equal footing dialogue, transcending the “center-edge” system of cross-cultural communication theory and realizing cultural attributes through people exchange. Cultural sympathy between the two countries must be founded on openness, tolerance, and dialogue about cultural equality, which is the bedrock of transcultural communication.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Sample Unit and Acquisition

A single story with a single protagonist is used as a sample unit. Selected episodes with representative characters from the first to the third season of “I Live”. As is shown in Table 1, the following is the presentation of the collected episodes.

Table 1 Selecting Representative Episodes of Characters from the First to the Third Season of “I Live”

Season 1	Season 2	Season 3
From Amateur to Cartoonist	China's “ Drama Queen “ Natto	What will happen to the world's top 10 Japanese travel companies under the epidemic?
The Favorite Places of Young Japanese	Japanese artist Ryota Katayaka challenges the mysterious power of China	The only Japanese contestant in “Youth With You 2”, Nanao
The Only Chinese Model at the Japanese Fashion Show	Single Japanese handsome man who started a successful business in Guangzhou	This group of young people has broken the Japanese media's prejudice against China!

4. Narrative Perspective and Transcultural Empathy Communication

4.1 Narrative Perspective of Seeing the Big with the Small

In terms of narrative perspective, “I Live” always insists on telling the stories of ordinary people[5]. The overall tone of the film is easygoing and relaxed, with a strong sense of city atmosphere. The main characters in the stories are ordinary people, except for the “star” segment, in which celebrities are invited to appear. By telling ordinary people's stories and conveying their emotions, a narrative perspective is more capable of breaking down cultural and geographical barriers and triggering emotional resonance than macro narratives. Only the proximity of cognition can further trigger the identification of emotional attitudes and values, thereby allowing transcultural communication to occur.

Furthermore, the narrative perspective of “seeing the big with the small” shows that the director is skilled at portraying the “struggle story of ordinary people” and seeing the world through ordinary people's eyes. “From Amateur to Cartoonist,” “A Single Japanese Handsome Man Who Succeeded in Starting a Business in Guangzhou,” and “China's “Drama Queen” Natto” are three episodes that

follow ordinary people as they pursue their dreams. The series depicts the changes in China's times and people's mindsets through the eyes of ordinary people who have moved to a foreign country for the first time, revealing the new face of China. Overseas audiences can see their shadows in their “struggle stories” and are more likely to accept and understand Chinese people under the influence of emotions, resulting in successful transcultural communication.

4.2 Telling China's Story from the Dual Perspective of “Self” and “Other”

Telling the Chinese story and spreading Chinese culture involves two dimensions: “self-representation” and “other narrative”[6]. “I Live,” a Sino-Japanese co-production, addresses not only the construction of China's “self-representation” image, i.e., how to shape China's image abroad, but also the perspective of how the “other's eyes” view China.

“I Live” director Ryo Takeuchi is a Japanese documentary filmmaker based in Nanjing, China[7]. To begin with, the director's identity as a “Japanese” is unique, and the entire film, from material selection to film conception, is shot from the perspective of Japanese people understanding China. The film is an “other” construction of China's image, from the choice of the main character for each episode to the director's follow-up and interaction with the main character.

According to the director, the perception of China among overseas audiences is formed not by China's own “self-representation,” but by their cultural context. For example, each episode is shot with the director's personal views and attitudes in mind. He expresses the emotion of “hoping to improve Sino-Japanese relations through this documentary” while interacting with the main character. “What is your reason for living here?” the director of each episode asks the main characters.

Responses from the protagonists are frequently sincere, as are “statements from the other,” which are frequently objective and true and easy for the audience to recognize and empathize with. “I live here because of my dream,” and “I live here because I like the feeling of belonging in a Chinese community,” the protagonists explain. When the narrators are Japanese, objectivity and truthfulness are often more convincing[8]. Through the use of the “other,” the film encourages overseas audiences to trust the film's perceptions and values, thereby initiating a transcultural communication mechanism that can promote changes in overseas audiences' perceptions of Chinese culture, Chinese people, and even China's image.

5. Narrative Strategy and Transcultural Communication

5.1 Face Up to the Hot Issues of Society

The “I Live” production team is particularly adept at capturing socially charged issues as filming subjects. Since the outbreak of COVID-19, people all over the world have been focused on the epidemic's situation. In the episode, “What will happen to the top ten Japanese travel companies in the world under the epidemic?” In this episode, the production team addressed the social issues caused by the epidemic by focusing on the economic crisis of a Japanese travel agency in China.

The number of Japanese tourists visiting China has plummeted as a result of the disease's outbreak in 2020, and the travel agency is facing an unprecedented economic crisis. Mr. Anda, the president of the travel agency, was interviewed, and the director followed up with the company's operations as well as Mr. Anda. Even in this situation, Mr. Anda did not abandon hope for China and Japan's tourism industries, but instead actively worked through the crisis with a special travel plan during the epidemic. The epidemic occurs during a hot and cold period in the world, and the outbreak's entry point can elicit sympathy and empathy for the main character. This emotion is the foundation of empathetic communication, a positive force that can transcend borders of country, race, gender, and age to empathize with the experiences or emotions of others. Empathetic communication, more than traditional rational communication, can break down cultural barriers and form a natural connection through emotion, triggering cognitive empathy. Such emotional empathy is frequently a game changer in cross-cultural communication.

5.2 Showing the Characters' Enriching Heart Journey and Emotional Experience

The epidemic's entry point can elicit sympathy and empathy for the protagonist. This emotion is the foundation of empathetic communication, a positive force that can transcend national, racial, gender, and age boundaries to empathize with the experiences or emotions of others. More than traditional rational communication, empathy can break down cultural barriers and form a natural connection through emotion, triggering cognitive empathy. In cross-cultural communication, emotional empathy is frequently a game changer. The movie follows Natto as he travels from China to Japan while working and editing amateur videos. There are numerous details in the film, such as going to the supermarket and only purchasing the cheapest bento, frantically revising the video script on the subway, waking up at 4 a.m. to edit the video, and returning to work at 7 a.m. Tearing the glossy skin away reveals the most genuine and moving aspect of the character's heart.

5.3 The Interview That Follows with the Main Character Reveals the Character's Inner Emotional Experience.

“Why do you want to shoot videos?” the director inquires. “I believe that self-media, or the video industry, is a very high-achievement industry where you feel needed by others,” says Natto. It's very satisfying. “My mother always wanted me to go to graduate school, but I told her, “I'm not going to graduate school, and I'm going to do my videos and walk down this path.” She didn't understand at the time; whenever she called, she scolded me, which was excruciating. “So, what brings you here?” asks the director. “It's because of the dream,” Natto explains. “I'd like more people to know who I am and to pay attention to what I have to say.”

The audience's emotional resonance is triggered by showing the heartfelt journey of a Chinese girl pursuing her dream.

Furthermore, in the episode “The only Japanese contestant of Youth With You 2, Nanao,” the inner emotional experience of the Japanese girl Nanao, who came to China to participate in the recording of the program “Youth With You 2,” from the unfamiliar environment at first to mingle with her friends, as well as Nanao's growth and inner changes, are recorded.

“It was particularly difficult at first because I had a major language problem, which was followed by introversion,” Nanao says. “Being unable to actively communicate with people,” the director says, “Yes, I was eating alone in the corner while everyone else was eating.” “When I needed to cry, I covered my eyes with a mask, and after a while, I removed the mask and resumed eating.” “Why did you come to China for this show?” asks the director. “Because as long as there's a challenge, I'll give it a shot,” Nanao says. “How did you feel when you were eliminated?” asks the director. “I felt especially good because I tried my hardest,” says Nanao.

Inner emotional changes in characters are frequently the most authentic, stemming from the characters' own real-life experiences. By depicting the characters' real-life experiences and empathic communication, “I Live” elicits recognition and identification from audiences. It achieves transcultural communication by altering the main character's inner emotions and demonstrating the positive vitality of Chinese nationals and the image of an inclusive Chinese society and Chinese nationals indirectly.

5.4 Breaking Stereotypes and Satisfying Public Expectation Horizons

“I Live” plays an important role in breaking stereotypes between China and Japan by sending positive signals and satisfying the public's expectations, thereby promoting cognition and attitude empathy and triggering transcultural communication. Aesthetician Yao Si proposed the concept of “expectation horizon,” which means that audiences have formed relevant expectations before watching a film or television work, and such expectations have a strong personal value orientation[9]. As a result of unfair coverage of China by Western and some Japanese media, overseas audiences have developed certain prejudices against China. As a result, Chinese and foreign documentaries are being tasked with reversing and eradicating stereotypes fostered by media reports.

“This group of young people has broken the Japanese media's anti-China prejudice!” The director debunks the stereotype of China in Japanese media as “backward and dirty” by following the lives of

a group of young Japanese people working in China. Mami, for example, works as an overseas e-commerce operator for an innovative product company in Shenzhen, producing products such as drones and toys; and after work, she works as a short video blogger, introducing modern life in China, introducing Chinese takeaway apps, and so on, demonstrating a new era of China. At the end of the show, the director asked Mami why she posted the video on YouTube, to which she replied, “It would be fantastic if people could discover the allure of Shenzhen and understand China's development through the video; those who have never visited China and do not have Chinese friends around them, if they experience China and are uncomfortable with it, forget it; I don't like it when people make wild statements without any experience.”

The life experiences and feelings of young Japanese people who stay in China are conducive to breaking stereotypes among overseas audiences about China and making them more aware of the face and development of China in the new era. Only when stereotypes are broken do the emotional bonds between two people improve, triggering empathy in perceptions and attitudes and promoting the spread of transculturalism.

6. Conclusion

Finally, the documentary “The Reason I Live Here” primarily activates the empathy mechanism through the “small but big” and the inclusion of the “other” in the narrative. It achieves emotional resonance through “ordinary people's struggle story” and the narrative technique of the “other.” At the same time, the documentary employs a rich narrative strategy to effectively break down cultural barriers and stereotypes by utilizing social hotspots and the character's inner emotions as entry points. Through emotions, the documentary establishes a natural connection and elicits empathy in cognition and attitude. It promotes the dissemination of Chinese culture and the shaping of the Chinese national image, realizes transcultural empathy communication, and offers creative ideas for achieving transcultural empathy communication of Chinese culture and the Chinese image in the new international context.

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