

A Study on the Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies of “Belt and Road” Documentaries: A Case Study of *China’s Calling Card on the Belt and Road*

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Abstract: On the occasion of the 10th anniversary of the proposal of the “Belt and Road” Initiative, China Central Television (CCTV) released the documentary *China’s Calling Card on the Belt and Road* in 2023. This documentary provides a panoramic retrospective of the “Belt and Road” across various domains, including infrastructure, transportation, energy, science and technology, economy and trade, and culture. By adopting the perspective of the “Other” to construct cinematic representations of China and narrate Chinese stories, the documentary explores the communication pathways of Chinese culture within a cross-cultural context. It presents a cultural exchange logic characterized by “appreciating the beauty of one’s own culture and sharing it with others.” Furthermore, utilizing concrete cooperative practices as a medium, it promotes the visual and emotional expression of the concept of a “community with a shared future for mankind,” thereby providing an effective cinematic paradigm for the global communication of China’s national image in the new era.

Keywords: “Belt and Road” Initiative, *China’s Calling Card on the Belt and Road*, cross-cultural communication

1. Introduction

“All living things grow according to their nature, and all undertakings succeed according to their laws.” From the historical depth of the “Ancient Silk Road” to the grand practice of the contemporary “Belt and Road,” this civilizational corridor spanning millennia not only inherits the spiritual core of peace and reciprocity of the ancient trade routes but also serves as a proactive response to the process of globalization. The proposal of the “Silk Road Economic Belt” and the “21st Century Maritime Silk Road” initiatives in 2013 signifies that this historical passageway has acquired unprecedented strategic significance and cultural missions in the contemporary era. While undertaking the function of deepening international economic cooperation, it also bears the communication mission of the global reshaping of Chinese cultural symbols, the diversified construction of the national image, and the facilitation of profound dialogues across civilizations.

Against this backdrop, the implementation of the “Silk Road Film and Television Bridge” project indicates the state’s high regard for the role of film and television works in constructing the national image and disseminating national culture(2017)[1]. Documentaries, owing to their media characteristics that combine both documentary authenticity and artistic quality, have become a crucial vehicle for narrating Chinese stories to the world and transmitting cultural values. The 2023 CCTV documentary *China’s Calling Card on the Belt and Road* departs from multidimensional perspectives—including infrastructure, energy, trade, transportation, technology, and culture—and adopts an “Other” narrative strategy. Taking the perspectives of participants, collaborators, and beneficiaries from countries along the route as the primary viewpoint, it conducts a panoramic retrospective that systematically presents China’s global cooperation practices within the “Belt and Road” framework. This highlights China’s core values of “harmonizing all nations, pursuing the great way together, sharing beauty, and achieving win-win cooperation.”

2. Appreciating Each Other’s Beauty: The Cinematic Expression of Chinese Culture

As the abstract manifestation of the unique culture of a region, nation, or country, cultural symbols serve as essential carriers and forms of cultural connotations. The Chinese cultural symbol system encapsulates profound philosophical thoughts, spiritual beliefs, and aesthetic emotions. These cultural symbols transcend their mere forms, permeating the cultural DNA and common spiritual symbolism of the Chinese nation. In *China’s Calling Card on the Belt and Road*, the construction of cultural symbols is not a static display but is instead endowed with dynamic cultural vitality through narrative and contextualized cinematic strategies. Taking dietary culture as an example, hotpot represents a vital component of traditional Chinese culinary culture. In the fifth episode, Transportation: The Steel Camel Fleet, the operational launch of the New International Land-Sea Trade Corridor in western China, combined with its unique cooking method, enables fresh ingredients from around the world to arrive via China-Europe freight trains, transforming the dream of “boiling the world in

a single pot” into reality. This process not only showcases the technological achievements of the logistics network but also metaphorically expresses the inherent characteristics of inclusivity and assimilation within Chinese culture, transforming hotpot into an embodied symbol of Sino-foreign cultural exchange.

The narrative expression of Chinese culture provides a vivid and concrete “on-site” experience for the visual construction of symbols. The first episode, *The Long Road Ahead*, begins in Xi’an and leverages the synergy of technologies such as animation and live-action filming to transcend the boundaries of time and space, delving deep into historical Chang’an to recreate the splendor of the ancient Silk Road. From the magnificent and colorful murals of the Mogao Grottoes in Dunhuang to the gold coins passed down from the Byzantine Empire, as well as the multilingual tombstones engraved with ancient Syriac, Arabic, Persian, and Chinese, every detail in the documentary is imbued with profound cultural heritage and the imprints of cross-cultural communication. These visual elements not only construct the civilizational landscape of the “Ancient Silk Road” but also, through concrete material remains, convey the openness and inclusiveness that China has long upheld throughout its history. The cinematic reproduction of such symbols is intrinsically a contemporary reinterpretation of the “Silk Road Spirit” and offers global audiences a perceivable, cultural “on-site” experience.

Centering on cultural memory, the documentary series *China’s Calling Card on the Belt and Road* contextualizes Chinese cultural symbols within the localized environments of countries along the “Belt and Road,” revealing their cross-regional and cross-ethnic processes of adaptation and mutation. As a fluid visual medium of modern communication, the documentary is capable of presenting the authenticity and completeness of the material development of the “Silk Road” and the spiritual evolution of the people. Concurrently, it can pierce through the historical mist to inherit the historical and cultural spirit of the “Silk Road,” thus possessing immense practical significance(2015)[2]. Traditional symbols such as tea culture, traditional Chinese medicine theory, and calligraphy art, upon encountering the indigenous cultures of regions like Southeast Asia, Central Asia, and Africa, have spawned new hybridized forms. This not only enriches the external expression of Chinese culture but also promotes the co-construction of cultural diversity among countries along the route, forming a global cultural pattern characterized by “appreciating each other’s beauty.”

3. Sharing Beauty Together: Cross-Cultural Communication Strategies

Amidst the continuously advancing process of globalization, cross-cultural communication has emerged as a crucial avenue for connecting diverse countries and regions and for fostering cultural diversity. “Sharing beauty together,” as a traditional Chinese cultural concept emphasizing the harmonious coexistence and mutual appreciation among different cultures, also provides an essential value orientation for cross-cultural communication. *China’s Calling Card on the Belt and Road* transforms conventional narrative strategies by departing from the perspective of the “Other.” By adopting the primary viewpoints of overseas participants, collaborators, and beneficiaries, and substituting self-narration with the voices of others, it explores the logic of cross-cultural communication and its discursive system from a narrative angle.

China’s Calling Card on the Belt and Road serves as an authentic record of China’s diplomatic efforts to benefit the people under new circumstances, a tribute to the great practice of building a community with a shared future for mankind, and a construction of China’s national image as peaceful, amicable, proactive, pragmatic, and globally minded(2024)[3]. Vienna Cammarota, an elderly Italian woman hiking along the ancient Silk Road, offered this evaluation of the “Belt and Road”: “I think this is a very ambitious initiative, because it passes through some countries that are not easy to unite, and it unites all these countries together.” Distinct from previous documentaries related to the “Belt and Road,” *China’s Calling Card on the Belt and Road* conducts extensive interviews with political figures, entrepreneurs, technical personnel, and ordinary citizens in countries along the route. This approach translates the effectiveness of the “Belt and Road” from statistical data into individual experiences, thereby achieving a dimensional reduction and transformation from a “grand narrative” to a “micro-narrative.” Consequently, it presents the tangible contributions of the “Belt and Road” toward building a community with a shared future for mankind from an objective and authentic perspective.

The documentary also illustrates artistic integration and emotional resonance in cross-cultural cooperation under the “Other” perspective. On one hand, by recounting the cooperative experiences of Chinese entrepreneurs, engineers, and artists in various countries, the documentary illustrates how they overcome cultural differences and language barriers. These stories not only allow audiences to witness the endeavors of Chinese people striving overseas but also, through cultural exchange, transmit the resonance and empathy that transcend cultural boundaries within the “Belt and Road.” On the other hand, by showcasing the fusion of traditional Chinese music and Southeast Asian folk music, the documentary narrates a cultural exchange where China and Southeast Asian nations co-create a novel musical style. The hybridization of artistic forms broadens the boundaries of aesthetic experience and promotes an understanding of the Other’s culture at the cognitive level.

It is noteworthy that in today’s increasingly globalized world, cross-cultural communication has become an important

channel connecting different countries and regions, promoting cultural diversity and global understanding. The introduction of the “Other” perspective in this documentary series is not merely a simple shift in narrative technique but rather a structural adjustment of the power dynamics in cross-cultural communication. It constructs a more egalitarian and reciprocal mechanism for symbol exchange, encouraging viewers to more deeply comprehend and appreciate the essence of the Other’s culture. Consequently, this facilitates in-depth cultural exchange, mutual learning, and sharing, thereby constructing an international cooperation platform for the “Belt and Road.”

4. Universal Harmony: The Generation of Cross-Cultural Consensus

When engaging in cross-cultural communication, “Belt and Road” documentaries disseminate not only culture but also a set of values—values of mutual benefit, reciprocity, and win-win coexistence(2017)[4]. In the current era of deepening globalization, cultural integration has become an unavoidable proposition of the times. As a vital vehicle for promoting global cultural integration under the joint construction of the “Belt and Road” Initiative, the documentary series *China’s Calling Card on the Belt and Road*, with its unique perspective and vivid narration, systematically displays the pluralistic pathways of cultural integration and provides a realistic footnote for the idealized vision of “Universal Harmony” (Tianxia Datong).

Through multiple micro-samples of cross-cultural interaction—ranging from the Ugandan young man Isaac and Chinese Kung Fu, to the Cambodian “Chinese language genius” Salik, to the exchange of skills between an inheritor of intangible cultural heritage from Guizhou, China, and Southeast Asian artisans—the documentary visually manifests the microscopic power of “people-to-people diplomacy” via cinematic language. This transforms “people-to-people connectivity” from a policy slogan into a perceivable narrative reality. The eighth episode of the documentary, Shared Destiny, utilizes specific cases such as the Chinese foreign medical aid team fighting the Ebola virus alongside the people of Sierra Leone, the construction and operation of the China-Laos Railway, and the rural well-drilling project jointly undertaken by China and Senegal. These instances demonstrate the substantive contributions of the “Belt and Road” in the domains of infrastructure and public services. These projects have not only ameliorated local living conditions but also established an institutional platform for cross-cultural collaboration at the operational level, embedding cultural understanding into daily cooperation and forming a positive cycle of “promoting exchange through cooperation, and consolidating cooperation through exchange.”

Examined from the dimension of communication pathways, the documentary series *China’s Calling Card on the Belt and Road* constructs a set of nested and mutually supportive channels for cultural integration. At the material level, relying on infrastructure and trade as carriers, it realizes the intercommunication and sharing of material culture. At the level of cultural symbols, utilizing art, language, and education as media, it facilitates the mutual translation and regeneration of symbolic meanings. At the value level, the documentary prominently presents the collaborative response practices formed by various countries when confronting global and systemic risks such as public health crises and ecological degradation. Through this, it summons and coalesces an ethical consensus that transcends geographical and ethnic boundaries. These three pathways are not parallel or independent; rather, they interpenetrate and mutually reinforce one another within the textual narrative and communication practices. Together, they drive the substantive transformation of the traditional philosophical concept of “Universal Harmony” from an abstract value proposition to an operationalized practical modality, thereby providing an operational framework endowed with both cultural sensitivity and institutional feasibility for the realization of the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind.

5. Conclusion

Over the past decade since the proposal of jointly building the “Belt and Road” Initiative, it has evolved from a regional economic cooperation initiative into a public good and institutional platform with global influence. As a cinematic memorandum of this process, *China’s Calling Card on the Belt and Road* employs a novel “Other” perspective as its core narrative strategy. By integrating a rich and vivid audiovisual language with a pluralistic story structure, it systematically presents China’s national image and cultural responsibilities within the context of globalization. The documentary conducts cinematic explorations into the contemporary construction of Chinese cultural symbols and their cross-cultural communication pathways. It empirically validates the operational feasibility of the concept of “appreciating each other’s beauty and sharing beauty together”—achieving the sharing of meanings and mutual connectivity of values through concrete cooperative narratives, predicated upon respect for cultural diversity. In the future, as the “Belt and Road” Initiative continues to deepen, further emphasis should be placed on the cross-cultural communication function of film and television works. This requires optimizing narrative strategies, expanding collaborative subjects, and strengthening local adaptability, in order to more effectively promote the symbiotic integration of global cultures and the sustainable construction of a community with a shared future for mankind.

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