

Communication Strategies for Chinese Documentaries from High-context to Low-context Culture: A Comparative Study of “Wild China” of BBC and CCTV Version

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As an important means of cultural transmission, documentaries are a powerful tool to make known the five thousand years of Chinese civilization to people all over the world. The “Wild China” of BBC version, popular among the great majority of overseas audience, serves as a successful carrier of Chinese culture export. Based on the theory of low-context and high-context culture, this paper uses the method of text analysis and focuses on the study of the texts in the Chinese and English versions of “Wild China” and explores the differences in the texts in terms of content and rhythm. The purpose of this study is to avoid cultural misunderstanding and optimize communication effect. Findings of this study show that against the background of low-context (English) and high-context (Chinese) culture, the English version has a good sense of rhythm, uses rhetoric for vivid description, expresses ideas directly, and provides explanation for phenomena through narrating or telling a story. But Chinese version has plainer descriptions, uses more euphemistic or abstract words, analyzes phenomena in less detail and narrates more formally. So, it is suggested that in translating texts into English, concepts need to be made accessible, logical and direct with more explanation, more rhetoric, more objective evaluation, and less pursuit of artistic abstraction. These communication strategies conforming to low-context culture can help overseas audience accept Chinese culture more easily.

Keywords: Chinese documentaries, texts, high-context and low-context culture, cross-cultural communication strategies

Introduction

“‘Wild China’ is a six-part nature documentary series on the natural history of China, co-produced by the BBC Natural History Unit and China Central Television (CCTV)” (Wikipedia). The six episodes demonstrate both the distinct cultural and ecological differences in China. The documentary is particularly keen to “record examples of traditional lifestyles which incorporate the natural world” (Wikipedia). In UK, “Wild China” of BBC Version was broadcast on BBC Two from 11 May to 5 June 2008, during which it has won a high percentage of audience share. “Wild China” of BBC version is considered a classical example of successful carrier of Chinese culture. Despite the fact that BBC Version and CCTV Version have the same filming

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techniques generally, it is obvious that there exists one different production detail—different texts of the two versions.

It is widely known that a documentary is an important channel for cross-cultural communication and cultural transmission. However, in modern times, the output of Chinese documentaries is in less quantity and most of them are unpopular with overseas audiences due to the fact that they feel hard to understand texts in documentaries. It is acknowledged that texts form indispensable part of documentaries, which play an essential role in spreading cultures. So, studying useful communication strategies in terms of texts for Chinese documentaries is strongly recommended for the purpose of increasing Chinese documentaries' popularity and spread Chinese culture efficiently and widely. And "Wild China" of BBC version has gained a great success on its audience rate overseas, which provides implications for communication strategies when compared with "Wild China" of CCTV version.

Cross-cultural Communication and Cross-cultural Documentary Communication

When it comes to the theory of high-context and low-context culture, Hall (1989) mentioned "high-context culture" and "low-context culture". According to Hall (1989), "context" is the information that has indivisible connection with the meaning of the event. Despite the fact that all cultures contain some characteristics of both high and low variables, most can be placed along a scale along their ranking on particular dimension. So "context" is divided into "high context" and "low context". In high-context communication, "most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit transmitted part of the message" (Hall, 1989, p. 91). On the contrary, in low-context communication, "the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code" (Hall, 1989, p. 91). In HC transactions, preprogrammed information is stored "in the receiver and in the setting, with only minimal information in the transmitted message" (Hall, 1989, p. 101). Therefore, words and word choice become very important, since a few words can communicate a complex message very efficiently. However, "LC transactions are the reverse. Most of the information must be in the transmitted message in order to make up for what is missing in the context" (Hall, 1989, p. 101).

Samovar, Porter, and Stefani (2000) further explain Hall (1989)'s high-context and low-context communication. It is acknowledged that culture teaches not only the symbols but also the meaning associated with the symbols, so "culture exerts an enormous influence on languages" and "culture influences the way people use language" (Samovar, Porter & Stefani, 2000, p. 125). High-context cultures prefer meaning which is not necessarily contained in words and "tend to be less open, they hold that conflict is damaging to most communication encounters" while "low-context cultures expect messages to be detailed, clear-cut and definite" (Samovar, Porter & Stefani, 2000, p. 81).

Guan (2004) mentions that "intercultural communication is actually a main part of international communication no matter whether communication is done through mass media or through interpersonal interaction" (p. 4). Guan (2004) further illustrates that owing to the diversity of cultural background, overseas receivers have to decode local cultures hidden in texts and it leads to three different results: (1) "preferred reading"—"receivers can understand messages according to decoders' real intentions" (p. 108); (2) "negotiated reading"—"receivers show partial understanding of speakers' original ideas and also present their own

judgments and opinions about information with the help of their own cultural background” (p. 108); (3) “oppositional reading”—“audiences totally misunderstand transmitters’ real intentions and instead offer entirely different explanation for messages” (p. 108).

Cross-cultural documentary communication is one kind of mass communication. McLuhan (1964) mentions “hot medium” and “cold medium”. It is proposed that “hot” is the grosser and participant form of art while “cold” is the abstract and intensively literary form. McLuhan (1964) believes a hot medium of high definition is filled with data and “dose not leave so much to be filled in or completed by the audience” (p. 8), but a cool medium of low definition gives so little information and “are high in participation or completion by the audience” (p. 8). This opinion inspires this paper to study communication strategies which can make Chinese documentaries become a hot media. Liu (2014) states the differences between Chinese and Western documentaries on the basis of five values. Wu (2010) also analyzes different cultural perspectives of Chinese and Western documentaries. And stereotype and cultural discount are introduced as negative effects during the process of cross-cultural communication, which provides implications for communication strategies for Chinese documentaries. Wu (2010) believes that documentaries should “get out of aestheticism”, “express universal value” and “strengthening international cooperation”. In addition, He, Li and Bi (2011) propose that, in order to make audience fully understand local culture, overcoming cultural conflicts is important.

Comparison of the Texts of “Wild China” of BBC and CCTV Version Based on the Theory of High-context and Low-context Culture

Despite the fact that both “Wild China” of BBC version and CCTV version have the same pictures and the structure of BBC version is generally consistent with that of CCTV version, it is the text that makes BBC and CCTV version differs from each other. Different details can be explored in the texts of these two versions. As a consequence, this part explores their differences in terms of two aspects: textual content and textual rhythm.

A. Content

Differences of textual content in “Wild China” of BBC version and CCTV version are analyzed from the four perspectives. According to the theory of high-context and low-context culture, it is widely accepted that BBC version with low-context culture tend to display meanings through direct expression and direct interaction so that producers prefer adopting objective words and associating specific and concrete words with real situation rather than using euphemistic or abstract words. Also, individualism is highly valued in low-context culture, so producers of BBC version are good at using rhetoric which can make words more vivid and specific for the sake of expressing directly their own feelings. In addition, “logic” is often used to present ideas through further illustrating and explaining phenomena. On the other hand, CCTV version with high-context culture usually pays attention to implicit messages and artistic abstraction, so producers prefer indirect expressions such as abstract words with connotations. Besides, in high-context culture, people tend to cultivate and establish a permanent personal relationship with the other people or the nature so that CCTV version uses vague and ambiguous words to avoid showing too many individual views directly, especially criticism and it has more neutral and subjective descriptions and less critical and objective comment.

First, the perspective of descriptions in the two versions differs from each other owing to different cultural background. Some information is comprehensible to Chinese audiences but is strange to foreign viewers.

Therefore, in BBC version, indigenous information overseas audiences are familiar with are adopted as a reference to make contents more understandable. For instance, in the first episode “Heart of the Dragon”, when it comes to the introduction of the south of China, CCTV version only uses one sentence “The South of China is a vast area”. But BBC version adds another sentence to make it more familiar to audiences. It reads “eight times larger than the UK”. It is clearly seen that the size of “UK” is generally known by audiences.

Second, compared with CCTV version, BBC version adds or decreases narration and descriptions about one common thing for the purpose of making descriptions more vivid, attractive, accurate and logical and expressing true feelings directly. For instance, in the second episode “Shangri—La”, when the southwestern tea and Silk Road is referred, BBC version adds: “Wars were fought over across to this tiny path, the only sure route in or out of China.” Introduction of the history of the road enriches the content. But audiences are unable to see the sentence in CCTV version.

Third, it is clearly seen that although the two versions have the same narrative subject, they have totally distinctive themes. CCTV version in high-context values harmony and friendly atmosphere, so it avoids evaluating some serious issues directly, but BBC version in low-context values personal and objective ideas so that it tends to unveil truth and adopt critical thinking skills to explore facts from realistic aspect and express emotions clearly. For instance, Chinese people who cultivate are mentioned in the first episode “Heart of the Dragon”, CCTV version says that cultivation makes them strong, BBC version, however, thinks of the phenomenon in a critical thinking way so that it reveals the truth that Chinese people who cultivate are “among the poorest in China”.

Lastly, some texts of BBC version and CCTV version reflect the same themes, but there exist different narrative methods in these same contents. It is divided into two types: first, BBC version prefers applying writing strategies such as rhetoric (metaphor and personification) and raising questions to visualize descriptions and make them more attractive and vivid. CCTV version, on the contrary, tends to adopt plain statements without decorating sentences. Second, BBC version describes things and expresses opinions in a direct way so that audience can easily find out explicit meanings from texts. While CCTV version prefers neutral views so that euphemistic and abstract words are usually used in a formal way. In the first episode “Heart of the Dragon”, when mentioning paw, CCTV version just calls it “Langurs’ paws”, but “paw” is transformed into “a vise-like grip” in BBC version. In the fourth episode “Beyond the Great Wall”, CCTV version uses one statement “it is found that they have different method of catching fish” to pave the way for the next introduction of catching fish, which seems a little serious and dull. But BBC version raises a question: “But how can they catch their quarries” to attract more audiences and make the content more inspiring.

B. Rhythm

According to the theory of high-context and low-context culture, it is acknowledged that in high-context culture, word choice is put high value on and they tend to be indirectly relevant with the theme, while in low-context culture, the number of word and word choice is less important. Besides, words are usually direct and accurate, because they are aimed to express people’s true feelings easily. Owing to this fact, BBC version and CCTV version have different textual rhythms. The BBC version has a good sense of rhythm, which is sometimes tense and sometimes relaxed so that the story plot is engaging. BBC version has fewer words below shots and all

of the words are clearly close to the main themes of the shots in the documentary and also present vivid pictures which make deep impression on audiences, while as for the CCTV version, its rhythm is plain and the structure of texts dose not have climax because many words appear below shots and the great majority of them have implicit meanings and are irrelevant with the themes of the shots in the documentary.

Suggested Cross-cultural Communication Strategies for Chinese Documentaries

A. Concept Accessibility in Contents

Certain abstract concepts mentioned directly in Chinese documentaries are supposed to be transformed and made accessible to overseas audiences. Owing to different cultural background, the perspectives of the two versions differ from each other. In terms of high-context culture (Chinese), descriptions tend to be generalized and abstract so that Chinese audiences are accustomed to comprehending something through contexts and also their life experience. By contrast, low-context culture (English) makes descriptions more visualized and specific so that it is much easier for westerners to understand without contexts. Therefore, certain abstract concepts demonstrated directly in CCTV version are comprehensible to Chinese audiences but are strange and obscure to foreign audiences because they lack of the relevant cultural and knowledge background. In an attempt to resort to this problem, in BBC version, what to describe is usually associated with certain local concepts westerners are familiar with. The familiar information is considered to be reference to make descriptions more understandable. This is called “transference”—one of the seven typical devices in the art of propaganda.

B. Transformation of Mode of Thinking

According to the theory of mode of thinking in international communication, low-context culture (English) and high-context culture (Chinese) result in totally different thinking ways. Influenced by directness, accuracy, vitality and logic demonstrated in low-context culture, westerners are featured by inductive reasoning, deductive reasoning, intuitional reasoning and dialectical reasoning. They tend to focus on details and use logics to analyze the essence of phenomena through separating them from surroundings. Also, rhetoric is one part of western logistics and it is usually adopted to express emotions straightly and make descriptions visualized and vivid in order to establish an intimate relationship with audiences. Artistic conceptions are put emphasis on in order to make themes more significant.

First, logical descriptions should be used by analyzing things from different perspectives instead of just describing them superficially. For instance, when it comes to the relationship between human beings and nature, CCTV version just uses one sentence “the relationship becomes brutal in the South of China” to generalize the fact without clarifying it. But BBC version analyzes the phenomenon deeper by enumerating specific examples such as “snake eating” and “illegal wildlife hunting”, which makes the statement more logical and evidential. Second, rhetoric is highly recommended to be adopted in an attempt to make descriptions more real and interesting. BBC version, for example, tends to take advantage of rhetoric such as metaphor, personification and exaggeration to attract more viewers’ attention through visualizing narration and making it real and vivid. CCTV version, however, is featured by plain sentences and lacks of beautification of sentences. Third, neutral views and euphemistic and abstract words are supposed to be forbidden in cross-cultural communication strategies, whereas accurate and explicit expressions, direct opinions and objective evaluation should be demonstrated by texts. For instance, CCTV version in high-context values harmony and friendly atmosphere and stresses peaceful

relationship with the other people and surroundings or the nature, so it avoids evaluating some serious issues directly and usually uses indirect expressions. But BBC in low-context values personal and objective ideas so that it tends to unveil truth and explore facts from realistic aspect and express emotions and ideas clearly. Therefore, Chinese documentaries are supposed to reduce the pursuit of artistic abstraction such as quoting Chinese ancient poetries or Chinese idioms on the generalization of the fact that all of them are so obscure and abstract to understand for audiences, particularly foreign viewers who are not conversant with Chinese culture and Chinese history. Instead, straightforward and simple words are encouraged to use because they are consistent with real situation and make texts much easier for receivers especially western audiences to accept and comprehend. For example, CCTV version uses one Chinese idioms “鬼斧神工 (uncanny workmanship)” to show sand stone pinnacles without describing them specifically and vividly. On the contrary, BBC version adopts specific words to make descriptions closer to the real situation, and it reads “the gravity-defying landscape of soaring sandstone pinnacles”. Additionally, unlike CCTV version just quoting a Chinese famous saying “乐山好水” to demonstrate harmonious relationship between human beings and mountains and water, BBC version uses more simple sentences with more accessible words to illustrate this concept because it is not familiar with overseas audiences.

Conclusion

From analysis, it is clearly seen that texts of “Wild China” of BBC version and CCTV version demonstrate distinct characteristics due to the fact that BBC version is in low-context culture while CCTV version is in high-context culture. BBC version is inclined to make descriptions more real and specific through using rhetoric, describes things and expresses ideas directly, evaluates issues objectively, and has further explanations for phenomena to make descriptions more logical. In addition, BBC version has a good sense of rhythm because it is sometimes tense and sometimes relaxed. Also, it acts as an approachable storyteller telling audiences engaging story plots. CCTV version, however, tends to use euphemistic and abstract words to create artistic abstraction and has less deep analysis and critical evaluation of phenomena. It is proposed that texts in Chinese documentaries achieve concept accessibility in translating texts into English, become logical and direct with more objective explanation and evaluation, more rhetoric and less pursuit of artistic abstraction. Producers of Chinese documentaries should change language expressions in essence instead of translating Chinese texts into English directly. These suggestions are aimed to make overseas audiences become more familiar with texts and find it easier to accept and understand Chinese culture for the purpose of optimizing communication effect and spreading Chinese culture more widely around the world.

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