

Discourse Construction and Identity Formation in the International Communication of Chinese Documentaries

Lu Chen*

Fujian Polytechnic Normal University, Fuqing, 350300, China

*Corresponding author: 18359185951@163.com

Abstract: In the context of deepening global cultural interaction, documentaries, serving as a crucial medium for cross-cultural communication, possess significant research value regarding their discourse construction and the mechanisms shaping international audience identity. This study, grounded in cross-cultural communication theory, focuses on exploring the discursive strategies employed in the international dissemination of Chinese documentaries and their pathways of influence on audience identity formation. Proceeding from the theory of the bidirectional construction of discourse and identity, the research analyzes the logic of discourse system construction through three dimensions: multi-agent collaboration, the modernization of narrative approaches, and the visualization of cultural symbols. It ultimately concentrates on the reception process of international audiences, dissecting how discursive meaning undergoes cognitive adjustment and emotional resonance to achieve the dynamic generation of internalized identity and externalized behavioral feedback. By constructing an integrative analytical framework of "discourse - reception - identity," this study aims to deepen the understanding of the efficacy of cultural media in transnational communication and to provide theoretical references for practical applications.

Keywords: cross-cultural communication; documentaries; discourse construction; cultural identity; international audience; reception mechanism

Introduction

In the context of globalization and the evolution of media technologies, the international discourse construction and identity formation mechanisms of documentaries, serving as a crucial vehicle for the dissemination of cultural soft power, demand in-depth investigation. The deepening international practice of Chinese documentaries highlights the necessity for systematic research on discursive effectiveness and its pathways of influence on audiences. Existing scholarship has often focused on macro-level strategies or isolated textual analyses, yet a theoretical framework that organically integrates discourse production mechanisms with the micro-level psychology of audience reception remains scarce. Therefore, this study, grounded in cross-cultural communication theory, aims to systematically analyze the logic of discourse construction in the international dissemination of Chinese documentaries and the intrinsic pathways through which it triggers audience identification. The significance of this research is twofold. Theoretically, it contributes to bridging discourse and audience studies by constructing a model of the "discourse - identity" transformation mechanism, thereby enriching theories of cross-cultural communication effects. Practically, by distilling scholarly insights, it seeks to provide strategic references for enhancing the efficacy of the international communication of Chinese documentaries and other cultural content, thereby facilitating cross-cultural dialogue and narrative innovation.

1. Theoretical Foundation: Discourse and Identity in Cross-Cultural Communication

1.1 The Theoretical Origins and Core Connotations of Discourse and Identity

Discourse and identity are core theoretical categories in cross-cultural communication research, with their theoretical origins deeply rooted in multiple disciplines such as linguistics, sociology, and cultural studies. Discourse is not merely linguistic expression but a form of social practice, involving

the construction of meaning and power relations within specific contexts. Influenced by the linguistic turn and social constructivist thought, discourse is regarded as a key mechanism for constructing social reality, shaping systems of knowledge, and establishing social norms. It delineates what can be said, who is qualified to speak, and which meanings are acceptable through specific symbolic systems, narrative frameworks, and rhetorical strategies.

Identity, on the other hand, is a dynamic process through which individuals or groups define, maintain, and reconstruct their self-identity by comparing differences and similarities during social interaction. As a crucial dimension of identity, cultural identity emphasizes an individual's sense of belonging and emotional attachment to a specific cultural group in terms of values, symbolic systems, and behavioral patterns. A bidirectional constructive relationship exists between discourse and identity. On the one hand, discourse serves as the primary arena where identity is expressed, negotiated, and contested; specific narratives and categorical language shape the perception of "us" and "them." On the other hand, pre-existing identity structures also frame and guide the production and interpretation of discourse^[1]. Understanding how discourse participates in the shaping, reinforcement, or transformation of identity constitutes a vital theoretical starting point for analyzing phenomena in cross-cultural communication.

1.2 Discursive Power and the Production of Meaning in Cross-Cultural Communication

The discursive interaction within cross-cultural communication is fundamentally a process where different systems of meaning and symbolic power encounter, collide, and negotiate. Discursive power, in this context, manifests as the capacity to define reality, set agendas, and construct frameworks for interpretation. Discourse systems originating from specific cultural contexts often carry their inherent ideologies, value assumptions, and cognitive models. When they enter the arena of international communication, they inevitably engage with discourse systems from other cultural backgrounds. This engagement can be one of dominance and subordination, or one of competition and dialogue.

The production of meaning becomes particularly complex in cross-cultural contexts. Through encoding, communicators embed their intended meanings into the text, while international audiences interpret them based on their own cultural decoding systems. A complete symmetry between the two is not guaranteed. The successful transmission and sharing of meaning depend not only on the clarity of the information but, more critically, on whether the discursive encoding can transcend cultural boundaries to tap into shared human experiences or resonate with the audience's interpretive frameworks. Furthermore, meaning is not fixed; it is continuously reproduced and negotiated through the interaction between the communicator, the text, and the audience. Analyzing the discursive construction in cross-cultural communication necessitates a focus on the implicit power dimensions behind discourse, as well as the potential shifts, augmentations, reductions, and creative interpretations that meaning may undergo during its circulation and reception.

1.3 The Mechanism of Media Discourse in Constructing Collective Identity

As the core institution for the production and circulation of discourse in modern society, media plays a pivotal role in constructing collective identity. Media discourse systematically influences the public's perception of the world and their imagination of their own community by selectively presenting reality, emphasizing specific themes, and employing particular narrative logics. The documentary, as a significant media form, possesses distinct characteristics in its discursive construction: it typically asserts a claim to authenticity and, through the integrated use of multiple symbolic systems such as imagery, sound, and text, constructs authoritative narratives concerning history, reality, nation, and culture^[2].

The mechanism through which media discourse constructs collective identity operates primarily on several interconnected levels. On the representational level, by repeatedly presenting specific cultural symbols, historical memories, geographical landscapes, and social practices, media discourse delineates a recognizable image of the "cultural self," thereby reinforcing members' sense of belonging. On the narrative level, through linear or thematic storytelling, it connects individual experiences with collective destiny, endowing the group's history with continuity and purpose, and shaping a shared collective memory. On the level of affective mobilization, media discourse is capable of evoking shared emotional experiences—such as pride, empathy, or a sense of crisis—thus enhancing the group's internal cohesion. Ultimately, by shaping the public discursive sphere, media facilitates the ongoing discussion of "who we are," thereby dynamically sustaining and renewing the boundaries and connotations of

collective identity.

2. Analysis of Discourse Construction Strategies in the International Dissemination of Chinese Documentaries

2.1 The Construction of a Discourse System through Multi-Agent Collaboration

The discourse production in contemporary international documentary dissemination has transcended the scope of single production entities, evolving into a complex system involving multiple participants and collaborative interaction. This system typically encompasses various stages including content creation, production, channel distribution, and promotional marketing. Different agents, based on their respective resource endowments and objectives, collectively participate in shaping the international discourse. Production institutions, as the source of content, are responsible for establishing the core concept and cultural tone of the work. Distribution and platform institutions, guided by the rules of the international market and audience preferences, strategically package and adapt the content, influencing its final form of presentation and dissemination pathways. Academic institutions and professional critics participate in the reproduction of discursive meaning and the construction of authority through their interpretation and critique of the works^[3].

The collaborative relationships among these multiple agents exhibit different models, ranging from tightly integrated co-productions to looser resource partnerships. This collaboration aims to integrate dispersed resources and advantages to form a more inclusive and market-penetrative discursive expression. However, a multiplicity of agents also implies diverse interests and perspectives, within which tensions may exist. The final form of the discourse system is the result of negotiation, compromise, and even competition among the various parties, reflecting the comprehensive balancing act by the disseminating agents among cultural positioning, market considerations, and international receptivity within the global context. This construction process itself is a microcosmic manifestation of the allocation and circulation of discursive power within an actor-network.

2.2 Narrative Transformation and the Expression of Modernity in Discursive Content

The context of international communication necessitates an adaptive transformation in the narrative strategies and content expression of documentary discourse. Traditional unidirectional, advocacy-oriented grand narratives are gradually giving way to more personalized, story-driven, and emotionally resonant micro-narratives. The narrative focus is shifting from generalized statements about outcomes and achievements toward in-depth portrayals of processes, individual experiences, and emotional journeys. By presenting individual destinies through storytelling, abstract cultural values and social transformations are concretized into relatable life trajectories. This approach transcends cultural differences to tap into universal human empathy. Such narrative transformation constitutes a crucial strategy for discourse to seek space for international dialogue.

The expression of modernity is reflected in the active engagement of discursive content with contemporary global issues. Discourse construction is no longer confined to showcasing unique historical traditions or regional customs; instead, it increasingly emphasizes the exploration of topics of global concern, such as technological innovation, environmental protection, urban-rural transformation, family ethics, and youth culture. By narrating its own developmental experiences within the framework of challenges and opportunities faced collectively by humanity, the discursive content gains broader relevance and contemporary significance. This mode of expression aims to move beyond the limitations of an exoticizing "Other" perspective, presenting instead a dynamic and confident stance as an active agent participating in the construction of global modernity. It thereby encourages international audiences to understand and accept the information and values conveyed by the discourse within a shared context of relevant issues^[4].

2.3 The Refinement of Cultural Symbols and the Construction of Visual Discourse

Visual discourse constitutes the most direct and potent component in the international dissemination of documentaries. Its construction relies on the systematic refinement and creative transformation of cultural symbols. The refinement of cultural symbols is a process of distilling the essential while discarding the superfluous to enhance recognizability. It involves selecting from a wealth of tangible and intangible cultural heritage those specific elements that are most representative, readily visualized,

and capable of evoking cross-cultural associations. These symbols encompass not only concrete objects such as artifacts, landscapes, and attire but also the visual representation of abstract categories including behavioral patterns, artistic forms, and philosophical concepts. The key lies in finding a balance between the national characteristics of the symbols and their international commensurability.

The construction of visual discourse, on the other hand, is manifested in how cinematic grammar is employed to organically combine these symbols, endowing them with narrative function and aesthetic significance. Through advanced cinematography, innovative editing rhythms, and expressive audiovisual language, traditional symbols are placed within new visual contexts, thereby opening up new possibilities for interpretation. The construction of visual discourse emphasizes immersive experience and emotional immediacy, striving to transcend language barriers by conveying mood and perspective through purely visual elements such as composition, color palette, lighting, and movement rhythm. Successful visual discourse not only accurately communicates cultural connotations but also shapes a unique visual style and aesthetic paradigm. It becomes the most penetrating component of a cultural identification system, directly influencing the perceptual frameworks and emotional identification of international audiences.

3. From Discourse to Identity: The Reception Dimension and Formation Pathways of International Audiences

3.1 Cognitive Frameworks and the Cross-Cultural Interpretation of Discursive Meaning

The reception mechanism through which international audiences engage with documentary discourse is fundamentally an active process of meaning negotiation and construction, rooted in their pre-existing cognitive frameworks. A cognitive framework, formed over time within the soil of a specific culture and through social experience, constitutes a relatively stable set of psychological schemata and interpretive paradigms. It predisposes the scope within which an audience perceives the world, the criteria for screening information, and the potential pathways for interpreting meaning. This framework encompasses multiple dimensions, including deep-seated cultural values, ideological orientations, accumulated historical memories, perceptions of social norms, and levels of media literacy. When documentary discourse, encoded with a specific cultural logic and narrative intent, enters a heterogeneous communication field, its encoded meaning is not transparently transferred. Instead, it immediately encounters the filtering, comparison, and reconstruction performed by the audience's cognitive framework. The interaction between the two exists on a spectrum: ranging from high congruence leading to semantic resonance and smooth acceptance, through partial overlap resulting in negotiated interpretation, to severe misalignment causing semantic conflict, cultural discount, or even oppositional decoding. This process reveals the inherent uncertainty and complexity of cross-cultural communication; the final locus of meaning is not unilaterally determined by the communicator but is "re-produced" through the dynamic interaction between the text's structure and the audience's framework^[5].

In light of this, the construction of effective international communication discourse must move beyond the unidirectional encoding of information and instead commit to the strategic work of "frame bridging." This requires the communicating agent to conduct in-depth research into the target audience's cognitive preconceptions and semantic maps, and to perform precise discursive adjustments based on this understanding. The core strategy lies in artfully establishing "meaning access points"-that is, identifying and highlighting narrative elements, emotional cores, or problematics capable of penetrating cultural boundaries and resonating with universal human experiences or global shared concerns. Examples include interpreting unique cultural practices within the context of universal themes such as family, growth, innovation, or ecology; or employing visual metaphors or analogies to connect unfamiliar cultural symbols with imagery familiar to the audience, thereby reducing cognitive load. A more advanced strategy involves actively constructing a "dialogic text" that, while presenting its own perspective, leaves open spaces inviting the audience to engage in meaning negotiation and reflection. This bridging is neither a simple pandering to nor a negation of the audience's framework, but rather a constructive intervention. It aims to gently expand the boundaries of their cognition, foster a comprehensible acceptance of unfamiliar cultural logics, and lay the cognitive groundwork for deeper semantic sharing and identity transformation.

3.2 Emotional Resonance and the Psychological Process of Accepting Cultural Identity

Building upon the initial exploration and adjustment at the cognitive level, emotional resonance serves as the crucial pivot and catalyst that drives the transformation of discursive meaning into a deeper psychological identification. While rational cognition provides the blueprint for understanding, emotional resonance imbues this blueprint with warmth, color, and vitality. It is the core mechanism for breaking down cultural-psychological defenses and establishing positive emotional connections. Leveraging the unique sense of authenticity and immersion inherent to its realist aesthetic, documentaries can directly touch upon those universal aspects of the human emotional spectrum that transcend specific cultural contexts. This is achieved through nuanced portrayals of personal destinies, revelations of internal emotional conflicts, displays of survival wisdom, and the creation of evocative audiovisual atmospheres. These elements resonate with shared human experiences—such as the defense of dignity, compassion for suffering, admiration for resilience, awe at the beauty of nature, and a common yearning for hope in the future. This emotional triggering accomplishes a form of "affective transfer," whereby the audience's emotional response to specific characters or stories is partially projected onto the associated cultural background or value system^[6].

The psychological acceptance of cultural identity is an internalization process that evolves from emotional engagement to value recognition. When an audience develops emotional affinity and identification with the cultural elements, ways of life, or value propositions presented in the discourse, it can subsequently trigger a psychological tendency toward feelings of closeness and belonging. This acceptance goes beyond mere appreciation of an "Other" culture; it may, in contrast with one's own identity, stimulate reflection on and reconstruction of one's own cultural positioning. By showcasing the richness, depth, and contemporary vitality of a culture, documentary discourse can shape a positive, approachable, and respectable cultural image. This, in turn, satisfies the international audience's need for understanding cultural diversity and establishes a stable, emotionally-charged psychological association and positive evaluation of specific cultural signifiers within their own world of meaning.

3.3 The Long-Term Formation Pathway of Identity Internalization and Behavioral Feedback

The ultimate establishment of a deep cultural identity is marked by the completion of an "internalization" process. This process transitions from the external reception of information to the integration of that information into one's internal psychological structures. Furthermore, it can manifest externally as sustained, autonomous behavioral intentions and feedback, thereby forming a self-reinforcing dynamic cycle. Internalization signifies that international audiences, having perceived, understood, and developed an affinity for specific cultural information, values, or perspectives conveyed through documentary discourse, organically integrate these elements into their own pre-existing systems of meaning and cognitive schemas. This occurs through repeated cognitive processing and emotional experience^[7]. It is no longer merely external, observed factual knowledge but evolves into a part of the audience's subjective worldview. It becomes an internal dimension that may be actively drawn upon when they perceive reality, understand issues, or make value judgments. This internalization may manifest as a conscious understanding of and preference for the symbolic meaning of specific cultural symbols, a sustained interest in and desire to explore issues related to that culture, or an unconscious adoption of a more understanding and empathetic communication stance in cross-cultural contexts.

Behavioral feedback is the external manifestation and reinforcement stage of identity internalization. It takes diverse forms, including actively disseminating positive information during cross-cultural interactions, engaging in secondary dissemination and meaning reproduction via social media, developing a willingness to consume related cultural products, or even demonstrating the influence received through concrete personal or social actions. This feedback creates a cycle from reception to re-dissemination, extending the chain of discursive influence and potentially affecting the perceptions of broader groups. The formation of a long-term, stable identity depends on continuous and diverse exposure to discourse and the accumulation of positive interactive experiences. It is a dynamic, non-linear process. It signifies the evolution of cross-cultural communication from short-term information reach and attitude influence to the construction of a cultural relationship characterized by stability and generative potential.

Conclusion

This study systematically investigates the dynamic process of discourse construction and identity formation in the international dissemination of Chinese documentaries. The research reveals that effective international communication constitutes a systematic endeavor involving complex discursive negotiation and psychological acceptance. Discourse construction manifests as multi-agent collaboration, the modernization and humanization of narrative approaches, and the universalized visual transformation of cultural symbols. Audience reception, meanwhile, follows a progressive pathway from cognitive adjustment and emotional resonance to identity internalization and externalized behavioral feedback. This indicates that the success of cross-cultural communication hinges critically on achieving a bidirectional alignment between textual strategies and audience psychology, as well as a creative synthesis of cultural specificity and universal human commonality. Future research could be deepened in the following directions: intensifying the study of refined audience segmentation and targeted communication; focusing on how new technologies within the digital media ecology reshape discourse forms and identity mechanisms; and exploring cultural integration and discursive innovation in transnational co-productions. These efforts could advance a paradigm shift from "telling China's stories" to "co-telling the world's stories," thereby fostering a more constructive relationship in global cultural dialogue.

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