

Cultural Transformation and Visual Practice: The audiovisual communication rhetoric of Qiaopi Culture as seen from the documentary “Approaching Qiaopi”

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Abstract: This paper takes the documentary Approaching Qiaopi as a case study to explore the rhetorical strategies of cultural transformation and dissemination of Qiaopi culture through documentary forms and audiovisual techniques. Qiaopi, a vital medium for communication between overseas Chinese in the Minnan region and their hometown relatives, carries rich historical memories and emotional symbolism. The documentary Approaching Qiaopi concretizes Qiaopi culture by showcasing the architecture, daily life of residents, historical materials, and reenactments in the Qiaopi hometown, thereby conveying its profound history and simple folk customs. By analyzing the audiovisual practices employed in Approaching Qiaopi, this study explores specific pathways for the visual rhetoric of Qiaopi culture, offering a logical framework to enhance awareness of inheriting and preserving this cultural heritage.

Keywords: Qiaopi culture; Audio-visual rhetoric; Audio-visual language of documentaries; Cultural communication strategies

1. Preface

“Pi” in the dialect of the southern Fujian region means “letter”, and “qiaopi” refers to the letters sent by overseas Chinese from the southern Fujian region to their relatives and friends through specific channels, often including remittances. Qiaopi is not only an emotional medium but also a historical medium, carrying the narrative of homesickness in a specific historical and cultural context. Qiaopi culture encompasses the living conditions of overseas Chinese families and the cultural and humanistic features of the hometowns of overseas Chinese in the southern Fujian region. It is a unique business card of the hometowns of overseas Chinese, condensing the spirit of the overseas Chinese’s hard work abroad and containing the spiritual core of the excellent traditional Chinese culture. It records the historical connections between China and Southeast Asian countries in the context of overseas Chinese going abroad and covers rich historical information and contemporary signals.^[1] Studying and disseminating Qiaopi culture has significant cultural, educational significance, historical value, and contemporary diplomatic functions.

As a form of expression of visual art, documentaries are true to the original appearance of things. Through real and rich historical materials and audio-visual means combining the virtual and the real, they transform the intangible “emotion” into tangible images, allowing the real historical culture to be recorded and disseminated more truly, systematically, and comprehensively. Therefore, documentaries can visualize Qiaopi culture through audio-visual communication means, transform Qiaopi culture with the help of images, sounds, words, and lenses, explore the temperature, depth, and thickness of Qiaopi culture, and convey a sense of cultural identity to the Chinese people.

“Approaching Qiaopi” (Season 1), jointly produced by the Fujian Provincial Archives and Fujian Broadcasting and Film Group, focuses on three themes: Connecting the World, Linking the Four Seas, and Expressing Sentiments to the Hometown. Taking Qiaopi as a clue, it comprehensively showcases Qiaopi culture

from aspects such as the evolution of letter agencies, the stories of overseas Chinese, and the operation network of Qiaopi. “Approaching Qiaopi” was selected as an excellent domestic documentary in the first quarter of 2023 by the National Radio and Television Administration and was simultaneously broadcast on the “Haibo TV” client in Fujian Province and the “Learning Power” Fujian learning platform.

This article takes the documentary “Approaching Qiaopi” as the research object, using case analysis and literature analysis methods to explore how cultural documentaries transform Qiaopi culture through audio-visual means? How can Qiaopi culture be more widely and effectively disseminated through audio-visual practices? With the spiritual value and emotional transmission in Qiaopi culture as the starting point, this text analyzes the cultural transformation and audio-visual practice of the documentary “Approaching Qiaopi”. Thus, it attempts to explore a specific path of visual rhetoric of excellent traditional Chinese culture and the logical approach to enhancing the consciousness of the Chinese national community.

2. Cultural transformation: Historical memory and emotional symbols

2.1. History of hometowns of overseas Chinese, urban memory

Urban memory is the cognition and reconstruction of the overall image of a city, and its carrier is the historical records with preservation value formed during the process of urban construction, transformation, and development. Qiaopi is one of the carriers of urban memory in the southeastern coastal areas of China. The documentary “Approaching Qiaopi” takes Qiaopi as a clue to explore the urban memory of key hometowns of overseas Chinese in Fujian Province.^[2]

In the second episode of the first season of the documentary “Approaching Qiaopi”, it filmed the ships coming and going at Shima Port, retraced the old pier of Longhai Shima Port using 3D models and photo materials, and unfolded the story of Rongyuan Letter Agency in Zhangzhou in the comparison of the old and new of the pier shipping. The camera combined the perspective of a traveler to record the details of life in Zhangzhou, such as the adjacent shops on the old street, the sofas placed on the street, the elderly chatting while drinking tea, and the hand-woven stool and chair furniture, with an observing attitude. In the second episode of the first season, the camera shows the close-up of the carvings, the close-up of the eaves, and the group portrait of the cornices of the buildings in Wulin Ancient Village, Jinjiang, Fujian Province, and showcases the Roman-style Western-style buildings, Nanyang-style Fanzi buildings, and red-brick houses with regional characteristics of southern Fujian that integrate multiple styles, bringing out the Overseas Chinese Architecture Museum of Jinjiang in the image overlay.

To sum up, through showcasing the architecture of hometowns of overseas Chinese and the daily life of citizens, with the help of historical materials and scene reproduction, and with the help of carriers such as buildings, street scenes, and Qiaopi, the documentary spreads the city image of the southern Fujian region as a gathering place of hometowns of overseas Chinese with a profound history and simple folk customs.

2.2. Attractive stories, touching with emotions

Spinoza regarded “affect” as active or passive physical feelings, namely emotional experiences, physical feelings, and thinking associations. This interaction can enhance or reduce the power of physical activities and also has an effect on the change of emotions. It is the movement and transformation from one state to another.^[3] From the perspective of publicity effects, the facts told by documentaries act more on the surface of the audience, while feature films act more on the hearts of the audience. Documentaries can enhance the story nature of the

film by shaping characters, connecting plots, adding details, etc., mobilize the audience to form physical feelings across the screen, enhance interaction, and enter the hearts of the audience to increase the appeal.

“Approaching Qiaopi” interviewed Zhuang Hai’an, a musician from Zhangzhou, and with his created Minnan dialect folk songs, the rendering of the old street in Zhangzhou and the close-up shots of guitar playing and singing, fully mobilized the audience’s audio-visual senses and conveyed the strong nostalgia of overseas Chinese in those years to the audience. “Fanke Shen” was the name given to the wives of overseas Chinese who stayed in their hometowns in the past in the southern Fujian region. The documentary focuses on this special group of “Fanke Shen”, and reproduces the scene of Fanke Shen writing a letter by hand and crying in her old age due to missing in the form of non-fiction reenactment, visualizing the details of the affection and love between Fanke Shen and her overseas Chinese husband in the family letters of Qiaopi for the audience. The documentary, in a real and sensible way such as non-fiction reenactment, local characteristic music, and personal oral accounts, visualizes the connection of affection among overseas Chinese in Qiaopi culture, the love of the local people for the local culture, and the respect and inheritance of Qiaopi culture by the descendants of overseas Chinese, triggering the physical feelings of the audience and achieving a deeper dissemination effect.

2.3. Symbol utilization, meaning extension

The signifier and signified of a symbol are not stable and unchangeable, and the meaning of the symbol is in a fluid state. As a symbolic system, documentaries express the denotative meaning through audio-visual images.

^[4] The creative team of “Approaching Qiaopi” refined the unique meaning of Qiaopi culture and expressed it through symbols to make the fluid and uncertain connotation actually perceivable and enhance the audience’s identity with Qiaopi culture.

In the first episode of the first season of the documentary “Approaching Qiaopi”, at the beginning, many family letters turned into paper boats crossing mountains and seas in an animation, showing the role of Qiaopi in connecting the friendship between the two places. At the same time, with the scene of paper boats crossing the sea, it pointed out that Qiaopi culture is a regional characteristic of the southeastern coastal area. The direction of the paper boats traveling towards the full moon means the fulfillment of longing and at the same time, based on the background of overseas Chinese going abroad to Southeast Asia, it also has the meaning of harmony. The overall tone is mostly brown-yellow, expressing the simplicity and thickness of history. Combined with the animation of paper boats crossing the sea, which is not completely smooth and vivid, and the 3D modeling is not fine enough, it is not easy to be accepted and loved by young groups who are not familiar with Qiaopi. “Approaching Qiaopi” filmed many empty shots of “boats” many times. At sunset, there is a lone boat at sea. The boat has the connotations of wandering at the end of the world, longing for return and relatives, and pursuing prosperity in Chinese culture^[5] In this film, it also confirms the theme that overseas Chinese went abroad to strive for development, and even many overseas Chinese had a drifting life and their relatives left behind had deep concerns. It also renders a subtle and profound cultural temperament. This film showcases many local buildings in hometowns of overseas Chinese. The purely Western-style building Qiyuan in Quanzhou was built by the descendants of Wang Shunxing, who was engaged in cross-sea business. The business points of Wang Shunxing Letter Agency were concentrated in Manila and once monopolized the Qiaopi business between the Philippines and Quanzhou. The documentary uses the building as an introduction to tell the history of the letter agency’s participation in the Qiaopi business and the construction of the Qiaopi business network that connects domestic and foreign.

3. Audio-visual Practice: Audience Association and Emotional Connection

3.1. Image ontology, association and identity

Metz divided images into real objects and imagined objects. The real object refers to the film ontology that triggers the audience's feelings, and the imagined object is the pleasant film attributed to the audience's own fantasy, which endows the image with emotional value.^[6] "Approaching Qiaopi" adopts methods such as scene reproduction and image blanking to stimulate the audience's active imagination, realizing the transformation from the image ontology to the audience's imagined object, allowing the audience to feel the charm of Qiaopi culture through the image and construct the identity of Qiaopi culture in the imagined object that pleases them.

For example, the documentary tells the life story of the overseas Chinese Huang Kaiwu, who traveled from Jiao Mei, his hometown, to the south to the Philippines, and then joined the Xialv Song Branch of the China Alliance Society to participate in the revolutionary movement of the motherland. The use of scene reproduction is impressive. The actor portrays the young Huang Kaiwu, carrying luggage and wearing a long gown, standing on the pier and looking into the distance, full of ambition; the next shot connects the elderly Huang Kaiwu standing and looking towards his hometown, with waves splashing at the pier. The contrast between the two shots interweaves the vigor and vitality of the young overseas Chinese leaving home to go abroad to strive and the thickness and sedimentation of the elderly, touching the audience with the performance of personal story fragments, triggering the audience's imagination about his life overseas, and extending to associate the magnificent history of overseas Chinese going abroad. At the same time, the camera shows the shots of Huang Kaiwu carrying luggage, hurrying with his feet, and the long gown being blown by the wind, without specific dialogue. The beginning and end of the story are connected by blanking, allowing the audience to fully immerse themselves in the blending of scenes of waves, sky, pier, youth, luggage, long gown, and other spaces and characters, and even substitute into the first-person perspective to empathize with the complex mood of overseas Chinese going abroad and experience Huang Kaiwu's enthusiasm for the revolutionary cause of the motherland while still in Xialv Song. In this process, the documentary stimulates the audience's active imagination, allowing the audience to construct the identity of adventure, responsibility, and patriotism in Qiaopi culture in addition to recognizing the historical value of Qiaopi.

3.2. Progressive narrative, emotional connection

Progressive structural thinking refers to a structural thinking mode in which the contents of each structural unit maintain an irreversible logical relationship, temporal relationship, spatial relationship, and degree relationship through progressive and in-depth penetration.^[7] The three parts of the first season of the documentary "Approaching Qiaopi" are "Two Lands in Storm and Rain", "Expressing Sentiments in Letters", and "Treasures Left by Time", progressively telling the story of letter agencies and the operation network of Qiaopi, the delivery personnel and the content of Qiaopi, and the concern of overseas Chinese for the revolutionary cause of the motherland and the exhibition of Qiaopi. The emotional advancement is completed in the large structure, from Qiaopi connecting the economy to Qiaopi related to love, affection, and patriotism.

In addition to the core events in the narrative structure of TV documentaries, satellite events need to be used flexibly to make the documentaries have a combination of density and sparseness and highlight the key points.^[8] Before telling the historical core event of overseas Chinese leaving their hometowns in the first episode of the first season of the documentary, it first introduces through Zhuang Hai'an's Minnan dialect folk

song and then introduces the concept of “Fanke”. The music element mobilizes the light and flexible rhythm of the documentary, making the audience gradually attracted and not bored, playing the role of satellite events in arousing the audience’s interest. This episode of the documentary also interviewed Zheng Huiying, the descendant of Wang Shunxing Letter Agency, to tell the family history, leading to the once prosperous situation of the Qiaopi letter agency and the function of the Qiaopi operation network connecting Southeast Asia.

Internationalized narrative is a very important feature of current cultural documentaries. For example, “A Bite of China” looks at the living habits of Chinese people through the window of food. In the narrative language, it adopts the introduction perspective of Chinese people as the main body, “Chinese people use tofu to express their soft and flexible adaptability”. Another example is the documentary “Above Rice, Oil and Salt”, directed by the Oscar-winning director and co-produced by China and foreign countries. Qiaopi culture has diplomatic attributes due to the history of Qiaopi industry connecting Southeast Asia and is suitable for internationalized narrative. The documentary “Approaching Qiaopi” does not have English subtitles and English dubbing. The narrative perspective mainly starts from an individual perspective, telling the history of hometowns of overseas Chinese in Fujian Province, and has room for improvement in international communication.

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