

The Presentation of Local Landscapes and the Construction of the National Image in the Documentary "Aerial China"

--An Investigation Based on Geography of Media

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Abstract

Geography of Media is a young discipline demarcated from the intersection of media studies and geography. Its emergence provides a brand-new theoretical perspective and research method for film and television communication. The documentary "Aerial China" uses aerial photography techniques to present the natural and cultural landscapes of various parts of China in an all-round way. Research suggests that observing "Aerial China" from the perspective of geography of media can reconstruct and present the geographical space of China panoramically, and enhance the geographical experience and local identity of the audience. In addition, "Aerial China", with dual scales of localness and globality, actively "shapes" China's image and tells China's stories on the international communication stage.

Keywords

Geography of Media; "Aerial China"; Landscape; National Image; International Communication.

1. Introduction

The TV documentary "Aerial China" was launched by the China Media Group in 2017, and has been broadcast for four seasons. Through modern high-tech aerial photography technology, it tells the unique natural geographical scenery and cultural and historical landscape of 34 provinces, autonomous regions, municipalities directly under the Central Government and special administrative regions of China, and comprehensively displays the regional culture of different regions of China. It depicts the magnificent mountains and rivers of China and the blueprint for the construction of a new era. As "historical palimpsest" and "cultural memory bank", local landscape has the imprint of history and times. *Aerial China has become a representative work in shaping national image, which is inseparable from the shaping of geographical landscape.* What is the relationship between Geography of Media and documentary? How does "Aerial China" take advantage of China's local geographical advantage - local landscape to present the story text, and how to tell Chinese stories well under the influence of two scales: local and global?

2. The Relationship between Geography of Media and Documentary

Geography of Media is a young subject divided from the borderline of media studies and geography. Its emergence provides a new theoretical perspective and research method for film and television communication. The proposed Geography of Media is the inevitable result of the integration and interaction between current communication studies and other disciplines. Media, as an extension of people, extends people's sensory system to the outside world, while documentary, as an important audiovisual medium showing the real world of human beings,

can construct community aesthetics in the image world for the audience through the objective landscape.

On the one hand, documentaries usually record and present specific places and environments, and often involve spatial movement and geographical change. Through visual presentation and narrative means, documentary can highlight certain geographical features and sense of place, affect the audience's cognitive and emotional connection to these places, and show the dynamic and diversity of places. On the other hand, documentaries can help shape and spread local identity by focusing on the history, culture and social life of a certain region, so as to resist the trend of cultural homogenization brought about by globalization, emphasize the importance of local cultural values and enhance the cultural identity of the community. At the same time, documentaries can also challenge and reflect on the construction process of local identity, revealing the power relations and cultural conflicts behind local identity.

It is worth mentioning that documentary production itself is a kind of space practice, involving the shooting and investigation of the film team in different locations. This practice not only affects the content of the film, but also reflects the interaction between the producer and the shooting location. The dissemination and screening of documentaries also have a spatial dimension. Audiences in different regions may have different interpretations and reactions to the same documentary, which reflects the dissemination and acceptance of media content in different geographical environments.

Therefore, documentaries shape and reflect geographical space and local identity under the framework of Geography of Media, which enriches the theory of Geography of Media and provides new theoretical support for its production and dissemination. Geography of Media focuses on how media shape and reconstruct geographical space. Aerial China breaks the audience's existing traditional movie-watching thinking through the perspective of aerial photography, and re-constructs the audience's cognition of China's geographical space through the division of provincial administrative regions, and presents the great rivers and mountains of the motherland from a panoramic and three-dimensional perspective. Make China's natural geographical environment and profound human history spread and express through new forms.

3. The Practice of Interpreting the Image of China in Aerial Photography of China

The geographer Carl O. Sauer defines a landscape as *"a medium for the description and interpretation of the world"* as *"an area consisting of a prominent combination of natural and cultural forms"* [2]. Thus, Sauer divides landscape into natural landscape and cultural landscape. The former refers to the landscape that is mostly or not disturbed by human activities, and the latter refers to the landscape that is only transformed by human activities and human attitudes. Cultural landscape not only has the material basis of natural landscape, but also is affected by social, economic and historical development. *Social meaning and spatial construction are linked to place, and it is because of the meanings combined between places that the concept of space has substantive content* [3]. Media constructs the "sense of place" of landscape for cultural identity through recording and shaping local landscape. The mass media plays an important role in the generation of modern people's sense of place, and the documentary that describes the objective real world plays an important role in interpretation, emphasis and prominence. Aerial China presents the two landscapes from the perspective of aerial photography, which is an effective practice path to interpret the image of China, so that its geographical landscape shows local characteristics.

3.1. Natural Landscape: the Natural Topic of Documentary Narrative

The formation of natural landscapes is influenced by many natural factors such as geology, climate, hydrology, biology and time, which work together to shape the various natural landscapes we see today. The natural landscape not only provides a magnificent visual effect for the documentary and enhances the viewing experience, but also provides the background and stage for the documentary narrative. By showing different natural landscapes, documentaries can show the unique environment and ecosystem of a specific region, thereby enhancing the authenticity and depth of the narrative and triggering emotional resonance among the audience. Therefore, the natural landscape has become a natural topic in the narrative content of the documentary, and it is also the source and basis of many beautiful shots in Aerial China.

Aerial China selects natural landscapes representative of provincial administrative units in China, such as Huangshan Mountain, Guilin mountains, Saimu Lake, Tianshan Mountain and Qinghai Lake. These landscapes not only have unique aesthetic value, but also represent the diverse geographical environment and natural conditions of China. At the same time, Aerial China not only focuses on static natural landscapes, but also shows ecosystems such as wetlands, grasslands and forests. Convey the biodiversity and ecological value of the natural landscape by displaying the flora and fauna of the ecosystem. China's border minority areas are close to nature and tradition, and are relatively less affected by modern industrial civilization. Aerial China focuses on showing the natural scenery of this region, which arouses the infinite yearning and happy imagination of many viewers. In the "Xinjiang Chapter", the film crew used a large number of long shots to show the magnificent natural scenery of Xinjiang, such as the tall and straight Bogda Peak, the warm and humid Yili Valley, and the mysterious Devil City, in order to show its geographical environment with wide variations in cold and heat and obvious vertical climate distribution. Through the linguistic symbols and non-verbal symbols of Aerial China, the local landscape of Xinjiang is presented, so that the audience can appreciate the vastness and shock of the northwest border, and present the tranquility and "original ecology" far from the city.

In addition, Aerial China focuses on the relationship between natural landscapes and human activities. For example, landscape such as afforestation and terracing construction not only show the natural geographical characteristics, but also reflect how human beings adapt and transform the natural environment to form a unique landscape that combines nature and culture. In the "Shanxi part", the film crew specially photographed the great achievements of afforestation in Youyu County that year, where the people have adhered to the valuable quality of afforestation for generations, turned the past "barren land" into today's "oasis", and cast the "Youyu spirit" of national civilization. The various deeds presented in Aerial China show that China has achieved remarkable results in the process of ecological and environmental protection.

3.2. Cultural Landscape: the Memory and Time Representation of Documentary Narration

Cultural landscape refers to the traces and changes left by human activities in the natural environment. Cultural landscapes include not only changes in physical forms, such as man-made environments such as buildings, transportation, fields and cities, but also immaterial cultural elements, such as languages, customs, religions and social structures. These landscapes reflect the interaction between human beings and their living environment, and are the product of the comprehensive effect of nature and culture. As each group has the function of constructing social and cultural memory, after a long time of accumulation, individuals gradually form personalized memories, and individual memories condense into social collective memory framework, reflecting the cultural identity of a specific region. "Aerial China"

focuses on historical and cultural cities, historical sites, religious sites, etc., and focuses on shaping the material carriers of the formation of collective memories. In addition, the formation of cultural landscape is a dynamic process, so it also has the cultural characteristics of the depth of time, and is in the process of constant reconstruction.

In the "Shanxi Part", the aerial camera takes the audience to enjoy the Taihang Mountain wall road and Hengshan Xuankong Temple on the "cliff", witnessing the diligence and wisdom of the ancients; Also fly over Pingyao Ancient City, royal courtyard, Yungang Grottoes, Buddhist resort Wutai Mountain, Yingxian wooden pagoda and other ancient architecture community, witness the former glory of the mountains and rivers and ancient civilization. For example, in the "Gansu Part", the camera probes into Lanzhou, a city where the Yellow River runs through the city. Speaking from the roots of Chinese civilization, the Yellow River has been called the "Mother River" of the Chinese nation since ancient times, and is the core birthplace of Chinese civilization. In the series on the theme of Shaanxi, Inner Mongolia, Shanxi and other provinces, the important cultural value of the Yellow River, a representative landscape, is also mentioned. For the Great Wall, which also has important cultural and historical significance, Aerial China provides a different aerial perspective from the ordinary "civilian perspective", and the audience can intuitively feel the majestic momentum and great face of the Great Wall. Through the most representative and influential thematic cultural landscapes in Chinese civilization, such as the Yellow River and the Great Wall, Aerial China continues to shape the profound and long-standing Chinese civilization.

"If we do not think in terms of temporal and spatial relations, we cannot form the concept of geographical landscape. It's in the process of evolving or dying or replacing" [4]. With the passage of time, the local cultural landscape is in a process of constant change, which is realistic and contemporary. With the advance of socialist modernization, the transportation landscape, which represents the progress and prosperity of human civilization, has profoundly changed the face of China, connecting metropolises and small towns, mainland and islands, home and far away. Important transportation arteries such as the railway into Tibet, the Hangzhou Bay cross-Sea Bridge and the Hong Kong-Zhuhai-Macao Bridge have shortened the distance between people. Aerial China skillfully combines the perspective of aerial photography with the social era to write a detailed account of the infrastructure landscape and construction legends across China. Aerial China also focuses on the development of all walks of life in China, and uses a large number of pictures to depict the great social changes brought about by scientific and technological progress. For example, the construction of Beijing Daxing International Airport witnessed the seventh miracle of the new world, and Liugang Fangchenggang Steel Base witnessed the development and progress of modern steel industry, which pointed out the way forward for the in-depth promotion of the new great project of Party construction in the new era.

3.3. Landscape Presentation Innovation: Aerial Lens Perception of Panoramic China

Geography of Media focuses on how media shape and reconstruct geographical space, while Aerial China reconstructs the audience's panoramic cognition of China's geographical space through the perspective of aerial photography. In the traditional way of geographical presentation, the ground perspective and map are the main ways. With the continuous upgrading and innovation of modern UAV technology, the aerial photography perspective makes it easy for humans to get the super-perceptual experience of leaving the surface and heading high, providing a broader and three-dimensional perspective, breaking through the previous spatial restrictions. From mountains to plains, from villages to cities, aerial photography reproduces and reshapes human worldviews. Therefore, it not only produces

meaning at the technical level, *but also provides "meaningful form" for the extension of narrative text of film and television art, which will certainly provide a new "way of viewing"* [5].

The lens field setting of "Aerial China" is mainly based on large vista, long view and large panorama. The lens is mainly presented from a top-down perspective, and flexibly shuttles freely in high altitude, low altitude and ultra-low air with vertical overhead shooting, horizontal translation, circling and follow-up lens. In the "Guangdong Part", in order to experience the modern vitality of the city of Guangzhou, the aerial camera machine circled the Guangzhou TV Tower to get a full view of the "small waist" of 600 meters. The camera then flies over the Tianhe Central Business District to show hundreds of thousands of white-collar workers working hard in China's densest area of super-tall buildings over 300 meters. While the views of God are powerful and fascinating, the lack of a search for life and detail makes the entire documentary dull and ungrounded. Therefore, Aerial China combines the perspective of high altitude and ultra-low altitude, and integrates the beautiful natural scenery far from the world with the hustle and bustle of the city. This treatment approach not only avoids a single narrative rhythm, but also shows the characteristics of aerial documentary. In the "Sichuan chapter", the beginning of the ultra-high-altitude perspective to shoot the Zoige prairie in western Sichuan, the first bay of the Jiuqu Yellow River, Jiuzhaigou Valley and other natural landscapes, and then fly over Longquan Mountain into the "land of abundance" Chengdu. The film crew chose wide and narrow alleys and people's parks with the most lively atmosphere in Chengdu, and the aerial camera even flew at a very low Angle below the crowd, showing images with traditional culture and life atmosphere such as Sichuan cuisine, Sichuan opera, and "Dragon Gate Formation", so that the audience could truly feel "the fireworks on earth, the country is peaceful and the people are safe".

4. The Dual Expression of the Local and Global Nature of Aerial China

In the study of Geography of Media, the human geography meaning of "scale" is often concerned. Scale is a real substance, a product of social development, and an important way for human beings to understand the world. The spatial expression of scale is diversified, *including four representations of local, regional, national and global, among which local and global are the two most important scales connecting media and geography* [6].

The modernization of documentary creation is also accompanied by the global and local development. In terms of localism, based on the background of global integration, documentaries are of great significance to the presentation and expression of local sense of place. Based on Chinese local stories, Aerial China deeply explores local landscape characteristics and different regional cultures to show the differences in natural geography and human history between different places. Through landscape nostalgia to create a memory nostalgia complex, the brushwork will further explore the audience's inner depths.

Local landscape is a cultural product with thought, and it is a rich material and cultural heritage. First of all, China has a vast territory and a long history. During the long development process, different regions have formed completely different natural environment and human history. The shooting content of "Aerial China" covers the whole of China, from Heilongjiang, a snow country in the north, to Hainan, a coconut garden in the South China Sea, from Taiwan, a treasure island, to Xinjiang, a border region in the west, showing the beauty of local differences in China concretely and profoundly. Secondly, landscape nostalgia expresses our nostalgia for the life style of our hometown and the pursuit of an ideal world. Aerial Photography of China records representative historical and cultural sites in various provinces, such as the Forbidden City in Beijing, the ruins of the Great Yuan Dynasty in Inner Mongolia, the Tomb of the First Emperor of Qin in Shaanxi, and the ancient Jiming Temple in Jiangsu, to awaken the cultural memories preserved in the vast history of the Chinese nation. In addition, in the current era of

industrial civilization, under the negative influence of cultural hegemony and materialism, people increasingly want to escape from the metropolis and find the "Garden of Eden on earth". Aerial China also features a large number of rural scenes, such as Wuyuan in Jiangxi Province and Bianchui town in Yunnan Province, which give the audience a sense of tranquility, leisure and rustic nature.

As far as documentaries are concerned, the shaping of China's national image can be divided into Western documentaries' "other shaping" and Chinese documentaries' "self-shaping" of China's image. However, to a large extent, China's national image shaping is "other shaping", which inevitably mixed with the position of other countries, behind the national interests, *which is not conducive to the true presentation of China's national image* [7]. Therefore, Chinese documentaries should strengthen the "self-shaping" of national image, take the initiative to design overall issues, including actively disseminating the idea of building a community with a shared future for mankind, *embody the principles of peace, win-win, openness, inclusiveness, joint construction and sharing, and let the world see the image of a responsible major country* [8]. "Aerial China" upholds the important mission of building a beautiful China, highlights the value and significance of telling China's story well, and calls on the people of the whole country to jointly build a prosperous, democratic, culturally advanced, harmonious and beautiful modern socialist country under the advocacy of the concept of a community with a shared future for mankind.

China's international communication is the competition between "Chinese version of Chinese story" and "Western version of Chinese story" [9]. "Aerial China" gives full play to the institutional advantages of the national mainstream media, platform resources and film and television talent advantages, concentrates on major events, and creates a high-quality documentary series that shows the national image and represents the national level. In terms of theme, Aerial China records every wonderful picture, every moment of life and every kind of historical precipitation on the land of China from the perspective of aerial photography, sparing no effort to show the natural geographical features, cultural and historical landscapes formed in China over billions of years and the rapid development of China's economy and society in the new era, constantly opening the eyes of Chinese audiences and inspiring the patriotic feelings of Chinese sons and women. This will strengthen every Chinese's deep love for the great rivers and mountains of the motherland and their cultural self-confidence and self-consciousness of national self-esteem.

5. Conclusion

A good documentary plays an important role in cultural diplomacy and also plays an important role in telling a good story about China. In this sense, the documentary "Aerial China" can be called "a symphonic poem calling for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation". From the perspective of Geography of Media, Aerial China provides a platform for the audience to re-understand China, and creates a panoramic and three-dimensional image of China in the new era. As a media fact, Aerial China presents the different geographical environments, cultural history and other dimensions of 34 provincial administrative units in China in a non-fictionalized way, which makes the image expression of the documentary have a certain "geographical temperament", which is of great value for how to tell Chinese stories well, shape national image and construct national memory in current documentaries. It is also a profound integration and practice of Geography of Media in the field of documentary.

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