

The Impact of Documentaries: The Image of Hsiung-nu in Chinese Documentaries

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Abstract: As a powerful supporter of mass media communication, documentary films bear a deeper social or historical responsibility than fictional images. However, historical documentaries run the risk of not being able to take on too much responsibility due to the spatial and temporal interval, for example, the comments under the documentaries on some platforms will reveal that the Hsiung-nu documentaries have not fully succeeded in guiding spectators to think about historical events with a dialectical attitude. This paper considers the causes of the biased evaluation of Hsiung-nu by the Chinese public from the perspective of documentary ontology and social factors. It concludes that ontological quality and multiple social responsibilities have stretched public trust in historical documentaries beyond their capacity; the factors like historical dilemmas, political demands, and the documentary production process make the Hsiung-nu non-objectively restored in some documentaries, leading the Chinese public away from a sufficiently dialectical view of the past. The re-examination and analysis in this paper are conducive to promoting the pursuit of realism among documentary filmmakers and cultivating dialectical thinking among spectators in documentary viewing.

Keywords: Documentary, Hsiung-nu, Media Communication

1. Introduction

Documentaries are historical images, where the synchronization of the camera and the event leads the viewer to see the unseen. The immediacy of documentary recordings of live events often brings the viewer great persuasiveness. Documentaries often become one of the most important sources for the public to obtain invisible information about the world lived. While historical documentaries are one of the popular documentary categories, they are different from other documentaries. Due to the long interval between the narrated events and the camera, its historicity points more about its content within the category of history. However, while the authentic effect of the synchronization performance is greatly reduced, which renders space for creation, its persuasive effect on the general public is not compromised as the authority of documentaries. Thus, although there are implicit credibility issues, historical documentaries still are significant approach for the public's understanding of distant events.

With the development of communication media, historical documentaries have become active on a myriad of platforms other than television, and spectators are able to interact with the images through commentary. However, the spectators' comments and understanding of non-live or historical events

sometimes detach from existing research findings. It is partially reflected in the spectators' comments on Chinese made Hun-related documentaries. For instance, on the prevailing video platform Bilibili in China, the most popular comment under the window of *Historical Turning Point: The Battle of Han-Hsiung-nu* praises Emperor Wu-ti for fighting back against the Hsiung-nu. They emphasize his decision brings national confidence to descendants. And the highly liked comments below highlight Hsiung-nu's defeat against the Han [1]. Among the comments, the spectators rarely develop a dialectical understanding of Hsiung-nu. They tend to make little reference to Huns' combat habits or their military-political structure, but more to the savagery and strength of the Huns to emphasize the harmlessness or strength of the Han. It leads to the question of how the image of the Hsiung-nu remains constrained to the mass Chinese netizens. This paper tends to answer the question from the documentaries' angle, what factors largely shape Chinese netizens' comments of the Hsiung-nu? It proposes that the non-objectivity in the nature of documentaries and the misrepresenting in the producing process affect historical documentaries' accuracy, at the same time, adding to the influence of their authority, the Chinese public's impression of the Hsiung-nu remains constrained.

2. The Unreality and Authority of Documentaries

Modern documentaries help to disseminate history more widely by means of visualizing materials, however, their authority towards the general public and their non-objective nature result in the reinforcement and dissemination of some inaccuracies. First of all, different from general public's perception, documentaries are essentially distant from objective statements. In contrast to fictional films, documentaries are often seen as non-fictional works. In fact, documentaries share numerous characteristics with fictional films. From the selection of the subject matter, the casting of actors or social actors, the lighting and set-up of the interview sessions, the composition of the images, and the extensive post-production editing, documentaries and films often share the same experience. They both use the camera to tell one or several points of view. As Bill Nichols suggests in *Representing Reality* that documentaries are "fiction unlike others" and "views on reality" [2]. Whereas viewpoints present an inherently non-objective and non-complete reality, therefore, documentaries do not qualify as non-fiction in the strict sense. Documentaries differ from fictional films only in the material incorporation, which constitute views that are reality-based. Modern documentary filmmakers inevitably take a certain point of view and use each image as a word to support an argument. They put each paragraph together montagically, and output a fictional world made of real material. Thus, the documentary, serving as a record of past that meets contemporary needs, essentially exists between nonfiction and fiction.

In addition to the dilemma of restoring reality to documentaries inherently, the process of making films often faces challenges in terms of reliability for external reasons. In some extreme cases, the implications of the documentary can even lean more towards fiction. First, modern documentaries often face a situation where the documentary filmmaker is part of an organization or institution, rather than a member of the group being filmed. The distance between the director and the life of the subject and the unique standards or perspectives of the institution further exacerbate the drift in perspective. These make the filmed material's own context and meaning become the institution's voice. The contradiction between the material and the agency is especially amplified when both are in opposing positions. For instance, this problem exists in a large number of World War propaganda documentaries, including the intentional glorification of the Nazis in *Triumph of the Will* and the deliberate distortion of the Jews in *Der ewige Jude* [3, 4]. Second, documentaries driven by profit incline toward commercial films. In the process of gathering primary source material, if the investment in filming or the time invested in researching the material is reduced, it leads to incomplete information gathering and misinterpretation of past events. And in order to attract more audiences, producers may increase entertaining features, such as reenactments and fictional editing. Without

faith in saving historical records, these documentaries are prone to add more beneficial adjustments, making it away from reality. Third, the fictionalization of documentaries is fostered by controversial historical materials and limited archaeological evidence. It is more often the case in documentaries dealing with history. As the relevant historical materials were recorded by human beings, which were not immune to subjectivity, there a myriad of potential misrepresentations. For example, there is a discrepancy between the written records of Hun politics and life by the Han dynasty and the evidence presented by Hun relics, as well as the controversial records of Haiti from a Western perspective [5, 6]. Then, when there are serious constraints or preferences of the recorder in the recording process, the historical record is not suitable to be fully trusted. Historical documentaries based on controversial historical materials will have problems with authenticity. In addition, the lack of materials and evidence will inspire the replacement of physical reality with animation, reenactment, and oral interpretation, and the content of the documentaries tends to be more speculative and imaginative. Therefore, in fact, the authenticity of documentaries is often at risk. Some gaps between producers and subjects will easily lead to the falsification of documentaries. The transmission of credible information depends on the spectators' trust and the producers' responsibility.

Under the combined influence of essential and external factors, however, their authority remains intact when documentaries cannot perfectly reproduce the history with aura. One source of this authority is originated from the camera. In terms of images, the camera's ability enhances persuasiveness. André Bazin points out that the mechanical nature of the camera removes human influence, "for the first time, an image of the world is formed automatically without the creative intervention of man" [7]. Psychologically, the image produced by the camera is more objective. And D.N. Rodowick notes that the automated process after the second the camera is pressed takes the image out of human control, "once the shutter is released the image is formed automatically in a chemical reaction to light reflected from a physical situation localizable in space and time" [8]. The light and shadows recorded in the runaway are closer to the original. This close-to-reality image brings spectators a sense of familiarity and provides the premise for the documentary narrative, making the result of "we see what was there before the camera; it must be true" [9]. In addition, the authority of documentaries is cultivated by factors beyond the images, including "its narration, site of exhibition, reputation, intention, interpretation-even its category at the local video store" [10]. Their authenticity is judged by directors and spectators and then influences the wider public, and Michael Renov even suggests that documentaries are more influenced by "a social bond" than by technical and ontological images [10]. Thus, even though there are debatable aspects, the authority of the documentary still occupies a stable place in people's perception. However, this contradiction buries the problem of misleading information dissemination.

3. Historical Turning Point: The Battle of Han-Hsiung-nu

If inauthenticity and authority are unavoidable in documentaries, the risks associated with these creative components will be more acute in documentaries featuring historical subjects that are separated from the camera. Here I will take the analysis of *历史的拐点之汉匈之战* (*Historical Turning Point: The Battle of Han-Hsiung-nu*) as an example [11], to help discuss how the Chinese netizens' understanding of the Hsiung-nu remain limited under the influence of documentaries. *Historical Turning Point: The Battle of Han-Hsiung-nu* is an episodic documentary made by CCTV-9 (China Central Television) in 2016. CCTV is central key news website hosted by China Central Radio and Television. It has a close relationship with national government that represent as the national television media in the People's Republic of China with the spirit of national responsibility, global vision, humanistic sentiment. *Historical Turning Point* is a documentary film entirely programmed by the organization, and the director and other principals are vested in the organization. In six episodes, the documentary film tells the story of the war and conflicts between the Han and the

Hsiung-nu from the Qin to Han dynasties. The film depicts the battle from the Han perspective, from the difficulty of conquering the Hsiung-nu attack to the later successful counterattack against the Hsiung-nu soldiers under the guidance of two great generals, and concludes with the Han's driving out of the Hsiung-nu. As these films are streamed on TV and online, the main spectators are Chinese citizens, and international audiences are potential groups. Due to the historical resources, contemporary national policies, and film production reasons, the documentary conveys a history that presents a non-complete reality, which leads to the spectators' absorption of the misrepresenting and generates a non-dialectical impression of the Hsiung-nu history.

Considering the perspective of historical resources, *Historical Turning Point: The Battle of Han-Hsiung-nu*'s problematic use of historical materials affects the accuracy of the information conveyed to the spectators. As mentioned earlier, documentaries based on questionable historical sources cannot be fully trusted. Given the perspectives of the documentarians, although historical sources are first-hand sources, the choice of historical material still requires thoughtful consideration. For example, in *制造汉武帝* (*Making Emperor Wu-ti*), it discusses that the *Zizhi Tongjian* by Sima Guang cannot be used as a general historical source for the study of Qin and Han history [12]. It is because of the serious issues with the historical sources *Zizhi Tongjian* based, such as *汉武故事* (*The Han Wu Story*) [12]. A similar problem exists in this documentary, where the only historical source presented in the entire documentary is *Shiji* [13]. *Shiji* is a great ancient historical material written by the historian Ssu-ma Ch'ien, but this does not mean that its contents are trustworthy. In *Ancient China and its Enemies*, Nicola Di Cosmo refers to the conflicting contents of *Shiji* and the fact that it documents some views that deviate from the reality of events [14]. For example, Cosmo mentions that on the issue of graves. Based on several Chinese burial styles of the Hsiung-nu coffins, Ssu-ma Ch'ien suggests that the Hsiung-nu followed China in their customs and culture to express appreciation. In fact, both the Hsiung-nu style and the Han-style noble tombs of Hsiung-nu are discovered, and Ssu-ma Ch'ien's argument is not comprehensive enough. Also, Cosmo mentions that Ssu-ma Ch'ien notes he was unable to express his opinions freely and publicly due to the censorship of the time in scroll 110 of *Shiji*. In *Silk Road Studies XIII*, Jonathan Markley also discusses some questionable portrayals of Han-Hungarian relations in *Shiji*, pointing out the different diplomatic attitudes of Ssu-ma Ch'ien and Emperor Wu-ti, as well as some intentionally misleading expressions about Emperor Wu-ti [15]. Even in the first episode of this documentary, expert dictations question the records of the Baideng Mountain War in *Shiji* [11]. He points out that it is unlikely that Maou-tun listened to his wife and gave up the siege of the Han army, but it is more likely that Emperor Gao-zu escaped in secret. From all types of analysis, it can be found that Ssu-ma Ch'ien holds a critical view of Emperor Wu-ti's diplomacy, at the same time, he is afraid of censorship and still has some uncontrollable bias as a Han person. Thus, although Ssu-ma Ch'ien has done his best to be objective compared to other historians such as Pan Gu, he is still unable to maintain a whole narrative of the Hsiung-nu society. In addition, the quantity and diversity of historical material selected made the documentary's reliability questionable. In the absence of a definite written record of the Hsiung-nu and with only archaeological objects to support the analysis, the Hsiung-nu perspective is missing in the process of restoring Han- Hsiung-nu relations. Also, for a historical documentary, the use of one historical source for the restoration is not sufficiently reliable. A single reference source implies a wholesale acceptance of potential problems. Thus, the limited available materials and the doubtful choice of materials make the documentary problematic in terms of historical support, giving the documentary more compositional space to imagine than to document.

Since the documentary was produced in recent years by an authoritative Chinese media organization, the involved political factors cannot be ignored. As Kingsley Edney mentioned in "Propaganda in Chinese Domestic Politics," "all media organizations in China must be officially attached to a supervisory department and a sponsoring work unit within both the Party and the

government” [16]. Films are under control without doubt, which is helpful to articulate state discourse and to guide public views. For example, in the *TV Content Management Regulations* that adopted in China [17], the fifth rule stipulates that film and television shall not involve content that damages national honor and interests as well as undermines national unity. Also, the fortieth rule emphasizes the management of TV series on major revolutionary and major historical themes, as well as the approval and broadcast management of co-productions and imported dramas, respectively, in accordance with the relevant national regulations. They hint at the country’s current national spirit and the image-building. Unity and self-confidence are the grassroots needs of the country’s culture. Media producers follow the nation’s cultural needs and political instructions strictly. For instance, in the chapter “Designing Chinese Nationalism” in *Staging China*, Florian Schneider mentioned how Chinese media reconstruct history for the state needs [18]. For the purpose of branding the nation as “benevolent, amicable family members and benign entities in international affairs” and cooperating with policy instructions, they reshaped the past by “allowing often radical departures from previous interpretations” [18]. For example, in *The Founding of the Republic*, the relationship between Mao and his political opponents tends to be mutually respected, and shares similar political ideas; moreover, Mao is portrayed not as emphasizing Maoist politics but as supporting the development of capitalism [19]. At the same time, worse historical periods such as the Great Leap Forward and the cultural revolution are often overlooked in recollections of the past, while the history of successful reforms is repeatedly referred to [18]. These situations and purposes are also implemented in *Historical Turning Point: The Battle of Han-Hsiung-nu*. In the documentary, the producers are committed to portraying the Huns as a barbaric, irrational, and untrustworthy group, without real or in-depth intention to cover the Hsiung-nu’s situation and customs, and regard them as a tool to serve the Han’s image of prosperity, harmlessness, and justice. For example, in the first episode, the expert in the documentary explains that because the Huns’ living environment is only suitable for growing grass but not crops, they choose to rob the Han people’s food. The description of this point is purely from the Han perspective, shaping the image of the Hsiung-nu as a barbaric and simple group. In fact, the Hsiung-nu have more complex reasons for their behaviors. From multiple historical records (e.g., *Shiji*, *Shi Ming* · *Shi Yin Shi*, and *Dong Guan Han Ji* · *Dougu*), it is basically accepted that the Hsiung-nu, as nomads, lived their daily lives on a diet of dairy and meat products, and their horses were fed on grass. Therefore, even if they did not live by farming, they were adequate for self-sufficiency in good environmental weather. At the same time, according to Ginpū Uchida and Wentao Wang’s summary, when the Hsiung-nu faced disasters resulting from environmental and climatic reasons, there was no large-scale plundering but caused social conflicts, divisions within the Hsiung-nu [20], and the quests for reconciliation with the Han [21]. What’s more, according to Ginpū Uchida’s analysis of the reasons for Hun invasions of farming areas, it is found that there was no invasion due to famine. The reasons for invasions in various periods were the recapture of grazing land, establishment of power, revenge after damage to properties, and greed for wealth [21]. Therefore, the aggression for food grabbing described in the documentary is non-objective and misleading. It is reasonable to consider the possibility that the documentary stands in a Han-centric perspective, considers the interests of modern China, and unconsciously stigmatizes the hostile Hsiung-nu forces.

In addition, there is also a deliberate omission of some history here in order to play up the theme of the Hsiung-nu’s malicious aggression and the Han’s continued efforts in accomplishing the counter-invasion. The first few episodes of this documentary lay out the constant aggression of the Hsiung-nu, and the latter episodes heavily exaggerate the several successful battles of the Han generals, and final part of episode five summarizes the frequent defeats after the Great Battle of the Desert North in two short sentences as “two years later, the Northern Hsiung-nu demised, and the Han Empire won the great victory.” First, the documentary ignores the unjust warfare part of the Han-Hsiung-nu War to reinforce Han’s positive image. From Baoshun Guan’s discussion of the nature of

the Han-Hsiung-nu wars, it is clear that the war between them is not provocations and counterattacks by one fixed side, but constant unjustified aggressions and judicial counterattacks or defenses by both sides based on their own economic and military development [22]. Hsiung-nu was not always the one waging unjust wars, and the moral image of neither could stand on the higher ground. Second, the documentary emphasizes the military power of the Han through a long narrative of several fruitful battles and the outcome of the victory, while weakening the military power of Hsiung-nu in the later period by ignoring the later Han's defeats and the complex causes of Hsiung-nu's demise. In fact, the final downfall of the Hsiung-nu was influenced by significant natural disaster factors. In the midst of poor survival, competition among Hsiung-nu's political groups and population loss gave the opportunity to the Han dynasty [23]. Hsiung-nu's ending was not due to their progressive inferiority to the Han in military capability but was the result of multiple factors. The Han dynasty simply seized the opportunity to be the straw that broke Hsiung-nu's back. Thus, influenced by contemporary policies, the documentary offers a non-complete reading of Hun-related history in response to present political guidelines, such as shaping a shared past and strengthening national self-confidence [18]. This series of historical reconstructions are intended to emphasize China's current revival, benign and righteous manner in dealing with affairs, its ability to solve current problems, and its prosperous future. However, the deliberate editing and evaluation of history in historical images have led to a biased perception of the past or future among the partial public, as exemplified by the topic of the Huns.

Besides influencing media content, netizens' comments are also being monitored or controlled by organizations, which affects the meaning of the documentary to the public. For the purpose of uniting citizens' spiritual beliefs in the nation, any speech is censored, including the comments below the series documentary discussed here. Edney mentioned that there are employees who work as website administrators, ensuring "online communications platforms are not being used in ways that the Party-state sees as undeniable" [16]. Furthermore, "Party State has paid Internet users to post comments online in order to steer the public discussion in the direction preferred by the CPD" since 2004 [16]. Then, it is reasonable to doubt the comment credits and motivations below the documentary. As expected, the public's interpretation of the documentary will be guided by the reviews, and other spectators also will be more cautious while making reviews. Therefore, the following comments may also be deliberately instructive for viewers.

In addition to historical and political factors involved in film credibility, the narrative strategies utilized in *Historical Turning Point: The Battle of Han-Hsiung-nu* also affect information transmission. First, the genre is what Bill Nichols refers to as expository mode, a genre typically characterized by the disappearance of the director and voice-over. In this mode, the narrator acts as the voice of God, interpreting the images with an authoritative posture. The dissemination of information is more conducted in an indoctrinated manner, and the spectators do not have much room for personal interpretation in front of the image. As Nichols Bill explains in *Representing Reality*, "the expository documentary may also try to mask or diminish its own shaping and modifying activity so that it seems self-evident that the world is indeed cast in the image that the film proposes" [2], *Historical Turning Point* also incorporates the way in constructing and well presenting an unlikely being challenged self-logical world, making the spread of ideology inhabited more smoothly. Second, the documentary uses live reenactment with the absence of historical images, yet it is not considered an appropriate choice for historical retracing. Unlike the images captured on camera, both live and animated reenactments have lost their link to a past reality. However, different from animation, live reenactment reconstructs a link to the present reality. Due to the uncanny similarities with the original link, the new link of live reenactment is much more confusing than animation. Nevertheless, the confusion of live reenactment is not beneficial. As Nichols argues in *Speaking Truth with Film*, the representation of reenactment contains distinctive quality in reenacted scenes, and deceit issues will

appear when the distinctions are not recognized by the spectators [24]. For the audiences, the realism brought by the live reenactment is convincing. However, the restoration is rather a new directive interpretation. Thus, live reenactments have the threat of misleading the spectators. Third, in terms of editing, the documentary also applies many fictional narrative techniques, such as framing design, storytelling style, speeding up or slowing down shots, excerpted text, and the choice of background music. For instance, while demonstrating historical text, the documentary selects words instead of full sentences or complete context, and the original meaning is changed to some extent. For the spectators who are not familiar with the original source, these deliberate adjustments are hard to distinguish. These choices in filming design show that it does not make much effort in realism, but more in serving the Hans' point of view, which helps to spread the thematic impression.

However, the above discussion of possible misleading components is sealed by the authority of the documentary. *Historical Turning Point: The Battle of Han-Hsiung-nu* is produced by China Central Television, China's authoritative mass media, and is classified as a historical documentary available to the public. As mentioned earlier, the external factors made documentaries successful in building authority, and the authority of the central media will doubly amplify this effect. Thus, in general, with the apparent effects of authority, *Historical Turning Point: The Battle of Han-Hsiung-nu* suffers from historical resources, political ideologies, and film producing underneath, and conveys a misleading image of the Huns to China's netizens.

4. The Mismatch Between Expectations and Presentation

What we can realize from the above discussion is the inaccuracy of documentaries and their authority over the audiences, which leads to a mismatch between expectations and presentation. This mismatch is not only triggered by documentaries ontologically but also reinforced by the spectators' own viewership. From the audience research study of historical documentaries conducted by Huimin Wang in Guangzhou, China, it can be seen that acquiring historical knowledge and understanding the historical process is the first need of the audiences, and the reason for their preference for historical documentaries is that it makes history and related knowledge available for people to learn in a relaxed way [25]. "Knowledge" implies that the presentation of documentaries will be seen as an extension of the real world rather than a derivative product. At the same time, people watch documentaries for the reason of seeking "relaxed" access to knowledge, whereas relaxed means that people are less likely to spend time and energy looking up historical materials for verification after watching the documentaries. This situation suggests that Chinese netizens are more likely to accept documentary information as a whole. It also means that the problems brought by potential mismatch between information and expectation will be ignored with high probability. Thus, this mismatch is influenced by both the image and the spectators, reinforcing the impact of misrepresentation. It is this mismatch that leads to the consequences of losing the link with physical reality. The situation is changed from "art from life" to "life from art," and people's fragile reality is confused by numerous chaotic ideologies. The confusion caused by this mismatch is the reason why the spectators are unable to have a dialectical conclusion when confronted with Hsiung-nu's image.

5. Conclusion

In a world swept by a torrent of messages, documentaries are more closely linked to reality in comparison, however, this does not mean that audiences should place an excessive amount of trust in them. Same as any other artificial works, they are vehicles that carry the producers' point of view. Contemporary historical documentaries limited by historical resources produced usable products that serve the needs of society. For Chinese netizens, the path to adjusting the image of the Hsiung-nu in their minds is to be aware of the mismatch between the authenticity of the documentary and their

expectations and be sober in the manufactured products with various intentional choices. When objective reality with an aura is an untouchable ghost, it is more important to think as Siegfried Kracauer supported, feeling physical reality with a dialectic attitude.

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