

Research Article

Exploring Chinese Homeland Sentiment in the Food Documentary: A Bite of China

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Abstract

This article utilizes the theories of film art, narratology, semiotics, and documentary filmmaking to analyze the text structure, audio-visual representation, and symbolism of the Chinese food documentary “A Bite of China”. The article reveals that the film not only showcases distinctive cuisines and their preparation processes from places throughout China, but also extensively examines the close connection between food and Chinese culture.

This article focuses on exploring homeland sentiment that is embedded in this documentary and its cultural significance, finding that it mainly consists of the camaraderie of neighbors supporting each other and the homesickness of longing for one’s hometown. By referencing aspects of daily life, narrating from the perspective of ordinary Chinese people, and meticulously portraying characters, this documentary effectively conveys the deep feelings that they have towards their homeland and culture. This article points out that this mode of expression not only strengthens its emotional resonance with the audience, but also promotes the exchange and integration of traditional Chinese culture with modern values, providing a unique perspective that enables global audiences to understand Chinese culture.

Keywords: *A Bite of China, Food Documentary, Homeland Sentiment*

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Introduction

A Bite of China is the first major high-definition food-themed documentary filmed in China, and it has had a widespread global impact. Following the popularity of A Bite of China, other food documentaries have been filmed, including A Bite of Chongqing, A Bite of Luoyang, and A Bite of the New Year, known as the Bite series.

A Bite of China highlights Chinese people's pursuit of the beauty of food and life while using personal stories to narrate China's regional food culture. On the surface, it introduces food and its preparation, offering the audience insights into China's regional ingredients and culinary methods. However, underneath this is China's unique culture, reflecting its image and showcasing Chinese cultural heritage regarding lifestyle, ideological concepts, and ritual ethics, portraying China's multilayered traditions and values, with the concept of homeland sentiment resonating most with the audience (Wang, 2020).

Homeland sentiment is an important aspect of traditional Chinese culture that influences every Chinese person. While showcasing a variety of foods, A Bite of China also interprets the significance of food in people's everyday lives by depicting family life, neighborhood interactions, and other home-related scenes. Home is a sacred and symbolic place in the hearts of all Chinese people. In this documentary, food embodies individuals' memories of their family and hometown, more vividly expressing their homeland sentiment. This imagery, and emotions associated with concepts such as "hometown," "nostalgia," "parting," and "reunion" frequently emerge as symbolic motifs in A Bite of China.

Therefore, a deeper exploration of the connotations of the homeland concept and conceptualization among Chinese people can contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Chinese social and cultural dynamics. Discussing how A Bite of China employs narrative and visual art techniques to portray these concepts can uncover the visual art expressions that evoke emotional resonance among Chinese audiences.

Objectives

1. This article aims to explore the connotation of the homeland sentiment among Chinese people by analyzing the content of the documentary A Bite of China.

2. This article aims to investigate how food documentaries convey homeland sentiment through audiovisual language and narrative strategies.

Literature Review

Numerous scholars have researched documentary theory, the artistic expression of food documentaries, the artistic and cultural value of these documentaries, and studies on their cultural significance. This article aims to review the theoretical foundation of documentaries, the current research on Chinese and foreign-made food documentaries like *A Bite of China*, and their cultural significance such as homeland sentiment. It explores how documentaries express and promote cultural communication and homeland sentiment.

Theoretical Foundations

This article seeks to conduct an in-depth exploration of the theme of homeland nostalgia as represented in *A Bite of China*, and the documentary's artistic modes of expression. This study will analyze the textual characteristics of food-related documentaries by employing concepts from film art, including visual language, auditory language, and montage, to examine aspects such as cinematography, composition, lighting, mise-en-scène, narration, and music. The objective is systematically to summarize and categorize the cinematic techniques utilized in the documentary to convey emotions and interpret the concept of homeland.

In examining the narrative perspective, structure, and semiotic systems of *A Bite of China*, this study will apply Genette's (1980) narrative theory and Barthe's (1977) semiotic theory to investigate the narrative mechanisms and methods of meaning-making within the documentary. Food and culture are intrinsically linked, exhibiting a close and interdependent relationship, with the bond between food and the concept of home being especially profound. On one hand, the preparation of food, culinary customs, and the aesthetics of cuisine are shaped by philosophical, historical, ethical, and aesthetic dimensions of traditional culture. Conversely, culinary practices also encompass diverse social phenomena within cultural domains, including social change, folk rituals, religious beliefs, and literary arts. Food and culture constitute a comprehensive system that is mutually embedded and co-evolving. This study will utilize Tylor's (1992) cultural theory to explore these interrelationships.

Food related documentaries emphasize cultural expression, responding not only to the imperatives of preserving traditional culture and addressing contemporary demands but also reflecting a process of self-innovation in both content and form. This reflects the

intellectual awareness and social responsibility of contemporary documentary creators in promoting traditional culture and chronicling the present socio-cultural milieu.

In conclusion, the examination of the textual characteristics and creative techniques of specific documentaries will entail a comprehensive application of film theory; narrative theory; documentary production theory and cultural psychology.

Current Research on Food Documentaries A Bite of China

Research on food documentaries varies considerably between Chinese and international scholars. In China, academic interest in these documentaries surged following the release of the first season of A Bite of China in 2012, focusing primarily on narrative techniques, communication strategies, and cultural values.

1. Research on Narrative Techniques

Studies on the narrative techniques of food documentaries frequently employ narratological theories to examine narrative art from multiple perspectives. These analyses have provided both theoretical frameworks and practical guidance for future documentary production. For instance, Zhou (2016) examined the narrative techniques in A Bite of China, highlighting it as a successful example of food documentary storytelling. He (2016) explored its narrative construction, strategies, and cultural values, while Li (2017) discussed its approach to popularizing food culture through storytelling.

2. Research on Communication Strategies

Research on communication strategies has predominantly centered around A Bite of China. Scholars have applied communication theories to understand how these documentaries effectively disseminate cultural narratives. Hu (2014) analyzed the documentary's media strategies, illustrating how it uses aesthetics to convey cultural concepts and expand its reach to a global audience. Similarly, Li and Xue (2017) examined how food documentaries depict regional images, allowing viewers to engage with cultural customs through the lens of food.

3. Research on Cultural Value

The cultural value of food documentaries has also been a significant area of focus, particularly in the context of A Bite of China. Long (2013) examined how the documentary reflects Chinese spiritual culture, while Zhang (2016) utilized representation theory to analyze its symbolic use of food and cultural traditions. Other studies, such as

those by Wang (2013); Yang, He, and Zhao (2013), have explored the symbolic relationship between food and cultural memory, noting its role in expressing traditional values. However, these studies often lack a combined analysis of visual language and narrative strategies across different documentaries.

The research conducted by the aforementioned scholars has offered substantial theoretical foundations and methodological guidance for this study. Distinguishing itself from prior studies, this research further refines the scope by specifically investigating the cultural connotations associated with the Chinese sense of home. Additionally, it provides a deeper analysis of how this sense of home is articulated through various artistic forms, thereby offering a more comprehensive understanding of its cultural significance.

Current Research on Food Documentaries and Their Relationship to Homeland Sentiment and Other Ethnic Culture

The popularity of *A Bite of China* has sparked comprehensive studies on food documentaries and their role in representing ethnic culture, but research specifically linking them to homeland sentiment remains limited.

1. Research on Food Documentaries and Ethnic Culture

Chinese scholars have analyzed *A Bite of China* for its portrayal of ethnic identity and cultural construction. Yu (2012) explored its role in constructing China's national image, while Xu (2015) examined its depiction of China's diverse geographical and cultural landscapes. Xiong (2013) assessed its effectiveness in cross-cultural communication contexts, and Wang (2015) compared different documentaries to understand how cultural differences impact the construction of national images.

2. Research on Homeland Sentiment

Research on the Chinese concept of homeland sentiment has primarily focused on literature, with limited exploration of film and television, and few documentaries addressing this theme. Zhong (2019) traced the idea back to an ancient book written by Xu Shen and completed around 100 AD, *Shuowen Jiezi*, identifying core elements such as security, tranquility, prosperity, and belonging, as reflected in the praise of living spaces and their enduring value in harmonizing communities. Xie (2017) examined Du Fu's poetry to highlight the homeland as both a geographical space and a spiritual construct, combining emotional, artistic, and cultural elements. Yu (2014) explored Su Shi's lifelong nostalgia,

while Li and Huang (2010) discussed Yan Geling's complex feelings of loneliness and freedom, suggesting that homeland sentiment is a psychological phenomenon influencing writers over millennia. Fei (1985) emphasized the role of the family in rural Chinese society, portraying the homeland as both an emotional anchor and a refuge in times of stress, embodying a multifaceted humanistic spirit.

Numerous studies on literature analyze the source of Chinese homeland sentiment by considering sociological, literary, and psychological perspectives to explore its cultural significance and artistic expression. Other studies and discussions highlight homeland sentiment as depicted in films and documentaries.

Wen (2021) noted the subtle yet powerful portrayal of homeland sentiment in cinema, often overlooked but materially and spiritually unifying. Ke (2019) observed that *The Wandering Earth* represents this sentiment through themes of ethical responsibility, wandering, and homecoming. Wang (2023) analyzed the depiction of rural transformations in documentaries, reflecting on how homeland sentiment alleviates modern nostalgia and embodies familial emotions. Chen (2021) illustrated this sentiment through narratives like the Chen family's heritage and Liu Duanrong's use of Yangzhou cuisine as a metaphorical return to one's roots.

Existing research suggests that the concept of home in Chinese culture is deeply rooted in history and often emerges as a significant cultural symbol in scholarly and literary works, evolving into a revered spiritual space in the collective consciousness. While numerous scholars have thoroughly examined the themes of home and belonging in literary works and among writers, and some have explored these themes within the contexts of film and television, the intersection between culinary documentaries and the sense of home remains underexplored. The originality of this study resides in its analysis of the seminal culinary documentary *A Bite of China* as a case study, investigating its potential as a medium for exploring the Chinese sense of home and examining the artistic techniques utilized to convey this sentiment.

Methodology

Population and Samples

Based on the status and influence of the documentary *A Bite of China* in the realm of Chinese documentaries, this article selects all three seasons of the documentary as the research subject and sample. The specific details are provided in Table 1.

Table 1 Basic Information on the Sample Documentary *A Bite of China*

Season	Premiere Date	Premiere Channel(s)	Total Number of Episodes	Total Duration (minutes)
Season 1	14-May-2012	CCTV1	7	350
Season 2	18-Apr-2014	CCTV1	8	400
Season 3	19-Feb-2018	CCTV-1, CCTV-9	8	400

Data Analysis

The study employs a literature collection method by gathering and organizing relevant literature, and uses a literature analysis method to sort and integrate this literature. It analyzes the themes, content, components, and narrative methods of food documentaries to comprehend the current development of Chinese food documentaries.

Content analysis is implemented to examine each frame and scene of the images and storylines in *A Bite of China*. This involves recording elements that express homeland sentiment, such as imagery, dialogue, and music. The collected data is then organized and analyzed further to understand the documentary's expression of homeland sentiment and how this resonates with the audience. This study explores the patterns, trends, and relationships of homeland sentiment in documentaries. It also reveals the extent of homeland sentiment, which provides a profound and comprehensive analysis for understanding this theme.

Results

Originally, 'homeland' referred to gardens within a family home, but later came to signify the family and one's hometown. This concept first appeared in *The Book of Later Han: Biography of Huan Rong* (Fan, 2016), which described a poor man who had to work for fifteen years without returning home. Thus, homeland represents not just a physical place of

birth and growth but also a spiritual reconstruction of one's hometown. This concept is about emotional attachment, artistic inspiration, and foundational thinking, which are deeply ingrained as part of one's collective cultural memory.

Later, literary scholars combined the feelings of love, nostalgia, and longing for one's hometown by creating the term 'homeland sentiment', making it a significant concept in the traditional Chinese cultural value system. This concept had a particularly profound significance for the famous Tang Dynasty poet Du Fu, who spent most of his life wandering and in exile. His poetry expresses strong emotions for his homeland, creating a deep-seated attachment. Homeland sentiment does not just involve him missing a physical place but is deeply ingrained into his life goals and spiritual awareness (Xie, 2017).

Through exploration of the concept of homeland sentiment in Chinese history and literature, the author discovered that the formation of homeland sentiment is closely linked to China's traditional family-based agrarian society. As an important category in traditional culture, homeland sentiment is reflected in many aspects of Chinese life, profoundly affecting every Chinese person's psychology, thinking, values, and behaviour. Emotions reflected in food-related activities, such as love for home, homesickness, nostalgia, and reminiscence, are the most genuine subconscious manifestations of homeland sentiment.

The author utilized content analysis to conduct a frame-by-frame and scene-by-scene examination of the visuals and narrative in the documentary *A Bite of China*. After systematically organizing various expressive elements such as imagery, dialogues, and music that depict the sentiment of homeland in the documentary, it was observed that the portrayal of homeland sentiment in the documentary embodies "the camaraderie of neighbors supporting each other" and "the homesickness of longing for one's hometown"

1. The Camaraderie of Neighbors Supporting Each Other

Throughout China's thousands of years of family-based agricultural production, people's physical labour required their family to obtain the materials and funds they needed to sustain their life. All production and daily activities were centered on their family and clan, forming a home-centric ideology. This approach involved measuring things based on home as a reference and standard. This has an important place in the traditional Chinese mindset, and is reflected not only in family hierarchies but also in daily activities like eating, socializing, entertaining, and learning. *A Bite of China* showcases people's food lives while

focusing on the reasons explaining Chinese people's emotional attachment to food, indirectly reflecting their concepts and understanding of family and kinship.

For example, in the first season's episode 'Secrets of the Kitchen', the town of Jun'an in Guangdong Province hosts sacrificial activities related to the Double Ninth Festival. Young people carrying a statue of the Eastern Han Dynasty general Guan Gong and elders wearing cornelian cherries walk the streets, making the town more lively than the Lunar New Year. This festival's celebrations also include banquets with red tablecloths, outdoor seating, and traditional dishes to remind the younger generation to respect and care for the elderly. These rural banquets use delicious food to create an emotional connection, which reflects the Chinese traditional virtues and social responsibilities that emphasize the need to value family heritage and respect the elderly.

In the episode 'Our Fields', in Congjiang County, Guizhou Province, the New Rice Festival is celebrated every October to welcome the rice harvest. Villagers set up tables along the street, where they sit together to sing, drink, and share special foods like five-colored sticky rice and sour fish. This is known as the Long Street Banquet. As a culinary folk tradition, this banquet represents the lifestyle and eating habits that these people have passed down in their agricultural society, demonstrating the cooperation and sharing among people from different villages. Most of these villagers are not related, but develop a collective consciousness and identification with these festivals and culinary traditions by living on the same land, which fulfills and satisfies their deep need for belonging. The Long Street Banquet is an opportunity for neighbors from the ethnic groups living in Guizhou's mountainous areas to communicate, share information about their daily life, and collectively pray for a good harvest. This tradition has gained international attention as a part of China's intangible cultural heritage.

In the episode 'The Taste of Staple Food', elderly Mr. and Mrs. Gu continue to make rice cakes based on traditional methods. Their neighbors come to help them, as they believe it is a culturally significant activity. The scene of these neighbors busily and joyfully helping each other is an ordinary yet common aspect of their daily life. However, when the documentary visually and audibly portrays this activity, it becomes a ritual and symbol that is a microcosm of countless interactions between ordinary family members and neighbors.

The dependent relationships among family members, the peaceful harmony among neighbors, and the reciprocal friendships are also expressed through mutual companionship. In the episode 'Our Fields', Zhang Guichun from Beijing invites neighbors to his rooftop garden on the first day of autumn to breathe fresh air, harvest vegetables, make dumplings, enjoy food, sing songs, and relish each other's company. In 'Secrets of the Kitchen', the Tibetan people from Nixi Township, Yunnan, help each other to seize the best time for fertilizing the highland barley fields, and Tashi rewards his helpers with pipa meat (Chinese lute-shaped Tibetan preserved meat) and butter tea. The scenes of neighbors working together, helping each other, and sharing food illustrate a harmonious and heartwarming atmosphere. The neighborly emotions and consciousness are consolidated and elevated through their shared enjoyment of food. Helping others and coexisting harmoniously are concepts and attitudes that Chinese people believe can maintain their collective lifestyle and help them deal with interpersonal relationships. These intimate images are rooted in the traditional Chinese cultural concept of harmony. They indicate to international audiences that Chinese people share a feeling of belonging amidst their modern contexts of interpersonal alienation and a lack of companionship.

2. The Homesickness of Longing for One's Hometown

Home is not only a geographical space with a real meaning but also a spiritual space with symbolic and emblematic significance. Rapid economic development has accelerated the pace of modern life, sometimes forcing Chinese people to leave their hometowns for unfamiliar cities to pursue their livelihood and dreams. Chinese culinary documentaries that tell stories about food focus on the everyday lives and emotional experiences of ordinary people. They highlight the relationships between people, families, and society built on food, demonstrating a strong emphasis on care. In these documentaries, fields, wilderness, rural areas, and ancient cities form part of the spiritual image of home, building a bridge to one's hometown and embodying emotions like homesickness, nostalgia, remembrance, and longing.

In 'The Story of Staple Food', 78-year-old Gu Ah Gong from Jingtou Village in Ningbo City mills her own rice, and her 5-year-old great grand daughter Ningning helps her make rice cakes. Gu and her husband have spent their entire lives in this seaside village, raising four children and now caring for their fourth generation. As the year's end approaches,

their offspring return to the village for a family reunion to welcome the Lunar New Year. The water-milled rice cake, a traditional must-have on their lavish dining table, is locally known as tuanzi, symbolizing togetherness. After their brief reunion, the children take their Great grand parents' home-made rice cakes back to the city. Their family seldom eats rice cakes, but their chewy texture and mild sweet rice flavor taste of home, leaving a long-lasting memory.

From the Chinese perspective, the most important ceremony associated with home is the family gathering during festivals and reunions. The traditional Chinese dining custom of family members gathering and sitting around a table reflects the Chinese cultural psychology of longing for a 'great reunion'. Food with the flavour of home and loved ones temporarily eases the pressures of work and everyday life.

The third season's episode 'Banquet' further enhances the concept of home. Martial artist Zhang Xiulin is about to celebrate his 90th birthday, which is not just a birthday feast but a family banquet. His disciples from all over China gather in Wuhu City, Anhui Province to celebrate their master's birthday. Zhang highly values this banquet, as it is when he traditionally accepts new disciples. During the disciple acceptance ceremony, Zhang kneels to his ancestors. The elderly man suddenly bursts into tears, moved to report to his ancestors that the martial art he inherited has new successors. He also encourages his disciples to pass on this art, perpetuating Chinese martial arts. The banquet dishes, such as 'Eight Water Immortals' and 'Eight Treasures Gourd Duck', symbolize reunion, while the harmonious flavour of Wuhu cuisine represents a habit of catering to diverse tastes. This is not only the secret of Chinese banquets but also Chinese people's philosophy of life, as disciples from all corners of China blend into this martial arts family.

Whether it is blood ties or the bond between master and disciple, reunion is a deep emotional aspiration for all Chinese people. Home always provides a powerful motivation for them to strive and struggle, and is also a spiritual haven that offers them the most profound feelings of comfort and encouragement.

Discussion

The author utilizes theories of film and television art, particularly focusing on the language of imagery, sound, and montage, in conjunction with semiotic theory, to analyze collected materials concerning the concept of “attachment to homeland.” This analysis examines multiple facets, such as cinematography, composition, lighting, narration, and music, to investigate the narrative mechanisms and artistic expressions that convey attachment to homeland in documentary filmmaking.

The homeland complex, as an abstract cultural concept, often exists deep within Chinese people's consciousness, exemplified by emotions like homesickness, nostalgia, and longing for home. Culinary documentaries combine images and sound to materialize this through the use of food as a tangible medium. Their creators genuinely record people's emotions towards family and loved ones, attitudes towards life and work, and reflections on life and dreams by carefully arranging the documentary's theme, viewpoint, and plot. They also skillfully incorporate visual and audio elements like camera angles, framing, and sound to make this homeland complex visually and auditorily interpretable.

1. Selecting Material from Everyday Life

Culinary documentaries reference sources originating from apparently mundane aspects by formulating them as they essentially appear to portray individualized elements of life. This creates a feeling of overarching human thinking regarding existential themes and insightful parts of life. These films' narrative themes are lifelike and popular, endowing them with realistic narrative content and a believable style. These types of ordinary narrative plots enable audiences to not only see the real process of food preparation, cooking, and serving, but also perceive the real emotions of ordinary people in their daily lives. This resonates with the characters' emotional experiences through these documentaries' scenes of daily life. The core of culture is human behavior (both explicit and implicit) and its outcomes, based on a well-established value system. When human behavior and lifestyle become part of artistic creation as aesthetic objects, they must maintain a complete form that is unified in its essence and phenomenon. As a cultural concept, the homeland complex must rely on a physical medium of resonating aesthetically with the audience. In this documentary's stories about people and food, when ordinary people reveal their true emotions during typical life situations like reunions and separations, the audience empathizes with them due to their

similar lifestyles and emotions. They understand the nostalgia for their hometown, attitude towards life, and reflections on life while sympathizing with the homeland complex illustrated in this documentary.

For instance, in the first season's episode 'The Story of Staple Food', Huang and his wife laboriously farm, make cornbread, and work hard to raise their children. Their children have settled in a city, but Huang refuses to leave, living in his cave dwelling, raising animals for farming, eating his crops, and guarding his homeland. These seemingly everyday, trivial, and fragmented life events are closely related to the audience's own experiences and emotions. They resonate most effectively with the audience's inner world, becoming the most effective narrative method in culinary documentaries for expressing emotions and representing culture.

Culinary documentaries' life like narrative themes do not mean that they are just direct and simple records of daily life. Instead, they are based on highly refined and elevated scenes of life and events, selecting the most symbolic as well as culturally and ethically emotional parts of life. For instance, when representing homesickness and love for home, these documentaries often depict ordinary people's lives and mental states during traditional festivals like the Spring Festival (Lunar New Year) and the Dragon Boat Festival. Some rejoice in reunion, others feel lost due to their work and responsibilities, and the heavy sensation of homesickness of those far from home. These parts of life, closely related to the audience's emotional experiences most vividly reflect these people's emotions towards their family and loved ones. They also exemplify how traditional culture and ethical factors influence their emotional values.

A Bite of China uses food as a medium to interpret Chinese people's unique feelings towards family, affection, love, and hometown through numerous lifelike stories, representing the homeland complex as reflected in traditional cultural concepts.

In the episode 'Seasons', Li Shuguo, an experienced logging team leader, often goes out to the mountains to cut down trees. Before returning home, his wife prepares his favorite frozen tofu. She travels seven or eight kilometers through the snow to fetch clean water for stewed fish, wanting to prepare him a hearty homemade meal. At 5:32, Li is leaning on the kitchen door and looking right into a close-up, while his wife is smiling slightly in a low-angle shot. Although they are not directly connected, their genuine expressions in these

shots subtly cause the audience to connect these scenes, feeling the couple's unspoken understanding and affection. At 6:06, in the foreground, a cat is enjoying tofu stewed fish on the counter, while the blurred background depicts this couple and their relatives drinking around the stove. This scene is authentic, unpretentious, and ordinary yet full of life and human charm. It accurately depicts the image of countless ordinary Chinese families when they experience moments of reunion.

2. Narration from the Perspective of Ordinary People

The point of view can be understood as a perspective. In narrative works, the viewpoint refers to the perspective from which the narrator observes and interprets the story. Modern narratology argues that the concept of the narrator involves addressing 'who speaks', while the concept of viewpoint addresses 'who sees', i.e., from what viewpoint the narrator tells their story. Documentaries choose suitable narrative perspectives based on the genre, further constructing specific narrative situations more effectively to display their intended content and themes.

There are three types of viewpoint. The first is the omniscient viewpoint, where the narrator knows more than the characters, i.e., narrator > characters, allowing for flexible narration. The second is the internal viewpoint, where the narrator knows as much as the characters, i.e., narrator = characters, meaning a specific character acts as the narrator, conveying information through their knowledge and feelings. The third is the external viewpoint, where the narrator knows less than the characters, i.e., narrator < characters, where the narrator can only describe the environment and characters' actions but cannot enter their inner world.

Chinese culinary documentaries rely on multiple narrative viewpoints to depict Chinese people's food, social life, and mental state from various perspectives. When representing the homeland complex in their collective consciousness, they often narrate from the internal perspective of ordinary, everyday characters, creating individualized documentary narration. From this internal viewpoint, the character's narrative motivation is personalized, stemming from their real-life and emotional experiences. Through their subjectively emotional narration, the audience feels closeness and empathy, perceiving the significance of food for their family and a deep sense of affection. At the same time, this documentary implements subjective viewpoints, monologues, and voiceovers to interpret

the emotions and feelings of the protagonists. This is more realistic and credible than the omniscient viewpoint, and also more touching and intimate.

For example, in the second season's episode 'Three Meals', Xu Lei and his wife, working in Shenzhen, are momentarily brought back to their distant hometown by her steamed cured fish and salted duck eggs. After dinner, smiling, she asks Xu to watch a video sent from hundreds of kilometers away. Seeing their child happily playing, her face beams with happiness. Xu's blurred face in the frame gradually becomes clear, his expression mixed with joy and worry. His wife comments on the child's playful nature, and Xu asks, "What about his studies in the future?" They watch the video, laughing and talking, accompanied by her voiceover, "There was no one to look after our child, so we had to leave him with my mother.", adding: "We miss him, but can only call home every day." The frame shows her as she subtly wipes her eyes. Although there are no tears, the audience can feel their longing for their family and their guilt and worry for their child. This documentary records scenes of this child with his grandmother, digging clay, making salted eggs, and calling out "Dad! Mom!" to a photo. Xu explains, "The ideal situation is to make our family happy, to help us live 'worry-free.'" Their sincere words show us the importance of family and kinship in ordinary Chinese people's lives. Like them, millions of young people struggle to survive amidst an industrial empire of factories. Their story demonstrates that traditional families' ethical concepts are deeply rooted in Chinese people's subconscious, while their goals and activities are aimed at creating harmonious families, developing peaceful relationships with relatives, and attaining a happy life.

In the third season's episode 'Life', Wang Luliang tells the story of his decision to pursue an agricultural lifestyle and create a farm based on the wisdom of the twenty-four solar terms, influenced by his child's experience with contaminated agricultural products. He insists on participating in seasonal planting while rejecting greenhouse cultivation and chemical fertilizers. The camera depicts him and his child trying to drive away animals eating the crops as well as feeding sheep together, with the child curiously asking him, "Is this vegetable tasty?" and the mother replying, "For the sheep, it is." The playful child feeds vegetables to his father, and the family radiates joy and laughter on the farm. Wang says, "Actually, the best food is seasonal," wanting to grow healthy food for his family and welcome spring with his organic products. The adorable child shouts, "Give me! Feed me!"

and “Thank you, Daddy!” However, Wang is rarely present in their urban home. The documentary shows scenes from their home, with the wife’s voiceover, “Actually, after starting the farm, we haven’t had any money to renovate this house. It’s been left like this for many years. Sometimes our neighbors ask me, ‘Is this house rented?’ I reply, ‘No, it’s ours.’” Her tone conveys frustration and dissatisfaction, yet she still takes her child to the farm to spend weekends with her husband. During scenes of Wang farming with his father, he remarks, “Being a farmer has reconnected me with the earth. Mother Earth is the most generous and selfless”, mentioning that “Agriculture has changed me a lot. Now I really like the word ‘down-to-earth,’ every step must be solid. It’s the mutual influence of temperament and food.” He also admits, “There was a time when I looked down on my father, thinking he was too honest, too down-to-earth. But after farming on my own, I found I had become that person.” He spent seven years searching for traditional rice seeds, and the voiceover during scenes of him sowing seeds with his child, explains, “Sowing seeds is the best interpretation of life’s rebirth.” From Wang’s perspective, he has his career that helps his family, his inner change due to his participation in farming, and his understanding of himself and his father. From his wife’s perspective, she feels helpless when facing life but also silently provides support and understanding for her family. From the child’s perspective, everything makes him feel excited and joyful. This documentary uses agriculture to depict the joys and sorrows of a typical Chinese farming family.

3. Character Portrayal Through Detail

In the art of film, details are the smallest parts of a character’s personality, the progression of events, social interactions, and natural scenery. In documentaries, details mainly include aspects such as environments, actions, language, and objects. These details capture and record key elements of the real-life development of events, emphasize and amplify character actions, expressions, and emotions, as well as highlight certain objects. This makes the documentary’s plot more observable and its character portrayal fuller and more three-dimensional.

Culinary documentaries focus on expressing the human spirit in traditional culture. Those who make them add details to present ordinary people’s culinary, family, and social lives through imagery, portraying realistic, vivid, and lively characters. They select and refine everyday scenes while condensing and sublimating character actions and emotions. This

helps them to create details that make the emotions in their work to appear more concentrated and intense than they would exist in real life. Their three-dimensional portrayal of characters requires their placement in specific, real-life scenes, such as an ordinary family's kitchen, a breakfast restaurant, a snack stand, or an elaborate feast involving clan members, neighbours, and locals. In scenes that closely represent the audience's daily life experience, when these characters express their feelings and thoughts about their hometown, relatives, and life in front of the camera, detailed image processing strengthens their emotional power. Thus, these documentaries make the abstract expression of homeland complex into a tangible concept, which resonates strongly with the audience.

In the episode “Harmony” from the third season, the documentary meticulously portrays Sichuan cuisine chef Chen Boming's skilled and fluid actions as he selects ingredients, sharpens knives, tests the blade's sharpness with his fingers, and executes a series of precise culinary techniques—including slicing, chopping, dicing, and pounding—while preparing dishes. These detailed shots are interspersed with images of his anxious expressions, creating a stark contrast and dramatic tension. The narration elucidates this conflicting imagery, revealing his wish for his daughter, who favours the popular spicy and numbing flavours, to also appreciate traditional non-spicy Sichuan cuisine. The narrator states, “In his heart, this is a contest between the traditional and the contemporary.”

The documentary employs a series of shots that avoid showing facial expressions, carefully depicting the chef's struggle and perseverance between tradition and modernity, and portraying the solitary figure of an elderly father in his daily life. As illustrated in Figures 1, 2, 3, 5, and 6, some shots position his face outside the frame, others obscure it in darkness, and some capture only a rear view, avoiding any facial features. It is only in Figure 4, after realizing that his daughter will not return for dinner and has gone out for hot pot, that the camera provides a close-up of his face. His heavy expression sharply contrasts with the close-up shots of the delicately prepared dishes. The blurred images of diners, mid-range rear views, and similar shots underscore Chen's solitude as he dines alone. In the scenes mentioned above, the clear sounds of washing vegetables, chopping, and sharpening knives accentuate the emptiness of the house with only Chen alone. During the meal, the distinct sound of chewing and the abundance of food, clearly more than what one person could consume, make his loneliness even more apparent. Amid dim lighting and melancholic

music, the distinct sound of chewing further accentuates the silence and poignancy of his solitude at home.

This segment skillfully utilizes audiovisual elements and techniques, capturing Chen Boming's language, movements, expressions, and ambient sounds realistically, enhanced by the musical score, to convey his authentic emotions to the audience. It presents the image of a traditional Sichuan chef who, while adhering to classic flavors amidst the popularity of spicy cuisine, strives to adapt to changing times, simultaneously portraying the image of a lonely father.



Figure 1 Chen Boming meticulously prepares a table full of dishes for his daughter.

Source: Liu (2018)



Figure 2 He calls his daughter, inviting her to come home for dinner.

Source: Liu (2018)



Figure 3 Medium shot, with dim lighting and shadowed facial features.

Source: Liu (2018)



Figure 4 The daughter does not return; Chen Boming remains silent for a long time.

Source: Liu (2018)



Figure 5 Eating alone with clear chewing sounds.

Source: Liu (2018)



Figure 6 A solitary figure from behind.

Source: Liu (2018)

In the episode ‘Three Meals’, a retired mother’s relaxed morning tea contrasts sharply with her son Liang Jingxuan’s rush to catch the bus. As his voiceover during his commute mentions, “I often don’t have time for breakfast, eating bread and milk on the go,” which portrays him as a young urbanite striving for his life and family. He adds: “Work is most important; without it, we can’t survive.” Scenes of running, making calls, reviewing documents, taking elevators, eating work meals, attending meetings, scratching his head, as well as his focused, thoughtful, and slightly anxious expressions in different settings showcase the mental state and struggle of contemporary Chinese young people as they undergo fast-paced transitions between work and life. At home, parents prepare a nutritious and delicious dinner, waiting for their son’s return. In the episode ‘Encounter’, Zhang Shizhong, who has been away from his homeland for years, finally returns to Taiwan to reunite with his brother-in-law. The camera captures their clasped hands and the two old men supporting each other, walking away. This expresses the wordless joy they feel when returning to their homeland and meeting their loved ones.

Recommendations

Recommendations for Applying the Results

The documentary *A Bite of China* uses carefully constructed narrative strategies and audio-visual language to enable audiences to feel the profound cultural significance behind Chinese food. Documentaries can convey cultural connotations through extracting materials

from daily life, narrating from the perspective of ordinary people, and meticulously depicting character images.

Recommendations for Further Research

Food documentaries contain many ethnic cultural connotations, and we can conduct research on the cultural connotations of other ethnic groups.

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