
Documentaries and Cultural Projects from the Perspective of Media Convergence: Taking "Shengshi Xiudian" and "Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings" as Examples

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Abstract: From the perspective of media convergence, this paper systematically and hierarchically combines theories of media convergence, visual culture, and documentaries to conduct a highly clear and solid analysis of the functional mechanism of the documentary "Shengshi Xiudian" in the "Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings" project. First, it clarifies the interface relationship between content integration, knowledge translation, and public communication in documentaries, and then naturally transitions to its function and significance in the flow of cultural resources and the construction of cultural memory. Subsequently, it specifically investigates the practical operations of "Shengshi Xiudian" in visual reconstruction, evidence mechanisms, and knowledge translation. Finally, it draws a clear conclusion that documentaries serve a two-way empowerment role as media interfaces and accordingly proposes practical suggestions for incorporating film and television communication into cultural project planning in advance.

Keywords: Media convergence; Documentary; Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings; Knowledge translation

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1. Introduction

Because the production and dissemination of cultural memory in the digital age are under new technological and institutional conditions, two clear and important changes can be observed very naturally and appropriately: First, the Internet and digital technologies have changed the logic of collecting, organizing, and distributing cultural resources, so cultural heritage no longer relies solely on offline exhibitions and publications to enter public cultural spaces. Second, knowledge translation and public communication have become key links for cultural projects to gain social significance and cultural influence. Because of this, several cultural engineering projects guided by national cultural strategies have emerged in China in recent years. By systematically and actively conducting cultural resource organization, digital processing, and dissemination through the coordinated means of publishing, exhibitions, database construction, and image production, a conscious mechanism for reconstructing cultural memory across different media dimensions is established.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Media Convergence Theory

The theory of media convergence was first systematically and explicitly proposed by Professor Ithiel De Sola Pool of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology in 1983. Its fundamental starting point and basic meaning are that various media have an obvious trend towards multifunctional integration. Therefore, it can be naturally and appropriately divided into narrow and broad levels: narrow media convergence refers to the new media forms formed after the convergence of traditional media such as television and newspapers, such as mobile newspapers and blog news. Broad media convergence is a more comprehensive and open media convergence process in the context of Internet development and technological progress. Besides the media elements themselves, it inevitably involves the mutual linkage and shaping of media functions, communication methods, and cultural structure elements.

The academic discussion on media convergence has a very clear and hierarchically recognizable expansion trajectory. Initially, discussions on convergence focused on the integration of technology and media forms themselves, meaning early media theory scholars had already discussed the overlapping trend of different media technology boundaries and the possibility of media multifunctional integration. Later, the perspective of communication scholars shifted from technology to organizational synergy between media, leading to systematic discussions on the strategic cooperation and collaboration mechanisms of different media organizations. After entering the digital and networked era, scholars naturally and appropriately placed media convergence within a cultural framework, proposing that media convergence has clear cultural significance. The concept of convergence culture views media technology, industrial practices, and audience participation as interconnected and mutually causal social and cultural processes. Therefore, it transcends discussions based solely on technology or platforms, and more fully and consciously examines the impact of convergence on content production, audience relationships, and cultural practices.

2.2. Media Functions and Social Roles of Documentaries

Michael Renov in documentary theory made a very clear and hierarchical summary of documentary functions, namely “to reveal or preserve”, “to persuade or promote”, and “to analyze or interrogate”, thereby naturally and appropriately drawing out their values in knowledge organization, concept dissemination, and social reflection. An excellent supplement to this is the discussion by Patricia Aufderheide, who explicitly and powerfully pointed out that documentaries play a role in knowledge translation, meaning they use image forms to translate complex professional information to ordinary audiences. Brian Winston in “The Documentary Film Book” conducted an extremely broad investigation into the social and cultural functions of documentaries. In addition to conventional recording functions, he also discussed audience participation and the dissemination of cultural significance. More importantly, the development of digital technologies and network platforms in recent years has brought new expansions to the functions of documentaries. No longer limited to television or cinemas, the Internet, mobile terminals, and social media have all become new fields for documentary knowledge dissemination and social participation.

2.3. Visual Culture Theory and Narrative Mechanisms of Documentaries

French thinker Roland Barthes in “Camera Lucida” provided an extremely clear and insightful analysis of the temporality of photography: the temporality of photography is constituted by “that-has-been” (ça-a-été), so images are inevitably related to past facts. Art images are by no means just for viewing but rather enter the cultural context in a “readable” way, thus naturally introducing dimensions of time, meaning, and interpretation. Therefore, it logically concludes that temporality and readability have become extremely important concepts when discussing image meaning production in visual culture theory.

British scholar John Corner has a very clear and highly logical discussion: documentaries are essentially a “discourse of factuality,” by no means a simple repetition or representation of reality itself but rather construct a set of discourse systems about reality that can convince and be accepted by audiences through a certain expression method. Therefore, he

naturally and appropriately examined documentaries within the framework of visual culture and communication systems, thereby highlighting their functions in knowledge organization, evidence logic, and cultural significance.

3. Media Convergence In “Comprehensive Collection Of Ancient Chinese Paintings” Project

3.1. Multichannel Presentation: Publication, Exhibition, and Digitalization

As an ancient civilization, China possesses a brilliant, continuous, and outstanding culture spanning thousands of years. Painting arts such as ink painting, calligraphy, and seals have a long history, serving as specific expressions of the aesthetic spirit of the Chinese nation while carrying its ideals and sentiments. Therefore, past dynasties’ Chinese paintings are by no means just systems of aesthetics and techniques; they are the crystallized results of mutual connection and supplementation among Chinese philosophy, history, and literature traditions. However, it is undeniable that due to frequent historical wars and scattered collections, numerous painting works have long been dispersed among museums, art galleries, and private collections at home and abroad, forming a realistic pattern of “one country’s cultural heritage scattered globally”. Therefore, systematically organizing and rigorously verifying such scattered works has long been recognized as one of the most difficult and challenging tasks in Chinese painting research and cultural heritage organization. Because of this, the launch of the “Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings” project has a very clear and natural connection with the cultural tradition and documentary fate of Chinese painting itself. In 2005, the Zhejiang Provincial Cultural Heritage Bureau and Zhejiang University jointly launched the “Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings” project. Its fundamental purpose is to complete the centralized collection, scientific classification, and orderly compilation of ancient Chinese painting documents through cross-institutional collaboration, thereby completely and appropriately presenting the historical overview of Chinese painting. The project is essentially both a cultural heritage organization endeavor and a future-oriented cultural memory project. Its achievements by no means serve only art history and documentary research; they more actively and fully enter the public cultural sphere, allowing traditional painting resources to be viewed, interpreted, and reproduced in cross-media and cross-platform ecosystems. Different from traditional organization methods centered on publication or exhibitions, the project built a systematic material platform based on digital document organization from the very beginning, utilizing methods such as photography, scanning, and database construction. This laid a sustainable and tangible media foundation for subsequent publications, exhibitions, and image presentations.

Because project publications are the second channel based on digitalization, they naturally undertake the function of systematically and hierarchically presenting academic knowledge to researchers and the public. Up to now, numerous volumes covering various dynasties have been published, including 62 volumes and 232 books, containing 12,405 pieces (sets) of Chinese painting collections from 263 cultural institutions at home and abroad. Even more remarkably, in addition to organizing art books by time, school, and subject matter, each publication is accompanied by rigorous, solid, and insightful documentary annotations and historical analyses. Therefore, the historical, artistic, and cultural values of each work are fully and appropriately displayed. Paper books themselves are the most reliable and touching preservation format of the project’s achievements, the foundation of academic research, and the ideal carrier of cultural memory.

On September 29, 2022, the “Shengshi Xiudian—Exhibition of the Achievements of the Comprehensive Collection of Ancient Chinese Paintings” opened at the National Museum of China. The exhibition presented the project’s achievements to a broad audience in diverse ways, utilizing multiple display methods such as images, texts, videos, and AI new media. The exhibition not only displayed the digitized and published achievements but also strengthened the audience’s immersive experience through spatial layout, interactive design, and guided tours. The exhibition complemented digital platforms and publications: audiences could feel the texture and aura of the paintings at the exhibition site, and deeply understand the historical and cultural background of the works through publications and digital platforms, achieving multi-level knowledge acquisition and cultural participation.

3.2. Role of Documentaries in Media Convergence: Two-way Empowerment Synergy Mechanism

In the media convergence ecosystem of the project, documentaries have a very clear and conscious media interface status: they use other media resources as the basis for creation and simultaneously feedback to other media through their own dissemination. Therefore, as an organic part of the project, the production team of the documentary “Shengshi Xiudian” set an excellent example first. They tracked the traces of the paintings, recording and filming simultaneously across numerous countries and regions domestically and abroad, fully and vividly presenting the entire process of the project visually, and introducing it into the public view naturally and appropriately. More remarkably, the documentary employed narrative and imagery methods to translate professional terminology, art history knowledge, and historical cultural backgrounds involved in painting documents into watchable and empathetic visual content. This truly accomplished the knowledge translation of painting documents from expert contexts to public contexts.

In addition, “Shengshi Xiudian”, the publications, and offline exhibitions formed a very clear and mutually complementary benign relationship. The documentary introduced the historical backgrounds and artistic features of the paintings through images; the publications provided rigorous and solid academic frameworks and detailed annotations; the exhibition offered the public direct and adequate visual experiences. Therefore, “Shengshi Xiudian” naturally exerted an interface function connecting different media, allowing cultural resources to flow freely among different media forms, thereby achieving fuller cultural participation and more effective public communication. Furthermore, the documentary enabled cultural projects to step out of closed professional fields into the open public cultural sphere, vastly expanding its social influence and cultural dissemination radius. Specifically, publications target the professional group of art history researchers, exhibitions target offline urban audiences, and documentaries broadcast on mainstream platforms cover a broader public. After watching the documentary, many viewers took the initiative to visit various touring exhibition sites, forming a typical audience conversion path of documentary diversion to other media undertakings.

4. Documentary Theoretical Basis And Image Practice Characteristics

4.1. Visual Nature of Documentaries and Reorganization of Viewing Methods

As a static medium, painting is generally appropriately regarded as an object of “instantaneous viewing”. The viewer grasps the entire image in an instant, and meaning is thus generated through behaviors such as gazing, comparing, and referencing. Forming a wonderful contrast, documentaries liberate paintings from instantaneity and bring them into a mechanism of “sequential viewing,” placing inherently static visual objects into a temporal structure. Through camera movements, editing rhythms, and information segmentation, the viewing behavior itself is transformed into a narrative practice. Therefore, this directly and powerfully echoes the “readability” of art images discussed by Roland Barthes: painting images are not only “viewed” but also “interpreted,” and dimensions of time and meaning naturally emerge.

“Shengshi Xiudian” presents a very natural and appropriate manifestation of the reorganization of viewing methods. The documentary form itself possesses advantages difficult to achieve in other media presentations, namely fully demonstrating the process of the project team traveling overseas to obtain precious painting shooting opportunities, and powerfully showing the difficulties involved through vivid video formats. Therefore, video editing also provides the “Shengshi Xiudian” production team with space beyond historical and painting materials, reasonably reconstructing art history scenes to create richer and more intriguing sensory experiences and clearer memory anchor points. This truly realizes the fluid transformation from static paintings to dynamic narratives. More remarkably, the AI technology used in the film dynamized classic paintings, leaving audiences with a strong and excellent visual impression. However, it must be noted that this dynamic presentation is by no means an alteration of the original work, but a rigorous and well-founded restoration of the painting scenes from the perspective of art history. Thus, it reshapes viewers’ understanding of classic paintings, brings static paintings into a dynamic narrative context, and provides viewers with fresher and more realistic sensory experiences. Therefore, this impression reconstruction is essentially a highly conscious and elegant practice of visual culture theory by documentaries, which is more conducive to audiences understanding cultural contexts and actively

constructing cultural memories.

4.2. Visualization of Professional Processes and Evidence Mechanisms

The professionalism of cultural projects dictates that most of their work is completed in a closed manner by professional institutions, making it difficult for the public to directly understand the specific details and internal processes. Therefore, the role of documentaries is by no means limited to recording processes; it must translate unknown contents into rich content that the public can understand, verify, and feel. Specifically, the first method is to conduct long-term tracking photography of the project, systematically and fully recording the team's workflows and technical details, making the project's progress visible immediately. The second method is to build an authoritative and solid knowledge support system through expert interviews and academic interpretations, naturally explaining the professional logic and academic value of the project. The third method is to use project achievements and offline exhibition scenes as carriers, presenting directly perceivable and verifiable consequential evidence, thereby allowing precious cultural resources to truly move from professional fields to public spaces. These three methods interconnect and supplement each other, forming a complete evidence loop. Therefore, the authenticity and credibility of the content presented by the project through the image medium have been excellently strengthened, making it easier and more direct for the public to perceive its value.

4.3. Knowledge Narrative of Documentaries and Translation Mechanisms of Cultural Projects

Because "Shengshi Xiudian" organizes knowledge in a narrative way, its greatest value lies in presenting the professional processes and terminology of the project as understandable and watchable. Therefore, the film turned professional aspects such as document collection, digital cataloging, and color restoration into watchable action sequences.

This visualization has narrative consequences: under image organization, professional aspects are naturally strung into a timeline with a temporal direction. Therefore, the project can be appropriately viewed as an historicized and culturalized production practice. "Shengshi Xiudian" translates originally professional vocabulary into film and television content favored by audiences and makes professional knowledge tangible and perceptible by coordinating visual logic and narrative logic. More remarkably, the film uses editing techniques to organize different stages of the project into a clear and powerful cultural timeline: loss of works, global collection, digital acquisition, publication compilation, and public exhibition. Consequently, audiences are not facing a set of scattered knowledge points, but are truly watching the continuous flow of institution, technology, and culture in the images.

5. Conclusions

Taking media convergence theory as its basic framework, this paper naturally and appropriately integrates documentaries with large-scale cultural projects, thus breaking through the limitations of single-medium research and logically demonstrating the translation value of documentaries between professional knowledge and public communication. Documentaries in the context of media convergence have long surpassed a single recording function. They can essentially be appropriately regarded as media interfaces and translation carriers of cultural projects, using images to convert professional cultural resources into usable content in public spaces and actively participating in the construction of cultural memory.

From the analysis of "Shengshi Xiudian", the specific roles played by documentaries within cultural projects can be clarified naturally and appropriately. First, compared with publications and exhibitions, documentaries have more adequate and obvious time continuity, thus realistically and completely recording the project's advancement process, rather than merely presenting achievements. Second, documentaries use interviews and narration to translate originally professional and academic content into forms that are easily accepted and happily consumed by the public, allowing the project to truly step out of professional circles and face the mass market. Third, the exceptionally strong dissemination power of images itself greatly improves the social exposure rate of the project, thereby attracting new audiences, users, and cultural consumers. Therefore, film and television methods have explicit supplementary value within cultural projects. The two

complement and promote each other, eventually forming a chain reaction of cultural dissemination, allowing cultural projects to truly benefit the public, subtly enhance national pride, and effectively improve national cultural confidence and artistic cultivation.

This paper explicitly and hierarchically demonstrates the new path opened by film and television dissemination for the subsequent dissemination of cultural projects, taking “Shengshi Xiudian” as a starting point to continue extending into digital platforms, educational resources, and public cultural scenes. The materials of the project provide excellent conditions for producing more segmented and refined thematic short films for purposes such as exhibition guides, online teaching, and cultural consumption, and are also suitable for joint organization of long-term planned screening activities with museums, art galleries, and local public cultural institutions. Furthermore, different cultural projects can form cross-resource and interconnected benign collaboration, especially effective linkage with the cultural heritage system, education system, and media system. For researchers, such projects are highly valuable and suitable for tracking to systematically investigate the organizational methods, collaboration models, and public reactions adopted by film and television dissemination during the advancement of cultural projects, to summarize more mature and reliable experiences.

Overall, because documentaries serve indispensable roles as recorders, translators, promoters, and constructors in contemporary large-scale cultural projects, to let outstanding traditional culture step out of professional halls and towards hundreds of millions of people, it is imperative to leverage the media advantages of documentaries and actively and fully integrate them with cultural projects.

Competing Interests

The authors have no relevant financial or non-financial interests to disclose.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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