

# Contrastive Narratological Analysis on English Presentation Films of Chinese and Foreign Universities

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## **Abstract:**

*In the framework of narratology, the author made a comparison about the narrative styles of twenty Chinese and foreign universities' English presentation films. Similarities and differences have been drawn between Chinese and foreign universities' presentation films at story level and discourse level, narrative time, point of view and space. The research results reveal that Chinese presentation films narrative adopt traditional single external perspective and flashback, focusing on the macro scene, lacking visual symbols and can't reflect the characteristics of these Chinese universities. Foreign presentation films do not follow a fixed pattern, emphasizing close shot and detail, and use visual and auditory symbols from multi-angles. On the basis of comparative analysis, the article presents several suggestions for Chinese presentation films' improvement in the future.*

**Keywords:** presentation films of elite universities; narrative time; narrative perspective; narrative space

## 1. Introduction

With the deepening of economic globalization, market competition has shifted from product competition to brand image competition. In this Brand Era, not only enterprises, even the state, city and public welfare organizations and other institutions, have begun to focus on their own image-building, since the brand image determines the development of a brand. Under this background, the domestic and foreign universities make their presentation films not only to expand international influence and popularity, but also to start Double First-rate construction, to attract high-quality overseas students, and to seize the development opportunities.

In recent years, various innovative and informative university presentation films have been released, which has aroused intense attention of the audience and scholars. The current research on the university presentation films mainly focus on promotional value, photography, creative methods and artistic method, technology route of clips, there are few about the presentation film narrative techniques and comparison of Chinese and foreign English presentation films. With the in-depth development of cultural studies, narrative theory has been widely used in the analysis of the film and television works, and the presentation films is a form of new media, film and television works. The author tries to apply narrative theory in the comparative study on narrative similarities and differences between Chinese and western university presentation films. To explore the narrative techniques used in presentation films, our universities can be more deeply aware of their own strengths and weaknesses in publicity and international image-building, and can improve video quality as well as provide some enlightenment in the future.

## 2. Literature review of related studies

### 2.1 Narratology

In 1960s, modern narratology came into being in France, which had a strong momentum of structuralism. It mainly discussed the internal structure elements and combination rules of literary works. Foreign studies generally divide narratology into classical narratology and post-classical narratology. Classical narratology is also called structuralist narratology, focusing on the text itself, emphasizing the inherent laws of narrative works, representatives are Propp, Genette, Prince and Chatman. The research objects of post-classical narratology are expanded from internal to external, focusing on interdisciplinary research, such as rhetorical narrative, cognitive narrative, etc.

Narratology focuses on two levels: "story" and "discourse". At the story level, theorists focus on the structure of events and characters (involving "what is narrated", including events, characters, backgrounds, etc.); At the discourse level, it focuses on the relationship between the narrator and the story, the timing of the story, the perspective of the story, etc. (involving "how to describe", including various narrative forms and techniques). The relationship between story time and discourse time is theoretically expounded by Genette for the first time. Genette puts forward three important concepts of order, duration and frequency, and elaborates the difference and relation between discourse time and story time. Order includes flashback and flash forward; duration refers to the relationship between the length of the story (measured in seconds, minutes, hours, days, months and years) and the length of the text (measured in rows, pages). Frequency refers to the relationship between the number of times an

event appears in a story and the number of times it appears in the text. The point of view refers to the angle of observation when narrating, and can be summed up into two categories, namely, the internal point of view and the external point of view.

In recent years, more and more attention has been paid to non-literal media narrative, such as movies, drama, painting, narrative and so on. The representatives are Andre Gaudreault, Francois Jost and so on. Film narratology not only pays attention to the story and the discourse, but also pays attention to the particularity of the movie language. In addition to the main narrative areas created by Genette, *What is Film Narratology* by Andre Gaudreault and Francois Jost adds and summarizes some special issues that the literature narrative not discussed, such as images, audio, discourse, text, music, these five materials together create a visual narrator.

## 2.2 University presentation films

University presentation films mainly refer to the university's enrollment videos and summary videos, also known as university image videos, and college feature films, is an important branch of educational propaganda film (Tian Rui Xue, 2016). Publicity films of Colleges and universities are the business cards of world-class university building, and also an international means of propaganda.

Through the retrieval of CNKI, it is found that the research of university image publicity mainly appeared after 2012. Retrieving "University presentation films" in the "title" field, as of June 2017, there are only 22 relevant research results, and focused on production, content analysis, visual communication, video production, creativity, etc.. Such as Gao Lei's "China's Image Publicity Planning Research", Guo Yanmei "Creation Analysis of Domestic College Advertising Film", Huang Songjian "Colleges and Universities' Image Promotion Design and Planning research". Most of the researches are based on semiotics, while the research from the perspective of narrative theory is still lacking, and the narrative mode is an important factor in the video production process. It is of great significance to study university presentation films based on narrative theory. In addition, through the observation and analysis of these presentation films, the author found that the current domestic university presentation films fail to reflect the characteristics of these universities, it is difficult to distinguish these universities if the school name and other information is removed. Therefore, it is of practical significance to compare the English presentation films of Chinese and foreign universities, to analyze the problems in our country's propaganda films production and to improve the measures of improving the production of English advertisements in our country.

## 3 Research methodology

### 3.1 Research questions

This study intends to answer the following four questions: (1) what are the similarities and differences of narrative styles at the story level between Chinese and foreign university presentation films? (2) what are the similarities and differences in the narrative time? (3) what are the similarities and differences in the narrative point of view? (4) what are the similarities and differences in the narrative space?

### 3.2 Research subjects

This study selected 20 Chinese and foreign university presentation films(English version), of which 10 Chinese university presentation films, including Wuhan University, Xiamen University, Shandong University, Tsinghua University, Peking University, Beijing Normal University, Sichuan University, University of Science & Technology China, Shanghai Jiao Tong University, Northwestern Polytechnical University; 10 foreign universities including Stanford University, University of Oxford, Massachusetts Institute of Technology(MIT), University of Queensland, University of Cambridge, University of Edinburgh, Imperial University, Cornell University, Melbourne University, Harvard University, those Chinese universities are “985 Project” universities, these selected foreign universities are ranked in the top fifty in their own country every year.

All selected presentation films of the latest English version are downloaded from the Internet and the subtitles are transcribed. AntConc3.2.1 and Microsoft office software are used in this research and the contrastive analysis are conducted under the framework of narratology.

## 4 Findings and discussions

### 4.1 The similarities and differences of narrative styles at the story level between Chinese and foreign university presentation films

The comparative study of narrative style at story level are mainly conducted from events and characters.

#### 4.1.1 Events

Although both Chinese and foreign university presentation films are made for their own advertising, there are great differences in the content displayed.

Through the retrieval of the transcribed text, removing the proper nouns and functional words, the top twenty keywords of Chinese university presentation films are as follow: university, students, international, research, world, science, academic, national, education, language, program, teaching, technology, disciplines, engineering, well, campus, development, cultural, culture; the top twenty keywords of foreign university presentation films are: research, world, university, students, want, people, place, city, really, college, education, new, chose, science, class, community, experience, good, thank, years.

From the above keywords can be seen, *research*, *university*, *students* these three words are widely used both in Chinese and foreign university presentation films, especially *research*, showing the content similarity, emphasizing the research characteristics of world-class universities, and scientific research strength is one of the publicity focus. Meanwhile, the key words used in Chinese and foreign university presentation films are also different. First of all, in Chinese university publicity films, the concentrated use of the two key words "world" and "international" reflects the lofty goal of the Chinese universities to be in line with international standards and strive for world class in the context of globalization. China's colleges and universities attach great importance to scientific research and discipline construction, and actively carry out the strategy of rejuvenating the country through science and education, and the development of science and technology, science and technology, disciplines, engineering, development

and similar words occupied half of the top 20 keywords accounted for that. In contrast, in addition to the introduction of disciplines and scientific research, foreign elite publicity films also pay special attention to publicizing their own personalized features. In the top twenty keywords, such as *place*, *city*, *community*, *chose*, *experience*, these words are simple, warm, and natural, not only highlight the humanistic concern of the school, also reduce the distance of the school and students, although unlike prestigious Chinese universities of obvious pertinence, but indirectly reflecting foreign universities pay attention to quality education, the service tenet of society.

In addition, there are some differences between Chinese and foreign university presentation films in content arrangement. Chinese university presentation films in the event arrangement usually follow the traditional narrative mode, that is, geographical location + history + domestic status + scientific research strength + discipline construction + outstanding alumni, only the order or content slightly changed, because the domestic colleges and universities focus on historical and cultural heritage propaganda, focusing on scientific research strength, and thus the content is roughly the same, so likely to cause loss of characteristics. For example, Northwestern Polytechnical University, Xiamen University and Shanghai Jiao Tong University are typical examples, and they all follow the basic pattern from geographical location to historical development, and then to scientific research strength and outstanding alumni. However, the content narration of the foreign publicity films is characterized by diversification, didn't follow a fixed pattern, but pay more attention to display the academic atmosphere and living atmosphere of the campus, especially the relaxing learning environment. For example, in Stanford university's presentation film, students rehearse together, singing songs and playing instruments, conducting individual research projects.

#### **4.1.2 Characters**

The difference of events leads to the inevitability of their differences in characters. As the Chinese university presentation films focus on the history, culture and scientific research strength, so the characters appear in the films are outstanding alumni, school research leaders, contributors and a few student representatives. The main characters in the elite foreign universities are diverse, with students, teachers, administrators and even parents. But the general order is students appear first as the narrator with personal experience.

### **4.2 Narrative time**

#### **4.2.1 Order**

The extensive use of flashbacks is one of the common features of Chinese and foreign presentation films. Most of the events in the films have occurred. And to reproduce them, flashbacks are widely used. The flashbacks of the presentation films of China's elite universities are mainly reflected in the introduction of its historical evolution and achievements. The methods used are: pictures (lots of historical events or characters) + subtitles + narration. And flashbacks in foreign presentation films are different, reflected greatly on personal narrative, namely by students or faculty with their own experiences to show the charm and features of the school. For example, in the presentation film of Harvard University, several students described the influence and help from Harvard University through

their own experience.

The use of flash forward in Chinese and foreign presentation films is similar, mostly for the future planning and outlook, usually appear in the end, and indirectly play the role of publicity.

#### 4.2.2 Duration

The length of the presentation films in this study is shown in the following figure:

**Figure 4.1 The length of presentation films of Chinese and foreign universities**

| Chinese universities                     | Duration (m's) | Foreign universities                       | Duration (m's) |
|--|----------------|--|----------------|
| Wuhan University                         | 7'15           | University of Edinburgh                    | 2'09           |
| Xiamen University                        | 7'27           | University of Oxford                       | 2'19           |
| Shangdong University                     | 14'36          | University of Cambridge                    | 3'02           |
| Tsinghua University                      | 7'20           | Imperial College London                    | 2'12           |
| Beijing Normal University                | 12'45          | Cornell University                         | 2'09           |
| Sichuan University                       | 11'35          | MIT(Massachusetts Institute of Technology) | 1'15           |
| Shanghai Jiao Tong University            | 9'56           | Stanford University                        | 8'55           |
| University of Science & Technology China | 6'55           | Harvard University                         | 16'36          |
| Peking University                        | 14'47          | The University of Melbourne                | 6'27           |
| Northwestern Polytechnical University    | 8'11           | The University of Queensland               | 2'49           |
| <b>Average</b>                           | <b>10'08</b>   | <b>Average</b>                             | <b>4'47</b>    |

As can be seen from the above figure, time of Chinese university publicity films is generally longer than that of foreign universities (except Harvard University and Stanford University), and the average length is two times more than that of foreign universities. Chinese elite presentation films tend to be comprehensive, and thus long. For example, the presentation film of Shandong University used nearly half of the length to tell about the origins of the university and its contribution to the national development of the country. While the foreign universities focus on highlighting one or a few bright spots, the establishment background of the school and outstanding alumni are not listed. Cornell university, for example, is highlighting the school's efforts to innovate. Innovation is the key word throughout the promotion. Another example of Imperial College London is its exploration of nature and the universe, which is the unremitting effort for the harmony between human society and nature.

### **4.3 Narrative point of view**

#### **4.3.1 Internal and external point of view**

Nine of the ten Chinese university presentation films have adopted omniscient point of view of external point of view, namely the voice-over narration mode. This kind of perspective has no fixed viewing angle, and the pictures are synchronized with the content of the voice-over. It is the most commonly used traditional view mode. Because Chinese university presentation films belong to the type of recording, the selected event contents are widely macroscopical, so it is often communicated with the audience in a similar way as the observer, so the reception of the audience is relatively passive.

In contrast, the narrative perspectives of foreign universities are more abundant. Of the ten selected films, only three use the pure voice-over omniscient narrative point of view, and the rest are different. Among them, three films without the aid of any voice-over or narrative, three are internal point of view, including fixed characters and transformation characters; there is a film of omniscient perspective combined with the character's perspective within. Cornell University, for example, is described by the headmaster alone, and is a typical view of the fixed character. Stanford university and Harvard University with students and faculty members, and teachers by sharing their experiences in the narrative, belongs to the transformation type character perspective, these experiences will greatly shorten the distance of the audience.

Through the analysis of the narrative point of view of Chinese and foreign university presentation films, it can be seen that the narrative perspective of Chinese university presentation films is still relatively simple, traditional, and remain in the external perspective of omniscient narration. In contrast, foreign universities use a variety of narrative perspectives, in various forms, flexible and innovative, highlighting their unique styles.

#### **4.3.2 Integration of narrative point of view**

There is a big gap between Chinese and foreign university presentation films in the use and combination of pictures, explanations, subtitles and music. Domestic films are generally more monotonous and follow the basic pattern. The typical narrative perspective is: the campus macro landscape, scientific research scene, historical event and the outstanding person silhouette overlapping alternately, the background music used is relatively smooth and serious. Foreign universities try to innovate in the form of pictures. For example, University of Edinburgh abandoned the reality scene, using animation, relaxed and humorous background music, which is refreshing. In terms of text, subtitles in Chinese elite presentation films are formal and rigorous, mainly are explanations of dominant disciplines, the historical events and characters, while subtitles in foreign university presentation films are more lively and intuitive. For example, in University of Oxford's presentation film, "number+n." is used to inform the audience directly about the number of books collected in the university, the student union, and even the number of ducks and geese on the campus. In the publicity films at the MIT, the headlines use the phrase "open+n." to show the content of each part. For example, under the subtitle of "open your horizons", students show up for concerts, sports and stage performances.

#### **4.4 Narrative space**

Chinese university presentation films belong to a recorded type, the event is usually arranged in accordance with the order of time. On the basis of the arrangement of the events, the space shows a certain regularity. Overall, the Chinese elite presentation film space is basically from the macro to micro, from the far to the close, almost exactly the same, slight change. For example, the spatial sorting of all Chinese university presentation films selected in this study follows the following pattern: the city's grand scene + campus overlooking + school gate + campus interior + laboratory + classroom + library. The exterior mainly shows the location, style and features of a university; close range mainly shows the students' research learning scene, highlighting the strong learning atmosphere, and the daily life of students and the campus entertainment scene is fleeting, without too much description. In contrast, foreign university publicity films do not follow a fixed pattern. Although the foreign elite presentation films also show the campus landscape, but most of them are insight, mainly with the students learning and daily life, and even more in daily life, such as the dorm life, class discussion, canteen food, sports and community projects, etc., paying much more attention to humanistic care, and the audience can feel close to campus atmosphere and its unique charm. For instance, in the presentation film of Harvard University, there is a section describing the dormitory life of students. The vivid scene meets the needs of the students and embodies the humanization of the university.

### **5 Reason analysis and suggestions**

#### **5.1 Narratological analysis on English presentation films of Chinese and foreign universities**

To sum up, the author believes that the reasons for the differences in the narrative styles of Chinese and foreign university presentation films can be attributed to the following points: (1) the attributes of Chinese and western universities are different. China's universities conduct the administrative management system, and the image communication is mainly led by the administrative departments of colleges and universities. Therefore, the publicity films are more official and formal. While many foreign universities are private universities, they can more freely form their own style of education. (2) the difference of publicity film making mode. Most of the domestic universities still follow domestic news feature films patterns, did not keep pace with the times. While publicity of foreign universities adopts film language to explain the school characteristics, and therefore more personalized and humanized. (3) some universities in China haven't formed their unique characteristics, which is the reason why the propaganda films are stereotyped and lack of individual characteristics.

#### **5.2 Suggestions on making English presentation films for Chinese universities**

Chinese university presentation films of English version are mainly aimed at international students, so it is of great need to break through the traditional Chinese narrative mode. To adopt narrative mode which is flexible, innovative and easy for international students to accept, Chinese universities need to work harder in the following areas:

(1) Transformation of narrative perspective. The transition from a traditional single point of view to a diversified narrative perspective should not be over-dependent on voice-over narration. (2) The use of visual symbols. At present, most of the presentation films of elite universities in China are listed in



chronological order. Multimedia digital visual symbols should be transformed in all aspects in the future. (3) The change of background music. The traditional dull and serious background music should be replaced gradually by the light and joyful music which fits the theme of the presentation films, so that the audience can share the content in delight. (4) The implementation of school orientation. Universities should first identify the characteristics of their own. The publicity can highlight the bright spot, showing the personality, overcoming the stereotyped shortcomings. Therefore, in the production of English publicity films, we must make rational use of narrative skills, learning from foreign experience, and play a propaganda role for our elite universities in Double First-rate construction.

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