

A Study on the Narrative and Thematic Transformation of Dunhuang Documentaries

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ABSTRACT

The development of Dunhuang-themed documentaries has undergone multiple transformations, from artistic display to academic research, from individual exploration to collective preservation, and from local narratives to global dissemination. This process reflects the evolution of visual narrative strategies and reveals the dissemination patterns of Dunhuang culture at different historical stages. Based on narrative and communication theories, this paper traces the development of Dunhuang documentaries and explores how images construct Dunhuang's historical memory, emotional resonance, and visual experience from three perspectives: historical and archaeological narratives, personal and emotional narratives, and visual and immersive narratives. Simultaneously, it analyzes how Dunhuang documentaries leverage technological innovation and international cooperation to expand their global influence and enhance the visual communication of cultural heritage. Research indicates that while constantly adjusting narrative strategies to adapt to media technology and audience needs, Dunhuang documentaries also promote the innovative development of cultural heritage visualization, providing new possibilities for cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Dunhuang Documentary Film; Narratology; Communication; Intercultural Communication



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INTRODUCTION

Dunhuang, located at a critical juncture along the ancient Silk Road, represents a unique convergence of art, religion, and cultural exchange. Its rich heritage, encompassing the Mogao Caves' murals, Buddhist scriptures, and other material and intangible cultural forms, has long attracted both academic and cinematic attention. Since the late 1970s, Dunhuang documentaries have gradually transitioned from primarily scholarly interpretations to approaches that foreground individual experiences, local practices, and daily life (Li, 2018; Zhang, 2020). Early documentaries often employed linear, authoritative narratives, emphasizing cultural continuity, national pride, and historical significance (Li, 2018). In contrast, contemporary documentaries increasingly experiment with non-linear structures, multiple narrative perspectives, and intimate portrayals of ordinary people, reflecting broader trends in documentary filmmaking and media evolution (Zhang, 2020; Wang, 2022).

Previous research on Dunhuang documentaries has largely concentrated on artistic style, technical innovation, and dissemination practices (Li, 2018; Zhang, 2020). While these studies provide valuable insights into production and reception contexts, they

often neglect systematic analysis of narrative strategies and thematic evolution. Narratology offers a powerful framework for such analysis, as narrative decisions—including temporal arrangement, focalization, and sequencing—directly shape the construction of meaning and the audience's interpretive experience (Chatman, 1978; Bordwell, 1985). Furthermore, the themes emphasized in documentaries are not merely aesthetic choices; they encode contemporary cultural values, social concerns, and modes of identity representation, thereby influencing both domestic and international perceptions of Dunhuang (Li, 2018; Wang, 2022).

This study seeks to examine the transformation of narrative strategies and thematic focus in Dunhuang documentaries from a narratological perspective. By closely analyzing a selection of documentary texts, it investigates how themes have shifted from grand historical and religious narratives toward personal stories, folk rituals, and everyday life. This thematic evolution is closely intertwined with changes in narrative structure, point of view, and cinematic techniques, including editing rhythm, visual framing, and sound design. For example, contemporary works often adopt multi-perspective storytelling or intertwine historical and contemporary footage to juxtapose the

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past and present, thereby enhancing emotional engagement and cultural resonance (Zhang, 2020). Such narrative innovations not only enrich the textual complexity of Dunhuang documentaries but also expand their potential for cultural communication and soft power projection, both within China and internationally (Li, 2018; Wang, 2022).

By situating the analysis in both textual and theoretical frameworks, this study aims to illuminate the intricate relationship between narrative form and thematic content in Dunhuang documentaries. It highlights the ways in which documentary filmmakers negotiate between historical authority and lived experience, grand narratives and individual voices, as well as tradition and modernity. In doing so, it provides a deeper understanding of how Dunhuang documentaries mediate cultural memory, construct social meaning, and contribute to ongoing dialogues about heritage, identity, and contemporary relevance.

RESEARCH OBJECTIVES AND METHODS

Objectives

To study the Narrative of Dunhuang Documentaries

Methods:

Textual Analysis:

In-depth interpretation of representative Dunhuang documentaries from different periods, examining their narrative structures, visual styles, and thematic presentations.

Application of narrative theory to analyze the relationship between story and discourse, the construction of narrative levels, and time manipulation strategies.

Focus on the use of visual language, such as camera language, editing techniques, narration, and interviews, as well as how narrative strategies shape the cultural image of Dunhuang and influence audience perception of its historical and artistic value.

Comparative Analysis:

Comparative analysis of Dunhuang documentaries from different historical stages to examine their evolution in narrative modes, thematic orientations, and dissemination strategies.

Investigation of the influence of different directors, production institutions, and media environments on documentary narrative styles.

Horizontal comparison of similarities and differences between different works and vertical analysis of key turning points in the development process of documentaries to explore how Dunhuang-themed documentaries adapt their narrative strategies to the demands of changing times.

Audience Research:

Analysis of audience feedback, reviews, and dissemination of documentaries to examine the

reception and impact of Dunhuang documentaries in different cultural contexts.

Study of how audiences interpret the narrative content of Dunhuang documentaries and analysis of their reception methods and cultural adaptation processes in cross-cultural communication.

Use of data from social media, film review platforms, and academic papers to explore how Dunhuang documentaries influence public perception of Dunhuang culture through visual narratives and play a role in global cultural exchange.

Historical Literature Method:

Combined with academic achievements in the field of Dunhuang studies, conduct a traceability analysis of the historical background, production background, and cultural communication of Dunhuang-themed documentaries.

Through the collation and interpretation of related literature, explore how Dunhuang documentaries interact with academic research, and examine their value in the inheritance and dissemination of Dunhuang culture.

Through the above research methods, this study will construct the development context of Dunhuang documentaries, reveal the evolution logic of their narrative strategies, and explore the multiple functions of visual media in the dissemination of cultural heritage.

FINDINGS

Analysis of Narrative Strategies in Dunhuang Documentary Films

The narrative strategy of Dunhuang documentaries not only determines the way the images are expressed, but also influences the audience's understanding and acceptance of Dunhuang culture. From historical recreation to characterisation to the exploration of immersive experiences, documentaries have adopted diverse narrative techniques at different stages to adapt to changing times and audience needs. The choice of narrative strategies is not only subject to the artistic concepts of documentary film creators, but also closely related to the development of science and technology and changes in communication media.

Historical and Archaeological Narratives: Recreating the Flux of a Thousand Years of Dunhuang

Dunhuang documentaries, throughout their various developmental stages, have consistently anchored themselves in historical and archaeological narratives, constructing the historical context of Dunhuang culture through detailed documentation, archaeological findings, and cinematic techniques. This narrative strategy not only reinforces the academic value of Dunhuang as a World Heritage Site but also lends greater historical credibility to the visual representations. (Hou & Guo, 2024) Across different

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periods, the historical and archaeological narratives in Dunhuang documentaries have evolved from macro-level descriptions to detailed explorations, from linear temporal storytelling to multi-dimensional narratives, and from singular academic interpretations to cross-cultural dialogues.

The construction of historical narratives: macro-linearity to multidimensional reproduction

The historical narratives of Dunhuang documentaries initially adopted a linear time structure, with historical changes as the main thread, to sort out the formation, development and circulation of Dunhuang culture. For example, Dunhuang (1994) adopts a chronological narrative that emphasises Dunhuang's position as a cultural crossroads on the Silk Road, and shows Dunhuang's artistic characteristics at different stages of history through the evolution of murals and sculptures.

(Zhu, 2013) These documentaries often rely on voice-over narration and static images to sort out Dunhuang's historical lineage with historical materials, which enhances academic rigour, but the form of expression is relatively homogeneous.

After entering the 21st century, Dunhuang documentaries have begun to adopt a multi-dimensional reenactment narrative, making the historical narrative more three-dimensional through cross-temporal juxtaposition, scene reproduction, expert interviews and other techniques. For example, *Dunhuang: In Search of a Lost Civilisation* (2005) not only recalls the discovery of the Dunhuang Cave of Sutras, but also explores the historical background of the dispersal of the document in the light of the research of contemporary scholars. The film contrasts the historical images of Western explorers Stein and Birchoff with modern archaeological research, reinforcing the global impact of Dunhuang's history and making the documentary more layered in its temporal narrative.

Deepening the archaeological narrative: from static records to dynamic restoration

The development of archaeology has provided new narrative perspectives for Dunhuang documentaries, extending them from traditional historical interpretation to more empirical archaeological exploration. Field archaeological images have become an important narrative tool for documentaries, allowing viewers to visualise the research process of Dunhuang sites through real-time archaeological field recordings. For example, *Dunhuang* (2010) uses on-site archaeological excavation filming, combined with interviews with scholars, to show the restoration and protection of Dunhuang's caves, allowing viewers to witness the process of archaeological discovery and enhancing the authenticity of the documentary.

The introduction of digital restoration technology has made archaeological narratives more intuitive. For example, *Dunhuang Digital Mysteries* (2021) visualises the restoration process of thousand-year-old murals with the help of 3D modelling and high-definition scanning

technology, allowing viewers to 'watch' the original appearance of the murals and their restoration process through moving images. Digital archaeology breaks through the limitations of traditional images, enabling the archaeological achievements of Dunhuang culture to be presented in a more immersive way, and providing an image basis for the digital protection of Dunhuang heritage.

Cross-Cultural Narratives: A Global Perspective on Dunhuang

With the internationalization of Dunhuang studies, the archaeological narratives in Dunhuang documentaries have gradually transcended local frameworks, integrating into the context of global cultural heritage preservation. For example, "Dialogue Between Mogao Caves and Angkor Wat" (2020) juxtaposed the archaeological research of Dunhuang and Cambodia's Angkor Wat, exploring the similarities and historical destinies of these two world heritage sites. This cross-cultural narrative model allows the visual expression of Dunhuang culture to transcend regional limitations, fostering cross-civilization dialogues and expanding the international perspective of archaeological narratives. (Duan, 2021)

From a narratological standpoint, the historical and archaeological narratives in Dunhuang documentaries have undergone transitions from linear storytelling to nonlinear, multi-layered narratives; from static imagery to dynamic restoration innovations; and from local research to global dialogues. These evolutions have not only enhanced the academic value of Dunhuang documentaries but also promoted the diversification of visual narratives in cultural heritage.

Character and Emotional Narratives: The Lives Behind the Guardians of Dunhuang

The narrative approach in Dunhuang-themed documentaries has evolved from historical investigation to character-driven storytelling, with a growing emphasis on individual stories and emotional expression. Compared to grand historical narratives, character-driven storytelling focuses on the lives of Dunhuang researchers, conservators, and artists, intertwining history with contemporary realities and cultural heritage with personal emotions. Through this approach, audiences can experience the cultural significance and spiritual essence of Dunhuang on a deeply personal level.

This narrative strategy not only enhances the dramatic depth of documentaries but also renders the preservation, inheritance, and study of Dunhuang's cultural legacy more tangible and vivid. By presenting the dedication and struggles of those who have devoted their lives to protecting Dunhuang, these documentaries create a more immersive and emotionally resonant portrayal of cultural heritage conservation.

Life History Narrative: Reflecting Dunhuang's Legacy Through Individual Journeys

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The history of Dunhuang is not only engraved in its caves and murals but also embodied in the life trajectories of generations of guardians. In recent years, Dunhuang documentaries have increasingly adopted a life history (Life History) narrative, portraying the cultural heritage of Dunhuang through the perspectives of individuals dedicated to its preservation.

For instance, *National Memory: Chang Shuhong* (2020) recounts how Chang Shuhong, upon returning from France, devoted his life to the protection of Dunhuang's grottoes, ultimately becoming a symbolic "Guardian of Dunhuang." The documentary vividly reconstructs his outstanding contributions to Dunhuang studies and cultural preservation in the 20th century while deeply conveying his unwavering cultural conviction, profound sense of historical mission, and strong patriotic sentiment. These elements endow the documentary with a powerful emotional impact and historical depth. (Ning & Jiao, 2024)

Similarly, *Chronicles of the Nation: Dunhuang Father and Daughter* (2019) weaves together family memories, letters, and interviews to intricately depict the emotional and cultural bond between Chang Shuhong and his daughter, Chang Shana. By intertwining personal narratives with national memory, the film highlights the intergenerational transmission of the Dunhuang spirit.

Emotional Narratives: From National Memory to Cultural Identity

Emotional narratives in Dunhuang documentaries often construct national memory through individual experiences, further reinforcing cultural identity. For example, *National Memory: Torchbearers* (2020) documents how Dunhuang scholars have passed down their knowledge across generations, illustrating the historical evolution of Dunhuang's cultural heritage. These documentaries often employ a combination of historical reenactments, archival footage, and expert interviews, demonstrating that the scholars' dedication is not merely a personal endeavor but a profound cultural responsibility, thereby fostering emotional resonance with the audience.

Additionally, *Traversing the Silk Road's Rain of Flowers* (2018) traces the history and impact of the dance drama *Silk Road, Flower Rain*, showcasing how this production has become a cultural emblem of Dunhuang and played a crucial role in international cultural exchanges. Through interviews with dancers, playwrights, and researchers, the documentary establishes an emotional connection, presenting Dunhuang not just as a historical relic but as a living artistic symbol that continues to inspire contemporary audiences.

Narrative Strategies in Character Portrayal

From a narratological perspective, Dunhuang documentaries frequently utilize the focalization strategy to shape their character narratives. Gérard Genette's concept of "internal focalization" is

particularly prominent in these films, as it allows audiences to experience Dunhuang through the subjective perspectives and emotional expressions of its guardians. (Zhao & Shi, 2008)

For instance, *Dunhuang: One Cave, One Life* (2020) employs extensive subjective cinematography and first-person narration, allowing viewers to directly perceive the protagonist's passion and dedication to Dunhuang. This approach enhances audience immersion, transforming historical narration from a mere transmission of information into a deeply personal and emotionally charged experience.

Additionally, the time structure of character-driven storytelling in these documentaries often exhibits a non-linear pattern. For example, *Dunhuang: Born Legendary* (2021) interweaves past and present narratives, connecting different generations of Dunhuang's guardians. This narrative technique not only enhances the dramatic depth of the documentary but also intensifies the emotional expression of its characters, creating a sense of timeless continuity in the preservation of Dunhuang's heritage.

Visual and Immersive Narratives: Reconstructing the Spatial-Temporal Experience of Dunhuang

The visual expression of Dunhuang-themed documentaries has evolved from traditional footage to multi-media immersive presentations. In recent years, with advancements in digital technology, virtual reality (VR), and augmented reality (AR), documentaries have increasingly explored visual storytelling techniques. These innovations not only enhance the visual impact of Dunhuang's cultural heritage but also provide audiences with a deeply immersive viewing experience. By reinforcing historical reconstruction, intricate detail depiction, and cultural perception, this approach positions documentaries not just as narrators of history but as "re-creators" of cultural memory.

Application of Digital Technology: From High-Definition Restoration to 3D Modeling

With advancements in imaging technology, Dunhuang documentaries have transitioned from traditional live-action filming to high-resolution scanning, digital restoration, and 3D modeling, allowing viewers to closely appreciate the intricate beauty of Dunhuang's art. For instance, *The Chinese Grotto Corridor: Dunhuang Paintings* employs high-precision imaging and color restoration technologies to enable audiences to observe brushstrokes and color variations in murals, overcoming the limitations of traditional filming in capturing fine details. Additionally, the documentary utilizes digital restoration techniques to recreate murals in their historical states, comparing different periods of mural evolution, allowing viewers to witness their transformation over millennia.

The integration of 3D modeling technology allows documentaries to move beyond the constraints of two-dimensional imagery, offering a more spatially accurate

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reconstruction of Dunhuang's caves. The Digital Secret Realm of Dunhuang (2021) employs 3D scanning technology to digitally replicate the interior structure of the Mogao Caves, combined with dynamic lighting simulations. This enables viewers to "enter" the caves virtually, experiencing their spatial layout as if on-site. Such applications not only enhance the immersive quality of documentaries but also contribute to the long-term preservation and study of Dunhuang's cultural heritage.

Immersive Experience: Innovations in VR and Augmented Reality

The application of virtual reality (VR) and augmented reality (AR) has allowed Dunhuang documentaries to break free from conventional viewing modes, enabling audiences to "immerse" themselves in cultural environments. For example, *Dunhuang: Born Legendary* (2021) employs VR panoramic filming, allowing viewers to virtually wander through the Mogao Caves, closely observe mural details, and listen to expert commentary. This interactive viewing experience shifts Dunhuang culture's dissemination from a one-way transmission of information to an exploratory engagement, significantly enhancing both immersion and appeal.

Additionally, the application of AR technology seamlessly integrates history with the present. *Dunhuang Instruments: Music Revived from Paintings* (2021) not only visually presents musical instruments depicted in murals but also employs AR to bring these ancient instruments "to life." The film invites music scholars and performers to recreate the instruments while using digital synthesis to simulate their sounds, allowing audiences to "hear" the music of Dunhuang after centuries of silence. This innovation not only enhances the depth of visual storytelling but also makes the transmission of Dunhuang culture more dynamic and multidimensional.

Expansion of Visual Narratives: From Static Representation to Dynamic Reconstruction

Unlike earlier Dunhuang documentaries that relied on static imagery and voice-over narration, contemporary works emphasize dynamic visual storytelling, making the content more cohesive and narratively compelling. For example, *The Chinese Grotto Corridor: Dunhuang Paintings* does not merely present static images of murals but employs digital technology to simulate their painting process. Viewers can witness how ancient artisans meticulously layered colors and traced lines, effectively reconstructing the artistic techniques and creative logic behind Dunhuang's murals. (Yang, 2006)

In terms of narrative strategy, Dunhuang documentaries have increasingly adopted a "temporal interweaving narrative" approach, seamlessly transitioning between historical footage and modern digital reconstructions. *Dunhuang Instruments: Music Revived from Paintings* exemplifies this by juxtaposing ancient mural depictions

of instruments with contemporary reenactments of their performances, making the "revival" of Dunhuang's musical heritage more tangible. This technique not only enhances the documentary's visual impact but also expands the temporal dimension of Dunhuang's cultural narrative.

From a narratological perspective, Dunhuang documentaries have shifted from "non-focalized narratives" to "multi-focalization" storytelling. Rather than relying solely on a singular visual presentation, modern documentaries integrate multiple media formats, technologies, and narrative approaches to offer audiences a more comprehensive understanding of Dunhuang culture. From a communication perspective, the adoption of visual and immersive storytelling has enabled Dunhuang culture to transcend the limitations of traditional documentary distribution. Through VR experiences, interactive exhibitions, and other multimedia platforms, it has established a more engaging and interactive cultural communication ecosystem.

Looking ahead, with the continued advancement of artificial intelligence (AI) and mixed reality (MR), the visual storytelling of Dunhuang documentaries is poised to become even more intelligent and personalized. Future innovations will allow audiences to explore different cultural themes based on their individual interests, deepening and diversifying the transmission of Dunhuang's heritage. Whether through historical reconstruction, spatial recreation, or cultural interaction, advancements in visual and immersive storytelling will breathe new life into Dunhuang documentaries in the digital age, ensuring its cultural significance resonates more widely on a global scale.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION:

From Artistic Display to Academic Research: The Shift from Story to Discourse

The thematic evolution of Dunhuang documentaries has transitioned from artistic visual representation to knowledge dissemination centered on academic research. This shift reflects changes in narrative strategies as well as advancements in Dunhuang's cultural communication model. From a narratological perspective, this transformation represents a shift from "story" to "discourse"—moving beyond simply showcasing Dunhuang's artistic appeal to engaging in in-depth discussions of its scholarly and cultural significance. (Li, Chen, & Jiang, 2023) Meanwhile, from a communication studies standpoint, this shift reveals the expansion of documentaries from aesthetic experiences to vehicles of knowledge dissemination and cultural interpretation, enhancing both their social impact and academic value.

Artistic Display: The Dominance of Visual Narratives
Early Dunhuang documentaries focused primarily on visual impact, emphasizing the aesthetic and historical atmosphere of Dunhuang's art. For example, *Silk Road and Rain of Flowers* (1979), although primarily a dance

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documentary, recreated the celestial figures from Dunhuang murals through cinematic techniques. By employing dramatized artistic storytelling, it provided audiences with an intuitive experience of Dunhuang's cultural charm. Documentaries from this period often employed a "storytelling" approach, placing Dunhuang within a mysterious historical setting to captivate audiences, while offering limited academic discourse.

Even in the early 21st century, visual representation remained central to Dunhuang documentaries. For instance, *Dunhuang* (2010) presented high-definition imagery that captured the intricate details of the cave murals, utilizing art direction and lighting techniques to enhance visual impact. These documentaries primarily relied on visual presentation, emphasizing the artistic characteristics of Dunhuang and immersing viewers in the beauty of mural colors and compositions. However, while this approach enhanced the appeal of Dunhuang culture, it remained limited in academic depth and lacked a systematic research perspective.

Academic Research Orientation: From Storytelling to Knowledge Discourse

In recent years, Dunhuang-themed documentaries have increasingly adopted an academic research orientation, emphasizing historical documents, archaeological discoveries, and cultural interpretation. This shift from "story" to "discourse" enhances the intellectual value of these documentaries while broadening their social function, positioning them as key media for the dissemination of Dunhuang studies.

For example, the documentary *Dunhuang: Born Legendary* employs dramatized storytelling to trace the rise and fall of Dunhuang culture. Through a "history through people" approach, the film deeply explores the historical context and academic significance of Dunhuang, reinforcing its scholarly value and authority. Similarly, *The Great Dunhuang* presents historical facts about Dunhuang, illustrating how it served as a crossroads for commerce, culture, and art between East and West for thousands of years. By adopting a mature narrative strategy and innovative audiovisual techniques, the documentary highlights Dunhuang's role in cross-cultural exchanges, emphasizing its profound heritage and global influence. (Wang & Che, 2025)

From a narratological perspective, this shift represents a transformation from story-driven narratives to the construction of academic discourse. Early documentaries predominantly employed an "external perspective," where audiences passively received stories about Dunhuang's culture. However, contemporary documentaries have increasingly introduced an "internal perspective," positioning archaeologists, art historians, and Dunhuang researchers as primary narrators, thereby enhancing the authority and professionalism of these films.

From a communication studies perspective, the thematic evolution of Dunhuang documentaries has also been

shaped by changing audience demands. In the era of information fragmentation and digital media, viewers are no longer satisfied with purely visual appreciation—they seek structured knowledge through documentaries. Consequently, recent Dunhuang documentaries have increasingly aligned with the "knowledge documentary" model, integrating expert commentary, textual analysis, and scientific research to deepen their content. This approach ensures that Dunhuang documentaries serve not only as artistic experiences but also as platforms for knowledge dissemination and academic engagement.

From Individual Exploration to Collective Guardianship: Expanding the Narrative Focus

The narrative focus of Dunhuang documentaries has undergone a shift from individual exploration to collective guardianship. This transition reflects not only the evolution of Dunhuang's cultural preservation model but also the broadening of documentary storytelling methods. Early works primarily revolved around personal journeys, shaping legendary researcher figures and highlighting the role of individuals in protecting Dunhuang. In recent years, however, documentaries have expanded beyond individual narratives to embrace group storytelling, depicting the involvement of scholars, restorers, cultural communicators, and even the general public. This transformation makes the narrative of Dunhuang's preservation more multidimensional, enhancing audience awareness and emotional engagement with this cultural endeavor.

The Individual Exploration Narrative: Focusing on the Inner World of Cultural Guardians

From the late 20th century to the early 21st century, Dunhuang documentaries often centered on individual figures, crafting vivid portrayals of cultural guardians. *Chinese People: Dunhuang Guardian Fan Jinshi* (2019), for instance, chronicles Fan Jinshi's journey from a young scholar to the director of the Dunhuang Academy, intertwining her academic achievements with personal sacrifices. This approach injects drama and emotional resonance into the study and preservation of Dunhuang. Such documentaries enhance viewers' understanding of the hardships of early Dunhuang research while creating a deep emotional connection with audiences.

These character-driven documentaries exhibit distinct narrative features. First, they typically follow a linear progression, emphasizing personal growth, challenges, and achievements while highlighting an individual's deep emotional ties to Dunhuang. Second, they employ meticulous visual storytelling to capture personal details, allowing viewers to immerse themselves in the scholar's dedication and struggles. This approach elevates Dunhuang researchers to near-heroic status, making the story of Dunhuang's protection more compelling. However, as research systems matured, this narrative strategy began to show its limitations—Dunhuang's guardians were no longer lone pioneers but part of a collaborative academic and cultural network. **The Rise of Group Narratives: Expanding the Social Perspective of Dunhuang Preservation**

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In recent years, Dunhuang documentaries have increasingly moved away from individual-centered narratives to adopt a group perspective, showcasing the diverse collaboration and societal participation in the preservation of Dunhuang's heritage. This shift broadens the social scope of these documentaries, offering audiences a more comprehensive understanding of Dunhuang's preservation efforts.

The documentary *My Time in Dunhuang* highlights the work and lives of young scholars at the Dunhuang Academy, including sculptors, artifact restorers, and mural copyists, illustrating their dedication to safeguarding and passing down Dunhuang's heritage. By interweaving multiple storylines, the documentary presents a holistic view of Dunhuang's preservation efforts, allowing audiences to appreciate the collective contributions behind this endeavor. (Xue, 2023)

Similarly, *The Great Dunhuang* takes on a broader international perspective, narrating the centuries-long exchange of commerce, culture, and art between the East and the West, positioning Dunhuang as a unique intersection of civilizations. Through documenting historical relics and scholarly discussions, the film reveals Dunhuang's impact on world civilization and showcases the Chinese nation's millennia-long pursuit of cultural exploration and preservation.

In terms of narrative strategy, these group-oriented documentaries break away from traditional linear storytelling, employing cross-cutting techniques and multi-perspective narration to add layers to the narrative. Additionally, the inclusion of everyday figures, such as Dunhuang cultural guides and volunteer mural restorers, enhances the accessibility of cultural heritage preservation and fosters a stronger public connection to Dunhuang's legacy. (Xue, 2023)

The Evolution of Narrative Focus: From Legends to Collective Resonance

From a narratological perspective, Dunhuang documentaries have transitioned from a "single-hero" model to a "group narrative" framework. This transformation is not only reflected in character selection but also in storytelling structure. Early documentaries often employed a cause-and-effect chain structure, tightly linking individual fates with Dunhuang's destiny. In contrast, contemporary documentaries favor a networked narrative, interweaving multiple storylines to provide audiences with a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted development of Dunhuang studies. For instance, *Dunhuang: Born Legendary* (2021) not only recounts scholars' research journeys but also integrates stories of mural restorers and visual documentarians, enhancing the film's depth and overall coherence. (Zhou, 2022)

From a communication perspective, group narratives have expanded the audience base for Dunhuang documentaries. In the past, these documentaries

primarily targeted cultural researchers and documentary enthusiasts. However, the shift toward collective storytelling has attracted a broader social audience, turning Dunhuang heritage preservation into a widely shared concern. For example, *Dunhuang Instruments: Music Revived from Paintings* (2021) explores musical instruments depicted in Dunhuang murals, combining historical music restoration with contemporary performances, drawing interest from music enthusiasts. This narrative approach moves beyond conventional historical storytelling, enabling Dunhuang culture to be disseminated through multiple dimensions and to reach diverse audiences.

From Local Narratives to Global Dissemination: Cross-Cultural Communication and Audience Reception

The narrative approach of Dunhuang-themed documentaries has undergone significant changes in the context of globalization, gradually shifting from emphasizing the local cultural value of Dunhuang to engaging in cross-cultural communication. Early Dunhuang documentaries focused primarily on China's historical context, highlighting Dunhuang's unique status within Chinese civilization. In recent years, however, production teams have increasingly emphasized the universality of Dunhuang's culture, situating it within the broader framework of global cultural exchange.

Constructing Local Narratives: Dunhuang Culture and National Identity

From the late 20th to the early 21st century, Dunhuang documentaries aimed to strengthen domestic audiences' cultural identification with Dunhuang. Through historical storytelling, archaeological research, and artistic reconstruction, these films highlighted Dunhuang's unique value as a significant part of Chinese civilization. For instance, *Dunhuang* (2010, directed by Zhou Bing) combined on-location filming, textual analysis, and expert interviews to systematically examine Dunhuang murals, sculptures, and historical transformations, reinforcing the cultural continuity of Dunhuang. Similarly, *Dunhuang Music and Dance* (2009) explored the musical and dance elements in murals, emphasizing the deep connection between Dunhuang art and traditional Chinese culture.

During this period, Dunhuang documentaries commonly employed linear storytelling, using chronological narratives to present the accumulation of cultural heritage at Dunhuang while relying on expert commentary to enhance credibility. However, while this approach effectively emphasized the local attributes of Dunhuang culture, it also limited international audience engagement. The discourse in these films was predominantly centered on Chinese history, rarely addressing Dunhuang's role in global cultural exchanges, making it challenging for non-Chinese audiences to establish a direct emotional connection. This limitation prompted subsequent documentary productions to explore more globally oriented narrative strategies while maintaining academic rigor.

Exploring Cross-Cultural Narratives: From Regional Heritage to Global Cultural Legacy

Since the 2010s, Dunhuang documentaries have gradually adopted an internationalized narrative approach, highlighting Dunhuang's significance in global cultural exchanges. For example, *Dialogue Between Mogao Caves and Angkor Wat* (2020) compares China's Dunhuang Mogao Caves with Cambodia's Angkor Wat, illustrating cultural interactions along the Silk Road. By transcending regional constraints, this documentary situates Dunhuang within the global heritage system, broadening its interpretative space.

Additionally, *World Heritage: Dunhuang Mogao Caves*, produced by Japan's NHK, employs an international visual language and narrative structure to introduce Dunhuang to a global audience. By incorporating insights from international scholars, the documentary enhances its cross-cultural adaptability.

From a stylistic perspective, these documentaries utilize high dynamic range (HDR) imaging to amplify the visual impact of murals, aerial cinematography to capture the geographic setting of the Mogao Caves, and dramatized re-enactments to strengthen the storytelling aspect. The integration of these techniques ensures that the films not only possess cultural depth but also align with the viewing habits of international audiences, improving their effectiveness in global communication.

Strategies for Global Dissemination: Multi-Platform and Multi-Channel Integration

In recent years, the dissemination strategies of Dunhuang documentaries have evolved from reliance on single-platform broadcasting to diversified, multi-channel distribution, enhancing their overall impact. Early Dunhuang documentaries were primarily aired on television networks such as CCTV, BBC, and NHK, targeting academic researchers and documentary enthusiasts. However, with the rise of digital media, this single-platform model has gradually been replaced.

For example, the New Media Center of the Dunhuang Academy has established accounts on WeChat, Weibo, TikTok, Kuaishou, and Bilibili, launching digital content brands such as *Dunhuang Festivals and Seasons*, *My Love for Dunhuang*, *Echoes of Dunhuang*, *Characters in Dunhuang*, and *Dunhuang Wallpapers*. These initiatives have gained widespread recognition and acclaim, positioning Dunhuang as an influential cultural symbol both domestically and internationally.

Furthermore, cross-national collaborations have become a key factor in promoting global dissemination. For instance, the bilingual documentary *Stein in Dunhuang* presents the experiences of foreign scholars researching Dunhuang, integrating both Eastern and Western archaeological perspectives to cater to Western audiences' cognitive frameworks. Similarly, a Sino-French VR project on Dunhuang allows global

audiences to virtually "visit" the Mogao Caves through immersive virtual reality technology. These cross-cultural initiatives not only enhance the international influence of Dunhuang documentaries but also open new possibilities for future cultural communication.

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