

# How to Tell an Impressive Chinese Story? ---A Critical Thinking of Chinese City Promotional Films in English

Yan-Yu Zhang

Zhejiang University of Water Resources and Electric Power, Hangzhou, Zhejiang, China

elainecheung@126.com

**Keywords:** City Promotional Film, Intercultural Barriers, Outcome, Narration, Content, Genre, Translation

**Abstract:** Many Chinese cities have shot their city promotional films in foreign languages. However, there exist problems in these films due to cultural differences and intercultural barriers. In the outcome, some films fail to identify themselves as a unique Chinese city and in film narration, quite a few cities simply base themselves on a finished Chinese script. In the content, a city film may have more than one theme without any focus or no theme at all. In genre, few cities have paid enough attention to it and most of the city films contain similar kinds of ingredients in a similar way. Problems in language translation and special effect are also found. With a detailed analysis of the typical city cases, the author aims to explore more effective ways to promote Chinese cities for better intercultural communication. In her opinion, the key to a successful film should be “what they want to see” instead of “what we want them to see” so as to create an environment where foreign audience is able to identify and describe cultural values shared through effective intercultural communication. Film producers need to do a market survey beforehand as to collect information on the target market, target audience, communication channels, different ways of thinking, different cultural values etc. While making the film, they also need to prepare a unique script, an attractive theme, an excellent special effect and a fluent narration with perfect details like language translation. Only in this way can they tell an impressive Chinese story to the whole world.

## 1. Introduction

With the fast development of the whole country since the dawn of the new millennium, Chinese cities also become increasingly embraced of the whole world in the recent two decades. One evidence is that many Chinese cities, big or small in their scale, have had shot their city promotional films in foreign languages, mostly in English.

A city promotional film is one of the ways in which the city actively constructs its cultural identity. When it targets at the domestic audience, that is, in Chinese language, it is unnecessary to introduce or explain too much about the local culture for recognition, since the audience is supposed to be familiar with it. Therefore, for a city promotional film in Chinese, a most popular and also reasonable way is to show the unique local culture as well as its fast economic development and famous tourist attractions considering the developmental disequilibrium and diverse cultures.

But a promotional film in another language is not the same. It involves different target audience in different cultures. In other words, it is not about the same culture that people share, it is about intercultural communication.

As advocated by the Chinese government, the developing country is now working to share its unique Chinese story with the other countries. Yet how to tell an impressive story to the foreign audience? It's still a challenging task for the Chinese people. In this article, the author aims to find out the defects in the English city promotional films for improvement with a detailed analysis of the film designs, styles, target audience etc. guided by appropriate outcomes.

## 2. Film Outcomes

A desired outcome for intercultural communication is to cultivate an understanding and awareness of

different cultural values<sup>[1]</sup>. Therefore, the biggest goal of intercultural communication in our case should be: assisting foreign audience in recognizing, accepting, and appreciating Chinese culture introduced in the promotional film. It is supposed to be the general goal for all the Chinese cities to promote themselves.

However, since it's promotional, a smaller yet more important goal for each film would be their unique cultural identity. That is, a city promotional film needs to identify itself in two ways: first, it's a Chinese city, not a Korean city, nor a Japanese city; moreover, it has unique local culture which makes it different from other Chinese cities. In a word, a successful promotional film for a Chinese city should make it greatly identifiable from both its domestic and foreign peers.

When we look through the city films, we can find that most of them have achieved the goal of making itself clearly a Chinese city by showing the typical Chinese cultural elements like tea, opera or Tai-Chi, etc. However, when it comes to the smaller yet more specific goal to make itself a unique and impressive or even unforgettable Chinese city, most of the cities follow some similar rules: they choose to show the city attractions --- it is necessary since it's a promotional film, and are also eager to show the foreign audience a striking contrast between its ancient history and the modern development --- a curious ambition to prove its fast economic development, which unluckily may not be so helpful.

### **3. Film Script**

Once the appropriate film outcomes are made clear, the next step is to check its script. It includes content, narration, focus, etc. Regrettably, in the promotional films by different cities, we can find the similar contents like senior citizens playing Tai-Chi in a morning park, young people excited about the sky-scrapers or grand shopping malls in the city center, opera performers for a classic play part, etc. with the same English word "charming" to conclude different cities --- charming Beijing, charming Qingdao, etc. (Zheng Guo, 2012<sup>[2]</sup>).

#### **3.1 Narration**

The biggest mistake that a few cities make in this step is that they just simply produce a Chinese-style film in English, more like an English version from a Chinese one. That is, it just translates directly from a finished Chinese script such as "Chongqing Travel"<sup>[3]</sup>.

Take "The City of Beijing"<sup>[4]</sup> as an example for analysis. It starts abruptly with the English subtitle in the first special-effect history part:

"Mountains embrace rivers/ Prosperity the water delivers/The City of JiYan was constructed/three millennia before/Five dynasties the capital beheld/eighty decades all along/Years stretch with time elapsed/Nature poem the city composed/Visions cross around the earth/time interacts with the space/".

Even Chinese people can be confused about which city it is simply with the Chinese subtitles when they watch the special-effect at the beginning of the film. Not to mention foreign audience who are supposed to know little about the long and complex Chinese history. As a result, when they read the English subtitle which is obviously not so coherent as the Chinese one<sup>[5]</sup>, it is very likely that some of them may lose their interest at the very beginning.

A good example about narration is the promotional film of Luoyang<sup>[6]</sup>. Similar to Beijing, it also starts with its long and profound history. In fact, the history narration takes about one fifth of the whole film (2'40" vs. 11'30"). However, similar lead-in here catches people's eyes with the narrator's first sentence: "If you want to see the ebb and flow of [Chinese] history, you need only look to Luoyang."

What's more, though a long historical prologue, it is closely connected with the following part or rather the whole film. When we keep watching it, we will find that the whole film is actually based on the history of Luoyang with the guiding sentence above.

#### **3.2 Content**

Therefore, when we discuss about the narration, we should also examine the content. Normally, there

are two general problems concerning the film content: theme and focus.

A city film is like a short story. With the time limit, most of the cities find it hard to present all its cream. Under such circumstance, film makers need to decide the theme of the film. Unfortunately, because of the typical Chinese way of thinking, which we will explore later in this article, the film may turn out to have more than one theme or no theme at all. Consequently, when foreign people watch the film, they may regard it not quite impressive as stuffed with various kinds of elements.

We can again take the Luoyang promotional film as a successful example. Throughout the whole film, though there are a few elements for the city to present--- attractions, special products and local culture, they are introduced with the string of the city history. Meanwhile, as Luoyang is famous for peony, this beautiful flower is also used as both an effective connective and attractive trimming.

Similar to Luoyang, the Shanghai promotional film<sup>[7]</sup> also focuses on its history. But unlike Luoyang, it pays great attention to the sharp contrast between its history and present. Yet unluckily, in this seven-minute-long film, with a local popular song *A Song of Four Seasons* (which used to be popular almost eighty years ago) as the background music, fast-changing scenes stuffed with numerous elements make the audience hard to catch them---too many themes with no focus, the film is quite confusing even for a Chinese person.

It's also hard to imagine the effect when it was played on the big screen of the New York Times Square. In fact, with no English annotation, no English subtitles, no English narration, it is hardly understandable for foreign strangers to figure out the content of the film, not to say remember it.

#### 4. Film Genre

When a city promotional film is being made, the producers need to be careful about its genre. If it's too commercial, the audience may look on it as pure advertisement; otherwise, people tend to consider it as propaganda. Thus, the appropriate and acceptable genre could be prominent to an impressive story in a city film.

Take the Hangzhou promotional films for G20 as a good example. The city prepared a series of different versions in different lengths including the Chinese, English, animated, e-commerce etc. For the general introduction, it takes an almost 17-minute-long film<sup>[8]</sup> to cover quite a few elements like the city attractions, history, culture, legends and even the city spirits. Meanwhile, in the short animated film<sup>[9]</sup>, with a bright children's song as the background music, it shows in a very happy way its warm welcome. As for the business version<sup>[10]</sup>, the city shows its advantages in cross-border e-commerce industry in a professional way.

Another special genre is the Chongqing promotional film "Chongqing---A City with Dazzling Beauty"<sup>[11]</sup>. Different from most of the other city films, it tells us a story in which a girl goes back to her hometown Chongqing. In her eyes and also in the gentle narration, the city shows its dazzling beauty with great changes.

Few cities have paid enough attention to its film genre by far. As stated before, most of the city promotional films contain many similar kinds of ingredients in a similar way. Some of the ingredients can even be found in a repeated genre such as tea culture, local opera or grand shopping malls. Once played in a foreign culture, audience may consider the film more like pastiche instead of impressive rhetoric.

#### 5. Other Problems

Besides the main problems stated above, there are some smaller ones in many Chinese city promotional films.

One is the language translation. This problem exists generally in almost all the promotional films --- it can be either the lack of English annotations for some Chinese proper names, famous attractions, local special products, operas, or the blurring subtitle at the bottom. Both of them prove the big negligence of the film-making.

Another problem is the special-effect. Chinese cities are so proud of their history that many of

them put it in their promotional film. Since it's a long story for short, film-makers choose special effect as a typical way for historical narration. However, due to the expenditure or technical reason, most of the special effect parts turn out to be either not quite clear in pictures or rough in technology. Foreign audience could be disappointed at both the quality and the content. The former problem can be found in the Hangzhou G20 promotional film and the latter can be found in "The City of Beijing".

What's more, quite a few promotional films adopt the typical Chinese way of introduction --- an indirect way to put the name of the city at the end of a long prologue usually historical lead-in. No introduction to its geographical position of where it is; no annotation of the city name --- a Chinese way of thinking to make an impressive story, which proves finally a not so satisfactory one.

## 6. Conclusion

When making city promotional films in a foreign language, the key to its success should be "what they want to see" instead of "what we want them to see". Due to intercultural barriers, the film needs to create an environment where foreign audience is able to identify and describe cultural values shared through effective intercultural communication.

It's a long and challenging task. Before film-shooting, producers need to do a market survey as to collect information on the target market, target audience, communication channels, different way of thinking, different cultural values, etc. While making the film, they also need to prepare a unique script, an attractive theme, an excellent special effect and a fluent narration with perfect details like language translation. Only in this way can they tell an impressive Chinese story to the whole world.

## Acknowledgement

This article represents part of the academic achievements of the 2017 Zhejiang Provincial Department of Education research project "Research on Intercultural Communication Channels and Strategies Targeting at Western Young Audience" (No. Y201738897).

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- [5] With the Chinese subtitle "山河相拥/因水而兴/建城蓟燕/五朝古都/八百年间/岁月延绵/水木诗篇/四海相望/时空相连".
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