

THE CURRENT DEVELOPMENT OF INDEPENDENT DOCUMENTARIES IN MAINLAND CHINA UNDER THE NEW MEDIA COMMUNICATION ENVIRONMENT

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the dissemination channels, current development, and future strategies of Chinese independent documentaries in the context of new media. The findings reveal that new media has expanded distribution channels, enhancing thematic diversity and audience reach. However, financial constraints, weak production teams, and regulatory restrictions remain key challenges. The study recommends increasing financial support, optimizing production teams, and leveraging digital platforms to enhance the quality and impact of independent documentaries. Future research should explore audience behavior, the role of new media platforms, and the social impact of documentaries to ensure the industry's sustainable growth.

Keywords: Communication, Independent documentaries, New media

INTRODUCTION

The development of independent documentaries in China is closely linked to social transformation and changes in the media landscape. Since the 1990s, independent documentaries, as a non-mainstream form of film making, have focused on marginalized social issues with a strong humanistic perspective, making them an integral part of Chinese documentary film making. However, due to limited funding and restricted distribution channels, early independent documentaries primarily relied on international film festivals and small-scale screenings, resulting in limited audience reach.

The rise of new media has introduced new opportunities for the dissemination of independent documentaries. Digital technology has lowered production costs, online platforms have expanded distribution channels, and the increasing cultural literacy of audiences has led to greater recognition of high-quality documentary content. Nevertheless, alongside these advantages, independent documentaries also face significant challenges, including fragmented dissemination, content regulation, and copyright disputes. Existing academic research on their digital dissemination remains insufficient, often focusing on case studies and interviews rather than providing comprehensive theoretical analysis.

This study systematically reviews the historical development of independent documentaries in mainland China and examines their dissemination characteristics in the new media landscape. By analyzing the opportunities and challenges they encounter, this research aims to provide strategic recommendations for the sustainable distribution of independent documentaries, helping them achieve greater influence in the digital era.

OBJECTIVE

- 1) To review the development history of Chinese independent documentaries.

- 2) To analyze the characteristics of Chinese independent documentaries in the context of the new media era.
- 3) To propose strategic recommendations for the development of Chinese independent documentaries in the new media era.

METHODOLOGY

Research Methodology

This study employs **literature analysis** and **comparative analysis** to systematically review the historical development of independent documentaries in mainland China and examine their dissemination patterns in the new media landscape. Literature analysis helps summarize existing research, defining independent documentary characteristics and their adaptation to new media, while comparative analysis identifies changes across different periods and contrasts Chinese and international documentary distribution models to propose tailored strategies for China.

Research Steps

- 1) **Define the Research Scope:** Identify the scope of independent documentaries in mainland China and select relevant literature and cases.
- 2) **Collect Literature and Data:** Gather academic papers, industry reports, and policy documents on independent documentary development and new media dissemination.
- 3) **Summarize and Organize:** Analyze collected literature to outline the historical evolution, dissemination patterns, and influencing factors of independent documentaries.
- 4) **Comparative Analysis:** Examine differences across various periods and compare the development trajectories of Chinese and international independent documentaries.
- 5) **Propose Development Strategies:** Based on research findings, provide strategic recommendations for the sustainable dissemination of independent documentaries in the new media environment.

Scope of the Research

Population Scope

The population scope of this study primarily includes independent documentary creators and distribution platforms in China. Through literature analysis, the study compares documentary production concepts and dissemination models across different historical periods to examine the impact of new media. Additionally, relevant domestic and international academic studies are analyzed to provide a comprehensive theoretical foundation.

Variable Scope

The study focuses on the following key variables:

- 1) **Production Concepts:** Evolution of independent documentary production across different stages and influencing factors.
- 2) **Dissemination Models:** Differences between traditional and new media dissemination methods and their impact on independent documentaries.
- 3) **Policy Environment:** The influence of government regulations and policies on independent documentary production and distribution.
- 4)

Time Scope

This study examines the development of independent documentaries in China from the 1990s to the present, with a particular focus on dissemination trends in the new media era from 2018 to 2024. By comparing different stages of documentary production and distribution, the research explores transformations and challenges in the digital age.

Data Collection

- 1) **Academic Papers and Books:** Literature retrieved from CNKI, Web of Science, Google Scholar, and other databases;
- 2) **Industry Reports and Policy Documents:** Reports and policies from domestic and international film industries to assess new media's impact on independent documentaries;

Data Analysis

- 1) **Literature Analysis:** Extract key insights from existing studies on independent documentary development and new media dissemination.
- 2) **Comparative Analysis:** Compare dissemination models across different historical periods and examine the differences between Chinese and international independent documentaries.

RESULTS

Several academic papers and books have systematically reviewed and divided the stages of the historical development of Chinese independent documentaries. Although these studies summarize the overall situation of different stages, they do not delve deeply into issues related to creation, dissemination, and distribution. Therefore, although there has been a certain amount of academic review of the historical process of independent documentaries, their latest development has not been fully reflected in academic papers.

- 1) **The Position of Independent Documentaries in Documentary History**
In the study of the development history of Chinese documentaries, Jiang Juan's "Subject, Perspective, Expression: Research on Chinese Independent Documentaries" (Jiang Juan, 2012) systematically traces the development of independent documentaries, discusses the boundaries of independence, and explores topics such as the subjectivity theory, grassroots perspective, and the inheritance and transformation of tradition and individuality. Additionally, Qi peng's "Folk Images and Personal Writing: The Creation and Dissemination of Chinese Independent Documentaries, 1990-2007" (Qi peng, 2013) places Chinese independent documentaries in the context of world documentary history and analyzes their historical background, creative psychology, aesthetic forms, and dissemination methods.
- 2) **Independent Documentaries in the Context of New Media**
In the context of new media, Xie Jie's "Innovation and Development of Independent Documentaries in the Context of New Media" (Xie Jie, 2021) explores the new forms and concepts of independent documentaries in the current media environment, illustrating the development of independent documentaries in different historical contexts with specific case studies. Xie Jie's master's thesis "A Preliminary Study on the Survival and Development of Chinese Independent Documentaries" (Xie Jie, 2008) comprehensively reviews the development and creation characteristics of Chinese independent documentaries from 1988 to 2007.

3) **Overview and Problem Analysis of Independent Documentaries**

Liu Che's master's thesis "Overview of Chinese Independent Documentaries (1990–2018)" (Liu Che, 2018) summarizes the major achievements and existing issues of independent documentaries, delving into aspects such as subject selection, narrative expression, and the value of these documentaries.

The concept of "independent documentary" in China differs from the West, emphasizing a break from institutional constraints and personal ideological expression. Over the past three decades, independent documentaries have transitioned from underground to niche and gradually into the mainstream, influenced by social, economic, and cultural dynamics, necessitating a reevaluation of their definition in the current context.

The rise of new media has broadened the thematic scope of independent documentaries. While earlier works focused on social issues, today's environment fosters a diversity of perspectives, driven by the increasing emphasis on personal expression.

The distribution of independent documentaries has shifted from personal exchanges, TV broadcasts, and screenings to online platforms. Unlike traditional channels, digital distribution removes time and space constraints, expanding audience reach. However, government regulations still impact TV broadcasts, limiting directorial expression.

Development Strategies

1) **Expanding the Domestic Market**

Developing the documentary market requires audience cultivation. Enhancing public appreciation, strengthening cultural awareness, and increasing domestic documentary production are essential. Government support has also played a role in fostering the industry.

2) **Learning from International Practices**

Chinese independent documentaries struggle with funding shortages and fragmented production teams, unlike their international counterparts, which benefit from strong financial backing and professional crews. Learning from global practices, refining production processes, and fostering team-based collaboration can enhance documentary quality. Addressing financial constraints remains a key challenge for industry growth.

3) **Leveraging New Media for Distribution**

The rise of new media has opened new avenues for independent documentary distribution, breaking traditional media constraints. Platforms like iQIYI, Tencent Video, and Youku have dedicated documentary channels, increasing accessibility. Unlike traditional outlets, online distribution removes time and space limitations, amplifying audience engagement and impact. Leveraging digital platforms is essential for the growth of independent documentaries.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

This study examines the current state and dissemination strategies of Chinese independent documentaries in the context of new media, proposing improvement measures. The findings indicate that the concept of independent documentaries in China has evolved from underground to niche and then to mainstream, influenced by social, economic, and cultural factors. The rise of new media has expanded the distribution channels, allowing for greater thematic diversity, audience reach, and expressive freedom. However, financial constraints, weak production teams, and regulatory challenges remain major obstacles to industry development.

Furthermore, online distribution has emerged as a key avenue for independent documentaries. The growth of streaming platforms has lowered the barriers set by traditional media and broadened audience access. Nonetheless, governmental regulations continue to impose limitations, necessitating a balance between creative freedom and policy constraints.

Recommendations

- 1) **Enhancing Financial Support:** Encourage investment from government bodies, cultural foundations, and private investors to improve production conditions and enhance documentary quality.
- 2) **Expanding Multi-Platform Distribution:** Utilize digital platforms (such as streaming sites and social media) to reach a wider audience and explore new formats like short-form and interactive documentaries.
- 3) **Optimizing Production Teams:** Learn from international practices to build professional production teams, improving technical standards and market competitiveness.

Navigating Policy Constraints: While adhering to regulations, filmmakers can adopt more flexible storytelling techniques, such as metaphors and symbolism, to maintain artistic depth.

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