

China through the eyes of ‘in-between’ narrators

Thematic patterns and discursive features of audio-visual content
about immigrants in China

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Over the past few years, international immigrants have been more frequently and prominently featured in Chinese audio-visual media products, including documentary series and reality/game shows produced by state-run or commercial media institutions, as well as user-generated content on various social media platforms. In this presentation, I intend to provide a general description of this phenomenon, pinpoint some important patterns and features of such content, and discuss briefly its effects and limitations, in the context of an increasingly globalized Chinese media environment and China’s efforts to boost its global discursive power.

Concept of ‘immigrants’ in the Chinese context

First, I shall offer some clarification of the term ‘immigrant’ in the Chinese context. Despite the Chinese nation’s extensive and complex history with both inbound and outbound migratory movements since ancient times, the concept of ‘immigrant’ is a relatively ‘new’ and contentious one in contemporary China. Though foreign residents, mainly international communists, were consistently present during the first decades after 1949, their stay was usually presumed to be temporary. After the declaration of ‘reform and opening up’ in 1978, more foreigners arrived, mainly sojourners such as educators, students and small traders. More sizeable, permanent communities of foreigners, including skilled workers and marriage immigrants, only began to take shape in the 1990s amid China’s further integration into economic globalization. Yet, they were rarely referred to as ‘immigrants’. It was after China joined the International Migration Organization in 2016, and established the National Immigration Administration in 2018, that the term ‘immigrant’ became more extensively incorporated into mainstream media discourse.

However, a precise legal definition of ‘immigrant’ does not yet exist in China. Even in countries with a comprehensive and developed legal system for immigration, the legal definition certainly does not cover all people being discussed as ‘immigrants’ in official and popular discourses. Therefore, my presentation adopts an intentionally broad concept, which includes all foreigners who have established usual residence in China, and intend to maintain

the residency for the long term. They are the most popular subjects in the recent proliferation of foreigner-related audio-visual content.

Immigrants as ‘in-between’ narrators

The media presence of immigrants began to grow around 2013. It was the time when China, under the new leadership, declared its commitment to further global engagement, through a series of globalist initiatives, such as ‘Chinese Dream’, ‘Belt and Road’ and ‘Shared Community of Mankind’. Immigrant stories, naturally, are the most convenient and effective resources for constructing a ‘globalist image’ of China. Audio-visual content featuring immigrant narrators can be found on both traditional media platforms and social media platforms. Many projects have achieved tremendous success in terms of viewership, influence and economic benefits.

But what makes their voices ‘in-between’? On the one hand, immigrants are no longer confined to segregated communities on the margins of Chinese society. As shown in these media products, they are deeply immersed in their social environments, undertaking a diverse range of social roles. Some have even acquired permanent residency or citizenship. This means that their take on China can no longer be simplistically described as an ‘outsider perspective’. On the other hand, the positioning of immigrants has not yet transcended the boundaries between the Foreign Other and the National Self long held in the historiography and other forms of identity doctrine of modern China (particularly after the early Twentieth-Century nationalist movements). Overseas Chinese returnees, naturalized citizens and intercultural families have blurred the boundaries to a limited extent. But in general, immigrants, especially immigrants with no visible Chinese ancestry, are almost never considered part of the Self in media discourse. Their ways of storytelling can thus be best described as an ‘in-between’ approach, which simultaneously showcase their presence as an acknowledged addition to a transitioning Chinese society, and stress ‘foreignness’ and the identity boundaries. Notwithstanding its limitations, the ambiguous positioning allows immigrants to develop a unique perspective on topics and issues related to China, which combines their own experiences in China with the preconceptions, assumptions, and discourses stemming from their foreign backgrounds.

Examples: *Foreigner in China* on CCTV and *Barrett* on YouTube

Here I will discuss briefly two examples to help illustrate important features of immigrant-related audio-visual products. The first example is a documentary program titled *Foreigner in*

China, produced and aired by CCTV from 2013 to 2019. The program consists of 282 episodes, featuring a diverse range of subjects. The stories revolve around four major themes: career development, family life, cultural immersion and reconstruction of memories. The latter two themes may seem more abstract. Cultural immersion pertains to stories in which immigrants are engaged in the appreciation, practice or preservation of both tangible or intangible forms of traditional Chinese cultural heritage, such as martial arts, traditional cuisines and folk music. Reconstruction of memories pertains to stories featuring early immigrants who have spent most of their lives living in China, witnessed historic moments, and made substantial contributions to the development of China. The second example is a YouTube channel titled *Barrett*, which is run by a British father-and-son duo living in Shenzhen. Since they uploaded the first video in 2019, they have garnered an impressive number of followers (321,000 subscribers, 33,976,453 views, as of 9 September 2021). The main themes of their videos are exploration and immersion, discussion of news topics, West-China comparison and response to controversies. Their interests lie mainly in high tech, cultural life and political issues.

Although they are produced for distinctively different communicative platforms, the two examples share some similar discursive features. Their narrative structures, discursive devices and styles are highly personalized. Their stories, inevitably, are all centered around a greater theme of China's economic, technological and social development, and its transition towards a more globally conscious society, but this theme is manifest through personal experiences and perceptions, which allows the narration to be more entertaining and effective for overseas audiences. However, as a state-sponsored media product, *Foreigner in China* focuses more explicitly on the coherence between personal stories and national narratives in selecting subjects and constructing storylines. In this process, it maintains the ambiguous designation of immigrants in the 'China story' and avoids discussion on their identity. The *Barrett* channel, as a personal project, does not bind itself to a certain agenda (at least it appears so), and thus covers a wider range of topics, including more timely, controversial issues such as Tibet, Xinjiang and Hong Kong. It often approaches these issues with a comparative perspective, explaining the situations in China in relation to Western historiography, politics and cultural premises. It does so not only through the creator's own interpretation, but also by engaging fellow immigrants, other content creators, and researchers. Moreover, the interactive nature of social media allows them to build a

discursive community, in which audiences can also share their voices through comments and interactions during live streaming sessions.

A preliminary conclusion: Effects and limitations

There are certainly much more discursive features that can be derived from these two examples. A forthcoming article of mine will provide further discussion. What I want to achieve with this short presentation is simply to draw more scholarly attention to this growing phenomenon in international communications about China, and propose some possible perspectives from which we as researchers specializing in the Chinese media can approach this subject. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile to outline some observable effects and limitations of immigrant-related audio-visual content as a product for international communications.

First, immigrants as ‘in-between’ narrators help to expand the scope of the ‘China story’, which includes not only economic achievements and technological milestones, but also increasingly complex connections with what is perceived as the outside world. Second, personalized storytelling from an ‘in-between’ perspective makes a more effective approach to constructing an image of ‘globalist China’ for overseas audiences. Meanwhile, the limitations are quite evident. Immigrant narratives are constantly faced with accusations by Western media of propaganda and paid publicity. For example, the *Barrett* channel has been accused by several British news outlets of being paid to manufacture positive narratives about China, which the creator denies in several response videos. Government-sponsored publicity campaigns, such as large-scale group tours for content creators, unfortunately seem to have only strengthened this impression. Many immigrant content creators have been invited to go on trips to cities and enterprises all around China. In these videos, it is obvious that they are on organized tours, and accompanied by officials or publicity agents, which makes their stories appear more suspicious in the eyes of China critics. Moreover, while the ambiguous positioning of immigrants is understandable, as the issue of immigration remains contentious in Chinese society, it raises the question of how long the ‘in-between’ status of immigrants can be maintained, or more generally, how China can balance its nationalist self-assertion and globalist narrative for the long term. Finally, there are inevitably conceptual and perceptual gaps in immigrants’ interpretations of Chinese issues, given their diverse backgrounds, including cultural, religious and political. At the moment these gaps are largely circumvented in media discourse, but a candid acknowledgement of the differences might be exactly what the ‘China story’ needs to become more universally appealing.