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On the ethical issues in the creation of social-humanistic documentaries in Chinese higher educations

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Abstract

Social-humanities documentary ethics focuses on managing the relationships between creators, subjects, and relevant social groups during the filming and dissemination process. Ethical fulfillment is the moral bottom line and basic obligation of documentary creators. In the teaching practice of social humanities documentaries in Chinese universities, students, limited by social experience, often encounter difficulties in ethical understanding and fulfillment. These mainly include utilitarian-driven creation, unequal relationships during filming, and a lack of emphasis on the subsequent impact of filming. Based on the unique artistic features of documentaries and the cognitive characteristics of undergraduate students, Chinese universities should enhance the cultivation of students' ethical awareness, emphasize the social benefit orientation of documentary creation, and establish appropriate full process documentary ethics supervision system. These measures are expected to strengthen students' ability to fulfill documentary ethics.

Keywords: documentary, ethics, higher education, filmmaking

Social-humanistic documentaries focus on people's living conditions in their social lives and present them to the public through visual language. Due to their involvement in various aspects of social life and natural proximity to social reality, social-humanistic documentaries possess unique aesthetic characteristics. Especially in the current era of vigorous development of AI imagery, reality increasingly becomes a valuable resource. The humanistic color and social responsibility concepts in social-humanistic documentaries make this type of film more socially significant. As social-humanistic documentaries may have impacts on relevant parties in reality, artistic ethics is a core issue in their creation and dissemination. Currently, mainland Chinese researchers have conducted extensive research on documentary ethics, but little attention is paid to its teaching in universities. Therefore, it is particularly important to conduct systematic research on documentary ethics in university education, aiming to improve the cultivation of documentary talent.

1. The ethical dimension of social-humanistic documentaries

Ethics refers to a set of values and institutional systems based on morality, namely, the basic norms governing interpersonal relationships in society and the corresponding moral principles. The essence of ethical issues lies in the relationship between the self and others, so all social activities involving people fall within the broad scope of ethics (Liu, 2022). Social-humanistic documentaries explore the relationship between people and society. In their creation and dissemination process, there is intersection and interaction between the subject, object, and audience of the filming. Therefore, since the birth of documentaries, their ethics have also emerged (Dong, 2017). Ethics involves the relationship between personal interests, the interests of others, and social interests. It is a core issue in social humanistic documentaries. The relationships between various stakeholders constitute the basic structure of the creation and dissemination of social-humanistic documentaries. On the other hand, the creators of social humanistic documentaries also frame and reorganize the material based on their own cognitive perspectives. Therefore, while social humanistic documentaries reproduce some social realities, they also express the creators' viewpoints and exert certain social impacts accordingly. The creative subject often employs various rhetorical techniques and filming methods to achieve this goal, highlighting the ethical issues in documentaries (Luo, 2012). It can be seen that the ethical dimension of social-humanistic documentaries can be distinguished into two categories based on the creators: ethics presented on-screen and ethics outside the screen. The former mainly focuses on the relationship between the creator and the

audience, while the latter mainly focuses on the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject of the film.

The documentary ethics on the screen

The ethics on the screen primarily concern how the work reproduces social reality, which is closely related to the authenticity principle of documentaries. Although many scholars have different understandings of the authenticity principle of documentaries, overall, documentary creation not only records objective reality but also expresses the creator's value judgments on social life, explores the truth of the essence of events, and achieves emotional communication with the audience (Zhao 2008). In other words, social-humanistic documentaries express the creator's values while maintaining the authenticity of people, events, and things, including the creator's self-expression and implied viewpoints (Liu 2021). Therefore, the 'reality' presented on the screen in social and humanistic documentaries is not objective reality, but a reproduction of reality filtered, reorganized, and interpreted by the creator. However, this reproduction of reality may have a real impact on the subjects being shot. Consequently, regardless of the identity of documentary filmmakers in the lives of their subjects, whether they are in an employment or friendship relationship, the act of recording others' images should not be taken for granted, but should have a strong sense of ethics (Nie, 2018).

The creation of documentaries is essentially an act of processing and disseminating real information. In this process of information processing and dissemination, multiple subjects and their interrelationships are involved, including media organizations, creative individuals, interviewees, and recipients (audience). The key to connecting these subjects and reflecting the relationships between them is the film itself as the carrier (Zou 2018). Therefore, the principle of authenticity in social-humanistic documentaries is not unlimited or absolute, but must be constrained by ethics. Documentary filmmakers should fully consider the social context in which the subjects are located and the potential impact of the film's broadcast on the subjects. Some scholars have noticed that when inexperienced subjects reveal themselves under the stimulus of the camera, they are prone to ignore the audience behind the lens. However, once the footage is broadcast, mass media can begin to pay various kinds of attention and judgment to the subjects, and this attention is often not rational viewing, but rather 'peering' and 'judging' with the nature of mass media (Dong, 2017). In mass communication, many events and language may be misunderstood, potentially leading to public opinion pressure, cyberbullying, and other impacts on the subjects being filmed. At the same time, it is important to note that documentary filmmakers do not inherently possess the

power or obligation to pass social judgments. Therefore, in their creation, they need to maintain an objective and neutral stance as much as possible, as well as a calm and restrained creative mindset. They should not attempt to impose their own views on the audience, but rather leave room for the audience to think and judge independently.

The documentary ethics outside the screen

The ethics of documentaries beyond the screen refer to the relationships among the filmmaker, the subject, and the public during the creation and dissemination of documentaries. Social-humanistic documentary creators establish direct relationships with the subjects during the creation process, often involving complex ethical issues during filming, editing, and dissemination. Especially when the subjects are marginalized, vulnerable, or sensitive groups, it becomes particularly important to handle ethical issues in filming. In such cases, creators often face a dilemma between creativity and ethics, choosing between obtaining and presenting impactful footage to enhance the quality of the work and protecting the privacy, interests, and dignity of the subjects. The purpose of ethical considerations between the creator and the subject is to coordinate the relationship between the filmmaker and the subject, thereby minimizing unforeseeable negative impacts (Dong, 2017).

On the other hand, social and cultural documentaries often involve the survival status of specific social groups at present, and there is often a significant information gap between the filmmaker and the subject in their creative process. In some cases, creators may not disclose all relevant information about the film to the subjects in order to obtain their true reactions. Scholars have noticed that in the various relationships constructed by 'watching' and 'being watched' in documentaries, whether the subject themselves and the image constitute a 'watching' and 'being watched' relationship is often overlooked. In *The Voice of the Past: Oral History* (2000), Paul Thompson criticizes the relationship between the interviewer and the interviewee: in this relationship, only middle-class experts can decide who to interview, what to discuss, and then he disappears without a trace with a tape about someone's life, while the interviewee can no longer hear the recording (Thompson 2000). Many social-humanistic documentaries have entered various film festivals, bringing fame and economic benefits to filmmakers, but they have not had a positive effect on the subjects, and many subjects have not even been able to see the films. Due to the huge gap in social status between 'watching' and 'being watched', there must be considerable exploitative and invasive power involved.

In fact, in some rural areas of mainland China, the lack of follow-up feedback from university documentary filmmakers after completing filming has had a negative impact on the local

community. In this article's explorations, many rural cadres and villagers expressed their dissatisfaction with college students who disappeared after their documentaries were completed. The statement of a Lhoba (a minor race in China) villager in Xizang(Tibet) is representative:

Why do the elders say they are annoyed? The elders have been telling stories for their whole lives, but they haven't had a single result. At that time, they (the students, added by the author) have filmed many videos, right?

He further explains:

I assisted these students in making a documentary that lasted for a whole month, including funerals, divination... What great material for a documentary. Who would let you shoot like this now? Just like the Celestial Burial Platform in Xizang, it can't be taken casually. But I beg the elders to agree... I don't know where these good things have gone now. I didn't earn one penny; I drove for them for a whole month. The funeral was for my grandmother... I let them shot videos in such a sorrowful situation. I communicated with my father and let them film. So many cows were killed at the funeral for sacrifice, and all the wizards were there. Such good materials. During the funeral, dozens of people carried the coffin along the road, and they dug soil there. All were shot by them. But no feedback was received as a result. I can't contact the producers anymore.

The practice of not interacting with each other after completing the filming and leaving the community has caused emotional harm to the participants, making them feel like they are being used as tools and exploited. Some scholars believe that the creative subject implements 'image exploitation' on the subjects being photographed, and this kind of image is consumed by the audience like popular culture. Therefore, they believe that this is a 'thematic speculation' behavior in literary and artistic creation, which violates the ethical norms of image (Luo, 2012).

2. The ethical dilemma of creation in the teaching practice of documentary films in Chinese universities

College students are still in the stage of cognitive formation and have limited social experience. They lack a deep understanding of documentary ethics in the filming of social-humanistic documentaries, and also lack experience in ethical implementation.

Therefore, they often fall into some ethical dilemmas.

Over-driven by utilitarianism and lacking initiative in class teaching

Documentaries bring fame and fortune to creators, but it is not uncommon for the subjects to receive no reward (Wang, 2020). There is also an ethical dilemma in the teaching of documentary courses in universities. The main motivation for students to shoot documentaries often comes directly from the homework assigned by teachers in the curriculum, which becomes a mandatory filming task. At the same time, due to the fact that most students in higher education are still in the stage of professional skills and cognitive improvement, with limited social experience and a lack of in-depth thinking on life experiences and social phenomena, it is difficult for them to have a deep understanding of the subjects being photographed, and it is difficult to generate empathy and form strong endogenous motivation. The main driving force for its filming often comes from the rewards in the university evaluation system, such as higher course scores, teacher evaluations, subject competition awards, and the advantages derived from it in comprehensive testing awards, recommendation for postgraduate studies, employment competitiveness, and other aspects. Establishing a good relationship between the creative subject and the interviewee is a prerequisite for the smooth progress of filming and interviews. This kind of relationship not only requires long-term interaction, but also requires the photographer to truly experience, understand, and empathize with the life of the subject being photographed, in order to uncover the most authentic thoughts of the subject being photographed. But as mentioned earlier, when filming becomes utilitarian, filmmakers often place more emphasis on visible and evaluative film quality in the short term in order to complete the filming within a limited period of time and receive higher evaluations, while underestimating the intangible creative ethics that are usually difficult to produce images for film evaluation.

The unequal relationship between the documentary filmmakers and the object

In documentary creation, when the creator and the object share similar social positions, it is beneficial to avoid unequal status between the two parties during filming and to gain a profound understanding of the subject. However, in teaching practice, it is difficult to mandate students to interview social groups that are identical or similar to themselves. Some student filmmakers choose vulnerable groups as objects, in order to give their films stronger storytelling, conflict tension, and expressiveness. But the objects presented on the screen did not benefit from it. A visually impaired person who has been interviewed by students in several college documentaries said:

Many college students came to interview me for their documentary production. They paid, so I accepted their interviews since I could earn some extra money. It is OK. However, I could feel that they came merely for their class tasks. I don't like this. They are not truly concerned about the plight of visually impaired people, our community, nor will they improve our situation. They shot and left, and they never contacted me again.

In some rural areas of China, the negative impact of departure or lack of follow-up feedback from documentary filmmakers from universities has become apparent. Many officials and the public expressed their dissatisfaction with the researchers who disappeared without a trace after the research was completed.

In this process, the subject is actually passively losing some deserved, even necessary personal rights, and even the personal friendship established between the photographer and the subject cannot fully compensate for this loss of rights (Luo, 2012). Especially for college students, their social resources and experience are usually limited, and even if they realize the existence of this hidden inequality, it is difficult to provide substantial compensation for the subjects being photographed.

In addition, the filmmaker's interpretation of the subject in the film may also constitute a form of covert verbal bullying. University student creators, in their editing, target teachers or various exhibitions and competitions, and interpret their subjects based on the university's teaching evaluation system. Therefore, their interpretation of the subject matter often becomes a simulacra that conforms to the aesthetic standards of the university community. Some cadres and masses from ethnic minority villages have mentioned that some university creators have misread the local traditional culture and customs in their images, and have not communicated with the local community before release, which has had a certain impact on the local cultural image.

Lack of attention to the subsequent impact of filming

The long-term relationship between the filmmaker and the subject has always been a challenging aspect of documentary ethics. There is currently no unified view on whether both parties should maintain long-term contact after the completion of the documentary, or how the filmmaker can break free from such a relationship, and what obligations the filmmaker has towards the subject. A prominent issue in Chinese higher education is that many student filmmakers ultimately fail to show their works to their subjects, which can have a significant negative psychological impact on them. In the subjects' eyes, they have invested time and

energy in cooperating with the filming and telling their own stories, but have not received any return. In fact, this has overdrawn the subjects' relative tolerance towards the student group and their expectations for documentary filming.

In fact, during the course practice, I found that some elderly people in remote rural areas had cooperated with the filming multiple times in the past but had not seen the relevant images, which had already annoyed them. Through interviews, it was found that their core demand is to see their own image. A more serious issue is that a small number of student film crews left a negative impression on subjects or local communities during filming, making it difficult for later creators to carry out their work. In addition, in university documentary film teaching practice, the scope of topics selected by student creators is usually limited, and some subjects often receive multiple filming requests. After multiple shots, the subject will form a fixed script, which makes accepting the shot a performance, and the 'reality' recorded in the documentary essentially becomes a homogeneous landscape.

3. Breakthrough strategies for ethical dilemmas in documentary creation in teaching practice

This article argues that the countermeasures to solve the ethical dilemma of creating social-humanistic documentaries in mainland Chinese universities must be based on the aesthetic characteristics of social and humanistic documentaries, the teaching evaluation system of relevant majors in universities, and the practical cognitive level of university students, in order to balance teaching effectiveness, film quality, and documentary ethics.

Enhancing the cultivation of documentary ethical awareness in class teaching

It is necessary to first clarify the cultivation of documentary ethics awareness in the classroom teaching of social-humanistic documentary in Chinese universities. Teachers should explicitly include documentary ethics in the course objectives and evaluation system, and incorporate it into their specific creative guidance and evaluation. In teaching, teachers should provide in-depth, practical instruction in documentary ethics and systematic explanations of ethics, which are usually ignored by Chinese mainland universities. The ethics of social-humanistic documentaries can refer to the ethics of fieldwork in anthropology, but should also be fully localized in the Chinese socio-cultural context rather than blindly applying Western theories.

Furthermore, college teachers should emphasize the importance of ethics in guiding the

process of humanities and social science-related courses, and pay attention to students' ethical compliance in creative practice. In fact, documentary ethics is not just a limitation on filmmaking, but also a collaborative framework that protects the interests of both the filmmaker and the subject and encourages both parties to work together toward a film that benefits both. Undergraduate students, limited by their social experience, may find it difficult to understand and adhere to the ethical principles of documentary filmmaking. Therefore, teachers need to actively guide students to unify ethical fulfillment with creation, such as establishing mutual rights and responsibilities in the process of creation and dissemination, to help student creators better communicate and gain the trust of the objects.

Emphasizing social-humanistic documentary's social benefit orientation

This article believes that college teachers must help undergraduate students understand the significance of making social-humanistic documentaries. Namely, to answer the question 'why make documentaries'. Teachers should help students understand that the so-called 'power of images' (a prevalent slogan in mainland Chinese universities) is not just an empty phrase, and that documentary filmmakers should be more proactive but cautious in the production process. Especially, after the film was completed, students should also be encouraged to actively engage in the film's social communication. A documentary film is expected to help solve the problems people face in their daily lives, rather than being sealed on a hard drive after submitting coursework.

In addition, undergraduate students are still in the process of shaping their cognitive concepts, and filming social-humanistic documentaries is also a way for them to understand the world and shape their values. Therefore, ethical education in documentary creation is not just about professional course content, but also about cultivating moral character. College teachers should cultivate ethical values through documentary creation and help students establish correct values. For example, in the course, students should be made aware not to magnify hardships in editing to guide the audience for the sake of the film's storytelling, or to amplify the psychological trauma of subjects in interviews in the absence of prognosis to obtain more dramatic language and shots.

Establishing an ethical examination mechanism for documentary films throughout the course

Ethics belongs to the category of morality, and its implementation cannot be separated from institutional guarantees. The creation of social and humanistic documentaries in universities

should also attempt to establish institutional ethical systems throughout the entire process. This can be referred to as the general international practice of anthropological field research ethics, which is to establish ethical review institutions and provide institutional supervision for researchers. Research ethics is an important component of the anthropological theoretical system. As a set of moral values and institutional systems, it clarifies the responsibilities of researchers towards their research subjects, peers, the public, and the environment. From the perspective of holism and systems theory, the role of research ethics is to protect researchers, research subjects, and the internal and external environment of research, and to maintain harmony and balance in the research ecology. Therefore, when studying human behavior, the importance of ethical issues is paramount (Babbie, 2018).

The international academic community often adopts a systematic approach to research ethics, including establishing ethical review bodies, formulating ethical codes, and imposing penalties for violations. The main terms of research ethics include informed consent, participation in cooperation, avoidance of harm, and return of benefits, among which informed consent is the core principle. Any social and humanistic research should emphasize the voluntary participation of research subjects, and ensure their privacy rights both during the investigation process and after the research results are published (Babbie, 2018). Under this institutional system, conducting field research requires researchers to submit ethical reports, which include specific research content, methods for confirming informed consent, possible impacts on participants and corresponding methods, methods for protecting personal privacy, and data storage methods. This is not only a form of review and institutional assurance, but also a self-examination method for applicants. The Code of Ethics of the American Anthropological Association (AAA) is an ethical code specifically designed for anthropological research, with universal applicability and broad influence. This code of conduct stipulates that anthropological researchers have a primary ethical obligation to their research subjects, data, and colleagues, which takes precedence over seeking new knowledge. The obligations of researchers include ensuring that participants' safety and dignity are not compromised, confirming whether participants wish to remain anonymous or be acknowledged, obtaining informed consent from relevant parties (especially in long-term relationships), and appropriately rewarding local target groups. It can be seen that ethical research in Western anthropology is mainly based on the criticism and reflection of the Enlightenment movement under the postcolonial trend, understanding and respecting the subjective consciousness and cultural values of the Other in micro scenes, and safeguarding

the rights and interests of vulnerable groups and ethnic minorities (Zhang & Wang 2010).

In the academic community of Chinese universities, the concept of research ethics was gradually introduced in the late 20s. Although anthropologists and folklorists have been actively discussing research ethics in recent years and attempting to establish an ethical system that is in line with Chinese social and cultural norms (Huang & Pan 2009; Gao, Guo & Gong 2020; Gao 2024; Zhao & Wang 2023; Niu 2021, Wang 2023, Xu 2020; Pan, Hou & Gao 2012), this effort has not yet achieved systematic results. For example, the case of 'Zhong County Cadres (Feng, 2010)' (in 2010, a PhD candidate from Peking University exposed his field investigation in a county government in Henan Province, resulting in local officials being punished by the government. This doctoral student conducted research in the county government under the guise of an internship, did not obtain informed consent, and published his thesis publicly) has significant ethical controversies in research.

In documentary filmmaking, ethical compliance often relies on the filmmaker's personal conscience and public condemnation, with no systematic regulatory measures, and students also lack corresponding ethical training. Therefore, in the teaching of documentary creation, teachers should play a role similar to that of an ethical review agency, supervising students' ethical issues in the process of documentary creation. In course design, students can be required to write ethical self-examination documents during the process of selecting themes and developing shooting plans, and further shooting can only be carried out after the teacher approves them. The ethical self-examination documents written by students and their ethical performance throughout the entire process should be included in the course grading system to ensure that students can correctly establish ethical awareness and put it into practice during the filming of their course assignments.

4. Conclusion

The ethics of social-humanistic documentaries refer to the moral principles governing the handling of relationships between individuals and between individuals and society during the filming and dissemination of documentaries. Ethical fulfillment determines the impact that a film can have on the filmmaker, subject, and society. It is the moral bottom line and basic obligation of documentary filmmakers. College students are in the stage of cognitive formation, and their social experience is relatively limited. Therefore, the ethical fulfillment of documentary films requires patient guidance from teachers. At the same time, ethical

fulfillment during the filming of a social and humanistic documentary can also shape students' values. Therefore, for Chinese mainland universities, in the practice of documentary courses in universities, it is necessary to strengthen the indoctrination of students' ethical awareness of documentary and the supervision and guidance of ethical fulfillment, to ensure the ideological and professional effectiveness of documentary teaching in universities, enhance the social benefits of documentary, provide talents with good ethical literacy for the documentary industry, and promote the healthy development of the industry.

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