

Evolution and Enlightenment: Media Image of Chinese Athletes in Sports Documentary

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Abstract: Taking sports documentary, the classic text of sports visual culture communication, as the research object, this paper focused on Chinese athletes in sports documentary. The methods of literature review and comparative analysis were adopted, and the theory of media image was applied. Based on three stages, the media image of Chinese athletes was completely combed and deeply analyzed, including their evolution, characteristics, and causes. It can be concluded that Chinese athletes have ceased to be the embodiment of ideology. From being vague to clear, Chinese athletes' image changes from a negative stereotype to a positive international image. Chinese sports are gradually dissipating seriousness and sanctification, and China is on the road to becoming a strong sporting nation, calm and confident because of its power.

Keywords: Sports Documentary; Chinese Athletes; Media Image

Introduction

The image of an athlete can be defined as the public perception of his or her behavior and effectiveness^[1]. The media image of athletes is constructed by means of media^[2]. In terms of media, McLuhan's famous statement that media is message is used throughout the construction of media image. He argues that the media has a strong reaction to the message, and that this active and dynamic reaction determines the clarity and structure of the message^[3]. In other words, the significance of the message is not only limited to the image construction itself, but also lies in the subtle changes and even stormy transmutations it brings to the image.

This paper takes sports documentary as the research object, a typical electronic media. They belong to the documentary nature of visual cultural products, take the state of sports life itself as the essence of recording content, and reflect the human-centered feature^[4]. From the perspective of the development of Chinese sports history, the media images of Chinese athletes in sports documentaries have undergone three stages of change, including "pre-documentary" era, "hero" era and "sports +" era. The images of athletes presented by them need to be paid close attention from all angles and the surface logic and deep laws behind their images need to be explored. Therefore, based on media image and three stages, this paper aims at promoting the positive construction and international communication of the image of Chinese athletes and sports power, so as to enhance the self-confidence of Chinese culture and promote the spirit of Chinese culture.

1. "Pre-documentary" era

In the "pre-documentary" era, defined here as the period before the founding of New China, there was nothing more humiliating than being labeled Sick Man of East Asia. The term was first used in 1896 in the Shanghai North China Daily News, an English-language newspaper sponsored by the British^[5]. The irony of Sick Man of East Asia for the Chinese — long braids and a dull appearance — was taken from a cartoon in a Singaporean newspaper, which ridiculed the total failure of the Republic of China's Olympic delegation at the 11th Olympic Games in Berlin in 1936, despite the fact that the Chinese martial arts team presented a wonderful martial arts performance. And before that, in the 10th Los Angeles

Olympics in 1932, Liu Changchun, the first Chinese Olympic sprinter, went alone and stood on the 100-meter Olympic track through all the hardships, but later returned to his homeland with the support of local Chinese in the United States. In any case, the strong will and sportsmanship he represented was finally recreated in 2011's *Tragic Glory 1932*, even though it was a Chinese sports documentary that was years late.

It is true that during the turbulent years of the war, the poor and weak China did not yet have the objective and subjective conditions to win or even compete in the championship. Due to the lack of talent, technology and stadiums, the few Chinese athletes could only be described as weak power. In the absence of a moving image memory, they could only passively present a still, black and white, negative and blurred image.

2. "Hero" era

In 1972, Bruce Lee declared to the world in *Jing Wu Men* that Chinese are not the Sick man of East Asia. In fact, the first time to shake off the hat of Sick Man of East Asia began with the birth of the first world champion in the history of Chinese sports — Rong Guotuan, whose motto of How many times can you fight in life still rings true today. He won the men's singles title at the 25th World Table Tennis Championships in 1959, and the original moments of Rong Guotuan's victory were reproduced in the documentary series *People's Heroes* to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the founding of New China. It is these precious black-and-white video materials that make the image of Chinese athletes realize the qualitative change from stillness to dynamics. Finally, the credit for shedding the Sick Man of East Asia label goes to Chinese shooter Xu Haifeng. He won his first gold medal at the 23rd Los Angeles Olympic Games in 1984, achieving a breakthrough of zero gold medals in China's Olympic history. The original footage of Xu Haifeng winning gold is shown in the documentary *Zero Breakthrough*, celebrating the 35th anniversary of the founding of New China, and the image of Chinese athletes has been transformed from black and white to colorful. What is worth praising is the Chinese women's volleyball team, which created the five consecutive championships in the 1980s. The resulting women's volleyball spirit is not only a spirit of the times but also a national memory, as epitomized by the 1982 documentary *Strive — China Women's Volleyball Team wins the championship*, which is the perfect epitome of striving for the rise of China.

From black-and-white photos to color images, the media images of Chinese athletes are inseparable from the flowers and medals in their hands, the tears in their eyes, the blood of the audience, and the solemn five-star red flag. Under the macro narrative framework of the country, the burden of athletes completely transcends the individual and micro level, creating a collective heroism value with elements of hard work, selfless dedication and national role model. They are ritualized and serious in the interconnection with the community, and is no longer limited to sports itself^[6]. Since the early days of the founding of New China, Chinese athletes with national righteousness and national sentiment have presented a dynamic, colorful, and striving image of heroes.

3. "Sports +" era

The Beijing Asian Games in 1990 was a good start, and the Beijing Olympic Games in 2008 is an eternal classic, with international events at all levels, such as championships, open tournaments, and World Cups, being successfully held in China one by one. One of the representative documentary *Building Dreams 2008*, which took 7 years to follow the whole preparation process of Beijing Olympic Games before and after, recorded the trajectory of life and reflected the changes of the times. In 2019, the Chinese women's volleyball team won the World Cup again, and this tenth world championship provided a strong spiritual force for our progress. 2020's *Winning the Championship* brought the audience an immersive experience of the women's volleyball spirit, while the documentary *We — Behind the Scenes of the Championships*, released in the same year, again explored and shared the spirit of women's volleyball without over-glorifying collectivism, but emphasizing respect for individual values. To our excitement in August 2021, in the men's 100m semifinal at the Tokyo Olympics, 32-year-old Su Bingtian broke the Asian record with a time of 9:83 and eventually made a historic sixth place in the final breakthrough. The Chinese documentary *Hello, Pioneer* in 2021 recorded Su Bingtian's self-breakthrough, and moreover proved Chinese speed to the world. At the same time, the documentary *More than Winning*, which was launched in August 2021, invited participants and witnesses of the multi-dimensional Chinese Olympics, such as Deng Yaping, Wu

Minxia and Huang Jianxiang, to tell their views on winning and losing and the stories of Chinese athletes who did not just win.

In the context of "sports +" era, gold medals have no national boundaries and gold medalism is not the spirit of a great sports nation. Chinese athletes are adding entertainment and commercialization, as they have the pressure to win, but also to enjoy their life of struggle. Chinese sports are gradually dissipating seriousness and sanctification as China is on the road to becoming a strong sporting nation, calm and confident because of its power. In the 2021 Tokyo Olympics documentary *Chasing the Light — The Road to Tokyo*, Chinese athletes, without forgetting the original intention of fighting and taking off the shackles of heroes, perfectly interpret a three-dimensional, multi-faceted and positive international image.

Conclusion

From Liu Changchun to Su Bingtian, China's flag bearers at the Olympic Games, the former is a tragic glory, but the latter is an exciting glory. From Sick man of East Asia to Olympic champion, the past 100 years have witnessed how China has completely shed its title as Sick man of East Asia and finally stood on the world's highest podium. The image of Chinese athletes has changed from vague to clear, from static to dynamic, from black and white to colorful, and from negative stereotype to positive international image. In short, the evolution of Chinese athletes' media images reflects the evolution of social and cultural concepts from political unity to consumption diversification, from the standard slogans of announcements to the real existence of humanity^[7]. Chinese athletes are no longer the embodiment of ideology^[8]. They can be sports geniuses, fashion gurus, or even spokespeople for the national image. In the vision of a community with a shared future for mankind, sports are becoming a landmark cause for the great rejuvenation of the Chinese nation^[9]. On the road of building a powerful sports country and realizing the Chinese Dream, it is imperative to construct a positive image of Chinese athletes and spread it internationally.

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