

## A Brief Talk on the Creative Idea and Technical Treatments of the Ethnographic Film of "The Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling"<sup>1</sup>

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### Abstract

*This paper makes an analysis of the documentary of "The Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling", the creative idea and film-making techniques of the Chinese ethnographic film are revealed fully by doing this. From a perspective of technical treatments, such as the original settings of the point-of-view shot and the close-up, the ingenious applications of the long take and the shot reverse shot, and visual impact of montage stunts to the viewers etc., the author demonstrates the developing tendency of visual expression of written ethnography and its practical significance.*

**Keywords:** creative idea, technical treatments, ethnographic film, pastoral children, schooling, shot

### 1. The Creative Idea of "The Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling"

In August 2006, author went to Imperial Town, Sunan Yugur Autonomous County, Zhangye city, Gansu Province for the field research. Imperial Town is a mix-dwelling pastoral place for seven ethnic groups, Tibetan, Mongolian, Yugur, Hui, Tu, Manchu and Han to live in. For a long period of time, all ethnic groups have learned and absorbed excellent culture from each other, while maintaining a relatively stable feature of the national culture, such as religious beliefs, folk customs, school teaching content and methods of imparting knowledge etc., and forming a diverse ethnic culture and complex relations among different ethnic groups. For nearly three years<sup>2</sup>, author, as a group leader, had been commuting between the Central University for Nationalities and the pastoral fieldwork spot, Imperial Town. Boarding with the local herdsmen and pastoral school teachers, experiencing unsophisticated folk customs, listening to unique Euphemistic grassland folk songs of all ethnic groups, being immersed totally in a strong atmosphere of Lamaism, Islam, Taoism and other religious beliefs, and a touch of voluminous books of heroic epics, songs, proverbs and fairy tales in Archives, the author had an extensive and in-depth understanding of the spiritual world of those ethnic minorities, who had been living in the broad pasture at the foot of Qilian Mountains, as well as their livestock production and daily life practices and contextual situation of the pastoral school. Personality traits of herdsmen—honest, hospitable, sincere yet slightly restrained—had left an impression on the author most and having had a very deep emotional experience. Seven ethnic groups, Tibetan, Mongolian, Hui, Yugur, Tu, Manchu and Han, have mix-inhabited in Imperial Town pastoral areas from generation to generation and having clung to the traditional lifestyle, occasionally disputed because of the pasture border, but there were no large-scale conflicts. In recent years, with the further development of the local economy, a clash has become increasingly sharp among school education, family education and pastoral community education. Minority children accept ethnic traditional culture at home, with the age growing older, having experienced diverse culture of all ethnic groups in the community, and received a single mainstream Han culture in school after school age.

#### Insert Figure1 about here

As showed in the figure1, the remarkable cultural differences among three backgrounds of family, school and community have become the source of contradictions. School-based curriculum construction in pastoral areas, on the one hand, aims at protecting traditional cultural heritage of all ethnic groups, creating employment opportunities for minority children, and to strengthen the hometown-building skills; on the other hand, at arousing enthusiasm for equal participation and cooperation in the masses and teachers and students of all ethnic groups, promoting the integration of ethnic relations, and to solve bottleneck problem of educational development. As a driving role being played, education development can push economic, social and cultural development forward, seeking for the thought-line of inner dynamism development in western pastoral areas.

<sup>1</sup> Ethnographic film of "The Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling" is the video part of author's dissertation, produced in May, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> From the year of 2006 to 2009, author participated in the project, "Economic&Cultural Patterns and Construction of Local School-based Curriculum for Junior High Schools in Ethnic Minority Regions of West China", funded by Ford Foundation, which chaired by the instructor.

Ethnographic film of "Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling" directly shot the fragments of herdsmen's real life and livestock production and made an impression on viewers that a director could intervene in the entire filming process, participate in the event log and make objective comments. Anthropological film has a direct record of real life, restoring the essence of life.

## **2. An Analysis of Form Structure of the Ethnographic Film of "Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling"**

Form structure of a film is closely linked to audiences' experiences of feelings, each description unit and each scene of a film can be taken at any time through cutting and effects synthesis, a film will be produced with a complete story. A film's meaning is expressed by form structure of the film, then further pay attention to the emotional reaction of the audiences, the anthropology film of "Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling" is no exception. The film, directed with the use of fixed lens, the Point-of-view shot, zoom lens, close-up, shot reverse shot and montage approach reflected the researcher's anthropological thought of "vision-centrism"<sup>3</sup>. It told us that two Yugur girls, Qieer Qiancuo and Au Jiao, a pair of good friends, were Grade-one students in SunanNo.2 Junior High School, Imperial Town, Sunan Yugur Autonomous County, Zhangye City, Gansu were born in the families of Yugur herdsmen and teachers respectively. During childhood period, they received traditional Yugur culture at home; slightly bigger, experienced diverse culture in the community of Han, Tibetan, Yugur, Hui, Mongolian, Manchu, and Tu nationalities; after school age in school received a single mainstream Han culture.

Two educational individuals, Qieer Qiancuo and Au Jiao, embodied cultural conflicts having been caused by three different cultural backgrounds of the family, the school and the community. The video recorded the course of changes from pastoral children's weariness of schooling from the beginning to the love of schooling, and demonstrating that school-based curriculum development was an effective approach to cultural conflicts' removal. At the Opening scene of the film, Several students' self-introductions were inserted, from which, the title of Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling was derived, further interpretation of the whole story that pastoral children were keen on schooling. The film's development shifted from the plot to the structure by involving in some of narrative elements, using a number of filmmaking techniques, and exhibiting the scene that ethnic language was taught to the child by the grandmother, the scene of Child's being reluctant to go to school at the school gate and the scene of teachers' training for school-based curriculum development in Sunan No.2 Junior High School etc..

### **2.1 The Original Settings of the Subjective Shot and the Close-up**

Generally, the Point-of-view shot is that the director matches eye-line of the protagonist in the shot on a particular thing or a figure, the spectators will judge subjectively, the thing or the figure that they see is what the main character in the movie sees. This vision effect of the point-of-view shot is expressed, through the interaction of the eye-lines by moving the camera lens constantly. In the film of "Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling", Au Jiao's mother's happily facial expressions. When being interviewed, her eye-line was cut to the close-up of red marks of "92" and "88" on Au Jiao's examination paper, which was abnormally eye-catching against the background of the light.

**Insert Figure2 about here**

Both this "jump-cut" editing and the reflex focusing lens highly combine the eye-line with the scene, which form the character's distinct emotional space, the viewers are also invited to come into the emotional space, and feeling the visual impact brought by the Point-of-view shot. Deleuze viewed "the close-up endowed the objective set with a subjectivity which equals of even surpassing it. The close-up was primarily a method to inscribe a subjective affect in a given situation."(Deleuze,1986:30) There are many Close-ups in the film of "Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling", such as, in the scene of pasturing sheep, the close-up of the sheep's grazing; close medium shot of the facial frame of Au Jiao's grandmother at family dinner; the profile of Qieer Qiancuo, thus strengthens social cohesion; on the other hand, through the close-up shots or close shots, the protagonist's happiness, sadness, anger, love and hate, etc., all these feelings are demonstrated completely to the audience, which reflect the film's vividness and reality, this is directed with the use of close-up where the originality is.

### **2.2 Ingenious Application of the Long Take and the Shot Reverse Shot**

"A long take is an uninterrupted shot in a film which lasts much longer than the conventional editing pace of the film itself, generally, usually lasting several minutes.

<sup>3</sup> To observe indigenous culture with viewpoints of the insider's

It can be used for dramatic and narrative effect if done properly, and in moving shots is often accomplished through the use of a dolly." (Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia, 2001) In the scene that the pastoral child pastures the sheep of the film of "Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling", at the opening, while the students were walking out of school gate after school, images on the screen were dramatic and lively. The camera curved across the face of one of the students out of school, the bustle of the school scene to a serene scene of a large flock of sheep eating grass on alpine pasture, which made a sharp contrast between the two, the effect was shocking.

### **Insert Figure about 3 here**

In the film, the shot exhibited in the forms of the continuity of units in the space and time guides the audience's eye-line to appear joyful or sorrowful or thoughtful. The camera lens can perform a simple matter, for example, shooting a person statically and can also be complex to follow a person through a long, interconnected space. In the film of "Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling", there is a half-a-minute long tracking shot. In this mobile shot, the camera followed the main character, Au Jiao, who was dressed in national costume coming into the courtyard from the outside, walking along the road inside into the small dark kitchen, and greeting her grandmother who was preparing for dinner, then Au Jiao set the table, and the Grandfather was at an interview; the close shot of facial expression of Au Jiao's mother and the close-up of marks on the papers etc. These shots, on the one hand, highlight the strong appeal of art form of the film, increasing the viewers' recognition of the roles in the film, further inviting them to experience a world, which were similar to the real whole family sitting down to have dinner, talking while eating. Continuity of this shot is an affirmation of the creative ability of the camera to extend across time and space. Shot reverse shot is a film technique wherein one character is shown looking at another character (often off-screen), and then the other character is shown looking "back" at the first character. Since the character are shown facing in opposite direction, the viewers assumes that they are looking at each other. Shot reverse shot is a feature of the "classical" Hollywood style of continuity editing, which deems to emphasize the transitions between shots such that the audiences perceive one continuous action that develops linearly, chronologically, and logically. (Wikipedia, the Free Encyclopedia, 2001) To illustrate this are as follows, in the film of "Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling", Au Jiao said in an interview,

Author: Did you have fun in the school when in the first year of the elementary school?

Au Jiao: Did love to, could play with the classmates in the school; did not love to, always beaten by the teacher, because I couldn't catch up with the others.

Author: Did the teachers speak Yugur language in class?

Au Jiao: Spoke words in Chinese, Mandarin.

Author: Was there Yugur culture included in the textbooks then?

Au Jiao: None.

Author: The books looked too unfamiliar for you to learn?

Au Jiao: Too difficult.

Author: If you didn't go to school, was that permitted?

Au Jiao: No way.

Author: Who forced you to?

Au Jiao: Mummy

At this point, the director used a reverse shot to deconstruct the scene, the audiences saw the mother riding motorcycle with Au Jiao to school, at the school gate, Au Jiao wanted to get rid of mother and ran away, as soon as she was held off the motorcycle. "I do not want to go to school, the teacher is always leaving me in the dark, the classmates laugh at me!" shouted Au Jiao; the mother's scolding, spanking, in addition. Au Jiao's crying made cultural clash escalate to the extreme in the film. Shot reverse shot is a conventional mode which is used commonly to the dialogue between the two, but how to break it, and how to use the structure of shot reverse shot as an amusement for making a sharp visual contrast to the audience? When author asked whether Qieer Qiancuo could ride the horse, she said, "My brother pastured the sheep when I was eight, he took the horse and let me ride on." At that moment, Qieer Qiancuo's vague line of sight should have been linked to a reverse shot, but it had already been cut, the subsequent screen which still kept on interviewing made enough room for the audiences to imagine. This movie screen and the spatial structure, in accordance of visual perspective of the film viewers, integrated the viewers' ideas into the structure of the film scene, thus the viewers became participants in the film story.

### **2.3 Montage Stunts Providing the Viewers with Visual Impact**

From the view of film theory, Vertov explained "this transformative role of montage in terms of three stages of editing.

The first stage was set up before the actual filming, and editing in this stage concerned the making of "the inventory of all documentary data directly or indirectly related to the assigned theme"<sup>4</sup>. In the second stage, editing entered into the filming with careful observations on the assigned theme. In the third stage, editing was done in the editing room where the most "expedient" data from all possible shots "were placed in a rhythmical order such that all links of meaning coincided with visual linkage" (Vertov, Dziga. 1984:88-90). Conclusions can be arrived at from the above, montage stunt in the film is that when video images are clipped, and the two shots are placed together in the same space, visual conflict and discord will be produced, the old opposite elements melt away gradually under the visual impact, a new composite image is created accordingly, which is the film's artistic value. The director of the film of "Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling" combined the following sequences:

Au Jiao's mother was riding the motorcycle closer from the far on the left of the screen.

Au Jiao's mother was riding the motorcycle closer from the far on the right of the screen.

The motorcycle stopped at the school gate, Au Jiao was being held off the motorcycle by her mother.

Au Jiao wanted to get rid of her mother and ran away, after failing in coaxing, the mother spanked her, Au Jiao cried. These scenes having been connected by means of clip-editing became a continuous whole in the eyes of the audiences, but the reality is that these sequences were shot in different locations at different time.

#### **Insert Figure about 4 here**

Such as the scene that Au Jiao's mother riding motorcycle was filmed by the author near Imperial Town hospital someday, not at the school entrance, presented on the screen after being edited, this is montage art. It used people's illusions to integrate different space-time segments into a narrative scene as to also embody in a close-up of facial appearance when Au Jiao's mother was interviewed, which was static, without any expression. When it was cut to the scene of examination papers with high grades got by Au Jiao, on the screen, happiness in the face of Au Jiao's mother was revealed fully. The second composition was to cut to a reverse shot of pasturing sheep, the camera highlighted helplessness in the face of the pastoral teacher when talking about educational awareness of herdsmen, "Some herdsmen feel they have sheep, cattle at home, and don't want their children to go to school..." said she. The third was cut to the scene that school teachers were undergoing a tug-of-war, "School-based curriculum development added the momentum to the stagnant pastoral campus," when Au Jiao's mother's joyful voice faded away, the audiences could see the face of Au Jiao's mother flashing a ray of glory. It can be seen that if a shot is cut to the different scenes, different images and concepts will be produced, the permutation and combination of the shots will lead to a clash of culture, which will bring the sequence of the film with new meaning, and arousing the audiences to think, which is the essence of montage stunt.

### ***3. Practical Significance of Visual Expression of Ethnography***

Since ancient times, cultural interpretations of human society had gone through three development stages: "telling the story" stage of oral heritage of culture; "writing the story" stage of printing heritage of culture; "acting the story" stage of image heritage of culture. The essence of the modernity could be summed up in "world image." The dynamic characteristics of images and static expression lies in its function of combination and decomposition. Function of expression of meaning of montage stunt is a process from modernity to postmodernity, which has been graded from the textual representation to cultural images shows, from large narrative to small narrative, from incommensurability to commensurability. The overall trend shows the characteristics of tolerance of the difference, the pursuit of optimum combination of both the text and images. Visional approach of ethnographic study was first used by Craig Nutt (Felix-Louis Regnault), she advocated that the film, as a scientific research tool, was the same observation tool as the microscope; she held that the film could help anthropologists conduct a scientific study. (Karl G. Heider, 1997) In the 1930s, Gregory Bateson and Margaret Mead used dual means of the images and text to write their field study reported on the culture and national character in Bali Island.

It was possible that the addition of the images made the characters shape fully. Since then, the image works had been an important part of compiling report on results of ethnographic research. Both anthropology video works and text ethnography were the statement of true status, images did not need copy the textual representation, and the contents of written text could not be mechanically applied for the interpretation of film expression in direct way, which also determined complementary value between the two. Ethnographic film of "Pastoral Children Keen on Schooling" was derived from the ethnographic field research — a practice of pastoral school-based curriculum construction which was in line with the text of "Theoretical Construction of Freedom and Pluralism of Pastoral Education from a Perspective of School-Based Curriculum Development".

<sup>4</sup> In the forms of manuscripts, objects, film clippings, photographs, newspaper clippings, books, etc.

The author hopes that the viewers from the perspective of the dual of the text are in sharp contrast, the visual image which provides immediate emotional experience is more attractive; the text is more abstract, more linear. When reading text, the readers will become more reflexive and imaginative. If we say that the main factors of culture in modern society is visual expression, the impact of visual images in film and television is far more powerful than that of statements of the text, such as books, newspapers and magazines etc.. Ethnographic interpretation of text and images can understand and concern about pastoral education status of freedom and pluralism, and future development. The film through the visual performance of the local natives explores local values and cultural patterns, realizing varying perspective requirements from the ethnographic researchers, film makers and local natives, and to push the visual expression of ethnographic research into deeper and broader level.

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**Figure 1.** Family Education, School Education and Community Culture



**Figure 2.** Close-up Shots



**Figure 3.** A Long Take



**Figure 4.** Montage Stunts

