

A case study of "Life as a Boil" and the food documentaries

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Abstract: The series "Life as a String" focusing on barbecue, which was launched by B station in 2018, continues to write the legend of Chinese food documentaries with a high score of 8.9 on Douban. "A String" and "Small Town Night Food", another food documentary "Life as Boiling" was launched on B station. However, "Life as Boiling", which exists as a sister to "Life as a String", has not achieved the expected positive results as "Life as a String", both in terms of the presentation of food and the narration of humanistic stories. The problems of "Life as Boiling" also represent to a certain extent the bottlenecks of other food documentaries in the "post-tongue" era, or some of the misunderstandings they have fallen into. In this paper, we will analyze the problems of this food documentary in terms of program format, content form and food narrative, and discuss the corresponding countermeasures through the collection of relevant literature and public comments on the Internet platform.

1. Development Background

After experiencing a budding and developing period, Chinese food documentaries officially entered a mature period, marked by the broadcast of China on the Edge of the Tongue on CCTV's comprehensive channel in 2012. During this period, the main body of food documentary production has become more diversified and the genres have become richer. Such as the emergence of "taste", "table", "private chef" and other series of food documentaries, more by region, such as the "taste of Lao Guang", "Taste of Shunde", and by type of food, such as the "life of a skewer". There are also series of food documentaries by type of food, such as "Life a String" focusing on barbecue, "Fruit Biography" focusing on fruit, and even three meals a day, such as "Breakfast in China" and "Snack Lake".

At the same time, Internet platforms have also started to become the main producers of food documentaries, and online food documentaries have become a major subgenre. Tencent Video has produced such food documentaries as "Flavor of the World", "Boiling, Hot Pot" and "Breakfast China", and Beili Beili has produced "Life in a String" and "Life as Boiling", etc. These documentaries have a more distinctive Internet cultural quality, with more grassroots food, higher content topics and a more youthful audio-visual language [1].

Looking at the "blossoming" food documentary screening, we can easily find that the mature food documentaries take food as the perspective, pay more attention to the cultural traditions and values embedded in human food activities, and reveal the closely related and harmonious relationship

between people, communities, society and nature. However, behind the appearance of prosperity of Chinese food documentaries, some of them have fallen into a misunderstanding of development. They have once deviated from their own positioning as food documentaries and have fallen into the realm of social documentaries. In other words, they have put the cart before the horse by overly pursuing the presentation of humanistic content. Even so, these food documentaries have failed to present stories as moving as "Tongue Tied", and "Life as Boiling" from B-site is a good "counter-example".

2. Program

2.1 Program Introduction

"Life as a Boil" is a food and humanities documentary produced by B-site and co-produced by Loud Media, which takes hot pot as an entry point to gain insight into the life of the nation. The positioning of the documentary is: "People gather around the pot to enjoy the most diversified, inclusive and pure food, but also to warm up the group and witness the sorrow, joy and happiness of you and me, and all kinds of life.

It is not difficult to find that "Life as Boiling" is still in line with the current development trend of most domestic food documentaries, that is, the narrative mode of "food + humanities"[2].

In the first season of "Life as Boiling" In the first season of "Life as Boiling", the stories of the owners of unknown hot pot restaurants in various cities are the most important. While describing the food, the seven episodes also cover family love, such as father-son love, long-lasting friendship, neighborhood emotions, the legacy between master and apprentice, homesickness of Chinese abroad, and reminiscence of youth by the elderly. It can be seen that "Life as Boiling" is still more "ambitious" in the design of content topics, in addition to involving the more common stories and emotions in daily life, but also attempts to show the audience is not often exposed to groups, such as the fourth episode about the story of the retired employees of Wujiangdu Hydropower Station to attend the reunion.

2.2 Program Format

2.2.1 "Micro-documentary" format

Along with the rapid development of new media and short video, the speed of information dissemination has increased and the channels of dissemination have been extended. "Fragmentation" has also become one of the characteristics of information dissemination in the new media era. "Life as a Boil" is a kind of "micro-documentary" in terms of program format. This is also a characteristic common to food documentaries broadcast on the Internet platform.

The editing of "Life is Boiling" is fast-paced and the overall length of the documentary is relatively short. Each episode contains three short stories, and each story takes up about 10 minutes on average. In addition, there is no content connection between the vignettes, so viewers can watch them in bits and pieces, without having to spend a full segment of time. In other words, viewers can watch one of the short stories in its entirety, perhaps while eating or waiting for the subway. The short length and fragmented editing make "Life as a Boil" a kind of "micro-documentary", which is very much in line with the viewing habits of the audience, especially the busy young people. This way of extracting complicated information and dividing it into a single short message is becoming a major development trend of online food documentaries [3].

2.2.2 Non-Grand Narrative Model

Another major format of "Life as a Boil" is the non-grand narrative mode, which is based on small characters and tells stories from small perspectives.

First of all, in terms of story selection, the The food documentaries focus on the unknown stores in each city, which means that the stories are told down to the city. Secondly, in the narration text, "Life is Boiling" adopts a more humorous and witty narration, full of city atmosphere. The copywriting of "Life as Boiling" is more "grounded", such as the lazy and flirtatious tone and the unhurried speed of speech. There are also commentaries such as "The lamb is smooth and tender, the baklava is fluffy, and the ironing is so good that it will kill you". Of course, there are also some phrases that are not well thought out for the sake of attracting attention, leading to some botched situations, which will be carefully discussed in the following section of "Life as Boiling".

To sum up, Life as Boiling does not adopt the serious style of traditional food documentaries, but adjusts the narrative style in an attempt to show the "approachability" of documentaries.

3. Problems

3.1 Food content is seriously lacking

Although "storytelling" has become the trend of food documentaries, the story of the characters and the emotions behind them are integrated into the food, and the food, story and emotions are fused into one. The explosion of the "tongue" series is precisely because it does not only depict food, but also affirms the main position of "people", giving food programs a strong humanistic concern.

But this does not mean that food documentaries can put the food part on the back burner, or even put the cart before the horse. Life as Boiling" positions itself as "a food documentary that takes hot pot as an entry point to gain insight into the life of the nation." But the feeling after watching the documentary is that "Life as Boiling" may be a qualified life documentary, but it is never a qualified food documentary. It not only deviates from its own positioning, but also fails to carry out the primary purpose of being a food documentary. The serious lack of food content in Life as a Boil is mainly reflected in the selection of food topics, food shots and presentation logic.

3.1.1 Lack of rigor in food selection

First of all, on the hot pot selection, take the first four episodes of Life as Boiling as an example. The four episodes introduced a total of twelve dishes from Taiwan, Macau, Sichuan, Chongqing, Guangdong, Yunnan, and Guizhou, of which Taiwan alone introduced four dishes. It is not difficult to find that the location of the selection is also too concentrated in the southwest, without giving the colorful northern hot pot the row that it deserves, and there is the problem of the narrow geographical nature of the selection.

Secondly, through the observation of the content of "Life is like boiling", there are some hot pot selections that are difficult to "convince" the public. That is, when the audience is watching, they often have a kind of "is this hot pot?" The audience is often confused. For example, the documentary in the Macau lamb belly pot, Guangzhou beef pot, Taiwan's pickled cabbage and white meat pot, these unconventional hot pot selection in the presentation is more challenging. Because it is difficult for the audience to identify with this "niche" hot pot.

3.1.2 Serious lack of food shots

Food should originally be the core content of a food documentary, and no other part should make it steal the luster of the food. The selection of ingredients, the special way of eating, the characteristics

of local tastes, and the footage of diners gorging on food, all of which are essential elements of food documentary content, are not given enough footage in "Life as Boiling". The serious lack of depiction of food has become the biggest fatal point of the food documentary "Life as a Boil"[4].

Compared to other successful food documentaries, "The Flavor of Life" makes extensive use of microscopic photography, super macro photography, and "molecular level" images to show the texture and subtle changes inside the ingredients. In order to show the internal crystal structure and shape of the pine egg, the team used a Sony high-speed camera with a microscope head to combine 1,000 photos per second into one image, which was carefully designed to provide viewers with a superb perspective. The average number of shots in a single episode of "China on the tip of the tongue" is also as high as more than 1,000, with the highest number of shots in a single episode reaching more than 1,400.

"Life as a Boil" not only fails to satisfy the viewers' desire for food footage from the above aspects, but also fails to put enough effort in showing different types of hot pot. The hot pot shots in the documentary are mostly homogeneous images of soup bubbling, and the directing team does not differentiate the food from its form and color, failing to fully show the "charm" of different hot pots and the impact of the food on people. In terms of food shots, "Life as Boiling" also fails to show in a short space the ingredients, simple and complicated ingredients, the cooking methods and the food from the north and the south. The cumulative number of food shots and the switching between shots fail to meet the audience's expectations.

3.1.3 Lack of logic in food presentation

The presentation of food documentaries requires a certain logic, such as the description of food, the connection between dishes and the introduction of stories of people behind the food. How to make viewers accept the food from the north and the south without feeling "chaotic" is an important issue that should be considered in food documentaries. "Life as a Boil" is still very young in this aspect, and does not show the professionalism of its crew.

First of all, the title of each episode of "Life as a Boil" is different, but the contents are not very different.

And "Life as Boiling" does not pay attention to differentiated thematic selections, such as this episode about meat, the next about vegetables, the next about bones, or this episode about family, the next about friendship, the next about strangers, and so on. This is not conducive to clearly guiding the audience to receive the corresponding content with clear themes and make them impressed. Food documentaries should follow a basic presentation logic - 100 cities, 100 tastes, what to eat to the origin of the food.

Finally, in the introduction of human stories, "Life as Boiling" is even slightly raw and disorganized. Food documentaries should first take food as the entry point, and then through the introduction, reactions and interactions of the bosses and diners, naturally lead to the human story or regional cultural characteristics of the branch line, in a single breath, integrated. For example, "Life as a String" systematically introduces the ingredients, techniques and characteristics of each barbecue, and then extends to the people who make them.

"Life as a Boil" presents the human story - after a brief introduction of a dish, the camera is almost always given to the person who makes the dish, the relatives of the person who makes the dish, the neighbors of the person who makes the dish, and so on. Apart from that, the human stories are told in a very mixed way.

3.2 The human story still needs to be penetrated

Storytelling is a trend in documentary film production in recent years. Through the process of

storytelling, the personalities and life experiences of the main characters are gradually set off, and the audience listening to the stories can easily place themselves in the stories unconsciously, reaching an integration of experiences with the main characters of the stories, thus creating a resonance between their personalities and life experiences. However, not all documentaries can present a moving storyline[5].

3.2.1 Character conflicts are not prominent

First of all, in the selection of the characters' stories, "Life as Boiling" does not reflect the natural contradictions of the characters, or rather, it does not bring out the contradictions of the main characters. In the first episode, "Life as Boiling" tells the story of a Chongqing hot pot restaurant owner who buys food at night. There is no clear story line and no obvious contradiction in the main character, which only leaves an impression of a chicken soup story that "doesn't make sense" after watching.

We can easily find that these materials are not the best choice of topics, whether from the food itself, or the people behind the food, are not new. The lack of contradictions in the characters also makes the presentation of the story bland and watery, failing to leave a deep impression.

According to the idea of "Life Is Like Boiling", any store in the marketplace would probably be the same story. So "Life as Boiling" fails in embodying the contradictory points of the characters, which is very detrimental to laying the foundation for good storytelling afterwards.

3.2.2 Storytelling without depth

Secondly, in terms of human storytelling, "Life as a Boil" only teases out the "skin". Each episode of "Life is Like Boiling" has a time allotment of about 10 minutes for the characters' stories, during which there is enough time to tell the whole story, introduce the characters, unfold the conflicts, resolve them, and do a good job of the sequel. But even at the cost of saving a lot of food shots, "Life is Boiling" still fails to present the human story thoroughly.

The reason why "Life Is Like Boiling" fails to successfully "transfer emotions" and trigger strong emotional resonance in the audience is that there is a problem in the storytelling. The failure to reflect the natural contradictions of the characters, the lack of specific development of the contradictions, the lack of precise focus on the characters, the slapdash descriptions, and the lack of eventful shots are all reasons why "Life as Boiling" fails to tell the human story thoroughly. Even though the program team tries hard to promote the truth, goodness and beauty of human beings in terms of family, friendship and love, the superficial storytelling makes these humanities seem a bit fake, big and empty.

3.3 Detail processing needs to be improved

In addition to the above analysis of the two most serious problems of "Life as Boiling", its "Life as Boiling" also has some flaws in the post-processing of filters and copywriting.

First of all, some of the shots have a very different color palette from the scenes, which diminishes the viewing experience. For example, the two shots from 2:14 to 2:16 in the first episode are spliced with cold and warm tones, giving the impression of changing scenes visually, but actually the same scene is shown.

In addition, some of the scenes in "Life as Boiling" are not soothing enough in terms of color, such as the scene of farmers walking through the fields from 25:16 to 25:19 in the first episode, which is brighter and more colorful than the previous scenes, giving people a sense of being out of the news. The raw colors are not conducive to the audience's emotional progression.

Secondly, the phenomenon of copywriting "out of control" happens from time to time. As mentioned above, the copywriting of "Life as Boiling" is one of its highlights, which reflects a unique

style of "smoke and mirrors". However, the copywriting of some of the content is out of proportion. The copywriting team often fails to grasp the right degree, and ends up with counterproductive effects. For example, the phrase "urgently needs to replenish the hormones evaporated by it" not only fails to match the corresponding picture, but also sounds inexplicably embarrassing. There is also the situation of relying too much on the copy to describe the story, that is, the story itself has not yet resonated with the audience, but the copy is eager to exalt or force the chicken soup.

4. Suggestions for improvement

4.1 Refocus the main content - food

Food documentaries should first make people "hungry". The main content of a food documentary should always be the food itself, and the program team should return their perspective to the presentation of hot pot food, rather than sacrificing food shots to tell human stories. This is the practice of putting the cart before the horse and losing sight of the other, and it is impossible to create a qualified food documentary.

Not only "Life as Boiling", but also other food documentaries should adhere to the creative concept of "seven parts ingredients, two parts people, plus one part background story". We can't let the non-food parts steal the limelight from the food. The program team should work on the selection of food, the preparation of ingredients, the cooking process, and the presentation of the dishes. Attention should also be paid to the all-round and close-up depiction of the food footage, such as slow playback and close-up presentation. In addition, the gustatory presentation of food can also be increased from the footage of diners enjoying the food. In other words, the primary purpose of food documentaries is to bring a plate of good food to the audience, so that the audience has the urge to pick up the chopsticks. Rather than rushing to tell the story behind the food.

4.2 Step by step to stimulate emotion - story

In recent years, the level of documentary "storytelling" has been improving, and various documentaries highlight the feelings through different narrative techniques to enhance the watchability of the work, while also enhancing the humanistic concern of the work. The idea of "people-oriented" narrative is increasingly recognized by the majority of documentary creators. However, not all food documentaries have succeeded in bringing emotional recognition to the audience. "Life as a Boil" fails to leave a deep impression on viewers in terms of storytelling, firstly, the characters' conflicts are not prominent, and secondly, the storytelling is superficial.

To address this problem, the program team should focus its perspective on social groups with natural contradictions or topicality, so that viewers can have a strong sense of immersion or empathy when watching. Second, in the storytelling, we should focus on exploring one of the contradictory points without pursuing "everything", such as the story of Miao parents going out to work in the aforementioned "Tongue", which is a very short space to capture the helpless and heartbreaking phenomenon of "left-behind children". The story of the Hmong parents who go out to work, as mentioned above, is a very short story that captures the helpless and heartbreaking phenomenon of "left-behind children" for emotional output. There is no unnecessary mention of how hard the Miao parents work outside or how the left-behind children go to school at home. The story is only presented in two big scenes: the parents return home and go out again.

In addition, the "people" and the stories behind the people in the food documentary should be more closely related to the food itself. For example, "Ah Miao, who has just turned 20 years old and is from northern Jiangsu, graduated from high school three years ago and came to Suzhou with his parents. Her parents hope that the boy in the family can go to university, and A Miao is the eldest sister, so

she needs to support herself as soon as possible" are narratives that are too narrative for the current stage of food documentary storytelling. When telling the story of a food documentary, the ups and downs of the characters' fate should not be reflected by the narration, but by directly connecting the protagonist with the food, which makes the protagonist closer to the food while diluting the characters' story. For example, in "The Flavor of Life", the narrative is no longer deliberate, but allows more viewers to remember the dart fish guy standing on the bow of the boat, fighting against nature, and the minority mother who prepares sour duck for her daughter.

Finally, the expression of emotions should not be divorced from the theme and forcibly exaggerated. Food documentaries should dig into the emotions behind the food and the story in a step-by-step manner. For example, the third season of "China on the Tip of the Tongue" used narration to sublimate the theme and elevate the tone, forcing the emotional story behind the narration, which led to a decline in the audience's acceptance of the whole film because it did not resonate with the documentary. The same problem exists in "Life as Boiling", so we should grasp the degree of copy and narration to make it serve the natural unfolding of the story and the true expression of emotions. It should not be a slapdash narrative or a superficial and sensationalist narration.

5. Conclusion

The lack of rigor in food selection, the serious lack of food shots and the lack of logic in food presentation make Life as Boiling unable to be an excellent or even qualified food documentary. The contradictions of the characters and the lack of thorough storytelling fail to bring out the humanistic sentiment of Life as Boiling. In other words, "Life as Boiling" does not let the audience "eat hot pot", nor does it let people experience all kinds of life, but is in an awkward situation of "four unlike".

Whether it is the "Tip of the Tongue" series, "Life in a String" or "Life as Boiling", we can see that these kinds of food documentaries seem to like to discover the life or emotions behind the food, from the food to the life. But the people and events behind the food need the food to do the backdrop, otherwise the lack of fireworks makes the human story can not penetrate the hearts of people. This also reveals other domestic food documentaries - food documentaries that do not depict food, is still called food documentaries? So food documentaries should not forget to show the audience the original intention of food, do not let the characters and stories "take over the main". And follow the logic of food first, then humanities, so that the audience can "see" before understanding the story. Secondly, at the time when the humanistic feelings should be shown, we should avoid the shallow stories like dragonfly dripping water, and dig deeper into the contradictions of the events and the hearts of the characters to achieve the effect of emotional sublimation.

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