

# Innovative Narrative Strategies in Cultural Documentaries: A Case Study of “The Master Biographies—Liu Zongyuan of the Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties”

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## Abstract

The large-scale cultural documentary “Patriarchs—Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasty”, produced by China Central Television (CCTV) in late 2023, exemplifies meticulous craftsmanship, perpetuating China’s rich traditional culture. This work follows in the footsteps of cultural programs such as “China in the Canonical Books” and “National Treasures”, which have gained significant acclaim. In the realm of new mainstream television, “Patriarchs—Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasty” stands out as a documentary of substantial cultural depth. It offers a multi-sensory immersive experience through innovative technical methods and unique content design. This program delivers an audio-visual feast by employing novel narrative strategies, including technological advancements in extra-narrative mechanisms, inter-temporal storytelling within intra-narrative mechanisms, and a multifaceted narrative approach.

## Keywords

Cultural Documentary, Narrative Strategy, The Patriarchs’ Biographies, Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties

## 1. Introduction

In the narrative strategy of ‘Biography of the Patriarchs—The Eight Greats of Tang and Song,’ XR technology is innovatively utilized to achieve immersive live-action interpretation. The program team meticulously designed nearly 200 magnificent physical scenes and choreographed approximately 20,000 square meters to capture the essence of Tang and Song rhythms (Lu, 2023). With cine-

matic quality, the program constructs a comprehensive narrative by presenting stories that transcend time and space and employing diverse narrative perspectives. Host Sabine, accompanied by a group of experts and scholars, pioneers the first live-action ancient costume reenactment in a cultural documentary. This leads the audience through the lives and ideals of the great masters, highlighting significant moments in the creation of the eight great masterpieces of the Tang and Song dynasties, showcasing China's unique cultural confidence (Sun and Zhang, 2021).

This paper focuses on the narrative strategy of the Liu Zongyuan chapter in 'The Patriarchs—The Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasty,' analyzing the film's innovative narrative strategies. By examining technological advancements in extra-narrative mechanisms, inter-temporal storytelling within intra-narrative mechanisms, and the three-dimensionality of characters in a multi-perspective narrative, this study reveals the film's unique contributions to the field of film and television narrative.

## 2. Extra-Narrative Mechanisms: Technological Innovations

The emergence of drama-style documentaries is a manifestation of the continuous collision and fusion of authenticity and storytelling, and its drama-style narrative characteristics embodied in the actors and actresses, cinematographic filming techniques, etc. have greatly increased the watchability of the documentary (Yang, 2021). Traditional filmmaking techniques and artistic performance in the "Patriarch Biography—Eight Greats of the Tang and Song Dynasties" of Liu Zongyuan chapter of the narrative strategy can be seen everywhere, for example, in the shooting of Liu Zongyuan's teenage years, Liu's mother to help the little boy fled because of the war in the scene, the director in the filming techniques, using the film's standard filming techniques of positive and negative shooting, to show the mother of Liu, Liu Zongyuan, fled the little boy of the relationship between the characters of the three in the boy, for shame and gratitude to the pot. When the boy is ashamed and grateful for the pot, the director uses the overhead shooting technique to show the powerlessness of the boy who is forced by life to be a thief. Finally, the director adopts the shooting technique of panning and tilting to portray the noble morality of Liu's mother and the sentiment of benefiting the country and the people, which vividly tells the environment in which Liu Zongyuan grew up in his childhood. Through carefully designed artistic lens composition and lens movement, the director increases the beauty of the documentary, highlights the key moments and important scenes in the life of Liu Zongyuan, and enhances the expressive power and visual effect of the narrative.

### 2.1. Cinematography

The emergence of drama-style documentaries represents a fusion of authenticity and storytelling, significantly enhancing their watchability. This approach inte-

grates actors, actresses, and advanced cinematographic techniques (Yang, 2021), which are prevalent in the narrative strategy of Liu Zongyuan's chapter in 'The Patriarchs—Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties.' The director dramatizes Liu Zongyuan's life and thoughts, making the story more engaging and enabling a deeper understanding of his character. High-quality photography and post-production techniques are employed to present the folklore, characters, and culture of the Tang Dynasty, immersing the audience in its social environment and enhancing their perception of Liu Zongyuan's era.

Carefully designed artistic lens composition and movement elevate the documentary's aesthetics, highlighting key moments and significant scenes in Liu Zongyuan's life, thus enhancing the narrative's expressive power and visual impact. For instance, during Liu Zongyuan's teenage years, the director uses standard filming techniques, such as positive and negative shooting, to depict the story of Liu's mother rescuing a young boy who fled from the war. This scene serves as an opportunity to incorporate Qu Yuan's "Li Sao," teaching the young Liu Zongyuan about the importance of being mindful of the world and growing up to contribute positively to society. The ideals that Liu Zongyuan pursued as an adult were already being instilled in him at this early stage, laying the groundwork for his future endeavors.

## **2.2. Immersive Live-Action Interpretation**

Immersive live interpretation is an art form that combines virtual reality (VR) or augmented reality (AR) technology with actual live performance. It enables the audience to immersively participate and experience the plot through technical equipment and scene design, immersing themselves in the story situation in an all-encompassing way. It is a standout feature of "Patriarchs—Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties". By constructing 200 physical scenes and utilizing nearly 20,000 square meters of stage furnishings, the production team combined high-definition photography with realistic visual effects. This approach effectively reproduces the traditional Chinese aesthetic depicted in Liu Zongyuan's poetic imagery of "millions of loneliness in Jiangxue," as well as historical spaces like streets and ancient buildings from the Tang Dynasty. Authentic scene building and elaborate set design enable the production crew to offer a richer depiction of the Tang Dynasty's social and cultural background, providing the audience with a more realistic and comprehensive narrative experience.

The detailed and authentic scene construction allows viewers to feel as if they are part of the Tang Dynasty's social landscape. This technological innovation not only enhances the film's viewability but also significantly increases the audience's sense of immersion, making the documentary more engaging and enjoyable. It allows viewers to gain a deeper understanding of the historical environment in which Liu Zongyuan lived and his lifelong ambition to pursue reforms for the betterment of society.

### 2.3. XR Innovative Presentation

XR stands for “Extended Reality”, an umbrella term that encompasses Virtual Reality (VR), Augmented Reality (AR), Mixed Reality (MR) and other related technologies. These technologies all combine the virtual and real worlds through computer-generated content to enhance the user’s sensory experience and interaction. In the early stages of virtual reality research, scholars emphasized the technical attributes and system functions of virtual reality, describing it as an ‘electronic simulation of the environment’ (Schweber, 1995) and a ‘collection of technologies required to build a virtual environment’ (Cruz-Neira et al., 1993) with key characteristics of imagination, interaction, and immersion (Burdea and Coiffet, 2003). Marshall McLuhan later proposed in his book ‘Understanding Media: The Extension of Man’ that ‘media are extensions or extensions of man’s sensory faculties,’ (Marshall McLuhan, translated by He Daokuan, McLuhan, 2019) broadening the ways humans perceive the world. With the advent of virtual reality media, represented by XR technology, this perception has been greatly enhanced. Extended Reality (XR) combines real and virtual environments to create immersive human-computer interactions, merging Virtual Reality (VR) and Augmented Reality (AR) to provide a seamless transition between the virtual and real worlds (Duan, 2023).

XR technology introduces an innovative narrative strategy in ‘The Patriarchs—Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties’ featuring Liu Zongyuan. In this documentary episode, producers combined the virtual world depicted in Liu Zongyuan’s poetry with a real studio setting. A visiting group of hosts, experts, and professors led viewers through virtual ink paintings of Chinese landscapes, accompanied by ancient-style background music and poem recitations. Furthermore, the crew used XR technology to transport the audience back to the Tang Dynasty, allowing them to experience the highs and lows of Liu Zongyuan’s life firsthand. This augmented reality narrative immerses the audience in Liu Zongyuan’s world, offering an intuitive understanding of his profound concerns for the country and its people during his brief life.

### 3. Intra-Narrative Mechanism: Story Presentation across Time and Space

The intra-narrative mechanism in a documentary film refers to the internal principles and methods used to construct and shape the story, guiding the audience’s understanding and perception of the storyline, character relationships, and thematic connotations. Inter-temporality in a documentary pertains to the changes in time and space within the film (Fu, 2020).

In Liu Zongyuan’s chapter of ‘The Patriarchs’ Biography—Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties,’ the narrative leads the audience through Liu Zongyuan’s life experiences from infancy to middle age. This is achieved by setting up plots that span across different times and spaces and skillfully arranging and linking these plots at various time nodes, including both main and sub-

plots. This approach helps the audience to understand and perceive the thematic meaning of the documentary. Through thoughtful plot arrangement, the storyline remains layered, compact, and orderly, engaging the audience's interest and evoking emotional resonance.

### **3.1. Real-Time Narrative with Studio as the Main Body**

The documentary employs the studio as the primary setting, presenting the narrative in real-time. The visiting group, led by host Sabine, has their initial meeting in the studio, where they provide a preliminary introduction to Liu Zongyuan's life and significant works. This real-time setting establishes the foundation for the story's development, giving viewers an initial insight into Liu Zongyuan and his contributions.

Within the documentary's narrative framework, the visiting group embarks on three inter-temporal journeys, transitioning from the Tang Dynasty to the present day. When they reach the historical time and space of Liu Zongyuan, the studio set is transformed into a realistic simulation of Tang Dynasty life. Each temporal journey in search of Liu Zongyuan's footprints allows for an in-depth exploration of his life. After these historical segments, host Sabine and the visiting experts return to the studio to further discuss and analyze the events that occurred during their temporal crossings.

The studio, designed as a study, serves as a realistic narrative space. Here, the visiting team conducts guided dialogues and discussions, leading the audience into the depths of Liu Zongyuan's heart through detailed analyses of his works and mindset. This narrative mechanism effectively combines the crossing of time and space with intellectual exploration, offering the audience a deeper, more comprehensive narrative experience.

In these scenes, which emphasize academic discussion and spiritual exploration, the audience gains a profound understanding of Liu Zongyuan's inner world. This, in turn, enhances their appreciation of the emotional and cultural connotations behind his works.

### **3.2. Participatory Story Presentation with Historical Memory as the Main Body**

The second temporal setting of the documentary is the Tang Dynasty, focusing on historical memory as the core narrative element. When the visiting group, led by host Sabine, travels back to Liu Zongyuan's era, they not only observe but also actively participate and witness events within the Tang Dynasty narrative (Liang, 2011). They engage deeply with Liu Zongyuan, his family member Liu Zongzhi, and his friend Liu Yuxi.

In this narrative space that spans time and history, the visiting group explores and presents Liu Zongyuan's life comprehensively and from multiple perspectives. This approach enhances the sense of presence and participation in the documentary, providing the audience with an immersive experience. Through

intimate interactions with Liu Zongyuan and the characters of his time, viewers gain a deeper understanding of his life and works.

This narrative design is both educational and entertaining, enabling the audience to acquire substantial knowledge about Liu Zongyuan while being engaged. The interactive narrative experience encourages the audience to actively participate in the story, fostering a deeper understanding and appreciation of Liu Zongyuan and the cultural landscape of his era.

### 3.3. Narrative Strategy of Reverse Traversal

In the final cross-temporal narrative of this documentary, Sabine, a member of the visiting team, invites Liu Zongyuan, nearing the end of his life, to travel forward in time to the modern era, a thousand years later. This innovative narrative strategy allows Liu to witness the prosperity of a contemporary city and the well-being of its citizens. He also visits the Liu Palace Shrine, restored in his honor by later generations, which serves to celebrate and preserve his collected works. This reverse journey provides Liu Zongyuan with a firsthand experience of the peaceful world he envisioned, adding a new dimension to the film's theme. His lifelong pursuit of a harmonious society, "Li An Yuan Yuan" is realized in 21st-century China.

This plot device cleverly bridges history and reality, highlighting the continuity and development of culture. The innovation of this narrative technique elevates the film's theme, prompting the audience to reflect more deeply on the inheritance and evolution of Chinese culture. This strategy creates a perfect closed loop with the previous inter-temporal narrative, allowing the audience to not only learn about Liu Zongyuan's life and thoughts but also to experience a dialogue between history and reality.

The story structure elicits a profound response from the audience, enhancing their understanding of the rich heritage of Chinese culture. By employing inter-temporal narrative techniques and reverse traversal, the documentary enriches the narrative's layers and connotations, providing knowledge and entertainment simultaneously. This innovative approach revitalizes the inheritance and development of Chinese culture, showcasing its enduring charm and value.

## 4. Multiple Perspectives Narrative: Characterization in Three Dimensions

Multiple narratives present events or plots to the audience through various perspectives, voices, or media. Unlike the traditional single perspective, multiple narratives break these limitations, allowing the audience to understand and perceive the story content from different angles. Cultural variety shows effectively present traditional culture through diverse themes, offering viewers a comprehensive understanding (Zhang and Dong, 2024).

In the portrayal of Liu Zongyuan, one of the eight great masters of the Tang and Song dynasties, the documentary skillfully employs a diversified narrative

strategy to enrich his image. By cross-cutting between contemporary and historical perspectives, as well as multi-stranded narratives, the audience gains a comprehensive understanding of Liu Zongyuan. The contemporary perspective is provided by the koan visiting group led by Sabine, while historical perspectives come from Liu Zongyuan's family member Liu Zongzhi and his friend Liu Yuxi. Each character's narrative adds new dimensions and meanings to the story.

This narrative technique enhances the richness, complexity, and engagement of the story, revealing the thoughts, emotions, and experiences of different characters. Multiple narratives allow the audience to gain a deeper understanding of character relationships, plot development, and thematic meaning. This approach not only increases the work's interest and appeal but also expands the audience's thinking, providing a deeper understanding and experience of the story content.

By employing multiple narratives, the audience is given a greater sense of participation and space for reflection. They are not just passive recipients of information but can empathize and engage in dialogue with the characters and plot. This interactivity and sense of participation greatly enhance the audience's viewing experience, making them more immersed in the story.

#### **4.1. Contemporary Perspectives Represented by the Visiting Team**

A contemporary perspective refers to the angle or position from which current time, culture, and social background are used to observe and understand events or people. This perspective not only informs the title of a documentary film but also enriches its expression through diversity and depth (Zhang, 2014). It reflects contemporary ways of thinking, value orientations, and aesthetic concepts.

In the documentary 'Patriarchs—Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties,' the visiting group led by Sabine examines Liu Zongyuan's life through in-depth studio discussions from a modern viewpoint. This approach provides viewers with profound evaluations and insights, reinterpreting historical events and characters while addressing contemporary social issues. By delving deeply into Liu Zongyuan's life, the visiting group allows the audience to scrutinize this literary master from a contemporary perspective, rendering the story more realistic.

Through the meticulous restoration of Liu Zongyuan's life, the audience gains a better understanding of his tumultuous experiences, aspirations, and concerns for the nation and its people. The team, led by Sabine, skillfully incorporates modern perspectives, enabling viewers to explore Liu Zongyuan's relevance in today's society. This documentary approach not only provides a fresh understanding of history but also prompts deep reflections on contemporary issues.

Guided by the visiting team, viewers can clearly see the resonance and conflicts between Liu Zongyuan and modern society, enhancing the story's realism. The multi-layered narrative of the documentary allows the audience to trace Liu Zongyuan's life while reflecting on the development of contemporary society. This narrative approach, spanning time and space, adds depth to Liu Zongyuan's

story and sensitizes the audience to the contemporary cultural context in which they live. The documentary's unique perspective inspires viewers to contemplate history and reality, making the entire work more compelling.

#### **4.2. Perspectives of Historical Figures Represented by Liu Zongyuan, Liu Zongzhi, and Liu Yuxi**

Set against the historical backdrop of the Tang Dynasty, the audience follows the visiting group as they meet Liu Zongzhi, Liu Yuxi, and Liu Zongyuan in succession. Each of these figures offers a unique perspective on Liu Zongyuan's life and the stories behind his works. Liu Zongzhi recounts how Liu Zongyuan was nurtured and educated by his mother during his teenage years, painting a picture of a young Liu Zongyuan who was deeply cared for and well-taught. Liu Yuxi's narration reveals Liu Zongyuan's ambitious efforts to reform the country for the people's benefit and his ultimate relegation to a tragic fate. Liu Zongyuan's own narrative provides insight into his inner struggles and growth, from initial loneliness and helplessness to later enlightenment and resilience in the face of adversity.

These varied perspectives create a multi-dimensional, vivid, and dynamic portrayal of Liu Zongyuan, enabling viewers to gain a deeper understanding of his life and emotions. The interweaving of these different viewpoints offers a comprehensive understanding of this literary giant, prompting viewers to reflect more deeply on his life. Through the historical perspectives of different characters, the documentary enriches our understanding of Liu Zongyuan's upbringing and experiences.

These narratives outline a vibrant and nuanced image of Liu Zongyuan, allowing viewers to grasp his emotional world more fully. In doing so, the audience not only feels the weight of history but also gains a true appreciation for Liu Zongyuan's greatness and wisdom as a historical figure.

### **5. Limitations of the Film's Narrative Strategy**

In the narrative strategy of the film, Liu Zongyuan, a master of the Tang and Song dynasties, through innovative forms of expression, craftsmanship, and heavy cultural core, deeply explores the humanistic spirit and contemporary value of the excellent traditional Chinese culture, interprets the legend of the masters with audio-visuals, and builds a bridge between the past and the present with science and technology, so as to truly realise the creative transformation and innovative development of the excellent traditional Chinese culture. However, through further analysis, it is not difficult to find that the film still has some limitations.

#### **5.1. Problems Compared with the Same Type of Cultural Documentaries**

Compared with cultural technical films such as "National Treasure" and "China in the Canon", the following limitations may exist in the narrative strategy of

“The Patriarch’s Biography—Eight Great Men of the Tang and Song Dynasties”  
Liu Zongyuan chapter.

### **5.1.1. Single Form of Presentation**

Compared with the “Legend of the Past Life” and “Story of the Present Life” of “National Treasure”, in which the ancient and modern stories of national treasures are interpreted by actors, and the “Interview + Cultural Drama + Film and Television” of “China in the Canon”, the programme is in the form of “interview + cultural drama + film and television”, in which the programme is in the form of “interview + cultural drama + film and television”. In the form of “China in the Canon”, the programme is divided into three parts: the interview room, the stage of drama performance and the canonical reading meeting, while the “Biography of Patriarchs—The Eight Greats of the Tang and Song Dynasties”, Liu Zongyuan chapter, is through the mode of “immersive live interpretation + cinematographic filming + XR innovative presentation”, which lets the audience immerse themselves in Liu Zongyuan’s life experience and literary achievements, with a slightly different form of presentation. Literary achievements, the presentation form is a little bit single.

### **5.1.2. Insufficient Depth of Story Content**

Compared with programmes such as “National Treasure” and “China in the Canon”, which show the long history and splendid culture of the Chinese nation by telling the stories behind the national treasures or canonical books, “Patriarchs—Eight Greats of the Tang and Song Dynasties” mainly focuses on Liu Zongyuan’s personal experience and literary works, and does not dig deep enough into the social and historical background and cultural connotations of the Middle Tang period.

### **5.1.3. Narrower Audience Groups**

As the content of Liu Zongyuan’s chapter of “Patriarchs’ Biographies—Eight Greats of the Tang and Song Dynasties” mainly involves the fields of literature and history, there is a certain threshold of comprehension for the general audience. In contrast, programmes such as National Treasure and China in the Canon are able to attract a wider audience group through diverse forms of expression and easy-to-understand narratives.

## **5.2. Limitations and Potential Drawbacks of XR Technology and Immersive Narrative Technology**

The application of XR technology in literary documentaries, despite bringing new possibilities and visual experiences, still faces multiple challenges and limitations. These limitations are not limited to The Patriarch’s Legend, but may also occur in other literary documentaries. For example, This Decade—Happy China attempts to recreate historical moments through XR technology, but it may face the challenges of authenticity in scene construction and spatial and temporal coherence; Shine! Chinese Civilisation” hopes to show the glorious history of

Chinese culture through XR technology, but it may need more technical exploration and innovation in terms of visual presentation and narrative depth; “Hong Kong, Our Story” faces the problems of picture clarity and colour reproduction when using XR technology to restore the city’s history. Taking the example of the chapter of “Patriarchs’ Biographies—Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties” by Liu Zongyuan, we can further explore the specific application of XR technology and its limitations in this kind of works.

### 5.2.1. Insufficient Picture Realism

One of the core of XR technology is its ability to create realistic virtual scenes. In the chapter of “Patriarch’s Biography—Eight Great Poets of Tang and Song” Liu Zongyuan, through XR technology, the audience can not only seem to travel through time and space and be present in the historical scenes of Liu Zongyuan’s life, but also travel to the poems written by Liu Zongyuan, and experience what Liu Zongyuan saw and thought. For example, when the host Sabine and the experts discuss “River Snow”, the big screen appears on the distant mountains, the virtual stage appears in the distance of the lone boat Demoiselle Weng, the virtual space of the conversation area is sprinkled with snow, so that the audience has a sense of being in the realm of reality. However, the fidelity of the virtual screen still has challenges, and the ancient scenes simulated by technical means have various defects in the details of the materials, textures, and light and shadow effects of the buildings, as well as in the detailed presentation of the general environment.

### 5.2.2. High Equipment and Technology Requirements

XR technology requires high-performance hardware equipment support in the application process. Equipment such as large LED screens, high-definition cameras, powerful rendering computers, etc., not only require expensive investment but also have high requirements for the professional ability of technicians and production teams. Especially in small production companies or projects with limited budgets, the cost and operational complexity of this technological equipment may become a major challenge, limiting the wide application of XR technology in literary documentaries.

### 5.2.3. Actor Performance Skills

The application of XR technology also poses new challenges to actors’ performance skills and teamwork abilities. In virtual filming, actors not only need to adapt to the existence of virtual characters but also interact with the virtual scene, which puts forward higher requirements for acting skills, movement coordination and emotional expression ability. In addition, the virtual filming technology itself is still in the process of continuous development and improvement, and the production of special effects, scene design and post-processing also requires more technical accumulation and innovative spirit from the production team, in order to ensure that the visual effects presented in the end meet the audience’s expectations and the requirements of historical accuracy.

The application of XR technology in literary documentaries is at a stage of continuous exploration and improvement. Although significant progress has been made in the technology, efforts are still needed to maintain historical authenticity, enhance the audiovisual experience and reduce production costs. Only through continuous technological innovation and in-depth team cooperation can the current challenges be better addressed, further expanding the prospects for the application of XR technology in the production of literary and art documentaries, and presenting viewers with a more authentic, profound, and shocking audiovisual experience.

## 6. Conclusion

In the cultural documentary ‘Biography of Patriarch: Liu Zongyuan of the Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasty,’ the narrative employs a dialogue between the past and present to showcase the spirit and cultural heritage of China. By leveraging technological innovations in extra-narrative mechanisms, inter-temporal story presentations, and multi-perspective narration, the documentary vividly portrays the legendary life of Liu Zongyuan and the creative context of his works.

Through this film, viewers gain a profound experience of Liu Zongyuan’s arduous journey in his pursuit of the people’s welfare and his cultural significance as a master of his generation. The documentary makes a significant contribution to the transmission of Chinese culture, offering both educational and entertaining content that highlights the charm and values of traditional Chinese heritage.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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