

# Poetic Expression and Image Significance of Documentaries on the Elderly

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## Abstract

In the context of the accelerating aging of the population in contemporary China, documentaries on the elderly have become an important way to interpret the intergenerational contradictions in modern society and re-understand the value of aging by focusing on the lives of the elderly and the relationship between generations. They use a realistic perspective, such as looking at ethical changes from the perspective of family daily life, looking at intergenerational communication from the perspective of technological influence, and looking at the changes of the times from the perspective of memory records. In the connection between personal stories and social development, they help people better understand the phenomenon of aging. This paper focuses on the creation wave of documentaries on the elderly in China after 2010, selects typical texts, and explores the response of images to the social spiritual dilemma of “getting old before getting rich” from the dual dimensions of the transformation of the character writing paradigm and the ethical tension of poetic expression. The study finds that the aesthetic expression level uses the aesthetics of mono no aware, the poetics of time, and the archaeology of sound to reflect the fault and bridging of collective memory through individual life history, so that the aging issue is sublimated from a social problem report to a metaphysical questioning of the dignity of life. This type of documentary builds a bridge between the embodied aging experience in the context of the “silver wave” through the strategies of “poeticizing trauma” and “sanctifying the daily life”, challenging the utilitarian discourse that reduces the elderly to a social burden and providing the possibility of visual therapy to eliminate intergenerational loneliness. This creative practice not only constitutes a cultural memorandum for China’s aging society, but also reveals the unique value of documentary art in protecting the warmth of humanity in the era of technological rationality.

## Keywords

Documentary About the Elderly, Character Writing, Poetic Expression,

## 1. Introduction

National “2023 National Economic and Social Statistical Bulletin”, shows that China has nearly 300 million people over the age of 60 (one in every five people is elderly), and the number will increase to nearly 500 million by 2050 (equivalent to the combined population of the United States and Japan). China has completed the aging process of France in just 25 years, which took 126 years. The “baby boomers” are collectively entering old age and the birth rate is decreasing (9.01 million newborns in 2023, less than one-third of that in 1990), which is reshaping the family structure and social culture: from the 2000 Yuan pension life of laid-off old workers in Northeast China, the drone hobby of the “new elderly” in Shanghai, to the faded plaques of elderly people living alone in mountain villages, and the daily life of “old migrants” in first-tier cities taking care of their grandchildren, aging presents a diverse survival picture, which is essentially a life epic written by 1.4 billion people.

This study uses documentaries on the elderly as a starting point to explore Chinese solutions to the challenges of aging. “Four Springs” transforms aging into a poetic gaze on the order of life through the daily details of combing hair and playing the flute of a retired couple in Gui-zhou; “I Only Know You” follows an elderly couple with Alzheimer’s disease, showing the emotional persistence in the disappearance of memory, reflecting the dependence pattern of “silver-haired partners” in the era of low birth rate. “Twenty- Two” uses the tenacious sunflowers in the rainstorm as a metaphor for historical trauma, and guides collective reflection through the separation of sound and picture; “Old After” focuses on Beijing’s “old drifters”, with hospital disinfectant water and the hustle and bustle of the morning market as the background, using long shots to record the fatigue of taking care of grandchildren, revealing the urbanization dilemma of the traditional elderly care model. These works take the elderly group as the core narrative object, reflect the different living conditions of the elderly, discuss the core issues of aging society such as aging, memory, family relationship, and social marginalization, and reflect intergenerational memory faults through individual stories. Aesthetic techniques such as natural images and voice narratives sublimate the aging issue from a social issue to a philosophical thinking on the dignity of life.

## 2. Image Fable: Image Reconstruction of Documentaries on the Elderly

### 2.1. The Aesthetics of Mono No Awareness: Still Life Close-Ups in a Desolate Home

The aesthetics of mono no aware, which was nurtured by classical Japanese aesthetics, advocates observing nature and objects from a delicate perspective to per-

ceive the impermanence and sorrow of life. In documentaries on the elderly, directors often use still life, space and natural images to transform aging, memory and existential dilemmas into poetic images. This is consistent with Motoori-Norinaga's interpretation of "mono no aware" in "The Essentials of Purple Text": "If you see the unusually beautiful cherry blossoms blooming and feel beautiful, this is the heart of knowing things. Knowing the beauty of cherry blossoms, your heart is moved and your heart is full of joy. This is 'mono no aware'." He often uses a seemingly neutral attitude to express small objects that can be found almost everywhere in life, such as apples in the garbage dump and flower arrangements on the table, but the audience can feel that these objects contain a certain meaning or beauty. This is similar to the way a rotting apple and a blooming cherry blossom stimulate the human eye in different ways, but they can both establish a connection with human life and thus touch others (Motoori-Norinaga, 2010). China's "material mourning" is an empathy for the perishable characteristics of things. It uses the decline process of objects to reflect the life process of people from life to death. From ancient times to the present, China's use of "material mourning" takes the Confucian "sorrow without injury" and Taoism's "Qi Wu Theory" as the core. Before, it carried sadness through China's unique natural images, rather than directly expressing emotions or using "blank space" to express feelings, but in contemporary times, it is more through imagery. Expressions link social issues to make them more socially critical.

In the documentary *Four Springs* (2019), director Lu Qing-yi filmed his parents' old house living alone, focusing on the empty dining table, the er-hu in the corner, and the dusty sewing machine with a fixed camera position many times. After his mother fell ill and was hospitalized, the camera was aimed at the rattan chair she had used for many years. The wrinkled texture formed by the worn bamboo strips and the sunken cushions on the chair back and the moving light spots cast by the sun through the window lattice on the empty chair, the symbolic still life contrasts the silence of no one sitting there with the noise of the whole family sitting around for dinner in the past, triggering the audience's imagination with a tension that is sad but not sad. These still lifes do not require commentary, only through the changes in light and shadow and the blank space in the composition, allowing the audience to perceive the aging of people from the decline of things, realizing the philosophical expression of "viewing people through things", and through the changes in material form, allowing the audience to perceive the "wrinkles of people" from the "wrinkles of things", practicing Motoori Norinaga's philosophy of "viewing the mind through things".

The practice of the aesthetics of mono no aware in documentaries about the elderly is essentially a methodological innovation of ethical poetics. By gazing at the decay of empty chairs, cracked objects, dusty old objects, etc. rather than directly exposing the pain of aging bodies, it not only avoids exploitative viewing of vulnerable groups, but also reconstructs individual and collective memory archives with the "wrinkles of things"-the worn rattan chair becomes a silent witness

of family history, and the repaired enamel cup is engraved with the life resilience of the working class. This aesthetic strategy sublimates the issue of aging from the surface of social issues to a philosophical inquiry into the essence of existence. In the incompleteness of things, the poetic gaze of the lens reveals that aging is not a collapse of life but a solemn ritual of living towards death. When the documentary sublimates the still life of the dilapidated home into a “non-linguistic historical text”, the aesthetics of *mono no aware* becomes an ethical declaration to resist forgetting. Every crack and every grain of dust is an epic footnote of mortals’ fight against the violence of time.

## 2.2. Poetics of Time: The White Hair Floating in the Backlight and the Superposition of Childhood Images

The language of images is diversified, and the montage that follows breaks the constraints of real time and space, making the film a time and space structure that integrates reality and assumption. When montage was popular, Bazin opposed montage’s absolute division of time and space, emphasizing that film should be an art of “time and space reality”, that is, it has “real time flow and real depth of reality” (Bazin, 2016).

By deconstructing time and reconstructing the intergenerational memory dialogue, we elevated the aging issue from a social issue to a philosophical meditation on the essence of life. “The high wall between the artist’s consciousness and our consciousness, time and space, was thus demolished.” (Bergson, 1958) Bergson’s “duration” theory believes that time is not a physical existence like the scale of a clock, but an interweaving fusion of the flow of memory in consciousness and the current experience. The documentary “I Only Know You” tells the story of Shu-feng, an elderly man with Alzheimer’s disease, and his wife Wei-fang. In the park bench scene, white hair is used as a carrier of time. The backlit camera focuses on Wei-fang’s almost transparent silver hair blown by the wind, and then superimposed on her black-and-white graduation photo with a pigtail in the 1950s. Director Zhao Qing uses non-linear time narrative to cross-cut real-life clips such as the elderly couple taking medicine and getting lost with old photos and home videos of their youthful images of dancing and teaching to form a “montage of memory”. When Wei-fang suddenly wakes up and says “He is my lover”, the background sound is synchronized with the melody of “Tuber Jasmine” on an old gramophone, which opens up the corridor of time and space with sound. Fragmented editing presents the disintegration of linear time by disease.

The film reconstructs the narrative logic of aging with the strategy of time poetics images, breaks the linear time sequence with flashback collage, and magnifies the details of aging with slow motion, so that the binary opposition of “young-old” is dissolved in the continuous flow of life experience. The construction of time and space bodies such as the changes in light and shadow on the porch of the old house and the montage of the display of old objects have become the visual hub connecting intergenerational memories. The juxtaposition of faded photo

frames and modern digital devices, the overlap of kerosene lamp flames and the blue light of smart bracelets, make the passing years “visible resurrection” in the spatial dimension.

In this narrative framework, time is stripped of its cold statistical attributes and transformed into a prism that illuminates the dignity of life: the worn marks on the porch steps are the physical engraving of individual time, and the sound of old clock gears becomes an auditory metaphor for the rhythm of existence. Aging is no longer a digital code of the “silver hair crisis”, but a self-fulfillment at the existential level—every wrinkle is a witness to the epic of time, and the memory fragments deposited between the wrinkles are collaged in the image into a life march that resists forgetting.

### **2.3. Sound Archaeology: Montage of Dialect Ballads and Breathing Sounds**

Sound archaeology constructs an “auditory memory bank” for an aging society by collecting auditory elements such as environmental sounds, dialects, and silence, transforming the statistically elderly population into a perceptible life narrative. The most important characteristic of the media history that Kittler himself studied was its media-centrism tendency (Xiao, 2020). He pointed out that technological media (such as tapes and phonographs) reconstructed the memory politics of sound. In the documentary “Twenty-Two” (2017), when director Guo Ke filmed Li Ailian, an elderly survivor from Shanxi, she sang the nursery rhyme “Pulling the Big Saw” in Shanxi dialect, and the camera cut to her hands covered with age spots slowly rubbing corn kernels. The tender melody of the folk song and the rustling sound of the shriveled corn constitute the sound paradox of “childhood-old age”; when the old woman recounted her experience of being abducted by the Japanese army, the director deliberately retained her 30 seconds of silence, only including her trembling breathing and the chirping of cicadas outside the window. When the breathing became heavier, the camera cut to the sleeping face of her grandchildren and babies. The soft snoring of the newborn and the panting of the old woman formed a metaphor for the cycle of life, using sound as a carrier to strengthen the originality and authenticity of memory.

By exploring and using sound, a new direction has been found for the expression of the theme of aging. The film uses the breathing of the elderly, dialect folk songs and environmental noise to break the traditional narrative mode dominated by images, making the “elderly population” in statistics no longer abstract, but real life with flesh and blood. It also interweaves the past and the present through sound, changing the single expression of linear time. At the same time, sound is like a ritual, awakening the common memory between different generations and sublimating personal pain into a common mark of human civilization. In the silent moments of the camera, the breath, dialect and silence captured have become tenacious witnesses in time— they use sound as a monument to record the journey of ordinary people against forgetting.

### 3. Trauma and Divinity: Imaging under a Dual Strategy

#### 3.1. The Poeticization of Trauma: Reconstructing Suffering through Aesthetic Distance

Poeticizing trauma is a narrative strategy that uses artistic means to transform painful memories into aesthetic expressions. The key is to use appropriate aesthetic distance to avoid directly showing trauma to consume pain, and to guide the audience to reflect deeply through metaphors and symbols. In the documentary “Twenty-Two”, when the Shanxi elderly Li Ailian tells about her experience of being abducted by the Japanese army, the camera turns to the sunflowers in the rain outside the window. The director uses a 20-second overhead shot of the rainstorm hitting the sunflowers to metaphorically represent the old man’s tenacity after enduring historical violence, and makes the natural image of the flower disk drooping in the wind and rain but not breaking become a carrier of trauma; at the same time, the sound and picture separation technique is used to mix the old man’s trembling narrative voice with the sound of rain and wind, and the picture always avoids close-ups of his face, avoiding consumption of pain with the shooting ethics of “not looking directly at the wound” and sublimating individual suffering into a poetic symbol of group destiny. The poeticizing of trauma is not to beautify suffering, but to sublimate individual trauma into a medium of collective reflection by creating an aesthetic distance. The strategies such as the sunflowers in the rainstorm in “Twenty-Two” all use the ethical attitude of “not looking directly at the wound” to introduce traumatic memory from the private sphere into the public discourse space. The documentary author has proved through practice that when poetry becomes a weapon against forgetting, aesthetic distance is the last barrier to protect human dignity.

#### 3.2. The Sanctification of Everyday Life: Discovering Divinity in the Ordinary

“The sanctification of the everyday” is a narrative strategy that sublimates ordinary life behaviors into spiritual rituals through the aesthetics of images, aiming to reveal the dignity of life and the meaning of existence hidden in the trivial daily life. Lefebvre believes that in order to cope with the social rhythm of daily life, the body should also be integrated with rhythm. In Lefebvre’s view, the body is the carrier of various rhythms, a “living, physical body” (Lefebvre, 2004).

In the documentary *Four Springs*, the mother combs her white hair with a comb moistened with saliva every morning while recovering from surgery. The camera is fixed in position and shot from a mirror reflection angle. The floating dust in the morning light and the trajectory of the comb teeth passing over the silver hair form a “light writing”. The sound of combing, breathing and the noise of the morning market in the distance form three layers of sound field, highlighting the anchoring of the individual life rhythm in time and space, and allowing the daily repetitive combing action to be elevated from body care to a solemn confirmation of the order of life. Using the body as a tool for rhythm analysis, rhythm analysts

listen to the rhythm of their own bodies and understand the influence, constraints and control of the body by the social environment and production activities (Li & Du, 2022). The documentary focuses on the repetitive actions of the elderly taking medicine every day, using a fixed lens for a long time to magnify the sound of opening the medicine bottle, shaking the pills, and swallowing saliva. These originally mechanical care behaviors are transformed into rhythmic life rhythms under the dual rendering of the lens and sound. Taking medicine every time is no longer just a step in treating the disease, but a solemn adherence of the elderly to the order of life, turning the ordinary daily aging into a practice of exploring the meaning of life, and sublimating the chaos of life brought by the disease into a vivid story that tells the philosophy of life with body memory.

The creative technique of “the sanctification of daily life” adopts a ritualized shooting method, such as using fixed camera positions and slow-motion lenses, combined with sensory enhancement methods such as sound close-ups and macro gazes, and repetitive structures, to sublimate the ordinary behavior of the elderly into a “mini epic” with existentialist meaning. The morning light of combing hair in “Four Springs” and the fragrance of tea in “I Only Know You” practice Lefebvre’s concept of “making daily life a work of art”. This aesthetic transformation provides a spiritual resource to fight against nothingness in an aging society. When the lens gives a bowl of soup, a wooden comb, and a breath a divine glimmer, aging is no longer a collapse of life but a light dwelling towards eternity. These strategies are essentially the spiritual redemption of the aging society by documentary authors. When mainstream discourse simplifies the elderly into “the denominator of the support ratio” or “medical burden”, image creation explores dignity in trauma through aesthetic transformation, such as the sunflowers in “Twenty-Two” and the hair-combing ritual in “Four Springs”, seeing eternity in daily life, using image language to transform painful memories into aesthetic contemplation and give spiritual weight to ordinary life.

## 4. Conclusion

### 4.1. The Paradox of “Visualizing Aging” in the Digital Age

In the digital age, “aging visualization” has a significant paradoxical tension: technological empowerment has opened up unprecedented self-expression space for the elderly, such as the Dou-yin “Fashion Grandma Group” breaking age stereotypes with cheongsam catwalks, VR technology rebuilding memory anchors for Alzheimer’s patients, and We-Chat communities reconstructing “white-haired communities” through digital connections. These practices confirm Donna Haraway’s “cyborg identity” to dissolve the biological age attribute. However, algorithmic gaze and data monitoring also alienate aging into a new bio-political object. Kuai-shou seniors deliberately perform “earthy forgetfulness” for traffic, smart bracelets turn heart rate variability into panoramic monitoring parameters of nursing homes, and 37 million digitally illiterate elderly people become “invisible groups”, which just confirms that Foucault’s “panoptic-on” is reborn in the cloud.

Ethical contradictions are becoming more and more acute, such as AI aging prediction software causing existential anxiety, beauty filters erasing wrinkles and selling the illusion of “frozen age”, and cloud photo albums permanently sealing the moment of collapse of dementia patients. The technological era has reduced aging to a data flow that can be calculated and intervened. When digital memory deprives humans of the right to “forget and be reborn” and algorithm recommendations transform aging into consumable symbolic commodities, in the game between pixels and wrinkles, whether aging is a battlefield to resist alienation or a new frontier of technological capitalism is a question that needs continuous reflection.

#### 4.2. Elderly Images Rebuild Intergenerational Ethics Amid Dramatic Changes in Population Structure

The conflict between traditional family ethics and the individualization tendency of modern society is becoming increasingly prominent. Video works on the theme of the elderly, from documentaries to short videos, are becoming a cultural medium to bridge the gap between generations and reconstruct ethical relationships. As a poetic medium for intergenerational reconciliation, elderly images have a core mission in the dramatic changes in the population structure. The scenes in “Four Springs” where the father’s trembling hands touch the photos of his grandchildren and the tea fragrance in “I Only Know You” diffuses through the screen into the noses of young audiences show that images are no longer just recording tools but have become the “social adhesive” for the reconstruction of intergenerational ethics. This ethical reconstruction is not a reproduction of traditional filial piety, but a return to the civilized consciousness of “respecting the elderly as well as the elderly of others” through memory sharing, physical empathy and narrative co-creation under the premise of recognizing individual freedom, so that the aging society can return from the statistical nightmare of “the burden of raising children” to the civilized consciousness of “respecting the elderly as well as the elderly of others”.

#### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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