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Article

From "Event Recording" to "Thematic Narrative": The Hermit's Mountain and River and the Narrative Transformation of Chinese Music Biographical Documentaries

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Abstract: Chinese music biographical documentaries have long taken "event recording" as their basic narrative paradigm, organizing material along a linear timeline and centering on "proof of achievement." Guo Xufeng's The Hermit's Mountain and River employs a polyphonic structure composed of six movements—"Retreat," "Portrait," "Migration," "Creation," "Cultivation," and "Like a Play"—abandoning linear temporal narrative and the driving device of reliance on others' commentary, and instead constructing a narrative space organized around thematic spiritual dimensions. Taking The Hermit's Mountain and River as its core case and situating it within the historical lineage of Chinese music biographical documentaries, this paper analyzes the transformation of its narrative logic from "event recording" to "thematic narrative" and its historiographical implications. The study finds that the essence of this transformation is a shift in the kind of music-historical knowledge produced by music biographical documentaries—from "what the musician did" (event history) to "who the musician is" (meaning history)—with thematic segmentation and the unfolding of spiritual dimensions as the core operations of its narrative structure. The internal paradox between the film's "de-legendization" strategy and the mechanism of canonization reveals the structural costs and implications of the thematic narrative mode.

Keywords: music biographical documentary; The Hermit's Mountain and River; narrative transformation; thematic narrative; music image

1. Introduction

Music biographical documentaries have long faced a structural predicament: narratives centered on "the person" tend to slide into chronicle-style biographical enumeration, or rely on others' commentary to "explain" the musician's significance. A researcher surveying music biographical documentaries has noted that this genre "highlights the subjectivity of musicians as 'people,' presenting character images and excavating human spirit through recording musicians' stories on and behind the stage," yet narrative strategy mostly remains at the level of "discursive connotation," and narrative logic itself—"how to organize a musician's life"—has never been genuinely raised as a question. Production techniques may have developed from the single-camera recording and simple editing of early "direct cinema" to multi-camera shooting and complex editing, but the deep connection between "what is told" and "how it is told" has never been systematically reflected upon.

In 2025, the documentary film The Hermit's Mountain and River, directed by Guo Xufeng, was released. This work, completed over seven years and centered on the composer Chen Qigang, abandons the shackles of linear narrative and structures the entire film in six prose-poem-like movements. China Youth Network praised it for "opening a new paradigm for biographical film through movement-style narration." One commentator positioned it as a "critical-biographical documentary"—"not merely a biographical film about a composer, but an artwork of art criticism unfolded through the

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medium of image, a holographic interpretation of an artist's creative soul." These evaluations point to a question worthy of in-depth analysis: what relationship does this film's narrative logic bear to the basic paradigm of previous Chinese music biographical documentaries?

The core judgment of this paper is: the narrative structure of The Hermit's Mountain and River marks a transformation of Chinese music biographical documentaries from the "event recording" mode to the "thematic narrative" mode. The essence of this transformation is that the music-historical knowledge produced by music biographical documentaries shifts from "what the musician did" (event history) to "who the musician is" (meaning history). Taking The Hermit's Mountain and River as its core case, this paper will first establish the historical coordinates of the "event recording" mode, then analyze the operating mechanisms of the film's thematic narrative, and finally demonstrate the historiographical implications and limits of this transformation.

2. The Historical Coordinates of the "Event Recording" Mode

To understand the narrative transformation of The Hermit's Mountain and River, one must first establish the paradigm from which it "transforms."

The narrative tradition of Chinese music biographical documentaries can be represented typically by Yingshanhong—The Artistic Career of Musician Fu Gengchen. The film "takes Fu Gengchen's life experience and musical creation as its thread, connecting his outstanding works from different historical periods, organically combining personal growth with the history of New China, and displaying the composer's vicissitudinous life and his love for music and the motherland." The film "takes musical creation as its main line and concert performances as its carrier, recording from different perspectives" Fu Gengchen's artistic career in music creation.

The basic features of this mode can be summarized in three points. First, linear temporal narrative. The film organizes material chronologically from the protagonist's birth, education, and rise to fame to his representative works. The timeline itself constitutes the narrative skeleton: viewers understand the musician's life through "what happened next." Second, reliance on others' commentary. The film intersperses interviews with numerous students, colleagues, and critics; these external voices perform the function of "explaining" the musician's significance. The protagonist's musical creations are presented, but the question "why was it created this way" is answered by others. Third, centering on "proof of achievement." The film's narrative drive comes from "proving the musician's value"—confirming his canonical status through awards, representative works, and social influence.

The historiographical consequence of this mode is clear: it produces a music history centered on "events." After viewing, the audience knows "what this musician did"—which works he created, what role he played at which historical moments, what recognition he received. But this knowledge is cumulative and factual. The audience may not understand "why his music is the way it is," nor enter a composer's creative thinking and spiritual world.

It should be noted that the "event recording" mode is not without value. In the historical context of Chinese music documentaries, this mode performed an important archival function: it preserved visual documents of musical activities, recorded musicians' public images, and left searchable visual evidence for posterity. The core function of approximately 170 music documentaries from 1949 to 1989 was precisely "recording." But as documentary theory has revealed, recording is never neutral—which events to record, in what order to organize them, and who is allowed to speak: every link is permeated with presuppositions of narrative stance. When the "event recording" mode became the default paradigm of music biographical documentaries, the view of music history it presupposed—that music history is an event sequence of musicians and their works—was thereby naturalized.

The narrative transformation of The Hermit's Mountain and River precisely challenges this naturalized presupposition.

3. The Operating Mechanisms of Thematic Narrative

3.1. The Polyphonic Structure of Six Movements

The narrative structure of The Hermit's Mountain and River is formally explicit and self-conscious. The film abandons the traditional linear narrative structure and "ingeniously adopts the six prose-poem-like movement architecture of 'Retreat,' 'Portrait,' 'Migration,' 'Creation,' 'Cultivation,' and 'Like a Play.'" One study summarizes it as a "polyphonic structure": "The film employs a polyphonic structure composed of six movements—'Retreat, Portrait, Migration, Creation, Cultivation, Like a Play'—and unfolds the life experience of artist Chen Qigang through multi-voiced polyphonic narrative." Another commentator notes that "the six parts each have their own themes yet are not isolated; like polyphonic counterpoint in music, they interweave and echo one another, forming a three-dimensional network that transcends linear narrative."

Calling the six movements a "polyphonic structure" requires careful discrimination. In music, polyphony means the simultaneous progression of two or more independent melodies. The film's six chapters are arranged sequentially in time; what they form is not strictly "simultaneous progression" but something closer to thematic variation. One commentary accurately captures this: "They are not a simple diachronic arrangement, but like thematic variations, delineating a three-dimensional and profound soul from different sides." Chen Qigang's "hermit" image is the unchanging theme; "Migration" presents its formation amid cross-cultural collision, "Creation" presents its unfolding in artistic practice, and "Like a Play" presents its confirmation in an extreme choice. Each chapter is a variational presentation of the "hermit" theme, but the theme itself remains stably present throughout.

Whether "polyphony" or "variation," the core operation this structure achieves is consistent: thematic segmentation. It cuts a continuous life process into six thematic chapters, each possessing an independent emotional tone and visual style, yet all serving the same spiritual core. The film's "hermit heart" is thereby presented—"a symphony of 'becoming oneself.'"

3.2. From "Time Axis" to "Thematic Narrative"

The direct consequence of thematic segmentation is a fundamental shift in the narrative axis. One commentator acutely notes that the film "abandons the 'time axis' narrative customary in traditional biographical films, instead constructing a 'meaning axis' interpretive space, enabling viewers to approach the artist's creative core from different dimensions." The expression "meaning axis," though vivid, easily invites ambiguity. A more accurate formulation is thematic narrative: the film organizes material not by chronological order but by thematic spiritual dimensions.

This shift is concretely embodied at every level of the film.

The "Migration" movement does not narrate "in which year Chen Qigang went to France," but rather presents how cross-cultural collision shaped his musical thinking through cross-cutting between historical footage and contemporary interviews. In the film, when the melody of Zou Xikou (Going Beyond the Western Pass) sounds, empty shots of natural scenery intertwine with Chen Qigang's narration, "presenting migration, displacement, and long-term life in France, and the shaping of Chen Qigang's open, inclusive civilized mentality and internationalist vision." Here, music is not an object to be "displayed" but an entry point for understanding a spiritual journey.

The "Creation" movement focuses on the creative process of Like a Play of Life, but the film's attention is not on the technical details of "how this work came into being," but on the artist's spiritual structure revealed by creative predicament. One commentary notes that the film "weaves musical works into the most faithful echo of the protagonist's fate and emotions": "We hear the lingering nostalgia in Zou Xikou, the impermanence and weight of Joy and Sorrow from the Same Source, the remembrance and mourning in Jiang Cheng Zi, and deeply experience a reflection on life itself that transcends personal pain."

The "Like a Play" movement records Chen Qigang's decision in 2017 to resolutely cancel the premiere of his new work Like a Play of Life when rehearsal fell short of

expectations. This scene is placed as the film's endpoint, and its function is confirmation—confirming that Chen Qigang's artistic personality has fully taken shape. He tells his students calmly yet firmly: "Art is a dream, and a dream must not be broken." This movement does not ask "what consequences did canceling the performance produce," but rather "what personality logic does this extreme choice reveal."

In thematic narrative, the core question of each movement is not "what happened next," but "what does this dimension mean." The musician's life is not presented as a series of markable events, but interpreted as a series of understandable spiritual dimensions.

3.3. The Structural Transformation of Sound-Image Relations

The realization of thematic narrative cannot be separated from the coordination of sound-image relations. One study notes that the film "relies on empty shots to construct visual metaphors, and through the use of various 'blank-leaving' techniques and freehand sound-image relations, jointly creates an aesthetic mood of Eastern introspection."

The use of empty shots is particularly crucial. "Birds glide across the sky, lakes mirror the mountain colors, morning mist wreathes the forest"—these images are "by no means random framing, but a carefully constructed system of visual metaphors, corresponding to the Eastern aesthetic qualities of 'ethereality,' 'blank-leaving,' and 'artistic conception' in Chen Qigang's music." In the traditional "event recording" mode, the function of empty shots is "transition" or "atmosphere creation," serving the connection between events. In The Hermit's Mountain and River, empty shots themselves assume narrative function: they do not "fill in" between two events, but "unfold" within a thematic dimension.

More noteworthy is the "non-synchronous" relationship between sound and image. One commentator notes that "Guo Xufeng repeatedly employs non-synchronous sound-image techniques." When Chen Qigang's music sounds, the image does not always present performance scenes; sometimes it is mountain mist, sometimes the window lattice of the academy, sometimes ripples on the water. This sound-image relationship constitutes an alienation effect: the meaning of music is not "explained" in the image, but generated in the gap between sound and image. One commentary incisively notes that "this sound-image relationship transcends the conventional 'scoring' function and constitutes a genuine artistic dialogue."

The transformation of sound-image relations from "synchronization" to "alienation" is a different facet of the same process as the transformation of the narrative axis from "time" to "theme." When narrative is no longer driven by "what happened next," the image no longer needs to "faithfully present" the event scene. The coordination of empty shots and music serves to open up a thematic space for contemplation beyond the temporal advancement of narrative.

4. The Historiographical Implications of the Narrative Transformation

4.1. From "Event History" to "Meaning History"

The deep consequence of thematic narrative is a change in the mode of producing music-historical knowledge.

The "event recording" mode produces an event history: the musician's life is organized as a series of markable events. What the audience obtains through the film is factual knowledge—"he created a certain work at a certain historical moment, and this work produced a certain influence." This knowledge is cumulative: knowing more events means acquiring more knowledge.

Thematic narrative produces a meaning history: the musician's life is organized as a series of interpretable spiritual dimensions. What the audience obtains through the film is interpretive knowledge—"his 'retreat' is not withdrawal, but another kind of perseverance; his 'like a play' is not willfulness, but absolute confirmation of artistic standards." This knowledge is not an accumulation of facts, but a deepening of understanding.

One commentator accurately captures the essence of this transformation: "In its content layout, The Hermit's Mountain and River substantively echoes the basic writing

framework of art criticism: from the combing of individual growth trajectory to the interpretation of artistic creation style; from professional evaluations in international circles to the self-elucidation of Chen Qigang's life philosophy of 'joy and sorrow from the same source'—these dimensions jointly construct a three-dimensional artist critical biography." The difference between "critical biography" and "biography" lies precisely here: biography narrates "what he did," critical biography asks "who he is."

4.2. The Paradox of "de-Legendization" and Canonization

Between thematic narrative and the mechanism of canonization in music-historical writing, there exists an isomorphism and rupture worthy of in-depth analysis.

The isomorphism lies in: thematic narrative likewise presupposes a "finished product"-style composer image. The six movements—"Retreat, Portrait, Migration, Creation, Cultivation, Like a Play"—constitute an arc from "withdrawal" to "completion." The film's endpoint, the "Like a Play" movement, functions precisely to confirm that Chen Qigang's artistic personality has fully taken shape. This is highly consistent with the core operation of the canonization mechanism—"extracting the composer from historical context and endowing him with trans-temporal artistic value."

The rupture lies in: thematic narrative does not prove canonicity through a "list of achievements," but presents canonicity through a "spiritual trajectory." The film employs a clear "de-legendization" strategy: "focusing on the artist's daily life, presenting the artist's creative predicament and his insistence on individual ideals, shaping Chen Qigang into a real individual who constantly questions himself amid fragility and resilience." Director Guo Xufeng takes "thus-recorded" as his creative concept, "not deliberately designing, not forcibly intervening, approaching the subject with the greatest patience and sincerity." The film "avoids these backgrounds, strengthening Chen Qigang's transcendent hermit image." Chen Qigang's public identity—music director of the 2008 Beijing Olympics, last disciple of Messiaen—is presented as "once closely connected with the grandest celebrations and the most brilliant stages, yet now at 72 he hides himself in the Genggeng Academy in Lishui."

But this "de-legendization" strategy itself constitutes a paradox. When a person's public identity is stripped away, leaving only "meditation during mountain walks" and "focus during coaching performances," this purified image itself constitutes a new legend. The "hermit" is infectious precisely because it highly accords with the contemporary cultural imagination of the "pure artist." The film chooses to present the posture of "retreat," and simultaneously chooses to omit experiences that do not fit the "hermit" narrative framework—the institutional collaborative experience Chen Qigang underwent as Olympic music director, and his long and complex interactive relationship with the Western contemporary music world. These omitted contents constitute an absent presence outside the film's narrative framework.

5. The Limits and Implications of Thematic Narrative

This paradox reveals the structural cost of the thematic narrative mode: any construction of meaning requires selection, and any selection implies omission. The cost of the "event recording" mode is "seeing only events, not the person"; the cost of the thematic narrative mode is "seeing only spirit, not context." The former omits the musician's spiritual world; the latter may omit the institutional and social conditions that made the musician's existence possible.

This cost is not a problem unique to The Hermit's Mountain and River, but an inherent feature of thematic narrative as a historiographical logic. The researcher's task is not to eliminate this cost—for it cannot be eliminated—but to reveal it and, in revealing, open new problem spaces. Chen Qigang's "hermit" image is powerful precisely because it distills a spiritual issue of an era through purification; and its limit lies precisely in that it cannot, through its own narrative framework, handle the experiences excluded by that purification.

6. Conclusion

The six-movement structure of The Hermit's Mountain and River marks the transformation of Chinese music biographical documentaries from "event recording" to "thematic narrative." The essence of this transformation is a change in the mode of producing music-historical knowledge—from "what the musician did" to "who the musician is," from event history to meaning history.

The significance of this transformation lies not in thematic narrative being "superior" to event recording, but in that it opens a new possibility: music documentaries can cease to be merely "images about music" and become "a practice of thinking about music through images." When the film organizes a composer's life narrative through thematic spiritual dimensions, it is in fact answering, through the medium of image, a fundamental question of music history—how should music history be understood.

Thematic narrative also has its limits. The paradox between "de-legendization" and canonization demonstrates that any narrative mode inevitably contains selection and omission. The value of thematic narrative lies not in its being "more truthful," but in that it produces knowledge about musicians in a manner different from event recording—interpretive rather than factual knowledge. When researchers use such visual historical materials, they need to ask two questions simultaneously: "what does the film present" and "by what logic does the film organize what it presents." The latter is precisely the core question raised by the thematic narrative mode.

The transformation from "event recording" to "thematic narrative" is not merely a change in narrative technique, but a sign of the awakening of historiographical consciousness in music documentaries. When a director chooses to structure a music biographical documentary by "theme" rather than "time," he is already participating, through the medium of image, in the discussion of "what music history is."

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