



Online creative community support: Framing of two independent documentary films' creation from Caochangdi Workstation during the COVID-19 pandemic

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ABSTRACT

In late December 2019, the world witnessed the outbreak of the novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19), which subsequently led to numerous social and work limitations including face-to-face communication and documentary production worldwide. While many studies have focused on the framing of COVID-19 by mainstream news agencies and political figures, few studies have concentrated on the perspectives of independent filmmakers regarding the pandemic. The challenges faced by these niche filmmakers during COVID-19 would have likely magnified and changed due to the uncertainties that befell filming and distribution. In this intrinsic case study, the researcher aims to explore the creative processes of two documentary films, *Luo Luo's Fear* and *Entrapment*, produced by emerging and experienced filmmakers, respectively, during the pandemic while participating in the Caochangdi (CCD) Workstation's Folk Memory Project. A qualitative thematic analysis was conducted on data collected from in-depth interviews with two participants and their reflective memos. This work also seeks to describe the filmmakers' experiences of filming during the pandemic and how these experiences framed their documentary filmmaking. Next, the researcher explores the salient visual framework used by the filmmakers through their documentary film analysis. Both films focused on their fears and challenges at this particular time of the pandemic, framing the entire film through internal monologues that have also become a distinctive style of their own creation. Overall, the current research contributes to the limited literature by focusing on the impacts of building of online strategies and creative community support on independent filmmakers' self-rescue during the pandemic and how visual framing can be enhanced in the study of films.

Keywords: ***Independent documentary film, online creative community, framing theory, COVID-19 pandemic, intrinsic case study***

INTRODUCTION

The novel coronavirus disease (COVID-19) that emerged in Wuhan, China, in December 2019 (Fanelli & Piazza, 2020), spread to more than 28 countries and infected tens of thousands of people within two months (Nuraryo, 2021). Following the rigorous quarantine restrictions and movement control order implemented by governments worldwide to prevent further the spread of the virus (Akser, 2020), these restrictions posed considerable impact on the quality of life and mental health (Zhang & Ma, 2020). Not only that, numerous businesses and industries were negatively affected by these new norms, including the film industry. Several studies have shown that the period of the global pandemic (COVID -19) had a highly disruptive impact on global film production, distribution and screening, as well as film teaching in universities (Akser, 2020; Ankenbauer & Lu, 2020; Grassilli & Colta, 2021). During this period, most countries suspended film production and film festivals, and closed cinemas and universities (Akser, 2020; Valck & Damiens, 2020), thus making 2020 a very challenging year for filmmakers and audiences everywhere (Eze et al., 2021; Ibrus & Teinmaa, 2020).

With the ongoing pandemic, most institutions and filmmakers have had to overcome the restrictions of face-to-face communication and concrete practices in documentary filmmaking. Although filmmakers were distraught with mobility restrictions and the cessation of documentary film production, this however did not hinder the independent folk organizations from improvising. In particular, the Folk Memory Project (FMP) in China managed to unify a group of independent filmmakers to overcome their isolation during the pandemic through their shared passion in filmmaking (Gao, 2021). Historically, FMP has been an integral part of the Caochangdi Workstation. The project was initiated in 2010 by the Caochangdi (CCD) Workstation, which aims to create a public memory archive of rural China via filmmaking (Huang, 2016). Founded by Wu Wenguang, a founding figure of Chinese independent documentaries, this project called for young documentary filmmakers to interview and record memories of older generations of the “Great Chinese Famine” generation in a new way (Meng, 2016). As a result, participants regularly returned to their communities to film, and a number of films were produced, while this project attracted people from different age groups and all walks of life (Wu, 2014).

Admittedly, despite the prevailing filming problems and uncertainties of screening for Chinese independent filmmakers during COVID-19 (Tong, 2021), little research has been undertaken regarding this crisis angle. Most western researchers have instead reflected on the crisis in terms of independent theatrical productions and independent film festivals, particularly regarding the fragility and resilience of the film industry system in this period (Akser, 2020; Ankenbauer & Lu, 2020; Grassilli & Colta, 2021). A majority of Chinese research has also concentrated on narrative framing and dissemination strategies of mainstream and new media documentaries concerning anti-pandemic topics in China (Niu & Zhang, 2021; Zhang & Li, 2022). Referring to the topic, however, little is known about the perspectives of niche independent filmmakers.

Additionally, some independent filmmakers have always contended with creative approaches, film content, distribution, and official restrictions (Jiang, 2012; Li, 2007; Meng, 2015; Wang, 2010), which were compounded by the pandemic. The independent filmmakers from CCD were not exempt from this. However, in spite of the pandemic causing numerous problems for the organization, some of its members continued to work. The statistics issued by the official account of the Caochangdi workstation (2021) recorded that eight films had been produced throughout 2020. Nevertheless, only two of the films included a direct filming experience during the COVID-19 pandemic and were posted online

to the public. The documentary films were *Getting Through, Chapter One, Entrapment* (Wu, 2020) and *Luo Luo's Fear* (Luo Luo, 2020). Both documentaries focus on the experience of isolation during the pandemic and both filmmakers narrate their respective stories through monologues.

In particular, the first focuses on how the filmmaker documented his own video diary at home at the beginning of 2020. During this crisis, he and his partners at the CCD workstation helped each other produce films that show how he coped with the pandemic. As a contrast, the latter film presents a retired middle-aged woman, a newcomer to FMP, who talks about her fear of the pandemic in front of the camera and her search for fellow filmmakers on the map to support her.

Significantly, there was a completely different way independent filmmakers began to fill the void created by the lack of government production during COVID-19. As is common, the films produced by these independent filmmakers have some vulnerabilities that are worth investigating. Specifically, the researcher intends to explore the vulnerability of production by independent filmmakers in China, and specifically focusing on the two films from the CCD Workstation that were produced during COVID-19 under very limiting conditions.

Based on the influence of CCD Workstation on Chinese and overseas independent filmmakers and researchers, the experiences of independent documentary filmmaking that were publicly screened online during the pandemic provide an important area of research because they may have shaped an important means of improving the sustainability of Chinese independent documentary filming during the pandemic. Their favorable experiences may be beneficial to a number of filmmakers and researchers who wish to pursue independent documentary works.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The features of CCD Workstation

As a non-mainstream independent art collective, CCD Workstation rallies around the “returning to the village” narrative, seeking to recreate historical “hunger memories” relevant to each of the independent filmmakers involved and to discover their own means of self-expression (Pernin, 2014; Tong, 2021). This group’s self-transformation goals, such as democracy, social participation, and keeping creation, are based on the historical “spiritual hunger” and “politics of memory” (Wu, 2014; Zhuang, 2014; Zito, 2015).

CCD Workstation has undergone many changes and crises over the past decade, while FMP has become a key presence in China’s independent documentary and contemporary art scene due to its longevity, number of participants, and diversity of work. In line with some of the innovative thinking of the new members, film content has been expanded from the framework of “remembering hunger” to include personal life stories. Moreover, returning to villages for long periods of filming is not the only way to develop a framework for FMP practice. The epidemic crisis has also generated new creative approaches among the filmmakers of CCD Workstation (Tong, 2021).

To understand how CCD filmmakers have responded to some creative changes and specific experiences of filming brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, researchers have turned to the framing approaches used in sociology and communication theory. Frames help the researcher to focus on key features of an issue and bind them together (Snow, 2013).

Framing theories

Framing theories, fundamentally, were born from the schools of psychology and sociology (Goffman, 1974; d'Accurzio, 1968), from which they expanded into economics, cognitive linguistics, communication studies, and other disciplines (Hertog & McLeod, 2001; Scheufele & Tewksbury, 2007). Though different schools of thought have different takes on the meaning of framing (e.g., Gamson & Modigliani, 1989; Reese, 2010), the most commonly accepted definition was established by Entman (1993) who described framing as the emphasis of certain parts of reality while ignoring others through a process of selection and salience. The objective of the framing theory is to recognize the lenses through which people view the world as it can help us to simplify information and to interpret as well as create reality more easily (Kalaloi, 2020). Additionally, it is a strategic action at the level of political and communicative objectives in the context of particular issues (Kaplan, 2008; Pan & Kosicki, 1993).

Visual framing

According to Coleman (2010), film is a type of visual medium which uses images, dialogue, and other techniques to convey meaning. In terms of filmmaking, visual framing is useful in examining how the director communicates concepts to the audience through film. In fact, visuals can also be described in terms of Entman's (1993) widely used definition of framing (Coleman, 2010).

Between film and verbal text, the former's visual elements have a more substantial impact on audience's perception and memory (Juneidi et al., 2020). Additionally, visual effects are sometimes more convincing than verbal text (Batova, 2021). Significantly, visuals are more figurative and are able to factually prescribe much more abstract realities. Hence, an effective visual portrayal of issues is crucial in the age of social media, particularly if an organization or individual wants to influence others (Mohd Fathir et al., 2022).

Recent research about the framing of the COVID-19 pandemic

The literature on the framing of COVID-19 demonstrates that many previous studies have focused on how COVID-19 is framed by political figures and the mainstream news coverage (Benziman, 2020; Garcia-Agustin & Agustin, 2021). Additionally, these studies illustrate that various mainstream social media and news agencies play a significant role in framing public health crises (Mohammad Ali & Malaco, 2022). Such studies, however, may fail to adequately capture and represent the perspectives of people from various backgrounds (Tahamtan et al., 2021). To date, limited studies have concentrated on film studies of visual grammar and the use of other semiotic devices, including photographs and videos (El Damanhoury & Garud-Paktar, 2021; Iedema, 2001; Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011). Building on the reviewed literature, this study seeks to fill a gap in the visual frames of film studies by exploring the use of visuals and accompanying texts in films. Unlike prior framing studies, this case study attempts to bridge the gap by focusing on the frames related to COVID-19 in independent filmmakers' documentaries, which voice the opinions of niche market groups of people.

Based on the presented discussions, this research therefore adopts a framing theory and visual frames to explore the works and self-transformation experiences of two independent filmmakers from CCD Workstation during the pandemic with the aim of contributing to the academic and professional literature. Based on the specific and in-depth nature of the research aims, the following qualitative research questions were formulated:

RQ1: How did the two independent filmmakers describe their experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in terms of quarantine and documentary filmmaking?

RQ2: How did their experiences during the pandemic frame the content of their works, *Luo Luo's Fear* and *Entrapment*?

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Research design

In an intrinsic case study, the case is selected when the researcher is interested in certain problems or issues that are related to the case (Kekeya, 2021; Stake, 1995). Driven by the researcher's interest to understand the experiences of certain filmmakers from CCD Workstation and their potential solutions of creation during the pandemic, the intrinsic case study was carried out using a qualitative approach. Additionally, the researcher used the method of member checking to define certain words (Brett et al., 2007) and to certify the rigor of the study's results (Carlson, 2010). Case study was deemed ideal for this study design because by investigating a case study, this allows the researcher to understand a contemporary phenomenon in a complex real-life context (Yin, 2018).

Sample

In selecting the participants of the study, the authors used purposive sampling according to the research questions. Frankel and Devers (2000) claimed that purposive sampling is an appropriate method to provide a rich descriptive picture of participants' lived experiences when conducting a study with an explicit goal. As this study focuses on the role of personal experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic in filming independent documentaries, purposive sampling was employed.

In order to answer the research questions, two informants were deliberately selected, one of whom is a novice filmmaker whose documentary was nominated by the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival, and the other is a professional and well-known independent Chinese filmmaker. They were given pseudonyms for their confidentiality. The first participant was a female filmmaker known as Luo Luo. She lives with her father and acts as his caretaker. The researcher met with her at an offline art event at CCD Workstation, which she expressed her excitement about attending.

The second participant, given the pseudonym Wu, was a male who was both an organizer and a participant of CCD Workstation. Unlike Luo Luo who was filming for the first time, Wu was an experienced independent filmmaker with over 30 years' experience. To date, he has produced numerous documentaries and published several books on the subject. Unlike Wu's previous documentaries, his latest film entitled *Entrapment* elucidates the daily life of isolation during the pandemic through some monologues that provoke reflection.

They were selected based on the following criteria: First of all, the selected documentaries recorded their own experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Secondly, their documentaries, without any funding, were posted on an online website for the public in 2021 and received the attention of a limited number of audiences. More importantly, the two informants helped each other complete their documentaries through an online interactive community. In particular, they had never met in real life and only established a relationship through an online website, and both of them were over 60 years old. Table 1 summarizes the relevant information regarding the informants and their documentaries.

Table 1. Main information of the two documentary filmmakers and the selected films

Attributes	Filmmaker 1	Filmmaker 2
Filmmaker's name	Luo Luo	Mr. Wu
Age	60	65
Gender	Female	Male
Professional status	Pensioner	Professional documentary creator
Documentary film title	<i>Luo Luo's Fear</i>	<i>Getting Through, Chapter One, Entrapment</i>
Release year	2021	2021
Film duration	85 min	95 min

Data collection

For this case study, data was collected from March to December 2021, via face-to-face interviews, the informants' creative memos, and the documentary films of each informant. The researcher began with in-depth interviews (IDI) with the two filmmakers, which centered around questions about the informants' experiences of their independent creativity. Moreover, the CCD workstation's official accounts were searched (manual searching) for creative and reflective memos (soft copy) for *Luo Luo's Fear* and *Entrapment*, using the related titles "Luo Luo's Fear", "Entrapment", "Luo Luo", and "Getting Through". Only films and reflective memos that were shot during the COVID-19 lockdown by these two participants and were directly related to the pandemic were considered as samples in this study. By examining the additional collection of participants' reflective memos, this allowed the researcher to get a more comprehensive picture of the participants' experiences (Rahiem et al., 2021).

Data analysis

Data analysis was completed using thematic analysis as summarised by scholars Braun and Clarke (2006). This common method is effective for beginners in qualitative research because through critical thinking and interpretation, one can produce a comprehensive and detailed analysis (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).

Initially, the researcher read all the interview transcripts (n=2), the participants' relevant reflective memos (n=51), and their related documentaries (n=2). Through the multiple readings and viewings, the researcher got to know one's own data. In the next phase of the study, the analysis allowed the researcher to classify and display the data based on their similarities and differences (Alhojailan, 2012) and provide meaningful patterns and conceptual labels. For the data analysis to be credible, all members of the research team have to agree upon the final categorizations. The transition from broad categories to general statements or themes is the final phase in the data analysis (Alhojailan, 2012). In this study, categories were derived from research questions. As a result, they were inductively created. In order to create themes, the final step in this analysis process involved identifying (dis)connections across categories. Once the researcher had a complete set of themes, the final analysis and report can then be completed (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

RESULTS

Data analysis of interview scripts and the reflective memos of two informants

Once the fundamental categories were identified, the categories were further revised. Subsequently, three themes were produced: i) Challenges; ii) Coping mechanisms; and

iii) Self-rescue and community mutual support. Similar to the findings' representation of the study conducted by Rahiem et al. (2021), the researcher used excerpts from both the memos and the IDI responses to interpret each theme. Based on participants' narratives, the memo data was coded as "Memo," and the IDI data was coded as "IDI".

Theme 1: Challenges

For independent filmmakers, the COVID-19 pandemic presented a considerable shock to their daily lives and their creativity, while proving to be a significant challenge. The overall attitude shown by the informants was negative and both of them mentioned fear, unease, and anxiety in the early stages. This theme contains three main categories: i) personal mental stress effects; ii) restrictions of creation; iii) lack of social connections.

Personal mental stress effects

This category is the single most prominent frame under this theme. Personal mental stress had a significant negative impact on the participants' daily lives and creative experiences. Both participants felt anxious and overwhelmed when they sensed that the pandemic situation will only worsen over time, particularly Luo Luo:

It's been 25 days since I learned about COVID-19 on January 23, and I could feel that it would be serious. I was full of fear, dread, and felt overwhelmed...
(Luo Luo/Memo)

Restrictions of creation

This category reveals the participants' limited state of creation in the grip of the pandemic, including the limitations of daily life and filming. Although the rigorous quarantine and travel restrictions implemented by the government were necessary to curb the infection, Wu pointed out that these limitations became a hindrance to the progress of filming. Here is an example of Wu's reflection:

People trapped within a confined space... Even if you have got permission to go out, your range of filming is severely restricted... such as our travel problems, space problems, time problems, and funding problems...
(Wu/IDI)

Lack of social connections

In addition, the pandemic made the participants feel isolated and less exposed to direct social connections during the lockdown period.

We are social and gregarious creatures, not absolute solitaries. You can enjoy your time alone, but even though you are independent, you still need to stay socially connected to others. How does human sociality manifest itself when we are faced with isolation during COVID-19?
(Wu/IDI)

Theme 2: Coping mechanisms

Specifically, this theme holds the most prominence. The subjects employed a variety of coping mechanisms during this period to address the challenges and fear that manifested during this unprecedented period. Based on the presented data, the researcher identified two categories: offline strategies and online strategies.

Offline strategies

In terms of offline strategies, both participants coped with their self-imposed quarantine through documentary filming. Luo Luo was inspired by Wu to document her lockdown experience in order to face her fears. This brought a positive change in her as she was thrilled to record her thoughts and feelings.

Last night, I received an email from Teacher Wu, in which he offered me some shooting advice... I quickly got my clean clothes and put on my hat and mask... Then, I documented my fear... This is my mask monologue filming... I was excited...
(Luo Luo/Memo)

The other participant corroborated this, who also recorded his inner thoughts on camera and shared his outlook.

I started the monologues next to the camera... What I had done was related to the advice I gave Luo Luo on how to resist her fears. Because Luo Luo was always emailing me that she was feeling panicky, I suggested she record her fears... It suddenly dawned on me that I could do it as well... (Wu/ Memo)

Online strategies

Both participants identified online strategy as the most important aspect when choosing to enter the self-rescue route, particularly during the pandemic. The overall statement was:

This year, our email-group, online workshop for reading raw footage, editing, and discussion after online screening use these approaches to rebuild an important creation process to create our own conditions during the pandemic... because I found that many problems are solved due to this online platform.
(Wu/IDI)

It also helped that the two informants mentioned their own gains and joys in their own notes and in the online Q&A sessions after the screening. This was also felt by the researcher as one of the viewers of the online screening. As one participant put it,

I was lucky enough to take part in 23 rounds of online... workshops... I started to experiment with filming and editing... I created my first documentary film, Luo Luo's Fear. It was something I never thought I could do in my life...
(Luo Luo/IDI)

Theme 3: Achieving self-rescue and community mutual support

Both participants reflected on the process of self-rescue and community support, which encouraged them to continue their break through and made their actions more meaningful and worthwhile. Two categories were developed: self-treatment and building mutual community support.

Self-treatment

One commonality among the participants was self-treatment. It is a very important process for a survivor or experiencer after a disaster. Wu agreed with this statement and mentioned that the healing process requires multiple steps involving “self-therapy”, followed by “group therapy”.

Each participant first needs to create a ‘self-therapy’ plan during the post-disaster and then a ‘group therapy’ plan should be conducted... It is a vital process. (Wu/Memo)

Building mutual community support

Since it is common for people to experience loneliness and isolation during lockdown, it is beneficial to foster online community connections during this period. This not only nurtures deep friendships between the creators, but also promotes the spread of independent documentaries through online screening. After forming a deep connection with fellow creators, one of the participants felt a strong bond towards this online community. It is possible that having a sense of belonging to a group of like-minded people can alleviate the negative feelings caused by the pandemic situation.

I have felt a very deep kind of emotion for this group ... an emotion that transcends love, family affection, and friendship. (Luo Luo/IDI)

Moreover, the experienced filmmaker mentioned that he overcame some of the original limitations and broke some of the traditional practices to build the community during the COVID-19 pandemic. This is evidenced in the following statement:

Personally, I used to be very uncomfortable with this kind of online communication... I just care about face-to-face communication... However, last year, the pandemic drove us into a corner... We had to use the internet. Nowadays, I prefer to communicate with others online... Our documentary film can also be screened online. (Wu/IDI)

The word ‘community’ is a term that is relatively unknown in China... While in the western context, people have a strong sense of ‘community’, which does not rely on an organization, an entity, or a party to gather people together... In the Folk Memory Project, we called ourselves a ‘creative community’. Creative work is one way for us to conduct the project. In today’s reality, how do we achieve self-inspiration, self-rescue, and then participate in a common intervention?... this is the value and meaning of the existence of ‘community’... (Wu/IDI)

Table 2. Overview of topic, themes and categories

Topic	Themes	Categories
Create ways for self-rescue through online community support during COVID-19 pandemic	Challenges	Personal mental stress effects The limitation of creation Lack of social connection
	Coping mechanisms	Offline strategies Online strategies
	Achieving self-rescue and mutual community support	Self-treatment Build mutual community support

Using the comparative analysis shown in Table 2, the 3 themes and 10 categories associated with the core topic became clear: a method to achieve self-rescue through online community support and promote the communication of independent documentary films during the pandemic. It demonstrates how independent filmmakers coped during the pandemic.

Data analysis of documentary films

The frame is regarded as the most prominent aspect of a shot or a series of shots. In such a series of shots, the researcher may decide that there is more than one salient frame and all of these need to be included in the analysis (Iedema, 2001). This is because different frames are a measure of objects and elements in the visual scene. Identifying the deeper meaning of these elements is also crucial to the visual depiction of the frame (Mohd Fathir et al., 2022). Accordingly, the study adopted a combination of visual analysis by Iedema (2001) and thematic analysis by Braun and Clarke (2006) with the aim of encoding and thematically analyzing the two films.

Specifically, the researcher uses several key principles, namely specific plot, character monologues, and shot techniques. As for the method of identifying themes and sub-themes, the related scenes, sequences, dialogue, and captions that link to the underlying themes will be discussed (Iedema, 2001; Rasit et al., 2011). Accordingly, the specific plots and shot techniques serve as data categories, while the subjects' dialogue, monologue, and captions serve as the main data quotations.

Through repeated viewings, the researcher analyzed the two films based on the visual and verbal content of the films themselves, which led to four main themes, also as referred to as visual frames: i) the current scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic; ii) fears; iii) online creative community; and iv) mindset change.

Theme 1: Opening: Current scenario of COVID-19 pandemic

The opening scenes of both documentary films illustrate this theme, by introducing the background of the COVID-19 epidemic and their inherent state. Two specific ways of describing the pandemic are through captions and long shots, and through television news footage to enhance the narrative. In this context, shot techniques can frame a particular in-depth meaning. For example, the background environment is primarily shown through long shots and points of view¹. Here, close-ups are an important means of exhibiting the inner workings of the characters (Iedema, 2001). Furthermore, Wu's film contains numerous long shots, which symbolize context, scope, and public distance (Rodriguez & Dimitrova, 2011) and convey the current scenario of the epidemic during the opening sequence as presented in Figure 1. Notably, both films open with silent images, and the emotions expressed are negative. Table 3 provides a summary of the theme relating to the current scenario of the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as subthemes, specific plots, shot techniques, and exemplar quotations.

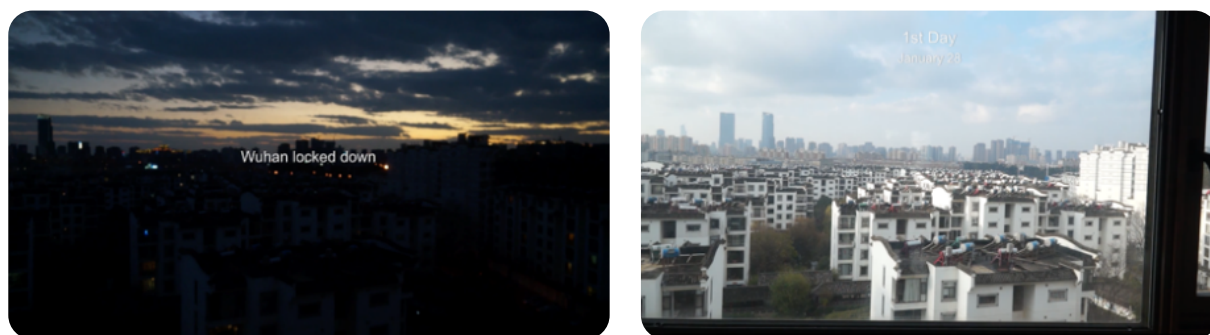


Figure 1. *Getting Through, Chapter One, Entrapment, Long shots*
(Source: <https://vimeo.com>)

¹ Point of view is used to indicate the viewpoint of the person represented to facilitate camera positioning.

Table 3. Current scenario of COVID-19 pandemic, subthemes, specific plots, shot techniques, and quotations

Subthemes	Specific plots	Shot techniques	Quotations
Introduction of the COVID-19 pandemic	Images and captions to show the pandemic	Long shot	Subtitle: 2020 January 23, Before Chinese New Year, Wuhan locked down. January 24 New Year's Eve, family reunion dinners cancelled... (Wu)
	Wearing a mask	Close-up	No character's voice (Luo Luo)
	The COVID-19 pandemic news was televised	Medium shot	Subtitles: Behind me stand the... to assist Hubei Medical Troop. Some of them are ready to deplane, a full speed, they will enter the hospital and dedicate... (Luo Luo)
Introduction of the current state by oneself	Introduce self	Point of view	I am Luo Luo... I have a daughter. Now, I am retired. My father and I live together. He is 90 years old... (Luo Luo)
	Map to light up Luo Luo's location	Close-up	For me, this is where Miyi is located... (Luo Luo)
	Use of images and captions to explain	Long shot	Subtitle: Room xxx, Unit x, building x, xx Community, Kunming, Yunnan Province, Living in solitude (Wu)

Theme 2: Documenting and facing the fears

Both documentaries were found to contain depictions of fears. To express inner fears and anxieties, the filmmaker used a lot of close-up shots in the film *Luo Luo's Fear* as shown in Figure 2. Luo Luo also interviewed her father and documented his fears, and she created an interplay of present and past fear memories. For Wu, his lens focused on the view out of the window into the public domain, emphasizing through monologues on how to face up to one's fears, thus aspiring to complete his self-motivation. Both documentaries feature numerous monologues that use the narrators' own voices to express their inner thoughts as an important part of their plot and creative approach. A summary of this theme can be seen in Table 4.



Figure 2. *Luo Luo's Fear*, close-up shots
(Source: <https://vimeo.com>)

Table 4. Documenting and facing the fears, subthemes, specific plots, shot techniques, and quotations

Subthemes	Specific plots	Shot techniques	Quotations
Documenting fears	To emphasize fear several times through masked monologues	Close-up	Monologues: <i>Since around January 21st, 22nd, I have been feeling anxiety and fear. That was when I started to see news about the pandemic... ...The fear inside of me reached its peak.</i> (Luo Luo)
	Luo Luo's father reads memoir	Close shot	In that time of extreme anger and fear, there were bitterness and sourness that can't be fully expressed... (Luo Luo)
	Interview with the father about the fear in the past	Medium shot	How did the great famine happen? ...there's no food... (Luo Luo)
Facing up to own's fears	Filming the residence and expressing oneself in front of the windows every day	Long shot	Monologue: <i>Facing up to all those feelings...those panic, fear...I was thinking what I can do</i> (Wu)

Theme 3. Online creative community mutual support

Both documentaries exhibit various strategies to overcome fear and improve film production, leading to the establishment of an online creative community, with participation in numerous online CCD Workstation workshops being one of the main strategies used by independent filmmakers during the pandemic. Figure 3 indicates precisely that these scenes are primarily shown through the close-up shots of the computer screens.

For this section, the shot techniques of fade-in and fade-out were heavily used. Significantly, one of the film's plot points ties up a rather important key issue between both documentary films, namely locating CCD Workstation partners by map as shown in Figure 4. This map on the film's screen connects every CCD filmmaker. A key subtheme under this theme is the active building of communal communication; it demonstrates an organizational frame actively promoted by CCD Workstation. The overview is presented in Table 5.



Figure 3. *Entrapment and Luo Luo's Fear*, online community communication (close-up shots of the screens) (Source: <https://vimeo.com>)

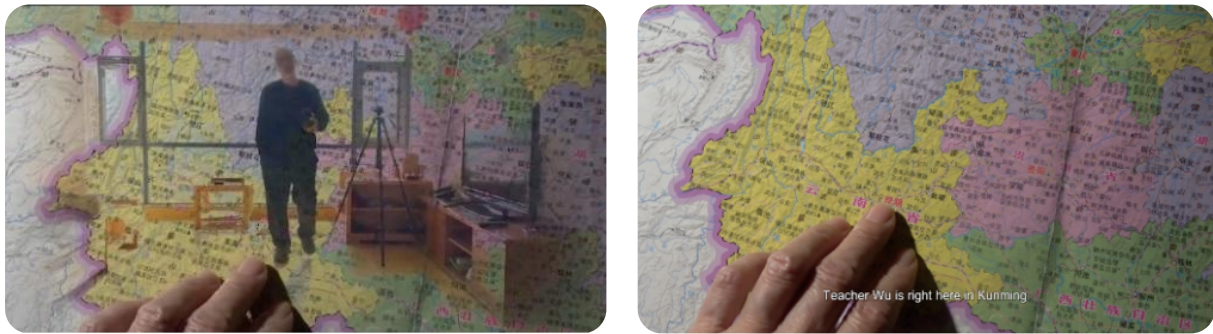


Figure 4. *Luo Luo's Fear*, fade-in and fade-out shots
(Source: <https://vimeo.com>)

Table 5. Online creative community, subthemes, specific plots, shot techniques, and quotations

Subthemes	Specific plots	Shot techniques	Quotations
Introducing the CCD workstation partners	Locate CCD Workstation partners through map	Close-up	Monologue: <i>My friends in the email group, I am going to find you on the map...</i> (Luo Luo)
	Scenes taken by members of CCD Workstation in their local villages	Fade-in; Fade-out	Subtitle: The information of filmmakers (Luo Luo and Wu)
Active community building and communication	Attend online workshops by CCD Workstation	Close-up to the screen	Dialogue: <i>The information of online workshops</i> (Luo Luo and Wu)
	Thanks to CCD Workstation by the mean of monologues	Close-up	I had the honor to enter the CCD workstation... I feel I got something that I never had in my life. So much encouragement, help, and support... (Luo Luo)

Theme 4. Mindset change

The final sections of both documentaries emphasize mindset change, as strongly demonstrated in the sequences where one of the participants finally removed her mask and sang Swan Geese as seen in Figure 5, meanwhile Wu narrated the gaining of hope in the form of monologue as shown in Figure 6. This aspect is viewed as positive. The related overview is presented in Table 6.



Figure 5: *Luo Luo's Fear*, Sings Swan Geese
(Source: <https://vimeo.com>)



Figure 6. *Getting Through, Chapter One, Entrapment*, monologue
(Source: <https://vimeo.com>)

Table 6. Mindset change, subthemes, specific plots, shot techniques, and quotations

Subthemes	Specific plots	Shot techniques	Quotations
Mindset change	Dancing in front of the window	Full shot	No character's voice (Luo Luo)
	Mask removal	Close-up	No character's voice (Luo Luo)
	A change of mentality expressed via monologue	Close-up	Monologue: <i>I think life cannot help but change. Mentality and ... hard to say now what kind of changes. Hopefully, something like the new humans...</i> (Wu)
Continue to break through	Singing <i>Swan Geese</i>	Close-up	<i>Wild geese up above, flying in formation. The river is long. Autumn is coming to an end...</i> (Luo Luo)
	Thinking of the continuing breakthrough expressed via monologue	Close-up	Monologue: <i>Within the entrapment, we try to break through...In search of still, a break through eventually...</i> (Wu)

DISCUSSION

According to recent studies, restrictions and uncertainties brought by the pandemic significantly affected film production and release across the globe (Akser, 2020; Grassilli & Colta, 2021; Tong, 2021). As independent filmmakers, the participants were also impacted. After analyzing the data gathered through face-to-face interviews, the participants' creative memos, and the documentary film of each participant, it can be concluded that both participants experienced personal mental stress, a restricted creative process, and limited social connection due to the isolation measures implemented during the pandemic. Both participants demonstrated a negative attitude towards the outbreak of COVID-19 as they felt anxious, isolated, and unable to produce film effectively due to limited space, time, and funding.

Kaplan (2008) highlighted that a purposeful framework for action is key in explaining how actors cope with information uncertainty. For the study participants, the need for creative freedom and the fear that they experienced prompted them to develop a number of coping mechanisms as a way of adapting to the changing environment. Overall, online coping strategies have been determined as the most prominent framework in helping the participants overcome their challenges. Significantly, the theme of self-rescue offered a number of advantages for the participants, mainly community building and self-treatment, amongst other actions. In this regard, another study corroborates that the collective spirit

and emotional intensity developed during a crisis can be mobilized for community activity-building purposes, the impacts of which are likely to be greater than usual (Bao, 2020).

Pragmatically, the channel via online screenings presents a window of opportunity regarding the dissemination of documentaries during the pandemic. By organizing community activities to enrich the limited distribution of independent documentaries through online screenings and Q&A sessions, CCD Workstation enabled direct communication and interaction between filmmakers and audiences during the pandemic. It has been documented that a photographer in the United States organized an online photography project, Covid Nites, to explore urban life in New York during the pandemic which offered some solace to people facing isolation after its online distribution (Arnold, 2020). In this sense, online engagement activities provide a very important positive action framework for creators during the epidemic (Feiock, 2013).

Through offline coping strategies, both participants coped with their negative feelings associated with the pandemic through documentary filming. Both films focus on their fears and challenges at this particular time of the pandemic, framing the entire film through internal monologues that have also become a distinctive style of their own creation. Moreover, both documentaries contain numerous close-up and long shots that reveal the subtle psychological changes of the filmmakers as well as the changing relationships between people and society, emphasizing the importance of community communication. The view is similar to Mohd Fathir et al. (2022), who also emphasized the importance of close-up shots so that their subjects' subtle emotions can be clearly seen and strongly highlighted. This result corroborates with the observations of Meng (2016) as well, who demonstrated that filmmakers have moved away from a purely observational style and instead adopted a more subjective and reflective mode. Although both filmmakers were unable to return to the village to film, this did not stop them from producing a good documentary. A similar study by Tong (2021) showed that filmmakers from CCD Workstation were able to produce a greater variety of films for the FMP project rather than being confined to the village to film.

Combining the data analysis from both sections, the participants' experiences suggest that positive online coping mechanisms and community support play an important role in helping independent filmmakers overcome their challenges during the pandemic. The offline strategy of documentary filming is helpful as a therapeutic outlet for filmmakers to manage their mental health for self-rescue. Meanwhile, the establishment of an online creative community helped the participants to achieve a change of mindset and feel connected with other filmmakers. Therefore, filmmakers should be encouraged to establish online community communication platforms to enhance social connections.

CONCLUSION

Numerous studies have focused on the impact of the recent pandemic on various industries, but not many researchers have investigated how independent filmmakers have been affected. In this respect, an in-depth qualitative analysis was conducted by the researcher in order to better understand this situation. The results demonstrate how important it is to use online strategies to rebuild social connections, especially with online creative communities. Additionally, the study reveals how visual framing as an approach can illuminate the operational experience of filmmakers for documentary filmmaking during the pandemic. Significantly, it should be noted that both participants found solidarity among filmmakers through a community formed by CCD Workstation, which is an organization that integrates writing, filming, editing, screening, online Q&A session after screening, and a documentary film festival.

This to a certain extent contributes towards addressing the widespread view that Chinese independent documentaries do not possess a sophisticated individual agency or artistic autonomy, a concern of Tong (2019). Simply put, the online strategies and the development of community communication support that the researcher analyzed provide a good example on how to deal with this crisis. Finally, one should also inquire how far the frames can be stretched until CCD Workstation loses its coherence and thus its creative power. Indeed, CCD Workstation's reframing process dedicated to putting a community frame in place is ongoing. This significant work's efficacy and success is still unfolding. Finally, future researchers are recommended to expand the scope of participants to explore a more diverse range of perspectives of other independent filmmakers within the organization and/or other stakeholders from other groups.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

The authors would like to thank the staff at CCD Workstation and filmmakers who provided support in the completion of this analysis.

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