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Documentary Legibility: Interpretive Authority and Temporal Design in *Longji* and *Falling Snow in Yili*

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Abstract

Chinese minority documentaries often operate through a dual logic: they make minority lifeworlds publicly visible while also translating cultural plurality into nationally intelligible narratives of unity. This article examines Chen Xiaoqin's *Longji* (1994) and Feng Lei's *Falling Snow in Yili* (2001), two Chinese minority documentaries produced within the broader period between 1989 and 2002, when market reforms, the restructuring of television documentary production, and the emergence of independent documentary practices reshaped the conditions of documentary representation. It argues that minority documentaries should be analysed not only through themes or broad modal categories, but through the formal means by which social life is made publicly readable. Through a matched comparison, the article identifies two divergent regimes of documentary legibility. *Longji* produces administrative-teleological legibility through categorical naming, selective voice-over anchoring, institutional framing, and seasonally indexed progression, rendering Red Yao life as a publicly accountable problem of schooling, scarcity, and intervention. By contrast, *Falling Snow in Yili* produces experiential-durational legibility through mood-first calibration, localised domestic speech, routine accumulation, and lyrical return, making Kazakh family life intelligible as durational coherence rather than as an administrable case. The comparison reframes the expository/observational divide as a contrast between two epistemic arrangements, each with distinct political trade-offs. Documentary form, therefore, emerges not as a neutral container of ethnic difference, but as a technology that conditions what kind of minority life can be known, by whom, and toward what horizon of unity.

Keywords: Documentary Legibility, Interpretive Authority, Temporal Design, Chinese Documentary, Minority Representation

Introduction

Chinese minority documentaries are important because they do more than preserve images of local customs, landscapes, and everyday practices. They participate in the public production of knowledge about ethnic difference, cultural diversity, and national belonging. In a multi-ethnic society such as China, the way minority life is filmed, narrated, translated, and temporally organised influences how wider audiences understand minority communities, how cultural plurality is made visible, and how unity is imagined across social and regional

differences. For this reason, the topic is significant not only for documentary studies but also for research on Chinese media, ethnic representation, cultural communication, and the politics of national identity.

The need for this study becomes clearer when Chinese minority documentaries from the 1990s and early 2000s are placed within their historical context. This was a period marked by market reform, the restructuring of television production, the growth of public-service documentary, and the emergence of more independent documentary practices. These changes did not simply alter production conditions. They also changed the available ways of making minority life publicly readable. Some films translated minority experience into developmental issues such as schooling, poverty alleviation, and institutional intervention, while others used observation, duration, ambient sound, and everyday speech to produce a less didactic but still intelligible image of minority lifeworlds. Studying this area is therefore necessary because it helps explain how documentary form mediates between cultural diversity and national narratives during a period of major social transformation.

Documentary study has long moved beyond the naive question of whether nonfiction films simply record reality. The stronger question is how they organise the historical world so that it becomes publicly intelligible. Nichols's classic account of documentary modes remains foundational because it showed that documentary meaning is rhetorically organised rather than transparently given (Nichols, 1991). Plantinga similarly treats nonfiction film as a structure of representation that directs inference (Plantinga, 1997), while Renov insists that recording, persuasion, analysis, and expression typically coexist within documentary form rather than appearing as separable functions (Renov, 1993). These arguments relocate documentary analysis from the fact of recording to the formal problem of public intelligibility.

Recent scholarship has widened that problem. Work on first-person documentary has shown that nonfiction knowledge can be organised through situated belonging rather than detached explanation (Denić, 2024). Research on 360-degree documentary has foregrounded embodied orientation and empathic calibration as conditions of spectatorship (Mikelli, 2024). Atmospheric approaches likewise argue that documentary meaning can be carried by ambience, environmental mediation, and perceptual relation rather than by commentary alone (Harris, 2024). The field increasingly recognises that nonfiction intelligibility is produced across multiple registers, including rhetorical, sensory, spatial, and temporal forms.

Yet scholarship on minority representation in China still often falls back on two shortcuts. One is thematic reduction: poverty, ritual, schooling, heritage, or development are treated as if they were self-evidently meaningful once placed before the camera (Zhu, 2018; Chen & Hao, 2014). The other is modal shorthand: a film is called expository. It uses voice-over, or observational, because it does not (Tang, 2011). Both moves obscure a more exact question. Minority life is never simply there to be perceived. It becomes publicly knowable through formal arrangements that distribute explanatory force, organise duration, and establish what kind of inference spectators are authorised to make.

This article, therefore, shifts attention from mode labels to the more specific question of how documentary form makes minority life readable. Rather than treating voice-over, observation, duration, or ambient sound as isolated stylistic features, it examines how these

elements distribute interpretive authority and organise time. This approach is especially useful for comparing Chinese minority documentaries produced across different institutional contexts, because state-aligned and independent works may both record everyday life while making that life intelligible through very different formal regimes. The aim is not to oppose expository and observational documentaries as fixed categories, but to ask how each film constructs a particular way of knowing minority life.

To address this problem, the article proposes documentary legibility as an analytic framework. Documentary legibility refers to the formal regime through which a film makes social life publicly readable by coupling two dimensions: interpretive authority and temporal design. Interpretive authority refers to how explanatory force is distributed across voice-over, synchronous speech, subtitles, music, ambient sound, and image composition. Temporal design refers to how time is configured so that events and routines become readable as progression, recurrence, interruption, continuity, or closure. Documentary knowledge does not arise from either dimension in isolation. It emerges from their coupling.

The argument is developed through a matched comparison of two Chinese minority documentaries: Chen Xiaoqin's *Longji* (1994) and Feng Lei's *Falling Snow in Yili* (2001). The comparison is methodologically useful because both films centre rural minority family life, yet they organise intelligibility very differently. *Longji*, produced within a television-aligned context, repeatedly translates Red Yao life into institutionally legible categories and developmental timelines. *Falling Snow in Yili*, produced within the early independent DV milieu, withholds expository narration and builds coherence through atmosphere, domestic speech, routine accumulation, and cyclical return. The contrast is not exhausted by the familiar opposition between expository and observational modes. It is better understood as a contrast between two legibility regimes: administrative-teleological legibility and experiential-durational legibility.

The article contributes to the study of minority documentary by demonstrating how formal analysis can explain the social and political effectiveness of representation. It shows that documentary form is not a neutral container of ethnic difference. It is a technology that conditions what kind of minority life can be known, by whom, and toward what horizon of unity. The comparison is deliberately asymmetrical in historical and industrial terms. Rather than treating the seven-year gap and the difference between television production and independent DV practice as limitations, the article treats them as the very conditions that make the comparison analytically productive.

From Political Legibility to Documentary Legibility

At its most basic, legibility names the capacity to be read. In ordinary usage, it suggests clarity or readability. In political theory, however, the term acquires a more consequential meaning. In *Seeing Like a State*, James C. Scott argues that modern state power depends on making complex social worlds legible through simplification, standardisation, and synoptic ordering (Scott, 1998). Cadastral mapping, census categories, permanent surnames, standardised language, and rationalised settlement plans do not merely describe society. They reformat local life into administrable grids. State legibility is therefore not passive seeing. It is an active reorganisation of the world to fit a scheme of governance. Scott's argument matters for documentary theory because it gives the concept of legibility a political and sociological depth

that a purely formal definition lacks. Once legibility is understood as a technology of simplification, the question is no longer only whether a documentary is clear or opaque. The sharper question is what sort of simplification it performs, toward what addressee, and with what political consequences. A documentary does not govern in the same way the state does, but it can nonetheless function as a public technology of translation. It selects, names, sequences, and scales the profilmic world into forms that become shareable as evidence, issue, atmosphere, or lifeworld.

This extension from statecraft to documentary should not be taken as a crude equivalence. Not every documentary reproduces state rationality, and legibility need not always be administrative. Scott himself is useful here for two reasons. First, *Seeing Like a State* clarifies that readability is historically bound to projects of simplification and intervention (Scott, 1998). Second, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant* reminds us that not all forms of public readability are politically equivalent. The same event can be made legible either through elite categories or through the situated logics of lived subsistence and social obligation (Scott, 1977). We see this distinction as crucial for documentary analysis. Films can render social worlds readable by subordinating them to externally imposed grids, or by allowing coherence to emerge from internal rhythms and situated forms of knowledge.

Documentary legibility, as this article defines it here, names this formal politics of public readability. It specifies how a film converts heterogeneous life into publicly apprehensible order by coupling interpretive authority with temporal design. Interpretive authority concerns who or what guides inference. Is relevance secured by narration, subtitles, interview testimony, domestic speech, rhythm, soundscape, or their interaction? Temporal design concerns the horizon within which those cues cohere. Does the film orient viewers toward development, repair, and qualified closure, or toward recurrence, persistence, and durational continuity?

On this basis, we propose two ideal-typical regimes. Administrative-teleological legibility arises when a film periodically consolidates authority through classificatory or expository anchoring and configures time toward development, repair, or closure. Such films tend to translate local life into publicly accountable problems and outcome-oriented sequences. Experiential-durational legibility arises when authority is decentralised into situated speech, embodied routine, ambient texture, and temporal continuity. Such films do not abandon coherence; they allow it to emerge through lived duration rather than through prior diagnosis.

What makes this comparative framework especially productive in reading *Longji* and *Falling Snow in Yili* is that it situates questions of cinematic legibility within the broader ideological and historical transformations of post-socialist China, during the late reform era and the early 2000s, when developmental governance, television restructuring, and the integration of western and border regions shaped the public readability of minority life. During the 1990s, Deng's reformist agenda intensified the state's commitment to developmentalism, modernisation, and market rationalisation, producing a dominant epistemic regime in which social reality increasingly had to be rendered measurable, governable, and administratively intelligible. Within this context, administrative-teleological legibility acquired significant political and cultural force because it aligned with the state's

broader project of narrating modernisation as linear progress, social management, and national integration. Such a regime of representation often privileges clarity of causality, identifiable social problems, and the visibility of institutional intervention, thereby producing forms of cinematic readability that can circulate effectively within official discourse and public pedagogy. Yet this same process may also reduce the heterogeneity of lived experience by translating social contradictions, ethnic tensions, rural dislocation, and subjective ambiguity into administrable categories compatible with developmental governance.

By contrast, the experiential-durational logic visible in Falling Snow in Yili resists the accelerationist temporality associated with reform-era modernisation. Rather than subordinating experience to narrative resolution or policy intelligibility, this film foregrounds slowness, spatial isolation, affective residue, and the uneven temporalities of peripheral life. This becomes especially significant in China's western and border regions during the late 1990s and early 2000s, when state discourse increasingly emphasised stability, ethnic management, and the integration of frontier spaces into the national developmental imaginary. The film's attention to environmental texture, silence, and unresolved social relations preserves an experiential thickness that exceeds administrative readability. In doing so, it reveals dimensions of social life that cannot be fully absorbed into the triumphalist narratives of reform, modernisation, and frontier integration that shaped the late reform era and the early 2000s.

The analytical value of this framework, therefore, lies not in establishing a normative hierarchy between these representational regimes, but in examining how each constructs different conditions of visibility and knowledge. Administrative-teleological legibility makes structural causality and institutional action publicly intelligible, yet risks flattening complexity into governable abstraction. Experiential-durational legibility, on the other hand, preserves ambiguity, affective density, and the phenomenology of marginal existence, though often without converting these experiences into explicit political argument or coherent social diagnosis. A matched comparison between *Longji* and *Falling Snow in Yili* thus illuminates how Chinese minority documentary negotiated competing demands between state modernisation, regional subjectivity, and the representational limits of post-socialist governance during the late reform era and the early 2000s.

Corpus, Method, and Historical Framing

The following analysis is based on a paired comparison of Chen Xiaoqin's *Longji* (1994) and Feng Lei's *Falling Snow in Yili* (2001). The two films were not selected because they belong to the same production moment or institutional environment. On the contrary, their historical and industrial differences constitute the basis of the comparison. *Longji* should be situated within the mid-1990s Chinese television documentary environment, in which rural poverty, minority education, and public welfare campaigns such as Project Hope became suitable materials for socially concerned broadcast documentaries. Set in the mountainous Longji region of Guangxi, the film focuses on Red Yao children, rural schooling, household labour, and the material scarcity surrounding educational access. Its narrative is closely connected to developmental and institutional questions, especially the visibility of school dropout, poverty, public welfare assistance, and educational intervention. *Falling Snow in Yili*, by contrast, was produced in 2001, at a moment when cheaper digital-video technology and looser production practices were enabling more mobile, low-budget, and observational forms of documentary

filmmaking in China. Set in the Ili region of Xinjiang, it follows the winter routines of a Kazakh pastoral household, especially the everyday life of the young girl Bahila, through domestic labour, family conversation, prayer, livestock care, song, and cyclical natural time.

The pairing is therefore methodologically purposeful rather than historically accidental. Both films centre on rural minority family life, child figures, labour, and the relation between domestic routine and larger social worlds. At this thematic level, they are sufficiently comparable. Yet they differ sharply in their production regimes, historical moments, regional settings, and formal organisations. *Longji* emerges from a mid-1990s television context in which minority hardship could be made publicly legible through educational scarcity, institutional concern, and developmental repair. Its use of Project Hope as an institutional horizon places Red Yao children's schooling within a broader public narrative of welfare, modernisation, and rural improvement. *Falling Snow in Yili*, made seven years later in an independent and more observational context, does not organise Kazakh life around a problem-solution structure. Instead, its low-intensity attention to domestic routine, ambient sound, ordinary speech, and repeated labour reflects a documentary orientation more closely associated with the independent DV practices emerging around the turn of the century. The comparison thus uses thematic proximity and industrial difference together: the films are placed side by side to ask how different documentary ecologies produce different regimes of public intelligibility.

Production context is used here not as a substitute for textual analysis, but as a historical condition that helps explain why different formal choices become available and meaningful. In Longji, selective voice-over, categorical naming, and institutional framing are not merely stylistic devices; they are consistent with a broadcast documentary environment in which social issues needed to be publicly portable, morally legible, and institutionally accountable. In Falling Snow in Yili, by contrast, the absence of expository narration and the emphasis on long observation, ambient sound, domestic speech, and ordinary interaction reflect a different documentary orientation, one that allows minority life to be understood through duration rather than diagnosis. Rather than translating Kazakh family life into a clearly defined social problem or developmental narrative, the film allows meaning to emerge through routine, sensory proximity, and the repeated rhythms of household and pastoral life. The central analytic framework of this article, therefore, remains documentary legibility, understood as the coupling of interpretive authority and temporal design.

The analysis follows a qualitative textual and audiovisual approach. Each film was viewed repeatedly and segmented according to shifts in narrative sequence, spatial setting, sound design, and temporal organisation. Particular attention was given to moments where explanatory authority is activated or withheld, including voice-over, subtitles, synchronous speech, music, silence, framing, and editing rhythm. Timecodes are used not as exhaustive shot-by-shot documentation, but as traceable evidence for key analytical claims. The comparison then examines how these formal elements produce different regimes of public intelligibility across the two films.

Longji and Administrative-Teleological Legibility

Longji constructs administrative-teleological legibility by repeatedly converting Red Yao life into a field of names, needs, and developmental milestones. Its most revealing feature is not

uninterrupted commentary but selective expository anchoring at decisive moments. Voice-over enters where the film needs to stabilise who is being seen, what counts as relevant, and what kind of future the sequence is moving toward.

The opening sequence is exemplary. Before sustained participant speech or interiority emerges, the child is identified through a compact administrative formula - name, age, ethnicity, and school grade - in the early classification sequence (00:01:00-00:01:08). The order matters. The child first appears not as a singular lived subject but as a classified instance. Schooling is installed at once as the primary axis of intelligibility. Scott's framework helps sharpen what is at stake here. Just as the state renders complex populations governable by translating them into synoptic categories, *Longji* renders the child publicly readable through a classificatory grid that precedes lived texture (Scott, 1998). The film apparatus does not simply show a Red Yao child. It produces an administratively parsable subject whose existence is already aligned with counting, educational deficiency, and developmental concern.

This classificatory logic returns whenever local activity threatens to remain merely local. A later school-construction sequence provides the clearest example (00:31:56-00:32:24). Villagers' labour is visible in the frame, but the epistemic centre of the scene lies in the narration, which supplies the lunar date, identifies the Project Hope office, specifies the funds allocated, and compresses construction into an intelligible chain of intervention and outcome. Labour thereby becomes programmatic proof. The scene is not allowed to remain a record of collective work, reciprocal obligation, or everyday village coordination. It is translated into publicly accountable evidence that a problem has been identified and is being repaired.

The political force of this strategy becomes sharper when read through Scott. Seeing Like a State insists that legibility is bound to teleology. Simplification serves schemes that aim to improve, reorder, or optimise the human condition, usually by forcing unruly local worlds into rationalised formats (Scott, 1998). *Longji* performs a cognate operation audiovisually. It translates the heterogeneity of Red Yao life into a scheme organised around schooling, scarcity, and intervention. The film's authority structure is therefore not merely explanatory. It is state-adjacent in the epistemological sense: it renders minority life visible in the same form that institutional action can recognise, count, and answer.

Temporal design completes this regime. *Longji* does not unfold as an open accumulation of village moments. It is organised by month-marked folk-song segments - "April/May," "June," "July," and "August" - that do more than add local colour. They create a seasonal spine along which domestic scenes, labour, and school construction can be read as stages within a directional process. Time is thus configured as development without losing its agrarian surface. The folk song performs a double function: it marks local temporality while simultaneously pre-structuring expectation.

Ricoeur is useful here because he allows us to distinguish chronology from configured narrative time (Ricoeur, 1988). *Longji*'s month markers do not merely tell viewers when something happens. They emplot the material. Once the film has organised its world into sequential seasonal units, later interventions appear temporally motivated rather than

externally imposed. Improvement becomes inferable because time itself has been shaped as a horizon of movement. The institutional narrative of Project Hope, school construction, and reopening does not arrive on top of the seasonal cycle; it is folded into it.

This synthesis becomes explicit in the final movement of the film, where school reopening is paired with ripening grain and the approach of harvest (00:43:52-00:44:14). The closure is not triumphalist in a simple sense; hardship has not disappeared. But it is unmistakably a qualified closure. Educational repair and agrarian fruition are aligned within the same temporal frame. The represented world becomes readable as one in which intervention has entered the proper rhythm of time. Such closure is highly compatible with the television documentary ecology from which the film emerges. Broadcast nonfiction often requires a legibility that is public, portable, and accountable. *Longji* satisfies that demand by offering viewers not merely scenes of minority life, but an intelligible sequence in which classification, intervention, and seasonal progression converge.

For these reasons, *Longji* is more than generically expository. It constructs administrative-teleological legibility through the exact coupling of selective interpretive authority and developmental time. Its voice-over does not simply explain; it authorises a grid of relevance. Its seasonal structure does not merely order scenes; it turns them into steps within a horizon of repair. The film's aesthetic choices are therefore inseparable from a broader logic of state simplification. *Longji* makes Red Yao life publicly knowable by converting it into a field of administrable problem-solving.

Falling Snow in Yili and Experiential-Durational Legibility

Falling Snow in Yili offers an alternative regime. It does not convert Kazakh family life into an institutional problem-frame, but neither does it abandon intelligibility. Instead, it builds coherence through atmosphere, local speech, routine accumulation, and cyclical return. The film's authority is decentralised, and its time is thickened rather than goal-directed. The result is experiential-durational legibility.

The opening is decisive. The film begins with a static view of falling snow, a centrally placed bilingual title, and a slow dombra melody (00:00:30-00:00:53). No character is introduced, no sociohistorical context is supplied, and no narrator instructs the viewer how to decode the scene. This is not an informational deficiency. It is perceptual calibration. Before the film discloses narrative information or establishes causal explanation, it first conditions the spectator’s mode of perception, training the viewer to apprehend the world through atmosphere, temporal drift, sonic texture, and durational attention. In this sense, meaning does not emerge primarily through exposition or narrative declaration, but through the gradual accumulation of affective and sensory relations embedded within the image. A critical textual analysis of the film’s formal organisation, its extended takes, sparse dialogue, ambient soundscape, and attenuated pacing, reveals that epistemology is displaced from the level of explicit statement to that of embodied experience. Harris’s recent theorisation of atmospheric documentary is especially useful here because it challenges the assumption that ambience functions merely as aesthetic decoration or emotional supplement. Instead, atmosphere operates as an epistemic medium in its own right: a way of knowing that precedes conceptual articulation and exceeds administrative readability. The film’s atmospherics, therefore, do not simply frame social reality; they actively structure how reality

becomes perceptible, intelligible, and affectively inhabitable. Through rhythm and duration, the spectator is not instructed what to think about the social world so much as immersed within the uneven temporalities and experiential textures through which that world is lived (Harris, 2024). In *Falling Snow in Yili*, mood is not secondary to knowledge; it is the first condition of it.

The subsequent landscape sequence consolidates this perceptual logic through a sustained emphasis on spatial continuity and durational immersion. Images of snow-covered fields, dispersed livestock, distant mountain ranges, and the faint resonance of children's songs unfold before the articulation of domestic or social relations, allowing the environment itself to assume an organising epistemic function. Rather than immediately situating the viewer within an explanatory social framework, the film delays narrative clarification and instead privileges sensory orientation, requiring the spectator to inhabit the rhythms and textures of the filmed world before its social structures become legible. The sequence, therefore, reconfigures spectatorship away from passive reception of authorised meaning toward a more contingent and embodied mode of witnessing grounded in attentiveness and temporal co-presence. MacDougall's account of corporeal documentary knowledge helps explain why this matters. For MacDougall, documentary meaning is not exhausted by verbal explanation or discursive translation, but emerges through bodily proximity, observational duration, and the sensory density of everyday life (MacDougall, 1998, 2006). The film mobilises this corporeal epistemology by foregrounding the temporal grain of ordinary presence, the slow unfolding of landscape, sound, and movement, as a primary mode of intelligibility. Knowledge here is not transmitted through declarative exposition but sedimented through sustained perceptual engagement, where duration itself becomes a condition for understanding.

Once this perceptual groundwork is laid, interpretive authority can be relocated to synchronous domestic speech. The breakfast conversation is exemplary (00:05:59-00:08:16). Bahila's remark about becoming a singer is not extracted and elevated by the film into a narratively decisive aspiration. It remains embedded in the low-intensity flow of family talk. This is precisely why it matters. Authority lies in the household's own speech ecology rather than in an external narrator who summarises what the dream represents. The film does not refuse meaning; it lets meaning arise from within everyday interaction.

This relocation of authority marks the biggest difference from *Longji*. In Nichols's terms, one might loosely call *Falling Snow in Yili* observational, but that label is insufficient. The film's authority has not disappeared. It has been redistributed into subtitles, synchronous talk, local sound, and the pacing of exchange. Bruzzi's claim that documentary meaning is negotiated through encounter is especially pertinent here (Bruzzi, 2006). What the spectator receives is not unmediated life, but a formally organised encounter in which the family's own speech provides the principal anchors of relevance. The absence of a voice-of-God narrator, therefore, does not produce neutrality. It produces a different authority structure.

Routine accumulation deepens that structure. The milking sequence is the clearest instance (00:22:09-00:23:43). A fixed framing concentrates attention on hands, body, animal, and the repetitive sound of milking. There is no explanatory gloss. Evidentiary force arises from duration itself. The viewer is asked to remain with embodied repetition long enough for

competence, labour, and practical attunement to become knowable. This is what I mean by evidentiary texture. The sequence does not extract information from routine; it allows routine to become the medium through which meaning is apprehended.

The same is true of prayer and other household practices. Ritual is not isolated as an ethnographic display or turned into a detachable sign of cultural difference. It remains embedded in the temporal continuity of family life. In this respect, experiential-durational legibility actively resists epistemological capture. The film does not deny that viewers outside the household can know something of Kazakh life. Rather, it refuses to make that knowledge available through premature abstraction. Coherence emerges immanently from the recurrence of speech, work, and shared gesture.

The film's digital materiality is not incidental to this effect. Robinson emphasises that digital video transformed Chinese independent documentary by altering duration, portability, and bodily relation to the profilmic world (Robinson, 2013). In *Falling Snow in Yili*, those affordances are palpable. Long takes of repetitive labour, quiet domestic exchanges, and slow environmental observation would have been far more expensive and materially constrained in a celluloid economy. DV does not automatically produce experiential legibility, but it makes it easier to sustain. The film's durational ethics are inseparable from the technological conditions that permit extended, intimate, and relatively unobtrusive recording.

The concluding sequence crystallises the film’s representational logic with remarkable formal precision. Returning to a static long take of falling snow while Bahila’s singing voice continues across the cut from the preceding scene (00:35:01-00:36:50), the film suspends narrative progression in favour of atmospheric and temporal continuity. Significantly, no authoritative voice intervenes to interpret the meaning of the events that have unfolded. The absence of narration, commentary, or explanatory closure refuses the conventions of teleological resolution commonly associated with socially didactic documentary forms. Instead, the film constructs an ending structured through persistence rather than culmination: snow continues to fall, the voice lingers beyond bodily presence, and duration itself becomes the organising principle of closure. Our critical textual reading suggests that the sequence gathers together the film’s recurring formal motifs, snow, sound, repetition, stillness, and temporal drift, not to synthesise them into a coherent moral or political conclusion, but to preserve their experiential openness. Closure is achieved at the level of rhythm and affect rather than a narrative solution. In this respect, Paul Ricoeur’s notion of refiguration becomes especially illuminating. For Ricoeur, narrative temporality retrospectively organises lived experience into meaningful time without necessarily reducing it to linear causality or instrumental logic (Ricoeur, 1988). The ending mobilises precisely this form of temporal reconfiguration. Recurrence produces coherence not through explanatory synthesis, but through the accumulation of sensory and affective resonance across the film’s duration. The repeated image of falling snow does not resolve contradiction or diagnose a social problem; rather, it re-situates the spectator within an ongoing temporal world whose meanings remain incomplete, cyclical, and resistant to administrative closure.

Falling Snow in Yili, therefore, produces experiential-durational legibility through a fourfold formal strategy: mood-first calibration, localised authority, routine accumulation, and lyrical return. Minority life becomes publicly intelligible as a durationally coherent

lifeworld rather than as an administrable case. The film's politics lie precisely in that difference. It does not make Kazakh life opaque. It makes it knowable on terms that do not require external diagnostic capture.

Comparative Synthesis

Placed side by side, *Longji* and *Falling Snow in Yili* reveal why documentary legibility is a stronger analytic than either theme or mode label alone. Both films address minority rural life. Both render that life publicly shareable. Yet they do so through different couplings of authority and time, and therefore produce different epistemic and political horizons.

Longji centralises interpretive authority and directs time toward qualified closure. Its classificatory opening, selective narration, institutional framing, and seasonal spine make Red Yao life readable as a problem of schooling, scarcity, and intervention. The film's unity horizon is institutional inclusion. Difference becomes compatible with the nation through a scheme of development and repair. *Falling Snow in Yili* decentralises authority and thickens time into recurrence. Its opening attunement, domestic speech, durational labour, and lyrical return make Kazakh life readable as relational continuity. The film's unity horizon is coexistence rather than incorporation. Difference becomes shareable not by being translated into a programme of intervention, but by being experienced as a coherent world.

Table 1
Two Regimes of Documentary Legibility in Longji and Falling Snow in Yili

Analytical dimension	Longji - Administrative-Teleological Legibility	Falling Snow in Yili - Experiential-Durational Legibility
Interpretive authority	Selective expository anchoring through voice-over, categorical naming, and institutional framing. Minority life is translated into a publicly readable problem of schooling, scarcity, and intervention.	Localised authority through synchronous domestic speech, subtitles, ambient sound, and household interaction. Meaning arises from within everyday life rather than from an external narrator.
Temporal design	Seasonal indexing and directional progression organise experience toward qualified closure. School construction, reopening, and harvest are aligned within a developmental horizon.	Day-cycle continuity, recurrence, and lyrical return organise experience through persistence rather than progression. Closure is achieved through resonance rather than problem-solution resolution.
Evidence form	Programmatic proof. Labour, domestic life, and village space are organised as evidence within an institutional narrative of access, improvement, and repair.	Evidentiary texture. Labour, prayer, speech, and domestic routine accumulate through repetition and proximity, making coherence available without explanatory compression.
Unity horizon and trade-off	Unity becomes inferable as institutional inclusion. The regime secures high public readability, but narrows lived plurality through administrable translation.	Unity emerges as relational coexistence. The regime preserves stronger experiential coherence, but leaves causal diagnosis less explicitly formulated as public argument.

What this comparison ultimately reveals is not simply stylistic differences between documentary forms, but fundamentally different regimes of epistemic organisation. Administrative-teleological legibility produces a high degree of public readability by clarifying causality, isolating identifiable social problems, and rendering institutional intervention intelligible within a developmental horizon. In films such as *Longji*, minority life becomes narratively organised through explanatory frameworks that align scarcity, intervention, and progress into a coherent trajectory of modernisation. Such a structure enables immediate political intelligibility because it translates complex social realities into administrable categories that can be publicly recognised, evaluated, and governed. Yet this very intelligibility depends upon reduction. Ambiguity, contradiction, and heterogeneous temporalities are often subordinated to explanatory coherence, producing a narrowed field of social plurality in which lived experience is rendered legible primarily through developmental logic.

By contrast, the experiential-durational regime visible in *Falling Snow in Yili* redistributes epistemic authority away from overt explanation and toward embodied perception, local temporality, and sensory immersion. Rather than converting minority existence into a publicly solvable social problem, the film privileges the density of lived time, the texture of ordinary routines, and the affective rhythms of everyday life. Causal diagnosis consequently remains less explicitly formulated, not because the film lacks political consciousness, but because intelligibility is produced through temporal and corporeal encounter rather than through declarative argument. The distinction, therefore, is not reducible to binaries such as truth versus falsity, objectivity versus ideology, or ethics versus manipulation. Each representational regime renders minority life public through different configurations of authority, temporality, and knowledge production.

The broader implication is methodological. The conventional expository/observational distinction remains analytically useful, but only if it is substantially respecified. On its own, the binary cannot adequately account for the complex ways documentary authority is organised across the audiovisual field. The central question is not simply whether a film explains or observes, but how interpretive authority is distributed, how temporality structures are intelligible, and what kinds of social world these formal arrangements permit to emerge. To classify a film as observational merely because it lacks voice-over narration reveals very little about how meaning is produced. Such a designation cannot explain how authority migrates into synchronous sound, domestic speech, subtitling practices, scene duration, framing strategies, or editorial sequencing. Nor does the label “expository” sufficiently specify the degree to which narration governs interpretation, the extent to which local voices retain autonomy, or the ways temporal organisation renders a political argument inevitable, persuasive, or merely suggestive.

Interpretive authority, therefore, becomes a more precise analytical variable than modal classification alone because it directs attention to how explanatory labour is distributed throughout the filmic system. Plantinga’s account of nonfiction rhetoric is important here precisely because it conceptualises documentary not as transparent access to reality, but as an inferential structure that guides spectators toward particular forms of understanding (Plantinga, 1997). Yet the opposite pole is equally significant. MacDougall argues that documentary knowledge may emerge through corporeal proximity, observational duration,

and the temporal grain of ordinary activity rather than through overt discursive framing alone (MacDougall, 1998, 2006). Bruzzi similarly cautions against treating documentary truth as something guaranteed either by omniscient narration or by observational purity. For Bruzzi, documentary meaning is always negotiated through encounter, performance, mediation, and situated interaction rather than secured by formal mode itself (Bruzzi, 2006).

Temporal configuration constitutes the second indispensable variable. Paul Ricoeur's theorisation of narrative temporality is especially useful because it demonstrates that coherence need not depend upon linear progression toward narrative resolution (Ricoeur, 1988). Meaning can instead emerge through repetition, recurrence, rhythm, and processes of refiguration. This insight is particularly important for documentary analysis because films frequently establish intelligibility temporally before they establish it propositionally. A recurring labour sequence, the cyclical return of landscape imagery, a repeated sonic motif, the appearance of month markers, or a voice carried across cuts may all organise experience into meaningful temporal structures without requiring explicit commentary. Temporal form itself becomes epistemologically productive.

Once interpretive authority and temporal configuration are considered together, a crucial point emerges: the absence of voice-over narration does not constitute the absence of authority. In *Falling Snow in Yili*, interpretive authority is not eliminated but radically relocated. It disperses into embodied routine, domestic conversation, ambient sound, silence, spatial duration, and the pacing of everyday actions. This relocation carries significant political implications because it resists what may be described as epistemological capture, the premature reduction of a lifeworld into a publicly manageable problem requiring administrative resolution. Conversely, in *Longji*, authority cannot be reduced merely to the presence of narration itself. What matters is how selective expository framing becomes coupled with a developmental temporal horizon in which minority life is organised as evidence of scarcity, intervention, and progressive transformation. The film's epistemic structure thus derives not simply from narration, but from the alignment between explanatory authority and teleological temporality, through which social reality is rendered governable, developmental, and publicly legible.

Conclusion

This article argues that minority documentary is most productively understood as a problem of legibility: the formal organisation of public intelligibility through the articulation of interpretive authority and temporal configuration. By bringing James C. Scott's theorisation of state legibility into documentary analysis, the article extends the concept beyond questions of visual representation toward the broader political conditions under which social worlds become publicly knowable. Legibility, in this sense, is not synonymous with neutral readability or communicative transparency. Rather, it names the selective operations through which complex forms of life are ordered, translated, and rendered intelligible for institutional, national, and spectatorial publics. Documentary form, therefore, becomes inseparable from broader epistemic structures through which minority existence is framed, administered, and narratively incorporated into modern regimes of knowledge.

The comparison between *Longji* and *Falling Snow in Yili* demonstrates the analytical value of this framework. *Longji* constructs what has been described here as administrative-

teleological legibility through the coupling of classificatory naming, selective expository anchoring, institutional framing, and seasonally structured progression. Minority life becomes intelligible within a developmental horizon organised around scarcity, intervention, and transformation. By contrast, *Falling Snow in Yili* develops an experiential-durational form of legibility grounded in atmospheric perception, embodied temporality, domestic speech, and the accumulation of evidentiary texture through repetition and routine. Its mode of intelligibility emerges less through declarative explanation than through sensory immersion and temporal co-presence. The conventional opposition between expository and observational documentary is therefore insufficiently precise because it cannot adequately account for how authority, temporality, and perception are differentially organised across documentary forms. What ultimately matters is not whether a film explains or observes, but how it structures the conditions under which social reality becomes publicly knowable.

The implications extend beyond these two films or the specific context of minority representation in contemporary China. Documentary politics cannot be reduced to thematic content, stated intention, or the presence or absence of narration, because the politics of representation are fundamentally embedded within the politics of form itself. To analyse minority documentary is therefore to ask not only what forms of difference are represented, but how difference is rendered legible, what forms of collectivity and national coherence become inferable through that legibility, and what dimensions of lived experience remain resistant to epistemological capture. The concept of documentary legibility offers a portable critical vocabulary for addressing these questions across different documentary traditions, particularly in contexts where cinema mediates the relationship between marginal populations, state rationalities, and competing regimes of public knowledge.

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