

Micro-Documentation of National Sentiment in the Era of Media Convergence: A Post-Print Dialogue with Chen Xiaobo, Narrator of “National Photo Album”

Authors: Chen Xuguan

Date: 2023-10-08T00:00:00+00:00

Abstract

In the basement of Xinhua News Agency’s east annex building lies the China Photo Archive, where Chen Xiaobo sifts through over ten million photographs searching for details of ordinary life from historical memory, tracing the trajectory of people’s lives through these details. When discussing achievements, Chen Xiaobo remains modest: “I’m just an ordinary member of the National Photo Album team. Following the production vision and narrative framework set forth by our agency’s leadership, togethe...

Full Text

Preamble

In the basement of Xinhua News Agency’s east annex building lies the China Photo Archive, where Chen Xiaobo sifts through over ten million photographs searching for details of ordinary life from historical memory, tracing the trajectory of people’s lives through these details. When discussing achievements, Chen Xiaobo remains modest: “I’m just an ordinary member of the *National Photo Album* team. Following the production vision and narrative framework set forth by our agency’s leadership, together we’ve picked up ‘pearls’ from the photo archive—each one brimming with emotional power and era-specific details—and strung them into collective memories of bygone years, awakening the sense of home and country in every Chinese person.”

Original Intent: Ordinary People Narrate a Great Era, Small Stories Reveal the Warmth of Time

Interviewee Profile: Chen Xiaobo, Lead Editor at Xinhua News Agency, Executive Editor-in-Chief of “Xinhua Collection,” Chief Curator of “Xinhua Photo Gallery,” and narrator of Xinhua’s micro-film *Red Temperament* and micro-documentary *National Photo Album*. She serves as Director of the China Photographers Association, Vice Chairman of the China Photographers Copyright Association, and instructor at the China Federation of Literary and Art Circles Training Institute. Her publications include: *Chinese Photographers* series (ten volumes, China Renmin University Press), *Why They Photograph* (Documentary Volume, News Volume, Culture and Art Publishing House), *Photography, Feeling China* (English, New Star Press), and *Viewing Damao* series (eight volumes, China Ethnic Photography Art Publishing House).

Regarding the creative vision for *National Photo Album*, the initial concept originated from *Red Temperament*—to create an album of nation and family, telling small stories within grand history while balancing macro-narrative with personal emotion. *National Photo Album* depicts the grand era through stories of ordinary people’s daily lives. Each episode, constructed around themes from old photographs, merges history with the present and individual destiny with national era, evoking emotional resonance among contemporary Chinese audiences.

Discussing the production process, Chen Xiaobo explains: “Every team member poured deep emotion into the making of *National Photo Album*, particularly the writers. They excavate stories from photographs and identify narratives within broader historical contexts. Each theme requires extensive reading, research, and field investigation. After completing a topic, the writer essentially becomes an expert in that field.” Perhaps precisely for this reason, we can sense an indomitable power within these thousand-word narratives, looking back at history through richly nuanced voices and feeling profound warmth. From the fusion of old photographs with narrative to the emotional integration of characters within and beyond the films, the ultimate realization is media convergence. Through conversation with Chen Xiaobo, the journalist gained insight into the “convergence code” behind *National Photo Album*.

In early July 2016, after Xinhua’s micro-film *Red Temperament* was released, Xinhua’s Editor-in-Chief He Ping convened the original production team to enter the China Photo Archive in the form of micro-documentaries, opening the national album to tell stories of era and national destiny, as well as tales and dreams of individuals and the state. According to Chen Xiaobo, Senior Editor at Xinhua, the cumulative views of *National Photo Album* have reached an enormous five hundred million. The planning and production of *National Photo Album* represents a key project personally conceived, planned, and guided by Xinhua’s leadership. Once a topic is selected for each episode, the team begins by choosing materials from Xinhua’s China Photo Archive, transforming

two-dimensional photographs into dynamic video records through digital technology, and tracing the “nation and family” lineage from fragmented historical photos. In the era of media convergence, technological innovation has brought a new perspective for looking back at history. In *National Photo Album*, every detail distills the life texture of “ordinary people,” awakening the sense of home and country in every soul through unadorned narration. Behind each product, one can also savor the creative team’s persistent and pure “sense of history,” marveling at the infinite tension within each work’s unpretentious narrative.

Convergence Process: Deep Emotion, Rigorous Execution

In each six-to-seven-minute episode, thousand-word narration, visual effects, background music, and life-rich old photographs leap onto the screen, opening a retrospective gaze at history, piecing together a complete character, a vivid story, a collective memory, and historical group portraits. In every team member’s WeChat group, weekly and for each episode, thousands of discussion messages flow—from topic selection and photo collection to writing team planning and scripting, then to rough editing, initial review, revision, final draft confirmation, and ultimate release.

When asked about difficulties in the production process, Chen Xiaobo responds: “Every episode presents challenges, but for the Xinhua team, nothing can truly be called difficult.” In the episode “The Most Beautiful is the Family Banquet,” Chen had already located a batch of photos from the 1930s-40s showing Chinese people eating reunion dinners. Editor-in-Chief He Ping asked whether they could find a photo from the late Qing or early Republican period. Even with a mental repository of millions of photos and rich photo-searching skills, this task was like finding a needle in a haystack. “Most photos might only take half an hour or an hour to find, but sometimes a single photo might take a whole day,” Chen explains. With the assistance of Zhang Zhiping, an archivist at the China Photo Archive, they finally located a photo taken by an American traveler in 1901 showing a prosperous Chinese family’s banquet.

This “craftsmanship spirit”—the art of addition, deletion, and polishing through multiple revisions—distills narrative layers, grasps story details, and conveys nuanced emotion. Chief Director Li Keyong and Directors Xu Zhuangzhi and Hao Fangjia oversee the scriptwriting process. Each episode’s writing team condenses narratives based on extensive literature review and numerous interviews. Chen Xiaobo notes she has witnessed these three directors “find solutions in desperate situations,” still meticulously refining film details on the eve of broadcast. Through conversations with production team members, the journalist learned that every writer practices “precision polishing.” After rough cuts are completed each Wednesday, Editor-in-Chief He Ping personally reviews the films and provides revision suggestions, with final review conducted Friday evening. Before each episode goes live, every team member makes careful refinements until the last moment.

Li Keyong states: “*National Photo Album* is produced according to television production standards. Even when displayed on large screens, it remains high-definition. The special effects created from old photos produce a different aesthetic from video footage, possessing a sculptural beauty.” Regarding creation, he notes that Chen Xiaobo is renowned for her research on old photographs—she can instantly recall three to four million photos from memory—and has played a significant role in both *Red Temperament* and *National Photo Album*. When asked about her professional experience and successful crossover into the “film and television circle,” Chen Xiaobo responds calmly: “If I must identify a secret, these six words have accompanied my entire career: ‘deep emotion, rigorous execution.’”

Converged Product: Exclusive Quality Resources + Product Innovation Awareness + New Media Communication Advantages

Media professionals are witnessing the true “era of media convergence.” Through technical means such as three-dimensional special effects, *National Photo Album* fuses each “decisive moment” into a complete story, narrating the consistent emotions toward life, family, and country across different eras. In terms of technical application, drone technology and post-production 3D modeling make documentation more convenient, expression more expansive, and viewing perspectives more diverse. Chen Xiaobo emphasizes that a product’s true value lies in content excavation. *National Photo Album* uses minimal special effects; each two-dimensional image is processed only in service of content and audience experience. What truly moves audiences are the historical photographs themselves and the souls behind them.

Chief Director Li Keyong told journalists that so-called new media innovation today primarily points to the visualization exploration of major themes. *Red Temperament* made major themes visible, perceptible, concise, and lively—suitable for online dissemination. As a micro-documentary series, particularly one centered on old photographs, *National Photo Album* represents an exploration that inherits from *Red Temperament*. Through the polishing of *National Photo Album* as a product, Xinhua’s various business personnel not only leverage their respective strengths to create converged media products but also demonstrate professional skills on the path toward becoming all-media talents. Chen Xiaobo notes that launching new products is the general trend in the era of media convergence, which also requires composite talents, necessitating that personnel training align with the needs of media convergence.

Academic commentary supports this view. Associate Professor Wang Jiahang, Director of the New Media Research Institute at the School of Journalism and Communication at China University of Political Science and Law, states: “*National Photo Album* represents an innovation with historical merit. Bringing over ten million previously sealed historical photographs to the public through micro-

documentary format, *National Photo Album* gives new life to historical memory through new media forms. In terms of content production, *National Photo Album* achieves a combination of national narrative, era narrative, and civilian narrative. As netizens have become accustomed to various light entertainment micro-videos, *National Photo Album* explores how to create documentaries on national themes suitable for multi-screen viewing. Each five-minute episode uses Xiaobo's narrative style to make grand themes approachable, also accommodating today's users' fragmented time. Overall, the creativity and production of *National Photo Album* are refreshing."

Regarding product convergence, Associate Professor Wang notes: "The launch of *National Photo Album* represents the deepening of Xinhua's media convergence. It demonstrates three awarenesses in the production team: first, product awareness—to some extent, *National Photo Album* is an online exhibition of over ten million historical photos, with the micro-documentary format reflecting the creative team's strong curatorial awareness and new media product awareness; second, communication awareness—the ability to bring over ten million historical photos to the public is a blessing of information technology development. Through synchronized dissemination across platforms including the internet, television, mobile terminals, and outdoor screens, *National Photo Album* reaches audiences at different levels, demonstrating considerable communication strategy; third, technical awareness—*National Photo Album* employs three-dimensional special effects and other technical means in production, achieving historical weight without heaviness or dullness, displaying good technical awareness in using new tools to innovate content."

In terms of dissemination mode, *National Photo Album* has formed a multi-platform matrix distribution model, utilizing Xinhua's client app, Xinhua Net, and other channels to rapidly expand dissemination power and enhance influence. The journalist learned from the credits of the 26th episode "The Hardest is Farewell" that after the 25th episode "Love in Family Portraits" was released, netizens posted their own family portraits from various historical periods. Behind these family portraits, though times and environments change, the frozen moments of deep affection awaken everyone's longing for home.

As Han Feizi stated in *Shuo Lin Shang*: "The sage perceives what is coming from subtle signs, and foresees the outcome from the beginning." *National Photo Album* achieves a leap from photographs to era, from family to national destiny.

Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.