

From Symbol to Empathy: A Multidimensional Exploration of Cultural Variety Program Hosts in Cultural Communication

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Abstract: *As an important vehicle for spreading Chinese culture, the role of the host of a cultural variety show is becoming increasingly crucial. The purpose of this paper is to conduct an in-depth exploration of the multidimensional roles of cultural variety show hosts in cultural communication, focusing on the dimensions of symbolic communication and empathic communication. Using the CCTV cultural variety show "China in the Classics" as an example, this study analyzes the visual symbols, linguistic symbols, and non-verbal symbols of the hosts. We explore their visual images, linguistic narratives, physical narratives, and cultural narratives in the program to achieve the audience's cultural identity and emotional resonance. This research provides theoretical reference and practical guidance for the cultural communication strategies of hosts in cultural variety shows. Also, it offers practical significance for the innovative inheritance and development of excellent traditional Chinese culture.*

Keywords: *Cultural Variety, Host, Cultural Communication, Symbolic Communication, Narrative Communication, Empathic Communication*

1. Introduction

Since 2016, China's cultural variety shows have experienced a surge in broadcast popularity, ranging from CCTV to local satellite TVs. Media serves as an important transmitter of cultural communication, and cultural variety shows act as key platforms for the inheritance and innovation of Chinese culture, with program hosts playing an increasingly prominent role. These hosts are not only conveyors of information but also interpreters of culture and communicators of emotions. As vital carriers for disseminating outstanding traditional Chinese culture, the multidimensional construction of imagery symbols and emotional resonance by the hosts of cultural variety programs has become a crucial factor affecting the effectiveness of dissemination. This paper takes the CCTV cultural variety show "China in the Classics" as an example, analyzing its hosts to stimulate the audience's cultural identity and emotional resonance through symbolic communication and narrative ritual. Therefore, the multidimensional construction of cultural variety show hosts in cultural communication not only provides theoretical guidance for cultural program hosts but also has great practical significance in promoting the dissemination of Chinese culture.

2. Symbols: Narrative Communication by Hosts of Cultural Variety Programs

As an important platform for spreading outstanding traditional Chinese culture and enhancing national cultural confidence, the symbolic communication role of hosts in cultural variety shows cannot be ignored. The following multidimensional communication strategies are constructed: the image-building of visual symbols, the cultural transmission of verbal symbols, the body narrative of non-verbal symbols, and the depth narrative of cultural symbols by the host. As the core and soul of the program, the host delivers cultural information to the audience and shapes the program's brand image through a unique symbol system.

2.1. Visual symbols for image building

Wilbur Schramm once said, "One of the most likely ways to change the effectiveness of a communication is to change the impression the target has of the communicator."^[1] The host is the image representative of the cultural variety program and the leader of the communication ritual, making it

extremely important for the host to construct effective visual symbols. Daniel Bell, a leading contemporary American scholar and thinker, suggests that "contemporary culture is becoming a visual culture, not a print culture." The visual symbol of the program host is the first impression that connects the program with the audience. It not only serves the basic function of transferring information but also showcases the host's professionalism, cultural heritage, and even the program's concept.

In the dissemination process of cultural variety shows, the external visual image of the host is the most intuitive and direct way for the audience to understand the program's tone. Therefore, constructing the host's external visual image is critical in presenting artistic aesthetics. The host's attire, hairstyle, and makeup should reflect the program's tone, often portraying an elegant, dignified, and culturally rich image.

In terms of visual perception within the program, the sequence is "view first, then sense." Creating a beautiful external visual image allows the audience to appreciate the cultural program aesthetically while obtaining information. The design of hairstyles, clothing, and accessories that align with the program's tone can help the host seamlessly integrate into the program, thereby better conveying its connotations and evoking cultural feelings and memories from the audience through visual effects.

2.2. Cultural transmission of linguistic symbols

The ideographic role of language symbols in communication is particularly significant, as the host conveys cultural information and builds the program's atmosphere through stylistic inflection and word modification. Cultural variety show hosts need strong cultural skills and language literacy to express the program's cultural connotations accurately and clearly.

In the program "China in the Classics," host Sabine uses harmonies and internet terms in some language expressions to help the audience inherit Chinese classic culture in an entertaining way. This approach brings ancient traditional Chinese culture closer to the audience, engraving a deep cultural imprint in their minds and enhancing their knowledge and recognition of traditional culture and mainstream values. Additionally, some program segments use the host's simultaneous narration to tell the story, conveying information while leading the audience to explore historical narratives.

The actors' performances in the program also significantly enhance language dissemination. Through stage interpretations of historical allusions, the actors create an immersive experience, enriching the audience's understanding of historical lines and stories. This multi-dimensional language rendering enhances the audience's cultural memory and cultural identity.

2.3. Non-verbal symbols for body narratives

In the program "China in the Classics," non-verbal symbols also play a crucial role in communication. Non-verbal symbols, such as expressions, movements, gestures, and postures, are programmed, materialized, active, and ritualized, possessing independence and mobility. These symbols are characterized by their ability to convey narratives in ways verbal communication cannot. The symbolism inherent in non-verbal cues significantly enhances cultural communication, expressing many ineffable messages more explicitly.

Body narrative prominently depicts the artistry of human behavior, referring to the host's messaging through non-verbal symbols such as body language. Herbert Bauer notes that stage actors use expressions and gestures to supplement meanings not conveyed in dialogue, while film actors' connotations flow from their expressions and gestures.^[2]As a crucial form of non-verbal symbolic communication, body narratives visually express the meaning conveyed by behavior. In the program, the host uses body language to enhance the vividness and expressiveness of the narrative, conveying certain aesthetic meanings.

In one episode, when Sabine travels back to the time when Sima Qian wrote the Records of the Grand Historian as a modern-day reader, he wears a traditional Han Chinese dress and carries a bamboo slip. The choice of dress and props acts as a strong non-verbal symbol, silently conveying the changes of the times and the inheritance of culture. As the plot advances, Sima Qian, under dim candlelight, sculpts history one stroke at a time. His focused eyes and trembling brushstrokes speak of his reverence for history and pursuit of truth. These delicate body languages become a bridge connecting the ancient and the modern, bridging the audience's emotions.

Additionally, the program skillfully incorporates ancient rituals and ceremonies. For instance, Sima

Qian's kneeling to his ancestors after completing important chapters expresses his admiration for the sages and commitment to his responsibilities. This ritualized action not only strengthens the historical weight of the program but also evokes the audience's deepest resonance through visual and emotional impact. Figures from different eras, such as Si Yu and Fusheng, also demonstrate their respect for and inheritance of culture through unique ritual forms. Interweaving these non-verbal symbols builds a space for cultural sharing across time and space.

Through the skillful use of non-verbal symbols, such as dress, props, body language, rituals, and audiovisual elements, "China in the Classics" successfully creates a shared space rich in history and cultural heritage, achieving the effective dissemination and in-depth recognition of traditional Chinese culture.

2.4. Deep Narratives of Cultural Symbols

Fredric Jameson posits that "culture is never philosophical; culture is storytelling."^[3] As a paradigm of CCTV's cultural narrative, "China in the Classics," with its host's innovative narrative approach combining ideology and artistry, deeply embeds ancient canonical texts of historiography with modern philosophical rationality and literary romanticism. Through multi-site displays, it interprets ancient and modern exchanges across millennia, reinterpreted from a contemporary perspective, opening up a cultural dialogue across the ages for viewers.

"China in the Classics" weaves a historical canvas using images of historical figures from canonical books as symbols, connecting their stories through these ancient texts. Performers seamlessly move between the theater stage and the television screen, vividly portraying the stories of these ancient characters and leaving a lasting impression on the audience. For example, in the "Book of history" chapter, Sabine travels through millennia as a "contemporary reader," engaging in conversations with ancient sages across time and space. He does more than tell historical stories; he brings them to life and expresses his reverence for these ancient sages.

The program cleverly constructs a dual narrative space of reality and history, using the "canonical books" as a medium, allowing ancient and contemporary voices to dialogue across time. Before the formal performance, segments like "canon scene" and "canon reading" create an immersive atmosphere, helping the audience feel the blend of ancient and modern. Scholars and experts deeply explore the origins and far-reaching influence of "people-oriented thinking," vividly demonstrating the people-oriented concepts and historical lineage embedded in the "Book of history" The program showcases ancient books and conducts profound cultural excavation and extensive cultural dissemination. By bringing ancient texts to the stage, the program harmonizes the vastness and depth of Chinese culture with contemporary spiritual pursuits, allowing the wisdom of the ancients to illuminate the path of today's people.

This two-way narrative, where ancient sages look into the future, and contemporary individuals look back into the past, allows the spirit of culture to transcend time. This approach deepens the audience's understanding and recognition of Chinese culture, stimulates their interest in and love for traditional culture, and opens new pathways for cultural inheritance and development.

3. Empathy: empathic communication by hosts of cultural variety programs

"Empathic communication is the process of formation and the transmission and diffusion of shared or similar emotions and feelings."^[4] Empathy is a crucial ability for building relationships and facilitating emotional exchange. In cultural variety shows, the host can better establish an emotional connection with the audience through empathic communication, enhancing the program's impact and appeal. Empathic communication is an important method of cultural transmission, with cultural identity as the deep bond of empathic communication. This bond enhances national cohesion and identity.

"China in the Classics" strengthens the audience's identification with Chinese culture through a multi-dimensional display of canonical story interpretation, dialogues across time and space, and lectures by experts and scholars. Emotional resonance, as the core of empathic communication, helps achieve a deep emotional connection between the audience and the program content. This connection promotes cultural heritage and emotional sublimation through cultural variety shows.

3.1. Identity Construction of Cultural Memory

Cultural identity, which recognizes a shared culture among groups, is closely linked with cultural memory. Cultural identity needs to be built on a shared cultural memory, and in turn, the activation and awakening of cultural memory consolidate people's identification with their culture. In "The Ethics of Identity," political philosopher Kwame Anthony Appiah demonstrates how narrative operates in the social identity process: "Identity usually has a strong narrative dimension. Through my identification, I make my life story fit a certain pattern..."^[5] Hosts of cultural variety shows should also focus on guiding cultural identity by showcasing the unique charm and value of Chinese traditional culture, stimulating the audience's sense of identity and pride in their culture, and thus promoting cultural inheritance and development.

Cultural identity is key to empathic communication and is a vital cornerstone for maintaining national cohesion and identity. Hosts are the ambassadors of TV programs and the endpoint of media communication; their recognition is directly related to the cultural identity of the audience. To gain audience recognition, hosts of cultural TV programs must ensure that the audience culturally identifies with the content to promote traditional Chinese culture effectively.^[6] "China in the Classics" brings the stories in canonical texts to life through the brilliant interpretations of actors and the interactive guidance of the host, Sabine. Through the program's presentation, the audience not only learns about the rich historical context of the canonical books but also realizes the profound philosophy and contemporary value contained within. This type of dominant sharing via the communicator fosters resonance among different subjects, leading to a stronger sense of identification with Chinese culture and a sense of mission.

Constructing traditional cultural identity is a crucial topic, representing contemporary people's identification with the glorious traditional culture of ancient China and the national spirit.^[7] In programs such as "China in the Classics," host Sabine builds the audience's interest in Chinese canonical books through a cross-temporal dialogue format as a "contemporary reader." This approach allows the audience to feel a bloodline connection and spiritual resonance with traditional culture, strengthening their sense of identity and belonging to their country, nation, and culture. "China in the Classics" fosters the collective memory of social groups with cultural confidence through the theatrical interpretation of Chinese canonical books, thereby reinforcing individual and national identity, promoting the Chinese spirit, and spreading Chinese culture.^[8]

3.2. Emotionally resonant empathic communication

Emotional resonance is the ultimate goal of empathic communication. "Exploring empathy is essentially about studying and exploring the communication of emotions and feelings." Emotional communication and empathic communication exhibit a clear behavioral direction. Through emotionally charged immersive experiences and empathetic interactions, cultural variety shows transform the audience into an emotional community, sharing in the "sadness and joy" of the program and participating in its "rituals."^[9] As the central figure in this ceremonial process, the host has responsibilities that extend beyond mere information delivery and knowledge presentation. They are tasked with reaching the depths of the viewer's soul through heartfelt narratives and passionate expressions that evoke strong emotions.

In "China in the Classics," the actors meticulously portray historical figures' complex lives and emotional journeys from ancient texts, capturing their trials and tribulations. This immersive experience, spanning multiple arenas and spatial realms, creates a space where emotional values are co-constructed, allowing the audience to project their emotions and perceptions onto the program. This results in a seamless transition from the formal integration of audiovisual elements to emotional resonance, fostering a deep connection within an emotional community. Emotional resonance is the ultimate goal for the facilitator, triggering empathic communication. Through the cultural and emotional expression of the program's content, the host successfully touches the audience's emotions and attitudes, eliciting strong emotional resonance. The mechanism of empathy connects different subjects, transmitting rich emotional values and diffusion, achieving emotional resonance, and establishing the audience's sense of mission for cultural heritage development.

Empathic communication is an indispensable ability for cultural variety show hosts. By employing emotional resonance and cultural identity strategies, the presenter effectively establishes an emotional connection with the audience, enhancing the program's impact and appeal. This not only improves the program's quality and reputation but also promotes the inheritance and development of excellent traditional Chinese culture.

4. Conclusions

Hosts of cultural variety shows serve as key figures in telling Chinese stories and inheriting cultural classics, bearing significant responsibilities for the dissemination of traditional Chinese culture. Through their symbolic and empathic roles, hosts engage in a multi-dimensional exploration of cultural communication, adhering to the essence of Chinese cultural connotations while driving innovative program expressions. In their role, cultural variety show hosts promote the creative transformation and innovative development of China's outstanding traditional culture. They stimulate the audience's cultural identity and emotional resonance, establishing themselves as crucial pillars in the mission of Chinese cultural communication. By integrating cultural heritage with contemporary presentation, hosts play a vital role in bridging the past and present, ensuring the effective transmission and evolution of traditional Chinese culture.

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