

# Analysis of Roles and Functional Innovations of the Host in Traditional Cultural Programs

Qian Chuqi

The Creative School, Toronto Metropolitan University, Toronto, Canada  
chuqi.qian@torontomu.ca

**Abstract:** *With the advent of the media convergence era, audience's audiovisual demand for cultural programs in traditional media is also shifting. As the most important part of the traditional media, the role and function of the traditional TV host is being challenged. However, in recent years, mainstream media in China, like CCTV, have innovated the role and function of the presenter in a series of newly launched traditional cultural programs, with remarkable results. This paper analyzes the role and functional innovation of the hosts in traditional cultural programs. Firstly, the role positioning and function of presenters in a broad sense is analyzed. Subsequently, we analyze the innovation of the host role in the traditional cultural programs of "Cultural Program + Theatre + Filmmaking Methods" represented by "Patriarchs' Biographies - Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties" and "China in Classics" from three aspects, including the role form, the image and the language of the TV host. Finally, the expansion of the presenter's functions is analyzed, including analyses of the presenter's participatory and interpretive function and cultural communication function.*

**Keywords:** *Traditional cultural programs, The role of TV hosts, The function of TV hosts, Innovation, Cultural communication*

## 1. Introduction

In many mainstream traditional cultural programs the roles and functions of the presenter have been more innovative compared to the past. "China in Classics" and "Patriarchs' Biographies - Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties" represent a category of "Cultural Programs + Theatre + Filmmaking Methods" traditional cultural programs that have greatly innovated the role of the host and its functions. In these programs, the role of the host Sa Beining is not only a connector and a guide, but he also travels to ancient times as a modern person, visiting famous historical figures. This time he is not just a bystander, he is a witness to history as well. The changing roles of the presenter in different scenarios also enable the show to enhance the effectiveness of cultural dissemination. In this paper, we will take "China in Classics" and "Patriarchs' Biographies - Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties" as examples of traditional cultural programs of "Cultural Programs + Theatre + Filmmaking Methods" to analyze the innovation of the host role and function.

## 2. Overview of Roles and Functions of TV Hosts

With the advancement of the media convergence era, multiple forms of media interact and integrate with each other, resulting in significant changes in the mode and characteristics of communication formed in the era of traditional media. In the media convergence era, the channels, platforms and institutions for information dissemination have all produced a multi-dimensional integration. In this context, on the one hand, cultural variety programs have been enhanced to a certain extent in terms of their communication power, influence and cultural value. On the other hand, they have also brought brand new challenges to cultural variety programs. The communication mode of a portion of traditional media programs has become a shortcoming in the era of integrated media to some extent. Therefore, as one of the important communication element of traditional media, the setting of cultural TV program hosts is facing some challenges. Many of these traditional media programme presenters have the same image, language and communication style. At the same time, the new media ecosystem has also led to the dilution of the host's voice. Some programs have even canceled their hosts. In recent times, many programs have begun to innovate their host settings in various aspects, the two most obvious of which are the role positioning and functions of TV hosts.

### **2.1. The Role of TV Hosts**

The earliest origins of the word "character" can be traced back to the field of theatre. A "Role" is primarily a designated character played by a comedian in a performance, whose specific image, language, personality, behavior are derived from the script and the secondary creation of the actor. The "character" in a performance is in fact a microcosm of a particular phenomenon in life. As a result, the word has also gradually moved from the theatre to all aspects of social life. While in cultural programs, role positioning is a way for the host to find his or her proper position in the show according to the form of the show, combined with his or her own characteristics, and to regulate his or her language, actions, clothing and other external characteristics, in order to achieve the integration and unity of the show and the host<sup>[1]</sup>. The host's role, image, personality and other important elements in a program depend not only on the host himself, but also fit with the tone, image and content of the show. Sometimes the host represents the whole show. This requires the host to have a deep understanding of the content information to be conveyed in the show, and then deliver the content to the audience through language, actions, behaviors, opinions, conversations and many other ways.

The audience's perception of the host's role comes from two main sources: the host's style and the host's language. The host's style encompasses the public's preconceptions of him/her, his/her persona on the show, what he/she wears, how he/she moves, etc., and is required to match the program's and the audience's visions. On the other hand, in the past, the audience's expectation of the host's language was simply that it fit the show and demonstrated a high level of professionalism. However, in the media convergence era, traditional TV hosts no longer exist singularly in front of the traditional media's microphone, but also appear in every media platform. The hosts will be portrayed in different roles and adapted to different media characteristics<sup>[2]</sup>. Moreover, from the period of scripted broadcasting, to the period of allowing hosts to play individually, to the period of integrated media in pursuit of a three-dimensional and multi-faceted "personalized image of the host", the audience's demand for personalized roles for hosts is also increasing day by day. Therefore, hosts need to show more ample, multi-dimensional and down-to-earth language as well as paralanguage based on their own personalized language.

### **2.2. The Function of TV Hosts**

In a program, the pacing and communication function of the host is particularly important. Pace is a universal aesthetic element in television programs, and the host's work is based on the ability to control the process of the broadcast of the show. For a host, it is particularly important to have a good grasp of the program's overall situation, a wide range of skills and a comprehensive knowledge of the show. The host is the ultimate embodiment of the program, and is the key to the success of the show planning. Being able to reasonably grasp the pace of the show and skillfully promote the show process is the most essential work of the host, and is the concentration of his/her business level<sup>[3]</sup>. For example, in the comments section of some cultural programs or variety shows, we can always see viewers discussing the host's field controlling ability. In the comments section of the 2019 CCTV Host Competition, the field controlling ability of the contestants has become the most common term mentioned by the audience. The field controlling ability is actually the control of the pace of the program.

In addition to controlling the pace, the host is tasked with delivering the message of the program to the demographics. From the perspective of television communication, creators of programs such as writers, planners, directors, producers or other sources of program-related information are indirect communicators<sup>[4]</sup>. Indirect communicators convey the program content and form to the program host, who is the direct communicator in the communication process of the program. The host conveys the content of the program to the target audience through his/her voice and image. In another aspect, the host as a direct communicator also feeds back the audience attitude to the creator of the program. It can be said that the host's linguistic expression, paralanguage, etc. will profoundly affect the effect of program content dissemination, and these functions will likewise give the audience new perspectives to interpret and understand the program. With the advent of the media convergence era, the functions of the host are also evolving. Compared with the past situation where the host focused on broadcasting scripts, nowadays, the host needs to have the ability to plan, edit and produce in a number of different media platform ecosystems, combining the functions of an indirect communicator and a direct communicator into one. Therefore, while the host's ability to convey information is continuously improving, the host's function as a cultural communicator is becoming more critical.

### 3. Innovation in the Role of Hosts of Traditional Cultural Programs

#### 3.1. Innovations in Roles of the Host

Traditional cultural variety shows launched in recent years have innovated the role of the host. In some traditional cultural programs, the innovation of the host's role develops in the direction of deepening and diversifying. First of all, it cannot be ignored that the host carries a certain social role<sup>[5]</sup>. The host is a character with a certain public nature, affected by its professional characteristics, as a bridge of communication between the radio and television programs and the audience. He/She is the spokesman of the content and will of the program, and also a friend of the audience; thus, the role of the host itself should have good moral character, spiritual style and so on. This social role is echoed and overlapped with the media role of the host in the process of program communication.

Secondly, the original media role of the host has been deepened and innovated in traditional cultural programs in recent years. In traditional media cultural programs in the past, the host mainly presented the media roles of guiding, linking and telling. At this time, the host's media role is mainly regulated by the media mainstream consciousness and audience expectations, mainly in the form of program organizer and topic guide<sup>[5]</sup>. In TV program "Everlasting Classics", host Sa Beining is the typical program organizer and topic guide. In the opening, Sa Beining has to express the solemnity of traditional culture and the relaxation of music through appropriate language to bring the audience into the program. In the flow of the program, he is responsible for controlling the program and regulating the atmosphere, and in the last part of the dialogue with the guests and scholars, he has to guide the topic and dig out the information. In some newly launched traditional cultural programs, such as "China in Classics" and "Patriarchs' Biographies - Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties", Sa Beining's role as a program organizer and topic guide stays not only in the studio, but also in the drama. In *The Chapter of Han Yu*, Sa Beining converses not only with Han Yu, but also with his wife and the people of the city; in *The Chapter of Su Shi*, the host also talks with a village boy who knows Su Shi well and the village boy's grandmother, and serves as a guide to link up the villagers' farewell party for Su Shi. The innovative application of Sa Beining's role as program organizer and topic guide brings the audience closer to the ancient characters and immerses them in history.

Finally, the newly launched traditional cultural programs in recent years have also innovated the roles of hosts, creating acting roles for hosts. For example, in "China in Classics", Sa Beining is the "host" of the program, linking up the process in the program and talking with experts, scholars, actors and other guests to interpret the classics; in another scene, Sa Beining is also incarnated as a time traveler on the stage. In the episode of "The Yongle Canon", Sa Beining travels through time to the Ming Dynasty and has a dramatic encounter with Chen Ji, who is portrayed by actor Duan Yihong. The same transformation also appears in the "Patriarchs' Biographies - Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song dynasties". Sa Beining, in the modern space-time scene, interviews with two guests in the studio, while in the ancient space-time scene, he takes on the role of a traveler to the Tang and Song dynasties to actually feel the life and customs of that time, interacting with local people, such as talking and gagging with the vendors on the street. Such an innovation not only enriches the roles of the host, but also gives great play to his personal style, and the joys and sorrows shown in the new role form a three-dimensional and multi-faceted "personality image of the host". This transformation of the host role not merely brings closer to the audience's viewing needs in the media convergence era, providing a more immersive experience for the audience, but equally deepens the audience's understanding of important cultural symbols such as the background of the era, the patriarchs, and the classics.

#### 3.2. Linguistic Innovation for Hosts

In program hosting, hosts should pay attention to all aspects of language art, including vocal aesthetic, technical aesthetic and contextual aesthetic, in order to improve the quality of the program and the artistry of linguistic expression<sup>[6]</sup>. Language is one of the important roots of cultural programs. In TV programs, the host enhances the quality, intrinsic beauty and ideological height of the program through language. In "China in Classics", Sa Beining's tone is thick and long, with more emotional expression. He has stronger emotional mobilization ability, which is more capable of conveying the extensiveness and profoundness of Chinese culture. After the role change, Sa Beining changes his language style and lowers his posture, asking questions to the ancients in a curious and inquisitive tone, while adding more personalized language and performance. For example, in "The Chapter of Han Yu", when the contemporary host visiting group come to Chaozhou to explore the city after Han Yu's reforms, Sa Beining intentionally tests the Chaozhou dialect of the hawkers and humorously introduces modern

textile technology to the weaving girl, using his personalized language to innovatively introduce the new face of Chaozhou to the audience, which draws the distance between the audience and history.

In addition to vocal expressions, paralanguage has also been optimized and innovated. Paralanguage is generally regarded as a symbol of non-verbal expression independent of vocal language. When the host expresses, non-verbal signs involving non-verbal expression and capable of carrying and transmitting information belong to the paralanguage. In the opening of the first episode of "China in Classics", when the different historical figures played by the actors walk past Sa Beining, the host accurately reflects the different roles of these ancients in the inheritance and transmission of the classics and the differences in their social status with his different eyes and body gestures. In "The Patriarchs' Biographies - The Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties", when visiting the young Han Yu, Sa Beining curls his upper body slightly and simply makes a bow, while when visiting the middle-aged Han Yu, Sa Beining looks more solemn. When conversing with the famous masters, Sa Beining, as the host, takes a humble posture; his gestures accurately convey Chinese people's admiration and respect for the masters. Sa Beining's facial and body movements change according to the scene, the subject, and the era, using paralanguage as precisely as possible. Such paralinguistic innovations fit with historical facts, serve as a model and guide, and also better disseminate traditional Chinese culture.

#### **4. Functional Innovation for Hosts of Traditional Cultural Programs**

##### ***4.1. From the Observer to the Participant***

In past cultural TV programs, the host mainly narrates from the perspective of an observer, which is more typical of the "National Treasure" series. Zhang Guoli, as the host, is responsible for linking the opening of the show, the introduction of the guests and national treasures, interpretations of the guests' stage plays, and the interviews with the relevant experts, as well as controlling the pace in the interaction with the guests and the audience, guiding and prompting the guests and scholars during the conversations. Programs such as "Everlasting Classics" and "Exploring China on Written Bamboo Slips" have set up the same process; their hosts have played the same role.

However, in recent years, the role of the host in the traditional cultural variety shows has seen a great deal of innovation, which in turn has led to a corresponding innovation in the function of the host. If the host of "National Treasure" is still in the perspective of an observer, then in some recent cultural variety shows, such as "Patriarchs' Biographies - Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song dynasties", the host not only assumes the function of an observer, but also becomes a participant. In "The Chapter of Han Yu", after the scene of the program is changed, Sa Beining time-traveled to the Middle Tang Dynasty with his visiting team into Han Yu's later years when Han is quelling the Huaixi rebellion. They do not become casual onlookers of the events. On the contrary, the visiting team participate in the historical event. At first, Sa Beining knocks on the door of a neighbourhood and no one dares to open it, then a group of soldiers run by and someone falls down in front of Sa Beining who helps the soldier up and finds that it is an old man. Such a plot not only visually shows the horror of the townspeople to the warlords, but also displays the social unrest at that time. Then Sa Beining changes into the Tang Dynasty costumes and enters the barracks, exploring in the barracks, dealing and chatting with the soldiers and others, and eventually witnessing the process of Han Yu's pacification of the Huaixi rebellion.

As the host, Sa Beining shifts from observing the historical event to being deeply involved into it, which also represents the audience's shift from observation to deeper involvement in the adventure. Sa Beining's performance and experiences in the story provide the audience with more sense of immersion and vividly present the historic occasion from history books to the audience. At the end of the program, on behalf of the audience, Sa Beining invites the master of literature Han Yu to come to the modern era as a first-hand witness to visit modern Chaozhou, introducing and watching the cultural heritage left by Han Yu himself, and finally receiving continuous praise and amazement from the latter. As the guide of the program theme and the participant of the story, the host once again brings this comparison and contrast of the ancient past and the present in front of the audience, and makes the effect of the whole show reach its peak.

##### ***4.2. From Information Transmission to Cultural Dissemination***

In cultural programs, it is the top priority of the program host to assume the role of stringing the plot together and controlling the pace. However, with the arrival of the media convergence era, the audience can no longer be satisfied with the host's single function of connecting, and the host's information

communication can not fully support the dissemination of program content. Therefore, for cultural TV programs, the host should achieve the function of cultural dissemination on the basis of information transmission, not merely to carry out understandable and effective cultural output to the audience, but equally to shoulder the responsibility of conveying the mainstream cultural values and guiding the society to be positive and upward<sup>[6]</sup>.

The host should not only display the culture to the audience through his/her language, style and other elements, but make the audience realize the importance of cultural inheritance through these elements as well. For example, in "China in Classics - The Book of Songs", Sa Beining travels back to the Han Dynasty and takes Mao Jang, the great Confucian scholar of that time, who interpreted *The Book of Songs*, into the long river of history together to witness the inheritance and development of *The Book of Songs* by the descendants of other dynasties in Chinese history, including royal prince Liu De of Hejian, Confucian scholar Zheng Xuan of the Eastern Han Dynasty, and poet Du Fu of Tan Dynasty. Finally they go into a village in Hejian where *The Book of Songs* has been inherited 2,000 years later to find the original Harvest Festival becoming the national festival, as well as a well-being life for contemporary generations. At the end of the program, the two men go back to their respective times to celebrate the harvests, chanting poems in *The Book of Songs* with their respective companions. Thus, the two eras echo each other. In the program, Sa Beining appears as the image of a contemporary scholar. Through his language guidance and performance in the ancient - modern interaction, Sa Beining allows the audience to feel the essence of *The Book of Songs*, and makes the audience understand the hardship of the inheritance and development of the Poetry as well as its importance to the future generations.

Sa Beining leads the modern audience to see the origin and charm of Chinese culture, and also leads the ancients to see the development and inheritance of Chinese culture in later generations. Cultural genes are being passed on at this moment. Similarly, with the help of his language and new media technology, *The Book of Songs* is no longer that obscure and difficult to understand. The program uses a brand new arrangement to smooth out the differences between traditional and modern Chinese culture, bridging the gap between the ancient and the present. In addition to stringing the plot together and controlling the pace, the host's function as a vehicle for cultural communication has also been explored in depth, making the obscure and difficult-to-understand verse better communicated in modern times.

## 5. Conclusion

With the advent of the media convergence era, traditional media continue to innovate and develop, and as a key role in traditional media programs - the role and function of the host has also been innovated and explored. Through the excellent traditional cultural TV programs emerging in recent years such as "China in Classics", "Patriarchs' Biographies - Eight Great Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties", it is not difficult to see that hosts have made a certain degree of innovation in their role positioning and functions. On the one hand, the forms of host roles are gradually increasing, host language and paralanguage continue to innovate. In another aspect, the hosts' functions no longer remain only in observation, narration, stringing, and pace controlling of the program, but rather go deeper into the program to become participants in historical stories and disseminators of culture, which enhances the irreplaceability of the host. At the same time, media hosts should better adapt to and integrate into the brand-new media convergence era, making possible the innovation and change in host's roles and functions, so as to better meet the needs of the audience.

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