

Aesthetic Interpretation of Cultural Television Programs from Communication Rituals: An Analysis Based on Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song

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Abstract:

In the new communication context, the ‘breaking of boundaries’ in cultural television programs can be attempted by exploring their aesthetic and educational functions. Understanding this phenomenon requires incorporating relevant theories of communication rituals. This study conducts an in-depth textual analysis of the television program *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song*. With a particular focus on the episodes related to the Three Sus, we find that the program successfully constructs ritualistic communication in the form of ‘dialogue between the past and the present’ through cleverly integrating diverse symbols. This ritualistic communication vividly presents the profound cultural content of the *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song*. The article argues that this program uses cinematography to create a mimetic environment that compensates for the absence of physical presence. It addresses the emotional and aesthetic deficiencies, fulfilling its role in aesthetic education for the public. Additionally, the program expands the mainstream cultural discourse and serves as a new model for the innovative development of cultural television programs in the current context. It also provides insights for constructing a new media ecosystem.

Keywords:

Communication Rituals, Cultural Television Programs, Aesthetic Interpretation

1. Introduction

Rituals are human history’s oldest and most universal social and cultural phenomena. They are usually constructed based on cultural elements and shared social identities specific to a particular ethnic group, which is crucial in establishing national cultural confidence. In the 1970s, James W. Carey introduced the concept of the “ritual view of communication,” suggesting that communication originates from

constructing and maintaining an orderly and meaningful cultural world. Observing the proliferation of traditional Chinese cultural television variety shows in the current media landscape, which have flourished with advancements in media technology, they have achieved cultural communication and shared meanings through ‘television rituals’, thereby establishing cultural identity and constructing cultural significance for the Chinese nation. For example, existing research analyzing the television program *China in the Classics* considers the issue of cultural identity^[1], and the emphasis on ‘interest’ or ‘creativity’ in overseas television programs has gradually been accepted domestically [2].

Facing new cultural missions in the production of audiovisual content in the broadcasting media, in recent years, China Central Television (CCTV) and local television stations have actively produced a series of cultural variety shows with relevant themes. The aim is to present new perspectives on Chinese culture in the context of the new era, promote the creative transformation and innovative development of excellent traditional Chinese culture, disseminate outstanding traditional Chinese culture, and enhance international influence. In recent years, CCTV has implemented a program quality strategy focusing on ‘content is king’, multiple cultural variety shows have taken root in the fertile soil of excellent traditional Chinese culture, maintaining cultural confidence. In the current entertainment-dominated media ecosystem, cultural variety shows on television have become essential carriers of aesthetic education due to their practical strategies of ‘aiming at cultural education and disseminating knowledge’ [3].

The subject of this study, *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song*, is the first cultural television program focusing on the eight great scholars of the Tang and Song Dynasties. It allows the audience to experience the enduring power of Chinese culture by revisiting the historical moments when numerous masterpieces were born. It has become a medium for aesthetic education in the new era, promoting the perception of culture among individuals and fulfilling Friedrich Schiller's aesthetic education concept by achieving human nature's total development. This study analyzes the ‘Three Sues’ chapter of this program. Based on James W. Carey's construction of the communication ritual view, it examines the emotional structure maintenance of a series of culturally significant symbols by mainstream media (CCTV) and the construction of a multifaceted and blended ‘media phenomenon’, which has particular social significance and academic value.

2. Literature Review

2.1. Cultural Television Programs

Cultural television programs refer to TV programs that primarily focus on the dissemination of culture, utilizing innovative techniques such as drama, visuals, and sets. In recent years, cultural television programs that promote excellent traditional Chinese culture, such as *China in the Classics*, *National Treasure*, *New Melody of the Ancient Charm*, *Shared Beauty*, and *Exploring Chinese Heritage through Scripts*, have continuously emerged. Regarding content, cultural television programs have an aesthetic orientation that revitalizes cultural heritage. Regarding communication practices, cultural television programs are finding a good combination point between online variety shows and documentary films, evoking dialogue between the past and the present.

Regarding aesthetic education, both ancient Greece in the Western world and the Spring and Autumn and Warring States periods in China highly valued the role and function of aesthetic education. For example, Socrates believed that aesthetic education had significant value in shaping a sound personality, and the ritual music system of the pre-Qin period contributed to the cultivation of aesthetics. In the era of extensive application of mass media, the aesthetic education function of cultural television programs and other cultural communication tools has also received significant attention [4]. Xu Fuguan also mentioned the popularization of traditional aesthetic education in *Chinese Artistic Spirit*, which helps individuals internalize aesthetics through mass media and achieve a state of appreciating the world's beauty. Cultural television programs combine excellent traditional Chinese culture with modern media technology, satisfying the audience's aesthetic needs while subtly internalizing external social norms into individual consciousness, thus realizing the daily and widespread nature of traditional aesthetic education and fulfilling its function.

2.2. Research on Communication Rituals

James W. Carey's concept of communication rituals suggests that communication is not simply the diffusion of information in space but involves a process of symbol transformation. Under the influence of communication rituals, audiences form a specific emotional identification and resonance [5]. For example, cultural television programs such as *China in the Classics* and *China in Stories* ingeniously construct a multi-level ritual space, helping the audience better understand the artistic essence of the works and deepening the expression of cultural television program works through symbolic ritual themes [6]. Communication rituals focus on individuals and their behavior, and information transmission is accomplished through various aspects such as specific symbolic meanings, ritual scenes, and participant elements. These elements enrich information content and give cultural television programs meaning and value.

In the current construction of mass media, it is necessary to pay attention to the participatory and shared nature of communication rituals and strengthen the effective dissemination of traditional culture through the power of contemporary new media technologies. In cultural television programs, art forms with 'Internet Genes' constantly expand creative ideas and innovate communication methods, enabling excellent traditional Chinese cultural themes to be favored by audiences, especially young people, and finding new ground for the visual expression of cultural texts.

In cultural television programs, performance spaces often set up '1+N' small stages to facilitate the construction of multi-level narratives and ritual spaces [7]. At the same time, contemporary cultural television programs create audiovisual spectacles that link screens of different sizes, presenting precise meanings and discourses. By utilizing this approach, such programs can enhance cultural taste and help shape value identification. Cultural television programs can achieve the value of communication rituals through the setting of 'multi-level ritual spaces' and 'symbolic ritual themes.'

3. Research Method: Case Study

As a cultural television variety show, *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song* focuses on the eight masters of the two dynasties, pioneering the exploration of the rich cultural treasures within traditional Chinese culture. To analyze the program's production strategies, this study selected the 'Three Sus' series as the

case based on its typicality and representativeness. The total duration of the ‘Three Sus’ series is approximately 6 hours and 23 minutes. Considering the duration of the series and the dissemination of secondary creations, the episodes of the ‘Three Sus’ series in the program are chosen as the objects of analysis in this study.

In this program, the ‘Three Sus’ series consists of four episodes: *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song - Su Xun*, *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song - Su Shi/Su Zhe (Part 1)*, *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song - Su Shi/Su Zhe (Part 2)*, and *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song - Su Shi/Su Zhe (Part 3)*. These episodes were broadcast during prime time at 8 p.m. on CCTV-1 from December 29, 2023, to January 26, 2024.

In terms of the content of this series, the episode on Su Xun mainly tells the story of a father, Su Xun, who gained fame in the literary world despite not achieving official success in his career and how he raised two sons who became renowned figures in history. The episodes on Su Shi and Su Zhe are divided into three parts, vividly presenting the story of these ‘twin stars of the literary world’ who achieved success in the imperial examinations, became famous in the capital, and always supported each other, portrayed with heartfelt emotions, and depicted their bond of ‘sharing a bed on a rainy night’ on the screen. This study focuses on how the program conveys the profound meaning of traditional culture, maintaining the unique charm of the classic intellectual property (IP) while incorporating artistic creativity and innovative communication approaches.

4. Research Findings

From the perspective of communication ritual theory, cultural television programs' aesthetic interpretation and research have become increasingly prominent in recent years, with more and more programs focusing on traditional cultural themes. *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song* exemplify this trend. It has played a positive role in constructing the collective memory framework of poetry culture, consolidating social consensus, and reshaping cultural confidence in Chinese poetry. This suggests that future original cultural variety shows should delve deeper into local cultural connotations, innovate in content presentation and communication forms, and enhance the sense of ritual in cultural variety programs.

4.1. Textual Analysis of the "Su Xun" Chapter

In terms of the portrayal in the television program, the ‘Su Xun’ chapter of *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song* highlights the basic structure of the ‘Three Sus’ story. It flexibly utilizes the characteristics of television media. On one hand, it uses visual and stage performances to visualize Su Xun's image and bring it to life. It also weaves important episodes of Su Xun's life through television language, thus dramatizing the narrative. On the other hand, it achieves a sense of unfamiliarity at the narrative level through dramatic devices, making art more lifelike. The unique perspective and rich details make the biographical storytelling captivating. Returning to television programs, this research suggests establishing a cognitive framework of ‘demand-design-aesthetics’ to analyze programs like *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song*.

Firstly, regarding program demand, ‘Su Xun’s chapter of “*Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song*” highlights the image of the historical

figure ‘Su Xun.’ Su Xun’s literary achievements are not as high as Su Shi’s, so his presence has been overshadowed by the extensive discussions and research on Su Shi in literary history and the history of the Tang Dynasty. As a television variety show that focuses on the Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song Dynasties, exploring the story of Su Xun helps uncover his actual image hidden beneath official historical records. In the program, the actor playing Su Xun interprets his understanding of the relationship between the Su family, father, and son, praising the resilient and warm family affection in a grand era.

Secondly, regarding program design, the ‘Su Xun’ chapter of *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song* focuses on the ethical family bond and patriotism between the Three Sus. The concepts of ‘family’ and ‘nation’ intertwine and jointly contribute to the content of the television program, creating a rich narrative. For example, the program includes scenes depicting Su Zhe’s daily life with his wife, appropriately dramatizing the plot based on historical records. The characteristics and temperament of Su Zhe’s virtuous wife are highlighted, connecting the stories of the Three Sus. The dramatic design of the television program relies on the connection between different scenes. Compared to documentary works on the theme of the Three Sus, the coordinated use of these elements contributes to the final program effect.

Lastly, regarding program aesthetics, the ‘Su Xun’ chapter of *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song* considers the viewing habits of contemporary audiences, satisfying their emotional needs while watching the story of the Three Sus. For example, the program portrays Su Xun and his wife treating each other with respect and equality, depicting their harmonious relationship in a relatable manner. These artistic elements in everyday life stimulate emotional resonance among the audience. Art originates from life and points to artistic content in daily life.

4.2. Textual Analysis of the "Su Shi/Su Che" Chapter

Firstly, in terms of program demand, the ‘Su Shi/Su Che’ chapter of *Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song* portrays the enduring brotherly bond and joint achievements of the two Sus in facing the challenges of fate and contributing to the cultural peak of the Northern Song Dynasty. The program captures the essence of their relationship and showcases their accomplishments and collaborative work. The program aims to inspire and move the audience by incorporating anecdotes and stories, invoking emotional resonance and fostering a sense of appreciation, love, and inheritance of traditional culture. It highlights the precious spiritual core of the masters, encouraging viewers to reflect upon themselves through their spiritual insights.

Secondly, regarding program design, the ‘Su Shi/Su Che’ chapter delves into the lives, literary achievements, and profound benevolence of the two great Confucian scholars by starting with well-known classical verses. It explores their personal experiences and the cultural legacy beyond what is commonly known, allowing the audience to better understand ‘Su Shi’ and ‘Su Che’ beyond what is found in textbooks. Unlike the documentary series ‘Su Dongpo’ aired on CCTV Documentary Channel in July 2017, which was constrained by limited materials and focused primarily on the life trajectory of Su Dongpo, this research takes a fresh approach by innovatively presenting cultural products. It delves into their eventful lives and expands the ‘availability of content’ in the cultural landscape, providing various

possibilities for cultural engagement. The program highlights the symbolic connection between Su Dongpo and Hangzhou, the 'heaven on earth,' through showcasing signature dishes such as Dongpo pork, Dongpo pastry, chunky fish, and Longjing shrimp.

Lastly, in terms of program aesthetics, one of the highlights of the 'Su Shi/Su Che' chapter is the collaboration between two seasoned actors, Wang Jinsong and Gao Shuguang, portraying Su Dongpo and Su Che, respectively. Their powerful performances showcase the essence and sentiments of being masters, providing captivating and brilliant interpretations. In the final episode of the 'Three Sus' chapter, the program specially designs a segment where Su Dongpo returns to present-day Hangzhou, seeking traces of his affection and experiencing the city's splendor. Host Sa Beining and actor Wang Jinsong, in the role of an elderly Su Dongpo, take a boat ride on West Lake, discussing famous scenes such as 'Spring Dawn on the Su Causeway' and 'Three Pools Mirroring the Moon.' They explore the cultural heritage of stone engravings in the Xiling Seal Art Society and visit famous landmarks like the City Gate and the Olympic Sports Center Gymnasium. In this sacred and ceremonial atmosphere, the audience gains knowledge and understanding of performing arts and culture and enhances their memory of the culture through immersive experiences^[8]. The immersive environment changes the relationship between the viewers and the live setting, allowing them to directly 'arrive' at the scene in a three-dimensional space and experience a 360-degree immersion, achieving a sense of physical presence. These designs create a harmonious aesthetic effect by connecting the past and the present.

5. Conclusions

From the perspective of communication ritual theory, communication activities construct the framework of cultural variety shown through 'rituals'. By encoding and decoding cultural symbols, audiences can experience the diversity of content in ritual activities. This study intends to conduct an aesthetic interpretation and exposition of the artistic variety show Biographies of Eight Great Prose Masters of the Tang and Song by exploring the multidimensional integration of symbols in television programs and the logic of ritual communication in television programs. Regarding symbol usage, this research focuses on the fusion of auditory and visual symbols in TV programs. For example, in the chapter about Su Xun, the program intentionally turns catchy dish names into tongue twisters. At the same time, the setting of the scene naturally highlights symbols with distinct characteristics of the Song Dynasty, such as porcelain and landscape paintings. Indeed, these details are not the main focus of the program's narrative, but the ingenious handling of these details can make the audience feel immersed. Research has shown that these details can be amplified on social media, providing more space for secondary creation.

At the same time, new media provides a space for interaction and communication between the program's creators and the audience. This not only cultivates a loyal audience for traditional cultural dissemination but also attracts more people to join the ranks of creators, thereby promoting innovative dissemination and creation. Internet users express their artistic appreciation, supplement historical materials, and interpret culture through bullet comments and comments. There are numerous examples of such interactions, transforming the interaction between online and offline communication into a cultural field that integrates the virtual and the real, as well as the subject and the object. It has evolved from the presentation and utilization of

individual traditional cultural elements to the extraction and ‘virtual simulation’ of traditional artistic conception, artistic charm, and other spiritual aspects, stimulating the public’s identification with traditional culture.

In future research, the availability of technology should increasingly become a topic of study in cultural television programs. American ecological psychologist James J. Gibson first proposed the concept of availability. He extensively explored the interaction between the environment and the subject, paying particular attention to the perception between the subject and the object and how the object shapes the behavioral possibilities of the subject through resource allocation in a specific environment. For example, when TV program viewers like, interact on the screen, and share program content on social media platforms, these are supplementary expressions of the program’s content. When the number of likes and discussions increases dramatically, data streaming platforms recommend these digital entertainment programs to more people, creating a solid emotional atmosphere due to the rapid expansion of the audience. This further triggers a broader emotional resonance, immersing the audience in the emotional experience of the program and making them reluctant to leave.

Conflicts of Interest

The author declare that there is no conflict of interest regarding the publication of this article.

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