

# *Meaning Production and Identity Interconstruction: A Study of Cultural Memory in the Program "National Treasures"*

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**Abstract:** "To strengthen the great unity of the Chinese nation, the long-term and fundamental thing is to enhance cultural identity", and cultural relics, as the condensation of cultural memory, are the factual basis and important source to promote cultural identity. The program "National Treasures" has enhanced the cultural identity of all ethnic groups with its extremely strong content substance and novel program format. Based on the theoretical basis of cultural memory reproduction and cultural identity, the study analyzes the logic of meaning reproduction of the program "National Treasure" from figurative to abstract, guardianship and inheritance, parallelism of multiple subjects, and interplay of interaction and exchange, and analyzes how the program realizes the mutual construction of cultural memory and cultural identity from two dimensions of identity strengthening path and memory transmission process.

## 1. Introduction

To strengthen the unity of the Chinese nation, the long-term and fundamental thing is to enhance cultural identity. As an important medium for presenting the past, the present and the future, the knowledge stored in cultural memory is of fundamental importance to collective identity<sup>[1]</sup>. In cultural memory, the past is often "captured". In cultural memory, the past is often "condensed into symbols to which memories can be attached," and memories are not only contained in words and texts, but also in these "symbolic" carriers. Cultural heritage is a specific carrier with symbolic unity, recording human social activities, cultural life and ideology<sup>[2]</sup>. It has become an important basis for strengthening cultural identity. However, memory is often accompanied by forgetting. The rapid and efficient development of media has made human memory increasingly dependent on external "symbolic storage systems", and the individual's own memory mechanisms have become increasingly degraded<sup>[3]</sup>. At the same time, the rapidly changing social context of the postmodern era has changed modern attitudes toward tradition, which has led to a gradual lack of memory in a group sense<sup>[4]</sup>. These have led to a gradual lack of memory in a group sense. Therefore, in order for people of all ethnic groups to form an emotional resonance and value identification with Chinese culture, the reproduction of cultural memory through cultural relics is an important way to consolidate national unity and promote national rejuvenation.

In 2013, it was pointed out that "It is necessary to systematically sort out the traditional cultural resources, so that the cultural relics collected in the Forbidden Palace, the heritage displayed on the vast land, and the characters written in ancient books can all come alive"<sup>[5]</sup>. In 2017, a large-scale cultural and museum exploration program was launched and achieved a good social response, which is the National Treasures series jointly launched by the Central Radio and Television Station and the Palace Museum and other 17 museums and nine historical and cultural heritages in China. The program adopts the "TV + network" dual-track broadcast mode, broadcast on CCTV-3 variety channel, and CCTV network, Tencent video, Akiyip, Youku video and Beili Beili video platform (hereinafter referred to as B station) for cooperation, and won high scores in major film and television review platforms. As of June 3, 2022, on the B station platform, the three seasons of "National Treasures" have achieved 27.852 million, 31.177 million and 40.563 million plays respectively, with a rating of 9.8 points. Each issue will feature a museum or historical and cultural heritage, debuting three selected national treasures, each of which invites a celebrity as the guardian of the national treasure and brings out an important person related to it to talk about it live. The cultural relics hidden in major museums gradually come from behind the scenes to the stage and tell their past lives through oral narration, video recording and stage performance, spreading the historical knowledge that was originally kept in the pavilion and only mastered by a few groups to the public. The program uses cultural relics as a carrier to convey rich cultural symbols, bringing hurricane growth in the number of visitors to the 17 cooperating museums and adding momentum to the cultural relics economy such as the Forbidden City's cultural creations. So what makes "National Treasures" break through the shortcomings of traditional heritage programs and succeed? How can the material form of cultural relics be transformed into the audience's inner cultural memory?

## **2. The Cultural Significance Production of the Program "National Treasures"**

Jan Assmann argues that each culture forms a "cohesive structure" that serves as a link and connection at the temporal and social levels. The group's shared past, shared norms of behavior, value judgments, and acquired knowledge provide the foundation for the individual "I" to the group "we". Maurice Halbwachs points out that transformation into meaning is a prerequisite for recollection to enter the collective memory, that memory makes meaning, and that meaning consolidates recollection <sup>[6]</sup>. The production of meaning is therefore the production of meaning for the object. Therefore, the production of meaning of cultural relics is to deepen the interpretation, reshape and revitalize the meanings they contain, and then to discover the contemporary value of these memory items <sup>[7]</sup>. The rapid development of modern media has led to the re-enactment of memory. The rapid development of modern media has led to the visualization and diversification of memory reproduction expressions and communication channels, and the program "National Treasures" integrates two creative approaches, documentary and variety arts, for innovative expressions. Through the selection, processing and artistic presentation of cultural relics and texts, National Treasures gives new meaning to cultural relics.

### **2.1. From Figuration to Abstraction: the Elaboration and Interpretation of Meaning**

Maurice Halbwachs believes that only by refining and interpreting the memories attached to concrete objects and bringing them to the level of ideas, spirit and symbols, people can better experience and remember. The program "National Treasures" uses cultural relics as the intermediary and culture as the core to showcase diverse themes of the times such as science and technology, philosophy, economy and trade, education, and diplomacy, and to construct an imaginary space where cultural memories and family sentiments intersect. People can clearly feel the connotation of

the cultural relics by watching the interpretation and elaboration of the relics. The terracotta warriors in the second installment of Season 3 symbolize the countless heroes who died for the Great Unification, and the expression "the mountains and rivers are unharmed, the heroes are immortal" in the narration reminds viewers of the martyrs who died for the pursuit of national independence in the Chinese nation over the past hundred years. In the fourth episode of the third season, "The First Topography of the Qianlong Imperial Stone Sutra" verifies the learned nature of the Chinese people since ancient times. Traditional Confucianism has built the backbone of Chinese literati, guided generations of Chinese people to revere knowledge, profoundly influenced the ideological temperament and philosophy of the Chinese people, and answered the question "Why are we who we are today?"

"Heritage is never a dusty antique", and moving from heritage to meaning is the discovery, revelation, and interpretation of the figurative, the transformation of memory into new knowledge and ideas, the "significance of historical facts (real and fictional) for the present and future of the nation"<sup>[8]</sup>. It is "the significance of historical facts (real and fictional) for the present and future of the nation. In the opinion of executive director Bi Bo, the fundamental reason for the success of National Treasure is that the team tries to restore not only the past lives of national treasures, but also the perspective of "history into reality". Due to the lack of informative historical records of some of the cultural relics, the "Past Life Legend" segment is mostly based on historical facts, the historical scenes of the cultural relics or the inner world of historical figures are reasonably imagined and artistically created in the form of skits, sketches, cabarets and other forms of small theater, so as to construct a "perceptible, tangible and realistic" experience for the audience. "perceptible, figurative" historical world. Actors in the stage or the interpretation of cultural relics, or the interpretation of the owner of cultural relics, or even the interpretation of cultural relics themselves, to convey the information related to cultural relics. In the "story of this life" link, the program often invites people closely related to national treasures, including archaeologists, cultural bloggers, educators, scientists, heritage enthusiasts and other professionals, they will be their own knowledge of the significance of cultural relics and the development of oral or visual expression, so that the cohesion of the story and meaning of each piece of cultural relics in the new social context.

## **2.2. Guardianship and Transmission: the Presentization of Cultural Memory**

"The continuity and transmission of memory is a purposeful, conscious and repeated reproduction", is the "re" processing of existing memory, including "repeated encoding, storage, extraction and resurrection of historical information process"<sup>[9]</sup>. This means that the analysis of cultural relics should be combined with specific spatial and temporal contexts, and the symbolic and meaningful functions of the memory field should be brought into play. The program "National Treasures" builds a memory space linking online and offline through the stage and media, in which the cultural memories contained in the cultural relics are reproduced with meaning. The narrative link "Story of this life" in the program explains the relevance of cultural relics, which is a new and authoritative discourse system. Throughout the program, the two key words "guardianship" and "heritage", is the program producer in the objective premise of the basic information of cultural relics, the excavation of the symbolic meaning of cultural relics and the continuation of the function. "Tradition is not an unchanging relic handed down from ancient times, but a living creation of contemporary people"<sup>[10]</sup>. The application of the "lost wax method" in the manufacture of turbine blades for the 21st century aerospace industry, the use of the gyroscope inside the Tang Dynasty grapes, flowers and birds silver scented capsule for navigation, the significance of the hot stamping pattern of the Style Ray family for architecture, and the revelation of the Du Hu talisman for information security in the Warring States period are all examples of "tradition" in contemporary

times. "Tradition" is passed on in contemporary times. In addition, the prehistoric instrument Jiahu bone flute, the pinnacle of bronze art in the Western Zhou Dynasty, the Dake Ding, and China's first copper-gilt wood core stirrup are all evidence of the advanced status of Chinese culture without equal. In recalling their own history, and in presenting the memory images that play a role in consolidating the foundation, National Treasures helps viewers build up great national self-confidence and strengthen their Chinese cultural identity.

### **2.3. Multiple Subjects in Parallel: the Representation of Shared Collectives**

It is worth noting that in the reproduction of the meaning of cultural relics, the producer of the program, the guardian stars, the guardians in this life, the director of the museum, and all the viewers (including those present and outside) are the subjects of meaning production, and they form a collective. In "National Treasure", a memory field full of meaning, the producer transcodes and processes the symbols contained in the relics to present new symbolic meanings. The stars use stage performances to interpret their understanding of meaning, the guardians of this life tell stories to illustrate the symbolic meaning of cultural relics, and the museum directors provide scientific and supplementary explanations based on their professional knowledge. On the one hand, the audience is immersed in the recording situation, automatically generating the imagination of the meaning, and on the other hand, they are included as a corner of the field of memory, constituting a mediating carrier of the identity of the audience outside the field. On the other hand, the off-site viewers receive and share the meaning through the media transmission of television and the Internet. These five subjects jointly complete the reproduction of meaning in cultural memory, performing "a series of active and participatory acts" <sup>[11]</sup>. The five subjects work together to reproduce meaning, performing "a series of active and participatory acts. Through the dual mechanism of internal anchoring and external materialization, the production subjects materialize unfamiliar cultural relics into subjectively visible, tangible, and controllable "real" reality, forming a collectively shared social representation.

As autonomous memory carriers, viewers do not passively receive cultural symbols from program expressions, but in certain social contexts, they subjectively understand and actively interpret program contents according to their existing concepts, knowledge reserves or cognitive levels, and form a shared meaning system in group interaction. They are also active reproducers of meaning. In this process, viewers relate their own thoughts and feelings to the cultural symbols displayed in the program, creating their own meaning and forming emotional resonance with the program's expression.

### **2.4. Interaction, Exchange and Integration: an Eclectic Chinese Civilization**

With its vast territory and numerous ethnic groups, the Chinese nation has a pluralistic identity: a unified national and ethnic community identity, and the identities of various provinces, municipalities, autonomous regions and ethnic minorities. In the second season, the sixth installment of the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region Museum and the third season, the third installment of the Tibet Autonomous Region Potala Palace, the intermingling of ethnic cultures reflected in the painted wooden figurines in silk, the cultural collision shown in the multi-form Fuxi and Nuwa drawings, and the multi-ethnic craft exchange in the red palace of the Potala Palace, all become the testimony of Chinese civilization and a symbol of the intermingling of ethnic memories.

"Cultural transmission between any ethnic groups is a two-way street." While Princess Wencheng brought Tibet writing, Buddhist scriptures and craft techniques such as weaving, papermaking and astronomical calendars, Tibetan polo, ochre face and conical bun also influenced the aesthetics of the Tang people. Contemporary Princess Wencheng - former Vice President of

Tibet University, Ms. Zhang Tingfang followed her Tibetan husband, Tsewang Junme, and was rooted in Tibetan education for more than forty years, making great contributions to Sino-Tibetan exchanges and education. Their emotion crosses religious beliefs and ethnicities, epitomizing the deep love of ethnic blood. Similarly, Chu Yan, associate professor of Beijing Institute of Fashion, the guardian of the silk-clad painted wooden figurines in this life, recreates the costume style of the Tang Dynasty through an ancient costume art. Cultural relics are symbols of cultural continuity and witnesses of national history. By creatively transforming the "legends of the past life" and "stories of the present life" of cultural relics, the program "National Treasures" builds an inclusive cultural meaning, allowing viewers to strengthen their cultural identity in a cultural interaction between self-affirmation and recognition of the other.

### **3. The "National Treasures" Program Reinforces Cultural Identity**

"Identity is a necessary condition for defining the symbolic boundaries of the group, achieving the production and reproduction of group centripetal force, and establishing the inward legitimacy of the group" <sup>[12]</sup>, memory, as the factual basis on which identity formation is based, exerts an important influence at all stages of the identity process. H. Tajfel divides the production of social identity into three stages: social classification, social comparison and positive differentiation. First, the most basic and important is social categorization. People unconsciously categorize things, i.e., social categorization. In this process, individuals also categorize their selves into corresponding social categories, i.e., self-categorization. Under the dual effect of social categorization and self-categorization, people will form the concept of in-group and out-group. The second is social comparison. Inter-individual and inter-group comparison is an important means of gaining identity. The third is positive differentiation. For self-motivation reasons, when individuals compare groups, they will actively choose the advantages of their own in-group as the comparison standard to achieve positive differentiation of the group to which they belong <sup>[13]</sup>. The third is positive discrimination. Common history and encounters, as well as cultural characteristics such as language, writing, customs, and religion, are key elements of identity <sup>[14]</sup>.

Cultural identity is an individual's sense of belonging and psychological commitment to the cultural group to which he or she belongs, and his or her cognition, behavior and attitudes are consistent with those of most members of the group. Therefore, common historical memories and shared cultural memories can help strengthen Chinese cultural identity. The three seasons of "National Treasures" showcase a total of eighty-one precious cultural relics, which convey the past shared by the members of the community through the representation of the relics among the audience. This allows "memories to keep reappearing, and through them, as through a continuous relationship, our sense of identity endures for a lifetime" <sup>[15]</sup>.

#### **3.1. Strengthening Consensus: Sharing History and Culture**

Individual identification with the group is based on "a common system of knowledge and shared memory among members", which can be called social consensus and relates to a common language, religion, norms of behavior, values, and social structures that are embedded in the deeper layers of knowledge. This consensus provides group members with a sense of wholeness and historical awareness in both time and space, strengthening the in-group attraction of the group, thus promoting the identity of group members and leading to the unity of collective action. The National Treasures program promotes a "consensus" through a cycle of cultural meanings, including the perception of cultural objects and the imagination of the past, concerning the rules that make collective daily life run smoothly and those that are self-evident in social interactions. The narrative of consensus creates a sense of belonging in time and space through shared memories or

commemorative rituals that also serve as the cornerstone of group identity <sup>[16]</sup>. The National Treasures program clearly communicates for viewers the origins of the nation, its shared cultural heritage, language and script, and religious beliefs in the production of stories and the construction of meaning for the artifacts. "Shared experiences and shared expectations build a common space of behavior. Shared knowledge as well as similar self-images shape a common identity" <sup>[17]</sup>. On the basis of this, each audience member identifies his or her own group identity, constructs a self-image, realizes "knowing where one comes from and knowing where one goes", and deepens one's sense of belonging to Chinese culture.

### **3.2. Positive Distinction: "We" is Different from "They"**

After reinforcing consensus and sharing memories, people make social categories based on the criteria of social memory formation in the group framework, distinguishing between in-groups and out-groups, i.e. "my group" and "other groups". For self-motivation and solidarity reasons, when comparing with "other groups", individuals tend to look for a certain point of advantage of "my group" to achieve positive distinction, exaggerate the difference between groups in a particular dimension, and highlight the favorable position of my group. In addition to favorable advantages, individuals also tend to unite with their members by sharing common encounters to achieve the purpose of enhancing in-group social identity. It is because of the existence of "them" that "we" have a deeper sense of self-identity. It can be said that cultural memory, as a meaning-making tool, constructs in-group identity in social categorization and group comparison.

On the stage of "National Treasures" program, the Zeng Hou B bell that rewrites the history of music in the world, the world's progenitor of military books "Sun Tzu's Art of War" and "Sun Bin's Art of War" Han jian, the bronze gilt wood core stirrup that promoted the development of medieval European chivalry culture, the masterpiece of mortise and tenon structure Ningbo "Wan Gong sedan chair" and other cultural relics fully prove that both artistic creation and law and military, as well as astronomy and geography and craftsmanship, all testify to the Chinese nation's leading global history, which is the basis of Chinese civilization's pride in the world. The National Treasure is a testament to the Chinese nation's global leadership in history, and the basis for Chinese civilization to stand proudly among the nations of the world. However, "National Treasures" is not immersed in a sense of pride and superiority, as the history of the Chinese nation's recent humiliation and defeat is also recreated in the program. The modern history of China is a special period of history and a hot period of Chinese cultural memory. In the sixth program of the first season, the lid and body of the bronze work "King of Earthenware" - Petrified Square Earthenware were forced to be separated for 92 years, and in the fifth program of the third season, the tragic history of "The broken calendar of the wine of the Guiyi Army Office" was divided into three, reflecting the fact that countless cultural relics were looted and stolen during the period of national collapse. robbed and stolen in a bad way. At the same time, the history of Chinese sons and daughters uniting and resisting is also shown in the story. In the fifth episode of the second season, the violin of Nie Er, the composer of the "March of the Righteous Army", fully illustrates the spirit of resistance of the Chinese nation. The meaning of the artifacts narrated at this time formed a strong centripetal and cohesive force, making a complete distinction at the emotional level and enhancing the sense of belonging to "us".

### **3.3. Immersive: History and Reality Overlap**

In the performance of the past life legend, the scene through the narration, screen and the performance of the actors, to create a historical situation and the atmosphere of the times to fit the heritage. The audience in the audience can not help but be pulled into the "remembered past" by the

actors. Viewers watching through the television network can also be infected by the medium of visual images, and will be able to imagine themselves as invisible participants in the past life of the heritage. "The long-ago past, like the dramatized and artistic life, has an objective temporal distance and a subjective psychological distance from the present reader, who imaginatively intervenes in the life and world of the past, a distance that puts the reader in an 'unreal and real' situation " [18]. Through the use of new media, the program "National Treasures" dramatizes the production of the meaning of cultural relics and transcends memory in time and space, realizing the creative reproduction of the "past" and reinforcing the cultural identity of the audience in the processing and tailoring of cultural memory.

The story-telling session of this life is also rich in the wisdom of time and space transformation. The ancient costume art reproduction of "Guan Tang" presented by China's Top Ten Fashion Designers Chu Yan, in which models dressed in Tang clothes slowly walked out from under the screen showing Dunhuang frescoes, as if the real Tang people had traveled through the time tunnel to the present day. In addition, Wu Qinghui from the Beijing Institute of Aeronautical Materials of China National Aero Engine Corporation also presented a demonstration of the "lost wax method", which spans over a thousand years. These ancient aesthetics and technologies have been kept up to date for a long time, making every audience, while admiring the wisdom of the ancestors, have the illusion that history and reality overlap and that nothing has changed.

#### **4. The Inter-construction of Memory and Identity in the Program "National Treasures"**

Although social identity and social memory are both group concepts, they are unified in terms of bearing subjects, and both are individualized and specific. Both social identity and social memory need individuals to carry and convey them. Moreover, both social memory and social identity are dynamic processes that are always under constant construction. The sense of belonging in time and space created by cultural memory becomes the cornerstone of cultural identity, while the process of constructing cultural identity also has a profound effect on cultural memory, and the two are interrelated. The program "National Treasures" constructs new cultural memories by mediating and representing the symbols of cultural relics, which are transmitted to and among individuals and groups through individual experiences. Individual memory, which carries the meaning of subjectivity, also undergoes the iterative change from self-identity to social identity in contributing to the formation of the meaning of "self" and "group".

##### **4.1. Build the Field of Memory, the Subject Internalizes the Meaning**

Nora emphasizes that the "field of memory" is not simply a combination of memory and place, but has symbolic and functional characteristics, carrying the function of shaping and passing on memory. The program "National Treasures" has created a memory field full of meaning, in which the program producer, the stars, the living guardians, the director of the museum and the audience engage in memory reproduction practices. The use of media technology allows viewers online and offline to receive the same symbolic system and reconstruct the memory of national culture simultaneously. All the memories extracted, processed and narrated in the narrative process are transmitted to the audience's mind through individual reception and understanding, completing the process of memory internalization. Although individuals may not know each other, at the same moment of watching the program, they all have the same identity and think accordingly, and share the meaning at the abstract level. It is worth mentioning that although social memory often exists as a collective image, it is conveyed through individuals. Only individuals who are members of the collective can remember. Just as social memory is carried by individuals, the bearer of social identity is also an individual, and the two are interrelated. Therefore, when viewers watch the

program, they will actively internalize the meaning and construct the Chinese cultural memory, which becomes the factual basis and spiritual source of Chinese cultural identity. The audience's memory contributes to the generation of cultural identity with its unique authenticity and interactive quality.

#### **4.2. Network Platform Interaction, "I" Upgraded to "We"**

Identity is always constructed in interaction. Individual consciousness is the "carrier" of collective self-perception or "we", but individual perception of identity does not directly rise to a sense of belonging as a member. In order to move from "I" to "we," individuals have to rely on the group framework to integrate their memories after acquiring them in the social environment. In the digital era, cyberspace has long become an important stage for memory transmission, and the social context, which is traditionally limited to interactive groups requiring physical presence, has been extended. In the program "National Treasures", in addition to the direct face-to-face interaction with the audience, the audience outside the venue can also interact with each other through TV and Internet media. The interaction between individuals and individuals deepens the intensity of memory, the interaction between individuals and groups strengthens the identity, and the interaction between individuals and symbols of cultural relics brings the distance between ordinary viewers and cultural relics closer. The television + network broadcast mode enhances the dissemination of the program, and the pop-up expression mechanism of the broadcast software allows each individual to speak freely and participate in real-time interaction while watching the program. The pop-ups can point to both the video itself and the pop-ups sent by other users, allowing viewers to exchange emotions and share information in the pop-up exchanges. In addition, the hot discussion on social media platforms also constructs a virtual space for interaction and builds a platform for sharing the psychological state of the group. The groups in the space have a common symbol system, the same narrative resources, and common emotional experiences, and they actively share their emotions and experiences around the program, thus creating a group belonging.

#### **4.3. Ritualization Promotes the Transformation of "Our" Identity**

In Collins' view, ritual is "a mechanism of mutually focused emotion and attention that creates a momentary shared reality and thus a symbol of group solidarity and group membership" [19]. In the transformation from "I" to "we," in addition to enhancing the interaction between individuals, identity can be reinforced through repetitive and meaningful rituals. The National Treasures program creates a complete ritualized process that includes systematic activities such as music, lighting, and character movement arrangements. This is not a simple reproduction of information about cultural heritage, but an expression that gives cultural memory a contemporary meaning through selection, embellishment and refinement, combining the longitudinal flow of memory through time and the needs of the times in common. The performance and narrative of "past lives" create a solemn ritual space for the audience, which not only highlights the national heritage and spirit, but also becomes an important symbolic resource for the audience to construct cultural identity and identity. Through the designed rituals, the emotional interaction between the narrative performers and the audience, the connection between identity and memory is enhanced.

In addition, each season of the program invites nine museum gatekeepers to participate in the interpretation of cultural relics, and each season of the program will be followed by the national treasures voting activities. The use of diverse ritual symbols not only enhances the viewing experience and emotional resonance of the audience, but also deepens the audience's understanding of the cultural relics, constantly reinforces the existing cultural memory, and thus promotes the transformation of "our" identity.



## 5. Conclusion

"Let cultural relics speak and tell people the wisdom of history", as a carrier of cultural memory, cultural relics bear the burden of passing on history and cohesion of identity. As a cultural exploration program focusing on the inheritance of cultural memory, the program "National Treasure" overcomes the shortcomings of past cultural and cultural programs and presents a new answer to the memory of the spirit of the times and history and culture. Through the representation and reconstruction of the imagery of cultural relics, the program achieves the reproduction of the meaning of cultural memory and strengthens the cultural identity of the audience on this basis. This not only constructs a system of meaning linking the past, present and future, with the meaning of continuity and homogeneity, but also allows the cultural identity of the Chinese community to be passed on.

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