

The Decoding Of The Micro-Narrative Of Traditional Cultural Documentaries Under The Theory Of Cultural Identity – Taking Bilibili’s Documentary “Masters In Forbidden City” As An Example

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Abstract: Drawing upon Cultural Identity Theory, this paper examines the cultural cognition, emotional resonance, and behavioral practice dimensions of the documentary “Masters in Forbidden City” on the Bilibili video platform. By conducting a categorical analysis of the time-sync comments and juxtaposing it with the documentary’s content, the investigation unveils the factors contributing to its widespread acclaim. Notably, the documentary employs grand themes with a focus on micro-narratives, utilizes diverse commentary to enrich the contextual meaning, and emphasizes contemporary humanistic perspectives over historical aspects. Consequently, the paper presents reflections on the development of traditional cultural documentaries.

Key Word: Cultural Identity Theory; Traditional Chinese Cultural Documentary; Time-Sync Comments Culture; Micro-Narrative

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I. Research Background

Cultural documentaries offer profound insights and perceptions into history, socio-cultural phenomena, or events, thereby carrying enormous historical and humanistic value in guiding people to understand traditional culture and perpetuate cultural inheritance (Liu & Yang, 2017). Numerous documentaries have been produced to promote traditional Chinese culture using the Forbidden City as a focal point. Since the airing of the 12-episode documentary “The Forbidden City” in 2005, subsequent works, including “The Taipei Palace Museum,” “When the Louvre Museum Meets the Forbidden City,” and “The Forbidden City 100,” have been released. In early 2016, a three-episode documentary titled “Masters in Forbidden City,” dedicated to the 90th anniversary of the Forbidden City, entered public view on China Central Television’s documentary channel. Instead of grandiose depictions, the documentary focused on a group of top “cultural relic doctors” working diligently behind the scenes, exploring their work and life experiences using a modest and approachable perspective. The documentary unveiled the world-class techniques involved in restoring cultural relics through a genuine and heartwarming approach.

Initially, when the documentary was aired on television, audience reception was lukewarm. However, after “Masters in Forbidden City” was uploaded to Bilibili, a renowned Chinese video streaming platform, it quickly gained traction, leading to it being recognized as one of the “Top Ten Most Influential Documentaries of 2016” by the China Broadcasting Film and Television Social Organization Documentary Committee. The documentary became a hot topic and a “phenomenon-level” masterpiece. The unexpected success and rise of “Masters in Forbidden City” merits further analysis and consideration.

Bilibili has emerged as the most popular cultural community and a significant online gathering hub among Chinese young audiences. At the fifth Internet Audio-Visual Conference, Chen Rui, the Chairman of Bilibili, publicly stated that Bilibili users constitute the youngest demographic among internet users in China, with 90% being below 25 years old and primarily consisting of those born in the 1990s and 2000s. The video-sharing platform extensively influences the cultural identity and ideological awareness of young audience groups. Although these young audiences are divided into different subcultures on Bilibili, they share a common characteristic, which is cultural identity. Many viewers are drawn to the documentary “Masters in the Forbidden City” and, while watching it, unwittingly strengthen their cultural identity and bolster their cultural confidence.

Despite having high quality, the documentary was initially lukewarm on China Central Television. However, after being introduced to Bilibili, it unleashed extraordinary energy and generated significant impact. This phenomenon is largely attributed to the young audience group and the time-sync comments culture (a characteristic of Bilibili), which provide unique opportunities and motivations for constructing a distinct cultural narrative space. Consequently, the following research questions guide the current study.

1. Why has the broadcast effect of “Masters in the Forbidden City” changed dramatically simply by switching platforms?
2. How does the documentary, among similar traditional cultural documentaries, narrate and encode intricate aspects within its grand theme?
3. How do young audience groups decode the messages using time-sync comments tools?
4. What implications can be drawn from these findings concerning traditional cultural documentaries?

II. Literature Review

1. Documentary

Among the numerous media platforms, documentaries hold an irreplaceable and significant role. International research on documentaries tends to focus on the technical aspects, for instance, interactive documentaries. Such documentaries aim to document “reality” with the assistance of digital interactive technologies, allowing active audience engagement in negotiating the conveyed “truth.” This process requires users/participants to establish genuine contact with digital interfaces, seeking responses and exchanges through actions like clicking, swiping, and typing (Judith Aston & Sandra Gaudenzi, 2012). Interactive documentaries emerge as a distinct digital representation of modern societal issues beyond traditional news reporting, offering empathetic media experiences, rich in aesthetic appeal (Robert Hassan, 2019). While viewing these interactive documentaries, audiences can closely engage with the character roles and embed themselves within audiovisual production, resulting in an “immersive turn” in factual storytelling (Mandy Rose, 2018).

Chinese scholar Wang Lingdong has demonstrated that light design is an essential element in historical representation within documentaries, addressing its connection to time, space, and emotion (Wang Lingdong, 2019). Further, Ma Chizhu and Liu Chunxiao summarized the essence of traditional culture, such as moral consciousness, filial piety, and propriety, by examining symbolic elements like costumes, food, and residences in humanistic documentaries (Ma Chizhu, Liu Chunxiao, 2020). From a cross-cultural perspective, considering global niche, Chinese documentaries could enhance the portrayal of simultaneous and interpenetrating cultural advancements by adopting a global historical view (Zhang Bingjuan, Yang Xi, 2021). Cultural documentaries in recent years have shifted from macroscopic storytelling of “Chinese stories” to experiential, insightful, and personalized narrative styles that reflect national spirit and aesthetics (Wang Ruoxuan, 2021). Thus, through the study of cultural documentaries, scholars emphasize the importance of traditional values and cross-cultural perspectives in examining Chinese documentaries, proposing a new transformation toward personalized experiences.

With the advent of the short-video era, micro-narratives have emerged as vital supplements to grand narrative-style city promotion films, presenting more humanistic city images (Wan Xinnan, 2021). Moreover, from a subcultural standpoint, the study of classical traditional cultural documentaries through the lens of micro-narratives deserves further scholarly attention.

2. Time-sync comments culture

The time-sync comments video viewing mode is a virtual interactive ritual, grounded in internet reliance and self-identification as members of the ACG culture group, carried out through non-physical bodily presence as a spatial positioning (Deng Xin, 2015). The rapid development of time-sync comments culture reflects the profound impact of digital media technology on future culture, leading to changes in traditional film and television viewing and consumption patterns. The audience’s perceptual structure has shifted from activities centered around “watching” and “appreciating” to those involving “intervention” and “participation.” While sending time-sync comments, users’ primary motivations include information needs, entertainment demands, and social enhancement desires (Tong Chong, Zhao Yuxiang, 2019). Time-sync comments culture illustrates the increasingly diverse emotional appeals and value positions among contemporary individuals, particularly younger populations (Zeng Yiguo, 2021).

Generally, in comparison to traditional comments, time-sync comments carry a reduced sense of responsibility for users due to their anonymous nature, resulting in more impulsive, aggressive, and low-quality negative characteristics (Halpern D., Gibbs J., 2013). In contrast to conventional text-based comments, time-sync comments can promptly reflect users’ immediate impressions of the video, establishing this information behavior as a cross-temporal interactive method for new media users in the digital age (Bao Yawei, 2021). Time-sync comments provide users with a sense of real-time interaction, breaking the boundary between physical and cultural spaces. Since the introduction of time-sync comments functionality in 2009, its

development on platform Bilibili has continued to grow in strength, fostering an improved understanding of why “Masters in Forbidden City” became a viral sensation on the platform.

3. Cultural Identity Theory

Stuart Hall, often considered the founding father of contemporary cultural studies, and his colleagues first proposed the theory of cultural identity (Hall et al., 2010). Cultural identity refers to the recognition of shared cultural elements between individuals and groups. The foundation of cultural identity lies in using the same cultural symbols, adhering to shared cultural beliefs, and following common patterns of thought and behavioral norms, with a core focus on value identification and shared values (Cui, 2004). Foreign scholars typically have two ways of understanding cultural identity: one emphasizes the individual level, such as an individual’s self-perception and self-definition within a particular cultural group (Schwartz, Montgomery, & Briones, 2006); the other focuses on the social level, seeing cultural identity as an aspect of social identity and the result of the interaction between an individual and the surrounding cultural context (Padilla & Perez, 2003).

In modern society, national identity requires not only recognizing one’s own citizenship and identification with a nation’s territory, history, and cultural values, but also accepting its political system and social structure (Peng, 2018). The theory of cultural identity highlights the process of constructing cultural and social identity, believing that cultural identity involves tracing shared cultural and historical roots (Xu, 2020). The aggregation of cultural identity and value identification, particularly in terms of fostering national belonging, is crucial in discussing ways to strengthen China’s national identity (Liu & Wang, 2015). Based on cultural identity theory, some studies suggest specific manifestations and dimensions of cultural identity, such as cognition, emotion, and behavior (Ding, 2021). The explosive popularity of traditional culture documentaries among young audiences, coupled with the time-sync comments culture that Generation Z is most familiar with and widely exposed to, will advance cultural identity research in this new era.

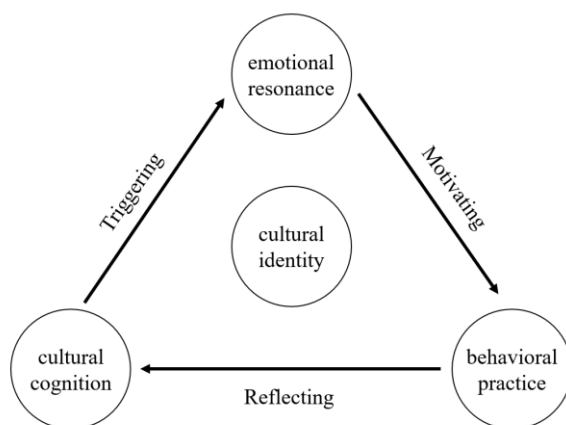


Figure 1: the diagram of cultural identity model

This study is based on cultural identity theory. Firstly, the theme of the documentary “Masters in Forbidden City” revolves around the cultural relics of the Palace Museum, which serve as symbolic representations of China’s long history and provide a basis for cultural cognition. Building on this foundation, viewers experience an emotional resonance through the interpretation of these symbols which, in turn, leads to behavioral practice such as sending time-sync comments, visiting the Palace Museum, or participating in related activities reflecting one’s cultural cognition. The interplay of cultural cognition, emotional resonance, and behavioral practice ultimately results in cultural identity.

III. Time-sync comments analysis of “Masters in Forbidden City” under the theory of cultural identity

Cultural identity is not about a simple review and return to existing culture. Instead, it involves drawing upon the achievements of one’s own civilization and historical identity to create new values that better align with contemporary needs, encouraging the public to actively, positively, and constructively accept and identify with these values (He Miao, 2021). Based on the related discussions of cultural identity theory, this paper divides cultural identity as reflected in time-sync comments into three main dimensions: cultural identity, emotional resonance, and behavioral practice (Zhang Ning, Duan Xiaoxuan, Yang Fan, Yuan Qinjian, 2022). Time-sync commenters engage in communication through time-sync comments, where cultural cognition

triggers emotional resonance and assimilation, then stimulates behavioral practice, which in turn reflects the cognition of culture, eventually forming a converging ideology and constructing cultural identity.

1. Cultural cognition

Cultural cognition mainly includes historical cognition, and national and ethnic cognition. In documentaries about traditional culture with the theme of the Forbidden City, audience understanding of history is an essential factor in forming cultural identity. By examining time-sync comments relating to historical cognition, we find three types of comments: cognition of historical figures (e.g., Qianlong's birth mother, Empress Dowager Chongqing, etc.); historical cultural knowledge (e.g., Chinese Buddhist culture in wooden Buddha statues from the Liao and Jin periods and traditional filial piety culture in the "Longevity Picture of Empress Dowager Chongqing's Eightieth Birthday"); and knowledge of historical cultural relics (e.g., the screen sealed for nearly 300 years, the world's largest Hainan Huanghuali cabinet, and the oldest existing silk landscape painting "Spring Outing" by Sui Dynasty's Zhan Ziqian, etc.). Approaching history from an affirmative perspective enables viewers to better understand their own nation, state, and historical culture. At the end of each documentary, a narrated summary accompanies a time-sync comments stimulated by the documentary's content, inspiring people's cognition of the nation and state, such as "this artifact is in history books," "great national craftsman," "I indeed feel what culture is," "so delicate, how come the craftsmanship was so good in ancient times," "Chinese characters are beautiful," "if a miracle had color, it would surely be Chinese red," "my great China," "this is a dialogue across hundreds of years," "I have seen them all, my Chinese heart," etc.

Restoration of cultural relics is not just the restoration of artifacts; it also involves reviving memories of the past, retracing history, innovating the technology of previous dynasties, reenacting lives in past eras, and inheriting the spirit of craftsmanship. With each restored relic, modern artisans preserve the historical culture within the artifact for future generations. Through a series of processes involving the excavation, restoration, and exhibition of cultural relics, culture is awakened and pieced together, with intangible culture transformed into tangible artifacts, and people's understanding of culture gradually becoming clearer and more profound. In the process where artifacts are successfully restored, the viewer's heart is stirred and swells, as the focus of the documentary shifts from the restorers to the broader context of the nation.

2. Emotional resonance

Cultural relics, as solidified historical and cultural manifestations, easily elicit a sense of belonging and pride among time-sync commenters in the realm of cultural and artistic content. The emotions aroused by the background music and copywriting of the documentary, coupled with an abundance of time-sync comments flooding the screen, lead to emotional resonance among commenters who actively participate in sending time-sync comments (Zhang Ning, Duan Xiaoxuan, and Yuan Qinjian, 2022). Emotion-provoking comments are rarely standalone and instead generate a series of follow-up comments, forming a wave of emotional resonance and shared frequency.

In the documentary "Masters in Forbidden City," numerous time-sync comments praise the nation and its people with statements such as "long live China," "suddenly love China so much," and "proud and honored." A considerable number of comments also focus on the immediate emotional reactions of the audience, like "moved," "genuinely impressed," "oh my," "tears shed," "salute," "awe-inspiring," "sublime," "breathtaking," "heart-stirring," "show of respect," "grateful for the documentary," and "sad that these skills might be lost in many years." This personal emotional outburst often culminates in the conclusion of the documentary, lasting until the very last second of the video.

This emotional resonance consists of two main components. Firstly, viewers express their heartfelt admiration, respect, and emotion when they witness the challenges involved in cultural relic restoration. Secondly, after seeing the restored relics, people feel pride and honor in Chinese history. The exquisite craftsmanship of the relics captivates people's aesthetic recognition of beauty and art while evoking admiration and awe due to the contradiction between historical technological limitations and the skillful presentation. Ultimately, the emotional resonance is further enhanced by patriotic sentiments emphasized through the documentary's script, background music, and other elements.

3. Behavioral Practice

Time-sync commentators generate emotional resonance through their cultural cognition, leading to specific actions. Actions associated with time-sync comments mainly include praising, paying tribute to and protecting, as well as on-site tourism and professional choices. Praise and homage-related actions are most likely to be formed, and this type of time-sync comment often intertwines with cultural identification and emotional resonance—such as touching tearful comments and tribute time-sync comments. Many comments express the desire to visit the Forbidden City in person, such as "I must visit the Forbidden City," "I like the special

exhibitions the most,” “I want to find time to visit the Forbidden City,” “It’s time to have a look,” and “I want to attend the Forbidden City’s 100th anniversary celebration,” among others.

Additionally, a more unique type of action-related comment pertains to professional choices, such as “I really want to repair cultural relics,” “I want to study lacquer art,” “I want to start making wooden utensils,” “I’m going to take the written test for the Forbidden City tomorrow,” “Are there any relevant majors in cultural relic restoration? I want to attend,” “Northwest University’s College of Cultural Heritage offers a major in cultural relic protection, welcome to apply,” “I saw a recruitment notice from the Forbidden City a few days ago,” “I’ve decided to choose the history department,” “I swear I must learn embroidery,” “I am preparing for the graduate examination in cultural relic appraisal and restoration,” “I am determined to pursue a lifelong career in a chosen art,” and so on. This type of comment is rare and is even frequently found in traditional cultural documentaries. Under the influence of outstanding documentaries, they see the life of cultural relics and the spirit of great craftsmen. Even audience members who did not send time-sync comments will inadvertently ponder when they see the time-sync comments about professional choices. When the documentary was broadcast on China Central Television (CCTV), the main audience was not as precise as on Bilibili, and there were hardly any discussions on professional choices. “Masters in Forbidden City” and the Bilibili time-sync comments culture would not have so many comments on professional choices if either component was lacking. Behind these comments are countless youthful dreams; if someone achieves success in applying for a relevant major or engaging in a related career, the far-reaching value of the documentary is further demonstrated. In fact, it was proven that more than 15,000 college graduates applied for cultural relic repair work at the Forbidden City that year (Nie Li, 2020).

By analyzing the time-sync comments of “Masters in Forbidden City” under the cultural identity theory, it can be seen that after switching platforms, the time-sync comments form has stimulated viewers’ expressions while watching the video, and in combination with the content of the documentary, it has promoted a concentrated perception of cultural identity among viewers. Compared to the one-way communication of TV media, Bilibili indeed achieved better communication results than CCTV, providing viewers with a more immersive and interactive viewing experience. The time-sync comments of “Masters in Forbidden City” are one of the factors that contribute to its popularity, while the high-quality content selection, narrative techniques, and humanistic orientation of the documentary itself also delight and receive widespread praise from the audience.

IV. Analysis of the Reasons for the Explosion of “Masters in Forbidden City”

1. Equal exchange: micro-narrative of grand themes

The paradigm of documentary creation in China has evolved from a top-down perspective to a more equal and horizontal one. The shortcomings of the top-down documentary style lie in its overarching preachiness, with little emphasis on impartial and uninhibited dialogue (Liu Mengzhi, 2016). The royal culture represented by the Forbidden City has always been unattainable, such that even personal visits to the palace may not afford close encounters with the cultural relics. Both the Forbidden City and its relics embody the grand theme of China’s civilization spanning more than 5,000 years. Some scholars, when discussing the grand narrative characteristics of documentaries, note that “in specific works, grand narratives tend to be closely related to ideology, and in contrast to detailed description and personal or everyday life narratives,” resulting in a communicative effect where “it is impossible to portray a clear and distinguishable image, causing people to lose touch with the genuine essence of history” (Xu Xiaolu, 2015).

In contrast, “Masters in Forbidden City” discards the conventional scientific and academic discourse, adopting a more relatable and quotidian approach. Engaging the audience through equal communication, the film portrays the serious work of artifact restoration in a lively and accessible manner, with some aspects being as mundane and repetitive as any other job. For example, Master Wang Jin spends one or two days adjusting a small issue in a clock restoration; during the repair of a wooden Buddha statue’s finger, Qu Feng sweeps dust from a windowsill to use as aging material; Master Wang Wusheng painstakingly studies and consults other Tang Tri-color horse relics in galleries to properly restore the lost tail of a Tang Tri-color horse. Simultaneously, the documentary captures the characters’ banter and jokes, making the audience feel that the real lives of these top restoration experts are no different from our own. Through engaging exchanges, “Masters in Forbidden City” narrates the cultural symbols, democratizing the Forbidden City’s history, and inspiring a sincere understanding of artifact restoration among the viewers.

2. Multi Decoding: Meaning Expansion by Time-sync comments

Initially, the secondary diffusion of “Masters in Forbidden City” on CCTV received significant attention on the internet, and it can be said that the online video commentary contributed considerably to its popularity. Time-sync comment is the most typical discourse form of audience participation, and the feedback in these comments represents a joint discourse creation between the video creators and viewers (Li Xiutong, 2018). The story presentation and audience feedback appear simultaneously during video playback, and the addition of

online commentary embodies the collective will of the majority audience and documentary authors, catering to young people's desire not to be passive spectators.

The previous analysis of cultural identity theory reinforced the online commentary's function as a venue for postmodern worship of traditional mainstream culture. On top of that, it can also be considered a multi-subjective, multi-layered decoding of the same content, enriching the meaning of the video. However, not all of this "enriched" content has to express deep meanings of cultural identity, emotions, or points of view. In the context of Bilibili's subculture, cultural genes undergo fusion and fission with the emergence of time-sync comments, which primarily focus on capturing, magnifying, and teasing minor details in the video. Some content may even veer towards the carnivalesque.

These comments include scene details, such as pointing out contradictions when the documentary openly films a "No Photography" sign and joking about "photography is prohibited, but not video recording". Another example is the emergence of Wang Jin, who becomes an internet celebrity for his dedication to craftsmanship in relic restoration, prompting comments like "Wang is so handsome" and "Marry me, Wang!" (Even if Wang is a man). Other commenters join in by jesting about daily aspects of the documentary, cherishing the mundane moments.

The majority of these comments interact with the video's minutiae, offering light-hearted banter. For those posting the comments, it represents a level of immersive viewing, while for other viewers who see the comments, it generates a sense of embodied companionship. The diverse decoding of these online comments also enriches the meaning of the documentary itself.

3. Inheriting the tradition: the humanistic orientation of cherishing the present and the ancient times

Traditional documentaries often adopt a stance of valuing the past over the present, particularly in the case of ambitious works centered around significant histories. The notion of emphasizing the present does not entail denying or belittling history; rather, it focuses on contemporary living, real world issues, and the zeitgeist (Cao Yan, 2018). Under the influence of the "Internet+", both mainstream media and younger generations exhibit a divergence in creative philosophy and formats compared to traditional documentary creators. "Internet+" documentaries typically share characteristics such as accessible content, a brisk pace, brevity, clear editing lines, fragmentary narrative techniques, and extensive use of special effects (Liu Bo, 2021). As younger and more diverse creators inherit traditional practices, they pay closer attention to embodying the spirit of the times and presenting traditional culture in modern ways.

The documentary "Masters in Forbidden City" is produced by a young and devoted team, skillfully using youthful and life-oriented methods to depict the cultural relic restoration work within the Forbidden City. Numerous details reveal a richness of human emotion and warmth: for instance, the film shows restorers delighting in everyday activities such as eating apricots, expressing frustration after a tree is pruned, boasting about collections, and taking a break to smoke a cigarette. Yang Zehua, a painting and calligraphy master, enjoys teasing cats, playing guitar, and telling jokes. Ceramics experts cycle through the barren plaza of the Hall of Supreme Harmony when the palace is closed on Mondays, playfully stating that the last person to bike there was Emperor Puyi. Documentary subjects engage in banter in light of electricity restrictions and greet each other casually while fetching water from a designated area. Retirees ponder how to pass on traditional skills in a fast-paced world.

Scenes are presented from everyday life: shade trees blocking out the sun, ripe fruit scattered on the ground with ants, a cat lounging on a stair, and a hot water faucet wrapped in gauze. These scenes marry daily life with ceremony, presenting both the expected and unexpected while diminishing the weight of history. These modern glimpses complement the documentary's primary focus on cultural relic restoration, achieving a harmonious balance without overpowering the central theme. The transition to scenes showcasing restoration work does not induce a disorienting change in context for the viewer. Instead, audiences can appreciate the dialogue between past and present within the same space, underscoring the humanity of the new era alongside traditional inheritance.

Transforming traditional and profound cultural symbols into everyday historical images, utilizing filming techniques based on content selection and equal exchange, the cultural essence is conveyed through the conversion of these symbols. In the discussion of minute narrative details via video comments, both the presenter and the viewer collaborate to construct a vivid and tangible Forbidden City. Bridging the dialogue between ancient and contemporary times reflects the progress of modern civilization, and this is the charm of "Masters in Forbidden City."

V. Conclusion: Reflections on the Development of Traditional Cultural Documentaries

Culture is a dynamic, open, and constantly changing system, where history and tradition are passed down through generations in the form of cultural representation, allowing preservation (Nie Yanmei, 2018). In traditional cultural documentaries of the new era, approachability and historical significance are not

contradictory; grand themes can be expressed and constructed through minute narratives and a humanistic orientation can be emphasized despite the thinning of ancient perspectives. We need to find the best way to combine cultural expression with the unique characteristics of different platforms to awaken the younger generation's attention to the history of cultural relics and traditional culture. This will enable the better preservation of culture and the stories behind it, effectively drawing the public into museums, closer to cultural relics, and experiencing culture, ultimately enhancing national cultural identity.

An excellent traditional cultural documentary, or even an outstanding traditional cultural program, must not only break free from the rigid and formal, detached, depersonalized, and objectified grand narrative style to attract audiences but also convey truth, kindness, and beauty, and guide viewers towards establishing a correct understanding of history and culture. This process delves deeply into the concepts, humanistic spirit, and moral norms inherent in Chinese traditional culture, and aligns with the demands of the times to continue innovating, allowing Chinese culture to display eternal charm and a contemporary appeal.

In today's era of prevalent Internet media, the dissemination of traditional culture must dare to innovate. Starting from our own national culture and aiming to inspire a sense of national pride among viewers, we must also look outward to the world, allowing Chinese culture to spread globally, realizing cultural appreciation, and facing the future. Through this process, we can better construct Chinese spirit, Chinese values, and Chinese strength, bolstering national confidence.

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