

# Telling the Chinese Story and Letting the Voice of China Be Heard

## Interpretation of the Cultural Program *China in Stories* Issued by China Central Television

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### ABSTRACT

*China in Stories*, a large-scale cultural variety show originally produced by CCTV (China Central Television), recreates the classics, excavates the true imprint and the spirit of the times behind literary and artistic works, and explores the national spirit and brilliance behind Chinese stories with an innovative narrative mode. By virtue of the value concept of telling Chinese stories well, it realizes the soft landing of Chinese cultural communication, and provides a new model for cultural programs to tell Chinese stories well and let the voice of China be heard. This paper is an interpretation of *China in Stories* from the aspects of story text, subject setting and field construction. The cultural value of the program is also summed up.

**Keywords:** *China in Stories*, innovation narration, cultural communication, Chinese story

### I. INTRODUCTION

Since its broadcast, *China in Stories*, a large-scale cultural program produced by China Central Television, has been covered positively by People's Daily, Guangming Daily and other mainstream media. The total number of views on topics related on the Microblog of "We Media" has exceeded 5 billion, and score of points in Douban (out of 10) has risen from 8.3 to 8.8, achieving a double harvest of audience rating and public praise. The program interprets "Chinese cultural code" with stories, and the selection of texts and the value of stories are important factors for its success.

### II. STORY TEXT: THE EVERLASTING NATIONAL SPIRIT AND PATRIOTISM

#### A. Text selection: shining classics of the times

Literary and art workers at China National Radio are well versed in the development of television literature and art and in the life cycle of television programs. It is a subject that the workers have been searching for to bring forth the new in the fixed era. As for the selection of story text, *China in Stories* focuses on the classic, touching and evoking story content since the founding of new China 70 years ago, and strives to

show the immortal national spirit and patriotism in the story.

Over the past 70 years since the founding of the People's Republic of China, there has been a vast sea of literary and artistic works that demonstrate the spirit and character of the Chinese nation. In terms of creation, *China in Stories* has been subtly infecting the audience with "good stories". Zuo Xing, producer and director of the program, said frankly that in the context of the 70th anniversary of the founding of the People's Republic of China, reflecting the spirit of the times and showing real historical marks are the primary basis for the evaluation of classic works of the program. At the same time, the significance of realistic themes cannot be ignored. Based on such selection criteria, a total of 50-odd classic works of literature and art were selected, but 13 works were finally shown to the audience due to actual situation. As for the type of text, the story involves literature, film, drama, national opera and a series of popular works, which are all classic works of literature and art since the 70th anniversary of the founding of new China. They bear the collective memory of national history and embody the universal hero complex of Chinese people, so they can withstand the grinding and deliberation of time and provide spiritual power for audiences of different times. [1] The goal of telling the Chinese story is to tell Chinese story. *China in Stories* takes "people" as the core and creates a vivid image of Chinese people. As for the selection of

characters in the text, the program outlines the heroic figures represented by revolutionary martyr Jiang Jie, lone hero Yang Zirong and excellent party cadre Jiao Yulu, intellectuals represented by struggling young Sun Shaoping, ascetic teacher Zhang Yingzi, and physician model Lu Wenting, and image of ordinary people represented by Jiu Er with great love and Liu Huifang with no regrets. The Chinese people's national pride, tenacious will to life, and simple and beautiful values all demonstrate a strong sense of national identity, belonging and mission. The program evokes the collective memory of the older generation through the reappearance of classics, and at the same time awakens the deep cognition of the national spirit and Chinese culture of the younger generation.

*B. The connotation of the text: the enterprising spirit of China*

With the help of classic Chinese literature and art works over the past 70 years, *China in Stories* seeks for the signs of the times in literary and art works, connects the grand theme and micro narration, and cultivate patriotism and the soul of the nation in the blood of Chinese people through the historical background and national spirit carried by the story, thus connecting the glorious epic of new China.

*China in Stories* focuses on the national liberation, the reform of the times, education and medical care, science and technology, targeted poverty alleviation and other aspects of the society in which New China has been struggling for 70 years. *The Waves that Never Die* told the glorious story of Li Xia, an underground worker who sacrificed his life for justice and devoted himself to the Party. *The Ordinary World* has created a group image of the era represented by Sun Shaoping and Sun Shao-an in which Chinese people dare to think and struggle. *At Middle Age* shows the image of Chinese intellectuals represented by Lu Wenting and Marco Fu who still adhere to their ideals after the midlife crisis. *Roaring Across the Horizon* deeply depicts the arduous work of builders of atomic bomb, hydrogen bomb and artificial satellite. *18 Cave Village* shows the new appearance of the countryside as the representative to strive for "strong life, rich spirit" after the targeted poverty alleviation policy since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China. Thirteen classic texts, with a brand new artistic style of film, television, drama and interview, awaken the national spirit and national feelings concentrated in the classic texts. The "story" in the program not only stays on the surface of the text, but also reflects the tenacious, indomitable and enterprising national spirit of the Chinese people through classical literary works.

### III. SUBJECT SETTING: MULTIPLE CHARACTER POSITIONING AND THREE-DIMENSIONAL EXPRESSION

After the narrative text of *China in Stories* is selected, the interpretation of the story is another important issue, that is, the setting of the narrative subject. "Story" is the specific content in the virtual context, while "China" is an abstract concept in the context of reality. The intersection and mapping of the two needs to sort out the relationship between "virtual" and "real", "concrete" and "abstract". The combination of performance and interview is properly integrated into the program creation, which brings the audience "immersive" program experience and places them in the dual space-time of history and reality.

*A. Double support of narration: the narration of history and the comprehension of present*

*China in Stories* has set a new benchmark for Chinese cultural programs. Most classic literary and artistic works have archetypal characters, from revolutionary martyrs to heroic deeds of the times. The national spirit and patriotism of story texts are the most powerful interpretation of Chinese stories. In the narrative process, the program cleverly employs the classic memories of the past to convey the value of the new era.

*China in Stories* reproduces human nature in classical works of literature and art in a way that pays tribute to the classics, radiating to a deeper and broader level through current interpretation. The cross-border cooperation between Dong Qing and the famous drama director Tian Qinxin is the biggest contributor for the success of *China in Stories*. As chief director, Tian Qinxin's A circle reading of the play is the field where directors and actors interpret past stories. The training of actors' lines, the adjustment of actors' performances and the deep interpretation of stories are the second creation of Tian Qinxin's works, which have the narrative function of story reporting. The opening, interview and summary of Dong Qing, the host, are the magnification of the present comprehension function of classic stories. She serves as a functional character of the program, guiding the discourse of the guests, arousing the emotion of the interview and interpreting the connotation of the story. The ninth episode of *China in Stories* brings to the stage a milestone in the history of Chinese TV drama, *Desire*. Dong Qing talked with TV director Lu Xiaowei about the reason for the popularity of *Desire*, and concluded that it shows the original life to everyone, and makes people understand the world from the inside. The Chinese people's attitude towards life and their aspiration for a better life behind the story are also expounded. Dong Qing's interview is another layer of narration to the program. The interpretation of the program paragraphs and the back

story by the interviewed guests is the contemporary understanding through the history of classical texts. The connection between the program paragraphs and the guest's interpretation of the story is the current understanding of the shining classic text.

#### *B. Performance plus interview: element fusion and narrative reconstruction*

*China in Stories* brings classic literary and artistic works to stage. Around this program, the China National Radio, together with CCTV Creative Media and National Theatre of China, jointly developed a brand new art form. Through the three-in-one three-dimensional expression of drama, film and variety, it aims at the diversified interpretation and multi-dimensional narration of Chinese stories.

*China in Stories* is not only the presentation of stage art, but also involves multiple elements such as interviews, films and documentary images. The combination of theatrical performance form and film and television creation technique presents the story of literary and artistic works and reflects the unity of the program's ideological content, artistic quality and ornamental value. The expression of interviews and documentary images reveals the little-known real history behind, which indicates that the program pursues the unity of documentary, caring and resonance. *China in Stories* is not simply an adaptation of literary and artistic works, but a 30-minute presentation of the story connotation and humanistic character of classic literary and artistic works. The program focuses on drama, film and television performances, and combines the stage sound, optical and other technologies to create the scene of the times of the story. The montage technique in film and television works is also innovatively applied to the stage of drama performance, presenting different scenes of story fragments in a three-dimensional way at the same time. Such arrangement not only brings a strong immersive experience to the audience, but also makes the performance of the stage more full. [2] In order to realize the integration of zeitgeist and national temperament contained in classic stories with the modern line, the program invites relevant guests to tell the story behind the works. The vivid characterization on the stage and the moving backstory off the stage bring the audience an "immersive" viewing experience, making them more aware of the power of the times behind the story.

*China in Stories* is good at capturing details, whether in program interviews or dramatic story reappearance. This is precisely the ingenuity of the creators. The program achieves the continuation of the story and the reconstruction of the narrative on the basis of detailed analysis. The first issue of *The Waves that Never Die* achieved unprecedented harmony between

stage performances and interviews. After Li Xia and He Lanfen leave, they spread out a classic dialogue in different space. At the end of the story, a bowl of hot soup worried about death gives the revolutionaries the true feeling of returning home. This echoes the conversation Li Lili, grandson of Martyr Li Bai (the character prototype of Li Xia in *The Waves that Never Die*), tells the story of a dialogue between grandpa and grandma through a small prison window after his grandfather was arrested. At this point, the performance and interview complete the reconstruction of the narrative in a mutually fulfilling way. The 11th issue of *Young at Heart* focuses on a group of high school girls in Beijing who are looking forward to the future with their beautiful dreams and youthful enthusiasm for the cause of socialism in the early days of the founding of the People's Republic of China. At the end of the stage performance, they made a mutual agreement to join in the great flood of national construction and meet again when their country was prosperous. The interview on the stage invited professor Zhu Xueqing and Professor Cao Lu, who used to be in the "Baer Class" of Beijing Female No. 2 Middle School, to tell the story of their youth. The youthful looks of the girls on stage contrasted with those of professors Zhu Xueqing and Cao Lu, both in their 80s off stage. The grand cause of the China's victory song is the result of people's struggle, the spirit of the Chinese people to remain young, and the aspiration that youth will always be with China. With the cooperation of "performance" and "interview", the audience's feelings are aroused in the opening "interview", the emotions are concentrated in the "performance", and the emotional sublimation is completed in a "interview". The innovative integration of elements and the reconstruction of narrative connect literary and artistic works and people in different time and space, so that the history and reality of China can be vividly depicted.

#### **IV. FIELD CONSTRUCTION: INTERPRETING THE THEME AND CONCEPTION**

##### *A. Interpreting the theme: immersive aesthetic experience of stage space*

*China in Stories* creates three stage performance spaces, giving consideration to the seamless connection between drama and film performance. The combination of stage technology and stage scenery innovation constructs a three-dimensional and immersive narrative field, which makes the audience deeply immersed in it.

As for the creation of stage space, the core creativity of "theater" was proposed based on the theme of "recreating the classics and exploring the zeitgeist behind them" proposed by China National Radio. Three art forms of variety, drama and film and television are completed in three conjured theaters, which are composed of golden platform and CNC lifting screen.

According to the presentation requirements of the stage performance content of the program group, the stage design highly restores the historical scenes in the three stages corresponding to the period of classical works, shows the most authentic times style in different theatrical performances, and excavates the profound theme behind the real story. Two levels of space are arranged on both sides of the stage. The double superposition of the secondary stage and the box space liberates the spatial level of the stage, promotes the spatio-temporal freedom of the stage, and enables the audience to feel the rich performance content in the way of combining scenes and scenes. In *Red Sorghum*, Jiang Xin as Jiu Er and Xing Jiadong as Yu Zhanao perform the vitality of life on the second stage. On the main stage, they fought bloody battles with the Japanese army, making public the tenacious fighting spirit of the Chinese nation. Such way of space design and interpretation on the stage makes the program present the aesthetic style of spectacle, and creates an immersive aesthetic experience, aiming to evoke the high-spirited heroism of later generation by shaping the spirit of predecessors' stubborn and unyielding struggle.

The structural basis of stage space is the principle of visual image creation, from Shanghai in 1953 to Beijing in the 1980s, from the vast loess plateau to Hutong alleyway. Based on the background of each story in the program, multi-layer techniques such as traditional painting techniques, digital landscape painting and 3D animation are adopted to arouse the audience's impression and emotional resonance from the visual sense.

#### *B. Conception: the intersection of history and reality*

*China in Stories* strives to build a museum of new China's photographic art. The classic texts displayed in the museum are, in the final analysis, the writing of "people". Recording, describing and interpreting are all narrative Spaces in which the stories of the past are connected again, so that the spirit of the times and national character meet at the node between history and reality, and the classics illuminate the reality.

*China in Stories* is not just a re-presentation of classic stories, but a new way for classic stories engraved in the memory of the Chinese people to emit light and heat. In *Tracks in the Snowy Forest*, when the actors take a curtain call on stage and the story of *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* comes to an end, Yang Zirong's spirit becomes clearer off stage. The live link of "Yang Zirong Corps" shows that the "Yang Zirong spirit" of the two time and space complement each other. The spiritual meeting across time and space shows that the hero has never gone far. The last episode of the first season *18 Cave Village* walked directly out of the stage and walked into the "field" of the story to feel the power of reality. In the crucial year of poverty

alleviation, the cultural variety show *China in Stories* has put into practice the "four forces" of propaganda work from another perspective. The show's creators, including Dong Qing, came to the families of the original characters in the film *18 Cave Village* to hear their most vivid stories. The scene moves from the stage to the mountain, and the story becomes a face-to-face listening. These stories are also the result of traveling and suffering. They use their feet to measure the long March of the new era, use their eyes to capture the endless rhythm of social development, use their brains to insight into the struggle behind a better life, and use their writing to tell inspiring stories about China. *China in Stories* opens up the field space between people and history, truly brings the four spaces of drama, history and reality alive, and finds a key point for the innovation of cultural variety shows.

### **V. THE FUNCTION OF WRITING IS TO CONVEY THE DAO: VALUE ORIENTATION AND CULTURAL BREAKTHROUGH**

After the broadcast of *China in Stories*, the popularity of relevant topics has remained high, and its cultural influence cannot be underestimated. Zhang Dexiang, vice chairman of the China Literature and Art Critics Association, wrote a literary review in *Guangming Daily*: "*China in Stories* condenses the great works of the times into the screen, vividly presenting the immortal memories and the spirit carried by classic works, and leading the national audience to review classics across generations." [3] The program connects the historical memory of China through a number of classic stories, which are fused into the blood of Chinese culture and form the genetic code of Chinese people. The "upward" value in the social context and the cultural breakthrough of the national spirit have achieved the cultural balance and value dissemination between the story and contemporary China.

#### *A. Educating for fun: reference of social education and life experience*

*China in Stories* outlines the image of China in the classic stories that remain in the memory of the nation one by one. The microscopic perspective and grand narrative find the empathy points of audiences of different ages and the common points of different times through the cultural values in the stories. It is not only the inheritance of Chinese spirit, but also a kind of innovation to construct a new mode of telling Chinese stories. It completes the exploration of Chinese people's life and social education with a cultural program.

Based on the story, the program explains the Chinese temperature, Chinese attitude and Chinese tolerance contained in the Chinese story text, and the enduring Chinese story has important social educational

significance for contemporary China. *Desire* discusses the simple values of the good Chinese, and *At Middle Age* discusses middle-aged intellectuals' dedication to the country. Both programs discuss the life attitude of ordinary Chinese people, which has a strong value of thinking and education. *Phoenix Harp* focuses on rural basic education and *18 Cave Village* focuses on targeted poverty alleviation. The discussion of topical social issues is of great significance for the current Chinese people to listen, comprehend, reflect and pay attention to the social process. The deep patriotic enthusiasm and national pride revealed in *The Waves that Never Die* and *Eternal Life in the Fire* have broken the single didacticism form of patriotic education and awakened the sense of social responsibility and national identity in the hearts of Chinese people.

*China in Stories* is not just about reshaping the classics, but about going deep into society, taking root in reality, and extending the moving stories of contemporary society behind the classic stories. The program not only enables the audience to find their own position in the program and generate deep personal resonance, but also continuously constructs and strengthens the imaginary community in the common meaning space. [4] The audience can find their own place and value in the story, see themselves in the story, and understand themselves. Sun Yuqing, a real-life "Xiao Fang" in *Desire*, recounts her past with her adoptive parents and pays tribute to the Chinese spirit of "truth, kindness and beauty. In *Phoenix Harp*, Hu Qingru and Hu Liang tell the story of the family's education relay that spans 70 years. The descendants of the heroes of the *Red Rock* in *Eternal Life in the Fire* recall the revolutionary days of their fathers. The story of the program has both temperature and hardness, and the characters have both human sparkle and special bearing, subtly influencing Chinese people's life attitude and values, and completing the social education of edifying, shaping and inspiring people with culture.

#### B. Cultural decoding: the emotional transmission of Chinese stories

The story of characters involved in *China in Stories* have a dual perspective of individual destiny and the country destiny. With the long scroll of the times as the background, the concept of a small family is integrated with the concept of a big family, and the theme of the national rejuvenation echoes with that of the Chinese story. The remolding of contemporary figures and classic stories completes the co-construction of the significance of history and the present, and achieves the dual recognition between the national pride, cultural confidence and the inspiration of the times carried by the story and the current audience's sense of identity and national pride for the national community with a shared future.

Taking the reproduction of classic literary and art works as the communication carrier, *China in Stories* integrates multiple artistic expression forms such as interviews, dramas and films into one. Classical literary and art works themselves are only the undertakers of stories, while national spirit and patriotism are the deep cultural core. The program decoded the spiritual core of the Chinese nation into 13 classic national stories: *The Waves that Never Die* told the story of Martyr Li Xia who sacrificed his life for the liberation of new China; the folk legend of Yang Zirong in *Tracks in the Snowy Forest*; *The Ordinary World* tells the story of Sun Shaoping and Sun Shao-an, two brothers fighting for their dreams on the loess plateau; *Roaring Across the Horizon* depicts the epic story of General Feng Shi and scientist Lu Guangda working quietly until they complete China's first atomic bomb; *18 Cave Village* tells a wonderful story of Yang Yingjun leading the Brothers of Yang Family to eradicate poverty and win a battle of poverty alleviation... *China in Stories* combines individual micro narration with national grand narration, and the individual destiny is closely intertwined with the destiny of the times to constantly outline the glorious course of the new China 70 years after its founding. In *White Haired Girl*, the program invites Meng Yu, who plays the first generation of *White Haired Girl* in China, to tell the story behind the creation. The arrival of the Japanese couple Yoko Morishita has opened the cross-border spread of friendship between China and Japan. The artistic vision behind a national opera opens the hearts of audiences all over the world, connects the friendship and love between China and Japan for more than half a century, and awakens the red memory and China complex behind the story.

## VI. CONCLUSION

*China in Stories* systematically sorts out and summarizes literary and artistic works with realistic themes since the founding of new China 70 years ago, selects outstanding characters and stories with ideological, artistic and ornamental value, and integrates film and television, drama, variety show and other artistic techniques, thus connecting the Museum of Video Art of new China. Shen Haixiong, director of China National Radio and producer of *China in Stories*, stressed in the theme panel of the 2019 CCTV Financial Forum — Enabling High-quality Development that the phenomena-level program *China in Stories* recalls the classics with the discourse of the new era and presents the style and spirit of the era and the national spirit with real people, real events and true feelings. It has received a warm response from the society and won full recognition from all sectors of society.

As a hardcore cultural innovation program of CCTV, *China in Stories* innovates the narrative mode of story text selection, subject setting and field construction, and

reinterprets the Chinese national spirit codes buried deep in classic literary and artistic works through the media platform to tell vivid Chinese stories. On the basis of model innovation, the program carries and spreads the cultural value to open up the “things in the story” that have been sealed in history, and draws out the noble figure and national genes buried deep behind, thus becoming a classic example of carrying forward the national spirit, telling Chinese stories well and transmitting the Chinese voice.

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