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Bridging Elite and Mass Tastes: The Role of Chinese TV Variety Shows in Revitalizing Traditional Culture

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Abstract:
This study delves into the role of Chinese TV variety shows in revitalizing traditional culture by catering to both elite and popular preferences. The paper scrutinizes the theoretical discourse on high versus popular culture, suggesting that television art has obscured these distinctions, fostering cultural harmony. Chinese TV variety programs have innovatively incorporated traditional cultural elements like poetry, painting, heritage sites, intangible cultural heritage, and culinary arts, repackaging them in accessible modern formats to captivate both discerning and broad audiences. This approach has not only cultivated public esteem for traditional culture, invigorated cultural memory and self-assurance, but also profoundly influenced cultural identity. It demonstrates the impactful role of merging elite aesthetics with mass entertainment in rejuvenating traditional culture and enhancing the audience's cultural understanding and engagement.

Keywords:
Chinese TV variety shows, traditional culture, cultural confidence, high culture, popular culture, cultural identity

1. Introduction

The rapid development of mass media has led to the predominance of popular culture over traditional high culture, challenging the survival of elite arts. The discontinuity or dualism between tradition and modernity has been a major theme in social theory since the inception of sociology(Xia, 1996). As Márkus points out, in the postmodernist stage, culture has been completely popularized. Sinnerbrink (2020) notes the disappearing boundaries between high culture and popular culture, including distinctions within literature. Facing modernity and various socio-economic challenges, the loss of traditional culture and lifestyles has become an increasingly pressing concern. Television, particularly through its innovative variety shows, has emerged as a pivotal platform for the revitalization of traditional culture alongside modern culture and contemporary art. By bridging the gap between modernism and high culture, television has transformed the relationship between art and the masses, fostering a dynamic interaction that not only integrates high culture into the fabric of popular culture but also actively reinvigorates traditional cultural elements, making them accessible and appealing to the general audience (Fiske, 2010a).

China has creatively leveraged television to revive traditional culture by embracing both elite and popular tastes. Since 2016, supported by national policies, a number of original TV variety shows featuring traditional Chinese culture have emerged, showcasing poetry, paintings, heritage sites, intangible cultural heritage, and

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more. These shows have promoted cultural confidence and identity. This evolution vividly exemplifies the concept of ' 雅俗共赏 ' (yǎsù gòngshǎng, mutual appreciation by both the refined and the popular), where the fusion of elite and popular elements within television variety shows not only preserves traditional culture but also makes it accessible and appealing to a broad audience spectrum. Shows like The Chinese Poetry Conference (Zhōngguó Shīcí Dàhuì, [中国诗词大会]) and National Treasures (Guójiā Bǎozàng,[国家宝藏]) have become standout examples, ingeniously blending classical poetry recitations, historical narratives, and interactive audience participation, thereby captivating both scholarly circles and the general public.

This paper reviews the theoretical debate between high and popular culture, illustrates how Chinese TV variety shows have blurred the boundaries and achieved a balance, and analyzes cases of how these shows have made traditional culture relevant to modern pop audiences, thus revitalizing traditions. This paper argues that TV variety shows serve as an ideal platform to sustain China's cultural heritage, effectively embodying the principle of "suiting both refined and popular tastes". By seamlessly integrating traditional cultural elements with contemporary entertainment, these shows not only create a shared space of cultural appreciation across diverse audience groups but also position themselves as innovative conduits for global cultural exchange, offering a model for cultural preservation that resonates beyond national boundaries.

2. Literature Review: Tracing the Academic Debates on Popular Culture

The academic inquiry into popular culture has significantly evolved from its inception in the 19th century, rooted in British cultural and literary studies. Initially dominated by an elitist perspective, key figures such as Matthew Arnold and F.R. Leavis laid the foundation for cultural analysis, a stance that would increasingly come under scrutiny as new voices in cultural studies began advocating for a more inclusive view of popular culture. Arnold's division of society into barbarians, philistines, and the populace underpinned a framework where culture and truth were presumed accessible only to an educated minority. This perspective implicitly marginalized popular culture, positioning high culture as the benchmark for cultural excellence (Arnold, 1935; Machann, 1998). F.R. Leavis furthered this elitist narrative by juxtaposing mass civilization against a minority culture, inherently devaluing the former while elevating the latter (Leavis, 1930, 1975).

The mid-20th century marked a pivotal shift as cultural studies emerged, challenging the binary opposition between high and popular culture by demonstrating the cultural value found within everyday popular experiences and media. The Budapest School, with its emphasis on the paradoxical nature of culture, and postmodern theorists like Fredric Jameson, who advocated for a holistic examination of culture, began challenging the elitist framework (Heller, 1999; Jameson, 1991). This period saw a gradual move towards symbolic interactionism and the rejection of dualism, setting the stage for a more inclusive understanding of culture (Grossberg, 1992).

The Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry and its emphasis on the alienation effect of technical rationality on culture and arts introduced a critical, albeit still somewhat elitist, stance towards popular culture. Adorno and Horkheimer's concept of the "culture industry" critiqued the commodification of culture and its implications for societal consciousness and autonomy (Adorno & Horkheimer, 1997; Jay, 1973; Marcuse, 1964). Despite their critical stance, their work illuminated the extensive influence of popular culture in shaping societal norms and values and laid the groundwork for subsequent scholars to critically examine the culture industry's societal role.

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From the 1970s onwards, the field of cultural studies underwent further transformation, embracing commercialization and popular culture's potential to invest in cultural forms with new meanings. This era saw the development of theories such as reception theory, encoding, and fandom studies. These approaches not only provided nuanced insights into the consumption and interpretation of popular culture but also highlighted the active participation of audiences in shaping the meaning of cultural texts, thereby valuing the interpretive power of the viewers (Morley, 1980; Jenkins, 1992). These paradigms highlighted the active role of audiences in creating meaning, underscoring the complex dynamics between cultural producers and consumers.

The Birmingham School's positive defense of popular culture, marking a significant departure from earlier elitist criticisms, was fueled by a growing recognition of how popular culture served as a site for negotiating social identities and resisting dominant ideologies. By advocating for a "common culture" and recognizing popular culture's role in expressing working-class solidarity, scholars like Hoggart and Williams contributed to a more inclusive and democratic understanding of culture (Hoggart, 1957; Williams, 1958). In the US, the gradual acceptance of popular culture by figures such as Hook and Podhoretz, alongside Leslie Fiedler's celebration of popular culture's inclusiveness, reflected a broader shift towards acknowledging the legitimacy and significance of popular cultural forms (Diggins, 1994; Fiedler, 1966).

The evolution of academic debates on popular culture from the 19th century to the present day not only demonstrates a shift from elitist dismissal to a more inclusive and analytical appreciation but also foregrounds the concept of "suiting both refined and popular tastes" as a pivotal theme in contemporary cultural studies. This principle, especially evident in the realm of Chinese television arts, underscores the fusion of traditional and modern elements to cater to a wide audience spectrum, thereby bridging the elite-popular divide and promoting a holistic understanding of culture.

In conclusion, the shifting perspectives on Western popular culture theory have not only enriched television arts research but also offered valuable insights into contemporary Chinese television arts. These insights serve as a foundation for embracing the "suiting both refined and popular tastes" principle, providing a new framework for understanding cultural exchange in the era of globalization. This approach not only democratizes cultural studies but also highlights the potential of popular culture to serve as a dynamic platform for cultural preservation and innovation, facilitating a more inclusive and nuanced understanding of cultural dynamics.

3. Television Arts: From Popular Culture to Middle Culture

Compared with other means of artistic expression, television culture employs a unique combination of audio-visual approaches to present life in a more three-dimensional and comprehensive way (Fiske, 2010). The vibrant dynamism and immersive stereovision of TV programs enrich audiences with a profoundly authentic and holistic cultural experience. In such audio-visual scenarios, television has masterfully blended high culture with popular culture, as seen in programs that pair classical music performances with contemporary visual storytelling, thereby engaging a wider audience.

On the one hand, many originally niche high culture works expand their dissemination through television as a mass medium. For example, the "future reality" allegorized in the sci-fi work The Three-Body Problem (Lei Yang, 2023)is vividly presented through stereoscopic audio-visual techniques in its TV adaptation, which has also enhanced its artistic expressiveness. This adaptation not only brings complex scientific concepts to a wider audience but also fosters a deeper appreciation for science fiction as a literary form, demonstrating

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television's unique capability to transcend cultural and intellectual barriers. The historical documentary The Warring States Academy: The Jixia Academy (Zhànguó Dàxuétáng zhī Jìxià Xuégōng, [战国大学堂之稷下学宫]) utilizes television's advantages in audio and video technology to vividly reproduce the scenes of debates among a hundred schools of thought, effectively illustrating how television can serve as a conduit for the rich tapestry of Chinese philosophical discourse, making it accessible and engaging to contemporary viewers. Therefore, by providing an enriched and vivid platform, television not only showcases these esoteric elite cultural works but also demystifies them, making high culture more accessible and relatable to the general audience.

On the other hand, some easy-to-understand popular cultures are also presented in television art. For instance, the cultural variety show Intangible Cultural Heritage in China (Fēi Yí Lǐ De Zhōngguó, [非遗里的中国]) masterfully demystifies traditional Chinese operas, folk crafts, and other art forms, rendering them in accessible formats that captivate and enlighten the ordinary viewer; the Spring Festival Gala program Night Banquet in Tang Dynasty Palace (Táng Gōng Yè Yuàn, [唐宫夜宴]) employs modernized artistic techniques to bring historical culture into public view in a light-hearted and humorous fashion. These examples not only demonstrate how television arts serve as an open platform for disseminating profound cultural elements but also illustrate how this approach fosters a sense of cultural identity and belonging among viewers by making traditional culture relevant and engaging. The two originally oppositional cultural forms have realized interaction and symbiosis through the container of television.

This cultural landscape, which illustrates the interaction and symbiosis between high and popular culture within television art, closely reflects the contemporary significance of the traditional Chinese concept of the Mean. The principle of the Mean emphasizes harmonizing contradictions and reconciling differences (Mintoff, 2013). Chinese Confucian thinkers elevated it into an ethical criterion and value concept, believing that grasping the proper extent in the development of matters and achieving a dynamic balance of the Mean is the key to realizing social harmony. This spirit of the Mean is also embodied in Western philosophical and religious theories such as Aristotle's Doctrine of the Mean and Christian universal benevolence. Hence, this fusion within television art not only demonstrates the contemporary embodiment of the Mean but also acts as a bridge, introducing and promoting the richness of Chinese traditional culture and its underlying values to a global audience. Therefore, television arts may be regarded as a middle culture in contemporary society, one that has absorbed the essence of high culture while retaining the inclusiveness of popular culture (Bourdieu, 1984). In general, it eliminates the boundaries between the two cultures and provides an open and inclusive public cultural platform.

Television arts have revolutionized not only the convergence and perception of cultures in contemporary society but also established an interactive platform where viewers can engage in a dialogue with diverse cultural themes, thus promoting a deeper understanding and exchange among cultures. Beyond merely presenting content, television has become a dynamic forum for cultural dialogue, where the complexity of high culture is made accessible to a broader audience, thereby democratizing cultural consumption. This evolutionary journey highlights television's pivotal role in cultivating cultural literacy, empowering viewers to delve into and appreciate the intricacies of themes and narratives rooted in diverse traditions. By translating the esoteric elements of high culture into more digestible forms, television arts not only broaden the reach of elite cultural artifacts but also invite a reevaluation of popular culture's value. In doing so, television serves as a catalyst for cultural synthesis, where the distinctions between high and popular culture are not only blurred but also

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redefined. This synthesis reflects a deeper societal shift towards inclusivity and diversity in cultural expression, mirroring the principles of the Mean by promoting balance and harmony across cultural spectrums. Consequently, television arts emerge as a pivotal medium in the creation of a "middle culture," bridging the gap between the elite and the masses, thereby enriching the cultural fabric of contemporary society.

4. Chinese Cultural Variety Shows: A Confluence of Elegance and Popularity

In the era of mass media proliferation, the avenues through which people engage with culture and entertainment continue to evolve (McLuhan, 1964). Utilizing technical advancements, Chinese TV media not only forge a harmonious fusion between traditional culture and contemporary life through cultural programs but also resonate deeply with modern audiences, as evidenced by rising viewership numbers and active social media engagement (Ang, 1985). The principle of "suiting both refined and popular tastes" traces its roots to the ancient Chinese literati's cross-boundary aesthetic experiences (Qi, 2024), as advocated by renowned scholars such as Wang Guowei （王国维）. This principle calls for the integration of both elite and popular art forms to achieve cultural unity, a notion that has been actively promoted by the Chinese cultural community and disseminated through contemporary cultural productions.

In the process, the essence of traditional culture is carefully preserved while being presented in fresh, captivating ways to maximize resonance with modern audiences. By leveraging innovative formats and incorporating interactive elements, such as live voting and audience participation, Chinese cultural variety shows like The Chinese Poetry Conference update traditions for the digital era, making ancient wisdom engaging and relevant. The seamless blending of meaningful content with compelling presentation makes sophisticated cultural concepts more accessible. In doing so, these shows activate cultural memory on a collective level, fostering a greater appreciation for China's heritage.

In 2016, the State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film and Television issued the "Notice on Vigorously Promoting the Independent Innovation of Radio and Television Programs," aiming to encourage a variety of TV programs to base their innovation on the excellent traditional Chinese culture. This initiative was further bolstered by a subsequent directive, "Opinions on the implementation of the project to inherit and develop the excellent traditional Chinese culture," released by the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China and the State Council in 2017. Following these policies, Chinese television has seen a surge in original cultural variety shows, with innovations in content and format directly inspired by the directives, leading to a richer and more diverse cultural programming landscape. Esteemed programs such as The Chinese Poetry Conference, and Seen from the Letters (Jiàn Zì Rú Miàn, [见字如面]) stand as prime examples of how traditional culture can be innovatively melded with contemporary entertainment, showcasing the impact of national policies on fostering cultural innovation within the realm of television programming.

The year 2017 marked a milestone with the launch of over fifty cultural variety shows across major networks and OTT platforms, significantly elevating the quality and breadth of cultural content. Flagship programs such as The Reader (Lǎng Dú Zhě, [朗读者]), Everlasting Classics (Jīngdiǎn Yǒng Liúchuán,[经典咏流传]), National Treasures, and Chinese Story Convention (Zhōngguó Gùshì Dàhuì,[中国故事大会]) have not only set the standard for cultural variety shows but also significantly altered public perception, making traditional culture a beacon of pride and interest in a competitive entertainment market. Among the

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emergent cultural variety shows, The Chinese World of the Classics (Diǎnjí Lǐ De Zhōngguó, [典籍里的中国]) stands out for its ingenious balance of sophistication and accessibility. By extracting the essence of ancient Chinese classics like The Analects (Lúnyǔ, [论语]), Classic of History (Shàngshū, [尚书]), Tao Te Ching (Dàodéjīng, [道德经]), Heavenly Creations: Blossoming Flowers of Medieval China (Tiān Gōng Kāi Wù, [天工开物]) and The Art of War (Sūnzǐ Bīng Fǎ, [孙子兵法]), the show brings textual masterpieces to life through vivid dramatizations coupled with engaging hosts and commentators. The succinct narrations and dynamic reenactments effectively communicate the profundity of these works to average viewers. For instance, core precepts in the Book of Rites (Lǐ Jì, [礼记]) like "wear benevolence and walk with righteousness" are presented through simple yet evocative skits, elucidating their contemporary relevance.

This innovative format succeeds in balancing sophistication with entertainment, neither compromising high cultural depth nor isolating general audiences. By capitalizing on the viral nature of television, the show has stimulated renewed interest in ancient classics while propagating timeless teachings at risk of fading into obscurity. Its runaway success on digital platforms, amplified by vibrant audience interaction and widespread sharing on social media, underscores the public's keen interest in accessible and relatable cultural content. Ultimately, The Chinese World of the Classics showcases how cultural variety shows can artfully transform elite literary works into contemporary crowd-pleasers, realizing the coexistence of elegance and popularity.

From 2017 onwards, Chinese cultural variety programs have demonstrated a robust trend of sustained growth, reaching unprecedented heights in 2022-2023. This period witnessed CCTV and local satellite TV stations championing Chinese culture through diverse themes, including poetry, painting, intangible cultural heritage, and artifacts, propelling cultural variety shows to new heights of popularity and acclaim. Remarkably, these programs dominated prime-time ratings on CCTV, with cultural variety shows securing 8 out of the top 10 slots, 5 of which achieved an average viewership rate exceeding 2% (China Audio-Visual Big Data [CVB], 2024).

Marshall McLuhan's seminal theory, "the medium is the message," posits that the media themselves constitute a significant component of the message (McLuhan, 1964). This perspective gains particular relevance in the context of television, where the embedded cultural content not only shapes a distinctive aesthetic that merges tradition with modernity but also plays a crucial role in shaping viewers' cultural identities and value systems, making television a potent medium for cultural transmission and education. Programs such as the Chinese Characters Dictation Competition (Zhōngguó Hànyǔ Tīngxiě Dàhuì, [中国汉语听写大会]) and the China Poetry Conference (Zhōngguó Shī Cí Dàhuì,[中国诗词大会])not only entertain but also educate by delving into the etymology of Chinese characters and the allure of poetry, respectively (Bai & Song, 2015). Art-oriented shows like The Renewal of All Things (Xīn Shēng Wàn Wù, [新生万物]) and Artistic Exploration of Intangible Heritage (Yì Lǎn Wú Yí, [艺览吾〞遗〞]) offer insights into intangible cultural heritage and the splendor of traditional Chinese arts and crafts behind them. Furthermore, music programs like Everlasting Classics and The Rites and Music of China (Zhōngguó Lǐ Zhōngguó Yuè, [中国礼 中国乐]) reinterpret classical poetry and explore the origins of traditional music, illustrating the fluid migration of cultural elements from elite contexts into the realm of popular culture.

Through programs such as the Chinese Characters Dictation Competition, the process of symbolic reconstruction is rendered vividly apparent. This process facilitates the conversion, transmission, and interpretation of cultural symbols, thereby rendering ancient Chinese literature and history accessible and relatable to contemporary audiences (Hall, 1997). In doing so, it underscores the medium's crucial role in the inheritance

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of culture and in embodying the aesthetic principle of "suiting both refined and popular tastes." These efforts mirror the ancient Chinese endeavor to bridge the gap between high culture and mass appeal, thereby realizing the educational elegance of the vulgar while enabling the modern resonance of elite traditional culture.

Expanding on this foundation, programs like The Quintessence of Chinese Drama (Zuì Měi Zhōngguó Xì, [最美中国戏]) and Best of Chinese Operas (Ná Shǒu Hǎo Xì, [拿手好戏]) rejuvenate traditional theatre by integrating modern storytelling techniques and visual effects, thereby captivating younger audiences and rekindling their appreciation for China's profound operatic legacy. Drawing from classics like The Legend of the White Snake (Bái Shé Zhuàn, [白蛇传]) and Mu Guiying Takes Command (Mù Guīyīng Guàshuài, [穆桂英挂帅]), these shows balance sophistication and entertainment in dramatizing enduring stories that have shaped the national psyche. Additionally, entries like The Grand Ceremony of Chinese Music (Guó Yuè Dà Diǎn, [国乐大典]) and Searching for Musical Companions in Nature (Gāo Shān Liú Shuǐ Mì Zhī Yīn, [高山流水觅知音]) showcase the splendor of traditional Chinese music, from percussion performances to Mongolian horse-head fiddle recitals, aligning with theories of cultural globalization (Tomlinson, 1999) by presenting niche artforms to mainstream viewership. Together these examples highlight television's role in propelling marginalized cultural traditions into popular consciousness, serving both educational and aesthetic functions. They also align with UNESCO's initiatives on safeguarding intangible cultural heritage (UNESCO, 2003), underscoring television's function as an impactful tool for cultural preservation and transmission.

Beyond entertaining and educating, these programs serve as bridges for global cultural exchange, enhancing the worldwide appreciation and understanding of Chinese traditional culture through engaging narratives and innovative presentation formats (Appadurai, 1996). They reflect Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital, where television democratizes access to cultural knowledge, and Arjun Appadurai's notion of -scapes, particularly mediascapes, illustrating how media shapes our perception of culture and the world.

Through the integration of traditional elements within contemporary frameworks, Chinese cultural variety shows not only nurtures a profound appreciation for China's rich cultural heritage but also paves the way for a future wherein these programs are poised to play a crucial role in sculpting the landscape of global cultural exchanges. This integration promotes a richer intercultural comprehension and admiration, ensuring their enduring significance within a rapidly evolving global context.

5. Conclusion

In the contemporary media landscape, Chinese TV variety shows have emerged as a pivotal arena for the revitalization of traditional culture, skillfully navigating the dichotomy between refined and popular tastes. This study has explored how these variety shows not only act as effective conduits for cultural preservation but also considerably enhance the public's appreciation and understanding of China's rich cultural heritage, by innovatively blending it with modern entertainment formats.

Central to this exploration is the concept of "suiting both refined and popular tastes", a principle that underscores the potential of popular media to democratize cultural education and appreciation. By integrating traditional cultural elements such as poetry, calligraphy, painting, and folk music into their programming, Chinese TV variety shows have effectively broadened the scope of cultural engagement, making it relatable and appealing to both connoisseurs and the general public alike. This innovative strategy not only enhances the visibility of traditional culture but also bridges generational gaps, stimulating renewed interest and pride

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across diverse age groups and social backgrounds.

The significance of these findings extends beyond the realm of entertainment, offering profound implications for the fields of cultural studies and media influence. These variety shows exemplify how media can play an instrumental role in the contemporary renaissance of traditional cultures, facilitating a dynamic interaction between the past and the present. These shows not only prove that traditional culture need not be confined to history books but also revolutionize how the public consumes and engages with culture, making it an active and living part of modern society.

Moreover, this investigation underscores the critical role of creative adaptation in the preservation and vibrant renewal of cultural heritage. The success of these variety shows in reviving and sustaining interest in traditional culture demonstrates the efficacy of innovative presentation methods. This creative adaptability ensures cultural heritage remains relevant in the digital age and lays the groundwork for a sustainable model that promises to enrich cultural transmission to future generations, potentially transforming cultural education and engagement.

As we look to the future, scholars, media producers, and cultural policymakers must acknowledge the indispensable value of media as a platform for cultural education and engagement. Future research should delve into the specific dynamics of how media influences cultural identity formation and global cultural exchange in the digital era, providing insights into the evolving relationship between technology, media, and traditional cultures. It is also crucial to investigate the long-term impact of these media practices on public perceptions of traditional culture and their contribution to the formation of cultural identity.

In conclusion, Chinese TV variety shows, through their masterful blending of refined and popular elements, have established a distinctive niche within the cultural landscape, offering a vibrant testament to the enduring allure and relevance of traditional culture. This study not only sheds light on the role of media in cultural revitalization but also calls for a broader appreciation of the innovative ways in which traditional culture can be integrated into the fabric of contemporary society. Moving forward, it is essential to implement targeted support measures, such as policy initiatives, funding, and educational programs, to champion these efforts, thereby ensuring the vital role of traditional culture in enriching the cultural diversity and wealth of our global society.

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