

Connecting Both Sides of the Strait Bridging Generations: The Multimodal Communication Strategy and Cultural Identity Construction of ‘The Sound of Life’

Yan Jin, Xiaofeng Liang*

School of Media and Design, Xi'an Peihua University, Xi'an, Shaanxi, 710125, China

**Corresponding author: 47720807@qq.com*

Keywords: Multimodal Discourse Analysis; Cultural Identity; The Voice Of China; Communication Strategy

Abstract: Taking Hunan Television's music variety programme The Sound of Life as its subject, this study employs multimodal discourse analysis to examine the programme's communication strategies in constructing cultural identity. It explores these strategies through multiple modal symbolic systems including language, imagery and sound. Through the skilful interplay of linguistic symbols, visual presentation, and auditory elements—manifested in stage design, musical selections, and audience engagement—‘The Sound of Life’ successfully constructs a cultural identity space bridging the Chinese-speaking world across generations. This study reveals the programme's implications for fostering cultural identity and perpetuating Chinese cultural heritage, offering valuable insights for the creation and dissemination of cultural programming.

1. Introduction

Against the backdrop of deepening globalisation, culture—as a core element of a nation's soft power—has seen its strategic significance in dissemination and export increasingly highlighted. As cultural exchanges and collisions grow ever more frequent, the construction of cultural identity has gradually emerged as a significant focus within academic circles. With the advancement of digital technology, traditional monomodal linguistic research struggles to comprehensively elucidate the complex processes of cultural transmission. Against this backdrop, multimodal discourse analysis theory has transcended the limitations of singular linguistic modalities, incorporating multiple symbolic modalities into its scope of inquiry. This approach offers fresh perspectives for delving into the phenomena of cultural transmission.

However, current academic research on cultural identity remains confined to the expressive mechanisms of single modalities such as visual symbols or musical texts, lacking systematic explanations for the collaborative logic of multimodal symbols and their functions within communicative contexts. Consequently, this paper introduces multimodal discourse analysis theory to effectively transcend the isolated, single-modality analytical paradigms of traditional media studies, offering a more suitable theoretical tool for examining cultural transmission in the era of media convergence.

Taking the music programme ‘Sound of Life’ as its subject, this study systematically elucidates how multimodal symbols—through language, imagery, and sound—achieve cultural memory evocation and emotional cohesion. It examines how the programme showcases and disseminates Chinese culture, thereby fostering audience cultural identification. This research not only deepens theoretical understanding of the relationship between media and cultural identity but also offers practical guidance for formulating cultural dissemination strategies. It holds significant implications for the creation and dissemination of similar cultural programmes.

2. Overview of ‘Sound of Life’

‘Sound of Life’ is a music competition and exchange programme jointly produced by Mango TV, Hunan Satellite TV and other production partners. Through its distinctive content and format, it has achieved remarkable success in cultural dissemination. Using music as its medium, the programme showcases regionally distinctive musical cultures through themed seasons such as ‘Hong Kong Music Season’, ‘Formosa Season’ and ‘Greater Bay Area Season’. The ‘Hong Kong Music Season’ revisits the golden era of Hong Kong pop music, reimagining its expression to resonate with contemporary youth, thereby breathing new life into the genre. The ‘Formosa Season’ focuses on Taiwanese music, reviving works steeped in historical significance. The ‘Greater Bay Area Season’ highlights regional cultural elements such as Cantonese and Hakka dialects, emphasising local customs and traditions to showcase the inclusive cultural character of the Greater Bay Area. ‘Sound of Life’ reinterprets classic music through contemporary artistic forms, breathing fresh vitality into these works. This approach not only evokes emotional resonance among audiences for diverse regional musical cultures but also subtly strengthens cultural identity. The programme positions the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area as a cultural showcase, presenting China's classical music to the world and demonstrating the unique charm of Chinese culture. It embodies cultural confidence while offering fresh perspectives for the international dissemination of Chinese culture.

3. Theoretical Foundations

Through its thematic design and artistic expression, The Sound of Life demonstrates unique efficacy in bridging cultural communication across the straits and generations. Its success is no accident, but rather the result of multiple symbolic systems working in concert. How elements such as language, visuals, and sound are organically integrated within the programme, and how they collectively contribute to the construction of cultural identity, requires in-depth analysis using systematic theoretical tools. By introducing multimodal discourse analysis theory and cultural identity theory, this study provides theoretical underpinnings for exploring The Sound of Life's communication strategies and its mechanisms for constructing cultural identity.

3.1 Multimodal Discourse Analysis Theory

The earliest systematic formulation of multimodal discourse analysis theory can be traced back to Gunther Kress and Theo van Leeuwen. In their 1996 publication *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* ^[1], they extended the linguistic theories of Halliday, founder of systemic functional linguistics, to visual sign systems. This established the first comprehensive analytical framework for visual grammar, marking the inception of a systematised theory of multimodal discourse analysis.

Building upon the foundations of systemic functional linguistics, Zhang Delu's ^[2] multimodal discourse analysis theory transcends Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar framework by

proposing a theory of multimodal coordination. This theory emphasises that symbols such as language, images, and sound can achieve semantic enhancement through mechanisms like ‘complementarity’ and ‘reinforcement’. Each modality possesses its own grammar to embody discourse meaning; the relationships between modalities are fundamentally the relationships between these grammatical systems in conveying discourse meaning.

This study integrates Kress and van Leeuwen's visual grammar framework with Zhang Delu's multimodal coordination theory to systematically elucidate the synergistic effects of multimodal symbols—including language, imagery, and sound—in the programme *Sound of Life*. The programme achieves modal complementarity through musical reproduction and spatial construction, whilst fostering empathic reinforcement via singers' reinterpretations and audience interactions – precisely embodying multimodal discourse analysis theory.

3.2 Cultural Identity Theory

The development of cultural identity theory can be traced to the interdisciplinary field of psychology, sociology, and cultural studies. The renowned American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson systematically introduced the concept of ‘identity’ in his 1950s work *Childhood and Society*, thereby laying the foundations for cultural identity theory. Cultural identity theory refers to the affirmative recognition of the most significant aspects of one's own ethnic group, formed through prolonged shared existence within an ethnic community. It constitutes a value affirmation of human spiritual existence.

Raymond Williams contends that culture conveys messages of identity, and when different cultures interact, ‘identity’ is the primary issue requiring resolution. In modern society, an individual's social standing and identity are determined by their environment. Culture and identity are often inextricably linked; individuals define themselves through group identity to distinguish themselves from others, thereby strengthening mutual recognition among group members. This shared cultural essence serves as the hallmark of the collective ^[3].

This study integrates multimodal discourse analysis theory with cultural identity theory. By examining the programme's orchestration of linguistic, visual, and auditory multimodal symbols, it systematically elucidates the group effects generated, enabling viewers to undergo identity transformation, immerse themselves in the cultural atmosphere, and achieve a profound leap in cultural identification.

4. Multimodal Discourse Interaction: Cultural Identity Practices in The Voice of China

The programme's meticulously orchestrated linguistic, visual and auditory modalities do not exist in isolation. Instead, they converge under specific interactive strategies to collectively forge a cultural identity space transcending geographical and generational boundaries. Examining three dimensions—the symbolic refinement of linguistic modalities, the spatial construction of visual modalities, and the stylistic fusion of auditory modalities—aids in systematically elucidating how the programme transforms abstract notions of cultural identity into tangible, comprehensible, and resonant multimodal discursive practices. This ultimately achieves its communicative effect of bridging the straits and uniting hearts.

4.1 Linguistic Modality

4.1.1 Visual Language: Symbolic Condensation of Cultural Memory

Visual language constitutes a non-verbal mode of communication that conveys information

through visual elements. The programme *Sound of Hong Kong: Hong Kong Music Season* adopts the slogan ‘Singing the History of Hong Kong Music’, transforming musical symbols into a cultural chronicle. Through renditions of songs such as *My Chinese Heart*, *Pearl of the Orient*, *Under the Lion Rock*, and *Let It All Go with the Wind*, it awakens collective memory, making these melodies resonate more profoundly within the hearts of listeners. Each season of ‘*Sound of Hong Kong*’ opens with a documentary segment spanning several tens of minutes, introducing audiences to the musical culture of the Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao Greater Bay Area. Adopting the programme slogan ‘One waterway, one language, one voice’, it employs metaphorical mapping to concretise abstract cultural identity into a tangible cross-regional vehicle. This guides viewers to recognise the shared cultural origins underlying musical exchanges across the straits.

4.1.2 Discourse Practices: The Ritualised Construction of Cultural Communities

Discourse practices refer to the process by which individuals express viewpoints, share information, and engage in communication with others through language and speech. Music, too, constitutes a form of discourse practice. In an interview with Greater Bay Area Quarterly, Hu Weili noted that his compositions all incorporate a foundation in Chinese cultural heritage, representing an accumulation of ethnic musical traditions. The opera elements in *Days of Our Lives*, the gongs and drums in *Drunken Master*, and the pipa in *The Ninth Rank Magistrate* all disseminate the most profound aspects of Chinese music through cinematic soundtracks. Music is not fabricated out of thin air; it invariably has origins and a lineage. The crafting of these scores has produced culturally rich audiovisual feasts, enabling audiences to deepen their understanding of Chinese culture while enjoying the music. This fosters emotional resonance, heightening pride and a sense of belonging, thereby enhancing the dissemination of Chinese culture.

4.1.3 Textual Reconstruction: Modern Transformation of Cultural Genes

The programme's script ingeniously weaves Chinese cultural elements into song introductions. The composition ‘Beyond the Waters’ draws inspiration from the imagery of ‘The Reed’ in the *Book of Songs*. The lyrics ‘The fair one dwells beyond the waters’ blend classical cultural genes with contemporary musical expression, preserving traditional elegance while imparting fresh, modern significance through its reinterpretation. When introducing the song ‘My Grandmother's Penghu Bay,’ the script describes: ‘This composition depicts the beautiful coastal scenery of Penghu Bay and the simple affection between grandmother and grandchild, serving as a vivid portrayal of Taiwanese folk culture and traditional Chinese familial bonds.’ By interpreting the song's background and meaning, it allows audiences to appreciate the close connection between Taiwanese music and Chinese culture in emotional expression.

4.2 Visual Modality

4.2.1 Spatial Design: Stage Construction as a Cultural Identity Field

As a ritualised space for cultural performance, the stage carries profound symbolic significance. The stage for *Echoes of Melody* features 65 crystal chandelier columns, creating a cathedral-like radiance. This spatial design establishes cultural sovereignty, symbolising the glorious history of Guangdong-Hong Kong-Macao music culture. The production adeptly employs montage techniques to transcend temporal and spatial constraints. For instance, during Kelly Chen's rendition of ‘Song of the Setting Sun,’ her performance intertwines with archival footage of Anita Mui, enabling audiences to journey from personal emotion to cultural communion through the music. New-generation singer Ma Jiaqi's rendition of Lo Ta-yu's ‘Your Face’ featured a crystalline timbre

and penetrating power that seemed to pierce the mists of time, allowing listeners to glimpse the visage of a former lover. Accompanying the performance, a large screen displayed a montage of Lo Ta-yu's photographs, stirring nostalgic sentiments among the audience. Through symbolic imagery and memory-evocation techniques, these stage designs transform the stage into a vessel for cultural memory, facilitating the transmission of cultural identity.

4.2.2 Scenes of Memory: Cinematic Narratives Awaken Collective Cultural Remembrance

Lighting and cinematography are indispensable elements in crafting stage effects. Through the combination of varied lighting and camera transitions, they can stir audience emotions with powerful resonance. For instance, in the programme 'Treasure Island Season', during Zhang Jie's performance of 'Thinking of You Every Day', lighting projected his silhouette onto a large white screen. Post-production then superimposed the image of Zhang Yusheng onto this silhouette, creating a mystical and dreamlike atmosphere that amplified the stage's impact. In the special programme commemorating the 25th anniversary of Macao's return to the motherland, the performances of 'Song of the Seven Sons' and 'Today I'll Be There' were seamlessly integrated. Employing montage techniques, the production documented scenes of everyday life in Macao, interspersed with archival footage of reports related to the handover. These images alternated with live footage of the singers. Through the lens, the programme united Chinese mainland and Macao, showcasing the shared cultural roots of the Greater Bay Area.

4.2.3 Identity Symbolism: Costumes as Cultural Identity Emblems

The attire of guests serves as a direct manifestation of cultural identity. Appropriate clothing assists performers in embodying song characters and enhances stage visuals. Alan Tam's vintage suit during his performance epitomised gentlemanly elegance, reflecting Hong Kong's cultural essence as an international metropolis blending Western fashion with Eastern refinement. When Karen Yip delivered Cantonese classics, her silver-haired cheongsam captivated audiences. The modified cheongsam blended Guangzhou embroidery's intertwined floral motifs with Western three-dimensional tailoring, preserving Lingnan cultural elements while subtly embodying Hong Kong's identity. Hu Defu performed 'The Olive Tree' in attire reflecting Taiwan's indigenous heritage, complemented by a red scarf, expressing reverence for aboriginal culture and unique Chinese spiritual beliefs.

4.3 Vocal Modalities

4.3.1 Diverse Musical Styles Enhancing Cultural Identity

The programme blends ethnic music with other musical genres, allowing audiences to appreciate the rich diversity of Chinese musical culture while fostering a sense of cultural identity and pride. Na Ying and Ma Jiaqi's rendition of 'The Preface to the Orchid Pavilion' infuses classical Chinese musical nuances into a contemporary melody. Commencing with a solo erhu interlude, the piece features Na Ying showcasing operatic vocal techniques during the interlude. From arrangement to performance, it embodies the elegance and depth of traditional Chinese music. Tan Weiwei's collaboration with the E'erguna Band on 'You Are My Rose' blends rock with ethnic elements, reimagining the original composition with fresh resonance. This fusion breathes new vitality into traditional music within contemporary musical frameworks.

4.3.2 Ethnic Instruments: Evoking Cultural Resonance

The programme selects instruments to complement each song's style and emotional requirements, using their distinctive timbres and expressive qualities to heighten the musical narrative. Folk-inspired compositions frequently feature Chinese instruments such as the erhu and harmonica. Li Hao performed 'Hide Your Talents' using the same guitar model as Nicholas Tse, employing its melody and rhythm to showcase the song's distinctive character. Zhang Jie and Yu Wenwen's duet rendition of 'Cao Cao' featured drum kits and electric guitars, delivering a masterful interpretation of Chinese-inspired rock.

4.3.3 Emotional resonance across generations of singers

Singers from different generations offer distinct interpretations of songs, evoking emotional memories across age groups. Alan Tam transports audiences back to Hong Kong music's golden era with classics like 'Can't Say Goodbye', stirring fond recollections of bygone days. Meanwhile, emerging artists like Huang Zihong reinterpret Hong Kong music with unique styles, infusing timeless hits with fresh vitality. Moreover, each episode of 'The Voice of Eternity' concludes with a grand chorus, where guests and audience members unite to sing classic songs, creating an emotional collision. The rendition of 'My Future Is Not a Dream,' performed from the studio to the streets of Taipei, captured the shared emotions and patriotic sentiments conveyed by audiences and singers across the strait. This moment perfectly embodied the concept of 'one family across the strait, sharing a common destiny' ^[4].

5. Cultural Identity Construction: The Multimodal Communication Strategy of The Voice of China

Analysis of the programme's multimodal discourse reveals that The Voice of China employs multiple modalities to forge a distinctive pathway for cultural identity construction. This extends into an exploration of its communication strategy, ultimately distilling a practical paradigm offering valuable insights and lessons.

5.1 Precise Positioning, Establishing Cultural Landmarks

The programme Sound of Life focuses on Chinese-language music, tracing its evolution through regional musical cultures. For instance, the Greater Bay Area season delves into Hong Kong's musical heritage, while the Taiwan season centres on the island's musical landscape. Spanning classic oldies to contemporary hits, it comprehensively showcases diverse regional musical styles, evoking audiences' memories and emotional connections to specific local musical cultures. By selecting songs imbued with regional characteristics and the spirit of their era, the programme precisely targets its audience, reinforcing identification with particular regional cultures.

5.2 Interactive Engagement, Cultivating Cultural Affinity

The programme employs both online and offline formats to foster comprehensive audience interaction. Each episode of The Voice of China concludes by announcing the highest-voted song, inviting the winning team to perform the 'Most Anticipated Song' alongside the live audience. During the third episode of the 'Treasure Island Season', singers including Na Ying, Wei Ru-xuan, and Ma Jiaqi performed "Later", joining the audience in a collective chorus that evoked Bakhtin's concept of the 'carnival square' ^[5]. For the audience, the immersive and awe-inspiring nature of this ritual offers a remarkable sensory experience. It facilitates symbolic participation and virtual

presence, enabling shared emotional engagement that fosters profound resonance and deep collective identity.

5.3 Symbolic Design: Reconstructing Visual Expression

Stage design, lighting and other visual elements incorporate abundant regional cultural symbols. The Hong Kong Music Festival stage backdrop features iconic Hong Kong architecture and neon elements, while the Taiwan Music Festival showcases Taiwan's natural landscapes and night market scenes. These visuals, paired with song performances, create an immersive cultural atmosphere. Artists' costumes and props also carry cultural significance, such as wearing traditional ethnic attire during performances of folk songs. These visual symbols continually reinforce audiences' recognition of regional cultures, deepening cultural identification through visual expression.

5.4 Matrix dissemination, activating cross-domain collaboration

The programme *Sound of Life* aired across multiple platforms including Mango TV, TVB, and Mango TV International, broadening its reach. Concurrently, activities such as trending topic discussions on Weibo engaged diverse audiences in dissemination. This participatory enthusiasm among viewers generated countless programme derivatives, entering independent secondary dissemination sequences. These continued to ferment and spread across smaller screens, producing a pronounced long-tail effect^[6]. Users across platforms further repurposed programme content, triggering viral dissemination that transcended geographical and generational boundaries to reach broader audiences. For instance, Joey Yung and others' rendition of 'Shanghai Beach' in the Greater Bay Area season ignited a nationwide wave of nostalgia, generating over two million related discussions. The lyric 'Love you, hate you, do you know?' became a ubiquitous soundtrack for short videos, spreading widely across platforms^[7].

6. Conclusion

Through multimodal discourse analysis of *The Sound of Eternity*, this study reveals the programme's innovative practices in fostering cultural identity. By synergising linguistic, visual and auditory modalities, the production cultivates a communicative context rich in cultural resonance and emotional warmth. Within this framework, classical and contemporary elements intertwine while tradition engages in dialogue with innovation, successfully showcasing the allure of musical cultures across the straits while evoking profound cultural identification among audiences. This cultivation of identity facilitates the inheritance and innovation of Chinese culture while offering fresh perspectives for cultural programme creation. Nevertheless, limitations exist. The analysis is confined to the specific programme 'The Sound of Life,' lacking comparative studies of similar productions, which may affect the generalisability of conclusions. Furthermore, the absence of data collection and analysis for the programme introduces potential subjectivity and partiality in certain findings. Future research could undertake comparative studies across multiple programmes and domains to validate the universality and applicability of this work. A particular focus should be placed on examining the long-term impacts of cultural identity construction, exploring its positive contributions to societal development, and providing academic reference points for enhancing national cultural soft power.

Acknowledgements

2024 Curriculum Ideological and Political Education Teaching Reform Research Project of Xi'an

Peihua University: 'AI-Empowered Construction and Practical Research on the Evaluation System for Goal Achievement in the Marxist Journalism Thought Course' (Project No. PHKCSZ202407)

References

- [1] Kress, G., & van Leeuwen, T. *Reading Images: The Grammar of Visual Design* [M]. Taylor and Francis, 2020-11-23.
- [2] Zhang, Delu. *Exploration of a Comprehensive Theoretical Framework for Multimodal Discourse Analysis* [J]. *Chinese Journal of Foreign Languages*, 2009, 6(01): 24-30.
- [3] Li, Ying. *A Study on Cross-Cultural Communication of Chinese Food Short Videos from the Perspective of Cultural Identity Theory* [D]. Liaoning University, 2023.
- [4] Zhao, Chenyu; Zhou, Yang; Zhou, Yugang. *An Analysis of the Emotional Rhetoric in the Music Variety Show Infinity and Beyond: Treasure Island Season* [J]. *Media Forum*, 2023, 6(24): 52-54.
- [5] Liao, Yufeng. *Innovation of Cross-Media Narrative Models in Music Variety Shows—Taking Hunan TV's Competitive Singing Tribute Program Infinity and Beyond as an Example* [J]. *Communication and Copyright*, 2023, (01): 40-42+62.
- [6] National Radio and Television Think Tank Official WeChat Account. *Infinity and Beyond: Singing the Shared Affection Rooted in Chinese Culture*. 2022-04-25. Retrieved from <https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/nQnAKHSTQRBvm7tpzDM8eg>
- [7] Cui, Xinjian. *Cultural Identity and Its Roots* [J]. *Journal of Beijing Normal University (Social Sciences)*, 2004, (04): 102-104+107.