

A Study on Strategies for Cultural Variety Shows to Bring Traditional Culture to Life: Taking "Poetry and Painting China" as an Example

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ABSTRACT

In recent years, CCTV's large-scale cultural variety show "Poetry and Painting China" has successfully revitalized traditional cultural classics in contemporary times through its three-dimensional innovation strategy encompassing technological presentation, artistic interpretation, and practical inheritance. Research Findings: Poetry and Painting China employs digital media to break free from the constraints of static art, constructing an immersive aesthetic space; it achieves the reconstruction of poetic and pictorial narratives through cross-disciplinary performances; and it drives the transformation of cultural inheritance from passive observation to active participation through its "Poetry and Painting Workshop." These practices provide a reference model for the creation of cultural variety shows.

KEYWORDS

Cultural variety shows; Revitalization of traditional culture; "Poetry and painting China"

1 Introduction

In the context of digital media reshaping cultural perceptions, cultural variety shows face a dual challenge: preserving the authenticity of traditional cultural classics while adapting to the fragmented communication ecosystem. CCTV's 2022 series "Poetry and Painting China" centered on the core concept of "uniting poetry and painting." Its first season seamlessly integrated multiple national treasure-level paintings with over a hundred classical poems, captivating audiences with its uniquely Chinese aesthetic blend of poetic imagery and pictorial charm. The program won the Entertainment Program Award at the 60th ABU (Asia-Pacific Broadcasting Union) Awards, establishing itself as a phenomenal original cultural IP. The key to its success lies in establishing a revitalization loop that integrates "technology empowering sensory experiences—art reconstructing emotional connections—practice activating cultural genes." This study uses it as a case to analyze the translation mechanisms and transmission pathways of traditional culture within contemporary media environments.

2 Technology shaping: breaking barriers, constructing immersive spacetime

The two-dimensionality and static nature of traditional calligraphy and painting, coupled with the museum-like constraints of viewing original works, often create an aesthetic barrier for the general public. Poetic China fully leverages digital imaging technology, extended reality (XR), surround sound fields, and olfactory simulation to deliver an immersive sensory experience where "poetry and painting merge as one" and "the environment shifts with your movements." This groundbreaking approach shatters the audiovisual boundaries of cultural variety shows, transforming classic works from static "artifacts" into accessible, interactive, and perceptible aesthetic experiences.

2.1 Digital animation: flat paintings come to life in three dimensions

The first episode's recreation of Fan Kuan's Northern Song Dynasty painting "Travelers in Mountain Stream" exemplifies the transformation of a two-dimensional artwork into a three-dimensional space, achieving the ideal of "stepping into the painting in an instant." The program adopts the perspective of a traveler within the painting, meticulously dissecting the artwork into over 80 elements. Each element is then redrawn before being reassembled using 3D digital modeling technology. This process recreates the entire painting while preserving the authentic texture of traditional Chinese ink wash painting, ultimately crafting a landscape space where real people can physically "enter."

Within the ink-wash landscape recreated through CG technology, actor Li Guangfu, as the scroll's unroller, transforms into a "mountain wanderer" stepping into the painting. He encounters figures within the artwork he has never met across millennia, sharing the breathtaking vistas within the painting. This three-dimensional presentation immerses viewers in the towering heroic spirit depicted within the painting, with many netizens remarking: "I truly see the world as Fan Kuan envisioned it a thousand years ago!" This approach not only eliminates the physical and psychological distance created by museum glass display cases but also profoundly restores the aesthetic philosophy of Song Dynasty landscape painting—where scenes are "explorable, habitable, and contemplative." It enables viewers to "enter" the paintings, facilitating a spiritual dialogue between the viewer and the artwork.

The program takes a further step in presenting Southern Song Dynasty painter Li Song's "Pedlar Scroll." The production team employed the creative medium of VR animation, using modern technology to transcend temporal and spatial boundaries. Young actor Han Haolin, wearing VR goggles, was transported into the scroll itself. The world within the painting has been transformed into a miniature "folk museum" through 3D reconstruction technology, guiding viewers through a child's subjective perspective to uncover the vast universe hidden within the humble peddler's cart. Amidst the abundant childlike charm, viewers also gain insight into the local customs and the thriving commercial trade of the Qiantang region during the Southern Song Dynasty as depicted by the artist.

2.2 Audiovisual synesthesia: a multidimensional symphony of poetry and painting

Interaction is a process in which participants develop a shared focus of attention and mutually perceive each other's subtle bodily rhythms and emotions ^[1]. Poetry and Painting China constructs an artistic realm where poetry and painting harmonize in a symphony of visual and auditory immersion. Through the collaborative presentation of music, vocal performance, and digital visual technology, the program not only recreates the artistic conception of ancient paintings but also breathes contemporary artistic life into traditional calligraphy and painting—making it audible, perceptible, and tangible.

Amidst the embrace of river waters and lush vegetation, Sun Yue and Lu Lu jointly interpreted the scroll painting "Sailboats and Pavilions on the River" through their voices and the melodic sounds of the konghou. CG technology crafted a verdant landscape, where Sun Yue transformed into a Tang Dynasty court lady. Gliding in a slender boat, she slowly entered the painting, encountering Lu Lu playing the konghou within its scenes. The melodious singing intertwined with the clear, resonant tones of the konghou, as if slowly unfolding the expansive scenery of "the tide leveling both banks, the wind filling the sail" before the audience's eyes, achieving a profound fusion of people, painting, music, and landscape.

Amidst the interwoven imagery of Xiang bamboo and ink wash, the China Oriental Performing Arts Group Bamboo Orchestra breathes new life into the scroll "Scene of Wind and Rain on the Xiang River" through the sounds of bamboo instruments. Wang Wei, founder of the ensemble, explained on the program that they drew inspiration from the swaying forms of Xiang bamboo depicted in paintings. Using seventeen traditional Chinese bamboo instruments, they composed and performed pieces that let bamboo speak through sound and music through imagery, seeking to breathe new life into ancient bamboo melodies on the modern stage. The delicate sounds of bamboo instruments not only convey the primal resonance of nature but also embody the unique artistic conception and emotional depth characteristic of traditional Chinese art, achieving a cultural dialogue that transcends mediums.

2.3 Reality and illusion intertwine: where wonder enters the painting, even the phantom becomes real

Poetry and Painting China employs cutting-edge audiovisual technology to seamlessly integrate traditional calligraphy, painting, martial arts, dance, and other artistic elements. It transcends the boundaries between reality and illusion, creating an imaginative and immersive cross-dimensional artistic experience.

Young dancer Hao Ruoqi took the stage as Gongsun Dawang, the "First Dancer of the Tang Court." Through digital effects, the intangible sword energy was transformed into visible, flowing light and shadow, recreating the sword dance that had captivated countless scholars and poets a thousand years ago. Additionally, the program employs cinematic filming techniques, utilizing multi-camera setups and dynamic shot transitions to capture the dancers' performances from multiple angles. This allows audiences to fully appreciate the heroic grace of Gongsun Dawang's sword dance. Through meticulous post-production editing, the visuals are seamlessly integrated with music and special effects, creating a breathtaking audiovisual spectacle.

Hong Kong actor Fan Shao-huang joins forces with world Tai Chi champion Yang Dezhan to step into the ink-and-wash world of Zheng Banqiao's Bamboo and Rocks. Accompanied by the ancient zither melodies of intangible cultural heritage inheritor Ding Chengyun, the two performers—clad in black and white ink-wash attire—blended strength with grace, stillness with movement, using their bodies to embody the resilience of bamboo and the ruggedness of stone. These segments not only recreate the artistic conception of calligraphy and painting but also deeply integrate martial arts, dance, and traditional painting through modern visual language, crafting an aesthetic experience that transcends artistic boundaries.

Audiences journey alongside performers through landscapes where reality and illusion intertwine, traversing martial arts realms and poetic realms. Supported by seamless technology, they immerse themselves in a cultural atmosphere that transcends time and space—this is the very embodiment of the artistic concept of "fusion" in Poetry and Painting China. In this space, technology is not merely a means of reproduction but a narrative tool that breathes new life into the classics.

3 Art empowerment: diverse interpretations, infused with contemporary expression

Poetry and Painting China rejects dogmatic artifact explanations and moralistic lectures, instead leveraging the

narrative power and emotional resonance of performing arts to establish a spiritual connection between classical texts and contemporary audiences. The program extensively incorporates contemporary performance forms such as theater, dance, music, and performance art. Building upon respect for traditional roots, it engages in creative interpretation, achieving a profound dialogue between ancient essence and modern sensibilities.

3.1 Performance interpretation: bringing characters to life, bridging past and present

The program employs diverse artistic forms such as drama, music, and dance to bring figures to life from within paintings. Through dialogue between past and present, it reconstructs emotional connections, transforming classic paintings and calligraphy from static artifacts into dynamic cultural experiences that can be felt, narrated, and resonated with. This interpretive approach not only deepens audiences' understanding of tradition but also broadens the pathways and expressive power of cultural transmission.

During the first installment's performance of "Ink Plum Blossom," a work by the Yuan Dynasty poet, painter, and calligrapher Wang Mian, actor Cao Lei and singer Tan Weiwei portrayed Wang Mian and the ink plum blossom within his spiritual realm, respectively. Through a fusion of drama and music, the two performers engage in a timeless dialogue, vividly embodying the noble spirit of the plum blossom captured in the inscription of the Ink Plum Blossom Painting: "Only its pure essence fills the universe."

In the second episode, dancer Wei Shenyang "transformed" into the Song Dynasty painter Li Tang, joining forces with singer Hu Yanbin to present a dialogue that transcended time. Their performance not only embodies the steadfast character symbolized by the pines in the "Pines in the Valley" painting, but also conveys the artist's profound patriotic sentiments.

When presenting Wang Xizhi's work "The Clear Weather After Heavy Snow," Liao Changyong, President of the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, and musical theater actor Ayunga transformed the stage into a theater. Through an ingenious musical short play featuring solo and duet segments that built upon each other, they brought to life the stories of Zhao Mengfu and Huang Gongwang. This innovative performance artistry masterfully transports the audience back to that snowy night nearly a millennium ago. Within a realm of pure white, the profound bonds between two pairs of master and disciple resonate across time, eloquently conveying the profound significance of cultural inheritance.

3.2 Cross-boundary integration: poetry and painting converge to give birth to new artistic realms

"Poetry and Painting China" showcases Xu Wei's Ming Dynasty scroll "Miscellaneous Flowers" by highlighting cross-disciplinary artistic innovation. Pianist Lang Lang appears within the scroll's floral landscape, performing a symphony of ink alongside an orchestra. Thirteen paintings depict flowers, plants, fruits, and trees; three pieces of classical music from East and West; black-and-white piano keys intertwine with flowing ink wash. Pianist Lang Lang and the Chinese Orchestra immersed themselves within an ink-wash scroll, performing the Eastern classic "Jasmine Flower" alongside Western masterpieces such as "Moonlight Sonata" and Grieg's Piano Concerto. The interplay of black-and-white piano keys and freehand ink brushstrokes breathed new life into Xu Wei's Ming Dynasty scroll painting "Miscellaneous Flowers." The exquisite melodies and the flowing brushstrokes intertwine between black and white, merging into one.

In traditional culture, water is imbued with spirituality and vitality. Confucius said, "The wise find joy in water." Laozi said, "The highest virtue is like water." Water, with its unique charm, has long been cherished by scholars and poets. Ma Yuan's Water Scene from the Southern Song Dynasty serves as an excellent example. Twelve segments of water scenery depict twelve distinct forms of water—rivers, lakes, seas, and more—with the fluidity and vitality of water vividly captured on paper.

How can we awaken the vibrant beauty on the canvas? "Poetry and Painting China" employs music and dance to imbue water with movement and color. In the performance, three dancers swayed gracefully beneath five meters of water, weaving through the vast scrolls of "Water Scroll" to embody the forms and essence of water as depicted by Southern Song Dynasty painter Ma Yuan. Colorless water takes on the hues of China through rhythmic movements, revealing the fluid transformations of water in paintings and immersing viewers in the beauty of water within the artwork. This cross-media symphony, where dance movements become brushstrokes and musical notes embody pictorial intent, profoundly interprets the Chinese artistic aesthetic concept that "painting and calligraphy share the same origin, while music and dance form a unified whole."

3.3 Narrative innovation: reconstructing poetic-pictorial narratives and emotional threads

The program employs a dual-track narrative strategy combining micro-narratives with an emotional storyline, using contemporary stage language to reinterpret the plot structure of classical works. This approach achieves an organic integration between poetic and pictorial texts and modern aesthetic sensibilities. Within this framework, historical contexts are embodied as tangible theatrical scenes, while emotion serves as the central thread connecting past and present. This allows audiences not merely to "view the paintings," but to "enter the paintings."

Against the backdrop of water and mountains, Wang Huichun and Wu Yue's painting "Farewell on the Jing River" connects ancient and modern times through a theatrical performance. Wang Huichun and Wu Yue portray painter Shen Zhou and his friend Wu Yu, who is about to embark on a journey. Over wine and song, they express their emotions through the scenery, pouring out their sorrow at parting and their deep affection for home and country. This narrative approach, which transforms static farewell scrolls into dynamic emotional scenes, preserves the original's literati sensibility while endowing it with dramatic tension and psychological depth.

At the intersection of nature and culture, Ni Ping and Liu Xijun step into the scroll of "The Ten-Thousand-Mile Search for Family," blending narrative storytelling with song performances to recreate the classic tale of the "Ten-Thousand-Mile Search for Family." Over three hundred years ago, painter Huang Xiangjian set out on foot from Suzhou to Yunnan in search of his parents. He traversed treacherous waters and perilous peaks, reaching regions seldom visited by humans, enduring a grueling journey of over thirteen thousand kilometers. The journey to find family is long and arduous. Ni Ping's delicate voice guides him through the mountains of Yunnan and Guizhou, while Liu Xijun's soulful singing accompanies him across towns and villages. The artist's yearning for reunion transcends time, carried through these melodies. This passage employs a blend of soundscapes and multiple narratives to epicize personal destinies, while also casting the eternal theme of familial affection into a collective emotion that can be both heard and felt.

4 Value resonance: infused with emotion, activating the spiritual core

Poetic China does not stop at aesthetic innovation in audiovisual presentation. It goes further by employing emotional storytelling and social engagement to guide audiences from cultural awareness to spiritual resonance, from passive reception to active preservation. This approach enables the continuation and rebirth of traditional cultural heritage in contemporary society.

4.1 Emotional awakening: beauty as the medium, emotion stirring the heart

Poetry, calligraphy, and painting embody the Chinese people's insights and philosophical reflections on nature and all things, mirroring the worldview, cosmic perspective, and spiritual essence of our ancestors^[2]. In its interpretation of Liu Cai's Northern Song Dynasty scroll *Falling Flowers and Swimming Fish*, the program employs cinematic macro photography to meticulously capture the drifting petals, translucent dewdrops, and swimming fish within the painting, eloquently conveying the realistic spirit of "observing things to gain knowledge" inherent in Song Dynasty painting. Each stroke is not merely a depiction of nature, but a profound contemplation of all living things. Kang Zhen, Vice President of Beijing Normal University, further illuminated its emotional essence: "In traditional Chinese culture, images like dragons, fish, and horses have never merely represented living creatures; they also embody the Chinese people's profound aspirations for life and destiny." Thus, each frame and stroke in the program not only recreates the brushwork techniques of ancient masters but also awakens a philosophy of life—one that contemplates all things and observes existence with quiet reverence. It resonates with contemporary concepts like "slow living" and "natural healing," allowing the rationality and warmth of the Song Dynasty to transcend time and space, nourishing the hearts of modern people.

In the appreciation section of the *Scroll of Butterflies in Natural Poses*, the butterflies in the painting appear poised to take flight, their forms brimming with vitality. Wu Weishan, Director of the National Art Museum of China, explained from the perspective of brushwork: "The essence of Chinese art lies in capturing the spirit—it must seize the charm and soul of the subject in an instant." Kang Zhen resonated emotionally: "Even when reality occasionally feels barren, as long as you still hold onto your passion, life will ultimately respond with all its romance." The program not only reveals the delicate beauty of a butterfly's trembling wings, but through the experts' heartfelt interpretations, it awakens viewers' perception and appreciation of the vitality of life. Here, beauty truly becomes a medium that transcends millennia and knocks on the door of the heart.

4.2 Participating in inheritance: revitalizing ancient intentions with contemporary interpretation

"Presence" relies on the existence of the program's radiating field. The audience's sense of presence, experience of presence, and presence itself—including the production of presence mechanisms—are all bound to the program's field^[3].

"Poetry and Painting China" abandons the traditional audience participation format, instead establishing a hands-on "Poetry and Painting Workshop" segment at the end of each episode to create a closed-loop communication experience encompassing "viewing-understanding-experiencing-creating." The membership of the "Poetry and Painting Handicraft Class" is richly diverse, encompassing participants of various ages and professions, thereby broadening the perspectives through which traditional poetry and painting are appreciated. Meanwhile, the value and meaning of these traditional paintings and calligraphy have also given rise to diverse new interpretations through the aesthetic reinterpretation by professional artists, craft inheritors, and enthusiasts.

In the discussion surrounding the relationship between Li Gonglin's scroll painting "Views of Sichuan" and Li Bai's

poem "Early Departure from White Emperor City," Fan Di'an, Chairman of the China Artists Association, offered insights from an artistic perspective, emphasizing that "poetry, melody, and emotion are embedded within the painting." Professor Kang Zhen of Beijing Normal University offered insights from a literary historical perspective; Ding Li, a leaf painting intangible cultural heritage inheritor and member of the poetry-painting workshop, depicted the scene of "Li Bai's light boat passing through Kuimen" on a leaf. By integrating intangible cultural heritage techniques with poetry and painting, both leaf painting and riverside poetic imagery gained a fresh form of expression. Through the "Poetry and Painting Workshop," the program enables modern audiences to traverse millennia and step into the scroll of Shu River Landscape and the Ba Mountains and Shu Waters depicted by the Immortal Poet. It invites them to engage with traditional classics through diverse perspectives and approaches, allowing the beauty of poetry and painting—along with the spirit of broad-mindedness and optimism—to radiate new value and meaning in the contemporary era.

4.3 Collective memory: exploring river civilization through poetry and painting

Poetic China uses art as a light vessel and emotion as its oars, navigating upstream through the vast river of time and space. It guides viewers deep into the essence of poetic imagery and painterly charm, probing the living springs and distant echoes of China's river civilization. Rivers are not only the lifeblood of China's geography, but also symbols of the continuity of civilization and shared emotional resonance. They surge forth from the depths of history, gathering with an unstoppable momentum to form the shared spiritual map and cultural identity of the Chinese nation.

Pu Cunxin, who has portrayed Li Bai on the theatrical stage for over thirty years, this time recites "Ode to Wine" in the guise of the Ming Dynasty painter Chen Hongshou. This transcendence of artistic genres and historical figures not only offers audiences a fresh aesthetic experience but also reveals, in subtle ways, how the Yellow River endows the creator with an unceasing vitality. Renowned recitation artist Chen Duo uses his signature deep voice to recreate the vast grandeur of the "Ten Thousand Li of the Yangtze River" scroll, where sound and imagery intertwine to evoke a sense of immense time and space; Gansu musician Zhang Gasong, meanwhile, uses the traditional folk art form "Lanzhou Drum Ballads" as a medium, immersing audiences in the historical charm of Lanzhou—once known as the "Golden City." Through local dialect and melody, he builds an emotional bridge... Rivers and lakes are not merely bodies of water in the natural sense; they also carry the collective memories and local identities of countless "book openers." Through these authentic and heartfelt artistic expressions, the program quietly bridges the gap between history and the present, grand narratives and personal experiences.

It is precisely through such collisions and fusions that traditional culture ceases to be a static symbol and instead gains a palpable emotional warmth. The audience not only witnessed the rivers and streams, but also heard the echoes of civilization; they were not merely watching a program, but engaging in a dialogue with their own cultural heritage. Through this approach, Poetry and Painting China has accomplished an emotional mobilization and spiritual transmission spanning millennia.

5 Conclusions

Poetry and Painting China offers an innovative paradigm for revitalizing traditional cultural heritage through the systematic integration of technology, art, and communication. By leveraging digital media to transcend the static limitations of classical art, it creates immersive, interactive audiovisual experiences. It empowers classical texts through performing arts, enabling contemporary narratives and emotional connections to historical imagery. Ultimately, through socialized practices, it fosters a profound shift in cultural transmission—from passive observation to active participation, and from mere reception to creative engagement. Its success teaches us that revitalizing traditional culture requires not only formal innovation but also a deep alignment between the aesthetic spirit of classics and contemporary values.

In the future, cultural variety shows can further explore cross-media storytelling (such as VR immersive theaters and interactive films), international expression (such as co-productions and adaptations for overseas audiences), and sustainable participation mechanisms (such as community-based creation and school-based curriculum development). By expanding their reach into broader communication spheres, these programs can drive the creative transformation and innovative development of China's outstanding traditional culture, ultimately achieving the goal of "living heritage and cultural roots."

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