

Macalester History Department

National Treasures, National Stories

Constructing Multimedia Narratives of Cultural and National Identity in a
Novel Chinese Edutainment Program

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Application for History Honors Program

In early December 2017, China was swept by a profound cultural and media phenomenon. CGTN, the state-sponsored TV network, had just released *National Treasure* (国家宝藏), an all-new program seeking to bring the contents of China's museums to life for millions.¹ An unprecedented blending of multiple media genres, *National Treasure* combined elements of documentary, reality TV and stage theatrics to present the stories of certain historical artifacts chosen from nine regional museums. Each artifact was presented by prominent Chinese celebrities, scholars and cultural figures in colorful segments of thespian storytelling on an aestheticized stage. Each was designed to represent an important region, theme or achievement in Chinese history, connected to and comprising a Chinese nation both ancient and modern, resilient and accomplished--but ultimately under the custody of the Chinese state.

The first season was a runaway hit, not only in terms of viewership and popular reception, but also in direct impact upon China's cultural economy. In the month since its first airing, internet searches for tourism options using the term "museum" increased by 50%, while museums everywhere in the country received massive spikes in attendance. Total museum attendance increased by 14.2% compared to the preceding year, while two years later in 2019 sales of museum cultural products had increased by 300%.² These numbers show the magnitude

¹ "TV Show Brings China's 'National Treasure' to Life," *ECNS*, December 21, 2017, accessed May 16, 2019, <https://www.ecns.cn/2017/12-20/285253.shtml>

² "Guojia Baozang yingfa wenbo rechao" 《国家宝藏》引爆文博热潮 [*National Treasure* triggers a museum rush], *CNR*, January 4, 2018, accessed April 11, 2020, http://ent.cnr.cn/zx/20180104/t20180104_524086386.shtml?_da0.7194848627012775; Mo Xiaoli 茉小莉, "Cong Guojia Baozang dao wenchuang zhoubian, bowuguan wenhua IP de jiazhi zhengzai fangda" 从《国家宝藏》到文创周边, 博物馆文化 IP 的价值正在放大 [From *National Treasure* to the periphery of the cultural creative industry, the value of museum cultural IPs is magnifying], *36KR*, February 1, 2019 accessed April 16, 2020, <https://36kr.com/p/5173059>; Zhu Changjun 朱昌俊, "Guojia Baozang zouhong, bowuguan jingji dayoukewei" 《国家宝藏》走红, 博物馆经济大有可为 [*National Treasure* shoots to fame, the museum economy has bright prospects], *Guangming ribao* 光明日报, December 25, 2017, accessed April 11, 2020, http://epaper.gmw.cn/gmrb/html/2017-12/25/nw.D110000gmrb_20171225_4-02.htm; "2019 bowuguan wenchuang chanpin shichang shuju baogao" 2019博物馆文创产品市场数据报告[2019 museum cultural creative

of *National Treasure*'s reverberation through China's cultural-economical landscape, but they also come at a historical juncture in which China's governmental leaders—and their counterparts across the world—are increasingly working to construct and promulgate powerful narratives of national identity and memory. Here in this program they are actively utilizing cultural heritage objects as centerpieces for their nation-building efforts, which is even more remarkable considering how ancient artifacts and artworks were designated to be destroyed as part of the “Four Olds” during the Cultural Revolution 50 years ago.³ Since then, the Chinese state has endeavored to reclaim an institutional and political relationship with China's cultural past, most notably through the founding of numerous museums and creating lists of cultural relics forbidden from traveling abroad.⁴

As such, I consider several key questions: how did this attitude shift happen? How does *National Treasure*, as a state-sponsored program involving collaboration between major cultural institutions, reflect the culmination of this evolution as it joins the current nationalistic trend? How does it fit into the broader timeline of performed national culture in China and its function for the state? How exactly does its artistic structure bring together bodies, designs, frameworks and tropes to construct a provocative narrative of identity for the Chinese audience, engaging them with an aestheticized experience of their “heritage” and “origins”?

Previous scholarship has touched upon other, earlier examples of the performance of national identity in China, vis a vis objects perceived to be part of the country's ancient heritage.

products market data report], *Sohu 搜狐*, September 6, 2019, accessed April 17, 2020, https://www.sohu.com/a/339327973_488901

³ Tong Enzheng, “Thirty Years of Chinese Archaeology (1949-1979),” in *Nationalism, Politics and the Practice of Archaeology*, eds. Philip L. Kohl and Clare Fawcett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996): 182.

⁴ Da Kong, “Imaging China: China's Cultural Diplomacy Through Loan Exhibitions to British Museums,” (PhD diss., University of Leicester, 2015): 57.

For example, James Leibold explores the conflicting national narratives expressed in the positioning of performative, ethnic bodies in the 2008 Beijing Olympics ceremonies, while Kevin Carrico closely studies members of an urban youth movement who seek to connect with an idealized, cultural past through the medium of traditional clothing and actions.⁵ Cheng-hua Wang has written about the deep origins of China's national heritage and museum culture, showing how media practices like image publishing can place artifacts in new contexts of meaning and signification, transforming them into powerful affective symbols of Chinese identity and memory.⁶ On a broader scale, scholars have also examined the Chinese state's long-term project of projecting China's "cultural soft power" into the global world, of which *National Treasure* is also a part.⁷ While all of them touch upon the complex processes by which Chinese national and cultural identity has been mediated and constructed in the modern era, they only approximate or predict the work that *National Treasure* has done to combine their elements into one unprecedented, grand and popularized spectacle delivered with the power of technology.

In this project, I will build on this foundational scholarship to examine *National Treasure* from several different perspectives. From a historical perspective, I will argue how the program reflects a significant shift in the Chinese state's attitude towards cultural heritage, how it relates to larger shifts in Chinese politics and culture, and how this shift may be paralleled in the nation-building, heritage-centered projects of other nations (such as Meiji-era Japan),

⁵ James Leibold, "The Beijing Olympics and China's Conflicted National Form," *The China Journal* 63 (January 2010): 24; Kevin Carrico, *The Great Han: Race, Nationalism, and Tradition in China Today* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2017): 97.

⁶ Cheng-hua Wang, "The Qing Imperial Collection, Circa 1905-1925: National Humiliation, Heritage Preservation, and Exhibition Culture," in *Reinventing the Past: Archaism and Antiquarianism in Chinese Art and Visual Culture* (Chicago: Center for the Art of East Asia Symposia, 2010): 325.

⁷ Danielly S. R. Becard and Paulo M. Filho, "Chinese Cultural Diplomacy: Instruments in China's Strategy for International Self-Insertion in the 21st Century," *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 62, no. 1 (2019): 2.

contextualizing it within a global scene of nationalistic processes.⁸ From an art historical perspective, I will argue how it devises object-centered narratives of heritage and continuity that appeal to the Chinese psyche, uniting disparate eras and spaces in the territory of China to create the impression of a coherent, primordial and rejuvenating civilization; how it effectively mediates this impression via aesthetic impacts and principles that engage the audience's senses, linking their energies to the narrative and therefore to the state; and finally how it utilizes the burgeoning structures of "edutainment" to achieve this goal amidst the shifts in human experience and learning brought by the digital age. To do so, I will utilize theoretical frameworks from several different fields. William Cronon and Sheldon Solomon et. al.'s writings on the nature of narrative cognition and worldviews, the works of prominent scholars of nationalism like Anthony Smith, John Hutchinson and Eric Gellner, Hobsbawm and Ranger's book on invented traditions and Marshall McLuhan's theory of medium as the message, accompanied by individual studies of how different media types interpellate the audience, will help me explicate the perspectives noted above. Furthermore, Pierre Balloffet et. al.'s survey of the development of "edutainment", especially as it applies to modern museums, will be a starting point for me to look more into the increasing emphasis on narrative, affect and experience in educating the public about culture, history and (in my topical case) national belonging. By applying these frameworks to the *National Treasure* program and its derivative social media products, this analysis will ultimately contribute to a deeper, critical understanding about how state-initiated spectacles of cultural history draw the public into a carefully choreographed narrative of state-centered cultural, national and ideological authority in China.

⁸ Julie C. Oakes, "Japan's National Treasure System and the Commodification of Art," in *Looking Modern: East Asian Visual Culture from Treaty Ports to World War II*, eds. Jennifer Purtle and Hans Bjarne Thomsen (Chicago: University of Chicago, 2009): 220.

National Treasure is a novel program that has not yet received a scholarly examination. However, the structure of its performances and episodes lend well to in-depth analysis, because they are all based around specific cultural artifacts with self-contained, tailor-made presentation narratives. Therefore I plan to select four to five of these artifact-centered narratives as case studies, each representing an important facet of the overall nationalistic culture narrative the program is promulgating. Examples include the segment devoted to the Han dynasty Changxin lamp, a famous artifact discovered in the 1970's which reflects the projection of an essentialized Han Chinese ethno-national identity, as well as the segment devoted to a Tibetan thangka painting that represents the Chinese state's struggle to include ethnic minorities as part of the cultural and political whole of "China". Using primary source analysis skills learned as a third-year History major and formal artistic analysis skills learned as an Art History minor, I will discuss the media and aesthetic workings of each artifact narrative, connect them to deeper historical processes of cultural nationalism in China and supplement them with similar artifact narratives from elsewhere in the show. I will then top these case studies with an introductory chapter on the show and its place in evolving state perceptions of China's cultural past, plus a theory chapter that outlines the models of media, narrative and edutainment that will be applied to the show. With this I hope to open readers' eyes to both the novelty of *National Treasure* as a media program and its work in constructing a narrative of cultural and national continuity for a country that gives rise to about a fifth of our world's total population.

In doing so, *National Treasure* plays into a universal human process that now more than ever must be subject to scrutiny. Humans fundamentally understand the world and ensure the functionality of their minds through narrative creation. Narratives are constructed through action,

art and media, which draw human senses and energies towards beliefs and performances that build or rend apart societies and civilizations. *National Treasure* is an example of such narrative creation, accomplished with a blend of both the newest and oldest forms of media in an age of heightened global tensions, dilemmas and factionalism. It is part of the spate of stories driving these conflicts, and thus it is becoming ever more crucial and urgent to place it in critical perspective. Doing so will contribute to a knowledge of how we link ourselves to the narratives we want, and how to be aware of the pitfalls this process may bring.

Suggested Timeline

May 2020: Continue to build source base; read theory pieces in depth to build arsenal of models for analysis of case studies; confirm core list of case studies

June 2020: Research history of Chinese state attitudes towards China's cultural past in preparation for the introductory history chapter; write theory chapter; come up with outline for case study chapters

July 2020: Finalize outline of entire project; write introductory history chapter; start first case study chapter

August 2020: Continue writing case study chapters

Fall 2020: Choose one case study chapter (or a few) to develop as part of HIST 490 capstone; continue refinement of case study chapters

Winter Break 2020-2021: Assemble all chapters and refine them for cohesion/updated information; write conclusion

Spring 2021: Collaborate with advisor to edit and revise chapters, defend thesis and revise based on defense, submit final product

Preliminary Bibliography

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