

New Historicism in Documentary---On CCTV's National Treasure

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Abstract: History, as a remembrance of a country's rise and fall, is hardly neglected by the public, through various ways. The once hit cultural exploration program *National Treasure* on CCTV once again inspired millions of people to pay their attention back to the country's glorious history. In the first season of the program, nine museums ranging from the Palace Museum to other eight major museums throughout China are participating, and each of which needs to select three most precious treasures in its museum to present its "previous history" and "present life". Through this form, this show aims to inspire more people to get involved in the ancient civilization and make the national treasures "come live".

Keywords: New Historicism; History; Documentary

1. The conversation between treasures and history.

Different from the normal documentary, *National Treasure* not merely retells the history behind each relic, but also tries to recreate the historical event, in order to make the relic "come live". Moreover, by presenting the present life of the culture relics, these relics along with histories are infused with new meanings. During these progresses, history and cultural relic are treated as texts, re-read and re-written by the producers.

1.1 Textuality of histories

According to the traditional critics, each cultural relic, as history, should be treated as an object, which conveys a part of history that cannot be changed. However, from the New Historicism perspective, when we are approaching to those treasures, they are presented as different texts. Though treasures, as a representation of history is presented to the public, "we can have no access to a full and authentic past, to a material existence that is unmediated by the textual traces of the society in question" (Montrose 409). Texts thus can only be treated as a medium to get close to the real history.

Taking the cultural relic Yunmeng Shuihudi Qinjian (Bamboo Slips of Shuihudi, Yunmeng County) in *National Treasure* as an example, those Bamboos Slips was discovered in one law officials named Xi. At that time, these bamboo slips were merely carriers of the law. Yet, when these slips were taken from the underground, the representations of these "texts" are changed. Bearing the marks of the Qin Dynasty, they provide perfect materials for historian to explore the law system, to obtain more details about the political, economic, and cultural situations at that time. Moreover, they are also considered as texts to study the ancient calligraphies. All of those readings are from the perspective of the historians and the archaeologist who are trying to use their specialties to present to the public a more professional knowledge about history. However, what really happened behind those bamboo slips can never be touched given that people cannot travel to the past.

1.2 Historicity of texts

"Texts are always produced out of a specific reality, and they bear the marks of their time, place, and mode of production. They are always to be understood as relating to historic and geographic specificity, both in terms of the moment when they are first produced and at the moment when they reproduced by our readings of them" (Wolfreys 48). Thus, when those cultural relics as texts are read by different people with different social or cultural background in different times, the content will be various since readers are restricted or influenced by their background.

In the documentary, the cultural relic presented by Hubei Museum is the most famous sword in Chinese history— Yuewang

Goujian Jian (Bronze Sword of Emperor Goujian). In this documentary, the sword is described as a dowry of Emperor Yue's daughter when she voluntarily chose to marry Emperor Chu in order to safeguard his father's state and dignity. Another version is considered the sword as a war trophy obtained by the Chu soldier. The scriptwriter chooses the first one over the second. Compared to the second one, the story of the sword from the first version would be presented in a much solemn and stirring way—a story of self-sacrifice. When taking the sword as a text, and read by contemporary audience, the content of the sword is enriched not only by the scriptwriter, but also the audience themselves. The caring of the emperor to his country, the sacrifice of the daughter, those sacred actions presented by the producer are perfectly in accordance with today's advocacy of the "core socialist values". That's might be what the producer want to convey through the history of the sword, but what other audiences can read from this text? Answers would also be various.

2. The Narrative Method of National Treasure

This program not only showcases the background stories of national treasures, but dedicates to create a tight bound between their histories and present situation, through different narrative methods.

2.1 The previous history of cultural relics

Traditionally, directors or producers of historical documentaries "repeatedly use the four elements: the historical picture (or video), the cultural relics, the witnesses of the history or the interview of the witnesses, and the voiceover" (Han 32) to retell history. By only presenting the objective historical relics, producers attempt to restore the true history. Nevertheless, the New Historicism critics believes that, history, under the influence of power relations, is meticulous chosen by the history recorder (Wu 38). Thus, new ways of retelling history gradually spring up.

In the documentary *National Treasure*, treasures are not presented in the way which only the origins or their representations are given to the audience. Instead, they are showed by the way of "scene reconstruction", which means that the history of the relics is shown by representing the situation at that time, giving audience a vivid illustration of the origin of the relic. However, as what is explained in the beginning of the show, each of the performance is "a proper adaption according to the acknowledged history". Just as what Wu Yujie says, "history, as a vast text, each scriptwriter can be treated as its reader and explainer" (31). In this sense, producers of the documentary have the full power to decide how to adapt the historical origin to the contemporary society according to their own understandings. However, each producer is inevitably influenced and shaped by the social ideology. Therefore, those "proper adaptations" are marked with the unique characteristics of the contemporary society. When the story of Zhenhouyi Bianzhong (Chime-bells from the tomb of Marquis Yi of Zeng State) is performed in the stage, the protagonist Zenghouyi says, "Yizhong shuangyin" (one bell, two sound, which means if you toll the Chime-bell from two different side, it can create two different sound), and stresses that the two different sounds are lying in the same bell, non-interfering with each other and in harmonious coexistence. From this explanation, the audience could promptly connect it with the country's longtime policy of "one nation, two systems". Take it into a larger context, the relation between two countries can also coexist harmoniously even though they might have different political or social backgrounds. That's what China has always called for since the establishing of the country. From this perspective, this treasure not only bears the history of the ancient time, but also be infused with the contemporary significance after reinterpreted by the producer.

3. The significance of the documentary

This show not merely aims to retell the ancient history to the public, but to make the national treasures "come alive" and revoke the national pride especially among the younger generations.

3.1 Revitalize the history

Just as what has been mentioned above, the ultimate mission of a documentary is never solely displaying what has been found in the past. It always has a purpose. "The New Historicism rediscovers the bound between the historical meaning and the reality...it makes the interpretation of the past becomes an enrichment of the present, and the discovery of the meaning to the past turns to the enlightenment of the contemporary world" (Wang 133). *National Treasure* links the past to the present world and histories of the relics are enriched by the present reading. Moreover, the new connotation transfused by the program gives an energetic life to the lifeless object. When history becomes alive, the communication between the history and the public will be increased. This documentary

provides a grand terrace for the public to get close to the national treasure. Through reading the ancient history of the relic, the audience now will have a deep impression of the country's long history. Through showcasing the present preservation and investigation, audience would also be attached by the professional dedications of the common people. By reading the past and the present story of those treasures, audience's national pride would surely be provoked.

3.2 Prevent the western culture penetration

When history and the present are tightly tied together, one group of people would be deeply influenced, that is the younger generation. As a generation which has been greatly benefit from the advanced technology and the input foreign cultures, their relationships with the nation's history seem to be looser and looser. To the younger generations, stick to the past becomes cliché and chasing the foreign western culture becomes a new trend. Nevertheless, they fail to recognize that that's one way for the western country to penetrate their values to the country, through which to strengthen their national power.

Yet *National Treasure* brings the young's attention back to the history. The stories of those historical relics are recreated by the producer by infusing contemporary characteristics. The audience would find more resonance in each of the story so that history is not the ancient story anymore. By receiving the stories created by the documentary, young people are unconsciously influenced by Chinese traditional culture. Once their national prides are provoked, they would gradually acknowledge the country's outstanding traditional cultures, thus would devote more of their time to the Chinese history.

Conclusion

National Treasure is definitely not the first documentary to use this creative way of presenting the history. However, it's creative method of showcasing the background stories of national treasures and the interconnection between history and the present certainly provide the audience a new way of getting familiar with the ancient treasures. Once the distance between the audience and the history disappears, and the history is accepted by more people, the nation's history will be passed through generations. Thus the country will be long standing in the world.

References

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