

# “Silk Road Utopia”: The Construction of National Image along the Belt and Road Initiative by Chinese Travel Variety Shows— — Taking *Divas Hit The Road Season V* as an Example

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**Abstract.** The news documentary *Divas Hit The Road Season V*, jointly produced by Hunan Radio and Television News Center and Mango TV, was broadcast, which showed the stories of young people and locals in countries along the Belt and Road Initiative and China. Based on the theory of space production, this paper analyses the construction of the national image of the Silk Road countries by the program. It was found that the program produced the Silk Road countries into a utopian national image through character setting, visual aesthetics and scene creation. “Silk Road Utopia” includes its culture, life and international relations. However, it should also be pointed out that the national image presented by the program is a filtered national image.

**Keywords:** China’s travel variety shows; Belt and Road Initiative; Countries along the Belt and Road; Image construction; *Divas Hit The Road Season V*.

## 1. Introduction

According to Fabian (1990: 756), “Our ways of making the other are ways of making ourselves.” In other words, how we regard others reflects the way we treat ourselves. At present, China’s status in the world is becoming higher and higher, and it has become the focus of world attention. This is because China’s comprehensive economic strength and extensive participation in international activities in recent years, as well as its commitment to establishing friendly diplomacy with various countries, have been well-received and supported by most countries. Under this international background, it is imperative to “tell China’s stories well” and fully display China’s image, which is our current key task. How foreigners regard China is significant because it affects how China and Chinese people should view themselves. Shaping the image of other countries is an effective way to build the image of our country. Therefore, it is vital to investigate how China’s media content portrays the image of other countries.

Mass media is an essential channel through which people can get to know the world. With the development of media technology, short videos, TV dramas, and movies have brought rich channels for the public to view the image of other countries. Some scholars put forward the concept of “media travel”, which means that tourists can browse vivid destinations only by relying on rich media technologies and products and even construct new story situations to enjoy the victory again so as to achieve the aim of briefly escaping from daily life and perceive the unique “climax” moment as experienced by tourists in real travel. Media travel has been deeply embedded in the overall life experience of contemporary individuals, and the audience/tourists establish a connection with the travel destination through the “media gaze” and construct a relationship. Therefore, the audience can enjoy the local customs through various media and have a media-based travel experience. Among them, the travel reality show is a media type that cannot be ignored.

In 2013, General Secretary Xi Jinping put forward the Belt and Road Initiative, and the inner spirit of the “Silk Road” that China continued more than 2,000 years ago was endowed with a new humanistic connotation of the times, showing China’s peace-loving concept of governing the country.

[1] The Belt and Road Initiative has begun to pay much more attention to communication, exchanges and cooperation with countries along the route, advancing the economic, political and cultural heritage of neighboring countries and promoting the in-depth development of China and other countries. It is an excellent opportunity for China to vigorously promote the Belt and Road policy,

and the public has a good consensus on the leading role of the media in the Belt and Road and the leading effect of the film and television industry in the implementation of the strategy. Domestic variety shows should take advantage of the Belt and Road to create high-quality variety shows with China's characteristics and enter a new era of exporting variety shows overseas. *Divas Hit The Road Season V* was created in the background of the 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Belt and Road Initiative, and it is a reality show that integrates culture, travel and adventure. In the program, young people who are energetic and love to explore are required to set foot on the Silk Road together, feel the customs of different countries, appreciate the beautiful sceneries along the Silk Road, visit the ancient local sites, taste the delicacies of various countries, interact with local people and feel the customs and lifestyles of different countries. [2] Based on the theory of space production, this paper studies how the program *Divas Hit The Road Season V* constructs the national image of the Silk Road country.

## 2. Literature Review

### 2.1 The development of Chinese travel variety shows

After 1990, the domestic tourism industry developed rapidly, but it was not mature enough. Individuals' tourism demand is restricted by economic development. At this time, the domestic TV tourism program *Zhengda Variety Show* began to develop widely. At that time, the slogan "I don't know if I don't see, the world is really wonderful" was passed down from mouth to mouth by the streets. [3] At home, people can enjoy a series of fascinating scenes such as the midnight sunshine in Nordic summer and the proposal of shells by indigenous people. However, the programs in this period were mainly single interaction, which was passively accepted by the audience, and the tourism programs were mainly science popularization programs. However, people do not regard travel as a widely accepted lifestyle in daily life, so the travel variety shows in this period did not actually promote the development of tourism.

After the 21<sup>st</sup> century, with the rapid development of the national economy, people have more and more ideas about travelling. Travel has become a lifestyle and cultural consumption, and it is a form to show their tastes and preferences. However, during this period, domestic tourism projects and product forms are still relatively simple. In addition, the domestic Internet industry has just started, and it still needs to be known by TV programs. Moreover, because the policy of radio and TV programs is not very strict, it has greatly promoted the rapid development of various domestic tourism variety programs. For example, in 2004, Hunan Satellite TV launched the variety show *Walker*, which showed people the travel itinerary and personal experience and conveyed the local customs and characteristics of tourism. [4]

In 2013, Hunan Satellite TV re-launched the variety show *Where Are We Going, Dad?*, the copyright of which came from the Korean program of the same name. [5] The program group shot extensively all over the country, watched the interaction between cute babies and their fathers, and appreciated the great rivers and mountains and cultural heritage of the country. After that, Hunan Satellite TV successively produced and broadcast a series of reality TV variety shows such as *Divas Hit the Road*, *Back to Field*, *The Chinese Restaurant*, and *The Inn*. These programs mainly focus on emotional experience and perception of the world and integrate different elements into them, creating a refreshing new idea for the audience. The rapid development of the Internet has also made these travel variety shows spread more widely, making more audience and netizens eager to punch in at the tourist destinations shown in the program after watching the program, which has promoted the development of the tourism economy.

Throughout the development of China's travel variety shows, the content and form of the programs have been undergoing innovation and change in order to attract more audience ratings. However, the common core of these programs is to publicize and export the culture of China and the world through travel so that the audience can feel different natural and cultural scenery through the programs.

## 2.2 Research on the construction of national image by travel variety shows

First of all, travel variety shows show the beautiful scenery and rich culture of other countries to the global audience through careful planning and production. These programs often select the representative scenic spots, delicacies and customs of other countries and let the domestic audience perceive the unique charm and cultural heritage of other countries through the lens of language and storyline. This intuitive and infectious presentation helps to enhance the audience's cognition and goodwill towards other countries, thus shaping a positive national image.

The shaping of national image is usually divided into two traditional dimensions: "self-shaping" and "other-shaping". Generally speaking, the creation of the Silk Road national image by travelling variety shows is a kind of creation from the perspective of other countries, and it is also a kind of other-shaping construction. *Divas Hit The Road Season V* is the national image of countries along the Silk Road from the perspective of China as the "other". However, travel variety shows may also face some challenges and restrictions in shaping the national image. On the one hand, due to the differences in cultural backgrounds and values in different countries and regions, producers need to respect local cultural traditions and national feelings when displaying national images to avoid misunderstanding and conflict. On the other hand, travel variety shows also need to pay attention to social hotspots and themes of the times in order to meet the aesthetic needs and values of global audiences. For example, in contemporary society, with topics such as environmental protection and sustainable development being increasingly concerned, travel variety shows can create a more active and responsible national image by showing the country's environmental protection achievements and sustainable development practices.

Media can construct individuals' cognition, and there have been many studies on media shaping individuals' local cognition. At present, it is the most common research path to study from the perspective of space. Since the 1960s and 1970s, space has become an ideological concept with the same weight as time. Lefebvre believes that "the analysis of production shows that we have shifted from the production of things in space to the production of space itself." Space is no longer a transcendental existence, but an artificially constructed experience, even including the expressive counter-space". [6] Space itself has no meaning, and it can only become spaces with special emotional orientation to people through definition and acquisition of meaning. [7] In *The Image of the City*, Lynch also defined the image of the city as "the image of the external environment summarized by the individual mind, which is the common product of direct feeling and past experience memory". It can be seen that people's perception of a place is not static but is constructed and dynamic. According to Foot, the subjective image of a city is a combination of language, mass media, memory, photos, movies and environment. [8] In other words, the media has an important influence on people's cognition of space. Specifically, the media gives meaning to the things contained in space, thus constructing people's cognition of this space.

## 3. The Construction Strategy of Silk Road National Image in *Divas Hit The Road Season V*

### 3.1 Character setting: Chinese celebrities integrated into local celebrations

In *Divas Hit The Road Season V*, the construction strategy of the national image along the Silk Road is reflected in the characterization. The program shows the diverse faces and elegant demeanours of these countries by integrating the carefully selected guest lineup into the local environment. These guests are outstanding actors from China with different backgrounds and characteristics. They not only bring audience ratings to the program but also show their professionalism and personality charm and convey the spirit of friendliness, enthusiasm, openness and tolerance of the people of China. Their interaction with local residents not only enhanced mutual understanding and friendship but also showed the audience in China the compatibility and enthusiasm of other cultures. The current study takes the clips in the program as an example. During their trip to

Croatia, two clips were impressive. First, the Chinese celebrities met at a “military parade” in the ancient Croatian city. The local “soldier” actors chose a lady among the tourists to become the queen of the day, and Dilraba was chosen to become the “queen” of the day. She changed local costumes and boarded the tower to accept everyone’s blessings. Second, the Chinese celebrities took part in the boat dance in Croatia. Qin Hailu put on the costume of *Two Families in Fifty Years* and sang *Ode To The Pear Flowers*. Dilraba danced the Xinjiang dance in national costume, Hu Xianxu played allegro in a mandarin jacket, Qin Lan in cheongsam, Zhao Zhaoyi in Hanfu and Xin Zhilei in northeastern-style shirt turned handkerchiefs and danced yangko together, which attracted local people and tourists from all over the world. *Divas Hit The Road Season V* has been innovated and upgraded on the original mode of travelling together, incorporating the element of a “study tour”. The program vividly shows multiculturalism on the Silk Road in the form of a variety show, and it achieves an overall improvement in conception, content and style. Through this innovation, the program successfully combines traditional culture with a variety of element, presenting an audio-visual feast of cultural exchange and integration for the audience.

### 3.2 Narrative choice: “Altruism” narrative highlighting the state relations

In *Divas Hit The Road Season V*, the audience can realize China’s positive contribution to international cooperation. The program mentioned many projects aided by China, such as the Peleshatz Bridge and Riyadh Transit Center. The successful implementation of these projects not only promoted the economic development of countries along the route but also showed China’s responsibility as a big country and international responsibility. The Chinese celebrities also went deep into the families of employees in China and talked with them to learn more about their local life and make the audience see that such a happy living environment is the epitome of friendly exchanges between the two countries.

After the group arrived in Saudi Arabia, the first stop was to visit a prestigious Chinese logistics company. In China, postal express delivery has become a part of daily life, and express delivery in neighboring provinces can even achieve the next day. However, in Saudi Arabia, in the past, the lack of standardized logistics management led to slow delivery speed, and it was not uncommon for people to wait for months or even half a year to receive packages. At the same time, problems such as losing couriers, missing couriers and damaging couriers also occurred from time to time. With years of logistics experience and technology accumulation, China has brought a fully automatic sorting and loading system to Saudi Arabia, which has promoted the transformation of the local digital economy. At present, the Saudi Arabian people can personally experience the convenience brought by China’s efficiency. Through the narrative of this program, the audience seems to be in a tour group, standing on a foreign land and witnessing the Chinese instruments made in China standing around. When the audience heard about the rapid development of Saudi Arabia’s express delivery industry, the national self-confidence and pride of Chinese people came into being.

By showing these aid projects, the program conveyed a positive and responsible image of China to the audience. It shows that China is not only concerned about its own development but also committed to promoting regional and even global prosperity and stability. Such image-building has undoubtedly enhanced China’s influence and voice on the international stage.

### 3.3 Image presentation: Visual aesthetics highlighting exotic scenery

By using special mirror-carrying techniques, the audience can feel the special local landform, vast and boundless desert, deep and mysterious blue holes, cold and clear glaciers, and colorful aurora and other landscapes, which create a good visual experience. In the *Divas Hit The Road Season V*, a special lens embodiment is used. Through the reversal of the long-term lens, it seems that time has passed, the world is wide, and it has been turned for a long time. Through the passage of time and the vast world, the audience realizes that the self is just a small existence, and they have a sense of wandering and loneliness, and they are immersed in the wonderful nature. This way of carrying mirrors enables people to reflect on the way they get along with the world, creating a romantic feeling

that there seems to be a lot to say and turning around is just the emptiness of the desert. At this time, this thought dives into the audience's consciousness and unconsciously integrates into their own flow.

Besides, the producers also have their own special musical opinions and understandings. The research team of Kunmanso, a professor of cognitive psychology at Cornell University, conducted in-depth research and analysis, divided the people who were tested into several groups, and used different music to detect their physical conditions. It was found that different music choices would make the heartbeat, breathing, and blood pressure of the people who were being tested have different changes, making people feel nervous, happy, anxious and relaxed. Music belongs to the third narrator in the content of the picture, which maintains the rhythm of the picture, reflects the emotion consistent with the picture, and satisfies the audience's senses and spirits.

### **3.4 The Silk Road National Image in Divas Hit The Road Season V**

#### **3.5 The charming image of the Silk Road countries**

The program creates a national image of the Silk Road with charming scenery that is full of cultural shock and attraction. For example, the desert in Saudi Arabia and the sea in Croatia all make the audience feel the beauty and grandeur of nature. Besides, different countries have different histories and cultures. The *Divas Hit The Road Season V* shows that different countries have various cultural charms, such as the mysterious Islamic culture in Saudi Arabia and the castles in Croatia, all of which show the charm of these countries. By showing the charm of other countries' cultures, it is also reflected that China is a peaceful and friendly country that respects other countries' cultures.

#### **3.6 The common development of multinational relations**

China put forward and promoted the Belt and Road Initiative for the needs of its own reform and opening up and sustained economic development, and it is also a new exploration of international cooperation and win-win mode. The variety show *Divas Hit The Road Season V* interprets and spreads this value concept well. In the documentary, when promoting their own industrial transfer and seeking sustainable economic development, Chinese-funded enterprises have also improved the level of economic and trade cooperation among countries along the route, improved the infrastructure, medical care, education and technology levels of countries along the route, and promoted people's living standards. Contemporary China develops friendly relations with countries along the Belt and Road, realizes the trinity interconnection of infrastructure, regulations and personnel exchanges, as well as policy communication, facility connectivity, smooth trade, financial intermediation and popular support, which jointly promote the prosperity of the world economy and political stability, fully demonstrating the new image of China's courage to explore the path of peaceful development. The *Divas Hit The Road Season V* broadcast by Hunan Satellite TV reflects the promotion of the Belt and Road interconnection project to the development of countries along the route and explores the great role of the regional market. China, which is rising peacefully, is promoting cultural exchanges and mutual learning with people along the route so that people from all countries can meet and know each other, trust and respect each other, and share a harmonious, peaceful and prosperous life. Such documentaries reflect the peaceful rise of China and play an increasingly important role in the international arena, especially in countries along the Belt and Road.

The aim of the Belt and Road Initiative is to create an inclusive new platform for international economic cooperation. It does not limit the scope of countries, does not engage in a closed mechanism, and breaks down the obstacles of cooperation, such as territorial disputes, political systems and religious and cultural differences so that any country along the route which is willing to cooperate can participate voluntarily and equally, become supporters, builders and beneficiaries of the initiative, and discuss, build and share the road of economic development. The Belt and Road Initiative is China's new exploration of building an all-round opening-up pattern and an inclusive international cooperation model under the realistic requirements of global economic integration and domestic economic development entering a new normal. The *Divas Hit The Road Season V* shows the open

pattern with the participation of all people. Saudi Arabia, the first stop, established diplomatic relations with China as early as the 1990s, is still actively responding to China's call and is willing to reach in-depth cooperation with China, get rid of its dependence on oil revenue and realize diversified economic development. The greatest contribution of the Belt and Road Initiative to the world is that it has always issued a voice of peace in building a community of human destiny. Earlier, under the mediation of China, Saudi Arabia and Iran, two Middle Eastern countries shook hands and made peace after breaking diplomatic relations for seven years. Two countries in the Middle East, which have long resented each other, broke the ice, reversed the tense situation in the Middle East, and sent a cry to the world that it is better to be happy with others than be alone. The documentary on China's cultural theme spreads the national image of China, which has a long history and splendid culture, and it is also an open and inclusive image of contemporary China.

### 3.7 The closely connected “human community”

The core of the Belt and Road Initiative is not limited to economic or cultural exchanges but a more crucial connection between the people. The connection between people's hearts constitutes the most basic, solid and lasting interconnection, which can closely connect the hearts of two foreign countries. The second topic of the high-speed rail study tour, “Collecting the Impression of China”, provides a rare opportunity for sincere dialogue with local people. The guests were divided into three groups and had in-depth exchanges with passengers of different ages on the high-speed train made in China. Passengers expressed their sincere thanks to the guests from China, and even friends from Libya called on China to establish diplomatic relations with Libya to help Libya build its country. Their expressions of enthusiasm, such as “We have the deepest friendship”, “China No.1”, and “Welcome to Saudi Arabia”, are different in language, but their enthusiasm makes the participants and the audience deeply feel the sense of mission and honor as Chinese people.

## 4. Conclusion

Based on the theory of space production, this paper analyzes the text of the program *Divas Hit The Road Season V* and finds that the program produces the Silk Road country into a utopian national image through character setting, visual aesthetics and scene creation. “Silk Road Utopia” includes its culture, life and international relations. However, it should be pointed out that the program's construction of national image and national relations is a filtered image presentation, which means that the program is a Silk Road national image constructed from a certain perspective. By constructing the national image of the Silk Road, the program also constructs an image of China pursuing peace and joint development.

The Belt and Road Initiative and the international communication capacity building in the new era promote each other and complement each other. With the innovative expression of cultural tourism variety shows, we can interpret the Belt and Road Initiative in a way that is close to life, stimulating the pride of domestic people and enhancing national self-confidence. Meanwhile, by exporting TV programs abroad, China's international image and influence will be enhanced. In recent years, the development of variety shows has been weak, but the opening of *Divas Hit The Road Season V* has gained very high audience ratings, which has become a successful example of the integration of *Divas Hit The Road Season V* and cultural tourism variety shows. This fully shows that through innovative breakthroughs in narrative, form and content, we can create a phenomenal program that pays attention to both connotation and layout. Therefore, enriching the cultural connotation, enhancing the audience's stickiness and continuing the popularity of the program will be an effective strategy for the future development of the cultural tourism variety show.

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