HiLL PUBLISHING

Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science, 2025, 9(8), 1473-1481
https://www.hillpublisher.com/Journals/jhass/
ISSN Online: 2576-0548
ISSN Print: 2576-0556

Analysis of the Documentary in the Transmission of Cultural Heritage to Shape National Image from the Perspective of International Communication—Take CCTV-4 *Around China* Program as Case Study

Zhou Yu*, Chunxia Shao

School of Political Science and International Relations, Tongji University, Shanghai 200070, China.

How to cite this paper: Zhou Yu, Chunxia Shao. (2025) Analysis of the Documentary in the Transmission of Cultural Heritage to Shape National Image from the Perspective of International Communication—Take CCTV-4 *Around China* Program as Case Study *Journal of Humanities, Arts and Social Science*, 9(8), 1473-1481.
DOI: 10.26855/jhass.2025.08.001

Received: June 22, 2025
Accepted: July 21, 2025
Published: August 20, 2025

***Corresponding author:** Zhou Yu, School of Political Science and International Relations, Tongji University, Shanghai 200070, China.

Abstract

In the context of globalization, information flows freely through digital media. The approach for nations to build their national image and strengthen their soft power through cultural communication is changing rapidly. This article tries to explore the ability of the documentary to shape national image by recording and inheriting its culture. It takes the Chinese documentary program CCTV-4 *Around China* as a case study, and combines the content analysis method to reveal the impact of the documentary on shaping the authentic national image through cultural inheritance and on its international communication. The results of the study show that the documentary plays an important role in providing cultural richness to a nation's cultural heritage, naturally integrating the discourse and activities of local communities and presenting an authentic and attractive national image to the world. However, the international communication power is still weak for the shortcomings of the documentary itself, and more research space should be expanded from the dimensions of cultural heritage, local communities' cultivation, and the perspective of international communication function, which are different from the previous studies. Overall, the documentary can enhance the cultural, cultivation, and communication functions to shape the national image through the interplay between cultural heritage transmission and cross-cultural international communication. It engages both domestic and international audiences in the construction process, shaping the national self-image internally and the other-image externally. Documentary will have a greater political and cultural impact in the digital future.

Keywords

National image; Cultural heritage; Digital documentary; International communication

1. Introduction

1.1 Background

1.1.1 National image and its Cultural Heritage Communication

National image is an important factor in enhancing the soft power of a nation. It's always discussed in relation to culture. Owing to cultural globalization, national cultures have been deeply affected, but the international

communication of a nation's traditional culture as a national cultural symbol has reconstituted contemporary political soft discourse. This is not only a matter of international cultural exchange, but also a process of diplomatic interaction with other countries. "One of the most critical of external forces involved in this process is the reputation a nation enjoys in world opinion, as reflected in its more or less consensual perception by other countries" (Rusciano, 2003). For most nations, enhancing international discursive power and telling their stories well to the world are important communication directions. Nowadays, it is a challenging and interesting issue to shape the national image and its cultural heritage communication.

1.1.2 Documentary as a Cultural Discourse and Symbolic Power

The usage of digital works, such as the documentary, to protect national cultural heritage and to promote national image on the cyber is considered more successful. "People whose decisions determine the policies and actions of nations do not respond to the 'objective' facts of the situation, whatever that may mean, but to their 'image' of the situation" (Boulding, 1959). Documentary international communication seems to be a useful exploration for a nation to record and communicate its authenticity and culture. It is part of political communication practices: these documentaries provide a microscopic perspective that resonates with audiences at home and abroad, especially with brand programs that have a lasting influence. This allows more people to understand the unique charm of a nation's culture and to have a more comprehensive and rational perception of the nation. It means that traditional cultural communication calls for new discursive power and symbolic power of national identity in the digital age.

1.2 Literature Review

The national image is the overall evaluation and identification of the State itself, its behaviors, its activities, and achievements by the external and internal publics of the State (Guan, 2007). In the post-truth era, authenticity is obscured and becomes secondary. The international communication of the national image is increasingly a complicated interactive process, inseparable from technological, cultural, and political elements.

The field of cultural studies has two different opinions when discussing the interaction between technology, culture, and politics. One view believes that technology can assist us in communicating our culture. According to the European Commission, the development of the use of digital technology to improve access to cultural heritage is encouraged. Michel Foucault, who is best known for his critical studies, pointed out that real power is achieved through discourses. For most developing countries, documenting culture with a documentary in order to express their "own voice" and to gain the right to realize cultural communication is necessary. On the other hand, the content of culture presented by digital technology is a selective process; technology is both friend and enemy. Culture is a complex of real and imagined practices, beliefs, rituals, and attitudes. It's "a hierarchical organization of values, accessible to everybody, but at the same time the occasion of a mechanism of selection and exclusion" (Foucault, 2001). But technology can manufacture the imagination and create a culture. The study of Political strategy is mainly concerned with controlling technology and cultural orientations. When talking about national image, patterns of national image formation are categorized into self-image and other-image. Some scholars investigate the impact of national image, involving hostility, friendliness, reality, cultural attractiveness, self-consciousness, and so on. Some studies focus on cultural diplomacy: The policy discourse around promoting national values globally engenders the diplomatic impetus to use state media as a means for nation branding (Zhu, 2022).

Regarding the study of the documentary, scholars have recently paid more attention to its future industrial and economic development. But it still needs to widen its cultural meaning. The function of the documentary is described as the communication of cultural heritage. And the production of the documentary can be integrated with the history exploration to establish the Chinese cultural system. Today, we are still exploring how to take full advantage of media technology to sustain cultural heritage and international identity. The documentary is a good vehicle to effectively communicate culture and gradually build up a positive international image.

1.3 Research Questions

The aim of this study is to explore how the documentary contributes to the national authentic image and its cultural heritage communication. In particular, whether national cultural documentary has an international influence. This study seeks to answer the following 3 questions by establishing an analytical framework for culture-cultivation-communication:

Q1: How does the documentary impact the domestic cultural inheritance and its international cultural

communication?

Q2: How does the documentary influence the perceptions and identities of native and overseas audiences?

Q3: What are the functional elements of cultural documentaries in shaping the national authentic image from the perspective of international communication?

Take the CCTV-4 program *Around China* as a case study. The results of this case study and content analysis would imply what kind of national brand documentaries are suitable for international communication. Here is a list of the possible functions of the documentary, such as internally inheriting traditional culture, cultivating public participation in regional co-construction, and externally shaping the national authentic image in the world. In addition, constructive suggestions are made on how to consolidate the cultural identity of an overseas state, build national cultural confidence, and tell authentic national stories well.

2. Methods

This article adopts a mixed-methods approach by conducting a case study and content analysis in order to test whether and how the documentary affects the national image, its cultural heritage, and audiences, and what the key functional elements are. A case study provides a comparison of different national programs, in-depth interviews, and participant observation, while content analysis implicates documentary contents and audience analysis.

2.1 Case Study

The case study method is suitable for in-depth evaluation and comparison of different cases. There are two measurement groups considered for the study. It is also designed to include several interviews together.

Firstly, a documentary program called *Around China* on CCTV-4 (Chinese international channel) was chosen as a case study group. It is a famous program brand that is known as a "city calling card" in China until now. What is more, it is also an international program using digital technology to be broadcast all over the world. Although there are websites and WeChat platforms to watch it, over 1,200 cable TV stations within China broadcast CCTV's International programs too. The program team has also set up its own Twitter page, which has gained many followers. The composition of the target audience for the program is Chinese citizens (including Hong Kong, Taiwan, Macau), Chinese citizens living overseas, and some foreign viewers who are interested in China. The program *Around China* started broadcasting at prime time in 2002 until 2019. It had three versions, including Asia, America, and Europe versions in different time slots. Its highest rating in China was 1.11% until 2011, and it gradually decreased in 2019. It is no exaggeration to say that this is the most comprehensive, influential, and longest-running documentary to date, which introduces the history, culture, geography, and modernity of all regions in China. The contents of this program are based on taking social and cultural geography as background, tracing clues of natural and cultural history sites (before 2016), and deeply reflecting national characteristics and new changes in modern society (after 2016). Therefore, this study selects programs with a high reputation in the middle period of 2010-2011 as cases. And the author had an internship in this program during this period for participant observation. It also has its own narrative structure as it follows: Firstly, some existing problems are pointed out, and then solutions are found through the explanation of local citizens and the analysis of experts.

Secondly, four programs were set as a reference group. One is the last episode of *Around China* (2019). The second one is a TV documentary named *Life at the Yellow River Delta* (2022), which has three episodes. The Chinese version was broadcast on domestic and overseas media platforms in 2022, and its international version was broadcast on the National Geographic Channel in 2023, covering dozens of countries and regions, including Japan, the United Kingdom, France, and Belgium etc. In 2024, the documentary won three international awards, including the Telly Awards. The third one is a special program at the same time, named *A special zoo in Thailand* of *Around Asia* (2011), which is also produced by the staff of *Around China*, but its content is about other countries in Asia. The last one is *lost in the Silk Road*, which comes from the *National Geographic—Culture China series* (2011). The National Geographic program travels around the world, documenting authentic cultural resources in many countries. Comparing Chinese and international characteristics in terms of cultural communication is significant. This set of data will be analyzed in combination with the results of the first group.

At last, it conducts a few interviews with people who are involved in cases to gain insights into their feelings and experiences.

2.2 Content Analysis

The main research method of this paper is content analysis. This methodology examines the content conveyed by the program. The study hypothesis is that cultural content is abundant and has some international appeal. All episodes were taken from the program website. Random drawing number 7 from 1 to 31 and choosing 12 programs on the 7th of each month in 2010-2011 years were chosen as samples. The final 11 programs were the first group (because one of the 12 programs is a special project belonging to "Around Asia" (Table 1). In order to measure concrete results, this study developed a scheme of content analysis including the following coded indicators: geographic location; theme; subtitle; content description; level of cultural inheritance; local community discourse; level of international communication (Table 2). Among them, the level of cultural inheritance includes tangible heritage and intangible heritage of traditional culture. The level of international communication can be interpreted as whether it demonstrates friendliness, authenticity, translation into foreign languages, further explanation of concepts and other vocabulary in different contexts, recognition of the environmental ambience, cultural attractiveness, and cultural self-consciousness.

Table 1. Random samples of *Around China* programs from 2010-2011

No.	Time	Name of episode
1	07/04/2011	*The rare stone lover of An Shun*
2	07/03/2011	*Migrant birds in Ningxia*
3	07/02/2011	*Imperial court cuisine of the Qing Dynasty*
4	07/01/2011	*The mysterious owner of a grave*
5	07/12/2010	*A marine gateway of China*
6	07/11/2010	*An anecdote about the Qiang group*
7	07/10/2010	*Tai-Ji of Wu Dang Mountain*
8	07/09/2010	*Seven islands in Xi Sha*
9	07/08/2010	*Big events in a small city*
10	07/06/2010	*Legend of the Fire Dragon-Dance*
11	07/05/2010	*The prehistoric cannibal*

Table 2. Coding scheme

Categories	Description
Geographic Location	*Happen location*
Theme	*Program topic*
Subtitle	*Program title and subtitle, Voice-over description*
Content Description	*story construction*
Level Of Cultural Inheritance	*Tangible heritage and intangible heritage: traditional culture*
Local Community Discourse	*Participation of local people*
Level Of International Communication	*Friendliness, authenticity, language translation, concepts explanation, environmental ambience, culture attractiveness, cultural self-consciousness*

3. Results

Based on the study above, the study found that culture was the main content of these documentary samples, traditional culture was preserved, and local communities were naturally involved in it. However, the level of international communication should be improved in detail.

3.1 Cases Show

After analyzing these 11 programs as primary study cases and 4 programs as reference study cases according to the indicators, some statistics are obtained as follows:

(1) Based on the geographical location, local cultures were recorded separately in four eastern cities, two central cities, and five western regions in China in the program *Around China* (2010-2011). And the *Life at the Yellow River Delta* program chooses the Yellow River zone.

(2) According to the theme and content description, most of the programs are about folklore, with 45.5%, and the remaining three parts are about history, nature, and modernization, with 18.2% each. Figure 1 shows the scene figures (the number of times of the following six parts in each program). The average values were calculated for each set of figures, which were 2.73 (history), 3.36 (folklore), 0.91 (nature), 2.00 (modernization), 0.45 (tourism), and 0.55 (foreign culture). The largest number of them is still about folklore, followed by history, and the smallest is about tourism. In terms of the case study, the last episode of *Around China* 2019, named *New Technology and Rural Poverty Eradication*, has strong political colors. It no longer refers to the local culture anymore which mainly points out the political policy to help local farmers plant better. And the *Life at the Yellow River Delta* is the ecological and environmental protection theme, the Chinese version presents the rapid changes in the lives of the people in the Yellow River Delta region on multiple economic and cultural levels.

(3) A case in point is the fact that there were no English subtitles in *Around China* at all until December 2010. Then, apparently aware of the importance of international cultural exchange, it added English subtitles. Unfortunately, this advantage did not carry over to the last episode in 2019. However, all reference group cases have English versions, and most of them in the form of voice-over description.

(4) To evaluate the functions of cultural heritage and international communication, tangible and intangible cultural contents were also presented on camera. One example is a program called *Imperial Court Cuisine of the Qing Dynasty*. It describes a situation when a kind of traditional food in China had been lost for a decade or two, and how it survived. You can find scenes of traditional institutions, traditional foods, historical figures, folklorists, historical documents, and historical sites. In terms of culture, there are a few international cultures in this program. For example, in a program called *Big Events in Small City*, the people living around the Yellow River still keep the custom of worshipping Ma Zu until now. While one of the local legends is the same as a foreign one, both believe that the sea goddess is also female. It is a very interesting destination for future development to get attention from overseas audiences. However, the documentary, like *Life at the Yellow River Delta*, is also based on the Yellow River, almost without cultural heritage content, and is replaced by a symbolic national cultural symbol such as the Chinese Yellow River and Chinese rare animals.

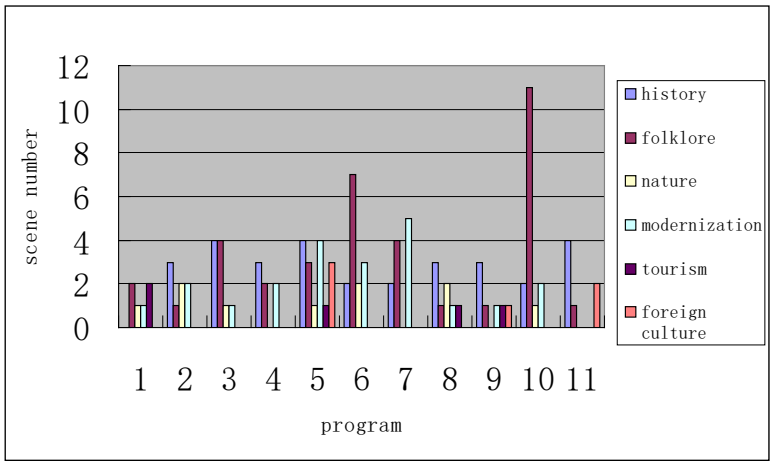

Figure 1. Contents of the program in *Around China.*

(5) On local community participation, Figure 2 shows the number of participants of both types for each program in the first group. 73% of 11 programs have the part of interviews with the local community. Most of these local residents who spoke were elderly persons, and they spoke in the local dialect. Some of them expressed their awareness

of the current state of culture, some feelings of concern, and a sense of responsibility and hope for the future of the heritage. In comparison, the reference group cases are lacking in terms of local community participation in co-creation. The program of *National Geographic* has no local expert to express their puzzled cultural things because of language barriers or the possible dominant values. Only one Sinkiang guy who had become a guide for two anchorpersons spoke in English and did not do too much to explain Chinese culture. Inversely, he was more like a geographic guide. But the program of *Around Asia* still maintains its character of *Around China*, choosing a smaller perspective and inviting one local expert to record the life of a local resident. Although the Thai-speaking local resident spoke a few words, it was all translated into Chinese.

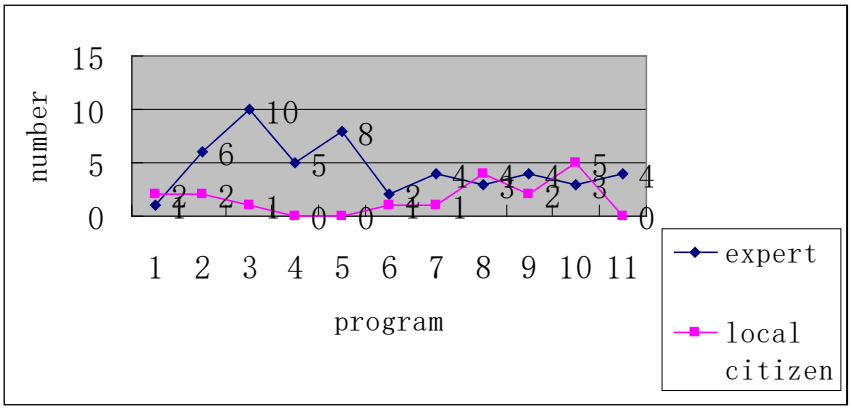

Figure 2. The number of the two kinds of speakers in *Around China.*

3.2 Interviews Findings

In terms of interviews, the majority of *Around China*'s target audience is Chinese citizens. One in-depth interview was with a girl who watches this program regularly. She usually watches them on television, but sometimes she would like to watch them on the internet for convenience or if she misses the broadcast time.

"I think it has deep historical significance, and I can easily learn Chinese culture from different places. Why do I like it? The reason seems to be that a lot of local people talk about their real lives; this format is the so-called documentary."

When she was asked why she knew this program, the answer was that one of her friends told her it was great. But why not media? She said that this program belonged to an international channel, so that few people would follow it regularly; conversely, she would like to watch modern dramas in prime time. The following one is a Chinese family living in Europe, and a young girl working in Hong Kong. The first family did not usually watch it, but found it a few years ago just by accident. And the Chinese channel has become a pay channel, which affects the overseas viewership of this program. But what is worth pointing out is that they felt proud in the sense of national identity while watching these traditional scenes. A Hong Kong interviewee once said she had never heard of this program, because she did not watch this Chinese channel and could not see any of the advertisements about it on television. When several foreigners were interviewed, they said they might be interested in it, but they never found this kind of Chinese documentary on platforms. Other comments came from Chinese Netizens on Sina, Twitter, and *Around China* BBS (Bulletin Board System). When asked why they followed this program, most said that they wanted to learn more about authentic China. But many of them were tour lovers.

These results explain very well whether the documentary is a cultural carrier and whether audiences get an image of the nation from the program. This study expects to find more corresponding national image contents, but the results also show the limitations of international communication.

4. Discussion

This study addressed the issue of the impact of the documentary on cultural inheritance and national image communication, which shows that a good documentary shapes the national authentic image through the framework of cultural narratives for the memory and identity of native and overseas audiences. It can further enhance the cultural, cultivation, and communication functions of documentaries. The preliminary conclusions are listed in three parts.

4.1 Cultural Functional Elements of the Documentary in International Communication

The study indicates that a good international documentary needs to contain many elements, such as historical and cultural narratives, a sense of the times, stories of the local community as an entry point, technological expression, equality discourse, and international cooperation; however, these cultural functional elements play an important role. This is because for international documentaries, their main function is to present a country's history, geography, and culture, rather than being driven by economic interests, as the content analysis shows. For the themes of *Around China*, it means that folklore in modern society still has its surviving space. For most audiences, folklore has a special cultural appeal and is easily accepted. Unexpectedly, almost every program is closely linked to modern developments. Many of them are scenes of residents participating in modern events, which show the spirit of cultural initiative and characteristics of the times. For the location, most of the images of the historical scene have been graphically restored using modern technology, which is a progressive attempt. In addition, for the program locations, the results of the study show that each place has a fair right to present its local culture. This finding is also reflected in the comparative case studies. A typical example is *Life at the Yellow River Delta*, which is an exploration of humanistic themes in recent years. This kind of global topic is more likely to have a greater international resonance and contribute to the building of a harmonious national image. In terms of cultural content, the American program *National Geographic* can't fully reflect the unique charm and rich image of a state because it fails to touch the deeper cultural connotation, and even some of its content is distorted. It is obvious that value orientation is still inevitable. All in all, by improving the level of cultural elements in documentary films, a national image can be effectively communicated both internally and externally.

4.2 Participatory Discourse Power and Audience Cultivation

The study indicates that local communities are involved in local cultural communication and have discourse that contributes to shaping the national authentic image and raises their awareness of self-cultural expression. Both *Around China* and *Life at the Yellow River Delta* programs show the importance of local community participation and expression of local communities in the discourse. But if they could exercise their power depending on the subject themes, many of them are just eyewitnesses. It could negate the impact of the discourse. More often than not, experts as society elites are leading spoken roles in higher numbers than local citizens. The findings focus on a Cultivation Theory that describes how watching TV for a long time will influence the attitudes and values of these viewers (Miller, 2005). The public could be cultivated into patriots and learn about national cultures by watching such documentaries for a long time. The hometown community is cultivated by these practices. Nowadays, especially through new media, audiences can be motivated by the activity and creativity after forming interactive experiences and memories, which fosters the understanding and communication of culture. The positive impact of the authentic national image is realized by the citizens, and their consciousness of the need to protect local cultural heritage is strengthened.

4.3 National Image and International Cross-cultural Communication

The study shows that documentary, as an important carrier of a national cultural export, still needs to focus on improving the effect of international communication in cross-cultural exchange. First of all, such documentaries have the important function of communicating traditional culture to Chinese people at home and abroad and shaping China's national image, but the level of internationalization still needs to be improved. This is highlighted by the problems of linguistic expression and translation, which create inconsistencies between the description of the national self-image and the presentation of the national other-image. It can lead to misunderstandings and a mismatch in audience perceptions. To promote a successful national image, a diverse translation is needed, which provides specific information through additional translations (Duan & Zhao, 2014). With the development of artificial intelligence and digital technology, documentaries will have more space for international discourse. Chinese international broadcasters have embarked on a reform path of media integration, which will inspire more international influences in the future. Second, the cultural heritage theme is very attractive for audiences, but local expressions can not be integrated into the international context, which limits the effectiveness of international communication. Comparing the cases of Chinese and foreign programs, the common point between the two kinds of programs is the choice of themes about culture and local characteristics. As a matter of fact, the documentary is a way to call for the international audience to understand the authenticity of China. The big challenge lies in the diversity of audience composition and the uncontrollable effects of the audience. However, the isolated local culture and staying away from popular culture and

overt political expression may lead to a loss of international audiences. At this point, more international common issues should be included in the documentary, and future research could focus more on implicit political communication in culture.

5. Conclusion

Overall, this article discusses the return of the national authentic image to the cultural sphere and the cultural cultivation of the audience. It contributes to how the documentary realizes inheriting national cultural heritage and shaping national image (see Figure 3).

The first conclusion is that the documentary is an effective way of shaping the national self-image in the domestic area through cultural heritage, and of shaping a national other-image in the foreign area through international communication. These content analysis results reveal that the function of documentary for cultural heritage is very important. It records the national culture and promotes its cultural heritage internally, presenting the national image with more cultural, social, political, and international values externally. And it is a living field of study, it becomes meaningful to form symbols of national identity, artistically reflect authentic changes of China, and a permanent record of actions in the world. But it is undeniable that the international influence of such documentaries is limited, and too much political expression and local cultural expression may not have the desired effect. This is because for the majority of audiences abroad, it is difficult to understand the historical figures and events of other nations from this program. “Visualization of Chinese symbols, effective communication in the form of easy-to-understand image symbols, and direct communication between different cultural groups can eliminate communication noise, reduce communication barriers, and play an important role in improving intercultural communication ability” (Du & Chen, 2024). In most cases, it is important to create a more authentic atmosphere of national image through perspectives on personal stories and international public issues. One effective strategy is to differentiate between domestic and foreign versions and focus on the international creation of the documentary work itself in order to achieve cross-cultural communication. Another neglected issue is the editorial team of its production, editors need high level of professional quality and social responsibility to handle this hard job. Other possible suggestions are to broadcast at different time slots through more media platforms. In the near future, documentaries can also gradually pursue their artistic value, cultural industry characteristics and the AI technological integration in culture inheritance. Some digital art resources are already widely used for interactive documentaries, 360-degree images, infographics and non-linear narratives.

The second conclusion is that the documentary cultivates domestic audience and audience in abroad to shape the national other-image who in turn participate in the cultural heritage and co-construction of the national image. This paper suggests that local governments and local communities should be involved in such programs to actively develop local culture and participate in cross-cultural international communication which will create a virtuous circle of interaction. To build the national image in the new era by reinterpreting its culture in the experience of popular life (Liu & Yang, 2023). This process is more meaningful than the documentary itself. On the other hand, the traditional form of documentary recording limits the discourse power of the participants. With the development of network and digital technology, they will have more power to participate autonomously in recording on different media platforms in order to better participate in cultural narratives and practices.

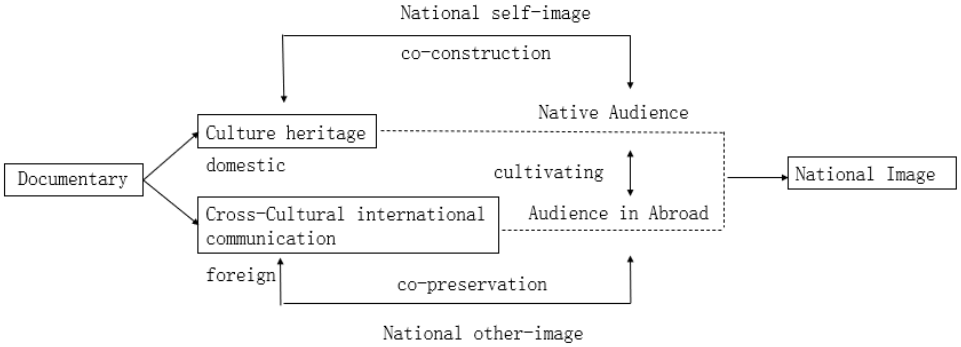

Figure 3. Documentary inheriting national cultural heritage and shaping national image.

Overall, this paper aims to inspire more attention to the importance of the documentary as a cultural technology for a nation's cultural heritage and international communication to improve the national authentic image. We can also find that more and more Chinese documentary programs, such as *A Long Cherished Dream*, which was co-directed by both Chinese and foreign directors, are popular in recent years. How to tell authentic national stories in the post-truth era, how to build a national image around cultural heritage and integrate into the global theme of national development, and how to make a successful international documentary deserve in-depth consideration by all sectors.

References

Boulding, K. E. (1959). National images and international systems. *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, *3*(2), 120-131.

Foucault, M. (2001). The hermeneutics of the subject, Course at the Collège de France, 1981-1982. Gallimard Seuil, p. 173.

Miller, K. (2005). Communication theories: Perspectives, processes, and contexts. McGraw-Hill.

Rusciano, F. L. (2003). The construction of national identity—A 23 nation study. *Political Research Quarterly*, *56*(3), 361-366.

Wen, H. G. (2007). A few thoughts on the study of China's international image issues. *International Forum*, *5*, 1-6.

Wen, P. D., & Xin, Z. (2014). Publicity documentary translation: From the perspective of national image publicity—With CCTV-4 *Around China as* a case study. *Journal of Changsha University of Science and Technology (Social Science)*, *56*(3), 116-119.

Yuxuan, D., & Honglian, C. (2024). The shaping of national image by cultural documentaries in cross-cultural perspective—With the example of *China in the Classic*. *Literature and Art Development and Innovation*, *1*(6), 13-18.

Zhongbo, L., & Yue, Y. (2023). Cultural writing and aesthetic construction of China's image: A study based on the international communication of Chinese documentaries. *Contemporary TV*, *6*, 4-9.

Zhu, Y. (2022). China's 'new cultural diplomacy' in international broadcasting: Branding the nation through CGTN Documentary. *International Journal of Cultural Policy*, *28*(6), 671-683.