

From Crisis to Breakthrough: A Study on the Creative Logic and Development Path of Henan Satellite TV's 'Chinese Festivals' Series of Programs

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Abstract

New media technologies have reshaped the media ecosystem, and traditional TV media are facing pressures such as declining viewership and audience loss. Relying on Central Plains culture, Henan Satellite TV achieved a breakthrough with the "Chinese Festivals" series, pursuing a younger, more refined, and cross-screen approach to traditional culture. This article examines the series' challenges, foundations, creative and dissemination strategies, while identifying existing issues and future directions. Henan Broadcasting focused on mobile scenarios, prioritizing "small screen" dissemination and using short, fast, and convenient audio-visual formats to create a long-tail effect. However, scholars note that improvements are still needed in model transformation, brand building, commercial profitability, and copyright awareness. Maintaining cultural depth and avoiding homogenization are also key challenges. Through systematic analysis, this article provides a reference for provincial satellite TV stations' digital transformation and cultural program innovation.

Keywords

Henan Satellite TV; Transformation path; Traditional culture dissemination

1. Introduction

New media and mobile internet have fundamentally changed traditional television. Communication has shifted from large screens to multi-screen coexistence, dispersing audience attention across online platforms. Consequently, satellite TV viewership and advertising revenues face continuous pressure. Research shows that the traditional operation model of local satellite TV stations has been greatly challenged in this new media era. Many local satellite TV stations have overly conservative operation models, with outdated and dull programs, narrow

communication channels, leading to a significant loss of viewers, weak revenue growth, and inability to sustain operations [3]. Henan Satellite TV, a lower-tier station, faces severe internal and external challenges. Despite policy support, cultural TV programs suffer from homogenization, limited commercial success, and form over content. The development of various satellite TV's artistic gala programs has shown a trend of homogeneity, constrained by traditional stage presentation forms and the strategy of intensifying the attraction of heavyweight stars, causing the artistic gala programs of various satellite TV stations to fall into the creative rut of "neither receiving positive reviews nor achieving commercial success" [2].

In such an industry environment, Henan Satellite TV successfully overcame the challenges since 2021 by relying on the "Chinese Festivals" series of programs. The "Empress Tang Palace Gala" program at the 2021 Spring Festival Gala received widespread praise, and subsequently, programs such as "Luo Shen Water Rhapsody" and "Longmen Buddha" continued to gain popularity. According to data from Henan Satellite TV's official Weibo account, as of March 2024, the "Chinese Festivals" series of programs have aired 4 seasons and a total of 23 episodes, with a total online reading volume exceeding 8.2 billion and a total viewing volume on overseas platforms exceeding 50 million [4]. This phenomenon not only provides a reference for the innovative dissemination of traditional culture in the contemporary era, but also gives provincial satellite TV stations at the lower end of the industry a new breakthrough point for transformation.

Henan Satellite TV's success stems from decades of dedication to a "culture-based platform," internal reforms (merging departments, introducing competition), and mobile-first communication strategies. Theoretically, its transformation enriches research on traditional culture's televisionization, empathetic communication, and media integration. Practically, it offers a replicable model for local stations. This article follows a "Before Breakthrough – During Breakthrough – After Breakthrough" framework, using literature, case, and comparative methods to analyze its journey and propose optimizations.

2. The Survival Crisis and Transformation Motivations of Henan Satellite TV during the Media Transformation Process

2.1. The survival crisis of provincial TV stations in the new media era

The rapid rise of short videos and live streaming is reshaping the media landscape. TV viewing rates and durations have continuously declined, severely weakening provincial TV stations' audience base. WARC reports that linear TV's share of global ad spending fell from 41.3% in 2013 to 12.4% currently. Nielsen data shows streaming accounted for 44.8% of U.S. TV viewing time in May 2025, surpassing broadcast and cable combined. From 2014 to 2024, global linear TV ad expenditure dropped 27.5% (50.8% adjusted for inflation). In the U.S., streaming ad sales rose 17.9% to \$13.2 billion, while broadcast and cable fell.

Brain drain is another challenge. Local TV stations rely on stagnating or declining broadcast and ad revenues, prompting many professionals to move to online platforms, worsening content innovation.

Meanwhile, the Matthew effect (or Malthusian effect) intensifies polarization. Resources concentrate among first-tier provincial channels, following the “20/80 rule.” Second- and third-tier channels suffer sharp declines in viewership and ad revenue. While top channels leverage capital and brand to invest in quality content, lower-tier channels face resource shortages and severely compressed survival space.

2.2. The feasibility and practical challenges of presenting traditional culture through television.

Traditional culture possesses profound cultural value and strong visual expressiveness, making it suitable for dissemination through visual means. In recent years, a series of cultural programs such as "National Treasures", "Chinese Poetry Conference", and "Chinese Classics" have continuously emerged on television screens, gaining widespread recognition from audiences. The audio-visual transformation of outstanding traditional Chinese culture IPs requires the exploration of valuable cultural resources elements, leveraging professional creativity and modern audio-visual technological means to conduct typological combination and morphological aggregation to produce specific programs [5]. Through televisionized presentation, traditional culture can break through the limitations of text and static images, entering the public's view in a more intuitive and vivid manner, which provides new possibilities for its dissemination.

Despite high investment and grand scale, traditional culture TV programs often lack true originality and quality, resulting in a “plateau but no peak.” They face three major challenges: historical distance, entertainmentization, and serious homogeneity in themes, forms, and stage design. Additionally, there is a mismatch between large-screen thinking and small-screen dissemination, as well as a disconnect between serious expression and popular aesthetics, leading to limited reach. Research also notes insufficient cultural depth and outdated formats. The lack of program mode innovation has led to a serious homogenization phenomenon, and the failure to fully utilize the advantages of new media platforms for dissemination has also affected the dissemination effects of the programs [6]. How to effectively connect the profound connotations of traditional culture with the acceptance habits of contemporary viewers is a key issue that needs to be addressed in the current television dissemination of traditional culture.

2.3. The foundation and conditions for the transformation of Henan Satellite TV

Henan Satellite TV's successful transformation stemmed from Central Plains' profound cultural heritage, which provides abundant relics, festivals, and folk

resources ideal for visual presentation. Henan Satellite TV has fully leveraged this advantage, adhering to the positioning of a traditional culture satellite TV channel, and deeply exploring various resource categories to revitalize artistic expression, attempting to showcase the cultural spirit of China through the charm of Central Plains culture [7]. These rich cultural resources provide continuous material support for the content creation of the program.

Secondly, Henan Satellite TV has long adhered to the broadcasting philosophy of "focusing on culture", and has accumulated rich experience in the production of cultural programs. Before 2010, Henan Satellite TV based its programming on local culture and launched the weekend prime-time edition, featuring programs such as "Liyuanchun" (a cultural program), "Wulin Feng" (a martial arts program), and "Huayu Zhiban" (a cultural program), forming a distinctive image of Henan Satellite TV [8]. After 2011, Henan Satellite TV embraced a "culture-focused" concept, launching successful programs like Chinese Character Hero and Chinese Idiom Hero, which laid the foundation for the Chinese Festivals series. In 2020, Henan TV merged three production departments into a market-oriented company, established 18 studios with competition mechanisms, and introduced project-based management. It also appointed young talents (born in the 1990s and 2000s) as directors, forming a low-cost, high-efficiency innovation system that ensures continuous quality output.

3. The breakthrough strategy for the "Chinese Festivals" series of programs driven by new media

3.1. The aesthetic shift of new media users and adaptation strategies

As "digital natives", the viewing habits of the Z generation tend to be fragmented and lightweight. A study indicates that under the influence of digital media, the Z generation can quickly obtain emotional value and do not immerse themselves in the emotional accumulation of long narratives, but rather prefer to obtain emotional resonance within a short period of time [9]. Foreign surveys show that smartphones are the most commonly used viewing devices for the Z generation, and their usage rate is almost twice that of traditional cable TV set-top boxes.

Henan Satellite TV targets Generation Z by shortening programs, adopting modular and immersive "web drama + variety" formats, and prioritizing new media over TV for mobile-friendly segmented dissemination.

3.2. Diversified program creation concept

While many provincial TV stations chase celebrity resources and Japanese/Korean trends, prioritizing form, popularity, and business over content, meaning, and culture, Henan TV has chosen a different, more culturally focused path. Henan TV did not follow this trend. Instead, it started from its own advantages and resources to seek a breakthrough point for differentiation [1].

Henan Satellite TV avoided popular themes, focusing instead on traditional festivals,

intangible heritage, and regional culture. Programs like The Tang Palace Night Banquet integrated relics, myths, and martial arts with modern technology to form a distinctive style. For casting, it chose local actors over celebrities, reducing costs and enhancing authenticity. Culturally, it highlights Central Plains heritage, differentiating itself from entertainment-focused Hunan TV, music-oriented Zhejiang TV, and emotion-driven Jiangsu TV, thus building a unique “culture” brand.

3.3. The contemporary interpretation of traditional festival spirit

Henan Satellite TV’s “Chinese Festivals” series reinterprets festival spirits by returning to their emotional essence. The Lantern Festival highlights lights and spring tides, the Mid-Autumn Festival explores reunion across geography, life, and culture, and the Double Ninth Festival elevates “respecting the elderly” to “respecting life.” These approaches break traditional frameworks. As relevant comments have pointed out, the spiritual connotations and new emotional values of each custom in the programs, allowing viewers to perceive the weight and human touch of Chinese civilization [10].

On the other hand, Henan Satellite TV has reinterpreted the essence of some festivals in a contemporary manner. The most representative example is the transformation of the Qixi Festival. It was reported that the Qixi Festival originated from ancient star worship, being a romantic night when young girls offered sacrifices to the star gods and prayed for skillfulness. In the “2025 Qixi Wonderful Show” program of Henan Satellite TV, they broke the single narrative of “Qixi = Valentine’s Day”, returned to the female growth essence of the Qixi Festival, using the framework of “skill inheritance - spiritual independence - era definition”, writing a new chapter for the “Daughter Festival”, presenting the vitality and growth trajectory of modern and ancient women “seeking within, cultivating externally, and growing upwards”, and achieving the value reconstruction of traditional culture in the contemporary era [11]. At the same time, the program successfully shifted the Qixi Festival from a single love narrative to its cultural origin of “Qixi Festival” and “Daughter Festival”, and integrated modern topics such as intangible cultural heritage embroidery, spending time with best friends, and “her power”, not only maintaining cultural depth but also evoking emotional resonance among women. Through such reconfiguration, traditional culture can regain new vitality in the contemporary context.

3.4. Innovative communication strategy based on multi-platform collaboration

Henan Satellite TV adopts a multi-platform strategy for its “Chinese Festivals” series: online-first release, followed by TV broadcast, and fragmented distribution via short-video platforms to maximize coverage. The Henan Broadcasting Television Station has promoted the strategic upgrade of the “Chinese Festivals” series of programs from multi-screen linkage to mobile-first through the reengineering of the

content production process and the innovation of communication channels, opening up a new pattern of "small-screen leading, multi-screen resonating" for the dissemination of traditional culture [8]. Data shows that seven days after broadcast, small-screen users reached 71.9%, mainly via WeChat and Douyin, confirming mobile as the main platform. The station uses live pre-preparation, full playback, and derivative footage to extend reach. User interaction and secondary creation drive participation. Short-video enthusiasts account for 45.9%, forming an ecosystem of "strong participation, wide dissemination, deep identification."

4. Analysis of the Creative Practice of the "Chinese Festivals" Series Program

4.1. The content creation mechanism under the "spectacle-making" orientation

Henan Satellite TV extensively employs modern technological means in the "Chinese Festivals" series of programs, transforming static cultural relics and historical images into visually impactful dynamic content. The program innovatively utilizes digital and intelligent technologies to empower cultural expression, presenting an extraordinary visual spectacle of Eastern aesthetics. With the "culture + technology" as the practical path, it uses technological means to reopen Chinese culture, making the connection between technology and program content tight, and constructing a visual cultural landscape of the integration of culture and technology [12]. "The Tang Palace Gala" uses 5G+AR to blend virtual and real stages, bringing Tang relics like Tang tri-colored glazed figurines to life. It breaks from symbolic portrayals, creating personified characters such as "Tang Palace Little Sister." This user-centered, cross-media approach bridges historical figures with contemporary audiences, enhancing psychological resonance.

4.2. Narrative Innovation from the Perspective of Empathetic Communication

In terms of narrative content, the "Chinese Festivals" series of programs on Henan Satellite TV no longer focus on grand historical events or elite figures, but instead turn the camera towards the daily emotions and life scenes of ordinary people. As the research indicates, the programs "integrate through a continuous perspective to establish emotional connections and consolidate value" [13]. The 2024 Dragon Boat Festival show uses song and dance to blend customs with real-life exam wishes, creating a "this is about me" resonance. Past-present dialogues and cross-temporal conversations in shows like the 2023 Lantern Festival Wonderful Show further enhance empathy. The "2024 Lantern Festival Wonderful Show" takes "the Lantern Festival night in parallel time-space" as its core concept, using seven chapters to trace the long history and innovatively interpret the rich emotions and cultural values behind the Lantern Festival [14]. Through this technique, the sense of national

sentiment and cultural identity are organically integrated into the delicate story, allowing viewers to enjoy the visual feast while naturally completing the emotional identification and value reception of traditional culture.

5. Analysis of Creative Issues and Future Development Paths

5.1. The homogenization crisis under the inherent model

Despite early success, Henan Satellite TV's "Chinese Festivals" series faces pattern rigidity and homogenization. The repeated "web drama + variety" model, predictable virtual IP characters, and overused dance and opera formats have caused novelty decline and audience fatigue. Ensuring long-term creativity rather than short-lived success remains a pressing challenge. On one hand, the content of traditional dance programs is rigid and lacks innovation, causing audience fatigue and boredom in terms of aesthetics. On the other hand, the phenomenon of homogeneity in dance content is severe [15]. Foreign research notes cultural programs face shallow content, homogeneity, lack of interactive innovation, and commercialization. Henan's "Chinese Festivals" series shows routinized use of AR/VR, weakening impact. Maintaining creative vitality is a key challenge.

5.2. The devaluation of literary value caused by "spectacularization" narrative

The early "Chinese Festivals" series created visual spectacles through "culture + technology," but over-reliance on effects soon emerged. Programs showed excessive cultural symbols, lax historical research, and awkward collages. The 2026 Henan Spring Festival Gala used AI templates extensively, making classic scenes stiff and "too electronic." Under spectacle-oriented narrative, dance and opera's expressive power weakened, with rigid content, aesthetic fatigue, and serious homogeneity. Core stage values like dancers' physical expression were squeezed by technical packaging. The evening party industry fell into "tech internal competition": more advanced XR/AR equipment led to emptier scripts and more distant audience emotions. Many parties sacrificed narrative logic for equipment showcase. As AI mass-production erodes the uniqueness of traditional symbols, audiences question: Is the program spreading culture or just displaying technology?

5.3. The creative optimization direction of coexistence between content and form

To address the homogenization and "technology over content" issues in the "Chinese Festivals" series, optimization is needed at three levels. Content level: Adhere to "content is king." Expand cultural materials beyond relics, dance, and opera to include folk customs, skills, classics, and traditional handicrafts. Since 2023, Henan Radio & Television has explored the "Chinese Seasons" track to broaden creative boundaries. Technology-art balance: Technology must serve content, not replace it.

While maintaining visual appeal, programs should return to cultural essence, allowing dance and opera's core values to shine without being submerged by special effects. Narrative level: Break away from fixed templates like "web series + web variety shows." Emphasize theme innovation (from "festival beauty" to cultural essence) and brand innovation (from viral dissemination to cultural IP creation). Enhance originality and ideological depth, avoiding repetition of successful models while constantly seeking new expressions. These adjustments aim to ensure long-term vitality and meaningful cultural transmission.

5.4. The cross-border integrated development path of "culture +"

The success of the "Chinese Festivals" series of programs on Henan Satellite TV has not only brought about an influence in terms of content dissemination, but also promoted the cross-border integration of the cultural industry, forming a virtuous cycle of "content attraction - cultural tourism monetization - feedback to creation".

At the IP matrix development level, Henan Satellite TV has carried out systematic and industrialized operation of the cultural images created in the programs. Research indicates that the "Chinese Festival" series of programs of Henan Satellite TV has explored a single-point vertical development path in the process of cultural industrialization, personifying the "Tang Palace Miss" symbol, constructing symbolic capital and advantageous resources, and creating derivative content of cultural IP, giving it independent value and cross-border influence; at the same time, it has explored a linked horizontal extension path, following the "culture+" thinking, achieving deep integration with user participation, creative industries and tourism industries [16]. From a TV program, "The Tang Palace Night Banquet" has grown into a mature industrial chain: IP licensed to hundreds of brands, hundreds of cultural products, offline stores, performances, exhibitions, and VR films. In 2025, the Henan Spring Festival Gala introduced AI representative "Tang Xiaomei" (AIMV), upgrading from live-action to digital image. Hanfu stores in one district grew from 18 in 2019 to 1,360 in 2025, creating tens of thousands of jobs and boosting related industries.

In cultural tourism integration, Henan Satellite TV turned online IP into immersive real-world experiences. The 2025 "Luoyi Ancient City Lantern Festival Wonderful Show" sold nearly 200,000 tickets, increased average tourist stay by 250%, and raised per capita consumption by 25%. According to Director Wang Chunyang, from January to October 2025, Henan Satellite TV drove a 30% growth in the province's culture and tourism sector, with 975 million tourists and 937.81 billion yuan in revenue.

Research highlights innovative paths: youthful expression, full media coverage, TV IP industrial transformation, and deep cultural tourism integration. These have energized the experience economy and participatory culture. By continuously expanding "culture+" boundaries, Henan Satellite TV has successfully transformed content dissemination into industrial monetization, providing economic support for

ongoing program creation.

6. Conclusion

Henan Satellite TV, by taking the "Chinese Festivals" series of programs as its starting point, has pioneered a distinctive path for struggling satellite TV stations to break through in the new media era. The programs are based on the cultural resources of the Central Plains, closely following the cultural core of traditional festivals, and adopt the creative approach of "culture + technology". They have carried out systematic innovations in content, form, and dissemination methods. Some research indicates that the "Chinese Festivals" series of programs of Henan Broadcasting Television Station, based on the media perception, aesthetic perception, and lifestyle of the Z-generation, through diverse dissemination methods, novel expression methods, and extended industrial chains, have achieved the penetration of excellent Chinese traditional culture into the vision of the Z-generation, reaching their hearts, and nourishing their lives [9]. Local satellite TV stations need not rely on stars or high capital. By deeply exploring local culture, aligning with young audiences' aesthetics, and innovating content, they can create influential products in fierce competition.

However, problems have emerged. After two years, while Henan Satellite TV produced excellent programs, a lack of creativity became visible. Ensuring cultural programs remain "ever youthful" rather than short-lived is a key challenge. Current research offers more praise than reflection, mainly limited to 2021 programs without systematic tracking of later developments. The program still needs optimization in mode transformation, brand building, commercial profit, and copyright awareness. Unresolved, these issues could harm long-term development and cultural brand influence.

Looking ahead, the "Chinese Festivals" series must continuously break through in content depth, artistic quality, and industry expansion. Drawing on Henan TV's experience, other stations should pursue differentiated paths based on their own conditions, while Henan itself needs further enhancement in model transformation, brand, profitability, and copyright. Moreover, foreign research indicates that the success of cultural programs in the digital era not only depends on high-quality audio-visual presentation, but also requires the establishment of a sustainable business model and brand extension mechanism to achieve the transformation from a one-off hit to a long-term IP [17]. The successful experience of Henan TV provides a reference model for other local TV stations to transform, but to form a more stable demonstration effect, it is necessary to continuously explore differentiated innovative paths and diversified industrial models while maintaining the cultural core.

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