

## Presences or Absences of China's Ethnic Minorities:

### -- A Case Study of Semiotic Analysis of China Central Television (CCTV)'s Spring Festival Galas' Ethnic Minority (2009-2016)

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#### Abstract

Since 2008, China's ethnic problems have become more prominent and the government has endeavored to improve the voices of ethnic minorities in the media. Against this background, ethnic minority actors dress up in minority costumes to represent the signs of ethnic minorities in the CCTV Spring Festival Gala through the combination of songs and dances which praise nature, the powerful nation and a happy life. However, the signs lack subjectivity in the CCTV Spring Festival Gala which is driven by political ideology. And these signs serve to differentiate 'us' from the 'others'. In conclusion, ethnic minorities have never been truly represented on the CCTV Spring Festival Gala because of the structure's binary opposition.

#### Keywords

**Ethnic minorities; CCTV Spring Festival Gala; binary opposition; the others; representation.**

#### 1. Introduction

The Spring Festival is the most influential and important festival of all the traditional festivals in China. The CCTV Spring Festival Gala, beginning in 1983, serves as a comprehensive variety show for celebrating the coming of a new year and airs on the eve of Chinese New Year. It is popular and influential. Since the First CCTV Spring Festival Gala, programs showing the culture of ethnic minorities have always been present, a tradition that continues to this day.

China, a multi-ethnic country, boasts 56 nationalities. In addition to Han nationality, there are 55 ethnic minorities in China. Every ethnic minority enjoys its distinct customs and culture. Influenced by different regions, culture, history, population mobility and other factors, many people don't know about the culture of other minorities or even about their own culture. Mass media plays a crucial role in forming the individual ethnic identity and in learning about the culture of the other minorities. And the Gala provides a platform for ethnic minorities to showcase their culture. Therefore, the ethnic signs appearing in the Gala are not just a vacuous idea, but a form of artistic expression with rich connotation and concrete feelings. Through this form or expression it is possible to transfer the culture of China's ethnic minorities to the whole of China and to the rest of the world.

Between 2008 and 2009, a wave of minority-related issues affected China. The Tibet riot in 2008, the hindrance of the Olympic Torch relay overseas in 2008, the Urumqi (Xinjiang Uyghur Autonomous Region) riots of 5th July 2009 and other relevant issues not only attracted attention in China, but also triggered heated discussion around the world over issues of ethnic identity and human rights. However, the international status and influence of Chinese media doesn't match with China's position and impact in the world [1]. Against this background, China has realized the importance of strengthening the voice of Chinese media and is trying to display

its traditional values and ideology. As a national medium, the Gala showcases the national ideology and traditional values and acts as a tool to shape the national image and demonstrate the soft power of the nation.

Nevertheless, the media are unable to construct and reflect the reality to some extent. The 'Spring Festival' is the cultural and psychological background of the Gala. And as a special status sign, the 'celebration' indicates the ideological intention of the Gala. Besides, the 'evening party', the platform provided by the Gala, refers to a fictitious space [2]. As a result, we can figure out that the ethnic minorities are constructed in the Gala as an imaginary 'other'. In fact, a considerable portion of Chinese people get to know about ethnic minorities through the 'imaginary reality' introduced by the mass media in China. However, the representation of all texts is transferred and formed by words with certain and strong values [3]. The strategy used for representing the 'others' by the media is a process to signify the others. In this process, the codes of the 'others' involve the choice and combination of a group of specific signs. And these codes work together with implied meanings to form a kind of faddish myth.

From the perspective of semiotics, the focus of media representation is the function of signs in the formation of meaning. And then they will reveal the codes and implied meanings through interpretation. With China attaching increasing importance to their voice in the media after 2008, people are paying more attention to ethnic minority issues. Consequently, we must work out what the signs of ethnic minorities appearing in the Gala refer to and how to represent their meaning. Moreover, we also have to make it clear which kind of ideology affects the presence or absence of the signs of ethnic minorities appearing in the Gala.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Ethnic Minorities in China**

In China, the concept of "nationality" has the characteristics of polysemy. Especially, the meanings of 'nation' in 'Chinese nation' and '56 ethnic groups' are significantly different. For this reason, many scholars have analyzed the concept of nationality in China [4, 5, 6]. Based on a survey of ethnic minorities conducted during the 1950s and 1960s, the Chinese government identified 56 ethnic groups (including Han) from the original numerous ethnic groups. Unlike many other countries, an ethnic group in China mainly refers to ethnic minorities. The identification and determination of ethnic minorities link closely with the preferential policies on ethnic minorities, the establishment of ethnic autonomous areas and their autonomy rights. In the early 20th century, Sun Yat-sen proposed the idea of 'Five Races Under One Union' which set the tone for China's multiculturalism. And in the 1980s, Fei Xiaotong put forward the theory of 'Plurality and Unity in the Configuration of the Chinese Nationality'.

### **2.2. The Representation of Ethnic Minorities in the Media**

Some previous research on the representation of the image of ethnic minorities in the media indicates that the civilized level of ethnic minorities as represented by many official media is lower than that of the Han nationality. For example, the study implemented by Blum reveals that poverty, illiteracy, superstition and other similar images are often connected with the people of ethnic minorities in official Chinese media, so as to highlight the superiority of the Han nationality [7]. Shan Xiaohong holds that the people of ethnic minorities in Yunnan Province, as presented by mainstream media, all reside in rural areas, act as festival-lovers, are good at singing and dancing, and are backward, illiterate, ignorant and poor [8]. There are also many studies that show that the media is representing ethnic minorities in connection with the opening-up and development. We can take Zhang Yuan's analysis of the reports about ethnic minorities issued by the People's Daily as an example [9].

Besides, ethnic minorities have been represented as 'other' by official media for a long time. As we all know, the mass media in multi-ethnic areas in China were established with the support of the Party and the government. Given the distinctiveness of multi-ethnic areas, mass communication fully exercises its function of propaganda and indoctrination for the people of ethnic minorities as an important ideological element. Overall, the mass communication lays equal stress both on information dissemination and indoctrination [10]. A survey of audiences in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region reveals that the accessible mass media for the people of ethnic minorities within this region are the newspapers, magazines, radio stations, TV stations and network media using Chinese characters of the central government or the governments at different levels. In this light, the mainstream values have great influence on the mass media accessible by ethnic minorities. Such a situation is also found in Qinghai Province, Ningxia Hui Autonomous Region, Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region, Yunnan Province, Guizhou Province and other multi-ethnic areas [11].

The denotation of the 'others' is often regarded as a strategy to differentiate 'us' from the 'others'. Van Leeuwen points out that 'us' usually refers to a specific and designated entity and the 'others' often involves a generalized category when representing 'us' and the 'others' at the same time [12]. 'Us' is a community with a common view and an entity with personification and civilization, but the 'others' is an unstable entity which is often dealt with through impersonalization, including abstraction or objectification. The process of representing the 'others' in media requires a series of choices. And the priority of the various choices is to choose presences or absences, which mainly deals with the identity of 'others' (who) and the selected content (what) to be presented or omitted deliberately. When it comes to the representation of the 'others', it's difficult to determine presences or absences [13]. In that way, the 'presence' or 'absence' of ethnic minorities in the Gala is a selection process of representing the 'others'.

### 2.3. The Ideology of the Gala

The Gala celebrations are always closely linked to the official ideology of the Party and the government [14]. Although the Gala is a form of entertainment, it has never abandoned its function of advocating official ideology. As Althusser pointed out, the state apparatuses of ideology are unified under the ruling ideology, which is the ideology of the ruling class [15]. The CCTV Spring Festival gala, in fact, is a comprehensive ideological state apparatus: As a television media, CCTV is an ideological state apparatus; As a representative of culture and art, the Spring Festival gala is also part of the ideological state apparatuses; As the smallest unit to watch the Spring Festival gala, "family" also functions as an ideological state apparatus. The Gala reflects the existing policies and ideology of political elites and presents the development of the economy and technological and cultural achievements. The official themes over the years have included the following elements: the traditional celebration themes, such as happy, good luck, family reunion, harmony, etc.; the preferred slogans of the Communist Party of China (CPC), such as making progress, forging ahead, proud, patriotism and unity [16]. As Pan Zhichang said, the 'country' is the only leading role in the Gala which is the most spectacular celebration of China. The Gala goes hand in hand with China's dominating ideology [17]. For this reason, it has transformed itself from a casual variety show into a mirror to reflect the dominating ideology of China which is inseparable from the nature of CCTV; the vice-minister of the Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China also holds a concurrent post as the head of China Central Television (Nie chenxi, the head of China Central Television and the secretary of party leadership of CPC of China Central Television, also serves as the vice-minister of Publicity Department of the Communist Party of China, director and secretary of Party leadership group of State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television and director of National Copyright Administration of China. Source: <http://cpc.people.com.cn/gbzl/html/121000050.html>. Time:

May 3, 2017.). Although CCTV has embarked on a journey of industrialization and commercialization over the past thirty years, it is still the official organ of the CPC [18].

Ethnic minorities are an important part of the national narrative in the Gala. The Gala usually expresses praise of the Chinese nation and strengthens the identity of the Chinese people with retrospection over a common ethnic history and the imagination of the future. As the 'others' beyond the 'Chinese nation' in the Gala, however, ethnic minorities are contradictory to the Chinese nation and interrelated to it as well. National unity is the dominating ideology shown in the Gala and the unity at the state level is realized through the conceptual space transformation from margin to center. And this centralization is realized by repeatedly presenting and constantly highlighting the ethnic margin [19].

### **3. RESEARCH METHODS**

#### **3.1. The Selection of Research Texts**

According to the semiotics theory of Saussure, a sign consists of the signifier and the signified. He also proposes the two concepts of syntagmatic axis and paradigmatic axis which lay the foundation for the text analysis approach in structuralism. Moreover, images and videos are also involved in the sign operation [20]. In 1977, Roland Barthes studied French news and advertisements of that moment through the approach of semiology and came up with criticisms of various information produced by the media in modern society. In addition to news photos, paintings, films and dramas can be categorized as simulating real conditions. Nevertheless, the simulation of paintings or films is not perfect. In the course of representation, the screenwriters will develop a supplementary message which is also known as a writing style [21].

Saussure points out that there are three research fields in semiology, including the sign, the signifying system which the sign is based on, and the cultural context which the sign operation depends on. The Gala, as a large live TV show, contains a lot of signs. Apart from language, images and videos, the actors, clothes, types of program, order of programs, words of the hosts, music, settings and all things on the stage are signs to express ideology. In fact, the Gala is a sign complex with a complicated structure. Given the complexity of the signs in the Gala, this research will be focused on the signs concerning ethnic minorities by analyzing the texts from the Gala between 2009 and 2016. In terms of the analysis procedure, the author will build an analysis pattern of signs with applicableness based on semiotics theory from the features of the Gala's texts so as to observe the sign structure and its function, to reveal the ways of representing ethnic minorities in the Gala and to figure out the characteristics of the ideology reflected in the Gala.

#### **3.2. The Text Characteristics of the Signs of Ethnic Minorities in the Gala**

Roman Jakobson, a Russian-American linguist and literary theorist, proposed a set of fairly good analysis tools which can determine the characteristics of texts. He suggests that we should clear up the relation between the six elements of communication context in the course of verbal communication when studying texts [22]. By virtue of the model provided by Jakobson, this research will study the characteristics of the signs of ethnic minorities appearing in the Gala through the elements of Addresser, Addressee, Context, Contact, Message and Code in the Speech Communication Model.

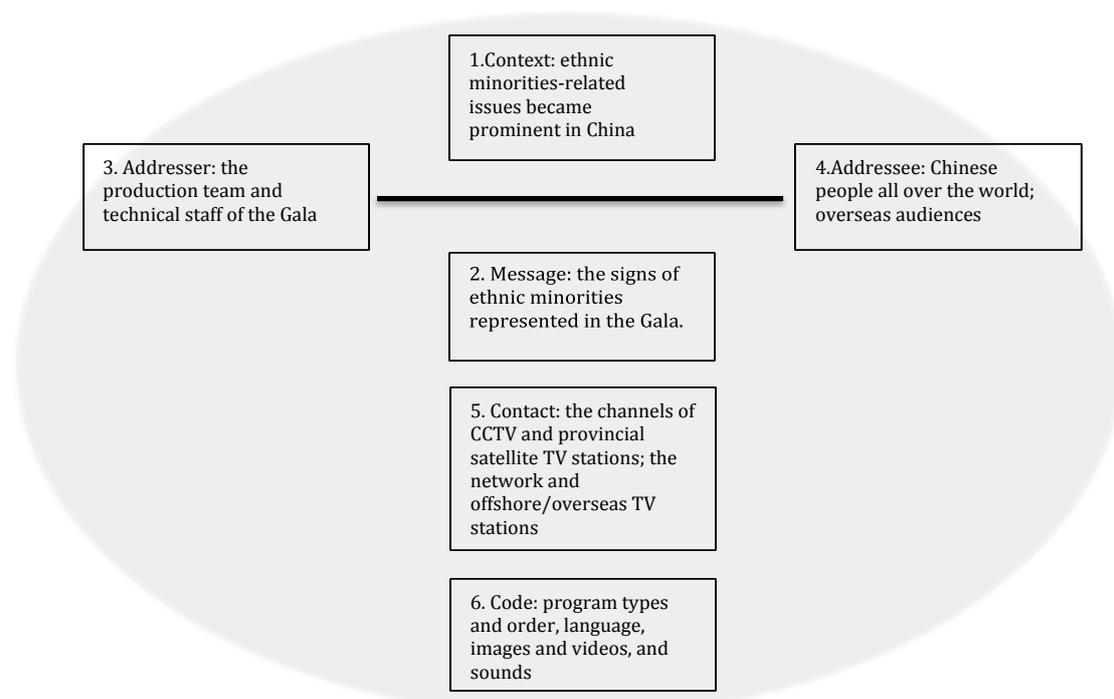
From the perspective of text characteristics of symbols, we can first be certain that the 'Message' refers to the signs of ethnic minorities represented in the Gala. However, these messages which have been represented are selected. In that way, this study will focus on analysis of what kinds of signs of ethnic minorities are presented in the Gala, how they will be represented and what kinds of signs of ethnic minorities are deleted or hidden.

The directors, production team, hosts, technical staff, and actors participate in the programs, and the audiences and guests who appear on the screen are all involved in the presentation of textual meanings in the Gala. And the production team and technical staff mainly decide the textual meanings of the Gala. Therefore, there is no doubt that they act as the 'Addresser' of the Gala.

The Spring Festival is considered an international festival by more and more Chinese people, so the 'Addressee' of the Gala is becoming increasingly diverse when it comes to cultural export. Undoubtedly, the various program types and arrangements are designed to draw the attention of audiences of different ages, regions, nationalities and classes. Chinese people all over the world are apparently the major receivers of the Gala. As a means of cultural export, the Gala takes overseas audiences into consideration. So, as the Gala is broadcast by TV stations overseas, an increasing number of foreign stars have the opportunity to appear on the stage of the Gala, such as the "Riverdance" from Ireland (2009), and Lee MinHo, a superstar from Korea (2014). More and more overseas audiences are involved as the 'Addressee'.

As mentioned above, the Gala is a complex with the complicated 'Code' structure. Focusing on the theme of ethnic minorities, this research will clarify the codes which have influence on the formation of meaning, such as program types and order, language, images and videos, and sounds. The 'Contact' of the Gala is relatively fixed nowadays. The network and offshore/overseas TV stations are also crucial communication media other than the channels of CCTV and provincial satellite TV stations.

The Gala is deemed as a mirror which reflects social changes. Actually, every Gala summarizes events that happened in the previous year. The Galas between 2009 and 2016 reflect that ethnic minorities-related issues became prominent in China after 2008. Besides, they also mirror that China is struggling for a louder voice on the international stage. The above-mentioned elements are actually elements of 'Context'. Accordingly, the text characteristics of the signs of ethnic minorities appearing in the Galas between 2009 and 2016 can be summarized as shown in Fig. 1.



**Fig 1.** The Text Characteristics of the Signs of Ethnic Minorities Appearing in the 2009-2016 Spring Festival Galas

Jakobson also points out that every element in the communication context has a corresponding function. And the six functions are not mutually exclusive, but every 'Message' emphasizes different functions. Hence, the specific differences lie in the proportion of the six elements in communication activities because of the different characteristics of texts. The 'Message' in this research is content related to ethnic minorities, and its corresponding function is 'Poetics' which is used for reminding and highlighting the signs. The Gala, which has been held for more than 30 years, certainly has a set of mechanisms for combination and selection. The sign operation of ethnic minorities appearing from the first Gala also indicates that the Gala has a corresponding mechanism. First of all, we should analyze the texts of the Galas between 2009 and 2016 and find out the main structural elements and combination laws if we want to analyze the signs of ethnic minorities appearing in the Gala. And then, we can discover the in-depth significance behind the signs of ethnic minorities appearing in the Gala combined with the current social context from the perspective of opposite or corresponding relations of different signs.

## **4. TEXT ANALYSIS**

### **4.1. The "Presence" of Media: "Ethnic Minorities" Signs Operation in the Spring Festival Gala**

The type or the way of code arrangement through which the ethnic minorities signs appear is the reappearance method of minorities in the Spring Festival Gala, with television and the network as the main media. Through the analysis of Spring Festival Galas from 2009 to 2016, the author analyzed the combination and selection mechanism of ethnic minorities signs in the Spring Festival Gala with a 'poetics effect', and summarized the following laws of sign operation.

#### **4.1.1. Ethnic costumes were the main sign to highlight the image of minorities**

From the perspective of ethnographic classification, most ethnic groups in China are Mongoloid, and inter-ethnic marriage is also commonplace, so it is difficult to distinguish the ethnic groups from their appearance. However, most minorities have unique cultural characteristics, such as costume, language and character. Costume is particularly unique. To highlight the ethnic minorities, actors were dressed in minority costumes, or minority people were dressed in minority costumes. Minority costumes appeared in the Spring Festival Gala in the following ways:

#### **4.1.2. Appearance of "Ethnic Minorities" Signs Under "Chinese" Identity Construction**

The Spring Festival Gala over the years has embodied national ideology, in which one important function is the construction of the "Chinese" identity. In fact, the construction of identity is widespread in the media and daily life in China. The political propaganda of the national media—XIN WEN LIAN BO, the geographical signs of Tiananmen Square and the Great Wall, allow people to understand their Chinese identity [23]. This kind of construction also appears in the Spring Festival Gala. It is one of the important tasks of the Spring Festival Gala to bring together the differences between the various ethnic groups, and to emphasize the 'great harmony' of the 'national people' and establish a common memory and a sense of participation. The Spring Festival Gala exploits the natural links and historical connections between national and regional cultures in an attempt to create a holistic image and sense of community, which is required if the dominant ideology is to naturalize, generalize and normalize. And it narrates the values it carries as natural, meaningful and worthwhile, thus calling people to enter the world of modern concepts and ways [24]. It is in this way that the Spring Festival Gala places the ethnic minorities in various 'major events' and 'grand scenes' and builds a sense of identity and belonging of minorities to the 'Chinese people'. Through analysis of the Spring Festival Galas in 2009-2016, it can be found that the specific forms reflecting 'minority' signs include:

**Table 1.** Symbolic Analysis of Minority Costumes in 2009-2016 Spring Festival Galas<sup>1</sup>

Form	Example	Image	Sign Selection Analysis
Actors wearing minority costumes for minority performance	Tujia and Miao people's song and dance: <i>Spring Comes Early to the Mountain Village</i> (2009)		The performers include students of Hubei University for Nationalities, Brother and Sister of Tujia and Miao minorities, and Bikazi team. Actors wore Tujia and Miao costumes.
	Song and dance— <i>The Sky Is Blue</i> (2011)		The Singer Song Zuying and 64 Dong girls from Dong chorus, Southeast Qian, Guizhou Province Performed the song and dance. Actors wore Dong costumes.
Actors wearing minority costumes for non-minority performance	Chorus— <i>In the Field of Hope</i> (2009)		The Tibetan singer Alu Azhuo (right 2) wore costumes with minority characteristics in the chorus <i>In the Field of Hope</i> .
	Song mix— <i>Girl, I Love You</i> (2010)		The Tibetan singer Suolang Zhaxi sang a song wearing Tibetan costumes, but the song itself does not reflect Tibetan culture.
People wearing minority costumes were invited	2009 Wenchuan earthquake victim representatives		Bai Lin, a student of former Sichuan Beichuan Middle School and her father, both of whom wore Qiang costumes, received an interview on stage as representatives of Wenchuan earthquake
Ethical model representatives wearing ethnic costumes (National moral models are invited to attend the Spring Festival Gala as audience every year, including minority moral models wearing minority costumes)	2010 "national dedication model"—Nima Lamu, and "national filial model"—Tan Zhiping		Nima Lamu was dressed in Tibetan costume, and Tan Zhiping was dressed in Tujia costume
	2015 "national model for helping people" Rehan Guli Yimier		Rehan Guli Yimier was dressed in Uyghur costume
Other appearances of minority costumes	2009 Wenchuan earthquake victims video		In the video, a quake-affected victim wearing Tibetan costume was pasting spring couplets, where "Communist party..." was written
	Short film <i>Return Home for the New Year</i> in 2012		The home of Yang Jilei—a soldier of western troop. His mother was dressed in Yi costumes to welcome his son.

1. In this study, all the pictures (screenshots) of Spring Festival Gala are from the "previous CCTV Spring Festival Gala" collection on "iQIYI" website [http://www.iqiyi.com/a\\_19rrgjbx11.html](http://www.iqiyi.com/a_19rrgjbx11.html). Introducing time: February 18, 2017.

**Table 2.** Ethnic minority signs from the perspective of ‘Chinese people’ in the Spring Festival Gala in 2009-2016

Form	Example	Image	Sign Selection Analysis
Minority actors appear on the stage when it comes to China’s annual “national events”. Sometimes they act as background only.	<i>Auspicious World</i> by Sichuan Ethnic Song and Dance Ensemble in 2009		Sichuan Wenchuan earthquake occurred in 2008. As Sichuan Province is a multi-ethnic area, including Tibetans, Qiangs, Yi and other ethnic groups, the Spring Festival Gala invited the Sichuan Ethnic Song and Dance Ensemble to sing the penultimate song in the song and dance drama <i>Auspicious World</i> .
	In 2009, representatives of aerospace personnel and astronauts paid a New Year call to the Spring Festival Gala		In 2008, the Shenzhou-VII spacecraft was launched successfully, and a historic spacewalk was achieved. When the astronaut representatives arrived on the stage for the New Year call, actors dressed in minority costumes appeared at the back of the stage with bouquets in their hands to embody the concept of “the Chinese nation”. The host said: “in AD 2008, the Chinese nation wrote a brilliant note again in the glorious history of space!”
Minority representatives occupy a certain percentage of “National Model Workers”.	The national model workers invited during the Spring Festival Gala included minority model representatives.	 (Part of the “National Model Workers” is provided in Table 1)	The Spring Festival Gala’s invitation of the national model workers is a kind of political propaganda. “National Model Worker” is the honorary title awarded by the Central Party Committee and the State Council to those who made major contributions to the cause of socialist construction.
Minority signs appeared on the stage during the New Year’s Eve Countdown.	Before the the New Year’s Eve bell ringing, the host made a countdown with the audience.		On the stage, actors dressed in ethnic costumes stood behind the host, and made a countdown together, indicating the symbolic meaning of “sharing the same happy festival time despite kilometers of separation” and “Reunion of the Chinese Nation”.
Other ways to show “participation”	In 2016 Spring Festival Gala, in addition to the main venue of Beijing, there were four separate venues (Quanzhou in Fujian, Xi’an in Shaanxi, Guangzhou and Hulunbeier, in Inner Mongolia)		Hulunbeier is a prefecture-level city under the jurisdiction of Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and there are 32 ethnic groups including Han, Mongolia, Hui, Man, Korean, Daur, Russ, Bai, Li, Sibe, Uyghur, Zhuang, Ewenki and Oroqen. The setting of the four sub-venues considered not only the geographical distribution of eastern, western, northern and southern China, but also the ethnic distribution.

**4.1.3. Relatively Stable Minority Program Type and Content Reference**

Through analysis of the ‘minority’ programs in the 2009-2016 Spring Festival Galas, it is not difficult to find that the main types are songs and dances, which often appear together. It is not

only the choice of the 'axis of convergence', but also the sign sequence of the 'composite axis'. The song and dance drama, Happy Family, which has won a special award in the 2011 CCTV Spring Festival Gala, blended song and dance features of Mongolian, Hui, Zhuang, Uygur and Tibetan ethnic groups. Such programs can accommodate many minorities, and don't take up too much time. As the duration of the Spring Festival Gala is limited, it is impossible to cover all 55 ethnic minorities. Ethnic groups with a large population appear more often. The minorities themselves have a lot of unique music and dance skills and musical instruments, which, combined with the sounds of nature and delicate emotional expression to highlight the minority culture characteristics with original voice and body signs, such as the Mongolian 'Khoomei' and 'Kam Grand Choirs', are the essence of national culture.

In addition to the type and arrangement of programs, the expression of program content is also very distinctive and worth studying. The appearance of ethnic minority signs in the Spring Festival Gala itself has considerable ideological features, but as Saussure said, 'signifier' and 'signified' of the connection is not natural, but arbitrary. There are three main ways to connect minority content and significance in the Spring Festival Gala:

a. Ode to nature and minority living traditions

"Many nationalities in our country have the custom of using dance to greet spring", went the MC script before the folk dance, Dance in Spring. This dance was performed by dancers of ten nationalities of Mongolia, Tibet, Hui, Miao, Dai, Wa, Korea, Uygur, Yi, and Zhuang. There are many programs to express this content in the Spring Festival Gala, such as the Hubei Tu-Miao song and dance Early Spring in Mountain Area in 2009, and the Yunnan Naxi song and dance Pure Land in 2013.

In addition, the content related to the life and production of minorities is also often used as the theme of the Spring Festival Gala song and dance performance, such as the national song and dance, Chasing Love, in 2012. The program of Chasing Love originated from the way of courting of the Yao minority in Wuling Mountain. The Yao minority in western Hunan has passed down a unique love and wedding custom from the matriarchal society; the young boys and girls of Yao do not go to the front door when they fall in love, instead, the boy climbs into the girl's attic in order to capture the girl's heart. The program integrates song, dance, acrobatics and melodrama.

b. Celebrate the country, the Communist Party and the policies and regulations

Because the Spring Festival Gala is a year-end summary, the events of the year, the national development and the new policies and regulations are celebrated in different formats. This model is also reflected in ethnic-based programs which often present ideological propaganda in a fairly straightforward way. For example, in the song and dance, Harmonious Homeland in 2010 and the Uygur song and dance Happy Life Yakexi (formerly known as the Party's Policy Yakexi), "Yakexi" is the meaning of "good" and "very good" in the Uyghur language. The song lists all the policies of the country and praises the Communist Party in a naked manner in the lyrics, such as, "Nowadays, the state has waived the agricultural tax/the sun shines in my heart"; "Today's primary and secondary schools are exempt from tuition / the children are all happily going to school"; "Now that the rural cooperative medical system has been established / the health has been guaranteed"; "the people of people of all nationalities in Hotan follow the Communist Party / happy day as sweet as honey"; "What Yakexi? Yakexi? /the Party's Policy Yakexi".

c. Celebrate reunion, harmony and a happy life

The 'Happy Reunion of the Chinese Nation' is one of the most enduring themes in the Spring Festival Gala. The appearance of the ethnic minority signs is itself a demand for the construction of national identity and ideology. Therefore, in minority-themed programs, highlighting reunion, harmony and happiness is a way of strengthening national identity and a sense of

belonging. First of all, in the names of the minority programs in the Spring Festival Gala, there are many words like reunion, harmony, happiness or words of similar meaning, such as Happy Reunion of China, Harmonious Homeland, Happy Family and so on. In addition, circular movements often appear in the dances of the minorities during the Spring Festival Gala. By this sign, 'reunion' and 'unity' are meant. For example, in the dance of Happy Reunion of China in 2009, there are concentric circles of dancers in various ethnic costumes throughout the dance. The circle is sometimes enlarged and sometimes narrowed. However, it always surrounds a fixed center, representing 'reunion'. It also refers to the political meaning of 'national unity'.



Fig 2. The Screenshot of the dance, Happy Reunion of China (2009)

## 4.2. Presence vs. Absence: Ethnic Minorities Inside and Outside the Spring Festival Gala

The imaginative reality of ethnic minorities appears more or less each year during the Spring Festival Gala. These 'presences' are in line with the ideological characteristics of the CCTV Spring Festival Gala. However, in addition to the appearances of the above-mentioned minority signs, there are 'absent' 'realities' that are not even mentioned. There is precisely a kind of 'binary opposition' between such 'presence' and 'absence'. The so-called binary opposition refers to the symbiotic but opposite form between signs, and the symbolic system has a formal meaning through this non-essential twin relationship [25]. In the following, the binary opposition structure under 'absence' will be dismantled in accordance with the laws of operation of the ethnic minority signs in the above section.

### 4.2.1. The 'false-real' ethnic minority signs

We can see that during the Spring Festival Gala, the minority signs are highlighted mainly in the form of performers in ethnic costumes or the minority people wearing ethnic costumes. However, such appearances are often not true representations of minorities.

First, the actors who wear costumes of a particular minority are not necessarily the people of that minority. In the song and dance, Blue Sky in 2011, the singer Song Zuying wears Dong costumes, but Song Zuying is a Miao. Another example is the song and dance, Chasing Love in 2012, which describes the marriage customs of the Tujia, Miao and Yao people in western Hunan. The singer Lei Jia is wearing a Miao costume, but Lei Jia is a Han Chinese. Wang Ya-bin, a dancer wearing a Korean costume in the dance Happy Reunion of China, is also a Han Chinese. Second, although the performers or minorities in the Spring Festival Gala are wearing ethnic costumes, many ethnic minority people in real life have been assimilated by Han people outside the Spring Festival Gala and rarely dress in ethnic costumes. For example, a survey of ethnic minorities in Guangxi found that 50% of minority audiences in Guangxi believe that in recent years they have been affected by the fashion culture of mass media, and great changes have taken place in dress and lifestyle. 94.3% of the minority audiences in Longlin Autonomous County and Dongxing City are usually dressed in modern fashion clothes or Han national costumes [26].

Third, actors in ethnic costumes perform using Mandarin Chinese, which is in itself is extremely discordant. In the Spring Festival Gala, local dialects are seldom heard. There are two main reasons: first, in China, the Han nationality population is far bigger than the total number of ethnic minorities, and so Mandarin is used to enable the vast majority of audiences to understand and accept the Spring Festival Gala. However, the ethnic minorities must appear as a community, thus the minority signs in disguise are selected to be reproduced. This is one of the ways in which the 'us' group is distinguished from "the 'others', where the minority is only an element of the media event, regardless of whether it is audible or in what language. Second, ethnic minorities have already been assimilated by the Han" Some studies show that 80% of the ethnic minorities surveyed in Guangxi use Chinese on a daily basis [27]. Analysis of the Spring Festival Galas of 2009-2016 found that minority languages only appeared in a few songs of the 2011 national song and dance Happy Family, but the lyrics were very few and were explained by subtitles in the live broadcast. Why was the show performed in a minority language? We have an answer from the introductory remarks made by the host: "Among the 328 actors, many are genuine peasants. Many of them came to Beijing for the first time. They wore national costumes, with homemade instruments, singing the blessing and praise of a happy life." This naturally leads us to a meaningful connection: the minority peasants who come to Beijing for the first time are the 'others' who speak minority languages and are different from 'us'.

#### **4.2.2. Minorities myth: "Chinese" as "the others"**

In China's history, the 'Chinese nation', which contains superior meaning, has in fact not included minorities. Until the 20th century, Sun Yat-Sen realized that it was not enough to equate China with the Han when in the face of foreign aggression, therefore, the four majorities (Manchu, Mongolian, Hui, Tibetan) are included in the concept of the 'Chinese nation' [28]. In the national narratives of the Spring Festival Gala, ethnic minorities and 'compatriots in Hong Kong, Macao and Taiwan', and 'overseas Chinese', all became imaginary entities that are both linked and opposed to the Chinese nation, and a myth of being "Chinese" as "the others" was derived. Fifty-six nationalities are one family, and harmony brings wealth. We are all 'Chinese descendants', 'successors of dragons', and the grand dance scene of national costume actors, all kinds of objects (Chinese elements) with ethnic ideas of Chinese family and nationalities are also built into a close and detailed national sign system and closely linked with personal experience, and dominates the imagination of each of the participating Chinese peoples [29]. Whether it's a great time to launch a manned spaceship, or a zero-hour countdown to this moment of 'Time Together across the Strait', all of them are symbolic images of building national and ethnic identities. The appearance of the minority signs, on the other hand, is also transformed into a part of the 'nationality' sign, guiding non-minority audiences to agree on a 'Greater China'.

#### **4.2.3. The type and content of minority programs: the subjectivity of 'being disappeared'**

In the Spring Festival Galas from 2009 to 2016, ethnic-related programs are almost the same. These programs stage different folk songs and singing and dancing, which make the audience form a kind of stereotype, as soon as we came to think of ethnic minorities programs, a group of people dancing and enjoying themselves in colorful ethnic costumes emerged [30]. In addition, even the people involved in the annual gala are invariable. The programs of Tibetan, Mongolian, Uighur and Yi people account for the majority, and a large number of the 56 nationalities have never appeared on the gala stage. This rigid 'carnival' program deliberately ignores the existence of ethnic minorities and instead serves to promote the ideology of national unity and national integration in an abstract, 'whole' way. As pointed out by Naran Bilik during the first Mongolian Nadam (Nadam, meaning "game" or "entertainment", is an

annual Mongolian traditional physical athletic festival developed from the traditional religious ceremony "Obo Tuckerogan (敖包塔克勒根)" (Obo worship), usually held in July to August each year. In the past, it will only be held in Mongolia and Inner Mongolia Autonomous Region and Mongolian Autonomous Region, and it is also held in Beijing, Harbin and other big cities by Mongolian.) Fair in Beijing: The structure of Nadam is complete, and the audience is nothing more than a 'chess piece' that can be replaced. The key is not to mess up [31]. As long as the minorities appear in the Spring Festival Gala, the so-called '56 nationalities' are complete; the program type, and the choice of minorities are but chess pieces that can be replaced.

There are three main ways the Spring Festival Gala builds connections through the content and meaning of programs performed by the actors from ethnic minorities, namely, 'great praises of nature and traditional lifestyle of ethnic minorities', 'great praises of the country, CPC, and policies and regulations', and 'great praises of reunion, harmony and happy life'. However, each of them is virtually unrelated to the Spring Festival, so, the meaning of the signs of ethnic minorities in the Spring Festival Gala is ambiguous.

Specifically, in the Spring Festival Gala many programs can be classed as the 'great praises of nature and traditional lifestyle of ethnic minorities' type, but why? I am afraid that we need to talk about the ethnic relations that have always existed in Chinese national history, namely, the so-called "Hua-Yi distinction" in ancient China. The Chinese nation has always placed itself higher than other groups. Some scholars asked college students from ethnic minorities about the negative impression of them they perceived from Han people, which mainly included being impulsive, conservative, rude, lazy, and careless [32]. To a certain extent, the programs of the type 'great praises of nature and traditional lifestyle of ethnic minorities' are also a metaphor for the primitive state of backwardness and underdevelopment of the ethnic minorities compared with the Chinese nation. In addition, the repeated presence of such programs is an explicit manifestation of discrimination against the 'others', the ethnic minorities. The contradictions implied by the 'presence' of ethnic minority signs in such programs are that ethnic minorities are in a primitive state and need to be enlightened, meanwhile, they are inherently backward and therefore cannot be enlightened [33].

The content of the programs classed as 'great praises of the country, CPC, and policies and regulations', and 'great praises of reunion, harmony and happy life' are not related to the Spring Festival, and are not even directly linked to ethnic minorities; these program types just change the signs of national ideology into the signs of ethnic minorities, and then appear in the Spring Festival Gala 'legitimately'. For example, in the Uyghur song and dance, Happy Life Yakexi in the 2010 Spring Festival Gala, the policies of 'exemption from agricultural tax', 'popularization of compulsory education in rural areas', 'rural cooperative medical care', etc. mentioned in the lyrics are policies favoring peasants, which are targeted at the peasants. However, the main character of this song was a Uyghur peasant from Xinjiang and it was performed by Uyghur actors, moreover, it has been performed over 200 times in the Hotan area, Xinjiang, the Shanghai World Expo, etc. More strangely, Wang Shijie, the lyricist of this song, is neither a native of Xinjiang or a Uyghur, which means that for the ethnic minorities, he is an authentic "other". Although it cannot be denied that Wang Shijie has profound feelings for the people of Xinjiang and Uyghur, he made a mistake, just like all of us, namely, we habitually regard others as 'frontiers', regard 'frontiers' as 'problems', regard things the same as ourselves as 'civilization' or 'progress', and regard things different from ourselves as 'backwardness' or 'problems'. Our cognition is limited because we cannot see ourselves and the things behind ourselves, and we do not regard ourselves as part of the environment or regard ourselves as the 'frontier' of other people [34]. Another example is the circular movement continually appearing in the dances of ethnic minorities in the Spring Festival Galas, which also vividly show the relationship between 'frontiers' and the 'center'.

Due to the influences of geography, language culture, education systems, and media coverage, there is segregation between ethnic minorities and the Han nationality in China. Ethnic minorities never truly appear in the Spring Festival Gala, and their stories are just an imagination rather than reality.

## 5. CONCLUSION

Although the Gala is no longer attractive for many people, its significance has already transcended entertainment to become a carrier of national narratives. The signs of ethnic minorities appearing in the Gala have never been a representation of reality. Most noteworthy in the Galas is the absence of discourses about ethnic minorities. And the presences and absences have apparent structural characteristics of binary opposition.

With China attaching increasing importance to their voices in media after 2008, people are paying more attention to ethnic minority issues. Against this background, the Gala has created a series of colorful media texts. Not surprisingly, we can find signs of 'absence' which have been selected or deleted when we study the 'presence' of ethnic minorities in the Gala. In the representational operation of the Gala driven by political ideology, ethnic minorities serve as a vehicle to differentiate 'us' from the 'others'. It's a paradox that the representation of ethnic minorities as different from 'us' is used to signify ethnic unity and integration.

The 'presence' plays a role in constructing the national identity of ethnic minorities and in safeguarding the stability of China and its regime. Ethnic minorities are just a version of an 'ideal reality' [35] and the Gala is not a pure entertainment program, therefore, the signs of ethnic minorities which go beyond the 'ideal reality' can not be shown on the stage of the Gala. This study mainly focuses on the representational significance of ethnic minority signs appearing in the Galas and the ideology and selection rules behind the signs. But there are still many problems to be explored in further study. In the analysis of the Galas' texts between 2009 and 2016, the results show that the characteristics of 'myth' and 'binary opposition' involve much more than the categories summarized in the research. And the most outstanding features are presented and analyzed in this study. Meanwhile, further study should analyze more texts so as to discover more operation rules of the signs. Besides, the researcher's understanding of ethnic minorities is not comprehensive and may even have misunderstandings or biases towards their culture because the author is Han Chinese. Although the researcher has endeavored to refer to relevant documents and papers, the inadequate understanding of the culture of ethnic minorities may still be a deficiency of the research. Moreover, there are numerous minorities in China. Audiences from different minority groups may have different interpretations of the ethnic minority signs. Research in this area would be more comprehensive and in-depth if it were possible to cooperate with scholars in the fields of ethnology and anthropology, or the local people from minority groups with the help of fieldwork, interviews and other effective research methods.

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