

Research on the Symbolic Mechanism of Constructing National Identity in Sports Event Ceremony Communication

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Abstract:

Based on the classical theories of communication, semiotics and cultural anthropology, using the research methods of literature study, text analysis, induction and deduction, this paper makes a theoretical exploration on the symbolic mechanism of constructing national identity in sports events under the concept of ceremony communication. The research holds that ceremony communication can provide another paradigm for us to research sports event communication. Sports event ceremony communication includes two kinds of ceremonies and two communication fields, which provides an important identity space for modern countries. Among them, symbols always run through the sports event ceremony communication, and its mechanism of constructing national identity is as follows: the symbol system function of sports event ceremony communication is not only information transmission, but also symbolic construction of symbol meaning; In the sports events ceremony communication, once a single or combined symbol is connected with the country, it has the meaning of the country, and it becomes a national symbol that can represent the country through metonymy function; National symbols can arouse people's collective memory and emotion towards the country, and make people anchor the reference of symbols as "identity, collective, nation and country". At the same time, people can realize the spiritual image of "national community" by means of imagination, thus completing the construction of national identity.

Keywords: Sports events, Ceremony communication, National identity, Symbol

I. INTRODUCTION

National identity refers to citizens' cognition of which country they belong to and their evaluation and emotion of the composition of this country, including the elements such as politics, culture, ethnic groups and other. It is the sublimation of ethnic identity and cultural identity [1], and an important force for the existence, maintenance and development of a country. However, make a general observation of the contemporary history of development, we can see that "national identity crisis" has gone with the development of the nation and country, and has become the primary challenge faced by current national construction. Therefore, modern countries are in urgent need of a kind of normal, competitive, ceremonial

and group activity to stimulate and maintain national identity [2]. Obviously, modern sports events are competitive, ceremonial and group activities, which have gone beyond the simple sports category, having super-secular value functions and playing a positive role in the construction of national identity [3, 4].

Since the beginning of 21st century, China has set off a climax of bidding for and hosting world-class sports events, precisely because sports play an invisible role of cohesion and identity construction. Then, what is the mechanism of identity construction in sports events? There is no systematic research on this issue in academic circles. In fact, human beings are highly dependent on media in modern society. Without the media, we would know almost nothing about the outside world. It can be said that the media has become a window for us to understand the world around us and enter the center of the society. By editing and sending “symbols”, the media enables lots of “absent” audiences to fully understand all kind sports events information at home, so “media sports” and “media ceremony” was formed, in which people can share beliefs and identities. In view of this, “sports events”, “symbols”, “media and communication” and “ceremony” should be the key elements that can not be ignored when sports events construct national identity. Therefore, from the perspective of ceremony communication, this paper attempts to research the symbolic mechanism of constructing national identity in sports events, in order to broaden the research horizon of modern sports and provide theoretical foundation for better construction of identity in the future. It should be indicated that the sports events in this research refer to large-scale international sports events such as Olympic Games, World Championships and Asian Games.

II. SPORTS EVENT COMMUNICATION: AN INTERPRETATION OF A CEREMONY COMMUNICATION PARADIGM

2.1 Analysis of Ceremony Communication Paradigm

The word “ceremony” appeared in the 19th century as a special word, which was confirmed as a concept in the classification category of human experience and a universal social phenomenon since ancient times. In a general sense, “ceremony is repeated symbolic behaviors regulated by society. Ceremony behaviors have formal quality, and they are a series of behaviors which are highly structured and standardized and are often performed at specific places and times that carry special symbolic meanings of their own. Ceremony behaviors are repetitive and therefore circular, but this kind of behaviors all serve the important significance and are used to channel feelings, guide cognition and organize social groups” [5]. In recent years, ceremony is the research object of cultural anthropology, and becomes an important field involved in journalism and communication gradually.

Ceremony communication belongs to the categories of anthropology and communication, and it is a combination of “ceremony as communication” and “communication as ceremony” [6, 7]. Firstly, “ceremony as communication” refers to ceremony activities which have communication characteristics, such as religious ritual, rite of myth, wedding ceremony, folk sacrifice and so on. These ceremonies convey feelings to people through ceremony behaviors, words and programs, reflecting the significance of ceremonies. It can be seen that ceremony is a medium with the function of diffusion and communication.

Secondly, “communication as ceremony” refers to communication activities which have ceremony characteristics. This thought comes from the American communication scholar James·W· Kerry’s “ceremony view of communication”, and Kerry advocates that people should go out of the positivism study of effect and carry out the cultural study of communication. He holds the opinion that, unlike the traditional “communication view”, communication does not refer to the process of the transmission and distribution of information in space, but refers to the maintenance of society in time. Communication can enable the audience to share the same event at the same time, and the essential is the realization of spiritual experience and faith sharing, which is a sacred ritual that brings people together in the form of groups or communities [8]. Therefore, communication takes ceremony as metaphor, that is, communication is equivalent to ceremony, and ceremony is the essence of communication [9]. From this point of view, the paradigm of ceremony communication includes two kinds of ceremonies and their communication. One is the ceremony site and the communication of this ceremony in the site, while the other is the communication of the ceremony created by the media and the formation of media ceremony in the process of communication.

2.2 Communication of Sports Events as Ceremony Communication

The sports event ceremony communication, so to speak, is an ingenious fusion of ceremony and communication, which includes “ceremony communication” and “communication ceremony” two parts. Its ceremony communication follows the path from the site to the media. As shown in Figure 1, first of all, the sports event ceremony communication includes two kinds of ceremonies. One kind of ceremony is the sports event itself. That is because sports events are activities carried out in a certain time and space and different from people’s daily life, and they also have the characteristics of repetitiveness, performance and symbolism. Another kind of ceremony is the watching ceremony formed by sports event ceremony communication. In the opinion of Dai Yang and Katz, media events include “competition”, “coronation” and “conquest” three types, and the process of their live broadcast on TV is the process of “ritualization”, so “TV ceremony” is formed. Nowadays, sports event information can be spread to the whole country and even the whole world timely and quickly through TV, Internet and many other media, and lots of “absent” audiences can be summoned to gather together at the same time and in different spaces. The audiences can participate in the large-scale “media ceremony” and share all kinds of sports event information by watching the symbol information sent by media. It is “taking communication as a ceremony process rooted in culture to bring people spiritual satisfaction and comfort through ceremony, and uniting people to maintain the existence and operation of a well-organized community” [10], which provides important fields for modern countries to construct national identity.

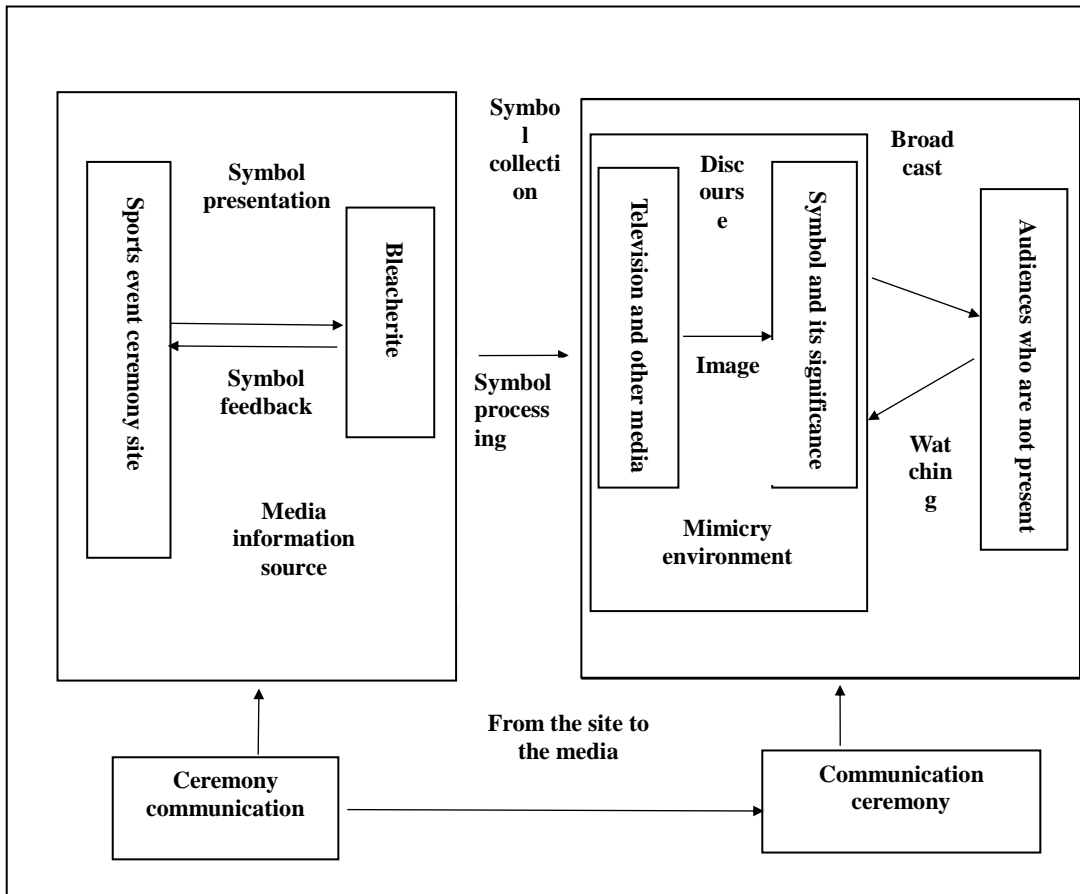


Fig. 1 Ritual communication model of sports events

Secondly, the sports event ceremony communication includes two communication fields. One communication field is the communication field of sports event ceremony, which is the real communication field, that is, the communication space in the ceremony site. Another communication field is the ritualized communication field of sports events, which mainly includes the watching space formed by the audiences through newspapers, television, Internet and other media. In the above two communication fields, the former is the reality, the foundation and the information source of media communication, while the latter is the image text, which is derived. The audiences can understand the ceremony activities through the “mimicry environment” in the latter.

In addition, it is worth noting that, it can be found from Figure 1 that symbols run through ceremony communication from the beginning to the end, and become the main elements of expressing meaning and constructing identity. At the ceremony site, symbols including the performances of the opening and closing ceremonies, athletes’ presentation, coaches’ commands, referees’ law enforcement, and cheers of other spectators are presented in front of the bleacherites. In the meantime, the bleacherites can give direct, strong and active live feedback with symbols such as language and behaviors to the ceremony. Moreover, all symbols at the site may become the focus of media to shoot and report. These symbols captured at the site are processed and encoded by media producers, and then are transformed into media words, images,

words, etc., and conveyed to the absent audience through mass media. The audiences will have psychologically acceptance or rejection by watching and decoding the symbols. Therefore, it can be said that sports ceremonies will not be performed and communicated without symbols.

III. FROM INFORMATION COMMUNICATION TO SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION: THE FUNCTIONAL REFLECTION OF THE SYMBOL SYSTEM OF SPORTS EVENT CEREMONY COMMUNICATION

3.1 Information Communication: Functional Reflection of Symbol System of Sports Event Communication

It is generally recognized that sports communication is an information transmission activity and behavior with sports as its communication content, the core content of which is sports events, and the way of communication is realized through symbol system. Comparatively speaking, there will be no good sports news and sports communication content if there is no good sports events. Therefore, influential large-scale sports events became the focus of media attention.

Throughout the development of sports events communication, profound changes will be brought in sports communication when every innovation of media technology is carried out. From audiences rushing to the arena to watch the beast fighting competition and cheering for the gladiators, to people using words and pictures to report sports events in newspapers, and then to people broadcasting the live sports events in language, especially in the era of TV. TV reproduces and reconstructs various scenes of sports events by using montage techniques such as enlargement, slow play, editing and synthesis through mixed symbols such as sound, words and images, so that “absent” audiences can share the live events in real time, making large-scale sports events become “media events” of global sports that people stop to watch. Nowadays, with the intervention of Internet and mobile Internet, VR (Virtual Reality) and AR technology (Augmented Reality), especially with the coming of the 5G era, the symbol transmission of sports events is mainly completed by large and small “screens” such as mobile phones, televisions and computers. In the aspects of content production, product form, user experience and marketing methods, the transformation of communication paradigm is also realized, and “immersive” experiences such as “body returning”, multi-sensory resonance and scene and sensory adaptation are realized [11]. It can be seen that the change of media technology has caused “body leaving” and “body returning” of audiences when they are watching sports events. And a rich symbol system of sports events were created and made use of by the media, forming a media spectacle of sports events. The enhancement of viewing effect enables the audience to deeply immerse in it and enjoy the sports feast brought by audio-visual system.

However, under the “energization” of technology, people find that human rationality and culture seem to have no progress, but a trend of “going from bad to worse” while cheering technological progress. Technology and mass carnival have expelled elites in the field of sports communication, and visual stimulation is more fascinating than meaning, which makes sports communication face the possibility of “value hollowing out” [12]. Therefore, the communication with the transmission symbol “signifier” as the

core theme and paying more attention to the communication effect has been denounced by people. The goal of pursuit has become looking for the significance of sports event communication and promoting and building the value in sports communication.

3.2 Symbolic Construction: the Reflection of the Value Function of the Symbolic System of Sports Event Ceremony Communication

In the view of Jeffrey Alexander and others, the essential difference between media ceremony and general news report is that the former takes creating identity as its primary goal, and the significance of media ceremony must be fully constructed and accepted by most members of society, otherwise it will be a failure [13]. It can be said that ceremony communication not only focuses on the process of information transmission, but also plays a prominent role of exploring significance, and “significance must be expressed by symbols” [14]. There are some previous studies on ceremony symbols. French scholar Maurice Halbwachs believes that “ceremony is composed of objects of worship established by a set of gestures and words and a kind of material form” [15]. That is to say, ceremony is a discourse composed of action symbols, language symbols and material symbols. British scholar Victor Turner has a similar view. He thinks that ceremony is “the aggregation of symbols” and “symbols are the smallest unit of ceremony”. In order to realize the symbolic significance of ceremony, there are generally three elements: The first kind of elements are exhibits or “things shown to others”, that is, instruments or sacred objects that can arouse memories or feelings through exhibition, such as relics of gods, heroes or ancestors. The second kind of elements are behaviors or “things that people did”, that is, behaviors and events that can arouse memories or feelings through imitation, such as certain plots in tribal myth or religious epic. The third kind of elements are edification or “what was said”, that is, the teaching to participants of the ceremony about the spectrum, cosmology, and the origin and secret history of organization of the society or religious sect they belong to. In general, we think that ceremony symbols can be roughly divided into material symbols, behavior symbols and language symbols.

The principle of human ceremony is symbolic, and sports event ceremony communication is a kind of ceremony, a huge symbolic token system and a “news gathering image” highly concentrated meaning. Its material symbols (things shown to others) include people, totems, scenery, cultural carriers, traditional clothing and clothing colors, etc. Behavior symbols (things that people did) mainly include people’s behavior symbols and events, such as stylized actions such as people’s performances, victory celebration and the singing of national anthem, etc. And behavior symbols also include events and images presented through narrative texts, such as the “Industrial Revolution” events displayed at the London Olympic Games; Language symbols (what was said) refer to the words spoken by people in sports event ceremony communication, including media words, such as commentary, subtitle language, text and so on. These are just the “signifiers” of symbols, which are the noumenon or carrier to convey symbolic significance, and their “signifiers” are conveyed as a metaphorical object. For example, at the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, these are all the continuation of the theme of “One World, One Dream” in the 2008 Beijing Olympic Games: the publicity of the slogan “Let’s Go to the Future Together”, the exhibition of “Five Rings Breaking Ice” which broken the gap, the construction of 90 “Uniting Snowflakes” with national

names, the presentation of “Chinese Knot” connecting the world, the reflection of “People of the World Going to the Future Together”, the affectionate confession in the song “Me and You”, and the fireworks show of “One World, One Family under the World”. These ceremonies are “Chinese interpretation, Chinese explanation and Chinese expression of the Olympic spirit, the concept of running the Games and the Olympic vision under the values of a community with a shared future for mankind” [16]. The 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics ‘enables beliefs, values, concepts, emotions and spiritual temperament that cannot be directly felt to be visible, audible and touchable’ [17], and makes these symbols symbolically point to China’s development concept of “harmony with all nations” since ancient times and the vision of actively advocating “building a community with shared future for mankind”.

In brief, sports event ceremony communication is a sharing activity of mass media and ceremony participants to specific event situations, which creates conditions for the expression of symbolic tokens and provides context for the production and interpretation of symbolic meanings. In addition, sports event ceremony communication has the implication of communication, commonness, community and sharing. “Through ceremony, the living world and the imaginary world are merged into the same world by means of a group of symbolic tokens, and they constitute the spiritual consciousness of a nation [18], which is conducive to the establishment of the identity of groups, nations and countries.”

IV. FROM INDIVIDUAL TO COUNTRY: METONYMY STRATEGY OF SYMBOLIC SYSTEM IN SPORTS EVENT CEREMONY COMMUNICATION

However, in the sports event ceremony communication, why a symbol or a group of symbols can represent the country? For example, if an athlete or a team won a competition, will it be regarded as a victory for a nation? Can a national flag represent a country?

Actually, this is caused by the metonymy function of symbols. “The basic definition of metonymy is using ‘part to represent all’, and metonymy must participate in the representation of reality. Metonymy is a part of the things it represents, including a highly arbitrary choice. But the arbitrariness of choice is usually concealed, or at least ignored by people” [19]. At this point, there are many symbols that can be metaphorized to symbolize the country and nation in the sports event ceremony communication. As one of the typical totem symbols of the representation of country, the national flag is the symbolic flag of the country. It is “positioned as one of the core symbols of mobilizing and arousing the national concept” [20] in people’s concept, which often represents a country. For athletes, their victory is considered as the victory of a nation, a country and a continent or continents after metonymy. For example, at the Tokyo Olympic Games held in 2021, China’s athletes won the gold medal in the men’s and women’s team competition of table tennis and achieved “four consecutive championships”, which was praised as a great victory for the Chinese nation, that is, a small group composed of several athletes and coaches represented the whole nation or country. Similarly, at the Athens Olympic Games, Liu Xiang broke the world record and won the championship in the 110-meter hurdle race, and at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, Su Bingtian won the sixth place in the final of 100-meter race, which was hailed as a victory for China and even Asia. In addition, there are sports heroes such as Yao Ming, Li Na, etc., who have become the

concrete heroes of “national image” and the sports spokespersons of national image in a certain era. At this time, in sports, “the perfect image of a hero becomes the benchmark of the community, and the achievements of a hero belong not only to himself or herself, but also to the wealth of the community and the witness of collective quality” [21].

In addition, there are also individual or combined forms in the sports event ceremony communication representing the appearance of the country and nation. For example, at the opening and closing ceremonies of the 2022 Beijing Winter Olympics, from the artistic presentations of the performance of famous Chinese traditional songs such as Jasmine Flower and the performance of classical poems such as How the Yellow River’s Waters Move Out of Heaven, to the display of traditional folk cultural symbols such as “Twenty-four Solar Terms”, “Zodiac”, “Lantern Festival”, “Bing Dwen Dwen” and “Shuey Rhon Rhon”, and then to the expression of Chinese emotions and etiquette such as “Welcome Pine in Fireworks” and “Fold Willow to Send Love”, historical and cultural symbols with Chinese characteristics are presented. Each of the above symbols is the reflection of Chinese culture, and these cultural fragments are combined, becoming the substitute symbols of Chinese civilization with a splendid historical and cultural tradition of 5,000 years under the function of metonymy.

It can be seen that in the sports event ceremony communication, once the single or combined symbols are connected with the country, they have the significance of the country. At this time, they become the substitute symbols of the country and represent a country or nation. With these symbols people’s emotion and collective memory of the country and nation can be effectively stimulated, and people’s imagination and recognition of the national community can be aroused.

V. MEMORY AND IMAGINATION: THE SYMBOLIC REALIZATION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE SPORTS EVENT CEREMONY COMMUNICATION

5.1 Collective Memory: Constructing the Symbolic Decoding Basis of National Identity

Why can’t the national flag symbol in sports events make an ignorant child have a sense of national identity associated with the flag? This is because children can only see the signifier of the national flag symbol, but for the deep signifier of the national flag, they are lack of associated memories which can lead to imagination. This kind of memory is not only personal, but also depends on the memory recalled and reconstructed by the group framework. It is a relatively fixed collective memory recognized by the group members and transmitted by the media. This kind of “root-seeking” collective memory caused by national symbols is like “connecting countless branches and leaves that have already branched to a common root, which not only gets the basis of mutual recognition, but also seems to find the source of strength” [22]. It can be said that collective memory is the national meaning of the symbols decoded by the worshippers participating in the ceremony, and it is also the premise and basis of the construction of national identity. On the contrary, “the lack or forgetting of collective memory will hinder the maintenance of identity between individuals and nations or countries, and impact the sense of identity of the nation and country [23].

In the sports event ceremony communication, national symbols can arouse people's collective memory, and then establish people's sense of national identity, belonging and loyalty, etc. First of all, to construct national identity, the first step is to establish the boundary of identity and answer the problem of "who am I", which is to strengthen and confirm the identity of "oneself" throee presentation of "others". Large-scale international sports events are country-to-country competitions, so the country names often appear together with sports events or athletes to indicate which country's team or athletes of which country are competing. For example, "Cuban Women's Volleyball Team", "Russian Swimming Team", "Chinese Women's Volleyball Team vs American Women's Volleyball Team", "Chinese Table Tennis Women's Team beat Japanese Women's Team at 3: 0" and so on. In addition, the media also highlights the existence of "others" by the means of describing "competitors" and reporting the evaluation and recognition of "other" to "us". These symbols including media discourse and competition pictures can effectively arouse people's collective memory of their country. In the competition with "others", the identity of "who am I" is strengthened and confirmed.

Secondly, if there is only the confirmation of identity, the national identity cannot be effectively triggered. To construct national identity, the emotional closeness and connection of individuals to the country are needed, and the recognition and praise of individuals to the country are needed. In sports events, there are many symbols that can arouse individuals' feelings towards the country, especially athletes' excellent performance and patriotic words which can effectively arouse people's feelings towards the country. For example, at the 2020 Tokyo Olympic Games, Gong Lijiao won the first gold medal of the Chinese delegation in the track and field events of the Olympic Games, and then she wore a national flag, gave thumbs up with both hands, and shouted "China is the best" in an almost hoarse voice. In an interview of the media, she said frankly, "Many people have asked me if I will retire, but I will definitely keep practicing until I can't practice as long as my motherland needs me." It was a sensational celebration and patriotic ceremony, and the audience's emotions were ignited. The evaluation of "yyds" (eternal god) spread on social media. At this moment, it evokes people's collective memory of the struggle history of sports in China, and even the struggle history of the country. Chinese athletes, Chinese people and China are closely linked under the psychological suggestion of "we are all Chinese". People are delighted that 'our country's people' won the gold medal, and their sense of pride arises spontaneously, which also evokes a sense of belonging and love for the motherland. Therefore, it can be said that the experience and emotion about the country contained in collective memory is a part of the foundation of national identity [24]. In addition, people's collective memory of the country is aroused and a sense of loyalty to the country is established through the behavior of the raising of national flag, the playing national anthem, the words of national leaders, the words and behaviors of athletes and coaches, and the words of the media. [25]. In a word, there are symbols connected with national meaning in the sports event ceremony communication. People decode the symbols by recalling collective memory, and then construct national identity.

5.2 Imaginary Community: The Symbolic Image Realization of Constructing National Identity

The object of national identity is the country, but "the country is invisible, it must be personified to see, symbolized to be loved, and imagined to be accepted by people" [26]. The concept of "imaginary

community” was put forward by Benedict Anderson, who thought that a nation or a country is an imaginary political community. That is to say, the country is constructed in the way of “imagination”. Here, imagination is not false and fabricated, but an “imaginative relationship”, including the relationship between individuals and nationalities or national attributes which is created by an imaginative way. The reason why a nation or a country is an “imaginary community” is: Even members of the smallest ethnic, it is impossible to meet, know or hear of most of their compatriots. However, their interconnected images live in the hearts of every member. In this kind of imagination, nationalism is close to statism, which is the main part of modern national identity. In *Imagined Community*, from the perspective of national emotion and cultural origin, Anderson pointed out that people’s cognition of the concept of nation has been continuously strengthened through various events [27]. In the history background of the times, Anderson thought that novels and newspapers provided technical means to reproduce the “imaginary community” of the nation or country. Nowadays, modern media technology is changing with each passing day and has the characteristics of immediacy of information sharing and wide range of dissemination, which provides a more favorable identity space for people who live in different regions, don’t know each other and have different cultural concepts.

“The construction of any national community needs a set of symbol system shared by most members (such as national flag, national anthem, national emblem, memorial days, etc.), which helps various interest groups in the community to reach a certain meaning agreement” [28]. There are a lot of symbols connected with the country in the sports event ceremony communication, which become the raw materials to evoke the collective memory of the people and promote the imagination of the national community. When expressing the indicating function, these national symbols “follow the principle of the general symbol use process, that is, perform according to the order of ‘expression → communication → reception → explanation’. In this process, every link is expressed in the form of symbols, and what the communicator and receiver ‘express’ and ‘explain’ is the indication hidden behind the symbols” [29]. The sports event ceremony communication provides a symbolic space for the audience. The names of sports events (such as Beijing Winter Olympics), the host place, event process, athletes, national flag, national anthem and other symbols that can replace the country are continuously presented by the media, and even the symbols such as human geography, landscape and culture of the host place appear. The ceremony worshippers retrieve and apply the existing collective memories of history, culture, ethnic groups, etc., so that the reference of national symbols in the sports event ceremony communication is anchored as “identity, collectivity, nation and country”, and they also complete the spiritual image of “imaginary community” at the same time. In a word, in the sports event ceremony communication, the symbiosis of collective memory caused by national symbols and imagination of national community has become an important logic for constructing national identity.

VI. CONCLUSION

Ceremony communication is a classical theory of communication, which can provide another paradigm for us to research the communication of sports events. Sports event ceremony communication is a symbolic construction process, which is mixed with many symbolic tokens. These symbols are connected

with the nation and the country through the function of metonymy. These symbols can arouse people's collective memory and imagination of the national community, thus completing the symbol construction of national identity. Therefore, , how to create media ceremonies, tap symbolic resources, promote the production and reproduction of collective memory, and stimulate people's emotional integration in the communication of sports events have become the key contents of constructing national identity in the sports event ceremony communication.

At present, the construction of national identity is one of the core tasks after China enters a new era, and it ranks first among the "five identities" of "building a strong sense of the Chinese nation community". China has set off a climax of hosting world-class sports events since the beginning of the 21st century. It has become an important means in national construction to make use of sports celebrations such as Beijing Winter Olympics, Hangzhou Asian Games and World Club Cup to promote national identity and show the national image in the new era. Therefore, in order to open up of sports event and the research paradigm of national identity and promote the construction of national identity in China, it is of great significance to clarify the symbolic mechanism of sports event ceremony communication to construct national identity from the theoretical level.

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