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Fiction as reality: Chinese youths watching American television



Yang Gao

School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University, 90 Stamford Road, Level 4, Singapore 178903, Singapore

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ABSTRACT

American television fiction is gaining traction among educated urban Chinese youths. Drawing on 29 interviews with fans among college students in Beijing, this article examines a shared perception among these youths that American television is “real.” This perceived realism, which is essential to their viewing pleasure, has two sources: American programming’s textual quality and the Chinese context in which it is consumed. First, US television appeals to Chinese youths because they perceive its topical content and complex characterization as true to life. This perception can be explained by the higher transnational cultural capital of these youths, which renders US programming intellectually more proximate and relevant than domestic programming. Second, the perceived realism must be understood within the socio-cultural context of contemporary urban China. Disillusioned with the largely lackluster domestic television content, and critical of state media regulation and cultural control, Chinese youngsters embrace US television’s relative openness and narrative complexity as more “real.” This study attends to the textual, contextual, as well as emotional aspects of the Chinese fascination with American television. It contributes to the literature on cross-cultural media consumption by demonstrating how perceived realism is both organized by media texts and shaped by consumption contexts.

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1. Introduction

In the last decade, American television fiction (hereafter US TV) has been gaining popularity in China, particularly among educated urban youths.¹ Although almost none of those US shows have been broadcast on Chinese television, some of the more avid and technologically savvy fans have taken matters into their own hands by volunteering to subtitle and upload a wide collection of series so that others can access the content for free on the Internet (French, 2006; Langfitt, 2013, 2014; Sydell, 2008). Given the rapid growth and improvement of China’s domestically produced television fiction since the mid-1990s (Keane, 1999; Zhu, Keane, and Bai, 2008), the rising enthusiasm for US TV curiously defies the logic of cultural proximity, which predicts audience preferences for national or regional media content to that of foreign origins (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007). Why, then, do so many young Chinese actively seek out US TV?

American programming enjoys unparalleled international viewership largely because audiences around the world find it enjoyable. After all, “nobody is forced to watch television; at most, people can be led to it by effective advertising” (Ang,

E-mail address: yanggao@smu.edu.sg.

¹ My study subjects are well-educated Chinese urbanites born in the 1980s. In this analysis I generally refer to this group as “young Chinese urban elites,” or, for simplicity’s sake, as “Chinese youths.” I describe this group in more details in Section 3 (“China’s elite youths and their affinity for foreign media”).

1985: 9). In the Chinese case, there is not even advertising. In fact, since American shows are absent from Chinese TV screens, fans need to go to extra lengths to get shows from the Internet, to be willing and able to consume content in a foreign language, and even this would not be possible without the subtitle translation and web maintenance volunteered by the linguistically and technologically more capable devotees.² Given the linguistic barriers and technical difficulties involved, what is so enjoyable and compelling about US TV that keeps the Chinese fans coming back for more? To what extent does US TV's appeal have to do with the Chinese context? The dearth of academic inquiry into these questions is surprising, given the deluge of journalistic reports about the Chinese enthusiasm for US TV, and given the surge of scholarly attention to cross-cultural media consumption in other national contexts (Ang, 1985; Havens, 2000, 2001; Iwabuchi, 2002; Kim, 2005; Kuipers & de Kloet, 2009; Liebes & Katz, 1990). And yet, these are critical questions to address before we can further understand the ways global media may inform youths' lived experiences in China and the broader socio-political implications of international media flows.

This article explores the pleasure of watching US TV in a Chinese context. Based on interviews with 29 university students in Beijing who regularly watch US shows, I analyze both the textual features of those shows and the contextual characteristics of the Chinese society that the students identify in accounting for their fondness of US TV. In particular, I focus on how the textual and contextual factors work in tandem to bring about an intriguing perception shared by all of my respondents despite their otherwise various reasons for watching and liking US TV, namely, the "realness" of US programming.

In what follows, I first review perceived realism as a central theme in cross-cultural reception literature, focusing on the term's intertwinement with concepts of cultural proximity and cultural capital in illuminating the ways in which audiences engage media content of different origins. Next, I describe the population of interest to my study and the socio-historical context of US TV's growing popularity among this population. After describing my study methods, I report my findings regarding the two textual qualities of US TV to which my respondents attribute its "realness." In discussing each quality, I attend to the textual, contextual, as well as emotional aspects of the realism perception among the respondents. I argue that this perceived realism and its ensuing pleasure are not simply functions of certain textual traits of US TV, nor are they merely wishful, personal constructions. Rather, the Chinese fascination and engagement with US TV must be understood within a particular context formed by both the immediate socio-cultural milieu my respondents inhabit and the broader Chinese culture they grew up in. More specifically, I will show that the "realness" stems from an *interactivity* – an interpretive and contextualized relation between US TV as an object (one that is relatively complex and sophisticated in its storytelling) and Chinese youths as subjects (readers with an emergent ability to interpret, appreciate, and critique culture). I conclude by highlighting and qualifying my findings within the Chinese context as well as suggesting their implications for understanding cross-cultural media consumption.

2. Perceived realism, cultural proximity, and the audience's critical ability in cross-cultural television consumption

Realism is key to the popular esthetics of television. Studies have found that while audiences are able to take different readings of the same media text, they share a preference for mediated messages and images that they deem to be "real" (Livingstone, 1998; Press, 1991; Shively, 1992). Cross-cultural television reception is also characterized by gravitation toward realism. On the one hand, a number of studies have found the viewers citing realism as a key reason for preferring domestic programs to foreign (especially American) ones (Biltereyst, 1991; Dhoest, 2007; Griffiths, 1995; Livingstone, 1988; Strelitz, 2002). On the other hand, research has shown that the immense global success of US programming at least partly lies in its superb textual strategies in concocting a sense of reality among culturally distinct viewers (Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1990). To the extent that "popular pleasure is first and foremost a pleasure of recognition" (Ang, 1985: 20), perceived realism is indispensable to the pleasure of watching TV.

Given that any reasonable contemporary viewer is well aware of the fictional nature of television drama, media scholars have made repeated attempts to understand what exactly audiences mean by claiming that certain programming is or feels "real." At least ten dimensions of perceived realism have since been labeled. Ranging from general to specific and dealing with a variety of referents such as settings, emotions, behaviors, and events, these sometimes redundant and/or inconsistent conceptualizations have done more to expand than to explicate perceived realism (Busselle & Greenberg, 2000; Hall, 2003).

Perceived realism is more elusive and harder to pinpoint when cross-cultural media reception is involved. In the studies mentioned above, for instance, the audiences speak of domestically produced dramas as more "real" or "realistic" than American ones in terms of the former's more familiar circumstances, compatible values, and relatable characters. Such conceptualization of realism in terms of the recognizability or familiarity of history, locations, and situations echoes the theory of cultural proximity. The idea is intuitive: people gravitate toward media products from their own culture or cultures that are close to their own because of supposedly greater cultural resonance or compatibility (Straubhaar, 1991, 2007). But cultural proximity is not to be treated as a monolithic principle hinged only on geographical distance. Rather, the diverse historical contexts and internal differences of particular cultures indicate that the distance from media products can be cultural, social, or demographic, as well as geographical (Kuipers & de Kloet, 2009), i.e., cultural proximity exists at multiple

² Several major Chinese Internet portals have begun importing licensed US TV content since 2010 (Beattie, 2013). However, at the time of my data collection, consumption of US TV in China relied on pirated sources.

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