

How young, educated urban Chinese people relate to US television shows

January 14 2016, by Grace Chua

Hollywood, it is often said, is global pop culture: In this day and age, American television shows are accessible online nearly all over the world, entertaining millions with Walter White's transition from a family man to ruthless criminal on *Breaking Bad*, and with epic dynastic feuds and mythical lore on the *Games of Thrones*.

Growing up as a student in China, Assistant Professor of Sociology Gao Yang of the Singapore Management University (SMU) School of Social Sciences recalls watching English-language TV shows like *Friends* to brush up on her English.

"We also watched *Sex and the City*—it was a bit heretical because of its racy sexual content," she laughs. "I spent a lot of time debating with my friends about different ways of interpreting foreign TV series, but despite our different understandings, we all loved these shows. We couldn't really articulate why and how, but we felt some of those foreign shows were more engaging and more relatable."

Some years later, she discovered a sizeable online community of urban Chinese youths who are fans of American [television shows](#). Professor Gao, who was then pursuing a PhD degree at Vanderbilt University in the US, decided to explore why and how young urban Chinese engage with American fictional television shows.

"The more traditional academic framework for understanding media consumption viewed popular-media consumers as passive, brainwashed

and inarticulate," she shares. "But of course none of those agreed with my own experience as a fan of popular culture. [Reading contemporary cultural studies literature] showed me that media consumers were more creative and critical than traditionally portrayed."

Authenticity on the small screen

Over the course of half a year, Professor Gao interviewed 29 university students in Beijing in depth about their TV-watching habits, garnering 800 pages of transcribed interviews. A paper on her studies, outlining how the authenticity of storytelling and characterisation appealed to audiences, was published in 2015 in the journal *Poetics*.

During her field research, one word kept cropping up over and over unexpectedly: *zhenshi*, or 'authenticity'. Professor Gao explains that these savvy youngsters were not, of course, saying they believed that US shows actually represented American reality. Rather, they found certain features in the stories told on US TV to be authentic and relatable, especially when compared to Chinese television.

Timeliness was one. For instance, characters from the TV series *Boston Legal* discussed the 2008 US Presidential election in an episode that aired on the eve of Election Day. Another was the multi-dimensional, complex characterisation of the characters in TV shows. One student mentioned Tony Soprano, the central mobster figure of *The Sopranos*, as "at once a son, a husband, a father, a businessman, an animal lover, and a middle-aged man with multiple weaknesses. Each comes across as so real!"

American TV shows, youths felt, were more willing to wade into uncomfortable, controversial territory. For example, one said of the counter-terrorism drama *24* that its politics and scandals, "all those ugly things laid bare right in front of you, warts and all", moved him to think

more critically about democracy and freedom. In contrast, Chinese television shows often tended to be more whitewashed or overtly moralistic, Professor Gao notes. "For many Chinese students, the more resonant and engaging storytelling of US TV is a welcome alternative to the bland or didactic Chinese TV."

The search for 'existential authenticity'

Most of the youngsters Professor Gao spoke to were part of the first generation of single children born in the 1980s, under China's one-child policy. As the offspring of relatively well-off, well-educated urban families, they shoulder a "tremendous amount of pressure from very high expectations of academic and professional achievement," she says. "These kids are growing up trying to explore their identity, trying to figure out who they are. They need role models, they need guidance, they need cautionary tales."

Where Chinese TV drama is bland or preachy, American TV invites youths to think about current issues and explore who they are—what Gao terms 'existential authenticity', or being true to yourself.

For instance, one student spoke about the caustic title character on the medical drama *House*, who marches to the beat of his own drum. "I think Americans emphasise 'self' whereas the Chinese emphasise 'relationship'... Everyone in that culture understands and agrees that one is free to proceed with his life in the way he pleases. But for the Chinese, it's so easy to do something inappropriately. We get bogged down with so many worries and concerns even when doing something simple. An American wouldn't sweat that much; his 'self' comes first."

Based on the same field data, Professor Gao discusses her interviewees' perception and embrace of such "existential authenticity" in her article "Inventing the 'Authentic' Self: American Television and Chinese

Audiences in Global Beijing", which has been accepted for publication in a forthcoming issue of the journal Media, Culture and Society.

Strategic consumers of American TV

By providing a glimpse into American social dynamics, these shows also help Chinese youths think about important relationships in their lives such as relationships with parents and friends, says Professor Gao. American shows also force them to think critically about the stereotypical representations of Asians as awkward and geeky, or of Chinese food as cheap, unhealthy takeout.

Professor Gao hopes to mine the same rich data for further insights, and to go back to Beijing to collect more data, with the aim of eventually publishing a book based on her research. "These are strategic consumers. They're using novel symbolic materials on foreign television to deal with the uncertainties they face in a radically transforming China."

More information: Yang Gao. Fiction as reality: Chinese youths watching American television, *Poetics* (2015). [DOI: 10.1016/j.poetic.2015.08.005](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2015.08.005)

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