Cultural Representation through Television Entertainment Programs:  
A Comparative Study on American and Chinese Versions of “Sex and the City.”

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ABSTRACT  
The American television series “Sex and the City” has become a global phenomenon. Not only has the program been exported to foreign countries but it also serves as a genre to generate new television shows to portray white-collar female’s love lives in other countries. For example, there are several Chinese versions of “Sex and the City” produced by Mainland China (“Down to Love,” “好想好想談戀愛” and “欲望都市: 女人行”), and Taiwan (“淑女日记/熟女欲望日记”). In all these Chinese versions, four main female characters are created to be similar to those in the American show “Sex and City,” i.e., white collar, beautiful, single, middle class, and looking for love. Moreover, the composition of the personalities and occupations in the group of four is similar to the four characters in “Sex and the City,” Carrie Bradshaw, Samantha Jones, Miranda Hobbs, and Charlotte McDougal. However, the motivations of dating, the relationships and conflicts with boy friends, the friendship among girlfriends, and the rhetorical reasoning and discourse in the Chinese versions are quite different from those in the original American show. There are even differences between the Mainlanders and Taiwanese. Based on the theories of cultural studies this paper employs textual analysis to examine cultural representations and signifying practices of television entertainment programs. The data are interpreted by taking into account the cultural and social factors to explain the similarities of and differences among those shows.

INTRODUCTION  
This paper examines the interactive relationships between mass communication, culture, and society. John Fiske (1987) explains the relationship between television and culture. Culture is the generation and circulation of meanings and pleasures within a society; and television is a bearer and provocer of meanings and pleasures in that society (Fiske, 1987). In the process of cultural interactions, “meanings, consequently, will always change, from one culture or period to another” (Hall, 1997, p. 61). Facilitated by media technologies, the cultural globalization process has not only been transforming contemporary Mainland Chinese society but also attracted the attention of global communication scholars and practitioners to the cultural changes in China.

The Development of Cultural Studies in Mass Communication  
The approach to cultural studies in mass communication is relatively younger than traditional mass media studies in the United States. Since the inception of commercial radio in the early 20th century, the mass media scholarship has been dominated by causal-effects studies, reflecting “the transmission view of communication” to analyze the relationship of mass media, audience, and society. James Carey (1989) points out, the transmission view of communication “is defined by terms such as ‘imparting,’ ‘sending,’ ‘transmitting,’ or ‘giving information to others.’ … The center of this idea of communication is the transmission of signals or messages
over distance for the purpose of control” (p. 15). In the late 1960s and early 1970s, due to the findings about the causal-effect relationship between tobacco uses and the lung cancer, the Surgeon General in the United States launched a national research project to examine the effects of televised violence and sexual content on children’s aggressive and anti-social behavior. Unfortunately, the $1,000,000.00 project could not find the direct causal relationship between television viewing and children’s aggressive behavior. Therefore, there was a paradigm shift in American media studies starting in the late 1970s, from structural-functional perspectives, uses and gratifications, to cognitive and interpretive analysis. Carey (1989) and other communication scholars (e.g., Fiske, 1987; Hall, 1980; Newcomb & Hirsch, 1994; Real, 1996) strongly advocate that the transmission view as an extension of behaviorism and functionalism practiced in mass media studies has exhausted. Instead, based on the pragmatism perspectives by John Dewey (1916), and interactionism perspectives by Charles H. Cooley (1902), George H. Mead (1934), and social constructivism by Kenneth Burke (1945), Peter Berger (1966), and Clifford Geertz (1973), Carey (1989) emphasizes the ritual view of communication. The ritual view links communication to the concepts, such as “sharing,” “participation,” “fellowship,” and “community,” and “the possession of a common faith.” Carey (1989) claims, “[mass] communication is a symbolic process whereby social reality is created, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (p. 23).

THE THEORIES DEVELOPED FOR CULTURAL STUDIES

Newcomb and Hirsch (1994) further define mass media as a cultural forum where popular culture raises questions and introduces audiences to the discussion of social problems. The cultural forum bridges “a concern for television as a communications medium, central to contemporary society, and television as an aesthetic object, the expressive medium that, through its storytelling functions, unites and examines a culture” (Newcomb & Hirsch, 1994, p. 503).

Stuart Hall (1980) argues about the encoding and decoding processes in the television discourse. He suggests that audiences are actively participating in the process of creating meanings when viewing media content. There are three positions in audience’s readings of media messages: dominant ideology, negotiation, and opposition (Hall, 1980).

Semiotics studies how signs and symbols are used to address meanings of human communication. The main concepts of semiotics are described by Seiter (1992) as follows,

Semiotics is the study of everything that can be used for communication: words, images, traffic signs, flowers, music, medical symptoms, and much more.
Semiotics studies the way such ‘signs’ communicate and the rules that govern their use …Semiotic first asks how meaning is created, rather than what the meaning is. (p. 31)

Communication process is the process of sign production, and is related to culture. Seiter writes, "All signs are cultural constructs that have taken on meaning through repeated, learned, collective use" (p. 34). Therefore, “The convention of the sign system controls the way we are able to communicate (that is, produce signifiers) and limits the range of meaning available (that
is, what kinds of signified can be produced)” (p. 35). Seiter (1992) further introduces the concepts of paradigm and syntagm in the process of constructing meanings in media production, “A syntagm is an ordering of signs, a rule-governed combination of signs in a determined sequence....A paradigm is a group of signs so similar that they may be substituted for one another in a syntagm” (p. 46). Paradigmatic analysis pays attention to the selection of signs that creates “a hidden pattern of oppositions that are buried in it and that generate meanings… The structured relationships among the characters and what these relationships ultimately mean should be the focus, not the way a story is told” (Berger, 2004, p.24). Syntagmatic analysis examines the narrative sequences of a story or the editing techniques of a video, which, “regardless of kind or genre, are composed of certain functions (or elements) that are essential for the creation of a story” (p.19).

Barthes (1972) also articulates semiotics to cultural contexts, emphasizing denotation and connotation of meanings. Seiter (1992) explains “In image, denotation is the first level of signification: the signifier is the image itself and the signified is the idea or concept” (p. 39). Connotation is the second-order signifying system that links signs to broader cultural themes, concepts or meanings (Barthes, 1972; Hall, 1997; Seiter, 1992). Connotation requires decoding the meaning of a signifier by linking it to wider cultural concepts.

Hall (1997) claims that communication processes are involved in the procedure of sign production, in which we use a representational system (concepts and signs) to construct cultural meanings. He indicates the function of a language system in human communication and defines the relationship between the material world and the symbolic practices and processes. He writes,

It is not the material world which conveys meaning: it is the language system or whatever system we are using to represent our concepts. It is social actors who use the conceptual systems of their culture and the linguistic and other representational systems to construct meaning, to make the world meaningful and to communicate about that world meaningfully to others. (Hall, 1997, p. 25)

Constructivism emphasizes the signifying process of signs, i.e., the coding system that depends on “two different but related systems of representation” (Hall, 1997, p.28). They are: (a) a system of mental representation, which forms concepts in human minds; and (b) a language that consists of signs organized into various relationships (p. 28). More importantly, these codes do not exist in nature, but are socially created and conventionalized through human communication. Hall (1997) points out that these codes, thus, “became a crucial part of our culture – our shared ‘maps of meaning’ – which we learn and unconsciously internalized as we become members of our culture” (p. 29).

Intertextuality and Genre

With regards to meanings, Fiske (1987) suggests applying the theory of intertextuality. It postulates, “Any one text is necessarily read in relationship to others, and that a range of textual knowledge is brought to bear upon it...Intertextuality exists rather in the space between texts” (p. 108). There are two dimensions of intertextuality, horizontal and vertical (Fiske, 1987). The horizontal intertextuality means “those between primary texts that are more or less explicitly
linked, usually along the axes of genre, character, or content," while vertical intertextuality refers to three levels of texts, i.e., primary texts, secondary texts, and tertiary texts. Primary texts are original television programs. Secondary texts “play a significant role in influencing which of television's meanings may be activated in any one reading,” such as studio press releases, commentary, critiques, promotions, advertisements on newspapers, magazines, radio, fashions, TV stations, and so on; Tertiary texts "are the final, crucial stage of this circulation, for they occur at the level of the viewer and his/her social relations" (Fiske, 1987, p.117).

Genre is a formula of the structural dimension in television or movie production. It is “a cultural practice that attempts to structure some order into the wide range of texts and meanings that circulate in our culture for the convenience of both producer and audience” (p.109). Genre presents a “triangular relationship between producer, text, and audience” (p. 110), which makes a television or movie text intertextually meaningful to audiences, such as “Seinfeld,” “Friends,” and “Will and Grace.”

METHODS: TEXTUAL ANALYSIS

Based on Semiotics, text is defined broadly. All the media products can be seen as texts, such as paintings, television shows, music, movies, radio shows, video games, and sports. Textual analysis is a qualitative approach to analyzing media content. It does not solely analyze the frequencies of sign occurrences. Instead, more importantly, it examines the signs that are chosen (paradigm) and assembled (syntagm) in the media product, and interprets the meanings of those signs by articulating them with the contexts in which they are chosen and assembled in certain way (Real, 1996).

Raymond (1976) claims that culture is a whole way of life. Maslow (1954) discusses human needs, from physiological needs, safety/security, social relationships (belongingness and love), self esteem (competent, gaining approval and recognition) to self realization. There are many dimensions in culture (Hall, 1997), such as life styles (food, fashion, dress, habits, etc.), social relationships (interpersonal, family, friendship, group affiliation, public, politics gender, etc.) and identity, communication styles, languages, shared values, beliefs, behavior, and attitudes, and so on. Everything presented in the media product is culturally meaningful.

Based on the theories of cultural studies, this paper examines cultural representations through television entertainment programs. The popular American show “Sex and the City,” the Emmy Award and Golden Globe Award winner, and its counterparties, several Chinese versions of “Sex and the City” produced by Mainland China ("好想好想谈恋爱" and “欲望都市：女人行”), and Taiwan ("淑女日记/熟女欲望日记"), are selected for the analysis. In all these Chinese versions, four main female characters are created similarly to those in the American show “Sex and the City,” i.e., white collar, beautiful, single, middle class, and looking for love. Moreover, their personalities and occupations are similar to the four characters in “Sex and the City,” Carrie Bradshaw, Samantha Jones, Miranda Hobbs, and Charlotte York. However, how are these white collar and sexy Chinese females portrayed in the Chinese shows that would appeal to their audiences who could be able to relate to, or identify with, those television characters? What are the similarities of, and differences among, these shows? The cultural attributes examined through textual analysis in this paper are focused on the signs that represent
romantic/sexual, gender, and family relationships, such as, motivations of dating, sexual attitude and behavior, relationships and conflicts with boy friends, friendships among girlfriends, and the rhetorical reasoning and discourses behind those relationships.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Brief Description of Each Show

**Sex and the City** (American television series on HBO, seven seasons from 1998 to 2004, and a total of 94 episodes)
Carrie Bradshaw was a journalist who wrote about sex lives in Manhattan for a popular New York Star column, “Sex and the City,” and published a book with the same title. Charlotte York was an art dealer who believed playing by rules would be the best way to get an ideal man for her marriage. Samantha Jones was a public relations executive who insisted that women should have sex like men. Miranda Hobbes was a corporate lawyer who was bothered by the lack of femininity perceived by men, and struggled with falling in love with a bartender who was below her socio-economic standard. These four were good friends meeting frequently in various restaurants and going to parties in Manhattan, and liked drinking, dating, having sex, shopping, and talking about their personal problems. They debated a variety of hot topics: sex preference and performance, marriage, divorce, pregnancy, honesty, identity, power in relationship, breast cancer, etc. However, no matter the differences they might have, they always supported each other.

**好想好想談戀愛** (Chinese DVD, made in Mainland China, 2004, 32 episodes)
谭艾琳 (Tan Ailing), 黎明朗 (Li Minglang), 毛纳 (Mao Na), and 陶春 (Tao Chun) were close friends. They were all in their thirties with a desirable job in a Chinese metropolis. However, they were single and had troubled handling a healthy romantic relationship. They were all struggling in the romantic arena. How to find happiness was an essential problem with the contemporary women. The opening question for the show was “Are we looking for love, or is love looking for us?” Tan Ailing (谭艾琳) owned a book-cafe where she facilitated meetings and club activities. She was pretty and smart, and loved writing. She used her romantic vision to screen men in the city in order to find the right man. She found one who caught her heart. However, was he the right man for Tan Ailing? Li Minglang (黎明朗) was an excellent television producer. She is a strong minded woman and feminist, stubborn, eloquent, and critical. She lacked femininity and believed that she failed as woman. On one occasion she fell in love with a handsome DJ in a bar. Not only was he not the person she deserved, but also he ended up stealing the music recording facilities from the television station to which Li recommended him. Mao Na (毛纳) was a successful stylist who loved the upper-class life styles and glamorous social activities. She was sexy and enjoyed dating and sexual relationships but did not believe the existence of true romantic love. Was Mao Na desired by all her men forever? Tao Chun (陶春) was a computer software designer. She was an idealist and “traditional romantic-oriented” girl. Her life goal was to get married, have children; her husband should be handsome, rich, and have an upper-class status. She exhausted herself trying to reach her goal, and finally got married to a perfect man. Was Tao Chun happy with her married life?
Four ladies living in the largest Chinese metropolis, Shanghai, were brought together by a man who cheated on them emotionally and whose behavior was disgusting. They were struggling to find true love. Their bitter/sweet lives were full of problems with dating, sex, marriage, romantic relationship and friendship, family relationship, and social pressures. Su Yafei (苏亚菲) was an owner of a lamp store, who was graceful and artistic. She sold the lamps she designed herself. Li Minmei (李明媚) was a toy designer who was creative and smart but sometimes showed her childish side abruptly. Xiao Lu (肖鹿) was a PR officer in a joint-venture company. She was an idealist regarding romantic relationships, and sometimes paid attention to trivial things. Ming Duo (闵多) was a perfume spoke person. She was sexy and desired by men. However, she dismayed men because she believed that all the men were sexually aggressive.

Succinct Analysis

The syntagmatic feature of those shows was to visualize/verbalize sexual acts and feelings in contemporary women’s daily life. However, the presentation was in a way of social discussion rather than pornography. The essential elements in those shows were set up by “Sex and the City.” There are eight elements: 1. a metropolitan area; 2. a group of white-collar, single females, in their late twenties and early thirties, beautiful and interested in a romantic relationship; 3. they are different in personalities, motivations for dating, and sexual desires, but they trust each other; 4. meeting a man in a public sphere; 5. dating the man and having a sexual relationship; 6. having problems with him; 7. breaking-up; 8. looking for a new relationship.

The camera shoots: the friends were often meeting in the city, in wide shots of a restaurant, bar, shopping center, or party, and sometimes in one’s apartment, to highlight the discussion on sexual experiences (good or bad) and issues; Medium shots to depict each one’s
sexual/romantic relationship(s), and close-ups to illustrate feelings and emotions of the characters struggling (happy or hurt) with the relationships. The sequences were either starting with the group meeting and then individual activities, or vice versa. Parallel plots, showing the ups and downs of love lives, went throughout the show. Two-four parallel plots were intertwined in each episode to discuss a special sex or love issue. It provided options and compromises, however, there was never a solution achieved or a direction indicated to find a solution. On the other hand, non-solution might be a way to continuously attract a wide range of viewers.

There was either a subtitle for each episode that indicated the topic/issue discussed, or a theme presented in the episode. There was a narrator playing multiple roles, announcer, moderator, commentator, critic, and consultant. Music was used to enhance the expression of a character’s internal struggle or non-verbal conflicts arising due to the relationship.

Sex and the City

The opening scene in “Sex and the City” showed the image of the Chrysler building, the Brooklyn Bridge in the Lower Manhattan, Twin Towers, Carrie’s medium and close-up shots of her walking on the street, bumper-to-bumper cars on the street, a yellow car splashing the street water on Carrie, and a bus with a picture of Carrie in a sexy dress and the title “Sex and the City” (Sadler & Haskins, 2005). The opening scene and theme music was signifying the busy life of the characters living in New York City, and it was played at the beginning of every episode. Sadler and Haskins interpret that “internally, the characters might have problems, but the city with its boutiques and restaurants is always there to comfort them” (p.209).

Carrie, as a magazine columnist and book writer, was the story teller. Viewers could either see her type on the computer screen or hear her voice telling what was going on. The ending was rolling credits over a black background with the theme music to make the viewers ponder about what just happened to the girls’ sex lives.

The endless contests were between the motivations of the characters and their partners: Carrie (seeking true love) and Mr. Big (her long time boyfriend), Miranda (struggling between sex, love, and family) and Steve (her child’s dad), Sam (looking for sex and money) and Smith (a former waiter, and later, a celebrity created by Sam), and Charlotte (focusing on marriage and child) and Harry (her divorce lawyer and the second husband). There were two sequel movies “Sex and the City” (2008) and “Sex and the City 2” (2010) to continue the relationship between Carrie and Mr. Big. However, while the television shows received the rating 7.1/10 by 17,910 votes, the movie got 5.4/10 by 44,493 voters (IMdb, the Internet Movie database, http://www.imdb.com/).
The Opening of “好想好想谈恋爱”

The video show “好想好想谈恋爱” was produced based on a book and adopted the book title. In “好想好想谈恋爱” the opening showed each character’s MCU (medium close up) image on the screen sequentially, and then two columns of small pictures on the left side (one with still color pictures and the other with moving black/white pictures). The third, the red color title “好想好想谈恋爱” appeared on the top of the right side screen, and finally, on the bottom of the right side of the screen were playing the clips in which these characters were struggling and having conflicts with their boyfriends, referring to the pictures above. The images used under the ending credits were matching with the opening scene, full of the characters’ surprise, anger, confusion, and struggles.

In addition to the opening, there was a meaningful lead-in phrase or subtitle for each episode. For example, the first episode started with the question “Are we looking for love, or is love looking for us?” In the second episode, it started with Tan Ailing’s comments on the conflicts between married women and single women. She said, “Those married women believe unmarried women were their biggest threat to their marriages.”

谭艾琳 (Tan Ailing), an owner of a book-cafe, was the main narrator with her voice throughout the show. Moreover, her three friends also narrated time by time over their own stories and commented on their friends’ experiences. The meeting location was often in Tan Ailing’s book-cafe. The parallel plots were developed to follow each character’s problems. Similar to Carrie, Tan Ailing was trapped in a relationship with Mr. Wu Yuefong, the Chinese Mr. Big. Mr. Wu married and divorced twice. He was attracted to Tan Ailing and dated her before, during, and after his second marriage but he had never proposed to Tan Ailing. She finally left him for good. 黎明朗 (Li Minglang) appreciated friendships with male friends while looking for romantic relationships with boyfriends. She was confused about the purpose of dating for marriage, so she was continuously looking for the answer. 毛纳 (Mao Na), who enjoyed dating and sex but did not believe in true love, was finally getting married to a small restaurant owner in a small town in southern China. 陶春 (Tao Chun) found an ideal husband but her dream family life was destroyed by her husband’s infertility. She was going to divorce him but changed her mind at the last minute before moving out the apartment. She decided to adopt a child instead because her husband was her true love.

欲望都市: 女人行

The opening scene of “欲望都市: 女人行” was an integration of the characters and the city, shown below on the left. The first episode started with a montage of snapshots showing the characters’ experiences in the city, Shanghai. The city was part of the themes. Some landmarks shot from various angles were portrayed in the opening, such as the night scenery of
Pudong Lujiazhi and Waitan, the Rotating Restaurant, the Under-River-Tunnel, and the Eastern Pearl Television Tower.

The characters met in various locations of Shanghai, the new area in Pudong, and the old area in Waitan, and there were often scenes of the four girls walking on streets. The ending video with credits included the flashback of individual moments. Although the video reminded viewers those girls’ sad and hurting experiences, the episodes ended with a scene in which the four friends were toasting red wine and supporting with each other, referring to the pictures below.

Moreover, there were production features different from other shows. Li Minmei (李明媚), a toy designer, was the narrator. The presentation used the story-telling format more often than others. Therefore, each character was a story teller. Their voices were over flashback videos or drawing pictures, such as character biographies presented in the first two episodes, the fantasy stories told in the last episode “Spending Valentine’s Day without a Lover.” Music was used more often than other shows to create the moods and deliver the meanings. Similar to Li Minmei’s personality, this show bring viewers back and forth between the real and fantasy worlds to portray the characters’ love lives.

The Opening of “淑女日记”
The title of “淑女日记” translated to English means the “Diary of Single Women.”
Yet, it was ironic that the term “淑女” sounds the same as “熟女” but their meanings are
entirely opposite. The term “淑女” means a “traditional girl” while “熟女” means a
“mature woman.” The title shown on the opening scene was “淑女日记” but its advertising
and promotion changed the title to “熟女欲望日记” that means the “Diary of Single
Women's Sexual Desire.” The opening video depicted the mature girls' sexuality, wearing sexy
dresses, and dancing with various gestures. A similar mood was displayed in the ending video,
the girls wandering on the street or sitting in the park with smiling faces.
In the first two episodes of “淑女日记,” the single women talked very explicitly about
sexual activities and experiences, and their sexual dreams. The images and language were
overtly graphic, some of which were not less than those in “Sex and the City.” For example,
Arpan used a crispy cucumber as a metaphor to allure her chef to having sex with her on the
kitchen table while her girl friends were waiting for dessert in the dining area, and she picked up
sex tools from the night stand drawer when her mother came to stay in her apartment; Meiqin,
the only virgin in the group, described the details how she stopped a sexual encounter in her bed.
Therefore, it would not shock the viewers that anything could happen in following episodes.
However, there was no nudity in “淑女日记” and there were less lovemaking scenes or
extraordinary sexual activities as those in “Sex and the City.”

As Carrie, 艾莲 (Ailian), the book-editor, was the narrator. Although there was no
subtitle for each episode, the group meeting was often focused on a special theme/topic that was
reflected in the characters’ relationships. The visual sequences portrayed the four girls’ different
quests for love: 艾莲 (Ailian) for true and stable love, 阿潘 (Arpan) for sex and money, 杨念
(Yang Nian) for respect and to be in control, 美琴 (Meiqin) for pure and reliable love. Through
the twisted romantic games, by the end of the show every girl found a man whose love she truly
accepted. However, there had been no final resolution yet, such as marriage or engagement.

Paradigmatic Analysis

Selection of Location
As described above, all the shows indicated the locations in metropolitan areas. “Sex and
the City” showed the image of New York City, such as the Chrysler building, the Brooklyn
Bridge and Twin Towers. The City was part of the show’s theme and depicted the hidden
patterns of opposition, such as rich and poor, advantaged and disadvantaged, sexual freedom and
conservatives, various religions and racial/ethnic origins, etc.

Similar to New York City in “Sex and the City,” the clear signs of Shanghai were
portrayed in the show “欲望都市: 女人行,” such as Pudong, Nanjing Road Waitan, boating
tour in Wangpu river, the Under-River-Tunnel between Pudong and Shanghai, and various
restaurants and streets. Shanghai was called the “The World of Adventurers.” The location made
the viewers believe that everything happening in Shanghai was possible. In “好想好想談戀
愛” the opening did not emphasize the location although the scenes revealed the location in
Beijing. Most of the scenes were located indoor, and the outdoor scenes used were busy streets
with bumper-to-bumper cars and crowded with pedestrians, just as backdrops instead of
emphasizing the identity of the city, Beijing. It seemed that the producer might not think the
identity of Beijing would be compatible with the sexual themes of the show. Therefore, the show actually could be entitled as “Sex in the City,” rather than “Sex and the City.”

The stories of “淑女日记” happened in Taipei, the largest metropolitan area in Taiwan. However, there were no representative icons shown in the show. Instead, the “Sassy Girl” restaurant owned by Arpan and various parks were the gathering locations. Those were not fancy places. Similar to “好想好想谈恋爱,” the show was focused on the sex lives of the white-collar women rather than the city.

The Creation of Characters
In Table 1, the Characters in each show were listed parallel with “Sex and the City.” It may demonstrate some commonalities among the characters in each category, such as Carrie and Chinese “Carries.”

Table 1: Comparison of Characters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex and the City</th>
<th>好想好想谈恋爱</th>
<th>欲望都市:女人行</th>
<th>淑女日记</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Carrie</td>
<td>谭艾琳 (Tan Ailing)</td>
<td>苏亚菲 (Su Yafei)</td>
<td>艾莲 (Ailian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miranda</td>
<td>黎明朗 (Li Minglang)</td>
<td>李明媚 (Li Minmei)</td>
<td>杨念 (Yang Nian)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Samantha</td>
<td>毛纳 (Mao Na)</td>
<td>闵多 (Ming Duo)</td>
<td>阿潘 (Arpan)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Relationships in Women’s Lives

Friendship

The friendships in each show were similar. No matter what happened to anyone, their friends were always there for her. However, there was a main difference between American culture and Chinese culture, i.e., the attitude toward privacy. In “Sex and the City,” each character handled problems by herself while consulting with her friends. The phone call could be dialed during midnight to tell every detail to a friend. In the Chinese shows, the girls might be actively involved in the process of establishing or terminating a relationship for their friend. For example, in “好想好想談戀愛” Tao Chun asked Mao Na to test her boyfriend’s honesty in order to make up her mind whether she should marry him. In “淑女日记” three friends went to criticize Ailian’s ex-boyfriend for his breaking up with her. When Ailian had problem with overuse of credit cards, Yang Nian sold her stock to help Ailian get through the financial crisis.
On the other hand, the Chinese girls did not want to tell everything about the relationship with their boyfriends. For example, in “好想 好想 談 戀 愛” Mao Na was not aware that Tan Ailing had feelings for the man with whom she fell in love until the man rejected her implicitly. For Tan, Mao gave up her love interest although she could have gotten him if she really wanted.
Romantic Relationships

Although American and Chinese girls desired to find the right man or true love for marriage, American girls were more interested in sex. As Samantha argued, women could enjoy sex the same as men do. In “Sex and the City” the girls dressed in fashion because the appearance was considered the most important thing in attracting men. They ate in various restaurants, and attended fancy parties to look for the potential “right one.” They openly talked about sexual urges and intercourse, and many episodes explicitly showed the scenes making love. They used the “F” word frequently, and discussed a variety of sexual relationships, such as homosexual and threesome. In the Chinese shows, sexual encounters were treated very carefully. Even kissing was not seen very often until the end of the show. Instead, hugging was the open demonstration representing romantic relationships. Nonetheless, there was one thing in common. Both Americans and Chinese would like to find a man who truly loved her, by accepting who she was, introducing her to friends and family, and maintaining a monogamous relationship with her. For example, Carrie requested Mr. Big remain monogamous in episode 7, and she left him later on because Mr. Big did not want to date her exclusively. However, in the last episode, Mr. Big went to Paris to bring Carrie back. Carries insisted that Mr. Big be committed only to her. In “好 想 好 想 談 戀 愛” Tan Ailing struggled for a monogamous relationship with her boyfriend whom she truly loved. She wanted to be introduced as his girlfriend in public, leave her personal things in his apartment, and finally be married to him. However, he could not promise her. Eventually, in the last episode, she decided to leave him for good. Ailin, Arpan, and Meiqin in “淑女日记” took the same action when their boyfriends failed to show their honesty to the relationships.
Yet, in Chinese shows there was a moral issue involved in romantic relationships. That was regarding the extramarital relationship. It was presented in “欲望都市: 女人行.” Su Yafei’s boyfriend was a married man who had a wife and a college student lover. Su Yafei was not told about the situation when they met. The man bought an apartment especially for Su Yafei and wanted her to be a housewife by giving up her career and business. Finally, Su left him. However, after the man went to jail for a financial dispute, she was visited by his wife and student lover. Both of them wanted to sell Su’s apartment to get the money. Although Su did not get any money, neither wanted anything to do with her ex-boyfriend. She was emotionally abused by those people.

American girls were cautious with dating married men. Carrie check the men’s ring finger first to ascertain if he was married before considering him a prospect for dating. Nonetheless, men might cheat on girls. Once the truth is discovered, many American girls would leave the man or request him to get divorce. In Chinese culture, a middle aged woman would keep the marriage even though she discovered her husband’s affair with another woman. Ironically, she would say that her husband was cheating on her because he still cared about her.
For example, Arpan’s mom in “淑女日记” was in such case. She left her husband and moved to Arpan’s apartment but later on she moved back to her husband. Chinese men might be in this situation too. In “好想好想談戀愛” Tan Ailing finally found a man, Zhou Yifan, who seemed to truly love her. However, she still kept seeing her ex-boyfriend, Mr. Wu Yuefong. Thinking to secure Zhou’s love, she felt guilty for cheating on Zhou and confessed to him. To Tan’s surprise, Zhou broke up with Tan. He said, “I could not stand your affair with Wu. Instead, I would rather not be told about it.”

Single Women vs. Married Women and Children

Having children was glue to a family but it was also barrier to marriage. Further, getting married might be a controversial issue to romantic relationships. Carrie and her friends were invited to a house warming party of her new boyfriend. To their surprise, all the people in the party were couples. Samantha was happy and tried flirting with men but their wives were cautious and dragged their men far away from the single women. After the party, her boyfriend showed Carrie his apartment. One room was reserved for a nursery. He told Carrie that his dating was geared toward marriage. Carrie said “I’m sorry” and left.

In “好想好想談戀愛” Tan Ailing asked “Is the relationship between unmarried and married women antagonistic?” Tan was misunderstood by her girlfriend who was a newly wed because her husband became interested in Tan. On the other hand, after Mr. Wu’s second divorce, Tan went to apologize to Wu’s second ex-wife for seeing him during their marriage. There were other examples. Li Minglang was forced to participate in a dating show because she was the only unmarried woman in the television production group. Her cousin blamed Mao Na that Mao Na enjoyed dating but disbelieved true love. Mao said it was because her cousin was trapped in an unhappy marriage.

In “欲望都市: 女人行” SuYafei desired to have a loving husband and her own home. Su did not know that her boyfriend cheated on her until he was arrested. Su became a threat to his wife and the student lover. Finally, Su left him without wanting anything from him.

Li Mingmei and her friends were invited to a baby shower. Those mothers-to-be were showing how a baby would make one’s husband happy, and telling single women that only having a baby would make a woman perfect. This stirred the girls’ emotions. Su Yafei and Xiao Lu were attracted to the idea of having a child but Ming Dou was not. Ming was even afraid to be touched by children.

In “淑女日记” Meiqin was falling in love with a pianist but did not know he was married. She broke up with him with the support of her friends. By the end of the show, he got divorced and came back to her.

Family Relationship and Social Issues

Since these shows were focused on romantic relationships and friendships, and family’s involvement with girls’ marriage decision making process was not a theme. However, family relationships and values were discussed as part of the girls’ lives. For example, in “Sex and the City” Charlotte married a Jew, and she voluntarily converted to Judaism before she was accepted to be Harry’s wife. Samantha was supported by the women who were the survivors of breast cancer, and she gained the strength to recover her health and rebuild her sexual functions. When her boyfriend came back from a performance trip, she decided to have sex with him and keep him for herself. During Carrie’s stay in Paris with Alex, she could not stand his negligence and finally decided to leave him for good. Mr. Big went to Paris to bring Carrie back to New York City and eventually said “I love you” to Carrie. Mother-in-law relationships were portrayed in
Charlotte’s marriage and Miranda’s relationships. Charlotte also filed adoption papers for a child. Miranda needed to deal with the health problem of Steve’s mother.

In “欲望都市: 女人行” mother-daughter relationships were discussed, which were related to such social issues as senior romantic relationships, divorce, and menopause. Li Mingmei’s mom was in her menopausal stage. She misjudged Li Mingmei’s friendship with a plumber. Su Yafei was wondering why her mom wanted to get married so fast. Ming Duo did not understand why her mom wanted to get divorce after so many years in marriage with her father. Each of them had a heart-to-heart conversation with her mother. They gained better understanding of their moms and became the strong supporters of their moms. Mingdu even bought an apartment for her divorced mom by sacrificing her own happiness in romantic relationships.

Family seemed an important part in a Chinese’s life. The characters in “好想好想谈恋爱” looked more pessimistic than those in “Sex and the City.” On one hand, they were looking for true love. On the other hand, with the uncontrollable aging process they were worried that seeking true love might not ensure their senior secure life. For example, Mao Na was a sexual-oriented girl who did not care about true love as long as she was attracted to, and desired by, men. However, she was scared by the helplessness she experienced once when her leg was injured. She called all of her ex-boyfriends, but none of them cared about her. Finally, she decided to get married to a small town boy in a southern province that was far away from the big metropolis. She wrote a long letter to her friends to persuade them to keep relationships. Tao Chun was the first one getting married and starting to have a family. However, she found out that she could not get pregnant, and her dream of an ideal family life was broken. She wanted to have a tube baby but her husband did not agree with her. They ended up separating. In the last episode, when she was packing to leave her apartment, her friends came to comfort and support her. Mao Na’s letter also helped Tao Chun realize that she was still in love with her husband. While she was in mediation, her husband came to pick up his last box. Tao Chun ran to her husband and they made up with a passionate kiss. They took a middle ground to solve the difference by making the decision to adopt a child instead of having their own.

While the shows made in mainland China shared many cultural attributes, the show “淑女日记” seemed a little bit different from others regarding gender relationships. The show claimed that women could not live happily without men’s love. She would not be a normal woman if she did not need a man’s love. That might be the reason for cultivating abusive relationships in the show. Women should not only be beautiful and sexy but also be able to serve men perfectly. For example, there were two characters, Ailian and Arpan, who experienced a boyfriend’s abuse. Although Arpan was created similarly as Samantha, she scarified her job and
freedom for her love with a rock star. He not only demanded her doing things she did not want to do but also left her without an explanation. Finally, she left him and got on with her life by opening a restaurant.

CONCLUSION

Based on the theories of cultural studies, this paper employs textual analysis to examine cultural representations and signifying social practices of television entertainment programs. The analysis of the show “Sex and the City” and three Chinese shows with similar themes demonstrates that pure sex without love may only serve the basic human needs for physiological satisfaction. The pleasure was temporary and meaningless. The results also indicate that both American and Chinese women were seeking true love and desired to have a happy family with a husband and child(ren). However, the romantic relationships portrayed by the television shows did demonstrate the differences between American and Chinese women in terms of sexual attitudes and behaviors, and motivations for seeking romantic relationships due to the cultural differences. This comparative study exhibits that television production was a ritual condensation process that converts producer/directors’ ideas into a physical performance for its potential audience. Television plays a dual role by both reflecting and influencing culture. Although the shows were produced in a same genre with similar characters and topics, they had to present the characters and stories in accordance with the culture. Thus, their target audience could understand the issues, identify with characters, and feel meaningful. That is the reason behind the differences among those shows. The theories and methods applied to the present study were appropriate for gaining better understanding of the relationships between television production and culture. In the future study, the research data needs to be compared with the data of sexual and romantic behavior in the real world. It would help to conduct an in-depth analysis on this topic.

References:


