Female’s Role Portrayed in Family-Oriented TV Shows:  
A Cultural Study on Contemporary China

By Zhuojun Joyce Chen, Ph.D.  
Associate Professor  
Department of Communication Studies  
University of Northern Iowa

Abstract:

This study examines the relationship between media representation and social reality. Since the implementation of economic reform in the 1980s, the globalization process of economy and culture has challenged the gender relationship and family values in China. James Carey (1989) suggests mass media as a site that engages the public in discussing social issues. For the study, the researcher selects several family-oriented TV shows that cover various cultural and social contexts in the past three decades and were popular in China. Based on Semiotics, the study applies a textual analysis approach by paying special attention to audio/visual signs used in each show to examine the portrayal of females. The cultural meanings of female in these shows are interpreted in terms of the role as a wife, a mother, or a daughter in a family, as an employee in workplace, and as a citizen in society. Finally, the discussion will be related to the historical contexts of social, political, cultural, and economic changes in China.

Since the open economic policy started in the later 1970s, every aspect of Mainland China has been dramatically changed. Especially during the late 1990s the marketplace has become a determinant factor to the development of the Mainland Chinese society. The looks, sounds, and smells of contemporary China signify its transition to a consumer society. Witness the rapid change of Chinese society, one may raise the questions: What are the impacts of political, economic, and cultural globalization on Mainland Chinese society? What are the cultural values that dominate contemporary Mainland Chinese society?

John Fiske (1987) claims that television is a cultural agent, particularly, a provoker and circulator of meanings (p.1). James Carey (1989) suggests mass media as a site that engages the public in the discussion of social issues through a symbolic process, “whereby reality is produced, maintained, repaired, and transformed” (p. 23). According to Newcomb and Hirsch (2000), the cultural study of television needs to be based on “the bridge between a concern for television as a communication medium, central to contemporary society, and television as aesthetic object, the expressive medium that, through its storytelling functions, unites and examines a culture” (p.561). This project aims to examine the cultural changes in contemporary Mainland Chinese society through the reflexivity of its dramatic television programs.
Television has become an essential part of daily lives in contemporary China’s society. Although China’s media ownership still belongs to the state and local governments, the operation and management of media are entirely driven by the market economy. According to the Report on Development of China’s Media Industry (2007), the total revenue of television advertising in 2006 is 41.9 billion that contributed about 0.2 percent to China’s GDP. About 95.84 percent of the population (4 years and older) are television viewers, and the average viewing hours is 176 minutes per day, i.e., 4 minutes less than 3 hours per day. As a matter of fact, the audiences aged 45 years and older consume more television programs than younger Chinese, about 3.5 to 4 hours daily. Among various programming, TV drama/sitcom is the most popular category, counting 35 percent of the total viewers.

For the study, the researcher uses the Chinese television as a cultural forum to examine what social issues and the events regarding gender roles in the Mainland China’s society have been discussed. Several popular family-oriented TV shows representing various cultural and social contexts in the past five decades in China are selected for the analysis. Based on Semiotics, the study applies a textual analysis approach that is focused on how television makes meanings to serve the dominant interests in Mainland China. The analysis pays special attention to the audio/visual signs used in each show to examine the portrayal of Chinese females. The cultural meanings in these shows are interpreted in terms of female’s role as a wife, a mother, or a daughter in a family, as an employee in workplace, and as a citizen in society. Finally, the discussion will be related to the historical contexts of social, political, cultural, and economic changes in China.

Social and Cultural Context in China

In this section, it is necessary to introduce Chinese culture and society in terms of Chinese tradition and its development under the influence of economic and political changes in Mainland China.

The Dynamics of Chinese Society

Confucianism (Collectivism). The foundation of Chinese culture is Confucianism that has penetrated deeply into Chinese daily lives and has had strong impact on their minds and thoughts. Confucius (551- 479 B.C.) was an ancient Chinese philosopher and educator.
Confucianism was institutionalized as a state philosophy and cultural ideology in 140 B.C. by the ruler of the Han Dynasty (Li, 1996; Lu, 1998). Confucius’ moral ethics stressed three principles (subordinates’ loyalty to the monarch, children’s obedience to the father, and husband’s power over the wife) and four virtues: (Ren) benevolence, (Yi) righteousness, (Li) decorum, (Xin) and faithfulness/sincerity. Under Confucius’ influence, Chinese culture reinforces virtue, selflessness, duty, patriotism, hard work, and respect for the hierarchical system in both family and society (Li, 1996). Reciprocity, indirectness, and face-saving behaviors are not only considered cultural norms but also used as communicative strategies in social relations (Lu, 1998). However, there were also utilitarianism represented by Mozi (480-420 B.C.) and individualism represented by Han Feizi (280-233 B.C.) in Chinese history (Lu, 1998).

Socialism. After the Communist Party took over China in 1949, Marxism was adopted as the official Chinese ideology. Growing up in a Chinese traditional farm family and educated under Confucius’ influence, Mao applied Confucius’ moral-ethical approach to social order and social relations. The meaning of Collectivism translated in Chinese is Jiti Zhuyi, “which is a moral attribute characterized by socialist and communist ideology, calling for a total devotion and sacrifice of self to the communes and the state” (Lu, 1998, p.98). However, since the late 1970s, China’s “open door” and “Socialist Market Economy” policy has allowed Western cultural influence to Mainland China. The values of utilitarianism have been restored and have become a competing ideology with the values of collectivism and Communism ideals. The ability to accumulate wealth (money making) driven by utilitarian values is encouraged, praised, and honored by the public as well as by the government officials (Lu, 1998).

From Closed Door to Globalization

During Mao’s era from 1949 to 1976, China was described as the country behind the iron curtain, isolated from most of the world. Since Deng Xiaoping’s visits to Japan in October 1978 and to the U.S. in January 1979, the “open door” has become the focus of the economic reform discussion among top Chinese leaders. The Third Plenary Session of the Eleventh Central Committee held on December 18-22, 1978, was the significant milestone in Chinese history. Since then, the era of “Taking Class Struggle as the Key Principle” has been replaced with Deng’s “Taking Economic Development as the Core” in China. Raising the national standard of living became a pragmatic goal of Chinese people after the fifty-year “thrift” lives. On July 15, 1979, through its official document 1979:50, the Chinese government announced the opening of
four Economic Special Zones. In 1994, about 345 cities or towns, covering a 55 square-kilometer area with the population of 3.3 million, were open to foreign investors and businesses. In addition, there were 52 high tech development zones and 11 foreign tourist resort sites (Yang, 1998).

With the implementation of the open door policy, various Western products and goods and popular culture flooded into China. Individualism gradually eroded collectivism among Chinese youth. The ideas about sex, marriage, and family have shifted away from traditional Chinese values and beliefs. Especially, sexual freedom has broken the forbidden zone in Chinese society. Not only have pre-marital sex and cohabitation become accepted behavior, but also having a “lover” or being a “mistress” is no longer uncommon. According to a survey report in the magazine “Democracy and Law,” about 16% of married women have affairs. Many Chinese families having discord started to break the traditional bond (Yang, 1998, p. 278). According to China daily (Divorce rate rises by 7%: Ministry of Civil Affairs, 05/25/2007), Although divorce is traditionally discouraged in China, over the past 20 years the rate has soared. This is said to be due to women becoming more financially independent and divorce procedures being simplified. Between 1985 and 1995, the rate more than doubled; by 2006 it had tripled. The Ministry of Civil Affairs calculates the number of divorces in terms of cases per 1,000 people. Last year, that figure rose to 1.46 from 1.37 year on year, the Ministry said. (p.4)

The Formation of New Class Relationship

The class struggle enforced by Mao was abolished and the new classes created with the development of the Socialist Market Economy. It has changed the economic structure from a system with high-employment and low-income to a system with marketplace competition and permissible income gap (Yang, 1998). This is a drastic transition from a permanent job system (so called iron rice bowl that would be never broken) to a competitive selection system. According to the World Bank’s 1997 report, China became one of the countries with a larger gap between rich and poor. Official Chinese statistics show that the registered unemployment in China was 3.1%, i.e., 5.5 million people, in 1996. In addition, about 6 million was in the status so-called “下岗” (laid-off). Thus, the total unemployment was 11.5 million, about 7%. By 1998, the “下岗” people would reach 12 million, and the number may increase to 15 million by 2003 (Zuo, 1998, p.2). Unemployment has resulted from the process of reducing the government size.
and re-structuring the industrial infrastructure. Governmental officers were cut off by about 50 percent, and 1.2 million textile workers and staff were laid-off. The lay-off wave rolled to the railroad industry and the army units. Even medical doctors and technical personnel were affected (Zuo, 1998). Among those unemployed, some found new jobs in the urban areas and needed to learn new skills; some went to the countryside and into farming; but most of them had to stay home, living on very low compensation (about 200-250 Yuan per month) paid by former companies or depending on relatives (Yang, 1998). In 1998, the Ministry of Labor announced a three-year job-training program from 1998 to 2000. It would help 10 million people learn new skills and find new jobs (Zuo, 1998, p.220).

On the other hand, paradoxically, a Chinese magazine “Seeking Truth” reported in the sixth edition of 1996, that there were over one million Chinese who were millionaires (Yang, 1998, p.413). Ten types of rich people were identified in China: (1) stock owners (especially in early 1990s), (2) private business owners (3) pop singers, movie stars, and star athletes, (4) entrepreneurs and shop keepers in rural areas, (5) governmental officer and staff, (6) manufacture managers, (7) construction contractors, (8) managers in foreign or joint venture companies, (9) new entrepreneurs, and (10) salesmen of manufactures in rural areas. In addition, restaurant owners, traders of cloths or books, and those working in insurance companies, banks, post offices or utilities companies also made good money (Yang, 1998, pp. 412-413). Those new rich people are attracted to the foreign products, services, and life styles. The large gap between rich and poor in China has an important impact on Chinese economy, politics and culture, including the gender relationship.

Gender Gaps

Since the implementation of economic reform in 1978, many light industry factories, such as textile, clothing, and food, have been moved out of metropolitans to rural areas or small cities where the material suppliers are closer to the production facilities. The restructuring process resulted in the “下岗” (layoff) of female workers. This reality was outlined in a report issued by the All-China Federation of Trade-Unions (ACFTU, a governmental organ under the leadership of the Secretariat of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China.), describing conditions women face in the workplace. United Nation’s report about “Gender Equality in China” (2001-2002) is concerned that Chinese women’s social status has been declined.
The report of World Bank (2000) also provides the investigation of gender in China. Six key challenges were listed as follows:

- Increasing gender inequality in employment
- Relative poverty of Women becoming more serious
- Gender Inequality of Education Opportunities
- The Side-effects of “marketization” of health care and family planning
- Lower social status increases the vulnerability of women and girls
- The less participation of women in the decision-making process

Because of the one-child policy, parents are assisted by new technologies to select their un-born child’s sex. Some parents in rural areas may abandon their newborn baby girls in order to have a son. These phenomena cause the rising situation of sex imbalance in China. Xinhua News Agency (March 9, 2004) reported that the sex ratio of newborn female to male was 100:116.9 in 2000. The vice chairman of the Population, Resources and Environment Committee of the Chinese government said, “Such a serious gender imbalance poses a major threat to the healthy, harmonious and sustainable growth of the nation's population, and could trigger such crimes and social problems as mercenary marriage, abduction of women and prostitution” (p.1).

In addition, the discrimination against women in employment, promotion, job assignment, and so forth is often seen in the workplace, as well as in education. In United Nation’s report (2001-2002), it writes,

Although the percentage of girls in primary schools has increased in recent years, rates drop off quickly at higher educational levels. For instance, while female students comprised 48% of primary school goers and 47% secondary school goers in 1999, they decreased to 40% for college attendance and only 32% for doctoral programs. The female illiteracy rate has been consistently higher than that of men. About 70% of China’s 140 million estimated illiterates are women, concentrated in the economically underdeveloped rural regions. (p2.)

The gap of income between male and female has been widened. According to the data shown on China Daily (June 16, 2004),
From 1990 to 2000, the ratio of men and women's incomes fell from 100:77.5 to 100:70.1, which shows the gap grew 7.4 percentage points. Statistics in 2002 showed that below the 500-yuan (US$60) monthly income level, female employees were twice the number of males, while above the 2,000-yuan (US$240) level, men were 1.5 times the number of women.

While more Chinese believe both genders are equal, a recent national survey by the All-China Women's Federation found women were still in a "passive and disadvantageous" position in the workplace. Consequently, the survey found 20 percent of the men had promotion opportunities in the past three years, while a little more than 16 per cent of their female counterparts did. For women working in cities, their average income is about 70 percent of what men receive, representing a disparity of about 7 percent wider than that of a decade ago (Xinhua News Agency December 16, 2002).

The working condition of women is worse than before. For example, “The survey in 2002 showed 21.9 percent of the newly-started companies refused to cover female employees' expenses in giving birth, and 16.2 percent did not allow female employees to have a maternity leave of at least 90 days” (China Daily, June 16, 2004). The All-China Federation of Trade Unions (ACFTU) report states that sex discrimination is the norm in today's workplace. The progress made in the early decades of the PRC has been, in many cases, abandoned in the years since economic reform began (China.org.cn by Wang Zhiyong, March 22, 2004). The investigation conducted by the ACFTU indicates the biggest problems women are facing today are reemployment after being laid off:

- unequal protection, rights and benefits in state-owned enterprises (SOEs)....and discrimination, harassment and abuse in private enterprises....Some non-SOEs terminate job contracts of pregnant women in order to avoid covering medical fees or providing maternity leave....It is not unheard of for an enterprise's contract to contain a clause forbidding pregnancy....A number of female employees are not given holiday leave and often work overtime without timely payment. Some enterprises have harsh regulations and severe discipline, including beatings, body searches and insults. The dignity and human rights of female workers are not guaranteed. (China.org.cn by Wang Zhiyong, March 22, 2004)
Women who are poor may turn to illegal business, such as prostitution. This can cause potential societal problems, from spawning criminal gangs to spreading the scourge of HIV/AIDS and other social misery and the costs it brings (China Daily July 2, 2004).

**Family Relationships**

Today, the question of whether women should stay at home has been discussed in the CPPCC debating room and been passed to ordinary Chinese people. At a time when both urban unemployment and the costs of childcare are rising, a woman’s choice between home and job has become a genuine issue. Some of the CPPCC representatives argue, “Women should recognize that taking care of their own houses and children is also a kind of job and responsibility as well as the manifestation of a mother’s commitment to her children. Given this, we should encourage laid-off female workers to return home to be homemakers, which I don’t think is prejudicial against women at all” (Beijing Review 04/25/2001, p.1). The proposal has angered many feminists, who believe that sending women home is totally prejudicial against women and represents a reversal in social development. (Beijing Review 04/25/2001).

Xinhua News Agency (March 7, 2002) reports a survey, sponsored by the Women's Federation and Bureau of Statistics of Guangdong, taken by over 2,000 families in early 2002. The result shows that about 60 percent of the respondents held that "a man should devote himself to building up a career while a woman's role should be at home,” which is a 14.8-percent rise over the same survey conducted in early 1990s. The news agency cited some positive comments from the public to support women’s work at home. Ms Lu said, "By rearing a child and doing housework, a woman also contributes to the society." And Tan, a former white collar, explained her own perceptions of equality, “Women do not have to do men's job in order to be treated equal…We might as well accept the differences between males and females and play well our role at home to improve the quality of family life” (Xinhua News Agency March 7, 2002).

On the other hand, China Daily (May 13, 2002) indicates Chinese women and children are still facing domestic violence that is a most serious issue in modern Chinese society. According to Zhai Yan, assistant to the director of the Beijing-based Women's Psychological Counseling Center, abused women tend to become abusers to their children. Statistics show that
women beat children, in fact, more often than men do in those Chinese families where there is
domestic violence. According to the Women's Studies Institute of China affiliated with the All-
China Women's Federation, in recent years, the increased amount and degree of domestic
violence has largely been related to mental health problems and poor living conditions during
China's economic reform and open door policy (China Daily May 13, 2002).

Women’s Purchasing Power

Paek and Pan (2004) analyzed the data collected from 3092 Chinese people for an annual
consumer behavior and lifestyle survey in 2000. The randomly sampled respondents were living
in three major cities in China: Beijing, Shanghai and Guangzhou. The purpose of the study was
to examine the effects of exposure to Western media and advertising on Chinese peoples’
consumerist value. While the results were consistent with previous findings, “the study also finds
that the rise of consumerist values and the development of a positive attitude toward advertising
are more apparent among the young, the well educated, and those who possess necessary
financial means….” (p. 513). The results demonstrate that adopting consumerist value is
integrated into one’s life world in the Mainland Chinese society rather than short-term and
immediate effects.

According to the Beijing-based China Mainland Medicine Marketing Research Ltd Co, a
research was conducted in spring 2004 among 6,000 urban women between the ages 15 and 55
in 30 provincial capitals across China, to measure the purchasing power and trends among
female consumers. The survey examined 13 fields that may be pertinent to the physical and
psychological well-being of women. The statistics showed that the yearly overall expenditure in
the 13 sectors amounted to 267 billion (US$32 billion), making up more than half of their total
expenditures measured at 480.5 billion yuan (US$58 billion). This meant the improved economic
conditions in families overall. The result also indicated that while women spend significant
amounts on garments, social activities and dining out, other items such as tourism, sports and
even plastic surgery are eating into savings nationwide (China Daily May 15, 2004)

Summary

The review of Chinese culture and society explains the gradual shift of the Mainland
China from a traditional society dominated by Confucian values and beliefs to a consumer
society where the economic market system has become the guidelines of daily lives in
contemporary China. The gender equality established in Mao’s era has been eroded by the marketing system. There are problems with gender inequality in family and workplace, and newborn sex imbalance. On the other hand, the media and governmental organizations have become aware of the situation and are trying to protect women’s rights and equality of life. There are also differences among women regarding their perceptions of women’s role in the modern Chinese society.

Theoretical Framework of Media Cultural Studies

Cultural Forum and Semiotics

Newcomb and Hirsch (1994) define mass media as a cultural forum where popular culture raises questions and introduces audiences to the discussion of social problems. Communication process is the process of sign production, and is related to culture. Semiotics is developed to study 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)

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).

Barthes (1972) 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-what it is a picture of” (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.

Representation and Social Constructivism

Fiske and Hartley (2003) apply the concept “ritual condensation” to the process of television production. Ritual condensation is “the projection of abstract ideas into material form” (p.68). As Hall (1997) claimed, the communication process is the production of signs through which cultural content is reproduced. He explains that in this process we use a representational system (concepts and signs) to construct meanings. Hall (1997) indicates the function of language system in human communication and defines the relationship between the material world and the symbolic practices and processes.

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. (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 the coding, thus, becomes “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).

Summary

The researcher is interested in how a female’s role as a wife, a mother, or a daughter in a family, as an employee in workplace, and as a citizen in society has been changed with the change of Chinese culture and society. Based on the theoretical framework of semiotics analysis, this study sees the Chinese television media as a cultural forum that allows Chinese producers and directors, on the one hand, to use television shows to tell their perceptions and interpretations of the society, and Chinese viewers, on the other hand, to use their feedback as a way to inform the producers and directors their needs and wants. Therefore, the popular
television shows would be able to represent the dominant Chinese culture and to discuss important issues. Consequently, it is justified for the selection of the representative Chinese shows to examine the gender relationship in China. Further, the review of Chinese media literature and official documents provides the real societal information regarding gender relationships in China. It makes the study possible to compare the media representation and the social reality in China.

Research 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 ways (Real, 1996).

Newcomb and Hirsch (2000) find the importance of Raymond Williams’ suggestion that emphasizes to examine strips of television programming as the “flow” of media text. By analyzing these flow strips, we may find the opposing ideas next to each other, and the same ideas being treated differently, through which we would get an overall view of the cultural forum initiated by television and invites the public’s participation in the discussion of various social issues (Newcomb & Hirsch, 2000). They recommend media researchers “taping entire weeks of television content, and tracing various potential strips of that week” (p. 568). In this way, they claim, “we might track the history of America’s social discussions of the past three decades by examining the multiple rhetoric of television during that period” (p. 568).

Based on Raymond Williams’ suggestion, this study examines flow strips of Chinese popular television shows. Fourteen television shows that are family- or women-centered are selected for the analysis. They are: 渴望 (Aspiration, 1990), 一年又一年 (Year after Year, 1999), 贫嘴张大民的幸福生活 (张大民’s Happy Life, 2000), 激情燃烧的岁月 (Years of Passion Burning, 2001), 十月怀胎 (Pregnancy, 2003), 中国式离婚 (Chinese-style Divorce, 2004), 妻子 (Wife, 2004), 好想好想谈恋爱 (Eager to be in love, 2004), 离婚女人 (Divorced Women, 2005), 欲望都市: 女人行 (Sex and the City, 2006), 同床异梦 (Strange Bedfellows, 2006), 家事如天 (Days of Family, 2006), 保姆
In the new era of marriage (The New Era of Marriage, 2006). In the appendix, there is a brief
description of each show.

The researcher watches all the shows and takes notes including following items required
for an textual analysis: brief description of the show; biography of each main character or of a
supporting role who has a relationship with one of the main characters in the show; important
plots that portray the major development of the main characters; signs, symbols, and dialogs that
contribute to the development of main characters; the relationships between characters, including
marital, romantic, family, and friendship, and conflicts within those relationships; the structure of
the shows, and editing features; indexical signs and intertextuality that make it meaningful to the
plots or the development of characters; social issues discussed and events reproduced in the
show.

The data are recorded separately for each show, and then, the data of each main female
character are used to construct an Excel version index of characters with the items, such as name,
age, education, job/occupation, marital/relationship brief and show title. It is easier to sort the
data based on each item, and add additional analysis comments. On the other hand, a content
description table is created with the items, such as title, year of production, time span the show
covers, and the brief description of the show. Finally, based on these organized data sheets the
researcher is able to find the themes and patterns and interpret the meanings by relating the
cultural contexts where each show resides.

Data Analysis and Discussion

Historical Perspectives

激情燃烧的岁月 (Years of Passion Burning) was produced in 2001, covering the past 5
decades from 1950 to 2000. This show was focused on the life of the father, 石光荣, who was a
military general. It told the stories of how the social changes affected this military family. It
covered the events such as the liberation of China, the Korean War, the Cultural Revolution, the
economic reform, and layoff, etc. Yet, since the life in the military was quite different from the
civilian lives, the scope of the society covered by this show seemed not as wide as other shows.
However, it covered some aspects that could not be found in other shows, and demonstrated the
relationship changes between the couple with the changing of the society. In 1950, 楚琴 had to
break up with her boyfriend and be married to 石光荣 because his position in the military was
much higher than hers. This was not unusual during the 1950s. Since then, 石光荣 had also become the commander at home and made decisions for his wife and children. In his family, everyone needed to serve in the army. 石光荣 demanded his eldest son stay in the army but his son did not want to and asked his mother 楚琴 for help. 楚琴 found an internal connection in the army to discharge her son. When 石光荣 got this information, he used his power to override 楚琴's plan. Nonetheless, with the social change during the period from the 1980s to the 1990s, 楚琴 gradually gained her power over 石光荣, and she could say “No” to him, and even shut her bedroom door in his face. 石光荣 eventually admitted his love with, and needs for, his wife and children, and showed his willingness to live under his wife’s rules.

一年又一年 (Year after Year) was produced in 1999, which reflected the political, economical, and cultural changes year after year from 1978 to 1999. 贫嘴张大民的幸福生活 covers the early stage of economic reform, from 1978 to 1990, while 渴望 starts one decade early, from 1965, the Cultural Revolution. These three shows depict the historical development of China, from Cultural Revolution to economic reform, restructuring the industry infrastructure that resulted in the layoff phenomena and the marketplace policy that allowed someone getting rich first, the resume of higher education that accommodated students going back to colleges, the open development of small businesses and foreign investment, the job market and stock market, the reform of the housing market, going to study abroad, the increased rate of divorce, etc.

The rest of the shows are residing in contemporary society to discuss a variety of issues, such as marriage, romantic relationship, extra marital affairs, sexual attentions, divorce, business, career, artificial insemination, family relationships, and so on. Overall, these fourteen shows have covered the social changes in China during the past fifty years.

Female’s Roles

In these popular shows, women play an important part in family daily lives and in relationships. Among the fourteen shows, there are 68 women identified for the analysis. They were either major characters in the show or a guest character that had a close relationship with a major character in the show. According to each character’s socioeconomic status and the relationships with husband or male friends, the 68 women portrayed in the shows are divided into four categories: 1. woman who is economically independent and has a husband or long-term relationship; 2. woman who is economically independent but does not have husband or long-term relationship; 3. woman who is not economically independent neither has husband or long-term relationship; 4. woman who is neither economically independent nor has a husband or long-term relationship.
relationship; 4. woman who is not economically independent but has a husband or long-term relationship. For those who have relationships, there are two sub-categories: a. woman who is a traditional wife or partner, and tries to please everyone in the family; and b. woman who is a liberal wife or partner, and wants to pursue non-traditional activities.

Economically Independent

The data portray three women in the shows, who are not economically independent nor have a husband or long-term relationship. They are 刘慧芳’s younger sister 刘雁 in 渴望, who is a college student with no income neither relationship; 张大民’s mother 张大妈 in 贫嘴张大民的幸福生活, who is a mother of a big family; and 郑大妈 in 家事如天, is also a mother of a big family. Both 张大妈 and 郑大妈 are widows. The majorities of the old generation woman characters in rest of the shows are economically independent and have a husband or long-term relationship, such as 陈焕’s mother and 林平平’s mother in 一年又一年, 项果’s mother in 十月怀胎, 楚琴 in 激情燃烧的岁月, and 陈灵宝’s mother-in-law in 妻子. And, they are all traditional wives who do everything and try the best for the family. Of the women in the age group of 30s-40s, there are 39 women, who are economically independent, among whom about two thirds have a husband or a long-term relationship. There are three women who are in the transition stage from a dependent to an economically independent and to establish a relationship with a significant other, i.e., a husband or a long-term relationship. They are 林小枫 in 中国式离婚, 陆建平’s sister 陆雪儿 in 同床异梦, and 马晓慧 in 保姆. There were special situations that made those women being a dependent on husband or a relationship. At the beginning of the show, 林小枫 has a job, an elementary school teacher, but she quits her job to become a full-time wife and mother in order to better take care of her husband, a surgeon, and her son. However, after her husband becomes rich, 林小枫 encounters many marital problems, and finally signed the divorce agreement. 陆雪儿 is a dancer but laid-off because of her back injury, so she becomes a full-time wife and mother for her husband and daughter. With a tight family budget, she has to bargain for every penny in the market. After her divorce she gets a job as a model trainer and becomes economically independent. When 马晓慧 cohabits with 张小光, she does everything for 张小光 without being paid. Finally, 张小光 dumps her. Then, she gets a job as a nanny, and becomes economically independent.

Inequality of Economic Power

There are gender differences in economic status. Usually, the male has more economic power over the female in a family or relationship. For example, in 同床异梦, 肖男’s boyfriend 吴永明
is a rich businessman who cohabits with 肖男 and controls her social activities. After 陆雪儿's husband works for 吴永明, he gets a big check and humiliates 陆雪儿 by stating that “I could have hired a nanny who might do housework better than you did.” In 保姆, 马晓慧 quits her college to take care of 张小光 and his daughter but 张小光 says, “I cannot marry you because you are merely a babysitter.” In 新结婚时代, 简佳 has a six-year relationship with a businessman who gives her car and housing but not marriage. In order to leave him, 简佳 returns the keys to him and moves into a place with only one room. In 中国式离婚, the marital problem between 林小枫 and her husband starts with money. 林小枫 wants her husband to earn more than her friends’ husbands do. However, after he earns more money and she quits the job, she becomes worried that she may lose him. In reality, the enlarged economical gap in a family might result in a husband’s extra marital affair.

There are also class differences in economic power. In the shows 保姆, 同床异梦 and 妻子 there are prejudices against the girls who come from rural areas or small cities, such as the attitudes of 张小光, 杨阿秀 and her daughter 吴建红 toward 马晓慧 in 保姆; the attitude of 陈灵宝’s mother-in-law toward 陈灵宝 in 妻子; 吴永明’s controlling and abusive behavior to 肖男 in 同床异梦.

Business Women

There are quite a few businesswomen portrayed in those shows. Some of them hold college degrees but some do not. All of them establish their businesses based on their economic mind and hard work, such as 陈灵宝 (a soft drink company) in 妻子, 林平平’s sister-in-law (a restaurant) in 一年又一年, 肖男 (a clothing store) and 姜微 (beauty salon and massage, fashion design) in 同床异梦, 谭艾琳 (book cafe) in 好想好想谈恋爱, 苏亚菲 (lighting and lamp store) in 欲望都市：女人行, 武清 (wedding fashion) in 十月怀胎, 毛沙沙 (Small business) and 大雨 (Small Business) in 贫嘴张大民的幸福生活. Some of them are country girls but they can overcome social prejudice and do better than their husbands or partners who were growing up in big cities.

Traditional Wife

Most women of the older generation portrayed in the shows are traditional housewives, i.e., understanding, patient, tolerant, kind, and selfless. Some of the women in the age group of 30s-40s are also traditional value oriented. For example, 渴望 is a sensational television show that was the most popular show in the early 1990s. This show portrays a loving and devoted mother and a traditional Chinese wife, 刘慧芳, who follows Confucius four-virtue principles. 刘慧芳’s story moved so many Chinese people, including men and women. Many male audiences show
Their desire to marry a woman just like 刘慧芳. In order to cure her adopted daughter’s leg illness, facing her ex-husband’s verbal abuse she swallows her words without saying anything to him.

Several other women in those shows are traditional wives too, such as 郑大妈’s eldest daughter-in-law 吴月 in 家事如天, 张大民’s wife 云芳 in 贫嘴张大民的幸福生活, 楚琴 in 激情燃烧的岁月, and 马晓慧 in 保姆. 刘慧芳 always smiles to her husband and agrees with whatever he says. 云芳 stays in a room very small the size of which only allows a bed, and works hard with all her heart to please her mother-in-law and sibling-in-laws.

Although 陈灵宝 in 妻子 is a successful businesswoman, she is also a traditional wife. She suffers prejudice of her mother-in-law when she just gets married. After her company is established, she offers jobs to all of her husband’s siblings. She quits her job to take care of her husband when he becomes mentally ill.

郑大妈 is another kind of traditional woman. She is from countryside without much educational background. However, 郑大妈 discovers the problems with each family of her children and helps them solve the problems by a mother’s wisdom, understanding, patience, tolerance, and selflessness. She receives respects and love from her children and in-laws.

**Liberal Women**

Most of the women in the age group of 30s or younger are liberals who are economically independent, possess higher education degrees, and hold white-collar jobs. These women are typically shown in 好想好想谈恋爱, 欲望都市: 女人行, 新结婚时代, 离婚女人, and 十月怀胎. They seem as if they are on a small sailing boat floating in an ocean. There may be no shores for them to land on, or answers to their inquiries. They are still wandering, but brave and careful. However, aging is the big threat to their journey. From those women’s life experiences, several issues emerge: a. for a relationship, marriage proposal is an important indicator of true love; b. what is the definition of “a woman”? c. multiple factors that cause divorce or breaking up of a romantic relationship; and d. what are the new styles of romantic relationship?

**Marriage Proposal.** In 好想好想谈恋爱, 谭艾琳 says, “I may not want to get married. However, I do care for a marriage proposal because it shows a man’s true love with me.” She finally leaves 伍岳峰 who is the man she loves but the man who could never propose to her. In 新结婚时代, 简佳 rejects 刘凯瑞’s marriage proposal because her love with this man has died after the long waiting of more than six years. Instead, she finds her true love with 顾小航 who is younger than her and not rich.
Definition of a Woman. 黎明朗, a television producer in 好想好想谈恋爱, 韦庄, a lawyer in 离婚女人, and 李明媚, a toy designer in 欲望都市: 女人行, are not seen as womanly by men. 韦庄’s husband leaves her for another woman because he does not think she possesses feminine qualities. By the end of the show he sends a sex toy as a gift to 韦庄. 黎明朗 and 李明媚 have difficulties establishing a long-term relationship with men because their dates often treat them as guy friends. As the male viewers’ respond to the show 渴望, they want to marry a woman just like 刘慧芳, a traditional Chinese wife who is beautiful, takes care her husband, parents-in-law, and children, and follows Confucius four-virtue principles. Men portrayed in the shows are usually those who would like to play with those liberal women for companionship and sexual gratifications but not for marriage. In fact, 伍岳峰 is not the person who does not want to get married. He has two failed marriages. One happens after he refuses to propose to 谭艾琳. He just does not want to marry her.

Factors Causing Divorce or Breaking up. There are multiple reasons: a. a dead marriage. For example, in 激情燃烧的岁月, 楚琴’s marriage to 石光荣 was the arrangement between 石光荣 and her parents. She did not love 石光荣. She wants a separation or divorce. In 欲望都市: 女人行, 闵多’s mother was in the same situation as 楚琴 and, in fact, this case happened to many Chinese city girls during the 1950s to early 1960s. To 闵多’s surprise, her mother finally divorces her father after a 30-year marriage and becomes a happy single-woman. b. an abusive husband or boyfriend. The abuses depicted in the shows are usually of verbal, which cause emotional and psychological damage to women. The examples are 刘慧芳 in 渴望, 马晓慧 in 保姆, 周圆圆 in 家事如天, 陈香 in 离婚女人, 楚琴 in 激情燃烧的岁月, and 肖男 and 陈丹妮 in 同床异梦. c. husband’s or partner’s cheating or negligence. The examples are 韦庄 in 离婚女人, 陆雪儿 in 同床异梦, 苏亚菲 in 欲望都市: 女人行, and 马晓慧 in 保姆. d. losing excitement in marriage. The examples are 姜欣 and 姜妍 in 离婚女人, and 林小枫 in 中国式离婚. e. external pressures, such as financial difficulties, family-in-law, business, career, etc. In 一年又一年 for her career, 林平平 decides to study abroad but 陈焕 has his career in China. They get divorced. 林平平’s brother is occupied by his business but entirely neglects his wife’s needs and feelings. His wife finally leaves him. In 新结婚时代, 顾小西 cannot stand 何建国’s family that demands more and more. They get divorced. In 十月怀胎, 项果’s mother is an abusive woman who ruins 项果’s marriage first but later she helps 项果 be strong and finally 项果 unites with her husband and son. In 中国式离婚, because of 林小枫’s desire for being rich, her marriage is finally broken.
New Styles of Romantic Relationship. a. extra marital affair becomes an accepted behavior, such as 苏亚菲 in 欲望都市: 女人行, 武清 in 十月怀胎, 简佳 in 新结婚时代 and 姜妍 in 离婚女人. b. senior romance, such as 苏亚菲’s mother engaged to an older friend in 欲望都市: 女人行, and in 新结婚时代, 顾小西’s father married to the nanny 小夏. c. older woman and younger man, such as 简佳 and 顾小航 in 新结婚时代. d. cohabitation life style: the characters in the shows 好想好想谈恋爱, 欲望都市: 女人行, and 离婚女人, do not mind the cohabitation life style if they cannot find a man for the life-long love. e. using artificial insemination to help marriage maintenance, such as 项果 in 十月怀胎.

Conclusion

How has the female’s role as a wife, a mother, or a daughter in a family, as an employee in workplace, and as a citizen in society been changed with the change of Chinese culture and society? From the data analysis, the results indicate the historical changes of women’s role in a family or a relationship.

According to the content, those shows can be divided into two groups: one group mainly represents a traditional China and a survey of the historical changes in China, including these four shows, 渴望 (Aspiration, 1990), 一年又一年 (Year after Year, 1999), 贫嘴张大民的幸福生活 (张大民’s Happy Life, 2000), 激情燃烧的岁月 (Years of Passion Burning, 2001). The approach used in these shows is more idealistic and tries to promote traditional moral standards and values; and the other group represents contemporary China and employs a realistic approach to the discussion of real social issues, including 十月怀胎 (Pregnancy, 2003), 中国式离婚 (Chinese-style Divorce, 2004), 妻子 (Wife, 2004), 好想好想谈恋爱 (Eager to be in love, 2004), 离婚女人 (Divorced Women, 2005), 欲望都市: 女人行 (Sex and the City, 2006), 同床异梦 (Strange Bedfellows, 2006), 家事如天 (Days of Family, 2006), 保姆 (Nanny, 2006), 新结婚时代 (The New Era of Marriage, 2006). In these shows, the presentation intends to expose the viewer to various beliefs and behaviors and invites the public to participate in the discussion.

The gender relationship between couples portrayed in the first group is more equal. Although 石光荣 in 激情燃烧的岁月, 王沪生 in 渴望, and 林平平’s brother in 一年又一年 are verbally abusive or negligent, they all feel sorry and apologize to their wives. The men in the second group are quite different from those in the first group. Some of them even physically abuse their wives or partners, such as 陈丹妮’s husband 冯西九, and 陆雪儿’s husband in 同床异梦. Even 何建国 hits 顾小西 in 新结婚时代. Further, men do not commit to the relationship and even cheat on
women. These are two evidences that indicate the changing role of women in the relationship, i.e., the decline of women’s rights in the relationship in contemporary Chinese society.

The economic gap of gender does exist in the family or a relationship. According to those shows, men usually earn more money than their wives or partners. Therefore, men are often in control of the relationship. However, the data show that the majority of women in the shows are economically independent, and that some of them are even better than their husbands, so they have the courage and economic foundation to break up an unhealthy relationship.

The analysis also indicates that the traditional woman still holds the popularity, no matter if she is a wife or a mother. A mother’s love is frequently praised in these shows, such as 刘慧芳 and 郑大妈. Mother–daughter relationship seems very important in a woman’s life and for a healthy relationship with her husband or partner, such as 玛果’s mother in 十月怀胎. In addition, a variety of issues are discussed in the shows, such as a marriage proposal, the definition of “a woman,” the factors causing divorce or breaking up, senior romance, age difference in relationship, artificial insemination, and cohabitation.

However, by comparison with the gender issues mentioned in literature review, such as newborn sex imbalance, employment discrimination, and workplace conditions, no relevant information dealing with these issues is found from those shows. There might be a time lag between the media representation and the social reality. The other possible reason may be related to the selection of the television shows for the analysis. The researcher leaves this question to the consideration for future studies.

Overall, this study demonstrates that television serves as a cultural forum that invites the discussion of various social issues through which we are able to examine the changes of culture and society. It also proves that semiotics analysis is an effective means, both conceptually and methodologically, for media cultural studies.

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