2-2016

Fiction as reality: Chinese youths watching American television

Yang GAO
Singapore Management University, YANGGAO@smu.edu.sg

Citation

GAO, Yang.(2016). Fiction as reality: Chinese youths watching American television. *Poetics: Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts, 54*, 1-13.
Available at: https://ink.library.smu.edu.sg/soss_research/2132

Published in Poetics: Journal of Empirical Research on Culture, the Media and the Arts, 2016 February, Volume 54, Pages 1-13
http://doi.org/10.1016/j.poetic.2015.08.005

Fiction as reality: Chinese youths watching American television

Yang Gao

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

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:
Received 2 August 2014
Received in revised form 13 August 2015
Accepted 14 August 2015
Available online 26 September 2015

Keywords:
Cross-cultural media consumption
Perceived realism
Cultural proximity
China
Youths
Television

ABSTRACT

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

1. Introduction

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

levels. Theoretically, this notion of "multiple proximities" (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005) is often coupled with Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital (1984) to explain how, within the same geo-linguistic or geo-cultural space, certain demographic characteristics, such as socio-economic class, education, and age, also affect the audience's decision about what to watch and their interpretation of what they watch (Iwabuchi, 2002; Ksiazek & Webster, 2008; La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005; Straubhaar & Viscasillas, 1991; Straubhaar, 2000). In this analysis, I will show how cultural capital, here in the specific form of the ability to understand and appreciate foreign media products, is instrumental to understanding Chinese youths' attraction to US TV, particularly their perception of this television as "real."

While cultural proximity tells a triumphant tale of national or regional programming outperforming big-budget American production, the evidence is strong that Hollywood remains the prevailing storyteller in film and television (Bielby & Harrington, 2005; Olson, 1999). And realism is a crucial force by which Hollywood attracts and engages audiences from a variety of "interpretive communities," despite its apparent cultural distances from many of them. For example, multiple studies attribute the insurmountable worldwide popularity of the American primetime soap *Dallas* in the 1980s partly to its realist allure, particularly in terms of theme and emotion (Ang, 1985; Herzog-Massing, 1986; Liebes & Katz, 1990). At a deeper level, such general embrace of Hollywood renditions as "real" does not necessarily contradict the logic of cultural proximity. Indeed, arguing along others (e.g., Gitlin, 2001), Straubhaar points out that precisely because it is so widespread, "by sheer dint of exposure, American culture began to seem as a familiar second culture to many people" (2008: 15). To the extent that cultural proximity is attributable to a sense of familiarity rather than being merely a function of objective geo-linguistic distance, the primacy of American popular culture may have enhanced its perceived realism among culturally distinct audiences.

Still, it appears that people engage with different kinds of realism depending on their socio-cultural distance from the media content. For viewers who favor domestically produced programs over American ones because of the former's greater realistic appeal, the perceived realism has much to do with a cultural proximity-induced sense of familiarity. This evokes what Corner (1998) refers to as "formal realism," i.e., verisimilitude in TV's representation of the "look" of real life. Meanwhile, to international audiences, what Hollywood lacks in cultural proximity it compensates by universal tropes – themes and formulae that are so primordial and fundamental that they are psychologically accessible and discursively intelligible to viewers around the world (Havens, 2000; Liebes & Katz, 1990; Olson, 1999). This evokes what Corner (1998) refers to as "thematic realism," i.e., the closeness of what TV is *about* to reality.

In her now classic study of the popular reception of *Dallas* in the Netherlands, Ang identifies an "emotional realism" that in many ways resembles "thematic realism." Most importantly, like thematic realism, emotional realism emphasizes audience appreciation of media texts at a connotative rather than denotative level: "what is recognized as real is not knowledge of the world, but a subjective experience of the world" (Ang, 1985: 45). However, unlike thematic realism, which stresses "the *normative* plausibility of characterization, circumstance and action" (Corner, 1998: 72, italic mine), emotional realism works through invoking prevailing "structures of feeling" among audiences and tapping into their visceral resonance with particular characters. Emotional realism is often powerful enough to activate viewing pleasure by overriding a program's "external unrealism" (Ang, 1985) and/or offsetting its apparent cultural distance from viewers (Liebes & Katz, 1990).

Perceived realism and the sense of involvement it generates have been a central concern within television scholarship. Even as audiences have increasingly been recognized as motivated, knowledgeable, and creative interpreters, scholars have remained wary of the persuasive powers of the media; many have suggested that seeing situations portrayed on TV as "real" or "typical" sometimes belies the audience's oblivion to true social predicaments and oppressions (Jhally & Lewis, 1992; McKinley, 1997; Press, 1991).

The idea that being swept up in the reality of a program is at odds with the audience's critical ability is also present in analyses of cross-cultural media consumption. For example, in their widely-cited research on the reception of *Dallas* among six different ethnic groups, Liebes and Katz (1990) identify two qualitatively different ways of engaging the show: the "referential" and the "critical." A "referential" framework treats characters and plots as if they were real. Viewers assuming this approach observe the program in connection with an observation about real life; they are, in other words, rather engrossed in the "reality" of the television text. The opposite stance, one that Liebes and Katz label "critical," is an emotionally more detached one that treats the program as artistic construction. Here "critical" is used in the sense of literary criticism, rather than as Marxist criticism or simply as being judgmental.

While viewers across groups approach *Dallas* more "referentially" than "critically," Liebes and Katz find people of different cultural backgrounds demonstrate different kinds and levels of critical ability. In particular, groups that are more removed from Western culture appear to be less critical, in the sense that they are more emotionally absorbed in the happenings on the show. In comparison, the Americans engage the program in an intellectually more critical yet emotionally more light-hearted manner, attending more to its generic formulae, narrative schemes, and other esthetic deployments in storytelling. The most critical group was the Japanese. However, unlike viewers in other groups who, despite their various grudges against *Dallas*, did enjoy it, the Japanese hated it. Liebes and Katz attribute the Japanese aversion to *Dallas* primarily to the program's incompatibilities with viewer expectations both of art and of life. As an artistic construct, *Dallas* violated the Japanese expectations regarding various generic conventions; as an allegory, *Dallas* jarred with the value orientation of the Japanese society at the time. This explanation highlights the key role played by context in shaping cross-cultural media reception. If the Japanese antipathy toward *Dallas* was largely due to a text–context mismatch, then the popularity of US TV among Chinese youths may well have to do with the particular socio-cultural context of contemporary China. The Japanese

case also raises the possibility that, despite their enthusiasm for US TV, Chinese fans may chafe at certain elements of that television.

The extant research thus fleshes out two important insights. First, it shows when engaging the dominant, American TV texts, audiences operate in the critical realm to various extents and in different modes. Cultural proximity is a significant factor here, and it plays out at multiple levels, conditioned by the audience's cultural capital. Thus, while viewers relatively removed from the Western culture may find the mediated America exotic, they may be more prone to subscribe to its "reality" partly due to their lack of media literacy. Meanwhile, as demonstrated by the Americans in Liebes and Katz's study, proximity does not necessarily coax viewers into taking the "reality" of the program seriously, inasmuch as an acquaintance with Hollywood storytelling has made them savvier when facing television reality. In short, "multiple proximities" affect the audience's textual-critical ability to approach television esthetically and analytically.

Second, the research highlights the importance of context in shaping the audience's pleasure and meaning making while watching TV. The chilly reception of *Dallas* in Japan had a great deal to do with its incongruity with Japan's particular socio-cultural condition at the time (Liebes & Katz, 1990). For a foreign program to click with local audiences, it has to make sense to them not only textually but also emotionally, i.e., to somehow mesh with audiences' perception of their local realities (Ang, 1985; Havens, 2000, 2001; Herzog-Massing, 1986).

Together, these two insights indicate that meaning not only resides at the nexus between text and reader but also derives from particular socio-historical contexts. Extending this understanding to perceived realism, many studies have noted that both the text and the context matter in perception of realism. However, to my best knowledge, no study has yet demonstrated how audience perception of realism is typically informed by both textual attributes and contextual conditions, a lacuna this study seeks to address. Next, in light of the second insight, I sketch the social backdrop of US TV's growing popularity among educated urban Chinese youths.

3. China's elite youths and their affinity for foreign media

Because the main venue for consuming US TV in China is the Internet, it is hard to pinpoint the exact demographic makeup of the fans. However, journalistic reports (French, 2006; Langfitt, 2013, 2014; Sydell, 2008) and the few academic studies about the Chinese consumption of foreign television (Jiang & Leung, 2012; Tan, 2011) indicate that the most avid viewers of US TV are young, well-educated urbanites. This observation aligns with the consensus within cross-cultural media consumption research that, compared with other social demographics, educated, cosmopolitan-oriented youths are particularly drawn to global media in general and Hollywood storytelling in particular (Butcher, 2003; Havens, 2001; Iwabuchi, 2002; Kim, 2008; Kuipers & de Kloet, 2009; Straubhaar, 2003).

Born in the 1980s, the subjects of this research belong to China's first generation of children under the one-child policy. As only children in their families, they have been raised with not only unprecedented parental largesse but also extraordinary pressures from parents and society to attain high academic and professional achievements (Fong, 2004). Meanwhile, despite the quick development of China's higher education, attending college (especially good ones) remains more a privilege than a right, and the system generally favors urban students over rural ones (Kipnis, 2001). As a result, although not necessarily urbanites by birth, the high-achieving members of the post-80s generation usually end up attending college and later working in urban China, especially the big cities. In this article, I refer to these youths as "elite" to stress how, in China, being both college-educated and urban marks one as belonging to a privileged social group.

China's elite youths are coming of age as the country's urban cultural landscape is rapidly diversifying and decentralizing. However, as a primary tool of the Chinese Communist Party's (CCP) political propaganda and social control, television is still under stringent state regulation (Miao, 2011). Meanwhile, as media reform accelerates commercialization, television producers find themselves sandwiched between market pressures, state directives, and audience demands. To survive an ever competitive and capricious market, and to avoid running afoul of the censor, production units resort to "safe" but insipid content rather than controversial subject matter that may provoke public debate, spark critical thinking, or challenge authority (Keane, 2012; Miao, 2011). As the famous Chinese talk show host Cui Yongyuan puts it, "If Chinese television is public television, it is the dirtiest one; if Chinese television is commercial television, it is the worst one. Our programs are boring and don't make money" (Yi, 2005, cited in Miao, 2011: 111).[3]

The lackluster domestic content has thus been a major force in driving those with more discriminating tastes to venture out of broadcast television for more enjoyable viewing options (Cai, 2008; Keane, 2005; Miao, 2011). Hollywood programming holds a special place in the hearts and minds of China's post-80s elites, which partly has to do with its increasing presence in urban China during the formative years of these youths.[4] For these youngsters, Hollywood's glamorous visual style and its narrative twists and turns not only threw into sharp relief the relatively lifeless and pretentious storytelling on Chinese screen (big and small) but also whetted their appetites for more sophisticated, higher

[3] This is not to say that all Chinese TV dramas are of low production values or simply "bad." For discussions of several Chinese shows that have managed to strike a chord in different periods, see, for instance, Lull's (1991) discussion of *New Star* (aired in 1986), Rofel's (2007) discussion of *Yearnings* (aired in 1991), and Hung's (2011) discussion of *Woju* (*Dwelling Narrowness*, aired in 2009).

[4] In 1994, the Chinese government began to import ten "excellent" foreign films each year in an attempt to resuscitate the stagnant domestic movie industry and market. Annual official imports doubled to twenty films in 2001 after China entered the WTO and increased again to thirty-four in February 2012 (Ann, 2012).

quality entertainment. This earlier exposure to Hollywood storytelling also initiated a challenge to address and tackle language and cultural barriers that they would encounter later when watching American television.

Chinese youths began to pursue US TV around the turn of the century. Thanks to new media technologies, relatively loosened cultural regulation, and devoted fans who volunteer their time, language skills, and Internet technology expertise to make subtitle translations widely available, viewers in China are able to download or stream for free an increasing number of subtitled US shows and movies from fan-created websites (French, 2006; Langfitt, 2013, 2014; Sydell, 2008).[5] With colorful vignettes and sound bites from enamored fans, journalistic reports paint an exuberant picture of the celebration of US TV in China. But little do we know what really lies behind this fascination. What do Chinese youths perceive as "real" about US TV? How does this perceived realism contribute to their viewing pleasure, particularly by recalibrating their perceived cultural distance to US content? What role does the Chinese context play in the formation and negotiation of this realism perception? How can such contextualized media use and meaning making help us understand audience agency and preoccupation and, thus, the social implications of international media flows? The next section discusses the methods and data I draw on to address these questions.

4. Methods and data

To study the way young Chinese urban elites engage American television, I conducted qualitative interviews with a non-random sample of university students in Beijing. I decided to collect data from Beijing more for its uniqueness than for its representativeness. Home to China's most ingenious and provocative artists, intellectuals, and activists, Beijing is the nation's throbbing heart of culture and creativity. Meanwhile, Beijing is the seat of authority, where regulation and censorship gets implemented most quickly and effectively. Bearing its uniqueness in mind, I do not propose that findings discovered in Beijing are replicable in other parts of China. However, precisely because Beijing is simultaneously a hotbed of creative thinking and the center of power and control, it bears the brunt of the dramatic social change that is sweeping China. Studying young people in Beijing who are caught in between global media and the state's emphasis on cultural purity thus promises to illuminate "the precarious nature of transnational cultural consumption" (Iwabuchi, 2002: 35).

My respondents were students from three universities in Beijing: Peking University (PKU), Renmin University of China (RUC), and Capital University of Economics and Business (CUEB). Both PKU and RUC are prestigious national universities whose students come from all over China; CUEB is a second-tier, more locally oriented university. The data collection spanned from September 2009 to January 2010. I recruited participants by posting study advertisements on the BBS (Bulletin Board System) of all three universities, inviting interested students to first fill out an online survey, through which I collected their basic demographic and TV viewing information.

Qualitative interviewing is an excellent choice for my study, because the objective is to discover and understand the respondents' own insights – regarding the pleasure they take in watching US TV and the meaning they make of it – rather than to make generalizations about opinions or behavior. One-on-one interviews and focus groups are qualitative interview methods commonly used in reception studies (Butcher, 2003; Kim, 2010; Liebes & Katz, 1990; McKinley, 1997). As part of a larger project that utilizes both methods, this article draws on 800 pages of transcript data from 29 one-on-one interviews.

I used two major criteria to determine my sample. First, I selected current viewers who had named at least three shows with which they were familiar enough to discuss with others. Second, I did my best to balance the gender distribution of the sample. Existing audience research suggests that television drama is more popular among female than male viewers (Kim, 2005). My sample comprised 11 males and 18 females, which, while heavy on females, was in line with expectations. All names used in this article are pseudonyms to maintain respondent confidentiality.

I conducted all interviews in Mandarin Chinese and later translated the transcripts into English. I interviewed each student by following a semi-structured guide. The loose structure was first necessitated by the sorely lacking existing knowledge about the consumption of foreign popular culture in China. Given the exploratory nature of my study, before going into the field I simply had no pre-categorized responses with which to assemble a more structured interview protocol. Moreover, I wanted to capture in as much detail as possible fans' own accounts of their viewing experiences in order to better understand their enthusiasm for US TV. Semi-structured interviews, sometimes equated with qualitative interviewing as such (Warren, 2002), can be very revealing and informative in this regard because it allows the researcher much more leeway to probe angles deemed important by the respondents and to pick up information that has not occurred to the researcher or of which the researcher has no prior knowledge (Brinkmann, 2013).

Each interview went through a series of more or less open-ended questions clustering around four topics: (1) initial experience with US TV, (2) current favorite US show, (3) comparison and contrast with Chinese TV, and (4) self-reported effects of watching US TV. Because the respondents often addressed spontaneously questions appearing later in the protocol, I used the protocol as a loose guide, following the flow of each interview while making sure to cover all questions. The complete interview guide is available upon request; here I discuss the first three topics that are most relevant to this article.

[5] In contemporary urban China, English is in the official curriculum from the third grade on and is one of the compulsory subjects in *gaokao* – China's national college entrance examination. English education continues in college, where students must pass at least Band 4 of the CET (College English Test) to get their degrees. Although certain plots, jokes, and other cultural references are bound to be lost in translation (or lack thereof), a large number of Chinese college students have English-language proficiency to more or less understand the premise of a typical US show, especially with subtitles.

The first topic inquired about the respondents' initial experiences with US TV. In light of the notions of cultural proximity and cultural capital, I wanted to investigate with this inquiry whether earlier exposures to US programming had helped cultivate in these youths a sense of proximity with the Hollywood formula; I also wanted to examine how such affinity might have contributed to further pursuit of US TV as it became increasingly accessible.

Moving on to the second topic, I invited the students to share their thoughts about their favorite US shows. Here I departed from the routine of picking a particularly popular or otherwise important show to focus on,[6] because I wanted to probe the students' idiosyncratic fascination and choices rather than their response to some common option or already determined show. Moreover, the abundance of US programming on the Internet, coupled with its near absence on broadcast television in China, meant that it would have been difficult to pick one show that everyone would have felt strongly about. Given the crucial role of perceived realism – especially emotional realism – in media reception, this topic contained questions that specifically asked whether and why the respondent thought the discussed show was realistic or truthful in its representations.

The third topic asked the respondents to compare their favorite American shows with Chinese shows of similar genres or subject matter. In view of the importance of context in shaping cross-cultural media reception, I included these comparative questions to uncover the special appeal of US TV in the Chinese context.

I treated each interview as a text for qualitative analysis, following the inductive strategy of grounded theory (Charmaz, 2004). During initial open coding, I read through the interview transcripts several times and identified segments of statements with emerging meanings. I then created labels/codes to summarize those meanings; the goal was to link the open-ended and expansive respondent statements with my research concerns by categorizing meaning and interpretation. At this stage I identified several salient and recurrent codes (e.g., perceived realism, sensitive/controversial content, comparison with Chinese TV, etc.) that would eventually form my conceptual scaffolding. Among these, I chose perceived realism as the central construct for further focused coding. During this process, my data revealed two textual features of television content (*topicality of subject matter* and *complex characterization*), which my respondents repeatedly invoked when accounting for their perception of US TV as "real." My analysis links the realism perception among the respondents to these textual features of US TV and to the Chinese context within which this television is consumed.

Because of the non-random nature of the sample and the small sample size, findings are not meant to be generalizable – obviously not to Chinese audiences at large, and not even to Chinese fans of US TV in particular. Instead, my hope is that these students' perceptions and interpretations of US TV will provide a window into the ways in which a typical group of privileged and aspiring youths in China engage a powerful component of global media and mobilize such border-crossing media experiences in their daily lives.

5. Realism perception of American television among Chinese youths

"I love this show because it's so real (*zhenshi*)!" was a pithy first reply from about half of the respondents when asked to explain why particular US programs were their favorites; it was also the single most common refrain I heard repeatedly throughout the interviews. Intriguingly, to a separate question that explicitly asked the respondents whether they believed their favorite shows were realistic or truthful, most responded either negatively, with something like "Of course it's not real; it's television we are talking about," or simply by retorting "How would I know? I've never been to the US!" Although I did not realize at the time that "*zhenshi*" would turn out to be the fulcrum of my research, the language caught my attention, and the semi-structured interview format allowed me to elicit clarifications on the seemingly paradoxical remark that US TV is unrealistic but nevertheless something that feels "real." Respondent elaborations crystallize around two textual features of US TV: *topicality of subject matter* and *complex characterization*.

5.1. Topicality of subject matter

For this study, a show's topicality refers to its references to current events and coverage of relevant and diverse social matters. My analyses in this Section 5.1 thus focus on respondent perceptions of US TV's *timeliness* (Section 5.1.1) and its seemingly *all-encompassing content* (Section 5.1.2).

5.1.1. Timeliness

To many respondents, a show feels more realistic and taps into their emotions more effectively if it is "up to date." For example, Shen Beili was pleasantly surprised to see the two protagonists on *Boston Legal* arguing over the upcoming 2008 US presidential election in an episode aired on the eve of the Election Day. "It felt very here-and-now, very realistic," she marvels. Similarly, having followed ABC's medical drama *Grey's Anatomy* for 5 seasons, Peng Yu tells me the show is a personal favorite because it "feels real":

[6] For example, *Dallas* has been repeatedly studied by different scholars among different groups of audiences (e.g., Ang, 1985; Liebes & Katz, 1990). Researchers have also studied receptions of such popular programs as *The Cosby Show* (Havens, 2000; Jhally & Lewis, 1992) and *Beverly Hills, 90210* (McKinley, 1997).

> It takes pains to blend in many things. For example, it. . .references the recent economic downturn by including plotlines about hospital merging and hospital cutbacks and lay-offs. . . You can see whatever is currently happening in real life on the show. (Peng Yu, female, 21-year-old)

Commenting more generally on the spontaneity of US TV, Zhang Hui says:

> American TV runs an episode a week, and each episode speaks to the real-life events in that week, which I think is a very mindful reference to real time. Chinese TV. . .doesn't have that kind of time-sensitiveness. . . You can't possibly imagine, say, because Obama was here last week, that there would be a reference to his visit on a Chinese show. . . But they are like. . . say a financial crisis is sweeping Wall Street; they'd script a Madoff fraud look alike (on *Lie to Me*). Or, say, universities are pinching pennies due to a tight budget, and as a result you really see Dan Humphrey's Yale dream get crushed and he ends up going to NYU (on *Gossip Girl*). These are all closely related to real life. . . Such effort at detail definitely makes a difference. When you watch [US TV], you feel you are taken seriously as an audience. (Zhang Hui, male, 21-year-old)

At first glance, the realism these students speak of is straightforwardly empirical, hinged upon the fit of what is in the television text and the externally perceptible realities. However, unlike the "referential" viewing Liebes and Katz (1990) identify in their aforementioned study, where verisimilitude induces pleasure via suppressing a program's constructedness, my respondents insist upon and delight in US TV's "realness" not by letting themselves forget but precisely by dwelling on its constructedness. We thus see the students invoke "critical" frames to make seemingly "referential" points: they claim forthrightly that US TV is "real," and yet, phrases like "mindful reference" and "effort at detail" not only reveal their clear awareness of the program's fictional nature but also demonstrate their critical ability of framing it as an artistic construction with particular esthetic choices.

The appreciation of US TV's timeliness would be impossible if not for the cultural capital these youths possess. US TV may have obtained a halo of authenticity thanks to its incorporation of many real-life events, but as real as they were, the events that got recognized and mentioned – be they Obama's presidential campaign or the US financial recession – did not actually happen in my respondents' immediate (Chinese) context. Some questions thus arise: against which reality are these youths gauging the realism of US TV, and what, indeed, constitutes their reality? In line with the idea that cultural capital fosters "multiple proximities" within a single geographical space (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005), the above quotes suggest that cultural capital may well partake in people's definition of their realities in the first place. As China's elite youths increasingly rely on more timely and less controlled media – such as the Internet – to stay informed (Miao, 2011), they have assumed a more cosmopolitan outlook, which in turn helps to broaden the scope of their reality.

Last but not least, Chinese youths may find US TV's sensitivity to time impressive partly because of the different, if not completely opposite, experience they have had watching Chinese TV. Given the standard practice of shooting all episodes of a show at once prior to broadcasting and the prolonged process of passing government reviews and getting the license required for distribution (Zhu et al., 2008), it is much harder to make timely references on Chinese television. Thus, while spontaneity does enhance US TV's "formal realism" (Corner, 1998) through literally representing real life situations, the appeal of this television in the Chinese context arguably has more to do with a sense of "emotional realism" (Ang, 1985) it affords. As the quotes suggest, the emotional resonance felt by the viewers is not with particular characters just yet. Rather, it stems from an appreciation of US TV as thoughtful and truthful cultural representation, produced with enough attention and care to "take audiences seriously."

5.1.2. All-encompassing content

The other contributor to US TV's topicality is its "openness" – its engagement with topics and conceits that are only alluded to, if not completely shunned, on Chinese TV. The most frequently and elaborately discussed topics fall into two categories: socio-political critique and sexual content. While the latter is a fairly explicit category, the former is more of a hodgepodge that includes comments on a variety of matters such as corruption, political conspiracy, mistrust of government, and so on.

5.1.2.1. Socio-political critique. Liang Hai frequently speaks of US TV as "real," "relatable," "transcending cultural boundaries," and so on. To find out more about his unapologetic endorsement, I ask him why, as a Chinese person, he has come to view American shows as more "true" to life. His response, tellingly, begins with complaints about Chinese television:

> I can't stand mainland Chinese TV shows. . . It's all about the lofty, the noble, and the perfect (*gao, da, quan*), but how could anyone be that perfect? It just doesn't feel real. . . One of the reasons that we like US TV so much is that it reveals all aspects of life, whether it's dark or bright, private or public. . . They can report their leaders however they want, be honest about mistakes made by their leaders, or even crack jokes about the seemingly prim and proper politicians. They don't evade anything and everything gets reflected on TV. . . That kind of openness, that candidness of giving you freedom and letting you see everything, is what's most appealing about US TV. . . Their media show you a world closer to reality. (Liang Hai, male, 20-year-old)

To Liang Hai, US TV stands out as "authentic" mainly because it is foiled against the largely agitprop Chinese TV. His belief in the total transparency of US TV may rightfully strike some as naïve. But, when juxtaposed with the highly restrained content on Chinese TV, the apparent no-holds-barred American approach may well appear genuine. Indeed, to many respondents, unremitting darkness and moral ambiguity seem to lend US TV a charming air of candor. For example, speaking of the action drama and political thriller *24*, Bai Tong insists the show is "real" despite its braided plots and staccato pace. As someone who finds the show entertaining but its plausibility strained, I press Bai Tong for some justification. He responds by remarking that although *24* is apparently about counterterrorism, it also explores other broad and complex themes such as democracy and patriotism:

> The show has a very important tangent: almost every season features a president's scandal, or the hoopla around an election campaign... You get to see nasty personal attacks between candidates... You might see the vice president trying to usurp the president's seat... All those ugly things are laid bare right in front of you, warts and all... I used to be like, America has democracy and freedom; their leaders are all produced through free elections; anyone, no matter how grassroots you are, can be a national leader as long as you try. I used to believe all that. But now I realize that their democracy can be just a mere token... I think one of the great things about *24* is that it really pushes you to think. (Bai Tong, male, 22-year-old)

Much has been written in the US about the problematic politics of *24*, which premiered two months after the September 11th attacks and uncannily paralleled a decade of American obsession over national security (e.g., Green, 2005; Mayer, 2007). For critics who take issue with *24*'s normalization of torture or the conservative credos that allegedly anchor the show, Bai Tong's positive take on the program may be seen as having missed the point. But his embrace of *24* for being revealing and thought-provoking is apropos to his reflection upon the Chinese media landscape, where complexities and controversies are conspicuously missing. Case in point, when I interviewed Bai Tong in 2009, the devastating 2008 Wenchuan earthquake was still fresh in the Chinese collective memory. While official corruption and negligence were fundamental reasons for the disaster's heavy casualties and damages (Qian, 2009), state media coverage was frustratingly misleading and paternalistic, turning the tragedy of the earthquake into a didactic "tragi-comedy of the people-centered myth" (Yin & Wang, 2010: 396). Against this backdrop, *24* feels "real" to Bai Tong precisely because it is myth-debunking for him. By exposing the hypocritical side of American democracy, *24* has challenged Bai Tong's earlier, rosier imagination of American politics, but that is exactly what he appreciates as "real" – it does not so much concern the happenings on television as it does the showing by television of "all those ugly things, warts and all." With broad coverage of the many and thorny themes of the human condition, shows like *24* provide a much-needed antidote to the whitewashed cheerfulness of Chinese mediascape.

The frustration over Chinese TV's uncontroversial purity is a significant theme that threads a large number of my interviews. Peng Yu takes up the issue by offering her observation and theory about the current inundation of Chinese TV with period dramas:

> Lately almost every channel airs historical shows. Why? You see, our society has various problems, but you can't really make shows directly tackling those problems in the here and now. So you project them onto the past. Why do you think so many historical shows are about corruption, or social inequality, or legal justice – remember all those shows featuring fair-and-square judges? Well, they're trying to draw people's attention [to something], but in a very indirect way. Because in China, you can't really express or discuss things point blank, like the way *Prison Break* alludes to corruption and conspiracy. So people take all sorts of roundabout routes. (Peng Yu, female, 21-year-old)

For many respondents who share Peng Yu's concern about media censorship, watching US TV wade into uncomfortable social issues has been an eye-opening experience. Chinese television may be more indigenous to these youths, but that does not necessarily grant it a more privileged relation to the "real," not if realism is assessed as a project concerning thematic relevance and emotional resonance. Instead, being squeaky clean makes the truthfulness of many Chinese programs pale in comparison with their American counterparts, where piety gets tossed aside for something grittier, less predictable, and less burdened with being good and responsible. That said, not all unrestrained content on US TV is welcomed without ambiguities. Sex, as it turns out, is a particularly divisive subject.

5.1.2.2. Sexual content. Speaking of her favorite show *Friends*, Song Fang marvels at how it takes "sensitive" matters so lightly, even playfully:

> Unlike Chinese comedies where you'd only see "pure" and "clean" stuff such as friendships and kinships, they actually talk about sex and things your parents wouldn't talk with you about. And those things aren't discussed at school either. It almost felt like a taboo area I'd never been to... I used to think only bad kids think about those things. But on US TV people just spit those words out and talk about those things naturally, like there's nothing wrong or abnormal about it. I feel they're really open. (Song Fang, female, 20-year-old)

When I ask Song Fang if she felt some sort of "cultural shock" when she first stumbled upon the "taboo area" through watching US TV, she says:

> It took some getting used to... But the more I watch, the more I feel it's actually a better way to deal with those things. Because those are things you'd bump into in real life no matter what, so why blush about them and why bother avoiding them? (Song Fang, female, 20-year-old)

More than anything else, it is the "everyday" nature of and open approach to sex on US TV that strikes Song Fang as refreshingly authentic, especially in comparison with how, in China, the topic is avoided or controlled on television as well as in everyday interactions. For Song Fang, since sex is an inevitable, real-life matter, featuring it not only does not make a show obscene but offers more informal and less condescending education on this must-know topic. Intriguingly, though, shortly after her endorsement of a more "open" approach to sex, when I ask if Song Fang has any reservation about *Friends*, she is quick to share her befuddlement with the sexual permissiveness it promulgates:

> [In China,] everybody is really careful about it [sex]... It's like, if you've done it before getting married, you are not pure, or you are a bad girl or something... But they seem to be really casual in America... For example, Rachel and Monica would say things like, "I went out with my boyfriend and made love with him." And then a few days later, they'd break up! To them, going out automatically means making love... I find that incredible. I guess there are certain things that I simply can't identify with. (Song Fang, female, 20-year-old)

Speaking in a "referential" manner, Song Fang rejects the casual sex on *Friends* in connection with an observation about her own real life, and she finds the sexual culture depicted on *Friends* "incredible." This designation of near falsity is not unlike when she suggests, earlier, that including sexual content "naturally," as the show sometimes does, is "true to real life." Quite a few students – mostly girls – share Song Fang's ambiguity about sex on US TV. While specific opinions vary, many students tell me they find "vulgar" or "shallow" portrayals of sex "unfathomable." This dismissal resembles the Japanese distaste for *Dallas* due to a clash of values between the Japanese culture and the American culture manifested in the program (Liebes & Katz, 1990). But the students in my study more explicitly employ the language of realism in expressing their value preferences: a smattering of sex on television can feel enticingly truthful, but when it diverges too much from one's Chinese experience and cultural taste, its plausibility becomes tenuous.

5.2. Complex characterization

Besides topicality, my respondents frequently bring up true-to-life characters to make the claim that US TV feels "real." For example, speaking of his favorite show *The Sopranos*, Sun Yang says he can relate to the program's central mobster Tony Soprano: "He is at once a son, a husband, a father, a businessman, an animal lover, and a middle-aged man with multiple weaknesses. Each comes across as so real!" In terms of cultural proximity, this kind of realism perception has been tied to the cultural-linguistic similarities between audiences and the TV characters (La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005; Livingstone, 1988); in terms of emotional realism, it has been attributed to audiences' emotional resonance with the characters at a connotative level (Ang, 1985). In this section, I inspect the specificities both cultural proximity and emotional realism take on when applied to explain the Chinese identification with US TV characters.

The notion of "multiple proximities" suggests the distance from the center of global media can be not only geographical but also socio-cultural or demographic (Kuipers & de Kloet, 2009; La Pastina & Straubhaar, 2005). In view of this idea, and given the tremendous linguistic and cultural differences between China and the United States, Chinese youths' affinity with US TV characters demands a closer examination of the particular dimension of proximity that is at work, the way it is perceived and constructed, as well as the way it intertwines with the audience's realism appraisal and viewing pleasure. Thus, noting that Soprano is distant from Sun Yang in multiple aspects – ethnicity, age, language, occupation, values, etc., I ask Sun Yang what he means by "real" and how he assesses the realism of a character so distinct from himself. Instead of answering directly, he says:

> I've noticed a big difference between Western and Chinese TV: programs from the West tend to dig more deeply into humanity. And humanity, that's something universal, right? So...when I see a character on [US] TV, I only see a human being. I see him in a specific circumstance, which may be very different from my own. And most probably what I see and feel is going to be very different from what an American audience sees and feels. But still, I think as fellow human beings we have a lot in common. (Sun Yang, male, 22-year-old)

Well aware of the apparent differences between Soprano and himself, and indeed, well aware of the likely disparate perceptions of the character among culturally distinct audiences, Sun Yang attributes his emotional resonance with the antihero to the entire series' firm grasp of universal humanity. The attribution, together with the indirect way Sun Yang addresses my question, reveals his textual-critical ability to approach television esthetically and analytically. In other words, he identifies as much with the *characterization* of Soprano (as a strategy of storytelling) as with the *character* of Soprano (as a persona in the story told). This distinction harks back to my earlier observation that my respondents' critical viewing stance both precedes and intertwines with their referential involvement with US TV, i.e., their perception of US TV as "real" is built through scrutinizing its very constructedness.

Additionally, Sun Yang's affinity for and ability to appreciate sophisticated characterization demonstrates the way in which cultural proximity operates at multiple levels in shaping cross-cultural media reception. Specifically, while the character Soprano is distant from Sun Yang's lived experience, its characterization is also unusual in the sense that such a

complicated and multidimensional figure hardly exists on the Chinese small screen. However, this foreignness attracts rather than deters Sun Yang partly because of his socio-cultural background. A Shanghai native who double majors in an elite university in Beijing, Sun Yang has had greater access to new media and Western culture than many older Chinese and his less-privileged peers. He thus has more discriminating tastes and greater transnational cultural knowhow to appreciate the relatively subtle and nuanced characterization on US TV. In short, a dimension of US TV's exoticism – character complexity – is nevertheless key to Sun Yang's felt proximity to it thanks to his cultural capital.

Granted, *The Sopranos* being a quintessential example of "quality TV," Sun Yang's fascination with it is not inconceivable or particularly "Chinese." Let us then look at a case that does not concern a particularly premium production. Take the quote below from Guo Tian, who is following both the Chinese police show *Zhong'an Liuzu* (*Felony Investigation Unit Six*) and the CBS police procedural drama *Criminal Minds*. She explains her preference for the latter:

> *Zhong'an Liuzu*. . .only gives star treatment to the two protagonists – the smartest female and male police officers. . . The heroine and the hero are always at work. Even when her sister runs into some kind of trouble, she acts like a police officer, you know, always putting righteousness above family and talking about serving the people all the time. . . While both [shows] promote the moral of truth, benevolence, and goodness, on *Zhong'an Liuzu* that moral is only carried out by. . .the good guys. . . But *Criminal Minds* explores humanity by delving into real social life, really zooming in on ordinary people. . . It attends to the good qualities of minor characters, sometimes even the criminals. (Guo Tian, female, 21-year-old)

Compared with *Zhong'an Liuzu*, which dissatisfies Guo Tian with its stereotypical characterization, the relatively even-handed approach to the various characters on *Criminal Minds* strikes her as more truthful to the social reality of "ordinary people." Situated at a connotative level, this identification draws attention to the emotional realism of US TV. Insofar as emotional realism works through appealing to the viewer's subjective experience of the world (Ang, 1985), unpacking the emotional meanings Guo Tian and her peers ascribe to US TV sheds light on the prevailing "structure of feeling" among these youths. Meanwhile, the analysis requires us to keep in mind the domestic television culture Chinese youths grew up in and to ask how it may have contextualized their perception and interpretation of US TV. Indeed, as Guo Tian further opines her relative lack of resonance with Chinese TV characters, she branches out from commenting on television to contemplating the cultural environ at home:

> I think the ideological control in China constrains people's imagination. Because it's always been like this. . . There is this [Chinese] program called *Dianying Chuanqi* (*Movie Legends*). . .which is sort of a review of all the iconic movies produced after 1949. If you watch that program, you'll notice a clear pattern [of most of those movies]. Basically, it's building a heroic image and putting it up on a pedestal, then promoting that image to everybody in society, like, really hammering it into people's head and making it an idol for people to worship. (Guo Tian, female, 21-year-old)

Through Guo Tian's envision of how iconic heroes in mainstream Chinese films have been lifted out of reality and "put up on pedestals," we gain a more contextualized understanding of her attraction to the unconventional ways morality and humanity are handled on US TV. With predominantly one-dimensional characters, black-and-white moral codes, and direct ideological preaching, the lion's share of Chinese shows, even though they feature familiar-looking social scenarios and characters, are emotionally more alienating than inviting to young cosmopolitans like Guo Tian and Sun Yang. As their quotes illustrate, viewers' identification with TV characters is more complex than a straightforward matter of similarity or familiarity. In comparison with the typically clichéd characterization on Chinese TV, US TV characters are portrayed with so many layers, so much fluidity, and such depth that they are seen by Chinese youths as at once provocative and sympathetic, both emotionally and intellectually.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This study addressed a lacuna within cross-cultural media consumption research, namely, how perceived realism, which is essential to the pleasure of watching television, is both organized by media texts and shaped by consumption contexts. To that end, I inspected a rarely studied cross-cultural media encounter by examining the popularity of American television fiction among elite Chinese youths. I found that these youths are drawn to US TV largely because they perceive its topical content and complex characterization as true to life, especially in comparison with the majority of Chinese shows. I have emphasized and demonstrated that this realism perception needs to be understood within the socio-cultural context of contemporary urban China. To wit, disillusioned with a domestic TV market plagued by copycat shows and propagandist dramas, when elite Chinese youths encounter programming that tackles sensitive and controversial contemporary issues and portrays characters with numerous shades and subtle strokes, they see in this television a rare kind of "truth."

Such cross-cultural appreciation requires an English language ability and global media literacy that in China only a trailblazing minority possess, and only time will tell whether, and to what extent, their taste for foreign content will spill over into a larger audience. Belonging to a small educated elite, my participants' cosmopolitan orientation and transnational cultural capital not only helps redefine their cultural distance from global – mainly American – content but also allows them to engage it in a critical manner. As I have illustrated, these youths are well aware of the artificiality of US TV and they show ample ability to grasp the art and craft of Hollywood storytelling. Indeed, I have argued it is precisely the knowledge of the

constructedness of these shows and the process of reconstruction that create a sense of reality and authenticity. To elite Chinese youths, the pleasure of watching US TV stems as much from the semblance of "reality" as from the sense of "a job well done" – an appreciation that their textual-critical capacities are more awakened and respected via US (versus Chinese) TV.

Especially given my respondents' strong textual-critical faculties, it is intriguing that they should universally adopt *zhenshi*, the word for "real," to encapsulate their partiality for a patently manufactured content. Examining this perceived realism through the conceptual lens of emotional realism (Ang, 1985) sheds light on not only the moral order to which these youths tacitly attach but also contemporary China's socio-political context. Specifically, elite youths are among the most sensitive, savvy, and vocal in pursuing freedom of speech, media transparency, and quality entertainment. These notions are more novel than taken for granted in contemporary Mainland China, where various aspects of social life are heavily regulated by the state. Thus, the social revelations on US TV may be neither accurate nor innocent of hegemonic sway – indeed, American popular culture in general has been criticized for being "fake" or heavily commercialized (e.g., Adorno & Horkheimer, 1979 [1944]; Potter, 2010). Nevertheless, in a land where all sorts of existential questions are greeted with prepackaged answers, the relative narrative openness and complexity of US TV bespeaks a broader sophistication, and it taps into young people's demand for something more "real."

More specifically, when my respondents applaud US TV for being "real," what they mean is that, compared with the largely stodgy storytelling on Chinese TV, US TV tends to be, or at least seems, emergent and spontaneous as opposed to planned and staged; it is or seems open and revealing as opposed to controlled and whitewashed; it is or seems deep and complex as opposed to shallow and simplistic; and it is or seems full of subtleties and ambiguities as opposed to imposing black-and-white morality and straightforward preaching. In short, what Chinese youths identify with is not so much a certain version of reality as a particular *way of representing* reality; they perceive US TV as honest and competent in capturing the messiness of life.

Unpacking this perceived realism in the Chinese context demonstrates the complicated ways in which realism assessment may intertwine with cultural proximity to affect cross-cultural media reception. While earlier propositions about cultural proximity emphasize familiar cultural elements as boosters of realism perception and drivers of global media flows, my findings indicate that proximity is not a simple matter of familiarity, nor is it determined solely by geo-linguistic distance. In the Chinese case, for instance, novelty trumps familiarity in cultivating affinity: young people embrace US TV for being more authentic precisely because they appreciate two of its textual qualities that are atypical of Chinese television – topicality and character complexity.

Such cosmopolitan allegiances, though strongly signaled, are not without restrictions or ambiguities. A prime example is the serious reservations my respondents have about the primacy of sex on US TV: some express incredulity toward this representation; others take issue with its gratuitous nature. This rejection may manifest a fundamental value clash between two distinct cultures; it also echoes previous research in suggesting that, despite the remarkable power of global media in challenging local identity, sex is one of those identity aspects where traditions hold sway (Butcher, 2003; Kim, 2005). As this finding illustrates, cultural capital in the form of textual-critical capacities is only part of the equation of perceived cultural proximity. Tastes bounded by social values and cultural traditions also affect the assessment of truthful or relatable content. In this sense, realism is a normative construction, shaped within certain national and political contexts, under "pressures toward such categories as the 'socially ordinary,' or the 'socially problematic'" (Corner, 1998: 72). Further research is needed to understand where and how Chinese youths draw boundaries between "realist" and "gratuitous" television content, and how such demarcation is informed by various asymptotic facets of these youths' cross-cultural identification.

In summation, the socio-political context of contemporary China has lent US TV an aura of authenticity in the appreciative eyes of elite youths, while cultural tradition sets limits to the kinds of "reality" portrayed in this television. Given China's unique media system and political environment, the Chinese reception of US TV is not a typical case of cross-cultural media flow. Indeed, due to the particular ways this television disseminates in China, its popularity explains transnational cultural flows not so much in terms of economic dependence or cultural invasion as by highlighting the alternative meanings that are afforded in foreign content but lacking in local content. Unfolding these meanings thus clarifies why American television has gained an edge and become a new point of collective meaning among elite Chinese youths: it serves as a cultural touchstone in a society where "authenticity," or the appearance of it, has become a rare asset. However embryonic this quest for realness may be, it may well be heralding the next cultural preoccupation of China's emerging leaders.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the respondents for generously sharing their thoughts and feelings with me. I am indebted to Scott Zeman, Markus Karner, Forrest Zhang, Ijlal Naqvi, John Williams, HOON Chang Yau, Clara Rodriguez, Christie Napa Scollon, Hiro Saito, and Norman Li for reading and commenting on earlier versions of this article. Finally, I wish to thank the Editor-in-Chief Marc Verboord and the two anonymous reviewers at *Poetics* for their thoughtful feedback and support.

References

Adorno, T. W., & Horkheimer, M. (1979 [1944]). The culture industry: Enlightenment as mass deception. In J. Curran, M. Gurevitch, & J. Woollacott (Eds.), *Mass communication and society* (pp. 349–383). Sage.

Ang, I. (1985). *Watching Dallas: Soap opera and the melodramatic imagination*. Routledge.
Ann, H. L. (2012, March). *Mega-imports to increase by 14 annually – Domestic movies facing challenge and change*. Retrieved from http://finance.cnr.cn/gundong/201202/t20120219_509180375.shtml
Beattie, A. C. (2013, April). *Why China obsesses over "The Walking Dead"*. Retrieved from http://adage.com/article/global-news/china-obsessing-walking-dead/240725/
Bielby, D. D., & Harrington, C. L. (2005). Opening America? The telenovel-ization of U.S. soap operas. *Television & New Media, 6*(4), 383–399.
Biltereyst, D. (1991). Resisting American hegemony: A comparative analysis of the reception of domestic and US fiction. *European Journal of Communication, 6*, 469–497.
Bourdieu, P. (1984). *Distinction: A social critique of the judgment of taste*. Harvard University Press.
Brinkmann, S. (2013). *Qualitative interviewing*. Oxford University Press.
Busselle, R. W., & Greenberg, B. S. (2000). The nature of television realism judgments: A reevaluation of their conceptualization and measurement. *Mass Communication and Society, 3*(2/3), 249–268.
Butcher, M. (2003). *Transnational television, cultural identity and change: When STAR came to India*. Sage.
Cai, R. (2008). Carnivalesque pleasure: The audio-visual market and the consumption of television drama. In Y. Zhu, M. Keane, & R. Y. Bai (Eds.), *TV drama in China* (pp. 129–144). Hong Kong University Press.
Charmaz, K. (2004). Grounded theory. In S. N. Hesse-Biber & P. Leavy (Eds.), *Approaches to qualitative research: A reader on theory and practice* (pp. 496–521). Oxford University Press.
Corner, J. (1998). *Studying media: Problems of theory and method*. Edinburgh University Press.
Dhoest, A. (2007). Identifying with the nation: Viewer memories of Flemish TV fiction. *European Journal of Cultural Studies, 10*(1), 55–73.
Fong, V. (2004). *Only hope: Coming of age under China's one-child policy*. Stanford University Press.
French, H. W. (2006, August). Chinese tech buffs slake thirst for US TV shows. *The New York Times* Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/09/world/asia/09china.html?_r=2
Gitlin, T. (2001). *Media unlimited: How the torrent of images and sounds overwhelms our lives*. New York Metropolitan Books.
Green, A. (2005, May). Normalizing torture on '24'. *The New York Times* Retrieved from http://www.nytimes.com/2005/05/22/arts/television/22gree.html?pagewanted=all&_r=1&
Griffiths, A. (1995). National and cultural identity in a Welsh language soap opera. In R. Allen (Ed.), *To be continued: Soap operas around the world* (pp. 81–97). Routledge.
Hall, A. (2003). Reading realism: Audiences' evaluations of the reality of media texts. *Journal of Communication, 53*(4), 624–641.
Havens, T. (2000). "The biggest show in the world": Race and the global popularity of The Cosby Show. *Media, Culture & Society, 22*(4), 371–391.
Havens, T. (2001). Subtitling rap: Appropriating the Fresh Prince of Bel-Air for youthful identity formation in Kuwait. *Gazette, 63*(1), 57–72.
Herzog-Massing, H. (1986). Decoding "Dallas". *Society, 24*(1), 74–77.
Hung, R. Y. Y. (2011). The state and the market: Chinese TV serials and the case of Woju (dwelling narrowness). *Boundary 2, 38*(2), 155–187.
Iwabuchi, K. (2002). *Recentering globalization: Popular culture and Japanese transnationalism*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
Jhally, S., & Lewis, J. M. (1992). *Enlightened racism: The Cosby Show, audiences, and the myth of the American dream*. Boulder: Westview Press.
Jiang, Q. L., & Leung, L. (2012). Lifestyles, gratifications sought, and narrative appeal: American and Korean TV drama viewing among Internet users in urban China. *The International Communication Gazette, 74*(2), 159–180.
Keane, M. (1999). Television and civilization: The unity of opposites? *International Journal of Cultural Studies, 2*(2), 246–259.
Keane, M. (2005). Television drama in China: Remaking the market. *Media International Australia, 115*, 82–93.
Keane, M. (2012). A revolution in television and a great leap forward for innovation? In T. Oren & S. Shahaf (Eds.), *Global television formats: Understanding television across borders* (pp. 306–322). Routledge.
Kim, Y. (2005). *Women, television and everyday life in Korea: Journeys of hope*. Routledge.
Kim, Y. (2008). Introduction: The media and Asian transformations. In Y. Kim (Ed.), *Media consumption and everyday life in Asia* (pp. 1–26). Routledge.
Kim, Y. (2010). Female individualization? Transnational mobility and media consumption of Asian women. *Media, Culture & Society, 32*(1), 25–43.
Kipnis, A. (2001). The disturbing educational discipline of "peasants". *The China Journal, 46*, 1–24.
Ksiazek, T. B., & Webster, J. G. (2008). Cultural proximity and audience behavior: The role of language in patterns of polarization and multicultural fluency. *Journal of Broadcasting & Electronic Media, 52*(3), 485–503.
Kuipers, G., & de Kloet, J. (2009). Banal cosmopolitanism and The Lord of the Rings: The limited role of national differences in global media consumption. *Poetics, 37*(2), 99–118.
La Pastina, A. C., & Straubhaar, J. D. (2005). Multiple proximities between television genres and audiences. *Gazette, 67*(3), 271–288.
Langfitt, F. (2013, May). Young Chinese translate America, one show at a time. *NPR* Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/2013/03/07/173729088/young-chinese-translate-america-one-show-at-a-time
Langfitt, F. (2014, March). "Sherlock," "House Of Cards" top China's must-watch list. *NPR* Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/2014/03/10/287339133/sherlock-house-of-cards-top-chinas-must-watch-list
Liebes, T., & Katz, E. (1990). *The export of meaning: Cross-cultural readings of Dallas*. New York: Oxford University Press.
Livingstone, S. M. (1988). Why people watch soap opera: An analysis of the explanations of British viewers. *European Journal of Communication, 3*, 55–80.
Livingstone, S. M. (1998). *Making sense of television: The psychology of audience interpretation*. London: Routledge.
Lull, J. (1991). *China turned on: Television, reform, and resistance*. London/New York: Routledge.
Mayer, J. (2007, February). Whatever it takes: The politics of the man behind "24". *The New Yorker* Retrieved from http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2007/02/19/whatever-it-takes
McKinley, E. G. (1997). *Beverly Hills, 90210: Television, gender, and identity*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
Miao, D. (2011). Between propaganda and commercials: Chinese television today. In S. L. Shirk (Ed.), *Changing media* (pp. 91–114). Changing China: Oxford University Press.
Olson, S. R. (1999). *Hollywood planet: Global media and the competitive advantage of narrative transparency*. Routledge.
Potter, A. (2010). *The authenticity hoax: How we get lost finding ourselves*. Harper.
Press, A. L. (1991). *Women watching television: Gender, class, and generation in the American television experience*. University of Pennsylvania Press.
Qian, G. (2009, May). A detailed account of why the reports about collapsed school buildings in the quake have been forbidden. *China News Weekly* Retrieved from http://www.china-week.com/html/5029.htm
Rofel, L. (2007). *Desiring China: Experiments in neoliberalism, sexuality, and public culture*. Duke University Press.
Shively, J. (1992). Cowboys and Indians: Perceptions of Western films among American Indians and Anglos. *American Sociological Review, 57*(6), 725–734.
Straubhaar, J. D. (1991). Beyond media imperialism: Asymmetrical interdependence and cultural proximity. *Critical Studies in Mass Communication, 8*, 39–59.
Straubhaar, J. D. (2000). Culture, language and social class in the globalization of television. In G. Wang, J. Servaes, & A. Goonasekera (Eds.), *The new communications landscape: Demystifying media globalization* (pp. 202–228). Routledge.
Straubhaar, J. D. (2003). Choosing national TV: Cultural capital, language, and cultural proximity in Brazil. In M. G. Elasmar (Ed.), *The impact of international television: A paradigm shift* (pp. 77–110). Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Inc.
Straubhaar, J. D. (2007). *World television: From global to local*. Sage.
Straubhaar, J. D. (2008). Global, hybrid or multiple: Cultural identities in the age of satellite TV and the Internet. *Nordicom Review, 2*, 11–29.
Straubhaar, J. D., & Viscasillas, G. M. (1991). Class, genre, and the regionalization of television programming in the Dominican Republic. *Journal of Communication, 41*(1), 53–69.
Strelitz, L. N. (2002). Media consumption and identity formation: The case of the 'Homeland' viewers. *Media, Culture & Society, 24*, 459–480.

Sydell, L. (2008). Chinese fans follow American TV online – For free. *NPR (Morning Edition)* Retrieved from http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91799790
Tan, S. K. (2011). Global Hollywood, narrative transparency, and Chinese media poachers: Narrating cross-cultural negotiations of Friends in south China. *Television & New Media, 12*(3), 207–227.
Warren, C. A. B. (2002). Qualitative interviewing. In J. F. Gubrium & J. A. Holstein (Eds.), *Handbook of interview research: Context and method* (pp. 83–101). Sage.
Yi, L. (2005). An exclusive interview with Cui Yongyuan: I have something to say. *Nanfang Renwu Zhoukan (Southern People Weekly), 15*, 25.
Yin, L., & Wang, H. (2010). People-centred myth: Representation of the Wenchuan earthquake in China daily. *Discourse & Communication, 4*(4), 383–398.
Zhu, Y., Keane, M., & Bai, R. Y. (2008). Introduction. In Y. Zhu, M. Keane, & R. Y. Bai (Eds.), *TV drama in China* (pp. 1–17). Hong Kong University Press.

Yang Gao is Assistant Professor of Sociology at the School of Social Sciences, Singapore Management University.