# TV TALK: AMERICAN TELEVISION, CHINESE AUDIENCES, AND THE PURSUIT OF AN AUTHENTIC SELF

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To my parents, for their unconditional love and infinite support.

献给我的父母

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# SECTION I

# INTRODUCTION

# INTRODUCTION

*Life (in America) is depicted as.... You just feel each individual has so many choices, very diverse choices. And whatever he chooses, he doesn't have to worry much about other people's judgments. He can ask (and answer) himself more truthfully, "deep in my heart what exactly do I need and want?" You know, rather than being forced to make important choices in his life under pressures from tradition, society, public opinion, etc.*

— Sun Yang (22-year-old male, double major at RUC)

Television is the number one pastime in America. Americans spend more time watching television than doing any other leisure activity — eating, reading, exercising, socializing.[1] While individuals embrace the pleasures of television, experts have been much more critical of its impact. Beginning with the Frankfurt School, scholars have characterized mass media, and especially television, as a type of "idiot box" — enticing people into passive acceptance of dominant messages regarding politics, violence, consumption, and social stereotypes (Adorno & Horkheimer 1979 [1944]). However, more recently, scholars have questioned the assumption that viewers are mindlessly manipulated by television, arguing instead that audiences actively engage television content in ways that reflect and help to positively construct both identity and self image (Fiske 1989; McKinley 1997; Kim 2005).

Television exerts a powerful influence on how individuals perceive themselves, others, and the way viewers make sense of the world. How does the relationship between television and identity function in a global context? When television is consumed across cultural and national boundaries, does it still have the same power in shaping identity and meaning in everyday life?

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[1] According to the American Time Use Survey conducted by the Department of Labor, Americans spent just shy of 20 hours a week (2.7 hours per day) watching television in 2010, which accounted for about half of leisure time (Source: http://www.bls.gov/news.release/atus.nr0.htm). Moreover, the Internet and digital video recorders such as TiVo and DVR have upped TV consumption by enabling people to watch more "time-shifted television" (Semuels 2009).

In contemporary China, an increasing number of young, well-educated urbanites find American TV worth watching. Although not a single American show is currently broadcast on Chinese TV, fans can easily find their favorite US shows — new and classic, broadcast and premium alike — on many websites where downloads are typically free and all shows are subtitled in Chinese (French 2006; Sydell 2008). Moreover, many of these websites have morphed into booming fan communities where viewers recommend shows to one another, exchange opinions about particular shows and characters, spread production-related information, gossip about stars, and share their own artistic and other show-related ideas. This vibrant cultural scene has both inspired me and granted me the opportunity to study the intriguing intersection between global TV and young people's identity work as they navigate life in transitional urban China.

The first four chapters of this dissertation constitute my Introduction. The first chapter documents my intellectual trajectory and the evolution of my research question and approach. The second chapter reviews the literature that has inspired and informed my study. The third chapter provides background information about contemporary urban China and focuses on the socio-cultural experiences and expectations of a particular cohort, namely, well-educated urbanites born in the 1980s. I will generally refer to this group as *young Chinese urban elites*, or, for short, as *Chinese youth*.[2] The fourth (and last) chapter of this Introduction discusses methods and data collection.

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[2] I discuss the term "elite" in my methodology chapter, chapter 4.

# CHAPTER I

# INTELLECTUAL TRAJECTORY

## How It Started

"Any research is a sort of autobiography."[3] So let me begin with my own experience with American TV. I watched my first American show — in the strict sense, that is, without Chinese dubbing or the heavy editing typically done to official imports — when I was a junior at Peking University in Beijing, China. Pulling my hair out while preparing for TOEFL and the GRE, I was encouraged to watch TV shows with the original English soundtrack to hone my language skills. But at the time, unlike Hollywood blockbusters, which could be easily found in the form of pirated DVD's on every busy Beijing street corner, American TV shows were almost nowhere to be found in China. There were two important exceptions: *Friends* and *Sex and the City* were widely circulated among college students, especially those studying for various English tests in order to pursue higher degrees abroad. Desperate to improve my English, I started watching both shows. But even though I approached the shows instrumentally, just to learn English, I couldn't help but feel put off by the fake laughter on *Friends* and shocked by the audacious sexuality on *Sex and the City*.

It wasn't until I actually moved to the United States five years later that I started to watch and come to like American scripted TV. I can't quite explain the change of heart, but some of the college students I interviewed for this dissertation told me that for them US TV took some getting used to as well. My attitude changed in my sophomore year as a Ph.D. student in Sociology at Vanderbilt University. I had just survived my first year in graduate school, experiencing my fair share of struggles with both language and culture. As someone steeped in 16 years of China's test-oriented education with its emphasis on book knowledge and rote learning, I found it extremely intimidating to have to openly express my *own* opinions and judgments using English. As a result, my first year in America left me feeling exhausted and frustrated, but also determined to better my English and enrich my cultural knowledge. As a busy graduate student with a limited budget, I once again turned to TV. This time it actually grew on me.

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[3] Georges Dévereux, quoted in Ang (1985: 12).

But the idea of studying the Chinese consumption of American TV did not arise until one June day in 2008, when I heard an NPR story about young Chinese urbanites' passion for American shows such as *Lost*, *Gossip Girl*, *Prison Break*, and *Heroes*. According to the NPR piece, fans could download the newest episodes of a variety of shows, and, thanks to the voluntary work of other (even more) devoted fans and tech buffs, could even view these shows with Chinese subtitles.

At the time, I myself was a fan of many American scripted dramas, including *Desperate Housewives*, *House*, *Lost*, *24*, and so on. I was, however, surprised that those same shows, without being endorsed by the Chinese government and lacking an effective advertising platform, had blossomed into a noteworthy cultural phenomenon in urban China. Out of curiosity, I checked out the website mentioned on NPR, http://yyets.com/, and was amazed by its remarkable collection of current as well as classic TV shows.

Within 20 minutes, I had easily downloaded a free, good quality, subtitled episode of *Lost* with no commercial breaks. I explored further and discovered vast resources of American TV (and movies) on the Internet. I was also amazed at how many Chinese people — again, most of them young, urban, and well-educated — were watching and talking about US TV online.

Exploring further, I found entire seasons of a large number of shows, organized by genre and with Chinese subtitles. There was an entire community of fans who took great pains to compile and translate these shows. This work was often done with detail and care. For instance, even the voice-over narrations were translated for *Desperate Housewives* and *Grey's Anatomy*. Similarly, some fans had gone to great lengths to explain the barbs, quips, and snide remarks made by the misanthropic medical genius Dr. House on the show of the same name. Still other dedicated fans posted pages upon pages of theories trying to solve the time travel puzzles on *Lost*.

What explains the incredible passion for US TV among so many young people in China? Who are the builders, contributors, and regular visitors/users of these websites? Where do all the resources come from and how are the websites sustained and operated? Given the Chinese government's notoriously tight control of the media, how was this phenomenon of viewing American television in China even possible, and how would its future unfold? These questions became entry points for my dissertation research.

## The Initial Agenda

My initial investigation of cross-cultural media consumption considered the "active audience" branch of cultural consumption literature with its emphasis on audience power, semiotic resistance, guerrilla tactics, and textual poaching (de Certeau 1984; Fiske 1989; Jenkins 1992). I approached my topic by examining the critical consumption of American TV by Chinese youth, especially the most active fans, contributors, bloggers, website administrators, and translators. The idea that creating subtitles rendered the Chinese translators a de facto part of US TV production (that is, at least for its Chinese audience) drew me toward literature on fandom and participatory culture. Following Henry Jenkins, a prolific media scholar as well as self-proclaimed pop culture fan, but with a cross-cultural touch, I hypothesized that the most active and participatory Chinese viewers (who I began referring to as "productive consumers") would be the most critical, both in the sense of maintaining a critical distance from the shows (i.e., talking about them aesthetically and analytically) and being critical of the values and morals conveyed.

My fascination with the subtitle producers and website contributors led me to contact volunteers at several websites.  I ended up working in a translation team at www.1000fr.net/ for about 5 months. But before heading back to China for data collection, I disclosed my intention to study this group. My admission raised serious mistrust among the website translation leaders, and eventually I was kicked out of the team and my membership revoked.

## The Expected and Unexpected Turns during Data Collection

Unable to work with volunteer translators, I broadened my scope and contacted dozens of “ordinary” consumers and fans of American television and I soon began both focus groups and one-on-one interviews. As I collected data, however, I realized that my original hypothesis did not hold. In the first place, level of active involvement, which I originally theorized as the “explanatory variable” for more critical consumption, did not indicate a tangible difference. Moreover, because students across the board spoke of American TV with an overall celebratory tone, it was difficult to discern levels of critical consumption among them. The most common reason students provided for liking US TV was that “it feels real.” I had been looking for critical consumers but instead had found unapologetic enthusiasts and passionate fans.

To make things worse, perhaps due to the upcoming 2010 World Expo in Shanghai, the Chinese government suddenly tightened its grip on Internet content, forcing many of the websites with free downloads of foreign media to go under. Most small websites simply vanished, while bigger ones adopted various strategies to survive. The change was dramatic, and I wondered at the time if the consumption of American TV was just another cultural fad that would quickly sputter out.

## What the Data Say — The New Project

Back in the US, I began immersing myself in the interview transcripts — a total of about 800 pages. The majority of the interviews were complex and filled with deep reflection.  Students had a lot to say about their viewing and often provided surprisingly personal accounts of their connection to the shows.

My original research agenda aimed at eliciting students' affective evaluations of American culture and values as depicted on TV, mainly by prompting them to take sides whenever our conversations touched on ostensible cultural or value differences between China and the US. However, in the course of the interviews, I found that most of the students spontaneously extended the conversation beyond this agenda to tell me what US TV meant to them personally and how the programs mattered in their daily lives. They mixed comments about particular shows and/or characters with personal stories and anecdotes, which, while often about their desires, aspirations, and goals, sometimes included confessions about their concerns, regrets, and confusions. I discovered that TV characters were often admired or despised in the context of a student's introspection and self-understanding: "I like her because she's so different from me" or "I don't like her since she reminds me of my own flaws." The same went for appraising TV relationships: "I wish my relationship with my parents was like theirs" or "I wish I could be more assertive with my friends, like Serena is with Blair (on *Gossip Girl*)." This proclivity to look inward and speak about self was so strong that my efforts to "refocus" our conversations more narrowly on the television shows themselves were often to no avail.

Theoretically speaking, this tendency to embed narratives of self in dramatic entertainment is a paragon of self-reflexivity and, as such, it is a hallmark of modern subjectivity. As a dominant trope in theories about detraditionalization, reflexivity permeates all levels of modern life. At the individual level, reflexivity, or self-reflexivity, refers to persons' continuous "monitoring of action and its contexts" (Giddens 1990: 36); it is a practice of "self-analysis" and "self-confrontation" (Beck 1994: 5) meant to "keep in touch with the grounds of everyday life" (Kim 2008a: 8). Scholars generally concur that reflexivity only comes to the forefront of everyday practices in modern or modernizing societies, that is, in the course of the release of individuals from traditional ways of life (Giddens 1991; Beck 1994; Heelas et al. 1996). Instead of settling into prescribed identities the obligations, responsibilities, and connections of which are clearly defined by tradition, people now have to confront themselves with questions like "What to do? How to act? Who to be?" (Giddens 1991: 70). In short, modernity has made reflexivity both practical *and* imperative, and it has rendered *self* the most viable object of reflexivity.

My respondents exemplify this modern sense of reflexivity, to the degree that they were expressing and confronting themselves through two everyday contexts — in their engagement with American scripted TV and in their voluntary and passionate conversations with me about how that engagement affects them. Such extraordinarily expressive self-disclosure suggested a new set of questions about students' fascination with American shows. In particular, what is it about US TV that allowed it to prompt such intense self-reflexivity? Moreover, what were these privileged, urban, college-educated Chinese youth reflecting on?

The students' comments converge on a central theme, which, while lacking a single equivalent Chinese expression, can be best conveyed by the English word "authenticity." That is, I found my respondents drawn to US TV because it comes across as honest, sincere, and sophisticated through non-judgmental story-telling (which I will call "textual authenticity"), and because it demonstrates ways of being and relating in which one is true to oneself (which I will call "personal authenticity"). Further, these ways of being and relating constitute a repertoire of practices through which young, educated Chinese can interrogate their lives and construct authentic identities.

In short, I embarked on this research with a general curiosity about the apparent obsession among many young Chinese urban elites with American scripted TV. I wanted to try to discern which viewers were more entranced and enamored by the portrait of America on television and which viewers were more critical and playful, aware of TV production tricks and apprehensive about the values and morals depicted by the shows. My 29 conversations with university students in Beijing, however, took me on a completely different journey, one that has been at once more challenging and rewarding. Unexpectedly, my respondents revealed personal issues that confront them every day. Many yearn for a sense of authenticity, which, as a desirable existential state of being, can be activated by certain cultural experiences. As this study demonstrates, American TV manages to attract and engross young Chinese elites precisely through offering such authenticity. Thus, although circumstances forced me to reconsider the direction of my work, I am still concerned with meaning-making in and through cross-cultural media consumption. My original questions still interest me, but my research now proceeds from a perspective that examines a more profound process — *the imagination and making of self via making sense of global media content*.

In the next chapter, I review existing theories and studies in the cultural consumption/reception literature. I examine (1) what researchers have learned about the interplay between audiences and what has been loosely referred to as mass media or popular media, particularly television; (2) how the evolution of the “active audience” approach has prompted its advocates to work with some of the key constructs in modernity theories, such as identity and reflexivity; (3) how borrowing from identity theories has enriched reception literature, particularly by shifting scholarly attention from how audiences differentially decode cultural texts to how audiences understand and form themselves via media engagement in everyday lives; and (4) the link between the notion of authenticity and my respondents’ reflexive engagement with American TV, despite the lack of a single Chinese expression that corresponds to the English word authenticity.

# CHAPTER II

# LITERATURE REVIEW

## Media Power vs Audience Power

The primary debate in reception literature has always concerned the power relationship between media and audience. Specifically, are audiences at the mercy of mass media's omnipotent power (e.g., numbing, stupefying, homogenizing, etc.) or are audiences savvy and agentic enough to appropriate media texts to their own ends? At one pole of this debate is a radically critical position against mass media, spearheaded by a group of Marxist scholars collectively known as the Frankfurt school. At the center of the Frankfurt school's critique of mass media is the assertion that the rise of the culture industry and mass production under capitalism inundates audiences with standardized cultural commodities that are sold using an illusory aura of individuality. As a result, mass media break down the spontaneity, creativity, and autonomy of audiences, turning them into docile and conformist "cultural dupes" (Adorno & Horkheimer 1979 [1944]).

In contrast to mass media critics, pioneering sociologist Stuart Hall argues that audiences are more active toward and less vulnerable to the effects of mass-produced culture. Hall's ground-breaking 1973 article "Encoding/Decoding in Television Discourse" argues that textual meaning is not simply fixed or determined by the sender, but rather can be "decoded" by audiences in different ways (Morley & Chen 1996). This proposition inspired later, more radical advocates of the active audience approach. John

Fiske, a firm believer in an audience’s “semiotic power” and “semiotic resistance,” argues that people do not passively swallow mass media’s intended messages. Instead, they remain active, creative, and resistant by approaching cultural texts from their unique positions, generating their own meanings for idiosyncratic purposes. Such tactical manipulation of the dominant media messages — or what Fiske, following the French philosopher de Certeau, calls “cultural poaching” — is not to be taken lightly, because it not only grants audiences pleasure and “semiotic democracy” but also empowers them to take action in their real, everyday lives (1989: 113). For example, Fiske discusses how Madonna’s female fans read themes of feminist sexual liberation into her sexualized performances. While Madonna’s performances could easily be read as reinforcing sexism and patriarchy, some girls in the audience view the performance as a celebration of women taking charge of their own sexuality in a liberating way.

Although Fiske has been credited with opening up the theoretical space for investigating real audiences, he has been criticized for making too many assumptions about how audiences actually think about and use culture in their lives (Alexander 2003). Specifically, instead of taking a serious empirical approach and interviewing actual audience members systematically, Fiske tends to implant his own voice where we might expect or would hope to hear those of actual popular culture users.

## Interpretive Communities and Comparative Studies of TV Reception

In line with the active audience approach, numerous studies demonstrate that mass media consumers have a great deal of control over the meaning of their engagement with television, popular music, and film. Collectively, these empirical studies shift the central question from what the texts really mean to what interpretations audiences actually pull out of the texts.

Important scholars like Stanley Fish (1980) and Janice Radway (1991 [1984]) find that interpretations of texts exhibit a social dimension. In particular, people belong to “interpretive communities,” or groups of people with shared “horizons of expectations” (ways of viewing, approaching, and making sense of cultural subjects) which in turn are rooted in their shared social identities, such as gender, class, age, race and ethnicity, and so forth. The sociological concept of “interpretive communities” qualifies the polysemic nature of cultural texts within meaningful social identity categories.

Since Radway, the concept of “interpretive communities” has been widely drawn upon in scholarly investigations of interpretive differences among cultural consumers. A number of empirical studies focus on TV consumption to demonstrate and inspect differential interpretation. These studies explore interpretive styles along sociological lines of race, ethnicity, nationality, class, and age. Below, I highlight a few “milestone” studies that are valuable not only in terms of their interesting findings but also, and more importantly, for inspiring intellectual debates about their theoretical and methodological approaches. The studies described below form the foundation upon which I build my understanding of Chinese college students’ viewing of American television.

## Race, Ethnicity, and Nationality

Jhally and Lewis (1992) compare the ways white and black American audiences perceive the popular American sitcom *The Cosby Show,* which centers around a well-off African American family. They find that different racial groups appreciate the show from decidedly different interpretive perspectives. Black audiences harbor mixed feelings toward the show, i.e., appreciating the show's upper-class setting, relishing its positive depiction of African Americans, while at the same time questioning the program's "realism" by pointing out its general silence on racial and economic problems.

In a broader comparative study, Liebes and Katz (1990) explore the ways the American hit TV drama *Dallas* is differently received by six ethnic groups. They find very clear-cut interpretive differences along ethnic lines. Specifically, although all respondents alternate between different talking frames (e.g., realist, ludic/playful, analytical), different groups exhibit different propensities. The Americans, for instance, speak playfully and analytically, making them the most "media skilled" community. The study also reveals how the same show delivers different messages to people harboring different horizons of expectations. For example, while Russians see the show as glorifying capitalism, Arabs see *Dallas* as a critique of materialism and capitalism. Interestingly, despite the show's broad popularity around the world, one group in the study — the Japanese — dislike the program in general. Liebes and Katz link this rejection to the show's lack of congruence with the Japanese audiences' "horizon of expectations," e.g., their hope of encountering less stereotyped and more complex and subtle characters, or romantic themes and familial harmony instead of “dark” *Dallas* themes such as family strife and betrayal.

## Class

Leal and Oliven (1988) find that Brazilian respondents from different social classes employ distinct narrative styles when asked to retell an episode of a soap opera. Each class also perceives the central theme of the show differently. In a study targeting female audiences of different class backgrounds, Press (1991) discovers that middle-class women are more susceptible than working-class women to the dominant ideology of femininity reflected on TV, and that they more often engage TV when dealing with real-life issues and conflicts. Working-class women, on the other hand, tend to be more susceptible to class-based hegemony — they criticize TV’s portrayals of working-class life as unreal but subscribe to its depiction of middle and upper-class life. In both Leal and Oliven’s and Press’s studies, working-class respondents are more likely to adopt a “realistic” frame in their “TV talk” (i.e., they refer to characters on the shows by their show names, speak of the story lines as if they were real, etc.), whereas middle-class respondents are more detached and analytical in evaluating the shows (i.e., they refer to characters by the actors’ names, speak of the stories as constructed plots, and comment on the acting, etc.).

### Age

In the aforementioned study, Press (1991) also compares TV reception by age, adding an important dimension to reception studies, which at the time had focused primarily on younger audiences (Alexander 2003). Specifically, she finds that older and younger women are alert to different facets of TV's representation of women, such as how female characters imagine and practice their sexuality, or how they balance work-family conflicts.

As illuminating as these studies are, however, many are plagued by two major problems. First, they paint the picture of meaning-making with too broad a stroke by linking interpretive differences to conventional identity categories (e.g., class, race and ethnicity, age, etc.). Fixating on such conveniently obvious distinctions risks treating audience identities as rigid categories, ignoring their dynamic nature in modern societies. In particular, comparative research on cultural consumption tends to treat identity as some kind of fixed marker that points directly and clearly to certain standard "horizons of expectations." Thus, when the research priority is to demonstrate interpretive differences between, say, white viewers and black viewers, older women and younger women, or the working-class and the middle-class, the more nuanced differences within each group are often brushed aside, as is the process through which each group actually makes meanings. Too much existing work suggests that each identity group simply brings an almost-stereotypical, pre-existent identity to bear on judgments of televised textual content.

But it has long been established in other critical work that modern identity is much more fluid, something to be understood more as a work in progress than as a given, structured category (Giddens 1991; Fornäs 1995; Thompson 1995). In other words, people do not simply "bring" distinct identities to cultural works and apply them robotically to yield patterned interpretations. Rather, while cultural consumption involves meaning-making informed by existing outlooks, expectations, and skills, it also prompts and involves self-reflective and self-examining activities — what I later call "identity work" — that can reshape one's identity (DeNora 2000). Indeed, the pleasures of cultural consumption are more sublime when existing identities and selfhood are challenged (Barthes 1975, cited in Reed [2002]). For example, in Reed's study of male fiction readers, respondents report that the most enjoyable stories are those that lead them "to question who they are and how they perceive the world around them" (Reed 2002: 183). This suggests that while pre-existing identity does inform readers' "horizons of expectations" and does shape what Ann Swidler would refer to as their cultural "tool kit" — "a repertoire...of habits, skills, and styles from which people construct 'strategies of action'" (Swidler 1986: 273) — cultural consumption continually negotiates, that is, re-negotiates identity. Cultural "tool kits" may limit identity, but identity is also variable and varied. People pick and choose tools from their kits when trying to make sense of cultural texts, but, by adjusting what they deem as appropriate, valuable, and admirable, they also modify their tools, and thus their kits, during the sense-making process.

Second, many existing reception studies neglect the embedded or situated nature of meaning-making (Thompson 1995; Kim 2005). While viewers/consumers bring their own references and interpretations to bear on texts, the reading, viewing, and interpreting that occurs during and after media exposure are necessarily situated, contextualized, and embedded. Even though transnational media, for instance, provide a broader range of cultural references for people's identity work, these references do not and cannot destroy the connection between self-formation and local conditions. The localized character of media consumption cannot be ignored, because specific cultural consumers are always situated in particular socio-historical contexts, and their media interpretation and appropriation are both enabled and limited by the interests and resources available in the contexts of their everyday lives (Thompson 1995; Bennett 2000).

Examining interpretation without considering its situated context, i.e., without being alert to audiences' everyday lives, leaves two critical sociological questions unanswered: 1) Where do the interpretations come from, i.e., what experiences have informed audiences' particular understandings of media texts? and 2) Where do the interpretations go, i.e., what are the implications of audiences' oppositional or negotiated readings for their everyday lives? In other words, how do audiences *use* media in exploring and navigating their own lives?

In the next section, I discuss three studies that have addressed the above problems, albeit with mixed success. These feminist critiques examine women's reception of often trivialized popular genres such as the romance novel and soap operas. I am not addressing the feminist concerns presented in these studies. Instead, because my interviews with the young Chinese urban elites 1) exhibit an overall enthusiasm for American scripted TV, which appears to stem from a general perception of US TV and

TV characters as being "real," and 2) are permeated by an intense self-reflexivity, my overview here focuses on the way these studies shed light on TV consumers' reflexivity and identity exploration. I also highlight the insight that cultural consumers' construction of realism can bring them pleasure as well as help them achieve a more positive sense of self.

## Unpacking and Contextualizing Meaning-Making — Lessons from Three Feminist Media Studies

Janice Radway's classic study of female romance readers has exerted a lasting and important impact on the field of reception scholarship. A literary critic, Radway first pursued her study by employing a limited conception of romance reading as a "differential interpretation of texts" (1991 [1984]: 7). However, her study participants "surprised" her by repeatedly discussing what *the activity of reading romances* means to them. Specifically, Radway finds that the women readers take the act of romance reading as a "declaration of independence" (1991 [1984]: 11) of sorts, a process that alleviates the pressures and stress they feel as primary family caregivers. Thus, in their reading activity they are carving out a space not only to escape temporarily from their domestic duties but also to vicariously live the fantasy of being loved and nurtured.

In listening to talk about romance reading, Radway notices that, while few women perceive similarities between real life people and the romantic characters, many more perceive similarities between their own feelings and reactions and those of the fictional heroines. This perception of equivalent reality, steeped in what Radway calls "emotional identification," allows us to see the apparently only "escapist" experience of reading a romance as an “affectively significant” *activity* (1991 [1984]: 98), as an identity negotiation.

Similarly, the fact that readers consider romance reading a generally “healthy” form of escape sheds light on their working definition of realism. While Radway’s informants are well aware of the fantastic nature of romances, they firmly believe that the depiction of the physical environment and historical backdrop of the stories is accurate. This assumption makes romance reading not only a compensatory activity, but also an empowering one, enabling these women to construct a positive identity by rationalizing romance reading as “reading for instruction” (1991 [1984]: 113). By claiming they can gain factual knowledge and broaden their horizons through reading romance — a genre with little artistic credibility — these women exempt themselves from a long-standing derogatory cultural stereotype while confirming their self-image as intelligent, hard-working individuals.

Realism and pleasure are also two of the central themes in Ang’s (1985) study of the reception of the American hit soap opera *Dallas* in the Netherlands. Arguing against the allegation of cultural imperialism that dominated the Dutch media during *Dallas*’s heyday, Ang takes viewers’ much maligned pleasures seriously. She argues that fans of *Dallas* are not blind to the show’s “external unrealism” — its improbable plots, twisted relationships, and other melodramatic elements — but instead follow the show with great pleasure because they identify with its “emotional realism.” So just as Radway’s romance readers find the feelings and responses of the heroines identifiable, *Dallas* fans are attracted to the show’s inner or emotional realism. This realism is conveyed by “lifelike” characters, but more importantly by what Ang calls a “tragic structure of feelings” — a certain recognizable and relatable sentiment aroused through the show’s emphasis on the precariousness of happiness. At one point, Ang is pretty straightforward in pointing out how soap-induced pleasure, though apparently just illusory or fantastic, is actually contingent on constructed realism:

> In this [tragic structure of feeling] many letter-writers who like *Dallas* seem to recognize themselves, and therefore experience it as “real”. And precisely this recognition arouses pleasure (Ang 1985: 47).

In both Radway’s and Ang’s studies, perceived realism is an important source of audience pleasure, and in both cases, the realism identified by fans is not so much empirical as it is psychological and emotional. That is, the realistic effect of romance fictions or soap operas is not based on their correspondence with real life, but rather on how their narrative structures invite and enable audiences into direct emotional involvements and identifications. Radway’s and Ang’s research helps us understand the paradox that agentic audiences insist that fictional genres are “real.” By compartmentalizing audiences’ evaluation of realism — plot vs setting in Radway’s study; external vs internal/emotional in Ang’s study — both authors highlight the constructed nature of realism. Their treatment of the “active audience” concept is sophisticated: rather than simply demonstrating the generation of different audience meanings from the same media text, both illustrate how audiences creatively *use* the meanings they pull from cultural texts and cultural practices to seek pleasure, stave off social stigma, and cope with real life frustrations.

In addition, both studies part ways with earlier text-oriented reception studies by contextualizing media use and meaning-making in their surrounding cultural and discursive environment — in Radway's study, it is patriarchy; in Ang's study, it is the "ideology of mass culture." This attention to the intersection between media and consumptive circumstance allows both authors to identify and theorize a cyclical and reciprocal relationship between media use and dominant ideologies. Audiences approach the media in question by means of the "cultural tools" available to them and in light of the real life pressures confronting them; the media, in turn, offer audiences new perspectives, references, and other symbolic tools to attend to their everyday lives in ways that either challenge or reinforce the status quo.

McKinley's (1997) study of young American women's reception of the hit drama *Beverly Hills, 90210* also attempts to work out the tensions between resistance and pleasure, power and agency, that is, between the joyful consumption of popular genres and that consumption's potential to perpetuate hegemonic norms. In her study, McKinley foregrounds the notion of the "discursive self." This concept marries the idea that identity in modern societies is an on-going work (instead of a preordained category) to the social constructionist position that the self, like all social realities, is a construction of language and shared meaning. McKinley expands the notion of "active audience" beyond the earlier, narrower idea that audiences make multiple meanings through text-oriented denotations. By viewing TV talk as action, she notes that in their cultural encounters audiences can be understood as engaging in reflexive identity work.

The intense *self*-reflexivity demonstrated by her respondents makes McKinley's study especially relevant. Although she does not use the term "reflexivity," she notices that the young women audiences readily combined *90210*'s fictional narratives with their own self-narratives: "as they attended to the show in the context of their own lives, they also attended to their own lives on the show's terms" (1997: 236). This reciprocal feedback loop, where audiences approach TV with various preoccupations and use TV narratives for self-examination and even self-reinvention, is a quintessential example of modern reflexivity (Giddens 1991; Thompson 1995). While it is common for cultural users to interpret their own lives by exploring fictional worlds and to use fictional characters to reflect on their self-image (e.g., Radway 1991 [1984]; Ang 1985), respondents in McKinley's study and my own research did this in an exceptionally intense and dynamic way.

According to a number of human psychological development theories (Arnett 2000) and various literatures on youth cultural consumption (Fornäs 1995; Rodrigues & Smaill 2008), this pattern of reflexive identity work may be particularly applicable to young people. The years between childhood and adulthood are riddled with ambiguities. Young people are more self-conscious about self-image, more keen on experimenting with alternative identities, and more prone to self-monitoring and self-reinvention than are very young children or matured adults.

But my respondents' heightened self-reflexivity when engaging US TV emerges with and from a specific context, namely, that they are coming of age in a relatively restricted society that is itself undergoing rapid and radical transitions. Under the shadow of its not-so-remote Confucian past and its more recent communist revolutionary past, China is currently in an “unsettled time,” an era characterized by unpredictability and uncertainty to the degree that (new) ideas confront and surpass (old) habits (Swidler 1986).

Modernity theorists would here be sure to emphasize the juggernaut of globalization, particularly how a mounting global media flow has significantly expanded individuals’ cultural “tool kits,” offering them alternative world views and new ways of thinking and being. In addition, in less individualized societies like China, professionalized resources for reflexivity such as psychological counseling and self-help expertise are not readily available (Kim 2008b). Moreover, “reflexive forms of media representations” are few and far between (Hu 2008). Thus, in the context of present-day China, global media such as transnational TV and the Internet provide opportunities both for entertainment *and* for self-analysis and self-evaluation. The three studies reviewed above are relevant here. They highlight the importance of emotional realism, a constructed sense of recognition that enhances consumptive pleasure, but they also speak to how (transnational) receptions of mass culture are sites and opportunities for intense self-reflexivity.

That said, while I intend to make use of these studies’ general insights, I find that Chinese consumption of US TV is a unique case where many of the key issues around media consumption are *intensified* by the socio-historical specificities that define contemporary urban China. What is the role of global media in altering self-understanding, the very texture of young lives, in non-Western contexts? What do young people think of the images of Western characters, and more specifically, what *use* do they make of those images? That is, how do they incorporate new cultural icons, references, and values into their own lives? Two new studies illuminate some of the intricacies of the way non-Western youth receive Western media.

## Non-Western Youth and Global Media — Two Recent Studies

Melissa Butcher's 2003 book, *Transnational Television, Cultural Identity and Change - When STAR Came to India,* looks at the ways transnational television shapes the changing perceptions of "Indianness." Butcher's historical examination of TV's development and impact in India also offers an empirical exploration of how TV viewers in contemporary India negotiate cultural boundaries when exposed to transnational television. Although Butcher speaks with different generations of Indians to document changing values across time, the majority of her study subjects are the principal viewers of transnational TV — urban youth aged 15-20 years. Butcher finds that this group exhibits a self-reflexive inclination in their TV talk. Her picture of young Indians' identity reevaluation and their negotiation of nationalism and cosmopolitanism is complex: on the one hand, they gravitate towards Western cultural elements that are typically considered useful (e.g., peer bonding or the separation from family and social collectives); on the other hand, young Indians often reject features that clash with highly salient local cultural traditions and values (e.g., they tend to dislike shows such as *Baywatch* which emphasize sexual content).

Youna Kim's 2005 book, *Women, Television and Everyday Life in Korea*, seeks "to understand how Korean women deal with social change and make sense of their everyday lives and identities with the cultural experience of television" (3). Kim's research is motivated by the identity crisis that characterizes both individuals and society as a whole in contemporary Korea. (Like India and China, Korea is currently undergoing a drastic and unsettling social transition.) Speaking with working- and middle-class women in their early 20s, 30s, and 50s, Kim finds that despite the vast differences in these women's self-image, social relations, TV-viewing habits, and lived experiences in general, their TV talk devolves into confessions about their innermost resentments, frustrations, needs, and desires. Like Butcher's respondents in India, Kim finds this self-reflexivity to be most obvious and intense among the youngest generation — women in their early 20s — and she associates this more heightened self-reflexivity with younger women's comparatively "high capacity for moving freely out of familiar local settings, confronting new and different environments, recognizing alternative visions and learning new identities" (119).

Of special relevance to my own interest in young Chinese urban elites' engagement with American TV is one particular group in Kim's study, namely, middle-class urbanite women between 20 and 22 years of age. Unlike their working-class counterparts and older women in Korea, these socio-economically privileged young women are "in the vanguard of change" (Kim 2005: 169) and they demonstrate a more individualized sense of self as well as work-oriented life expectations. This group is further distinguished from other cohorts of Korean women by its greater exposure to and familiarity with Western culture through travel or consumption of transnational media such as television.

Examining the reception of Western, particularly American, TV and movies by these young, middle-class Korean women, Kim discovers that they are “characterized more by their inquisitive search for ‘differences’ than by universalities” when engaging Western programming (Kim 2005: 187). Moreover, both Kim and Butcher find young people to be ambivalent — admiring some ways the Western world is depicted while contesting others. On the one hand, youth across the board associate America with free, less restrained lifestyles, and they share a fairly strong admiration for American individualism. On the other hand, Indian youth and Korean young women both appear to largely reject the depiction of Western sexuality in Western media.

Butcher’s and Kim’s studies relate to my work in many ways. First, although both studies include more diverse subjects in terms of age and class, both reveal that persons belonging to the demographic I am particularly concerned with – young, well-educated urbanites with (potentially) higher incomes — seem to be especially attracted to English-speaking programs in non-Western cultures. The identification of this more “cosmopolitan group” — in terms of their “willingness to engage with the Other” and their “intellectual and aesthetic stance of openness toward divergent cultural experiences” (Hannerz 1990: 239, quoted in Kim [2008b: 37]) — resonates with my own interviewees in contemporary China.

Second, both studies reveal dissatisfaction with indigenous television content on the part of young audiences, especially prior to the introduction of transnational channels in their respective countries. In Kim's study, for example, young women across the class spectrum dislike Korean TV's stereotypical and patriarchal rendition of gender roles and gender norms as well as the stigmatization and marginalization of intelligent and/or professional women. These same young women speak highly of the American individualism they spot in depictions of the West, voicing strong desires for more freedom, independence, and personal fulfillment in the professional world. Similarly, based on the students' claims that offerings by the government-controlled network are both irrelevant to them and constraining, Butcher's India-based study illustrates the affinity of urban, middle-class students for American, rather than Indian, programming. My Chinese respondents also complain about the failure of indigenous, government-regulated TV to embrace the texture and detail of their present unsettled circumstances and of the overarching relevance of social change. I argue that this dissatisfaction is one of the basic reasons why Chinese students reach beyond official outlets to seek media content with which they can relate and identify.

Third, both studies concern the way TV experiences are implicated in ongoing identity work. In both cases, we see that audiences are active and autonomous not merely in terms of their ability to extract different meanings from the same cultural text but also to the degree that they deliberately and mindfully use culture as symbolic materials, as building blocks, in their continual construction and negotiation of identity. Thus, while McKinley's study of young American women's reception of the popular drama *90210* ties audiences' media talk with their identity narratives, Butcher's and Kim's studies illustrate how the involvement of *trans*-national media (i.e., non-local knowledge) can render the identity work of youth that much more intense. The Asian youth in Butcher's and Kim's studies are involved in heightened and more elaborate identity work to the extent that they are confronted with a more foreign symbolic world. They must therefore attend in particular to constructing and negotiating the boundary between us and them, I and Other.

Finally, both studies concern the ways television intersects with the everyday lives of audiences in non-Western, transitional, and relatively restrictive societies. By doing so, these studies not only bring much needed scholarly attention to audiences in non-Western cultures (Butcher 2003; Kim 2005), but also challenge existing ideas about the (supposed) one-way influence of cultural imperialism.

My research focuses on the reception of US TV by a specific Chinese demographic and does not set out to evaluate claims about cultural imperialism. However, my work *does* provide evidence to challenge longstanding concerns in the Chinese national psychology — recently revived in Chinese political and cultural discourses (McDonald 2006; Spencer 2007; Shieber 2011) — about the impact of foreign culture.

First proposed by Schiller (1969), "cultural imperialism" refers to the cultural penetration, conquest, and domination of the developing world by the Western developed world (especially the US), primarily via the dissemination of media products and technologies. These products promote the superiority of Western norms, values, and expectations, and threaten indigenous cultural integrity and heritage (McPhail 1987; Schiller 1991; Downing et al. 1995; Boyd-Barrett 1998, 2006). The thesis sees American cultural hegemony — the permeation of American consumer goods and cultural icons —

as a powerful extension of the country's economic, political, and military domination of the world. The notion of cultural imperialism thus also implies the gradual disappearance or denigration of many cultures around the globe due to the overwhelming influences of corporate and cultural America.

With its broad theoretical approach and critical perspective, the cultural imperialism thesis influenced international communication research during the 1970s and early 1980s. But it was simultaneously critiqued (Thompson 1995) as offering homogenous interpretations (by the audience), universal effects (on the audience), and flawed presuppositions about the determination of meaning (in cultural texts). Understanding cross-cultural media engagement based on such problematic assumptions tends to disregard the complex, dynamic, and contextually specific ways in which transnational cultural content is interpreted by local individuals and incorporated into their everyday lives.

By highlighting these details, various cross-culture reception studies have effectively discredited the cultural imperialism thesis. However, in redressing the reductionism of the thesis, earlier reception studies have occasionally fallen prey to essentialism. That is, by treating identity as a categorical as opposed to a dynamic concept, many studies (particularly those of the compare-and-contrast type) make a case for recipients' activeness and resistance only by highlighting how audiences belonging to different identity groups or interpretive communities decode media content differently.

Thus, the fact that identity in modern societies is fluid, fragmented, and constantly being negotiated and reinvented is largely brushed aside.[4]

By focusing their investigation on *contextualized/situated media appropriation*, Butcher's and Kim's studies show a promising way forward and offer a more sophisticated antithesis to the cultural imperialism allegation. The emphasis here is on "contextualization," which, as discussed above, has largely been missing from reception literature (Thompson 1995). All types of media engagement take place in concrete socio-historical contexts, and therefore media reception involves interactions not only between audiences and media texts, but also between audiences and the social norms and cultural traditions surrounding them (Thompson 1995; Kim 2005).

But in defending Butcher's and Kim's exploration of *contextualized/situated media appropriation* I also want to highlight and explore "appropriation." According to Thompson (1995: 42), to appropriate a message is to assimilate and incorporate it into one's own life, particularly by *using* the messages one decodes from symbolic forms as resources and vehicles to reflect on self, others, and one's own living conditions. If decoding is the first step toward interpretation, then appropriation, as an extended process of self-reflection, self-monitoring, and self-(re)invention, is a more advanced as well as sociologically relevant aspect of interpretation. Thus, to really press to the heart of the cultural imperialism thesis, studies of cross-culture media reception need not only to illustrate local, diverse decoding, but also to shed light on the "black box" of appropriation, i.e., how local audiences find their own ways of relating to global images; how they actively construct a sense of who they are and what they desire to become through understanding and judging representations of Western culture and personalities; and how they weave the (new) cultural references offered by transnational media into the symbolic fabric of their own everyday lives.

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[4] I should note here that it is not generalization or characterization that I am arguing against. In fact, generalizations (both quantitative and qualitative) are essential if we are to understand the commonalities and differences among and between cultures. What I suggest are plagued by essentialism are generalizations that ignore internal variation or that assume some kind of unchanging nature unaffected by human reflexivity or activity.

Butcher's and Kim's studies illustrate both the *contextualized* nature of border-crossing media consumption and young people's *appropriation* — the strategic selection, adaptation, and incorporation — of Western media content in self-understanding and self-formation. In terms of contextualization, both scholars highlight the conflicts among different forces — the local, the national, and the global — in shaping interpretation and reception. For example, contrary to the loudly voiced concerns about the vulnerability of young people in the face of American consumerism, youth studied in both Indian and Korean contexts appear wary of consumerist desires and materialist indulgence, if not completely immune. They also quite unequivocally reject Western sexuality. What seems to be appealing, especially to young people with urban, middle-class backgrounds, are the non-monetary aspirations they derive from American popular media — ideals like freedom, independence, self-improvement, and self-realization. Comments made by young people themselves — sometimes expressing great pride in and allegiance toward national or local cultural heritage; sometimes actively pushing against certain traditions and social norms — are evidence of the ways local contexts provide filters for and impose moral boundaries upon the reception of global media content.

In terms of the appropriation of Western media, the oscillation between the local and national, on the one hand, and the Western and cosmopolitan, on the other, produces a fused or hybrid identity. This hybridity is a manifestation of identity as a cultural strategy. Particularly, when youth feel restrained by cultural conventions and struggle for independence against the otherwise family-oriented local culture, they turn to Western or Westernized TV for inspiration and guidance. However, when the need to remain respectably nationalistic arises, the same young people latch onto points of continuity with national cultural heritage by rejecting the televised West as "shallow," "obscene," or otherwise undesirable. The dynamic and complex process in which youth interpret, negotiate, adapt, or reject transnational media when contemplating their immediate surroundings and real-life issues provides a telling example of how transnational media appropriation can temper the cultural imperialism allegation in a rather nuanced yet effective manner.

In short, Butcher's and Kim's studies provide me with useful references for understanding how young people in urban China — a non-Western, less developed, yet quickly transforming environment — decode Western media content and incorporate it into their own lives. The special attention given to the young, urban demographic in both studies coincides with my observation that there is an affinity between Chinese middle-class urban youth and Western media and that the tension experienced by that population when it comes to negotiating multiple identities in a globalized, transitional society is rather unique. Moreover, both authors emphasize the complicated and ambiguous ways in which young viewers align themselves with the local and traditional, on the one hand,

and the Western and cosmopolitan, on the other. My respondents also express the desire for a hybrid identity that includes the best of both cultures, and in my interviews they reveal how they relate to, or are unable to relate to, different aspects of televised Americanness. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, both works approach the reception and use of global media as part of the reflexive and strategic work of identity-formation. This perspective not only refocuses scholarly attention away from examples of textual polysemy to more active and agentic uses of culture and media, but, by doing so, also provides a more sophisticated and effective critique of the cultural imperialism thesis.

## The Chinese Consumption of American TV — Encountering Authenticity

Like transnational media consumption everywhere, the Chinese reception of American scripted TV takes on its own specificities to the extent that certain political and socio-economic conditions underlie the encounter. Most significantly, the Chinese reception of US TV is characterized by a distinct sensitivity to and celebration of what I call American authenticity. This section discusses the conceptual issues surrounding the notion of authenticity as well as the challenges presented by the effort to translate the term and concept from Chinese to English.

The English word “authenticity” is not an obvious choice, not only because authenticity was not a concept I drew upon in my original research agenda, but also because, as I briefly mentioned above, there is no single Chinese expression corresponding to the English word and what it generally means or can mean as a singular term. Instead, the Chinese employ a number of words to express a variety of significations of and for "authenticity." We say, for example, that a TV show *truthfully* or *realistically* represents contemporary urban Chinese life; we praise people who "mean what they say" as *sincere* or *honest*; we recommend a restaurant for serving *real* or *genuine* local food; so on and so forth.

Like Radway (1991 [1984]) who was surprised and enlightened that *the activity of reading the romance* bears more meaning for her study subjects than the actual *romances,* I was led by my respondents to discover the importance of authenticity by noticing how they describe what they like about American TV. I expected Chinese viewers to offer a critical and cautious assessment of American TV and American life in general. Instead, the single Chinese term that came up over and over again when respondents talked about their favorite American shows and TV characters is "*zhen shi*,*"* which is composed of the Chinese character "*zhen*," which means true, real, genuine, and "*shi*," which means solid, true, real, honest.[5] To these students, American shows outshine local Chinese shows and popular offerings from other Asian areas such as Hong Kong, Taiwan, South Korea, and Japan because they are more "*zhen shi*;" similarly, American TV figures are admirable and inspirational because they are "*zhen shi*."

According to many Chinese-English dictionaries, the most straightforward translation of "*zhen shi"* is "real" or "true." But both translations came up short when, upon further probing, all respondents denied the truthfulness/factuality of American scripted TV: "Of course it's not real; this is TV we're talking about," some would say. Others would refuse to offer a judgment because they "haven't been to America and therefore honestly have no clue whether it's real or not." And yet the expression "*zhen shi*" kept coming up and almost always topped the list of offered reasons for American TV's tremendous appeal. If what is at stake is *not* perceived truthfulness based on the empirical reality of American society and culture, then what do these students mean when they appraise American TV or TV figures as "*zhen shi*?"

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[5] Translations obtained from a popular online Chinese-English dictionary: http://dict.cn/

Upon examination, I have found that respondents' comments related to "*zhen shi*" fall into two broad categories, each crystallizing around one of the two distinct senses of authenticity as it is understood in the popular as well as intellectual discourse in the English world. The first, which we can call "object authenticity" (Reisinger & Steiner 2006) or "objective authenticity" (Wang 1999), refers to the "realness" or "genuineness" of artifacts or events. In the second sense, which we can call "existential authenticity" (Wang 1999; Steiner & Reisinger 2006), authenticity refers to being "true to oneself."

In its first sense, which concerns whether a thing is what it claims to be, authenticity has been explored in research on the production and consumption of a wide range of cultural objects and experiences, including tourism (Boorstin 1964; Cohen 1988; MacCannell 1999 [1976]), music (Peterson 1997; Grazian 2003), food (Johnston & Baumann 2010), television (Rose & Wood 2005), self-taught art (Fine 2003), and style and fashion (Postrel 2003). One widespread agreement in this literature is that object-related authenticity is a socially constructed interpretation of an object as opposed to its inherent properties. On the side of consumers, this process of constructing object authenticity, or authentication (Peterson 2005), has been found to be contingent on the weighty issue of one's (idealized) sense of self (Cohen 1988; Holt 2002; Fine 2003; Postrel 2003; Grayson and Martinec 2004; Peterson 2005; Beverland & Farrelly 2009; Johnston & Baumann 2010). For example, Johnston & Baumann's (2010) study of contemporary American "foodie" culture shows how people integrate their consumption of "authentic" food — food with certain geographic specificities, personal connections, links to historical or ethnic traditions, etc. — into their foodie identity, which in turn is part of a desirable cosmopolitan identity that values democratic inclusiveness.

Authenticity in its second sense — existential authenticity — denotes a special state of *being* in which one is true to oneself (Wang 1999; Steiner & Reisinger 2006; Johnston & Baumann 2010; Potter 2010). The term appears in the literature of philosophy, sociology, folklore, anthropology, and has become one of those fuzzy catchwords in popular discourse and commerce. As a human attribute, existential authenticity has become a facet of modern individualism (Trilling 1972; Johnston & Baumann 2010). Some scholars contend that the quest for authenticity has become increasingly urgent in late modernity as concerns about identity proliferate. As Turner and Manning write:

> Authenticity is only possible once the taken-for-granted world and the security it offers are called into question. This is dependent on a specific mood — anxiety — which, in subjecting everydayness to questioning, reveals the groundlessness of human existence. (1988: 137)

In striving to find a conceptual frame that can capture and help explain my respondents' intense and pronouncedly reflexive responses to American scripted TV, I observed that students pepper their TV talk with references to authenticity in the senses discussed above. In terms of object authenticity, or what I shall term "textual authenticity” in the context of this dissertation, students discuss subject matter and characterization. The former includes statements about how students find themselves drawn to US TV’s broad coverage of timely, diverse, and relevant subject matter. When shows tackle sensitive and controversial contemporary issues, students interpret this as a sign of truth-telling sincerity and fearless earnestness. Meanwhile, students show an appreciation of the ways multi-dimensionality and complexity make characters on American shows sympathetic and relatable, even when they are clearly scripted, caricatured, and not always likable. Tired of the black-and-white division between the hero and the villain witnessed in most Chinese shows, many respondents suggest that they are fascinated by American TV figures who, whether they hate to love or love to hate them, always strike a chord.

On the other hand, once students dive into US TV’s content and speak about their favorite protagonists, their comments often begin to allude to authenticity in its second sense — an idealized condition of living in accordance with one’s unique sense of self. While many intellectuals increasingly question the modern cult of authenticity (Bellah et al. 1985; Taylor 1992; Potter 2010), the young Chinese with whom I spoke embraced it. They want to be authentically unique, autonomous, free-choosing, and personally fulfilled.

Specifically, almost all respondents draw on US TV to make a case that Americans, as represented by TV characters, generally stay true to themselves. Overall, these students embrace and celebrate this particular American way of being and relating to others as “real.” Upon probing, some would say a character is real in that “she speaks her mind spontaneously and doesn't worry about other people's judgment;" others would argue that misfits, rebels, or otherwise non-conforming figures are refreshingly and even respectably real; still others would maintain that the courage to dream big and the grittiness it takes to fulfill one's dreams make a character true to herself. These three criteria — spontaneity, non-conformity, and self-fulfillment — correspond almost perfectly with the core elements of existential authenticity as conceptualized in the West (Trilling 1972; Bellah et al. 1985; Taylor 1992; Potter 2010). Moreover, many students would confide that they hope to become a more authentic person in part to better relate to others: they want to be more transparent with friends, more independent from parents, and enjoy a free but committed intimate relationship. In my argument, I follow Vannini and Williams, designating this second type of authenticity as "personal authenticity," a concept which refers to "both an individual's experience of authenticity (i.e., 'self authenticity') and to the interpersonal dynamics surrounding the formation and maintenance of authentic social identities and personas" (Vannini & Williams 2009: 6).

I embrace the notion of authenticity with an awareness of the compounded and unstable nature of the term as "a muddled amalgam of philosophical, psychological, and spiritual concepts" in the Western intellectual world (Steiner & Reisinger 2006). Indeed, in light of the complexities and controversies around the concept, I want to clarify and emphasize that my study is not about authenticity per se. In other words, my goal is not to answer questions about what authenticity means or how notions of authenticity might reinforce power and status. Instead, I use authenticity as an inductively developed construct, one idealized and pursued in this case by young Chinese urban elites as they engage a particular genre of transnational media.

In summation, studies informed by the active audience approach have evolved from focusing on audiences' creative and identity-informed interpretation of cultural texts to exploring how meaning-making intersects with audiences' reflection on their own identities. Such emphasis on reflexivity during cultural engagement is particularly relevant and fruitful in studies of cross-culture media consumption, where alternative meaning-making is nearly inevitable and identity negotiation is especially profound.

My study examines the ways American scripted TV is sought out and engaged by young Chinese urban elites as a vehicle of self-reflexivity and as a symbolic tool for identity work, all within the socio-economic and cultural context of transitional urban China, where this particular group of consumers is embedded. By highlighting the reflexive and strategic narratives of respondents concerning authenticity and situating these narratives against the backdrop of larger social structures, I hope to advance a more sophisticated notion of active audiences, emphasizing both audience agency and recipient context.

Moreover, the students studied in this dissertation are unique to the degree that their social and historical circumstances are unique. Their situated reflexivity is and will be crucial, in this respect, in shaping not only their own but China's future. The post-80s generation is the first and most direct beneficiary of China's post-socialist reform and "opening-up." As the best and brightest within that generation, many young, well-educated people, like my respondents, will be the future leaders and pillars of China, the world’s biggest emerging power. Blessed with the nation’s highest quality education and situated in a professional world that increasingly values individualism and entrepreneurship, young urban elites are not only the trend-setters in China’s cultural scene but are poised to change the rules of the game in regard to the country’s economy and government. Understanding where these rising elites and future leaders secure their inspiration in contemplating their needs, goals, and priorities, and how they envision themselves as modern yet culturally-grounded subjects, is not merely a topic of cultural consumption; more so, this is of interest and importance to everyone concerned with questions of modernity and tradition, of reflexive identity, and of cultural globalization.

Following Butcher (2003) and Kim (2005), I believe that a sociological investigation of cross-culture TV consumption should ground audiences’ accounts of their TV experience in their everyday environment. To do just that, in the next chapter I sketch the transitional flux that has characterized China’s urban landscape during the last thirty years, and I focus on three realms of particular relevance to the present study: education, the job market, and media consumption.

# CHAPTER III

# BACKGROUND OF CONTEMPORARY URBAN CHINA

*[P]opularity is never the unique accomplishment of one isolated cultural product. It is also dependent on and connects with the context in which it is consumed.*

— Ang (1985: 4)

As I discussed in the previous chapter, the heightened self-reflexivity revealed in my data tells the story of how young Chinese urban elites engage and incorporate transnational media into their daily exploration of living in a transitional society. In this new framework, TV is not only an object of "textual poaching" (Jenkins 1992) or a domain of meaning making but is a resource and vehicle for the examination of everyday life and the "reflexive achievement of self-formation" (Giddens 1991: 215).

But just like all other conditions of modernity, reflexivity is neither a universal capacity nor a generalized experience. Instead, reflexivity is always experienced and practiced differently by subjects in different social contexts and positions (Kim 2008a). Therefore, to fully understand the reflexive identity work Chinese urban youth engage in while watching and talking about American TV, we need to consider the socio-cultural transitions urban China has gone through in the past three decades.

Now on the fast track of modernization, urban China is bearing the brunt of many of the modern conditions that swept the Western world in the early 20th century. The reform and opening-up policy adopted by the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) since

1978 set in motion China's transition to a market economy. This decentralized, more liberal economic model has significantly revitalized Chinese people's stagnant and desolate social and cultural life under the socialist planned economy. However, it has also brought about new problems such as growing social stratification, new forms of inequality, rampant corruption, and crisis of values, to name just a few.

Without trying to give an exhaustive account of China's social transformation, I focus in this chapter on three aspects of contemporary Chinese urban landscape relevant to the young elites studied in this dissertation: (1) the evolving education system, (2) the marketization of labor, and (3) the changing television culture under media reform. These three aspects are chosen for two reasons. First, because they have been demonstrated by existing studies and journalistic reports to have the greatest bearing on people coming of age in cosmopolitan China, and second, because they emerged from students' free discussions of issues which concern them most in their everyday lives.

## Education

### Revived Emphasis on Education

Academic pressure is exceptionally intense for Chinese young adults born in the 1980s — the so-called post-80s generation[6] and China's first cohort of single children under the one-child per family policy. As the anthropologist Susan Greenhalgh (2010) points out, China's family planning policy was never just about reducing and controlling population *quantity*; it was also about increasing the *quality* of the population to "create a globally competitive society standardized to the modern norms" (40). Since the post-Mao regime switched China's national agenda from class struggle and socialist revolution to economic development and modernization, education has been treated as the key to creating a high quality population. In contrast to Mao's suspicion of intellectuals, attacks on occupational specialization, and emphasis on "redness" (i.e., political correctness and loyalty), the post-Mao regime was explicit about the importance of economic growth and the link between modernization and education (Greenhalgh 2010; Hoffman 2010).

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[6] Also known as China's "Me Generation" (Elegant 2007; Dyer 2010) or "Generation Y" (Lynton & Thøgersen 2010a), the colloquial "post-80s generation" refers to those born between 1980 and 1989 in Mainland China. Two caveats concerning this term are significant for this dissertation. First, when I use the term, I refer particularly to the urban-located segment of the generation, including those who were born in rural China but are currently studying or working as professionals in urban China. Second, although the boundary between the post-80s and post-90s generations is technically 1990, I take the notion of post-80s more as a self-categorization. For example, two of my youngest interviewees were born in 1990, but they both self-identified as members of the post-80s generation.

This revived emphasis on education and professionalism, together with the increasing association between education and income (Bian & Logan 1996), rendered education the top priority of every Chinese family. Vanessa Fong's (2004) ethnographic exploration of the lives of China's first generation of single children — tellingly entitled *Only Hope: Coming of Age Under China's One-Child Policy* — documents how the one-child policy has prompted parents to make enormous investments in each child, while at the same time relying on children for old age support. For many families, the most important investment is in education. The parents and children in Fong's study live almost obsessively in the future tense — always focused on the next examination or academic competition that will give them a leg up in the new knowledge economy. As a result, parents worry a great deal when children get distracted from their studies by less "legitimate" interests like socializing, fashion, and hobbies.

## *Gaokao* (The National College Entrance Examination)

In China, a student's performance in *gaokao* — the National College Entrance Examination — is the main determinant of university admission and employment prospects (Fong 2007). *Gaokao* is not only high-stake but also extremely competitive. For students and parents alike, "millions of troops crossing a single log bridge" is an all-too-familiar expression illustrating how insanely important *gaokao* is for an average 18-year-old as she/he competes to enter college in China. Ever since universities reopened in China in 1977 after the 10-year shutdown during the Great Cultural Revolution, China's college entrance rate has been significantly lower than that in the developed world. In early 1990s, only about one in five high school seniors were able to go to college (Li, Z. 2010).

College acceptance rates increased steadily throughout the nineties. In 1999, the year I took *gaokao,* universities and colleges substantially expanded the admission quota for the first time. That year, an increase of 331,000 in planned enrollment made everyone's college dream, especially the "borderline" students, that much more hopeful (China.com.cn 2008). However, while college enrollment quotas have continued to increase, so that now about seven in ten students make the cut (*China Daily* 2011a), new pressures arise. Since there are more college degree holders these days, the relative value of a college degree keeps depreciating. Consequently, graduating from a prestigious university becomes increasingly important, as does the cultivation of one's ability and professional skills — obtaining a paper credential helps, but it guarantees less unless it is backed up with ability (Hoffman 2010: 79).

Despite the debates about measuring academic achievement through standardized testing and the common condemnation that exam-oriented education is “unhealthy,” *gaokao* is still seen as the only fair way to ensure meritocracy in China. In particular, because education resources are so unevenly distributed across China, because *guanxi* (social connections) and bribery are so widely used in obtaining education, and because the demand for high quality higher education greatly exceeds supply, the majority of Chinese students rely on *gaokao* as the *only* sure way to attain a prestigious college education and eventually prestigious careers (Kipnis 2001; Liu 2012). As long as exam performance is still heavily rewarded by China’s stratification system, *gaokao* remains a national obsession and a preoccupation of every high-school student who wants a bright future in China.

### Post-*Gaokao* Reflection — Problems with Chinese Education

But for most college students in China, surviving *gaokao* and getting accepted to college offers no guaranteed path to a secure and self-directed career. To begin with, unlike American students who declare their major area of study after exploring their interests and passions in college for some time, Chinese students have to choose their majors *before* taking *gaokao*, and changing one’s major in college is not an easy option. The problem is that most 18-year-olds do not know precisely what they want to study in college. By the time they have to pick a major, Chinese late teenagers have been buried under an avalanche of test-oriented schoolwork for so long that they have had little time to explore their own interests and passions (Jiang 2010). As a result, choosing a major is more of an investment strategy than a matter of following one's passion, and the actual choice is often a compromise between parents' expectations and a realistic prediction of one's *gaokao* score (Fong 2004).

Moreover, for many Chinese students, *getting into* college seems to be the hardest part. After more than a decade of rote learning, unquestioning focus on the all-important *gaokao*, and fearing they will disappoint their families, many students are simply burnt out when college actually rolls around. Now that they have finally realized their — or rather, their families' — college dream, many tend to slack off, skipping classes and indulging in entertainment (Schmitz 2011). For those who maintain their momentum and want to make the best of college, Chinese higher education may not deliver. Critiques against the system target a number of issues: the system's prioritizing of memorization over creativity, its emphasis on collective opinion as opposed to originality, its focus on obedience to teachers instead of on critical thinking, and so on (Gordon 2010; Jiang 2010; Chew 2011; Kristof 2011). Even though reforms in college admission and curricula have been oriented toward the new goal of "training students in creative spirit, practical abilities, and entrepreneurship" (Zhou 2006: 91, quoted in Hoffman [2010: 73]), these abstract guidelines can be hard to implemented, especially in a culture that has been practicing Confucianist inculcation for thousands of years.

## What Did Students Say?

My own conversations with college students in Beijing bear out the way Chinese education is problematic for student identity formation and for preparing them for real life. Even though our interviews focused on the consumption of American scripted TV, reflections on *gaokao* and China's education came up quite often. Indeed, although my respondents had "survived" *gaokao* and were now attending high-caliber universities, they remain alert to the way committing themselves to being "star students" can frustrate their personal growth. I will thus provide a few vignettes below to illustrate the salience and relevance of this issue for my interviewees.

To begin with, one common confession they offered concerned the fact that, now that they had finally made it to college, they were nonetheless experiencing even deeper frustrations and greater senses of loss. Here is an exemplary quote from Song Fang, a 20-year-old biology student at PKU:

> I think China, especially the ancient Chinese education system, cuts students from one mold. I've experienced it myself, you know, from primary school, to junior high, to high school, so I feel it deeply. Sometimes I really envy how kids abroad study. Especially now that I'm in college, I really feel what we learned in high school, the way the teachers taught… I don't think those things will be very helpful for my development in college. I feel Chinese education and American education are reversed. (In America) They don't push you too hard in high school; like, "you have to go to this or that kind of college" or something. I feel they kinda just let kids explore themselves; it's really laid back. And like that, you can figure out what you are really into. And once college rolls around, they study hard and really pour themselves into what they're really passionate about. But me, I was confused throughout my entire freshman year because I didn't know what I wanted; I didn't know what I was into; all of a sudden, I just felt lost. (P. 3-4)

Others are self-conscious about how Chinese education has failed them. Take 23-year-old Wei An, a communication student at PKU, as an example:

> More and more, I feel that one's personality is deeply affected by her education growing up. I've been steeped in the traditional, conventional Chinese education from the start, and so, in many ways... I feel my ability to adapt is relatively weak... Like, if I got transferred to another school in Beijing, I'd feel really disoriented. (P. 14-15)

And finally, Yang Tao, who is slightly older and has just started pursing her master's degree in finance at PKU, reflects on her college experience and her longing for more self-exploration:

> One of the results of our education, I think, is that if you follow along and behave, then you don't really look into yourself... I didn't think too much before college. All I thought about was studying hard, going to a good college, and that was it. But once I got in, I wasn't forced to do various things anymore, and I needed to take initiatives. Like, I had to figure out whether I wanted to start working (a normal job) or to keep studying. But for what? You've got to figure out the meaning (of what you're doing). I felt I was freer; I felt that so many things are possible as long as you try... But why? For what purposes? And now, I feel it's important to really live your life, to spice it up a bit. This change just kind of happened. And I feel that that show (*Gilmore Girls*) really speaks to me. (P. 10-11)

In passing, a number of students also attributed their personal "problems" or "defects" to the Chinese education style: "I just can't let go and relax. I guess it's because of school." "Since we have been taught to speak properly, I don't know if I'll ever be able to speak my mind." "Even if I want to be No.1, I wouldn't say it. We are taught to be humble." I heard such laments and regrets over and over again in interviews, which raises the question: aside from requiring perfect scores to get in and yielding stellar transcripts, how well do Chinese universities prepare students for the fast changing, increasingly competitive, and unstable world ahead? Rigid structure and constant drilling may help students ace standardized tests, but it also tends to quash creativity and cripple innovation — both in regard to how they approach their education and work and to how they approach their own identity and self development. Having passed the main hurdle of *gaokao*, Chinese college students worry about whether a university education truly increases their chances at landing a good job. The challenge of post-graduation employment for college students in an evolving China is the topic for the following subsection.

## Marketization of Labor

At the core of China's economic restructuring is the transition from a socialist planned economy to a market-oriented economy. This transformation has had, and is still exerting, profound impact on the country's urban space, reshaping various social institutions and practices such as employment patterns and consumptive choices. Of particular consequence for the post-80s generation studied in this dissertation is the commodification of labor and the opening-up of the labor markets. To help us better understand the significance of this transformation of labor markets for identity-formation in young urban Chinese students, I first describe how labor was managed prior to the reform and opening-up. I then discuss how commodification of labor has informed the emergence of a three-pronged professional subjectivity among young educated elites in urban China. This professional selfhood, I argue, is characterized by (1) self-responsibility and self-advancement, (2) insecurity and anxiety, and (3) social and national responsibility.

### Direct Assignment, Dossier, and Household Registration — Strict Control and Central Planning in the Pre-Reform Era

Throughout the Maoist era, there was no real labor markets to speak of in China. The government paid for student education, and in return, all college and university students were required to work for the state upon graduation. The job-assignment office on campuses would determine where each student would fulfill their work obligation. Under this top-down and highly bureaucratic assignment system, each individual was to help accomplish central production plans by becoming a "bolt in the socialist machine," and the university and workplace were but agents of the central government's policies and directives. Instead of universities or the workplace, the central government made all kinds of decisions, including setting the number of students needed in each major and where graduates were assigned (Hoffman 2010).

Aiding the state's control, normalization, and regulation of labor were the dossier system and a strict household registration system called the *hukou* system. A dossier (*dang'an*) is a file kept by schools and workplaces that records one's personal, professional, and political information. In the high-socialist era, everyone had a dossier that followed them wherever they went. Indeed, knowing that one is constantly being monitored but not knowing what has been written or might be written in one's dossier can leave one feeling uneasy and hesitant. Due to its permanence and its detailed documenting of personal information — from academic performance to work history, from marital status to Party status — every citizen felt a "general anxiety" about the contents of his or her dossier (Yang 1988).

*Hukou*, on the other hand, is a residency registration system that grants one the legal right to live in a specific place. In China, everyone is registered in the *hukou* system at birth and any kind of residence change has to be first reported and then permitted (Yang 1988). In the high-socialist era, changes to one's registration place were virtually impossible, and landing a job in a bigger or more desirable city that was not one's birthplace was extremely difficult. In this sense, *hukou* was a crucial tool in regulating labor mobility, and it helped reproduced various structural differences such as unequal job assignments and distribution of welfare benefits (housing, medical care, etc.) based on one's registration location.

In short, in the pre-reform era, the state-directed labor allocation, the dossier system, and *hukou* residency registration together constituted a powerful structure of social control. These state techniques and regulatory mechanisms were effective in producing disciplined and motivated socialist workers for whom "duty to one's country and socialist selflessness" (Hoffman 2010: 56) defined a politically safe and desirable subjectivity.

### Choice, Autonomy, and Freedom — the New Focus on the Self in the Reform Era

In the wake of reform and opening-up, the state-directed assignment system was critiqued, along with other central planning mechanisms, for being inefficient, inflexible, wasteful, and overall irrational (Zhao 2005; Hoffman 2010). In the meantime, the post-Mao focus on economic development and national modernization valorized the market, which in turn arose as the dominant model for managing labor. In the transition from a planned economy to a "socialist market economy," the state devolved its once centralized power to cities, universities, and workplaces, adopting more distanced techniques for governance, including governance of young, educated workers.

For instance, since the early 1980s, a series of education and labor law reforms has loosened top-down control of how and where students transition to the working world. These reforms include: the institution of "mutual choice" to allow job seekers and employers, as opposed to state functionaries, to make decisions about where to work and who to hire; the promotion of short-term contracts and phasing out of "jobs for life;" the replacement of campus "job assignment offices" with "career guidance offices;" opening talent exchange centers and job fairs to facilitate "mutual choice;" and so on (Zhao 2005; Hoffman 2010). In addition, the end of the Cultural Revolution and the new emphasis on knowledge economy and modernization ushered in a celebration of talented human capital. Consequently, once-powerful normalizing and disciplining institutions like the dossier and *hukou* systems have lost much of their effectiveness in shaping professional careers (Guthrie 2006; Hoffman 2010).

The new, more distanced governmental styles and techniques have significantly changed both the employment and, more fundamentally, the identity hopes of young educated elites in urban China. Whereas prior to the reforms this cohort had little autonomy to plan their future career and little freedom to pursue individual interests, in the contemporary era college students are granted more opportunity for self-planning and self-development. Indeed, with structural reform has come ideological reform: with the new professionalization of young Chinese urban elites has come a new focus on the self. More specifically, education and training are now prioritized for self-improvement and self-fulfillment; career-planning now emphasizes self-direction and is fundamentally geared toward self-actualization; and career guidance focuses on self-cultivation and self-presentation in order to improve one's competitiveness on the job market. In short, as the state's role in determining one's professional career recedes, young people are increasingly expected and encouraged to engage a multitude of self-responsible and self-enterprising practices to take control of their own fates. Young people are thus in the process of shaking off the traditional, more passive employment mentality (Bray 2005) and are embracing "an ethic of self-care that foregrounds individualized career development and social mobility enacted through the marketplace" (Hoffman 2010: 17).

## Insecurity and Anxiety

The new employment system has ushered in opportunities and freedom, but it has also been a conduit for various insecurities and uncertainties. And reciprocally, despite being dismissed as stifling and inefficient, the state-directed assignment system in the high-socialist era had its perks of security and stability. For young adults back then, being assigned a job at an urban work unit — which most college graduates did obtain — basically meant stable and lifelong employment, subsidized housing in the city, and other benefits of socialist welfare known together as the "iron rice bowl" (Guthrie 2006; Hoffman 2010).

With the state pulling back job guarantees, college graduates now face the reality of unemployment, new and increasing inequality, and even homelessness (*China Daily* 2011b). Confronted by a global economic recession and, thanks to the continual expansion of college enrollment, increasingly competitive job markets, students now must learn a number of vocational techniques: to equip themselves with knowledge and skills in school, to "sell" themselves on job markets by presenting their expertise and potentials effectively, to make career choices and be prepared for potential risks and consequences, and to adjust their expectations of quick, upward social mobility to the often lackluster reality of the workplace. More recently, in the face of even tighter job markets, students have been encouraged to start their own businesses and be self-employed (Hoffman 2010).

In a nutshell, while young urban elites in contemporary China do enjoy more options and greater autonomy in negotiating their way into the professional world, they also face unprecedented insecurities and uncertainties. Feelings of ambivalence and anxiety thus constitute another important dimension of urban Chinese youth's professional selfhood.

### Social and National Responsibility — "Patriotic Professionalism"

The third component of young Chinese urban elites' professional subjectivity is what Lisa Hoffman calls "patriotic professionalism" (Hoffman 2010). Hoffman coins the term when investigating how autonomy and choice, despite being part of the professional subjectivity of educated urban youth, are also part of the Chinese Communist Party's new governing techniques. Called "good authoritarianism," "liberal despotism" (Sigley 2004), and "socialism from afar" (Zhang & Ong 2008) by other observers of contemporary China, the new reforms see workers and citizens less as "passive objects of government fiat" than autonomous agents invested with democratic rights and economic interests (Sigley 2004: 569 & 573).

In exploring post-Mao, late-socialist Chinese subjectivity, many scholars warn against creating a false dichotomy between individual desires and socialist controls. For instance, Lisa Rofel critiques a number of commentaries (largely from the Western world) which characterize the Chinese people as "casting off socialism to find their true inner selves;" instead she suggests that we ask "*how* these inner selves come into being" (Rofel 2007: 6, emphasis mine). Sigley (2006) suggests that post-Mao reform and opening-up should be considered a "regrouping" rather than "retreat" of the Chinese Party-state. Similarly, Zhang and Ong (2008) point out that the aim of privatization to enhance the overall strength of the Chinese nation by emphasizing the powers of the private self was "a deliberate shift in China's governing strategy."

Echoing these more nuanced understandings of subject formation in contemporary China, Hoffman (2010) argues that notions of choice, autonomy, and freedom — which are particularly salient for young adults in transition from the academic to the professional worlds — should not be seen as natural human aspirations. Rather, they are new governing techniques and regulatory devices adopted by the CCP to help specify what constitutes the new urban professional. Hoffman shores up this proposition by gathering ethnographic evidence in the course of interviewing young professionals in urban China. She notices that in embracing the new self-enterprising ethos, these young professionals adopt and blend narratives of both professionalism and patriotism. That is, on the one hand, they emphasize autonomous decision-making and calculative choices for self-development and self-advancement; on the other hand, their employment choices are informed by explicit concerns for the welfare of both their families and the nation. This confluence of self-responsibility, familial obligation, and national duty is yet another defining feature of the emerging young urban subjectivity in contemporary China.

In sum, professional subjectivity is a critical component of and for selfhood formation among educated workers. In contemporary urban China, Party-state reform has altered the channels and mechanisms through which these workers transition from school to the work world. These reforms simultaneously usher in a new ethics of professional subjectivity that features three characteristics. To begin with, college students are transformed from passive assignees to actively choosing job seekers and self-enterprising employees. They are enabled and encouraged to plan their own careers, to desire and pursue material success, and to bear responsibilities and take risks. This newly established and glorified autonomy, however, challenges these same youth with unprecedented uncertainties and insecurities. The second facet of young people's work-related subjectivity, then, concerns the ambivalence and anxiety which autonomy brings with it. The state, however, does not disappear. The newly valorized entrepreneurial attitude and self-enterprising ethos can be channeled to the collective project of serving China. Our third facet is thus a "patriotic professionalism" that emphasizes both self-responsibility, in terms of advancing one's own career, and social and national responsibility, in terms of helping China prosper.

## Television Culture under Media Reform

To understand the exceptional appeal of American scripted TV to young Chinese urban elites, we need to know what other TV choices they face. In this section, I discuss the basic institutional structure of Chinese TV as well as the viewing options it affords to young people. Many of this study's respondents make comparisons with Chinese TV throughout our conversations; therefore the next subsection provides readers with a basic understanding of the production and consumption of Chinese scripted TV. I also describe some important changes in China's media landscape that bear upon the experience of my respondents.

## Chinese TV as a Primary Organ of State Apparatus

Similar to what happened in the United States in the 1950s, the 1980s saw a dramatic jump in TV ownership in China. By the end of the 1980s, nearly every Chinese family owned a set (Lull 1991; Zhu 2005). The introduction and quick dissemination of TV intersected with — and in many ways aided in — other significant economic, political, and socio-cultural changes in urban China: the initiation of the one-child policy, the first decade of economic reform that would usher China into escalating marketization and privatization, the opening-up policy that introduced Western culture to urban China, and a general liberalization of the national cultural landscape (e.g., fewer restrictions on popular media). Until today, TV remains the most widespread and influential medium in China (Miao 2011).

The dominant national network, Central China Television (CCTV) was formed in the mid-1970s with the primary task of "unify[ing] the country through presentation of official news and information, culturally-appropriate entertainment, and use of the official dialect (Mandarin Chinese)" (Lull 1991: 22). Despite a series of reforms in cultural management that have gone hand in hand with economic reforms in general, the primary goal of Chinese TV remains to "publicize and disseminate political propaganda" (Miao 2011: 91). Currently, all TV stations in China, together with other media enterprises and non-business media organizations, operate under the administrative umbrella of the State Administration of Radio, Film, and Television (SARFT).

Due to its incomparable availability and accessibility, television has been the ideal and dominant venue for the CCP's political propaganda and social control, and the Party-state's grip over TV has always been extremely tight. The quintessential example is CCTV's 7 o'clock news, which is broadcast daily nationwide from 7:00pm to 7:30pm on all CCTV national channels as well as all provincial news channels. The newscast, which features stone-faced anchors monotonously covering the most important national events and selected, "safe" international news, has a knack for "trumpeting the good news and whitewashing the bad news" (*bao xi bu bao you*). The lack of transparency and timeliness and the blatant distortion in TV news have generated contempt and distrust among audiences. Younger and more educated populations in particular now rely on more timely and less controlled media — such as the Internet — to stay informed (Miao 2011).

## Chinese TV as Leisure: Conditions of Domestically-Made Scripted Dramas

Despite TV's intended propagandistic and pedagogical function in China, ordinary Chinese citizens use TV first and foremost for entertainment. Scripted serial dramas have long been one of the most popular genres, second only to news (Lull 1991; Zhu 2005), and dominate programming schedules nationwide (Keane 1999, 2002; *Xinhua*

2008a). Since the first serial drama was screened in 1981, production has increased exponentially. By the end of the 1990s, about 8,000 episodes of serial dramas were produced each year in China (Keane 1999); in 2003, annual production exceeded 10,000 episodes and kept rising in the following years (Li, Z. M. 2011); in 2007, 529 serial dramas (a total of 14,670 episodes) obtained distribution licenses, crowning China as the largest producer of TV serial dramas in terms of quantity.

This surge in TV production, however, can be juxtaposed to a continual decline in ratings and viewing time when it comes to actual consumption (Liu 2011a). In fact, dissatisfaction with domestically produced serial dramas emerged as early as the late 1980s, mainly over such problems as predictable and boring content, unsubtle political sermonizing, repetitive broadcasting, poor production quality, and inconvenient airing times (Lull 1991: 160-162). Curiously, the introduction of market mechanisms and more distanced and flexible media policies in the reform era has not resulted in qualitative improvements. Audience complaints over domestic content today sound very much like those over two decades ago, only with new gripes about lack of innovation[7] and too much derivative programming[8] (Le 2008; Ke 2011; Li, L. 2011). As a result, more and more young people, especially the better-educated urbanites with some English skills, turn to the Internet for alternative viewing options (French 2006; Sydell 2008).

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[7] This means following suit to produce shows with similar themes. For example, in the late 1990s, several period/costume dramas — all set in *Qing* dynasty, the last dynasty of imperial China — became extremely popular among audiences. The success was followed by a surge of similar dramas flooding the Chinese small screen, leading to what Zhu refers to as a “Qing drama craze” (2005: 7).

[8] This refers to more brazen imitations of hit domestic and imported shows. For example, popular American scripted dramas such as *Friends*, *Sex and the City*, and *Ugly Betty* all have their respective Chinese versions, in which plot and even dialogue imitations are sometimes outrageously obvious. In a slightly more subtle manner, hit shows such as *Prison Break*, *Desperate Housewives*, *ER*, *24*, and *Lost* have also inspired a slew of Chinese TV dramas featuring similar premises.

Why are audiences in China, especially highly educated urban youth, so disgruntled with domestic TV content? Why has the quality of Chinese TV not developed in proportion with its quantity? While it is neither my intention nor within my expertise to thoroughly explore such questions, they are relevant to understanding the appeal of American scripted TV. I address these issues below by describing three key players in contemporary China's TV sphere — (1) the growing TV market, (2) the audience (particularly the urban, young, and well-educated), and (3) the state cultural regulators. I then provide a brief history of the introduction, dissemination, reception, and regulation of American TV in China.

### The growing TV market in China.

Commercialization and marketization of China's TV industry started in 1979 when the state stopped subsidizing production, programming, and broadcasting and forced creative personnel in the industry to scramble for alternative funding sources by wooing investors (Keane 2002; Miao 2011). In this emerging market, TV stations and production units faced both internal competition as well as competition in the 1990s from a growing leisure market aimed at urban youth that included karaoke, nightclubs, shopping malls, and cheap Hollywood blockbusters on pirated VCDs and DVDs.

In their battle for market shares in this emerging, immature, yet ferociously competitive cultural marketplace, TV creators and broadcasters adopted production strategies that critics contend reduced programming appeal to audiences. For example, to attract and satisfy investors, production units now often succumb to imitation, that is, to the repetition of programming formats (genres) and content (subject matter) that have demonstrated prior audience success (*Xinhua* 2011; Liu 2011b). Similarly, hesitant to broadcast new shows with unpredictable "fates," TV stations are tempted to re-broadcast popular programs to ensure ratings (*Xinhua* 2011). As a result, rather than spurring innovation and creativity, the marketization of Chinese TV has led to "cloning" hackneyed formats and predictable content.

### The audience.

As television became ubiquitous in urban China, audience tastes became more sophisticated. Exposed to more options, including Western media, consumers sought more choice and sovereignty in their selection of programs (Lull 1991; Hong 1998; Keane 2002). Consequently, audience expectations of just what constitutes quality TV have evolved significantly. Long gone are the days when people had no choice but to watch socialist realist dramas characterized by predicable plots, one dimensional characters, and explicit political posturing.

Increasingly, young Chinese urban elites are developing a taste for "Westernized" culture. Born when China took its initial reformative steps, the post-80s generation spent their early childhood in a rather barren cultural landscape. But with economic and cultural reform, this cohort, at least in urban China, has experienced the profound impact of cultural globalization. Coming of age precisely when computer technologies and the

Internet rapidly diversified and came to enrich urban China's cultural sphere, these young urbanites were quick to embrace film, music, television, and Internet content brought to them by powerful global media.

In particular, the social proliferation of Hollywood blockbusters paved the way for young urban elites' later affinity with American scripted TV. In fact, among my 29 respondents, 25 mentioned their experiences with Hollywood movies. Referred to in Mandarin Chinese as "*jinkou dapian*" (literally "mega-imports"), foreign movies — predominantly Hollywood blockbusters — were first brought to China through the cultural administrator's historic decision to import ten "excellent" foreign films each year that "basically reflect the finest global cultural achievements and represent the latest artistic and technological accomplishments in contemporary world cinema" (*Xinjingbao* 2004). This meager quota of 10 per year[9] left many Chinese viewers demanding more.

College students and young professionals in urban areas have been the most avid consumers of American movies, so much so that vendors peddling pirated DVDs of the newest Hollywood releases are common on university campuses in major Chinese cities. According to many of my respondents, their early experiences watching Hollywood films whet their appetite for more sophisticated, higher quality entertainment. These early encounters also initiated a challenge to address and tackle language and cultural barriers that they would encounter later when watching American TV.

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[9] The quota was increased to 20 in 2001 after China entered the WTO, and has just been increased to 34 in February, 2012. See Ann (2012).

### The state cultural regulation.

For TV producers in an authoritarian regime like China, placating officials by ensuring the political correctness of programs remains essential even in the market era. In contemporary China, even in the context of deregulation and privatization, the Party-state still exercises ideological control. As many have pointed out, the new autonomy granted to cultural workers and the valorization of cultural heterogeneity, while apparently in accordance with market ideology, can both be seen as a *discreet* approach by the CCP to use culture as a prop of governmentality in post-Mao China (Donald & Keane 2002; Keane 2002).

More specifically, in contrast to the direct political indoctrination methods of Maoist China, the CCP has tempered its cultural administration's political authority and now manages culture through an "arm's length principle" (Keane 1999) and by means of "persuasion" (Brady 2008). To achieve controlled ends without dogmatic means, the Party-state has deployed new, deliberately nebulous vocabularies to curb cultural diversity. For example, the SARFT coined the notion of "socialist mainstream melody" in 1987 and has since been using the term to promote artistic works that "realistically" depict important social issues, deliver positive and uplifting social messages, and reflect appropriate behaviors and normative values (Keane 2002; Hung 2011). Cultural regulators explicitly endorse "mainstream melody" works by awarding them in annual award ceremonies and endowing them with positive media coverage. However, just what constitutes "mainstream melody" can be extremely nebulous, arbitrary, and unpredictable (Keane 1999, 2002). In general, although the government dictates less through direct ideological propaganda, what is and is not permissible remains generally unclear. Cultural producers, in turn, have been and remain hesitant to generate programs that raise social concerns or offer socio-political critique; they are instead inclined to produce bland and “harmless” programming (Miao 2011: 100).

In the mean time, censorship and banning remain powerful backup strategies of the Party-state. As state-sanctioned marketization and opening-up have exposed Chinese audiences to a broadening spectrum of cultural materials, the CCP has also been intensifying censorship to hedge against the potential political repercussions of liberalization. Take TV cartoons as an example. In 2000, when Japanese animation nearly monopolized the Chinese TV cartoon market, the SARFT put a limit on the number of allowable TV broadcasts of foreign cartoons. In 2004, another regulation would demand that at least 60 percent of primetime cartoons be domestically produced. In 2006, all foreign cartoons were banned on TV from 5pm to 8pm. The SARFT claimed that the ban was issued in response to children and parents’ demands for domestic cartoons, even when a survey conducted earlier showed clear preference for foreign cartoons among Chinese children (*Xinhua* 2006). In 2008, the ban on foreign cartoons was further extended by an hour, from 5pm to 9pm (*Xinhua* 2008b).

The CCP has also been tightening its grip over TV media by waging attacks against a widening range of formats and content. For instance, in 2004, crime shows were banned during primetime in an effort to protect young viewers from being negatively affected (Miao 2011: 98). In 2007, talent contest shows became the primary target, apparently for being “vulgar” and promoting “bad taste” (Cheng 2011). Epic/costume dramas were banned in 2009 during the celebration of the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic of China. And since 2010, dating reality shows have been frequently criticized and put under progressively stricter regulations (Wong 2011). More recently, the SARFT launched a general clampdown against "excessive entertainment," a move aimed both to restrict spy dramas, crime shows, time travel dramas, and reality shows, and to bump foreign dramas from primetime (Lim 2012).

TV programming has been censored for a variety of reasons. But as analysts point out, it all boils down to checking the public's access to information that might inspire them to challenge Party rule (Shirk 2011). A telling example is *Super Girl*, China's first *American Idol*-esque singing-contest reality show, which premiered in 2004. Despite, or perhaps because of, the shows' sweeping popularity nationwide, it has been repeatedly criticized by the government, pressured to make content revisions, and even suspended before finally being canceled in 2012 (Cheng 2011). Officials condemned the show for being "vulgar," "profane," "unhealthy," and "poisonous" for young people (Hughes 2011). But many commentators and critics suggest that the show had raised the eyebrows of officials more for its Western style of selecting winners based on the democratic principle of audience voting (Branigan 2011; Hille 2011).

In the domain of scripted TV, shows dealing with social change in contemporary China have been popular among audiences (Keane 2002; Hung 2011). But by raising difficult social and moral issues, such shows also generate contentious public discussions, thereby running afoul of the censors. Take 2009's *Woju* (*Dwelling Narrowness*) as an example. By focusing on young people's difficulties managing the rising cost of living in

China's big cities, the drama touches on many hot button problems in contemporary urban China: low salaries and soaring housing prices, extensive corruption and social injustice, prostitution, tenuous interpersonal relationships, distorted moral values, and so forth. Because it critically engages many of the downsides of urban Chinese modernization, *Woju* attracted a huge viewership — especially among urban youth who share many of the protagonists' struggles — but it also raised heated audience discussions on the Internet. In light of this passionate public reaction, the SARFT criticized the show for using the topics of sex and corruption to raise its profile (Hung 2011: 155). Soon thereafter, Beijing Television stopped broadcasting the show, while other stations that did not pull the plug nonetheless started airing a newly edited version of the show (Zeng 2009).

In summary, TV in contemporary China has become progressively diverse and vibrant. However, despite general deregulation and greater tolerance, the Party-state still keeps a tight rein on materials that provoke public debate, spark critical thinking, and challenge authority. Regarding scripted TV in particular, to the degree that TV producers find themselves sandwiched between market pressures, audience demands, and state directives, it has become a daunting task in contemporary China to make quality dramas. Thus, beyond the few shows that have been able to strike a chord,[10] most domestic productions are widely disdained and disregarded. My interviews with university students in Beijing in late 2009 corroborate journalistic reports about such audience dissatisfaction. Many of my respondents describe Chinese shows across genres as

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[10] For discussions of several popular Chinese shows that were the talk of the nation 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).

“predictable,” “repetitive,” “slow,” “boring,” produced with “amateurish” techniques, and of overall low entertainment value. Students are fed up with a TV market flooded with copycat shows and “mainstream melody” dramas that trumpet China’s economic development, social advancement, and national stability and unity. The lackluster domestic content has thus been a major force in driving young, well-educated audiences to “better” viewing options such as American TV.

## American TV in China — A Brief History

### Three phases.

The Chinese consumption of American TV can be divided into three phases: (1) the 1980s and 1990s, (2) the period from 2000 to 2005, and (3) the period from 2005 to the present. China started importing American TV programs at the end of the 1970s. Throughout the 1980s, dozens of American dramas appeared on the Chinese small screen, including such popular series as *Garrison's Gorillas, Dallas*, *Hunter*, and, perhaps most memorable for the post-80s generation, *Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck* — a weekly compilation of Disney cartoons dubbed into Mandarin Chinese. The two major American imports during the 1990s were *Beauty and the Beast* and *Growing Pains.* The former did not leave a very deep impression as only the first season was imported. By comparison, *Growing Pains* left such a profound impact upon the young people I interviewed that a third of them brought up the show when I asked about their first American TV experience. When I asked what struck them most when they first watched the show, many suggested that they "didn't know parents could be friends with their kids like that" until they watched *Growing Pains*.

Then came the 2000s, the decade Chinese fans describe appreciatively as "when the 'magic box' of American TV completely opened up" for them (Hermione 2010). This decade can in turn be divided into two phases: the (pirated) DVD period from 2000 to 2005 and the Internet era from 2005 onwards.[11] One elaborate commentary posted on the American show information website "http://huo360.com/" by a fan with the net ID "yadi," speaks of the DVD period, in this regard, as "eliminating US TV illiteracy" (*meiju de saomang jieduan*). Indeed, she/he analogizes this period to the early days of the opening-up policy: "It's like the early 1980s, when all sorts of foreign ideas poured into China. In those days, it was as if Chinese intellectuals constantly overdosed on oxygen. Too much oxygen; too much fertilizer" (yadi 2009). In this earlier stage (i.e., 2000-2005), only a few shows circulated among Chinese fans, all of which, however, remain very much cherished — some are even nostalgically referred to by fans as "classics" or "must-sees." Representative works include *Friends*, *Sex and the City, 24, ER, The West Wing, Band of Brothers*, etc. *Friends* and *Sex and the City* were especially popular on college campuses due to their novel format, bawdy content, witty lines, and, as a practical feature among students, their function as guides for learning vernacular English.[12]

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[11] There is no "official" statistics to shore up this periodization, but it appears to be accurate based on my interviews with 29 Chinese fans of US TV, my own experience of watching US TV in China, and other confirmative information I gathered through reading online blogposts and discussions by a greater number of Chinese fans.

[12] All of the students I spoke with named English learning as one of the reasons for their consumption of US TV. See also Li, Z. M. (2010a).

The Internet period is from around 2005 up and through the present. Three factors have contributed to make this period possible and distinct, namely, the ubiquity of personal computers, the affordability of Internet services (which are free on most university campuses), and the creation by Chinese fans of American TV websites. Indeed, thanks to new media technologies, a more tolerant culture, and the loose collection of devoted fans who volunteer their time, language skills, and Internet technology expertise, Chinese audiences are able to download an increasing number of American TV and movies from the Internet, for free and sans commercials (French 2006; Sydell 2008). The two main ways of viewing American shows using the Internet are watching online and downloading to personal computers.

Having survived rounds of government regulation and crackdowns, the Chinese fan-created American TV websites provide Chinese fans of American popular culture with a diverse and dynamic virtual community. For example, the website http://www.1000fr.net/, for which I once volunteered as a translator, boasts nearly 500,000 registered members as of May, 2012. 1000fr has four major fan-oriented sections: downloads, previews, forums, and auxiliary products. The “forums” section bears the greatest relevance to my concerns in this research. Here, fans consume American TV culture by sharing all kinds of TV information (e.g., ratings, reviews, airing schedules, news about shows to be canceled, shows to be launched, etc.), by helping one another get beyond language and other cultural obstacles, by discussing specific plots and characters, and by sharing their thoughts on all matters inspired by watching US TV.

### The Chinese government's approaches: importation and censorship.

The escalating popularity of American TV among China's young urban elites and the lively fan community it has catalyzed have raised concerns among cultural regulators. The Party-state's reaction to this lively cultural scene is two-pronged: importing selectively and eliminating the rest. The former involves importing, editing, dubbing, and broadcasting selected shows, whereas the latter refers to uprooting the rest of US shows by clamping down on video-sharing websites.

Regarding importing, CCTV had contemplated bringing in *Friends* in 2004, but eventually dropped the idea in light of the show's "overt sexual themes" (Zhang 2004). Further, of the handful of shows that did make it into China legally, many have been so extensively vetted by censors that they have lost much of their original "flavor." Take ABC's dark dramedy *Desperate Housewives* as an example. The show's first season was imported and debuted on December 19, 2005 on CCTV-8, the television drama channel of China's state-run national broadcaster. The series was squeezed into the 10pm-1am time slot by broadcasting three episodes back to back each night. The inconvenient screening time was exacerbated by the SARFT's excessive "sanitization" of the show: unwholesome scenes (e.g., those involving crime, violence, sex, etc.) were snipped, and "racy" lines were toned down with vague euphemisms. Translation and dubbing also proved an indomitable challenge. On top of the fact that most of the show's witty one-liners and double-entendres simply do not have vivid and apt Chinese translations, the CCTV dubbing was criticized as sounding unnatural and as misrepresenting and flattening character personalities.[13] Bewildering the older and culturally less adventurous Chinese generations with its fast pace, twisted plots, and inadequate translation, and irritating the younger, cosmopolitan generation with its compromises and heavy editing, the show, not surprisingly, flopped during its first screening in China. As much as this and other CCTV renditions of American shows failed to win fans over to US TV, many viewers, and especially young viewers, continued to seek unedited US TV with the original English sound track.

CCTV's effort to import and edit, and so to "tame," selected US TV turned out to be an "arduous but thankless job" (Li, Z. M. 2010b). Outright bans proved more effective. The SARFT began tightening its grip in early 2009 in an attempt to crack down on "low-brow" cyber content (*Xinhua* 2009). Later that year, in the run-up to the 20-year anniversary of the Tian'anmen incident and the 60th anniversary of the People's Republic, and after the Xinjiang riots in July, the government sought to increase control over both domestic and overseas content. Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Flickr, Windows Live, Hotmail, and thousands of foreign websites were more or less suddenly blocked (Branigan 2009). As the year drew to a close, the government's "big ban" on file-sharing websites was in full swing (*Xinhua* 2009). In the name of fighting piracy and unhealthy content on the Internet, the SARFT shut down more than 530 BitTorrent (BT) websites which, by offering peer-to-peer file-sharing, enabled users to share "unauthorized" audios and videos (Mu 2009; *China Daily* 2009).

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[13] There are a great number of reports and discussions on the CCTV rendition of *Desperate Housewives*. For example, see Chen (2005) and Sun (2005).

This clampdown had a rather significant impact on my research activity. In December, 2009, I was in Beijing, ready to proceed with my plan to interview several 1000fr contributors/translators. They were the “productive consumers” I had lined up for my study when I had volunteered for the website earlier that year. But as soon as China’s broadcasting watchdogs cracked down on the file-sharing websites, *none* of my 1000fr affiliated respondents wanted to be interviewed. This eventually became one of the major reasons that this research took on a broader approach to TV consumption, focusing on fans rather than translators.

Still, some sites remain active. Nearly a year after the ban came into effect in 2009, many fans found they were still able to watch American shows online, but only within 24 hours of the upload. Thus, fans keen on sharing US TV could download the episodes within 24 hours and then spread them in private. Others suggested that the SARFT regulation only affects those who watch the shows through online streaming, and therefore as long as one pursues the alternative, download-and-watch route, most shows are still free and just a few clicks away (Liu 2010). In the meantime, facing more stringent regulations, a number of video-sharing websites have come up with a variety of strategies to survive. For example, in line with the SARFT’s directive regarding copyright issues, many big video-streaming sites have been working to secure legal copyrights for the films and TV series hosted on their websites (Zhao 2010). Thanks to such proactive moves and countermeasures, the consumption of American TV among urban Chinese youth remains alive and well.

## Summary

This chapter has highlighted some of the dramatic changes that confront urban Chinese youth daily. I have concentrated on three specific aspects that shape young people's subjective sense of self: (1) education, (2) labor market prospects, and (3) media — particularly TV — consumption. I began by introducing the exceptionally rigorous education standards the post-80s urban Chinese youth are expected to live up to and the draconian processes they have to go through in order to get a decent college education. I then described the mismatch between China's restrictive education and the new emphasis on creativity, innovation, and critical thinking in China's transition to a market economy. Such tensions have generated confusion and frustration among Chinese college students who must balance supposed career freedoms with ongoing education system restrictions.

From there, I proceeded to examine the changing scenario of labor allocation in urban China and the three-pronged professional identity it has engendered for young adults. First, as the state has adopted a more arms length approach to controlling human capital in China's cities, autonomy and choice have been emphasized as essential components of the ideal professional identity. As employment has become a site for self-fulfillment, college students' upcoming transition into the professional world becomes a key phase for developing self-responsible and self-enterprising personhood. Second, and meanwhile, the prospect of navigating immature but increasingly competitive job markets has brought about feelings of insecurity and anxiety among college students. Finally, the third component of urban Chinese youth's forming professional subjectivity is an emphasis on “patriotic professionalism” — the idea that an entrepreneurial self should also be loyal to one’s family and country and responsible for their prosperity.

Most directly related to this project, I have reviewed the changing conditions of TV production and consumption in China over the past 30 years or so. I have demonstrated that, despite its celebrated marketization, Chinese TV, as a primary device of state propaganda and control, has had a difficult time satisfying audiences’ increasingly diverse and sophisticated tastes. Disheartened by the state’s increase in media control, Chinese audiences, especially those who are young, well-educated, and media-savvy, have employed new media technologies to aid their active search for and engagement with alternative viewing choices.

Having established the socio-historical backdrop against which Chinese students establish their identities as young adults, we must then ask what accounts for their fascination with American television. And what do they “do” with the television shows they watch? Based on 29 extensive interviews with university students in Beijing, in the following chapters, I will demonstrate how American TV provides these students with novel symbolic materials with which to make sense of the growing individualism that permeates contemporary urban China. I argue that exposure to American lifestyle and television personalities prompts young Chinese urbanites to search for ways to make sense of unfamiliar settings and values and to reflect on the taken-for-granted legitimacy of their own social order. In particular, it is a sense of cultural authenticity — both as an existential condition of being spontaneous and true to oneself and as a style of cultural representation that features genuine artistic expression and honest social critique — that Chinese youth, in this transitional moment, find fascinating, engaging, and inspiring.

# CHAPTER IV

# METHODS AND DATA

To study the way young Chinese urban elites engage American scripted TV, I conducted qualitative interviews with a non-random sample of university students in Beijing. This chapter provides a general account of my study method and data collection. I start by discussing "TV talk" as a form of reflexivity and its methodological value. Then I interrogate the advantages and drawbacks of in-depth one-on-one interviewing for my research. I then proceed to discuss my research subjects and sample, providing a justification for the small, relatively privileged group of student interviewees and their not-so-common TV taste. After briefly introducing the three university campuses where the participants were living and studying and where the interviews were conducted, I describe the actual data collection procedure and discuss my interview guide. At the end of the chapter, I highlight several important issues regarding transcription, translation, and data analysis.

## Reflexive Talk and the Construction of the Discursive Self

This dissertation is about how educated urban Chinese youths use American scripted TV to reconsider their own living conditions and renegotiate their own identities. There are a slew of questions that can help us understand this intersection between how respondents make meaning of TV texts and how they think about themselves and their emerging identity as adults. Most importantly, I want to understand why so many well-educated young Chinese find American scripted television so appealing. More specifically, what is it about the shows or characters that strikes a chord, raises a question, provokes introspection, sparks an idea, or causes discomfort? Further, other than the act of watching, what do student fans *do* with their beloved shows in their daily lives, and what do they perceive the shows *do to them*?

## TV Talk as Identity Talk — Methodological Value

In the literature review chapter, I argued that television, like many other cultural objects, is a powerful vehicle for modern reflexivity. That is, people engage TV images and messages in part to make sense of and come to grips (through such cultural categories as gender, age, class, race, ethnicity, and nationality) with their personal and social identities. If modern identity is an ongoing project motivated by heightened reflexivity, then TV feeds this reflexivity by providing shared as well as novel cultural frames and references with which audiences can rehearse ideas about self and society. Moreover, talk about TV, whether with friends or in response to an interview, is an expressive manifestation of how individuals process and make sense of the "raw materials" of television — the characters, plots, situations, dialogue, roles, and relationships. According to this position, TV talk is not just a conduit or result of the meanings viewers make of TV texts but rather is part of the process of viewers actively using media texts to explore identity. It is in this sense that TV talk is at the same time "identity talk" (McKinley 1997), of which reflexivity is an integral part (Kim 2005).

Studying viewers' TV talk, then, we see them reflecting on themselves and can learn about how they understand their social world.

## Qualitative One-on-One Interviewing

### Advantages

For the students in this study, the main site for TV consumption and fandom is the Internet. However, I chose personal interviews over other forms of interaction (e.g., letters or blogging) because the one-on-one conversations allowed me to question the informants more carefully and to push them to elaborate, clarify, and explain themselves (Morgan 1996). Because the Chinese consumption of US TV is a relatively new, albeit quickly growing cultural phenomenon, there are few previous studies. Therefore, I wanted to capture as many details as possible in terms of what led my respondents to watch American TV and how they interpret their viewing experiences. In-depth interviewing can be very revealing and informative in this regard because it allows the researcher to "gain in the coherence, depth, and density of the material each respondent provides" (Weiss 1994: 3). For the same reason, I used a semi-structured interview guide. Many of my interviews lasted 2 or more hours, giving me time to develop a strong rapport and sense of trust with these students, which in turn aided my efforts to elicit personal information and probe for details about their experience with American television.

As per my original research proposal, I also conducted 13 focus groups, with the hope that data collected in this way would complement in-depth interviews in serving my original research purposes. While the focus groups have informed my findings and analysis, I ended up using the 800 pages of transcript data from the one-on-one interviews in my formal analysis. I excluded the focus group data — despite the fact that many well-known reception studies have used focus groups (e.g., Radway 1991 [1984]; Liebes & Katz 1990; Gamson 1994; McKinley 1997; Butcher 2003) — simply because the one-on-one interview data provided a richer source of information about personal reflexivity and the focus group data did not add substantially to my conclusions.

All participants first took a brief screening survey (see Appendix A), through which I collected their basic demographic, TV viewing, and contact information. Even though I used it mainly to solicit and select participants for the one-on-one interviews, the survey included a few questions regarding respondents' general opinions and thoughts about US TV. My rough analysis of the survey data further confirmed the necessity of extensive, face-to-face interviews. For example, one survey question asked respondents to "give me a one-word or one-sentence reason why you are attracted to American shows." The answers were unsurprisingly standard: "interesting," "fascinating," "well-made," "learning English," "curiosity about American culture," etc. By contrast, the interviews enabled me to discern that the fascination these students exhibit toward American TV is in large part driven by their yearning for a sense of authenticity, both as an existential condition of being true to themselves and as a cultural representation of respecting and honestly exploring the human condition. Thus, while answers to the survey only vaguely hinted at it, this aspiration gradually and more clearly emerged in most cases in the course of an interview.

### Limitation

This study is based on a non-random sample of Beijing-based college students; the findings do not necessarily apply to all Chinese college students, not to mention a wider range of young professionals off campus. However, as the capital of China, Beijing is undoubtedly at the forefront of China's emergence as a globalized economic powerhouse. Further, since Beijing is under the constant scrutiny of the CCP administration, it is precisely where cultural regulation gets implemented most quickly and effectively. Boasting the country's best educational institutions, Beijing also attracts the nation's brightest to study and work. These university students represent the leading edge of a broader pool of young, eager aspirants who are most likely to benefit from and even to drive China's current boom (Lynton & Thøgersen 2010b). Thus, in-depth interviewing allowed me to investigate both how a typical group of privileged, well-educated youth in urban China is engaging a powerful component of global media and how these media experiences are being mobilized in their daily lives.

## Population of Interest

The subjects of my study are young elites in contemporary China. They represent a broader cohort born in the 1980s who are often referred to as China's post-80s generation, the "Me Generation," or "Generation Y." At the time of the data collection, this cohort was between 20 and 29 years of age. Although not necessarily urbanites by birth, they are currently studying or working in urban China, especially in the big cities.

When I use the term “elite” here and throughout this dissertation, I want to stress how being both college-educated and urban marks one as belonging to a privileged social group. Although the beginnings of China’s higher education system were humble, this system is developing quickly. More importantly, however, the system generally favors urban students over rural ones. While nationwide only a small fraction of college-age youth are enrolled, an even smaller fraction attend the high-caliber universities to which my interviewees belong (Xiang 2009; Levin 2010). In short, in a country where higher education is still more a privilege than a right, college-educated urbanites constitute an elite group, and my interviewees belong to that group.

Moreover, the urban youth are that segment of the population most often identified by critics and officials concerned with the negative effects of cultural imperialism (Butcher 2003). The Party-state’s various forms of cultural control and media regulation are almost always justified in terms of protecting youth (especially urban youth) against harmful culture. If we add to this the fact that cities like Beijing have borne the brunt of the dramatic modernization that has swept China, we see that students in these cities are confronted daily with unsettling social and economic change. As discussed earlier, such change has transformed identity from a fixed category into an evolving project, making “coming of age” a prolonged and highly reflexive endeavor. Caught in the crossfire between global media and the state’s emphasis on cultural purity, cosmopolitan Chinese youths thus represent an ideal target population if we want to better understand the influence of global media. As a group, they are perfect for examining the intersections between the consumption of global media, the experience of social transition, and the work of reflexive identity.

Indeed, systems of higher education emphasize and complicate this identity work. Identity work involves "dialectical movements of intense *progression* of creative acquisition of new competences and temporary *regression* to earlier positions" (Fornäs 1995: 236). Education and pedagogy are therefore sites for identity work and ambivalence — while students learn new things through books and in class that challenge their background assumptions, they are expected at the same time to follow rules, defer to authority, and accept conventions and rituals of learning that ensure a secure and stable future (Fornäs 1995). For these reasons, college is a formative time that renders young people's identity exploration particularly salient.

Finally, I selected college students to constitute my sample for three more practical reasons. First, college students are the chief audiences of American TV shows in China (French 2006). Second, with free high-speed Internet on all college campuses in China, students have easy access to American shows. Third, college campuses are convenient locations to recruit study participants.

## Data Collection: Locations and Procedures

### Three Campuses

The data collection spanned more than 3 months from early September to mid December, 2009. I conducted interviews on the campuses of three Beijing universities:

Peking University (PKU), Renmin University of China (RUC), and Capital University of Economics and Business (CUEB).

PKU, my alma mater, is a top-notch university in China, often dubbed "China's Harvard." As the country's first modern national university, PKU was established in 1898 and quickly became a national nucleus of progressive thought, having educated and hosted many prominent modern Chinese figures, including Mao Zedong himself. The university has been the seedbed for many critical social movements during China's chaotic early modernization, from the New Culture Movement that introduced modern Western conceptions of science, technology, and democracy in the 1910s and 1920s, up to the 1989 *Tian'anmen* event, and beyond. Neighboring a dozen other colleges and universities, PKU is located in *Zhongguancun*, which is a technology hub in northwest Beijing often described as "China's Silicon Valley."

RUC is another highly prestigious research university in Beijing. Founded in 1937, RUC is also located in *Zhongguancun*, near PKU. The university offers a distinct focus on the social sciences and humanities.

Finally, CUEB was established in 1956. In comparison with PKU and RUC, CUEB is a second-tier, more local university, where 90% of the enrolled undergraduate population are originally from Beijing. The university has a prominent focus on economics and management. Its main campus, where I conducted my interviews, is located in Fengtai District in south Beijing.

### Recruitment and Sample

To recruit participants, I posted advertisements for my study on the BBS (Bulletin Board System) of all three universities, inviting interested students to first fill out an online survey I set up using Google Documents. I received a total of 124 responses, from which I chose 29 students to interview. I used 2 major criteria to determine and put together the final sample. First, the survey helped me to identify current fans of American TV and to exclude those who once watched but were no longer actively watching American shows. I then selected more avid viewers who had listed at least 5 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 final 29-person sample consists of 11 males and 18 females, which, while heavy on females, is generally in line with expectations.

### Interviewing

I conducted all interviews face-to-face using a digital recorder. I contacted participants by phone or email to set up a time to meet. As for location, except for a few early outdoors campus interviews, I conducted the majority of the interviews in an empty campus classroom.

Before the interview started, I broke the ice by introducing myself and my study. I then went over the consent form and assured each interviewee once again that any and all identifying information would remain fully confidential. All respondents gave me permission to tape-record the entire interview. Although the interviews were about consumption of American scripted TV, which meant that using English might be convenient from time to time (e.g., to refer to the name of shows or characters, to recite specific lines, etc.), given the fact that all respondents were more fluent in Mandarin Chinese, all interviews were done in Mandarin.

In conducting each interview, I loosely followed an IRB-approved interview guide/protocol (see Appendix B). The guide includes a large collection of questions targeted at different “types” of audience, as per my original research proposal. This means that only part of the guide remained relevant to the current project. Since participants’ basic demographic information had been collected through the pre-interview survey questionnaire, I did not ask those questions again during the interview. The relevant questions in the interview guide can be roughly grouped into 4 sections. To begin, I asked respondents about their first experience with American scripted TV (which had typically happened years before when they watched officially imported shows dubbed in Chinese). I asked students which show(s) they had watched in those initial encounters, and what they liked or did not like about those early shows.

Then we proceeded to the second, most important part of the interview — respondents’ thoughts about and engagement with their current favorite American shows. I typically asked them about their favorite and least favorite characters, about the show’s primary theme or central message, about their perception of its realism, its relevance (or lack thereof) to their own lives, and so on. All questions were open-ended, and I probed for details or asked for elaborations where necessary.

It is worth noting here that asking each respondent to discuss her/his own favorite show is not typical in reception studies. Instead, researchers usually pick a particular, often popular, or otherwise important show and then base the study on that show.[14] In my study, however, I didn't pre-select shows but instead opted to let the respondents talk about the shows they were most passionate about. This allowed me to probe their particular fascination and choices rather than their response to some common option or already determined show. Moreover, since none of the American shows (at least in their untampered, original version) were broadcast on Chinese TV, each fan's tastes were really his or her own, which meant that it would have been difficult to pick one show that everyone would have felt strongly about.

Most respondents picked one show and stuck with it for the majority of the interview. Some, however, alternated between a couple or even a few different shows. I did not try to stop such wandering, nor did I try to control which shows they might discuss. While I was genuinely concerned with how to account for "show-hopping" in the data collection, it turned out to be a significant expression of the intense and varied reflexivity in students' engagement with American television. They did not pick a single favorite show to tell me about but switched between different shows as they brought up different aspirations, personal challenges, and value orientations. Similarly, some shows were more relevant to one period of their lives than another. I often heard the following refrain, for example: "I used to like show A, which I still think is great, but I feel I've outgrown it; and right now show B really appeals to me…."

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[14] For example, *Dallas* has been repeatedly studied by different scholars among different groups of audiences (e.g., Ang 1985; Liebes & Katz 1990). Scholars have also studied reception of such popular programs as *The Cosby Shows* (Jhally & Lewis 1992) and *90210* (McKinley 1997).

With the third group of questions, I asked respondents to compare favorite American shows with Chinese shows of similar genres or subject matter. I included such comparative questions because I wanted to discover and begin to explain the special appeal of American shows.

In the final group of questions, I asked respondents to reflect on what American TV had done to them. More specifically, I was concerned with two types of self-perceived "effects." I asked students if watching US TV had influenced their impressions of America or American culture, and if so, in what ways. But I also asked them if watching US TV had in any way affected *themselves*. In both cases, I encouraged respondents to elaborate by providing examples.

I generally aimed to follow the interview guide and to explicitly ask about perceived effects rather late in the interview. However, the students would often begin to talk about how their favorite shows had made a difference in their lives — especially in terms of changing their (desired) ways of being and doing things — almost as soon as they began sharing with me their perceptions and interpretations of the shows. That is, students often entered the terrain of my fourth question-set as soon as they entered the second question-set. When I asked them to talk about the shows (characters, plots, etc.), they often transitioned without my prompt into talking about themselves and their own life conditions. I take this blend of talk about shows and talk about self as a key sign of the heightened reflexivity involved in students' consumption of US TV.

At the end of the interview, I gave each participant a small amount of money as a token of my appreciation for their help and their trust. Each interview lasted between 1.5

and 3 hours, with 13 out of the 29 interviews lasting for 2 hours or more. All the respondents seemed to enjoy our conversations; quite a few asked if they could have a copy of my dissertation when I finish it.

## Transcription, Translation, and Data Analysis

I transcribed all 29 interviews in full, the transcripts of which total about 800 pages. In light of this heavy volume, I decided to analyze the data in Chinese and only translate quotes into English that would be included in the dissertation. Even so, translation has proven to be a challenging process. I discussed the most important translation issue in the Literature Review Chapter, namely, how I came to adopt the English word "authenticity" as the concept that could best explain why the Chinese students I spoke with find American scripted TV appealingly "real," or, in their original Chinese, "*zhenshi.*"

This, however, does not mean that I actually translated all utterances of Chinese "*zhenshi*" into the English word "authentic." For example, when a respondent said that she likes *Grey's Anatomy* because it is "*zhenshi*," or when another respondent complained that a mainstream-melody Chinese show "doesn't feel *zhenshi*," I translated "*zhenshi*" in both cases into the English word "real," which is the word I would expect an English speaker to use in similar situations. In other words, the term "authenticity" is more of a theme or theoretical concept that underlies perceived truthful TV representations or desired existential conditions. In everyday speech, words such as "real," "genuine," "truthful," "honest" are often used to express connotations of authenticity, and I try to be "authentic" to that in my translation.

I translated all quotations myself. Not surprisingly, I ran into difficulties such as lack of corresponding English expressions and other word choice dilemmas. In these situations, dictionaries were my first recourse, but more often than not I ended up solving the problem by discussing it with my supervisors or other American colleagues and friends. As Sherry Simon (1996) argues, "The solutions to many of the translator's dilemmas are not to be found in dictionaries, but rather in an understanding of the way language is tied to local realities, to literary forms and to changing identities... In fact the process of meaning transfer has less to do with *finding* the cultural inscription of a term than in reconstructing its value" (137-138, emphasis in original). In line with this, my translation did not aim at finding the single correct translation of a text so much as at capturing the assumptions, feelings, and values carried by the language of my respondents. While complete conceptual equivalence across languages is, as Phillips (1960) puts it, "in absolute terms an insolvable problem" (291), I tried my best to be truthful to my respondents' statements. Born and raised in Beijing, I spoke Mandarin Chinese exclusively for the first 22 years of my life while learning English in school. At the time of the study, I had been attending Vanderbilt University and living in Nashville, Tennessee for over 6 years, and had been primarily using English in my academic pursuits for over 8 years. These experiences have allowed me to navigate the two enormously complicated linguistic systems with reasonable confidence. Further, the fact that I personally conducted all the interviews allowed me to recall the actual communicative and conversational contexts to aid the translation wherever the meaning of the literal texts appeared nebulous or vague.

My data analysis proceeded inductively through identifying recurring themes and patterns in the interview transcripts. I would suggest that an inductive approach is optimal in this case, given the exploratory nature of this study and the unexpected turns it took during data collection. More specifically, I based my analysis on the inductive strategy of grounded theory, which allowed me to "develop progressively more abstract conceptual categories to synthesize, to explain, and to understand the data, and to identify patterned relationships within it (Charmaz 2004: 497). In contrast to the typical grounded theory method where data collection and analysis take place simultaneously, I did not start analyzing the data systematically until all interviews were conducted and transcribed. This delay was due to time constraints and the intensive traveling during data collection.

Grounded theory's basic rule of studying "emerging data" has, for me, been incredibly helpful. This rule urges the researcher to spend a lot of time with the data, to submerge oneself in it, and to be simultaneously aware and critical of respondents' "implicit meanings and taken-for-granted concerns" (Charmaz 2004: 505). Here, being critical, as Charmaz argues, does not mean being judgmental about research participants, but being inquisitive about the data. This approach influenced the development of this work's conceptual frame. When my original research agenda and initial hypotheses turned out to be problematic, I was left with no other alternative but to "let the data speak for themselves" and reveal emergent patterns and categories. I studied the interview data extensively, not just by reading the transcripts, but also by repeatedly listening to the interview recordings. This is how the language of "*zhenshi*" (real) caught my attention: It emerged when so many respondents emphasized it as a critical, attractive feature of both the American national character and American TV.

Even though I did not realize at the time of interviewing that *zhenshi* would turn out to be my central concept, I often probed further and asked follow-up questions when I found respondents offering unreflective meanings of "real." It seemed natural at the time to ask questions such as "What do you mean by 'real'?", "Could you describe what 'realistic representations' look like?", "Tell me more about why you think that protagonist is 'real'", or "What do you mean when you say that that show doesn't feel 'real?'" I discovered the latent/emerging notion of authenticity precisely as its different connotations were articulated and elaborated by respondents in answering those follow-up questions.

The initial line-by-line coding was done using *Atlas-ti*, a data analysis program that facilitates the coding and retrieval of qualitative data. This program has helped me identify some of the most important recurring themes and sub-themes in my current theoretical framework, such as personal authenticity, relational authenticity, perceived realistic representation, resonance, and so on. This has helped me bridge respondents' open-ended and expansive responses with my newly formed research concerns and emerging categories of meaning and representation. I did not rely on *Atlas-ti* in the later stage of more focused coding.

# SECTION II

# TEXTUAL AUTHENTICITY

# INTRODUCTION

Why do Chinese youth watch American TV shows? Apparently because they find the shows enjoyable. As Ang suggests, “nobody is forced to watch television; at most, people can be led to it by effective advertising” (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 translation and web maintenance volunteered by the more avid, linguistically capable, and technologically savvy devotees of American shows. Why, then, do so many young Chinese actively seek out American TV? What is so compelling about it that keeps them coming back for more? What is “enjoyable” about the experience? How have they become so invested in US TV that they speak of it in such self-reflexive ways? These are critical questions to sort out to better understand how American TV has come to be incorporated into Chinese youth’s everyday living.

In this section, which includes chapters 5 and 6, I tackle these questions and argue that Chinese youth are drawn to and continually engaged by American scripted TV because they find the shows to be rendered *authentically*, especially when compared with indigenous content and other viewing options. Textual authenticity not only enhances viewing pleasure, but prompts reflexivity among the young Chinese, elevating their TV experience from mere entertainment to a critical avenue of (what we have seen as) their everyday identity project.

What do I mean by textual authenticity? From the angle of art history and museology, Lionel Trilling (1972) unpacks the modern ideal of authenticity as establishing the distinction between what something seems to be and what it actually is. But in the world of scripted TV, authenticity is a rather slippery notion, and each TV genre lends itself to a different notion of authenticity. For example, epic and period pieces are typically more concerned with the historical accuracy of content, whereas sitcoms and comedies are expected to be more artificial, stylized, exaggerated, and playful. Indeed, in the contemporary era where many scripted TV shows — especially on premium cable — have arguably outshone respected films in building well-rounded characters, experimenting with mixed genres and edgy concepts, and presenting sophisticated storytelling (Edgecliffe-Johnson 2010),[15] authenticity has become a more elusive concept and drifted even further away from the strict notion of realism.

Consider the most popular and critically acclaimed TV shows of the last decade or so — from *Sex and the City* and *Friends*, to *The Wire* and *Desperate Housewives,* to *True Blood* and *Mad Men*. These shows represent vastly different genres and distinctive subject matter, but they are all regularly deemed authentic by both ordinary viewers and TV critics.[16] This is a sure sign of the increasing elusiveness of the concept. Thus, a number of questions open up. For instance, can the use of stereotypes be authentic? Are shows that constantly twist plots to upend audience expectations and assumptions authentic or not? What about grittiness? If grittier, darker shows are more authentic — as the success of *The Wire* and *Breaking Bad* seems to suggest — then what are we to make of the equally acknowledged authenticity of such deliberately campy shows as *Desperate Housewives* and *Modern Family*?

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[15] Several TV producers interviewed on PBS's *America in Primetime* also make similar observations.

[16] *America in Primetime*. 2012. PBS.

One common thread in the cacophonous discourses around authentic TV is the idea of emotional resonance. Whatever a show's genre or subject matter might be, if the human conditions and struggles it reflects feel familiar and relatable, and if its exploration of basic, universal human emotions strikes a chord, then viewers applaud and embrace it as being authentic, even if the context or plotlines are not "real" in the sense of being accurate portrayals of real people, events, and places. In other words, the authenticity of a show does not so much reside in spreading valid information as in sharing an emotional experience that has a significant kernel of truth; it is the feelings and emotions the plot stirs up that are to be evaluated as real or not.

If emotional resonance is at the core of authentic TV experience, then the key to understanding why American shows are authentic in the eyes of Chinese youth resides in discovering what it is about those shows that conjures emotional resonance for Chinese viewers — that is, why the shows' characters and stories afford audiences a profound sense of connection and empathy.

By talking at great length with my respondents, I found that American TV strikes them as authentic because it embraces the unpredictability and messiness of life. More specifically, in comparison with Chinese shows and other available viewing options, American shows across genres tend to be, or at least to seem, emergent and spontaneous as opposed to planned and staged; they are or seem open and revealing as opposed to controlled and whitewashed; they are or seem deep and complex as opposed to shallow and simplistic; and they are or seem full of subtleties and ambiguities as opposed to offering black-and-white morality and straightforward preaching. With brutal honesty and an occasionally dark sense of humor, American TV offers the young Chinese viewers a rich variety of materials to work with as they deal with their own lives in flux.

While this perceived textual authenticity can be affected by many factors, from premise to cinematography and from casting to acting, I take an inductive approach and focus on two particular elements that my respondents commented on regularly. These two aspects are *subject matter* and *characterization*, which are considered in detail in chapters 5 and 6, respectively.

# CHAPTER V

# SUBJECT MATTER

Subject matter is the substance, content, or main themes of a work of art. During the interviews with my respondents, they praised American TV's subject matter, particularly its thoughtful references to current events and broad coverage of social matters. In this chapter, I explore these comments by categorizing them into three "ideal types," namely, (1) *timeliness*, (2) *concrete and alternate visions of the US*, and (3) *sensitive and controversial content*. The reader should know that these categories are Weberian ideal types because they are only developed for analytical purposes. From my reading of the data, these "types" best capture the wide range of comments about subject matter on American TV. There is some overlapping of types. For example, the longer a respondent speaks in response to one of my questions, the greater the chance that he or she will digress and transition into describing other aspects of textual or existential authenticity. As a result, many comments, including some of those used below, do not fall smack dab into a single category. My approach is to present quotes in the category "type" I deem most appropriate, but noting when and where the material becomes richer and multi-dimensional.

## Timeliness

Timeliness is an important criterion for assessing the authenticity of American shows. A show can feel more realistic and will be able to tap viewers' emotions more effectively if it is "up to date" and includes timely references to real-life happenings. For example, for Peng Yu, a 21-year-old philosophy student at RUC, a sensitivity to real time and real life events gives her favorite show a refreshing sense of spontaneity and openness:

> I think *Grey's Anatomy* is pretty much based on real life. It takes pains to blend in many things. For example, it makes many references to the American medical system. It also references the recent economic downturn by including plot lines about two hospitals merging, hospital cutbacks and lay-offs, and whatnot. I think the show is very interesting exactly because of its timeliness. You can see whatever is currently happening in real life on the show. That's pretty awesome. (P. 8)

Similarly, for 21-year-old Shen Beili, a student of social work at RUC who is preparing to study law, *Boston Legal*'s appeal is increased by its attention to timeliness:

> *Boston Legal* tries hard to blend in timely references, so it's closer to current social events and feels real. For example, during the 2008 presidential election, I remember the characters on the show actually bickering with one another by saying 'Hey, you support Hilary!' or 'I'd like to see a black president in office,' or something along those lines. The (election) result wasn't out yet when that episode aired, so it felt very here-and-now, very realistic. You could probably say things like that are just smart shticks, but what really gets me is how it's able to tell dramatic and yet vivid stories. For example, whether they are representing a little black girl or a celebrity or anyone in need of help, they try their best to protect the client's originality and personhood, to prevent that originality from being smashed by social prejudice or stereotypes, to help people fight for what they deserve. I think that's really precious. I love listening to their closing addresses to the jury; they're like lectures, only more passionate and touching, and really push the jury to take justice seriously. (P. 9)

Like Peng Yu, Shen Beili both spots and appreciates real-life happenings on American TV. Notice that she also seems to be playing down the importance of including real-life events in the plotline by calling it a "shtick." The significance of a trivial detail obviously registers with her, as she remembers it clearly and takes the trouble to bring it up in our interview. But Shen Beili then switches to suggest that what really appeals to and resonates with her is the show's primary theme of respecting and protecting the originality and personhood of each individual. While seemingly a random divergence, this change of topic suggests that, in leaving a positive impression, timeliness paves the way to a deeper emotional resonance. That is, by appearing to be refreshingly adaptive to and congruent with real life, the show gains trustworthiness, so that the fight for justice by the TV lawyers then comes across as believably "passionate and touching." To further understand how making prompt references to timely events enhances the overall authenticity of American TV, let us hear what Zhang Hui, a 21-year-old sociology student at RUC, has to say.

> American TV runs an episode a week, and each episode speaks to the real-life events in that week. It has some sort of sensitivity to time. Take the most recent episode of *Lie to Me*; it's about a white Christmas — a Christmas Day with snow. You see, because it's now the end of November and December is coming, it tells a winter story on TV, which I think is a very mindful reference to real time. But Chinese TV, I guess partly because its production is less mature and partly because its airing schedule is different, doesn't have that kind of time-sensitiveness; nor does it feel close to reality. 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; there is that limitation. In other cases, it may be because we aren't as imaginative. 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 might 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. As a university student, when I saw those details, I was like, wow, that definitely resonates; and I know it'd be hard to

> apply for scholarship from American universities. Such effort at detail definitely makes a difference. When you watch (American TV), you feel you are taken seriously as an audience; it pays attention to the actual context we are living in in real, everyday life. (P. 19)

Sounding very much like Peng Yu and Shen Beili, Zhang Hui is more expansive in pointing out how timeliness impresses him. In particular, seeing real life situations on TV that are relevant to his own study plan not only literally resonates with him — in the sense of enabling him to anticipate the difficulty of winning a scholarship from an American university — but also enhances his emotional resonance, in the sense that he then believes that American TV is produced with enough attention and care that he is "taken seriously as an audience."

Although I do not have hard evidence to prove that seeing real life happenings on TV cues audiences to believe a show's general truthfulness, all three respondents use timeliness to shore up their claim that a particular show feels real. Further, Shen Beili and Zhang Hui both combine their appreciation for a show's timeliness with narratives about the ways they feel strongly about the show's deeper messages. This suggests that when respondents bring up the importance of timeliness in making a show feel real, there is much more at stake than simple verisimilitude. Timeliness may initially give a show a realistic hue, but more importantly, the feeling that a show's plot moves in tandem with one's own timeline can enhance the trustworthiness of the program by giving it an authentic halo.

## Concrete and Alternate Visions of the US

To most Chinese youth who have never been to the States, America is a heavily mediated image. “It” is taught in classrooms, reported on in the press, biographically featured or fictionalized in books, described in pop songs, pictured in Hollywood blockbusters, not to mention that it flows around urban spaces in the form of various cultural icons — Coca Cola, blue jeans, fast food, and the like. Exposed to all these media, students share some common impressions of the US. Among the ideas and notions conjured up by mentioning America or American culture are freedom, democracy, individualism, openness, tolerance, and so on.

And yet, my student respondents told me that up until the point where American shows became staples on their cultural consumption menu, all these words they had associated the US with had not meant anything very specific, had not yielded any concrete sense of what America is really like. As Peng Yu puts it:

> Watching US TV allows me to know America on more concrete levels because the other ways of knowing America usually just leave vague ideas, no actual content. I mean, if you really want to understand their political system, or their history and culture, you get nothing (from those abstract concepts) because it’s empty in there. But when you actually watch a show, you see a bunch of people with flesh and blood living an American life, and that allows you to really know and understand their lives and lifestyles. (P. 32)

Many others share this point. Here is another exemplary quote by Guo Tian, a 21-year-old sociology student at RUC:

> I think American TV gives me a fuller, multidimensional image of the US, rather than a simply flat impression. So an American man doesn’t have to be a middle-aged, uncle Sam look-alike; he can look different, live various kinds of lives, hang out with different people. Similarly, an (American) woman can be a girl, or an elderly woman; she can look like a Barbie, she can be a blonde, or any other image. American life can be chaotic, like on *Gossip Girl*; it can be like the family

> life on *Desperate Housewives*' Wisteria Lane; and of course, it can be like *Criminal Minds*, where darkness always lurks behind tranquility. Watching American TV, you feel that different facets of American society are unfolding in front of you, and you end up having a multidimensional rather than a flat image. (P. 16)

For Peng Yu, Guo Tian, and many other students, the realism of American TV first and foremost lies in its concreteness, the nuts and bolts of everyday life it presents to an international audience. "Flesh and blood" characters, their emotions, struggles, adventures, and relationships all seem and feel "real" not in the sense of being completely truthful to *the* "reality," but in terms of their tangibility and vividness. To use a respondent's words: "When it comes to US TV...as long as it gives a sense of life being lived, I'd just eat it up" (Wei An, 23-year-old female, PKU: P. 9).

But all shows present characters and tell stories, and as students' consumption of American TV accumulates and their imagination of the US becomes more fleshed out, some develop a sense of what an authentic representation of America looks like. To understand students' still-fuzzy but increasingly discriminating assessment of authenticity, let us first hear from Lu Hao, a 21-year-old religious studies student at RUC who is here commenting on the perceived realism of his favorite show, *Supernatural*, despite the show's Sci-fi genre:

> I think, barring those Sci-fi elements, it's actually pretty realistic because most of the movies we've seen are set in mega cities in the US like New York, Washington, Los Angeles, or smaller ones such as Houston. But this show is all over the map, like, it travels through the American countryside and to different states. Honestly, I don't even recall the last time they went to a capitol city or a big city; they hardly go to those places... And its presentation of country life, like, sometimes a town only has two cops; one is the sheriff, the other the deputy sheriff, or something like that. Or a town with very few people and almost no contact with the outside world, and people sometimes ask, 'What's up out there?' I think these things are all very possible. I mean, although America is a highly

> modern, developed society, parts of it are very conservative. I know that partly from statistics in class, but also from watching that show. I mean, the way people talk on that show is not very modern; they got their raggedy cars from their dads and keep driving them as long as they're running; and the country life, like farming in the field, and meandering country roads; there's no high-tech whatsoever. I think that show really lets you in on a very different side of American life, you know, its country side of life. I think that's very significant. Because if you watch *CSI* every day, you only get to see Miami, or Las Vegas, or New York, which are all very modern, too modern. And since you're surrounded by that modern vibe right here in Beijing, what's the point then? True, they have skyscrapers, but there's nothing more than that. Plus many buildings in New York are in fact a lot shabbier than ours and the slums there are way more rough-and-tumble. (P. 9-10)

By tracing the journey of two brothers hunting demons and other supernatural creatures, *Supernatural* is clearly fantastic and "unreal." And yet Lu Hao is not bewitched when he designates the show as one of the most realistic on his list. Well aware that the show is about suburban legends and small town myths, he focuses his attention on how the series stands out from those that portray America exclusively from a glamorous, metropolitan perspective. As a born and bred Beijinger growing up when China hit its stride in post-socialist reform, Lu Hao is neither unfamiliar with nor intrigued by fashionable city scenes featuring towering skyscrapers, eclectic boutiques, and flashing neon lights. Not only have those images lost their appeal, but they are no longer authentic hallmarks of America, or of any other global city for that matter, because more and more they all look alike. Instead, figures of authentic American life are cast through images of muddy, wandering country roads and scenes of blue-collar townies going about daily lives with their sleeves rolled up. In a similar vein to the "concreteness" argument made above by Guo Tian and Peng Yu, *Supernatural* radiates a sense of realism partly because, in projecting an American story featuring American characters in flesh and blood, it concretizes the otherwise abstract notion of the US. But more importantly, this realism is significantly enhanced by the *alternate* vision of America the show offers: shunning the all-too-familiar supercity scenes filled with men in suits and women in heels, the show feels refreshingly earthy by telling campfire ghost stories.

Echoing this appreciation of an alternate vision of the US on TV, Peng Yu offers an interesting reason for her sense of the authentic character of *Grey's Anatomy* and *Desperate Housewives*:

> I think *Grey's Anatomy* is more real than most other American shows. You see, many American shows are set in New York, but I don't think New York is a typical American city. I've said this to other people before, really, I mean, it's not a typical American city; it's kind of unique, you know, in terms of its heterogeneity. As for *Grey's Anatomy*, it's set in Seattle. But Seattle is not representative of America either, which is partly due to its geographic location, like, its special climate, its closeness to Canada, and things like that. But *Grey's Anatomy* presents an interesting crowd... First off, the bosses are all black, I mean, both the chief and Bailey are black. And then there are Asian, Irish, as well as typical American people. I'd say Derek is a typical American, and Grey, and Addison..., and Mark; they are all very American. But some of them feel different, like the newcomer who used to be an army surgeon. You see, it tries to present a very diverse America; it tries to blend everything in, even if it can't really represent the whole... I also feel *Desperate Housewives* is pretty representative of at least one aspect of American life, because it's not about super stars, CEO's, and people like that. Many shows set in New York are about those kinds of people, you know, or about the fashion industry, about the super rich... But *Desperate Housewives* is set in this quiet suburb, where people drive to work and drive back home just like that. The depiction of that neighborhood, that kind of quiet life, it strikes me as pretty realistic. (P. 18)

On the one hand, like Lu Hao, Peng Yu is tired of watching shows about glittering big city life, and she too finds the tranquil (albeit manicured) suburbia of *Desperate Housewives* refreshingly down-to-earth. On the other hand, despite "violating" the "no big city" rule, Peng Yu's favorite show, *Grey's Anatomy*, still rings true to her because the diversity of its cast in terms of both racial and personal background compensates for its unrepresentative geographical setting. For both students, besides rendering a vivid and concrete image of America, a show scores higher on the realism scale if it provides a different facet of the US, one that helps expand and enrich their image and impression of America.

But let us not hasten to conclude that by saying a show is "real" students take its portrayal of the US completely to heart. This is why I believe the notion of "authenticity" is better than "realism" for helping us understand respondents' comments about aspects of American TV being "real." Take this statement made by Lu Hao:

> Honestly, I think it's very hard, almost impossible, to know America in full by watching US TV because all the TV shows are selected and edited to begin with... So for example, if you watch a whole bunch of crime shows, you'd never want to go to America, because you're convinced you could be killed at any moment. Similarly, if you only watch Sci-fi shows, you'd feel those aren't the real America but some imagined and constructed images. So drawing a complete impression of the real America from watching US TV is almost mission impossible, because you only see the picture from selected angles... That said, I do get to see different aspects and images of the US by watching American TV, some highly advanced whereas others are very primitive. I don't know, maybe that's what their concept of "pluralistic society" is all about, you know, pluralism means it can't be the same everywhere, right? (P. 9)

Zhang Hui voices a similar idea:

> I think neither the beauty nor the ugliness on US TV is completely real... But with any art, especially films and TV, and novels, my approach is always one of 'conditional acceptance'. Art can turn us into idealists, or sometimes even worse, it may turn us into illusionists... because as forms of art, and to get high ratings, TV and films have to exaggerate. They give you the most beautiful and the ugliest. And so if it's a crime show, it'd be something like a good cop getting killed by a New York gang at the behest of a big, international drug lord; if it's about love, then it has to be someone as rich as Chuck Bass romancing the queen bee of Manhattan's beyond-exclusive social scene (*Gossip Girl*). But you see, real life is much blander, if not completely boring... Our everyday life may very well revolve around things like eating, chatting, sleeping, and other mundane stuff. In that sense, if you take what's on TV to heart and use it as a model for living your

> own life, that’s dangerous because you may end up finding everything falling short of your expectations and disappointing. That said... I believe that the beautiful things I see on US TV, even when they’re way overblown, are still rooted in real life. You know, things like people genuinely caring about their loved ones, the value of liberalism, those are fused in the nitty-gritty of everyday lives. Same with the darkness: even though not every criminal is a drug lord, it’s quite possible that certain areas in America are replete with crime... The point is, the more shows you watch, the fuller the picture you’ll get, and eventually you’ll develop a “conditional acceptance” approach. Then you’ll know what it is about American TV that pulls you in. You’ll be able to pick and choose, as opposed to simply swallowing what’s handed to you. (P. 25-26)

Pointing out the editorial work and artistic exaggeration involved in the production of US TV, both Lu Hao and Zhang Hui are well aware that in many ways television goes above and beyond reality. But such awareness does not prevent either of them from seeing US TV as essentially authentic. For Lu Hao, the authentic appeal of a show stems from its originality, such as in the presentation of a new angle that sheds light on a different aspect of Americanness. For Zhang Hui, American TV similarly transcends quotidian everydayness while remaining rooted in reality. In general, students value how US TV renders America more comprehensible, providing an all-around image through multiple angles and portraying people from all walks of life.

## Sensitive and Controversial Content

For the purpose of this analysis, “content” refers to the primary as well as peripheral themes and topics of a show. To the Chinese viewers I spoke with, part of American TV’s authenticity lies in its warts-and-all openness — its diverse, unrestrained content, and particularly its engagement with themes and topics that are only alluded to, if not completely shunned, on Chinese TV. While the diversity of American TV’s content is brought up by almost every student at some point, the most frequently and elaborately discussed content falls into two thematic categories: *sexual content* and *socio-political critique*. While the former is a fairly explicit category, the latter is more of a "hodgepodge" that includes students' comments on a variety of socio-political matters they see on US TV, such as violence and crime, terrorism, corruption, political conspiracy, mistrust of government, etc. In the following, I touch on each thematic category to illustrate students' perception and interpretation of sensitive and controversial US TV contents which are often completely absent from the Chinese small screen.

### Sexual Content

To begin our examination of young Chinese people's perceptions of and attitude toward sex on US TV, take my conversation with Song Fang, a 20-year-old biology student at PKU. The conversation begins when she marvels at how *Friends* takes "sensitive" matters so lightly, even playfully:

> When I started watching *Friends*, what struck me the most is how diverse the show's topics are. Unlike Chinese comedies where you'd only see "pure" and "clean" stuff such as friendships and kinships and stuff like that, they actually talk about sex, homosexuality, and things that your parents wouldn't talk with you about. And those things aren't discussed among classmates or between teachers and students either. It almost feels like a taboo area I'd never been to before watching American TV. And so when I first saw those things (on US TV), I was really struck by how open they are. Like, you'd hear words such as "naked," "sex," and "lesbian" in their daily conversations. I mean, those are things I'd never talk about with my classmates and my parents. Plus parents avoid talking about stuff like that in front you. You know, 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 natually, like there's nothing wrong or abnormal about it. So I feel they're really open. (P. 4)

> Q: You just mentioned the notion of “taboo area,” and it seems like in some sense US TV is like an eye-opener for you in terms of exploring sensitive subject matter. I guess my question is, when you were first exposed to those matters through American TV, did you feel uncomfortable? I mean, did you experience some sort of “cultural shock,” if you will?
>
> Song Fang: I think that has to do with the Chinese education style. I feel like, growing up, I mean, there would be courses about those things at school. You know, you’d be taught about those things in a very serious and formal way. But in everyday life you’d never hear people joke about them or even talk about them casually. And so when I first watched American TV, I was indeed a bit surprised by how open they are; I mean, it took some getting used to, I guess. 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? I think being open about them is the way to go. (P. 4-5)

While initially surprised by explicit sexual content on American TV, Song Fang has come to embrace such freedom of content and sees it as informative and necessary. But more than anything else, it is the “everyday” nature of and open approach to sex on American TV that strikes her as refreshingly authentic, especially in comparison with how, in China, the topic is avoided or controlled on TV as well as in everyday interactions. For Song Fang, since sex is an inevitable, real life issue, featuring it on TV not only does *not* necessarily make a show obscene, but may instead offer a more natural, honest, and less condescending way of helping her learn about these must-know topics.

As it turns out, Song Fang is far from alone in at first being surprised by but later accepting and even appreciating sexual content, or at least discussions about and references to sex, on US TV. Here Liu Yun, a 22-year-old sociology student at RUC, tells me with a giggle about her experience with discussions about sex and sexuality on *Friends*:

Liu Yun: I just recalled a plot line where, well, I forget which one of the three guys, but he didn't know the location of women's, what would you call them, erogenous zones? Anyways, he didn't know where they are, and so Monica drew a picture, listed 7 of her personal favorites, and started going through them. As she went through different zones, she put on an act about different levels of sexual arousal. And I remember the laugh-track was going crazy at that moment... That's very impressive for me. I was like, wow, I didn't see that coming! (P. 7)

Q: Do you think that kind of depiction, I mean, do you think *Friends* truthfully portrays sex culture in real American life?

Liu Yun: I think so. In fact, come to think of it, *Friends* is more than a decade old, and in comparison with the new shows now it's pretty conservative. For example, *Desperate Housewives* is a lot more revealing when it comes to characters' clothing styles. Same with *Ugly Betty*; the male protagonist has a lot of one-night stands with different women... Really, *Friends* is much more implicit and indirect... Plus on *Friends*, sex is only an entertaining gimmick, not a primary theme. And that just reminds me of *Gossip Girl*, which I watched a couple of episodes of and really wanted to keep following it. But after those two episodes I found myself not liking it. I don't know, maybe I just didn't get it, or maybe I misunderstood its central themes or whatever, but at least those two episodes left me feeling it's all about physical relationships and sex. I don't think there's anything else in there. And that makes me feel the show is vulgar and shallow, and so I dropped it. (P. 7)

Q: You just said sex is an "entertaining gimmick" on *Friends*, and that seems to be part of the reason that you're OK with it. I want to know more about your take on sex on TV. Which kinds of TV depiction or representation of sex are acceptable for you, which don't concern you that much, and which simply make you very uncomfortable? Could you tell me more about it?

Liu Yun: I don't think it's just about sex. I mean, when it comes to TV watching, well, I'm not really into Korean shows and some of the Taiwanese shows, because I think they're too adolescent and shallow. You know, the plots are so trite: there has to be a pretty female protagonist, and she's gotta have a BFF [best friends forever] who's not nearly as beautiful and can only be her foil. That kind of stuff drives me nuts; I mean, how much phonier does it get? It's just so boring to always bump into that kind of stuff. And so when it comes to TV sex, I think if it sheds light on something deeper and more interesting, then I'd like to watch it. But if, on the other hand, it only gives you the flashy stuff — well, I'm using the word 'flashy', you know, things that are gaudy but don't really have any substance inside — that's just not my cup of tea. (P. 8)

Q: So, you don't really have an issue with sex on TV per se, do you?

Liu Yun: No. That's perfectly fine. (P. 8)

Like Song Fang, Liu Yun was initially "wowed" by the sex content on *Friends*. But while Song Fang generally welcomes less constrained TV content, Liu Yun is more discriminating. Specifically, although she does not have an issue with TV sex, she finds herself loathing "vulgar," "gaudy," and "shallow" sexual content, such as that on *Gossip Girl*. To her, sex can be a harmless, even enticing, shell, but without something meaningful and worthy inside, it easily degenerates into something discomfiting and disturbing. What exactly the "deeper," meaningful substance is, Liu Yun does not say. But others who share her discriminating taste for sexual content, or unrestrained TV content in general, offer some interesting comments to help us on this matter. Here is Peng Yu commenting on the sexual content on one of her favorite US shows, *Sex and the City*:

> I think with *Sex and the City* you really need to hang tight and sit through it. To be honest, I don't like the first season, because it focuses too much on sex. And for us girls, I think sex is apparently inseparable from relationships; I mean, it's inseparable from affection. I don't think a girl can be completely OK with sex without affection. You know, she can't simply accept it emotionally. Well, I guess I'm just speaking for myself, but I can't, and I don't think as girls we can. And so I don't think *Sex and the City* does a very good job with its first season. It tries too hard to play up the sex part, like, it feels forced. But if you stay with it, you'd realize that what those four girls are really looking for is love and the person they belong with. It's not sex that they are after; it's not that simple. Really, if you follow through on the full six seasons, including the new film that just came out, you'd see that they're still looking, at the age of 40, or 50, they're still looking for love, you know, the kind of love and marriage they once dreamed about. (P. 22)

Just like Liu Yun, Peng Yu frowns upon TV sex that is just for the sake of sex, particularly the casual kind that is not based on affection or reinforcing commitment. At the textual level, she views the first season of *Sex and the City* unfavorably precisely because its sexual content feels gratuitous. The show loses its authenticity by trying "too hard to play up the sex part," to the point that "it feels forced." But the program gradually gets on the "right" track by taking viewers like Peng Yu on the four heroines' journey of seeking true love and commitment — a thornier yet also more legitimate and meaningful venture than simply indulging in casual sex. Here the two types of authenticity narratives seem to be mixed: casual, meaningless sex is an inauthentic way of relating to others, and highlighting sex — especially the meaningless kind — as a selling point undermines the credibility of the entire show.

Still discussing sexual content on TV, Peng Yu's next statement further demonstrates that while unrestrained content is generally welcomed, realistic presentations of sex and relationships are particularly valued when they help viewers gain new perspectives and approaches for navigating their everyday lives:

> Unlike shows such as *Prison Break*, *Heroes*, or *True Blood* — those shows you just watch to be entertained, to get psyched up — when it comes to actually making a difference in your life, I don't think those shows are up to it. But shows like *Sex and the City* and *Desperate Housewives* and *Grey's Anatomy*, this kind of show really has some bearing on your life. I mean, it'll affect your attitudes; it'll provoke you to think about questions and issues that especially concern people our age because shows like *Desperate Housewives* and *Sex and the City*, their primary themes are love, marriage, and things along those lines, which I think.... Because thinking about it, we're kind of on the road. I mean, at least before you get married, you're going to be curious about those things, and you're going to think about them a lot... But I don't think Chinese parents are very upfront with their kids on those matters, especially when you're young. Parents don't like to see you dating in high school, and so they don't talk about things like love and marriage with you to begin with. They'd probably start talking to you about those things once you're in college. Anyways, I think watching those American shows is really helpful. They provide some sort of guidance, like, helping you understand guys, because we don't really know much about guys. They help you understand the differences between girls and guys; they offer tips in solving some of the practical problems you'll actually bump into when seeing someone; and

> they prep you for your own love life and marriage. That's why I think American TV is serious stuff and is worth watching. (P. 20-21)

Like Song Fang, when discussing sex content on American TV, Peng Yu voluntarily brings up how sex is very much circumscribed, "purified," or equivocated in her everyday life in China. This sharp contrast may well help us understand why students appreciate American TV as more authentic than Chinese TV — that is, as more open and honest — in approaching sex. In addition, Peng Yu differentiates shows that are just for fun from those that offer something more — something deeper and personally relevant. In her opinion, for a show to be held dear and watched with intense reflexivity, it must fall into the latter category. As such, those shows are more authentic than pure entertainment since they afford relevant and practical lessons about real life issues she may eventually have to face. Textual authenticity, in this sense, is related to depth and complexity rather than to mere provocativeness. Indeed, as it turns out, the same standard of depth and of providing food for thought is equally important in students' assessment of the second kind of novel content they see on US TV, *socio-political critique*.

### Socio-Political Critique

For the young people in my study, coming of age in the digital era in post-socialist China puts them into a unique position — they are faced both with an unprecedented information explosion and with the Chinese government's determined control of that information. Due to its porous and hard-to-control nature, the Internet is perhaps the most liberal, free, and informative cultural domain for young people in China. Traditional indigenous media such as TV, film, and other forms and varieties of publication feel stifling by contrast. Indeed, about two thirds of the respondents express varying levels of disappointment with contemporary Chinese TV dramas, especially those produced more recently. To these students, the lion's share of current Chinese shows are obnoxious because they either mythologize China's imperial past (as with period pieces about various Chinese dynasties, often the most prosperous ones), glorify its more recent, revolutionary history (as with stories about China's communist revolution and its early socialist years), or imitate popular foreign shows (e.g., *Friends* and *Ugly Betty*). Shows that reflect and examine contemporary social problems in Chinese society are far and few between. "Take a look at the (Chinese) shows on the market now. What the heck are those?... Do they think we were born yesterday?" cries 25-year-old Du Qun. Others, like Peng Yu, provide more analytical insight:

> I've noticed something interesting. Until very recently, there were tons of period pieces in our TV markets. I mean, for quite a while, almost every channel played historical shows. Why? I was really curious and kept thinking about it for a long time... I even chatted about it with an older friend of mine who is a TV producer. And she actually had a very interesting theory. She said that our contemporary society has various problems; however, you can't really address those problems by making shows directly tackling them in the here and now. So you project them onto people in the past. You see why so many historical shows are about corruption, or social inequality, or legal justice — remember all those shows featuring fair-and-square judges? It's some kind of… well, it's 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 social conspiracy. And so people take all sorts of roundabout routes. (P. 7)

For many students who share Peng Yu's concern about China's media censorship, watching American TV reflect and explore all sorts of social events, issues, and problems is an eye-opening experience. For example, Liang Hai, a 20-year-old biology student at PKU and an avid viewer of American TV, characterizes US TV as "cozy," "real," "relatable," "striking a chord," "transcending cultural boundaries," and so on. To find out more about Liang Hai's endorsement of American TV, I asked him why, as a Chinese citizen, he has come to view American shows as more "true" to life. Here is his response:

> I think it's primarily a cultural difference. I can't stand mainland Chinese TV shows. You know why? Because it's all about the lofty, the noble, and the perfect (*gao, da, quan*). There is a show called *The Secretary of Provincial Party Committee* or something like that. My mom loves it, but I'm like, how could anyone be that perfect? It just doesn't feel real. As for TV from Hong Kong and Taiwan, frankly, they rank second on my list, right after American TV, which is my favorite. The reason that I like shows from Hong Kong and Taiwan is that, as we all know, Hong Kong is an open society; it's democratic and all voices *can be heard* there. Their shows offer a lot and reveal a lot. But that's still not enough. Plot lines (in Hong Kong TV) are hackneyed — like, members of super rich families fighting for inheritance, or cheating on your spouse and then making up for it, or young people pursuing one another and playing the romantic game, and things along those lines. But those things are flashy and shallow and it's nothing like the nitty-gritty of real life. Although TV shows from Hong Kong and Taiwan try really hard to be true to life, I still think they are not as honest as US TV. 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. I think that the transparency and openness in foreign media is really admirable. They can report their leaders however they want, be honest about mistakes made by their leaders, or even crack jokes about their seemingly prim and proper politicians. They don't evade anything and everything gets reflected on TV. I remember on *Friends* they once even mentioned 9-11.[17] I think that kind of openness, that candidness of giving you freedom and letting you see everything, is what's most appealing about US TV. But in China, including Hong Kong, there still are restrictions and taboos — even in Hong Kong or Taiwan you won't see any media making wise cracks about political leaders. But in America there is no such restriction; their media show you a world closer to reality. (P. 12-13)

For Liang Hai, the majority of Chinese TV dramas are unbearably inauthentic in part because of their highly restrained and whitewashed content; this is exacerbated by unmitigated moralism and unrealistic characterization. While more open than those from mainland China, shows from Hong Kong and Taiwan are still not transparent and bold enough. Specifically, by focusing on matters which are extreme (conflicts in "super rich families"), frivolous (romantic games), or all too easily solved (cheating, followed by quick reconciliation), those shows come across not only as simplistic and shallow but as staged and restrained. In comparison, no-holds-barred American TV goes aboveboard but is also genuinely outspoken. This tell-all authenticity is most effectively brought out by US TV's audacity to step on toes and grate on nerves, particularly those of authority figures. Thus, as compared to a staged drama which trivializes serious issues in the service of sensationalism, the equally dramatic unveiling of the unseemly on US TV is seen as courageously authentic thanks to the more substantive and meaningful social and political critiques involved.

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[17] He was referring to a plot line in the second episode of season 8, which involves Chandler joking with airport security. The episode was shot before September 11, 2001 and does not involve actual reference to 9·11. But that particular plot was removed when the episode aired on TV because the scheduled airing was two weeks after the events of 9·11. Liang Hai is aware of this detail because he downloaded and watched the untrimmed version of the episode.

To further demonstrate that media authenticity is related to content that is thought-provoking as opposed to merely provocative, I now turn to Bai Tong, a 22-year-old sociology student at PKU who appreciates TV which not only covers diverse subject matter but spurs critical-thinking and offers food for thought. When I ask Bai Tong what he thinks the central theme is of his favorite show, the action drama and political thriller *24*, he suggests that although the show is primarily about anti-terrorism, it also explores three other broader themes: American democracy, American patriotism, and American individualistic heroism. "Watching *24* really gets me to think about those issues," he says. When queried further, he elaborates by first talking about how *24* has changed the way he sees American democracy:

> In my opinion, America's democracy is more advantageous; I mean, at least they have the presidential election and people get to pick and choose their own leader. But watching that show (*24*) helps me see the other side of the coin. I mean, it's dawned on me that most of the candidates have big money behind them, and that's the sort of power beyond the control of the rank and file. So the show has a very important tangent: almost every season features a president's scandal, or the hoopla around an election campaign, you know, stuff like that. You get to see nasty personal attacks between candidates, and once the election is over, you might see the vice president trying to usurp the president's seat, or something like that. All those ugly things are laid bare right in front of you, warts and all. I honestly had no idea about all this (before watching US TV). You know, 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 as mere token. (P. 7-8)

To Bai Tong, besides being an exciting action drama/thriller, *24* has debunked his prior, rosier image of the US and has shed new light on his understanding of democracy. When I ask him, now that shows like *24* have knocked American democracy from its pedestal, whether he identifies more with democracy in the US or in China, he responds:

> Identify? It's hard to say. I guess neither. I think one of the great things about *24* is that it really pushes you to think. I guess I don't aspire to either (type of democracy). All I can say is that any democracy has both strengths and weaknesses. There's no way you can get something perfect, because, all those relationships, relationships between people, relationships between people and institutions, all those power relationships depicted on that show simply convince me that all institutions, democracies included, are created by us, human beings with flaws to begin with. (P. 8)

To Bai Tong, getting to see "the other side of the coin" — the hypocritical side of American democracy — has not led him to switch off *24* in disgust, nor has it invalidated his appreciation of American political culture, although it did challenge his earlier, more naively imagined version of it. Instead, by holding nothing back and airing dirty laundry, the show nudges him to give more thought to, and allows him to have a better grasp of, the complicated and nuanced notion of democracy. That critical perspective, as well as the largely unrestrained content itself, makes *24* a great show in his eyes. This embrace of US TV's broad coverage of the many and thorny themes of the human condition, as well as television's venture into new perspectives and understandings on those themes, is shared by many respondents. Zhang Hui articulates it so well that I consider his lengthy statement worth quoting.

In describing how watching US TV such as *Lie to Me* has changed his impression of the US, Zhang Hui says that he once held, successively, two completely opposite views of America: as an angry leftist, he first believed that America is an evil capitalist nation bent on destroying socialist China, and then as an active rightist he thought of America as a Mecca of freedom and democracy. Now calling those two images of America "stereotypes," Zhang Hui says watching US TV has made him realize that politics is not about simple oppositions — left vs right, freedom vs suppression, or voting vs not voting — but rather involves multi-dimensional, complicated matters. And to him, what is intriguing about American TV is exactly its recognition and reflection of such complexity:

> As we know, many Hollywood writers are leftists. They condemn their president, the FBI, the CIA, and almost all state institutions. If you look carefully enough, you can notice lots of details where the writers are being sarcastic about their government... One episode of *Lie to Me*, for example, tells a story where someone in the FBI risks the lives of frontline soldiers to get intelligence that can get him a promotion. Also, you can see reflections on US TV about the ridiculousness of bureaucracy, such as the complicated and lengthy procedure of processing something simple, the bad attitudes of state officials, and so on. You can see depictions of and criticisms against those things on TV.... I'd say my understanding of politics has changed tremendously by watching US TV. I used to believe elections in the US were all about money. I mean, we learned from textbooks that only rich people can become senators in the US. Well, that may be

> true. But I remember watching *Gossip Girl* where there is a plot about Tripp Vanderbilt running for congress. True enough, Tripp is a very rich man and he won the campaign by smartly using the media to generate good publicity. But it got me thinking, is someone elected in such a manner really that bad? Is it really bad that rich people get to be senators? Maybe not. It's quite possible that, precisely because he's counting on his constituents' votes, he's actually willing to listen to them. And so even though he comes from a prestigious background, when he serves as a senator, say when he's working on some sort of bill, his identity is inseparable from his constituents. In that sense, he stands for both the rich and the poor, which makes him a more representative senator. But we, on the other hand, well, this may be a tad sensitive, but the NPC [National People's Congress] representatives elected via our system are... Well, they look very representative: you see farmers arriving at the meeting dressed like farmers; you see ethnic minorities showing up in ethnic costumes. But it's more like a show. I dress this way just to show that I'm an ethnic minority; it doesn't mean I'd actually speak for my people or that I'd actually act in my people's interest.... So, my point is that all those details you get to see on American TV help overthrow the stereotypes you once had about the US. Another example is love and sex. I once had this idea that Americans are all very open and casual when it comes to sex. But in fact there're lots of Catholics or otherwise very traditional and conservative people out there in the US. They value loyalty, swear by monogamy, and raise their kids strictly. I even heard that some Americans take some sort of "virginity vow." You see, my point is that American TV allows me to see many possibilities in life and many different aspects of America. To me, America no longer simply stands for freedom or sexual openness; but it's where liberalism is imbued with bureaucracy, money politics is mixed with true democracy, and sex liberals coexist with sex purists who are more traditional than most Chinese. Thanks to American TV, I now have a rich and complicated vision of America. (P. 26-27)

Like Liang Hai and Bai Tong, Zhang Hui finds US TV's daring references to grand issues such as corruption, bureaucracy, and compromised democracy eye-opening and thought-provoking. In comparison to Bai Tong, who in seeing the other side of American democracy has become more thoughtful when making judgments and more reserved when taking sides, Zhang Hui plays up the importance of the criticism of social problems and institutional defects on US TV. More specifically, despite the obviously fictional nature of scripted television, he finds American shows' interrogative spirit and open critique of real social issues impressive and inspirational. By contrast, the formal manifestation of Chinese politics on Chinese TV feels rather fake and superficial; it is, in essence, "more like a show." In all three cases, the honest revelation and brave social critique on US TV strike the respondents as refreshingly authentic. It has not disenchanted these students or rendered them cynical, but instead has left them feeling intrigued and touched, particularly by US TV's seriousness about addressing the burning and controversial matters that concern all modern societies.

To conclude, as part of my exploration of the strong attraction of Chinese urban youth to American scripted TV, this chapter focuses on one aspect of US TV's style and production quality — its subject matter. I examine how three characteristics of US TV's subject matter — its timeliness, its concrete and comprehensive depiction of everyday life, and its tackling of sensitive and controversial topics — have come to be perceived by Chinese youth as markers of authenticity. Together, these elements contribute to the textual authenticity of American shows by making them appear spontaneous, open, subtle, deep, and complex, willing to embrace and capable of capturing the messiness of life. In the next chapter, I investigate how respondents identify and interpret these authenticity markers when attending to and appraising another aspect of US TV's production quality — characterization.

# CHAPTER VI

# CHARACTERIZATION

In *America in Primetime*, PBS's recent four-part series tracing the evolution of four key character archetypes on primetime American TV, the film director and producer Ron Howard (2011) says, "[Television] is really about developing those characters. And when it's really well done, it provides the most kind of depth." Indeed, given that subject matter is carried out by characters and plot lines are driven by characters, when it comes to whether a show feels real or resonant, characterization is essential.

Findings from my data confirm the critical role of characterization in enhancing the overall authenticity of a show. Many students suggest that being able to feel for and relate to the characters, even the ones they do not particularly like, ultimately confirms a show's adequate grasp of "truth." As one respondent, Wei An, puts it: "[W]hat I really care about is not the truthfulness of the scenery or physical environment; it's the people. In other words, the question is whether the characters resonate" (P. 9).

But what exactly do authentic characters look like? A student of neither literature nor screenwriting, I do not venture to propose a legitimate definition of authentic characterization, nor is it my task to evaluate the validity of my respondents' statements about and assessment of character authenticity. Instead, my goal as a sociologist is to find out what it is about American TV personae that strikes respondents as real and authentic. Specifically, my interview data yield two criteria: *character complexity* and *character* *resonance*. The first criterion is achieved by building characters who are *multidimensional* and *dynamic*. The second criterion is either achieved by the *juxtaposition of ordinariness with extraordinariness* in characterization or emphasized as viewers engage in *future-oriented self-reflexivity* while talking about US TV.

The rest of this chapter consists of two sections, each tackling one of these criteria. The second section is further divided into two subsections to deal respectively with the two scenarios discussed above. But before we begin, I will again remind the reader that these two basic constructs, character complexity and character resonance, like many others in this dissertation, are ideal types. This means that they are developed inductively to highlight elements common to the relevant interview material, and that they are not meant, and are not able, to encompass the discrete, diffuse, and at times self-contradictory points respondents make in a single quote. Meanwhile, in and despite being distinct conceptual constructs, these two criteria are themselves intertwined, for more often than not the complexity of a character enhances its resonance with audiences, while this resonance in turn helps the viewer to appreciate the character's complexity and dynamism. For my study, the first criterion is based on the observation that whenever respondents mention the word "complex" in talking about characterization, they tend to elaborate by commenting on how characters on US TV are multifaceted and/or exhibit full developmental arcs. On the other hand, when respondents discuss characters that are "resonant," they often emphasize the ordinariness of the characters, followed by pointing out a deeper level where the character is *not* so ordinary. Alternatively, when discussing character “resonance,” they point to something in the character which triggers them to contemplate their own future.

## Character Complexity

The first criterion of authentic characterization — character complexity — has two components: *multidimensionality* and *dynamism*. Multidimensionality dictates that a character is multifaceted, with complicated desires, emotions, and feelings that sometimes contradict one another. Additionally, inner conflict makes the character act and react in complex ways. As the creative writing instructor Robert McKee puts it, “dimension means contradiction.” The most obvious example of multidimensionality is the fuzzy boundary between the “good” and “bad” aspects of a character. Dynamism, on the other hand, has to do with the construction of character arc, i.e., does a character change, and how? The depth and layers of a dynamic character, revealed by her journey and struggles, make her conflict believable and relatable. Multidimensionality and dynamism reinforce each other in accomplishing character complexity: if a complex character is a delicate balance of opposing aspects of personality, that balance is achieved precisely through the struggles she confronts in the arc of her development.

The saying “no one is perfect” is so simply true that it sounds cliché. But imperfection is not merely a fetter of identity. Indeed, my respondents are drawn particularly to American shows with characters who honor human imperfection. By contrast, more than half of my respondents complain that on Chinese TV they rarely see characters who are *not* perfect (that is, both perfectly good and perfectly bad). When I ask what they mean when they describe Chinese TV characters as “fake,” “phony,” and “unreal,” many of them attempt to clarify their meaning by using words like “flat,” “predictable,” “boring,” “formulaic,” and “black-and-white,” all of which point toward the problem of character simplicity and one-dimensionality. On the other hand, American TV characters ring true because they demonstrate, often at once, a variety of human features, whether virtuous, faulty, or somewhere in that vast between-area where we find complexity and ambiguity. For example, Wei An, a 23-year-old communications graduate student at PKU, tells me that one important reason she’s drawn to *Desperate Housewives* is the show’s skilled characterization:

> Like, it really elaborates on people’s shortcomings and lets the characters fully unfurl. We have very few characters like that (on Chinese TV). Of course, you can see each protagonist’s virtues and faults, but when it comes to faults, especially if it’s a good guy, someone noble, then his defects are so small and subtle that they’re almost ignorable. But that’s not real. Defects are defects, and if you tone them down that much then they aren’t defects anymore. Plus, on Chinese TV, well, it’s probably much better now, but there used to be this super clear distinction between good and evil, to the point that you couldn’t see anything good in a bad guy or anything bad in a good guy. That’s too idealized. But in *Desperate Housewives*, people’s shortcomings are clearly laid out and that feels better. (P. 9)

To Wei An, real characters should be multifaceted, and that means they ought to embody both merits and flaws and should not be easily pegged as either good or bad. Indeed, when characters are multidimensional, this makes it hard for fans to take sides or make easy judgments, as indicated by Wei An’s response to my question about her least favorite character on *Desperate Housewives*: “Honestly, there isn’t one, because they all have things I like and things I don’t like about them.”

But blurring the boundaries between black and white should not render characters boringly grey and undistinguishable from one another. Instead, as Wei An insists, real people are colorful but also have their own “distinctive individuality,” and it bothers her that “Chinese TV doesn’t emphasize characters’ distinctive individuality enough. We see a lot of cookie-cutter characters” (P. 9). Asked what she means when she says that Chinese TV figures lack “distinctive individuality,” she answers:

> By lack of distinctive individuality I mean the characters aren’t complex or multi-dimensional, like, they’re flat and one-dimensional, and they don’t feel like they exist in real life. But it’s getting better these days, I mean, you don’t see the mighty, noble saints anymore... But still, our characters are not complex enough... If someone is supposed to be a good guy, then bad things won’t happen to him. Even if something bad does happen to him, there’d be people coming up to help him out... That’s a really simplistic, cardboard cutout character. And there isn’t any surprise either. His life trajectory is pretty much decided and nothing would pop up that allows you to see the other side of him. I think as long as you are a human being, you have a dark side. I’m not saying TV should be all about showing our dark sides, but I’d like to see more realistic hang-ups, motivations, and wrongdoing on TV. I mean, nobody is perfect. If you portray someone as perfect, or nearly perfect, that’s simply unreal. (P. 9-10)

In Wei An’s eyes, a real bane of Chinese TV is formulaic characterization that disregards the multifariousness and unpredictability of human nature. What also robs a character’s complexity, for her, is a life trajectory devoid of any change or surprise. The lack of dimension and the lack of arc feed off each other: on the one hand, a one-dimensional character without layers lends itself to, or highlights, a predicable, boring plot; on the other hand, a hackneyed storyline devoid of surprise does not afford opportunity for sufficiently shaded characters. What is also interesting, and typical of a large number of respondents, is how, when Wei An commends character complexity, she elaborates by emphasizing the human “dark side” and by insisting that TV should show more human fallibility. This particular appreciation for characters who struggle and reveal their imperfections is a telling reminder of young viewers' frustration over Chinese TV's concerted effort to — more or less *only* — provide positive, imitable role models. Having grown up with explicit moral preaching on TV, these Chinese viewers find characters with moral shortcomings particularly refreshing and authentic.

Like Wei An, many other respondents make comparisons between US and Chinese TV characters, calling attention to the former's more nuanced protagonists. Jiang Jingzhe, a 24-year-old education graduate student at PKU, here discusses the reasons why she would likely *not* watch a Chinese TV show that offers subject matter similar to her favorite American show, *Desperate Housewives.* Jiang Jingzhe says that even if she brings herself to watch it, she probably wouldn't like it. And she turns to characterization in explaining her negative view:

> Jiang Jingzhe: I think acting (on Chinese TV) is fine. But in terms of characterization, you know, character development, including her outlooks, the complexity of her emotions and thoughts, those things might not be handled as skillfully on Chinese TV (as on US TV).
>
> Q: Why do you think characterization is problematic on Chinese TV?
>
> Jiang Jingzhe: Because I've felt for a long time that figures on the Chinese screen are kind of flat. Like, you get the full picture of a protagonist's character and personality at first sight — he stands either for justice or for evil, and his character never changes. That's different from US TV, where you get to see multi-dimensional protagonists. Like, you find yourself liking some aspects of a person while hating others. On Chinese TV, either this person is very good, like a saint, or he's very bad, and makes you grit your teeth watching him. (P. 5)

Male respondents also enjoy the intricate and dynamic characterization of American TV. For example, Xiong Haoran, a 26-year-old Ph.D. student studying international relations at RUC, speaks highly of the richly drawn characters on US TV in general. Like female respondents, he too relishes complex TV figures who embody blemishes and defects as well as strengths and merits, and he too appreciates elaborate explorations of the psychology and emotional journeys of characters:

> I think characters on US TV are more well-developed. I mean it shows people's strong points on the one hand and their defects on the other, and it also lets you see the emotional hardships people go through in dire situations. I think they are good at delving into people's minds, which is unlike Chinese TV, which kind of stereotypes people... So for example, you can tell a guy is a bad guy by just looking at his demeanor and language; and similarly, you can sense a good guy's integrity and righteousness by the way he talks. That's really a big difference between our shows and American shows, although we are getting better and better. (P. 16)

Echoing Wei An and Jiang Jingzhe in emphasizing character dimension, dynamism, and subtlety, Xiong Haoran also mentions the intrigue that is stirred up upon entering the emotional worlds of characters. This attention to inner experience is also expressed by Wei An:

> I watch a character as if she's a real-life person. If I see her acting as I would or as people around me would, I mean, given her circumstances, how she thinks, how she acts, how she feels, if those things feel real, then I can buy it. It's not about whether the concrete living environment is believable or not. I think wherever you are, it's your action as a human being that's evaluated as real or unreal... What strikes me as real about *Desperate Housewives* is the emotions and feelings its protagonists demonstrate and the experiences they go through. (P. 9)

As the quote suggests, the authenticity of a show hinges on the authenticity of its characters, which, despite being affected by numerous other factors such as setting, costume, dialogue, accent, etc., is in another sense essentially determined by how "emotionally true" the show is. Here, the old writing adage "Show, don't tell" can perhaps shed some light on the matter. That is, tired of Chinese TV that features plainly good and bad characters who walk around bearing equally one-dimensional moral codes, Chinese youth are excited to see characters — on American TV — who exhibit complicated and conflicted desires and motives, who react to their circumstances in an honest, albeit not always noble, way. Despite the existence of many potential cultural obstacles, that honesty, as we shall see later, is essential in generating resonance.

The appeal of complex characters is not limited to certain TV genres, such as the more soapy, character-based comedy-dramas discussed above. Fans of more plot-intensive medical shows, police procedural dramas, and sci-fi series also pin the authenticity of a program (at least in part) on richly drawn characters. For instance, here is Ke Song, a 20-year-old economics student at RUC, speaking of her favorite show, Fox's hit medical drama, *House*:

> I think my focus is not on the medical stuff, because I don't have much medical knowledge. So I wouldn't be like, oh, that disease is so fake, or something like that. Instead, I focus on people and their stories. To me, the show is first and foremost about the leading character House, about his peculiar personality which is really not that healthy but absolutely charming. House is a genius, and like all geniuses he's quirky. The show is about how a person like House gets along with people around him, you know, with his friends, like Wilson, and with his team; and it's about how he approaches his profession. The show is named *House M.D.* because the main character is a doctor, but really, House could be anyone, in just about any walk of life. So I think the point here is not him being a doctor, but rather his character as a person. You see, such a person, when he's around people he can really drive them nuts, but he does save lives and is pretty darn good at it. But does he do it out of genuine concerns for patients, like Wilson does? Or does he do it to live up to some moral code, like Cameron does? I don't think so — he just wants his answer. In that sense, I almost feel he's kind of cold-blooded. And so I've got rather complicated and mixed feelings about him. On the one hand, you wouldn't want to be friends with such a person in real life, because he'd really drive you up the wall. On the other hand, you can't help being drawn to him. I think this show is brilliant because it builds this complicated figure and shows you how such complexity in humanity can lead to a whole bunch of problems in society. It really pushes you to think about things you've never thought about before. You know, things like the relationship between means and ends. (P. 7)

Although *House* is a show about solving medical puzzles, Ke Song's focus is on the drama's central protagonist, Dr. Gregory House. "I'd never seen a character as interesting and electrifying as House! He's so head-to-toe unconventional that you feel like you're being grabbed by the show," she says (P. 20). For her, *House* is fascinating not only because it approaches its main protagonist (or should we say antagonist?) with enough nuance to make audiences think twice about him, but also because it leaves moral judgment up to the audience. If anything, the absence of moralizing is more stirring and thought-provoking than finger-pointing or some placating, everyone-gets-what-he-deserves resolution. In fact, elsewhere, Ke Song mentions several times how profound *House* is in terms of "digging deeply" into its characters' motivations and emotions, which, not by chance, are often presented as conflicted and complicated. For her, such exploration "presents you with all sorts of paradoxes and dilemmas which push you to really think them through; or rather, they allow you to take your time and think" (P. 11). This embrace of a show's apparent profundity or depth in character building once again illustrates the eagerness of students to enter into the rabbit hole of ethically-problematic characters' minds, adopt their perspectives, and, at times, assume their position.

Jiang Lin, a 21-year-old management student at RUC and a passionate fan of ABC's sci-fi hit *Lost,* also applauds the plot-driven show for its characterization. Even though the show is marketed as a sci-fi mystery, Jiang Lin feels the series is a gem primarily because of the painstaking development of its main characters:

> I know many comments and discussions about *Lost* on Baidu[18] are about the sci-fi plot lines, like, what the heck is going on, trying to unravel all those mysteries. But I'm not really into sci-fi. I can't really wrap my head around the time travel, the different spaces, two dimensions or three dimensions, and things like that. Well, those are fascinating for sure, but what attracts me the most is *Lost*'s characterization. It goes all out to give all its characters full sweep, and that allows me to get to know every one of them deeply and to fully understand and empathize with their encounters and stories. I think that with any TV series you've only got so many episodes to unfold the plot lines, but the characters have to be fully developed for the plot lines to really take off. (P. 5)

Just as Ke Song is unable, and does not attempt, to grasp the medical content of *House*, Jiang Lin does not watch *Lost* to quench a thirst for science fiction or to feed curiosity about supernatural mysteries. Instead, her priority is to get to know the characters, to understand them, to develop empathy for them, and perhaps eventually to identify with them. She then expands her view of the subtlety of realistic characterization on *Lost* by comparing it with other American shows:

> I think *Lost* does a superb job drawing its characters... The characters are real people; they're not "good" people or "bad" people in the strict sense. Everyone's thoughts and behaviors are complicated... In fact I think no protagonist on any American show is pure good or pure bad and that's why I like American TV. But still, there's a difference. For example, the bad guys on *Prison Break* are more obviously just bad guys. But *Lost* is a lot more meticulous in developing its protagonists; each character is richly drawn and has a full arc. (P. 6)

When I ask Jiang Lin to explain more what she means by "full arc," she underlines the brilliance of the flashbacks employed on *Lost* to introduce character backgrounds:

> There are lots of flashbacks on *Lost* and many people think they're kind of annoying. But I think they're really necessary. For example, a particular episode can be dedicated to one person's pre-island stories. I think that's a very bold scripting strategy for TV. Nowadays people are used to "fast-food culture," and most American shows are fast-paced. But *Lost*...devotes many episodes to

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[18] Baidu is a Chinese search engine for websites, audio files, and images.

> flashback stories, stories of characters before they get on that airplane... I myself was confused when watching the first season...and I’d skip the parts I didn’t think were important. Then I came across some posts on Baidu, where some fans said if you really love this show you’ve gotta know each and every character’s background. And so I went back and started watching the show episode by episode, not missing one bit. And then I realized it’s really like what Freud’s theory says, a person’s character and behaviors all result from his childhood. Take Sawyer...when he was little his parents were conned by a man, and as a result, his dad killed his mom and himself while Sawyer was hiding under the bed. When he grew up he adopted the name and profession of the man responsible for his parents’ death. You know, he went around seducing and conning rich married women and wrecking their families. After his plane crashed on the island, he didn’t want to have a normal relationship with anyone and he went all out to annoy people, like, giving them nicknames and whatnot. All those things are results and reflections of his horrible childhood, and so if I skipped his previous experiences, I’d never really understand this person. Plus after I knew more about his early life, I could really understand many of his later encounters and behaviors. I mean, I really understand why he does this or that or why this or that happens a lot better. (P. 5-6)

Like Ke Song, Jiang Lin enjoys riding the motivational and emotional journey along with characters, in particular by understanding their past. To her, traces left by earlier experiences render current personae complete, credible, and sympathetic. She is also onto something when she appraises the generous screen time dedicated to flashbacks on *Lost* as “bold,” since in the current media-saturated but attention-deficit era, creative workers in showbiz will typically do anything to keep stories simple and move them forward quickly (Flint 2011). The “cynicism that if it is good and complicated, it is going to get cancelled”[19] makes *Lost*’s scrupulous characterizations more valuable and respectable for viewers like Jiang Lin since, for her, methodical background storytelling allows viewers to get “up close and personal” with each character, and to discover and really understand their distinctive goals, conflicts, and mannerisms.

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[19] This statement is from Shawn Ryan, the creator of Fox's drama *The Chicago Code,* quoted in Flint (2011).

And of course Jiang Lin is not alone in relishing dynamic characters that feature depth and broad developmental arcs. Guo Tian, the 21-year-old sociology student we first heard from in the last chapter, has a police officer in her family. She expresses a taste for various kinds of police/detective shows and is a fan of the CBS police procedural drama *Criminal Minds*. When I ask her to pick between *Criminal Minds* and a Chinese police show entitled *Zhong'an Liuzu* (literally, *Felony Investigation Unit Six*), which she also has been watching, she explains her overall preference for *Criminal Minds*:

> I think *Criminal Minds* wins because its images of all BAU[20] members are so fully-developed. Everyone has a strong, shiny side, but also has a somewhat unhappy past which is known only to himself. For example, Giddion has a very good female friend who is killed by a killer, and this leads him to leave BAU. Morgan grew up in Chicago in a…, I mean, not the best neighborhood or family. And Reid and the issue with his mother. And JJ's problem with that dog. And Elle, who got shot. And Hotch's history with Foyet. And Garcia, she used to be a hacker. All these make you feel those characters are so full-fledged, so alive. But this may have to do with the fact that it's already run 5 seasons, I mean, it has had the time to unfold those stories. But still, *Zhong'an Liuzu*'s characterization is very Chinese, meaning it only gives star treatment to the two main protagonists - the smartest female and male police officers. You know, they are the two most impressive characters and all other people are just foils for them.
>
> Q: Then how about those two central figures? Do you like the way they are depicted?
>
> Guo Tian: Well, not really. I mean, it's not good enough. Still taking *Criminal Minds* as an example, Hotch can be very grim and exacting at work, but he also has a family, a kid, and so seeing his whole life makes you feel he's real and alive. But on *Zhong'an Liuzu*, you simply get the feeling that 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, somewhat condescendingly, like, always putting righteousness above family and talking about serving the people all the time... This is why I think, that while both promote the moral of "*zhen*," "*shan*," and "*mei*" (truth, benevolence, and goodness), on *Zhong'an Liuzu* that moral is only carried out by the police..., the heroes or other "good" people... But *Criminal*

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[20] BAU is short for Behavioral Analysis Unit, which is part of the FBI's National Center for the Analysis of Violent Crime.

> *Minds* usually explores humanity by delving deeply into real social life, really zooming in on ordinary people, as opposed to merely focusing on the BAU members. Of course, the show plays up their ability and integrity, but it also attends to the good qualities of other minor characters, including the rank and file, sometimes even the criminals. (P. 13-14)

Early in this conversation, Guo Tian echoes Jiang Lin's appreciation for the carefully crafted, and often dark, back-stories of characters — their very personal pasts that make them feel real and sympathetic to the respondents. As she expands her comment, Guo Tian moves from discussing "arc" to another aspect of complex characterization — building characters with multiple dimensions. While this idea echoes those in some of the responses quoted earlier in this chapter — such as Wei An's, Jiang Jingzhe's, and Xiong Haoran's — Guo Tian's comment moves beyond character complexity to touch on the issue of script or show complexity by applauding *Criminal Minds*' attempt at making even minor characters well-rounded. Complexity can be an attribute of a character, an episode, or an entire series. Here not only are main characters drawn to be complex, but by inviting audiences to engage the feelings and contradictions of even minor characters, the entire plot and narrative stand out as real and accessible.

Additionally, compared with comments made by other respondents, Guo Tian's discussion of *Criminal Minds* really drives home the moral ambiguity and controversy involved in developing sympathy and empathy for antagonists and anti-heroes:

> Most of the time, the show doesn't just frame the criminals as demons. I remember an episode in season 4 where the UnSub (i.e., the criminal) took that blind kid to the ferris wheel. That episode is very touching to me. Also, some UnSubs have very high IQ's and they want to expose the darkness of humanity. For example, I forget if it's in season 2 or season 3, but one episode is about three girls being locked up in a basement and forced to betray one another in order to survive. That really plays up the human complexity. (P. 7-8)

When I later ask Guo Tian if she finds it disturbing to watch American shows in which conventional moral codes are contested and boundaries between good and evil are blurred, she says:

> Oh, yeah. As a matter of fact, legal shows can be more disturbing than shows like *Criminal Minds* because they're about lawyers defending the wrongdoers. So for example, I watch *Shark*, and sometimes I feel like some guy, he committed a crime only out of desperation, or his hands were tied and he had no choice but to do it, you know, things along those lines. But he did commit a crime, no question about that either. And I then find myself in a dilemma: on the one hand, he broke the law and should be punished; on the other hand, you simply find yourself feeling sorry for him. That kind of situation is disturbing, but also thought-provoking, and like it or not... Well, I just don't think such dilemmas get reflected often enough in Chinese movies or on Chinese TV. (P. 14)

And when asked why such touchy issues are absent in Chinese popular media, Guo Tian gives her diagnosis:

> I think the ideological control in China constrains people's imagination. Because it's always been like this, ever since the foundation of new China in 1949. All the movies... There is this program called *Dianying Chuanqi* (*Movie Legends*)...which is kinda like a review of all the iconic movies produced after 1949. If you watch that program, you see a clear pattern (of characterization). 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 everyone's head and making it an idol for people to worship. (P. 14)

Growing up with TV dramas that feature unrealistic heroes and villains and that trumpet black-and-white moral tales, Chinese youngsters like Guo Tian initially find the grittiness of American TV unsettling. But they are also engaged and inspired by the unconventional ways justice and morality are treated on US TV, where even "bad" characters are not pre-judged.  That is, instead of simplistically demonizing wrongdoers, US dramas assume a non-judgmental perspective and dig deeply into the motivations behind all sorts of deeds, even those often conveniently labeled as crimes. To Guo Tian and many others, the more subtle and nuanced characterization on US TV is more effective in provoking emotions and thoughts, especially when used in crime and legal shows that tackle moral and ethical issues head on.

In a similar vein, shows about war offer powerful challenges to assumptions while spurring reflection. Xiong Haoran, a self-proclaimed fan of war series and a military history buff who is particularly fond of works by Steven Spielberg and Tom Hanks, says part of the reason he finds *Band of Brothers* spellbinding is its historical authenticity: "they've really done their homework. I mean, you can tell they really studied the materials...because what you see on the show is historically accurate and very realistic, even when it comes to the smallest details" (P. 14). But the show also rings true to Xiong Haoran, or at least it offers him another perspective on truth, through its neutral and non-judgmental approach to characterization. When I ask Xiong Haoran if the depiction of WWII on *Band of Brothers* fits the impression and understanding of the war he held prior to watching the show, he says:

> It actually differs from my earlier understanding because in our official depiction (of WWII), the Germans are the bad guys and the allies are the heroes, period; it's that simple. Like, the two images are pretty clear-cut and diametrically opposed to each other. But on *Band of Brothers* that boundary between good and evil is blurred. For example, I remember clearly a scene where Americans killed German prisoners. That scene blew me away because even though I knew that under certain circumstances Americans would kill captives, I didn't expect to see such a direct and graphic portrayal. It's pretty intense and impressive. And it doesn't exactly tally with what I'd learned from textbooks and Chinese media. The Germans are also depicted differently. My impression based on textbooks used to be that Nazi Germans were, you know, monstrous, brutal, all menace and no soul. But watching *Band of Brothers*, you realize that may well just be a stereotype. For example, there is this scene where they caught a German after the Normandy Conquest. Chatting with the German, they discover that the guy actually grew up in a neighborhood close to one of their own guys. And chatting they also feel he wasn't what they imagined and he was very civilized and well-educated, just like

> many other German soldiers... So, yeah, those are some of the places I feel are different from what I see on Chinese media, which is exactly what I think makes the show a good one. (P. 6)

As in Guo Tian's case, for Xiong Haoran American TV honors the complexity of humanity by highlighting the fuzzy nature of ethics and morality. Such neutrality in characterization can be a particularly potent sign of candor and authenticity when adopted in shows with weighty subject matter such as crime and war. In comparison with character building on Chinese TV, the nuanced shades with which protagonists and antagonists are painted on US TV give them so many layers, so much fluidity, and such depth that they are rendered at once provocative and sympathetic, both emotionally and intellectually. In terms of characterization, such complexity and moral ambiguity strikes students as refreshingly original and authentic, leading them to dive into the characters' worlds, to try to understand their motives, to know their thoughts, to feel their emotions, and to pull for them when they encounter difficulties.

This emotional connection, even with characters the audience is not supposed to agree with, is here termed *resonance*. In reception studies of popular genres such as the romance and TV dramas, resonance (or relevance) is often discussed in conjunction with "emotional realism" (Radway 1991 [1984]; Ang 1985; Spencer 2006). Just as emotional realism is not about exact representation of the factuality of life, resonance does not rely on a tight fit with existing beliefs and conventions. Rather, it is grounded in the recognizability, relatability, relevance, and utility of cultural objects perceived by audiences who are themselves socially and culturally embedded (Schudson 1989). For most of my respondents who grew up watching noble, competent, yet patently unlikable

Chinese TV heroes, meeting characters who are flawed but sympathetic is a satisfying yet novel experience, an encounter that itself may well be described as "authentic," as the word is used in English. In the next section, I investigate the way emotional resonance with American TV characters comes about, how it endows the characters with a sense of authenticity, and how it helps an international audience overcome potential cultural obstacles to obtain a deeper experience of cultural engagement.

## Character Resonance

### Extraordinary Ordinariness

The second criterion of authentic characterization, character resonance, is what audiences feel when they find that a character (e.g., her desires, emotional response, experience, etc.) strikes a chord as realistic, sympathetic, or otherwise relevant. Such emotional resonance in turn leads to empathetic understanding, prompting the audience to feel the character's emotions, know her thoughts, and experience vicariously what she is going through (Ang 1985; Spencer 2006).

As contemporary cultural consumers, we need not be exceptionally savvy to be aware of the artificiality of scripted TV. If we know TV is not "real," what makes us let down our guard, suspend our disbelief, and join willingly and actively in the pretense of TV's dramatic world? My interviews suggest an interesting explanation for this, one which can be expressed in the following principle: honoring the ordinariness of characters, but more importantly, lacing their ordinariness with extraordinariness.

To begin with, resonance presupposes recognizability and familiarity (Schudson 1989). Thus, the weaknesses, flaws, quirks, and vices that help to transform an idealized or monotonous character into an ordinary one, and which humanize her, also make her recognizable and relatable. Similarly, characters are sympathetic if they have been dealt a bad hand in life. In both cases, the imperfections — whether of the characters themselves or of the situation they are in — make them ordinary and therefore resonant and appealing. As discussed previously, one important reason that Chinese TV largely fails to engage younger audiences is that it is filled with characters that are "too good to be true." Instead of embodying real people's real problems, those characters are tidied up; they feel like "ideological pawns" in the presentation of an ordered world where "good" always triumphs.

But to use Liang Hai's words quoted in chapter 5, "how could anyone be that perfect? It just doesn't feel real." As my interview data reveal, TV figures who are polished but lack dimension are simply not sympathetic enough to draw audiences in. Indeed, many respondents embrace some US TV characters not *despite* but rather *because* of their non-heroic personalities and quirky tics. The characters' imperfections strike these students as marks of honesty, unpretentiousness, of being true to life. For example, here is Xiong Haoran, speaking positively of the true to life characterization on *Friends*:

> I think American TV is skillful in characterization, and it feels close to real life. Take *Friends* as an example. It doesn't avoid anything, including adult jokes, our flawed humanity, and things along those lines. You thus have the spoiled Rachel, the dorky paleontologist Ross, the goofy Chandler, and, I forget her name, but she loves to sing "smelly cat." I mean, there is definitely exaggeration in there, but the characters are all defined with distinctive personalities that feel true to life. So you

> feel this person is funny but you also feel you know him; you can even find someone in your life that's like him. Even though it's not 100% identical, there're definitely parallels here and there. (P. 18)

"Spoiled," "dorky," "goofy" — these are not likely the qualities we look for in an "ideal ego," and yet they make the crew on *Friends* human and relatable, and make audiences such as Xiong Haoran burst into knowing laughter again and again. Notice that saying the characters on *Friends* are real does not mean that Xiong Haoran overlooks their scripted and dramatic nature. Instead, aware of the artificiality and exaggeration involved in slapstick characterization, he is just excited to see funny, distinctive, and yet also recognizable characters on US TV.

This emotional connection with characters who share our common foibles or experiences is vital for drawing viewers in, as is demonstrated by the following comment from Liu Yun. *Friends* is the first American TV Liu Yun ever watched, but three years and many shows later, she still thinks of *Friends* as her favorite American program because it "is about the everyday lives of those at the bottom of society's pecking order" and therefore it "is more representative, more real" (P. 9). As it turns out, Liu Yun is especially sensitive to the ordinariness of the characters, an awareness drawn from her own humble background:

> For example, Phoebe is, you know, she's been through a lot in her life. She used to be very poor, even homeless for a while, I think. Then Rachel, although her dad is rich she wants to be independent, you know, by waiting tables at that restaurant and things like that. And Joey, Joey is an actor, but really he's just an extra. So you see, none of them holds a very prestigious job. Ross might be a bit different. I mean, he's a professor. But there isn't much about his work on the show; in fact it's more about his everyday life, his goofiness... I think this probably has something to do with my own background. I mean, I'm from an ordinary family, bottom of society, and so I like that kind of stuff better, like, it strikes a chord, you

> know. Right, I think that's definitely part of the reason why the everyday lives of normal people appeal to me and carry more resonance with me. (P. 10)

To Liu Yun, the ordinariness of the characters on *Friends* is demonstrated by the familiar, universal problems they face on a daily basis, and in particular, by their struggling with unstable, lackluster jobs and material hardship. As Liu Yun points out twice, the plainness of *Friends* tugs at her heartstrings because it resonates with her own modest upbringing. This perceived shared experience makes it easier for her to live vicariously through their struggles and independence.

If imperfections and flaws impart to characters a sense of veracity and relatability, they also afford characters space to grow, to transcend their limitations and fulfill their potential, to experience what can be termed "extraordinary moments." Nothing resonates more than the story of someone overcoming her flaws and weaknesses to reach a higher place or accomplish something great. The ordinary and the extraordinary are two sides of the coin of resonance.

As an example, let us hear from Yang Tao, a 22-year-old finance student at PKU who is originally from a small town in Hubei Province. She sees her favorite American show *Gilmore Girls* as essentially about "love and growth" but observes that the very reason the show stands out above others is, rather ironically, its ordinariness. Asked to elaborate, she continues:

> I said it's ordinary because, you see, the mother and daughter live in a peaceful, small town, and there's nothing special about them. Just like ordinary people, they have budgets, have their own little social circles where they sometimes feel loved but other times feel trapped. I mean, that's the normalcy we all live in. But they're able to make that ordinary life meaningful. For example, the mom, being a single mom, has the responsibility to raise her daughter alone, and so she... has to work extra hard. But she really has fun with her work. Like, instead of stressing out she

> manages to find pleasure in work... And the girl too. I think she really thinks about where her heart belongs. She loves to read and she reads a lot. She wants to be a journalist because she thinks it's important that you can express yourself and voice your opinions about things... But she's also different from most of the other people... I mean she doesn't really want to go to a prestigious news agency such as *The New York Times* or something. Instead she wants a challenging journey, like traveling in and reporting about China or something like that. You see, she doesn't do things for the monetary reward but for the meaning. That's why I love this show, because it tells you that life is not all about freedom and there are lots of restraints in life, but you can still improve your life if you make efforts. And most importantly, your goal has to be yours; it has to be where your heart truly belongs. (P. 5)

Like Liu Yun who finds the banality of the gang on *Friends* identifiable, Yang Tao relates to the small town mother-daughter pairing on *Gilmore Girls* precisely because of the everyday problems the pair keep running into, just like ordinary people. Unlike Liu Yun, however, Yang Tao talks extensively about how she is drawn to the Gilmore girls because of their ability to make something extraordinary out of their ordinary lives — in particular, the mom's capacity to draw pleasure from the stressful task of raising her daughter, and the daughter's ability to willingly cope with growing pains to at last find her true self and passion. In other words, the main characters' low-profile, problem-ridden small town life, which parallels Yang Tao's own background, may be what initially drew her to the show, but what really sustains her interest is the promise that as long as one stays true to oneself, one can outdo any adversary, prevail over any obstacle, and emerge both unscathed and strong.

Other respondents also embrace the theme of "the extraordinariness of ordinary people." For example, when asked about *Friends*' basic moral, Liang Hai says:

> The basic moral of *Friends*, well, having run for 10 years, it's going to have lots of morals, but to me, the show revolves around six ordinary people. You know, all their feelings and emotions, including kinship, friendship, and love... It really

> moves me and makes me feel cozy. I mean, I feel the show is telling the stories of ordinary people; and those six characters feel just like friends around me. (P. 7)
>
> Q: Um, "feel just like friends around" you. Since you just said so, I want to ask, do you think *Friends*'s representation of friendship is real?
>
> Liang Hai: I think it's pretty real. Because I see in every one of them, well, although not in the way that a certain protagonist is exactly like so and so, but I feel their characters are very much like those of people around me, and that strikes me as real. You see, they are not great heroes of any sort. In fact, I'm not very into crime shows or medical shows precisely because I think those shows tend to make one protagonist special, like, one of a kind and really standing out or something like that. But *Friends* is different: each friend by himself or herself looks so common and ordinary, but when they get together their commitment to friendship makes them extraordinary. You know, sometimes I think it's really a matter of how you approach life. I mean, we all see ourselves as very ordinary, sometimes even to the point of being characterless or mediocre. But when we're all together, you find somehow you've gained some sort of specialness and extraordinariness. (P. 7)

Like others, Liang Hai relates easily to the *Friends* formulation of a bunch of average people going about their everyday lives, a perceived theme which in turn contributes to the affinity he feels for both the characters and the show in general. And as in Yang Tao's case, Liang Hai's attraction to *Friends* does not entirely lie with its preoccupation with the banality of everyday life. Instead, what makes the show truly strike a chord is how this seemingly ordinary "gang of six" manages to transcend obscurity and achieve something special, be it a happy-go-lucky spirit or long-lasting and loyal friendships.

This nuanced blend of ordinariness and extraordinariness is a recipe for authentic characterization. However, depending on the genre and subject matter of a particular show, the relative significance of the ordinary vs extraordinary may shift. Sometimes, as in Yang Tao's appreciation of *Gilmore Girls* and Liang Hai's embrace of *Friends*, the juxtaposition demonstrates the way ordinary people can achieve extraordinary things. Other times, the combination is resonant because ordinary things happen to people who are otherwise extraordinary. Note, for example, the following comment by Xiao Shasha, a 22-year-old student at the Law School of PKU. Listing *Gossip Girl* as her current favorite show, Xiao Shasha suggests that the show is rather “shallow,” “flashy,” and not “terribly intelligent” (P. 2), and that she likes it precisely because it is a “no-brainer.” But when I ask whether or not she thinks what takes place on *Gossip Girl* is real, she pauses briefly and says:

> In some sense, yes. Although the show is about upper-class people whose lifestyles are extremely different from ours, somehow as an audience you feel they’re also breathing human beings. I mean, when they bump into certain situations, they’re just like us and they have exactly the same reactions we do... And when I find they have hang-ups and frustrations similar to mine and they also go through similar emotional ups and downs under certain circumstances, that’s when I find myself keep going back and wanting more. (P. 7)
>
> Q: Any concrete example you want to share?
>
> Xiao Shasha: Well, for example, there’re lots of family issues on the show, which isn’t surprising given that the protagonists are all teenagers. I remember a scene where Blair says to Jenny something like, “I think you’re very lucky, because you have a dad who truly loves you.”... And Jenny replies by saying something like, “You’re lucky too, because you have a mom who really loves you.” That kind of conversation makes me feel those characters are breathing human beings. I mean, they don’t just dress up and go to parties and they don’t just bully or be bullied; they are real people... And so on the one hand, the show gives you the realistic side, I mean, the side of them as real people. On the other hand, it gives you something you want to see, you know, the stuff that catches your eyes, in this case the upper-class lifestyle that’s so different from ours. Personally, if a show has both, I will likely buy into it, or even like it a lot. (P. 7)

To Xiao Shasha, there is more to the racy teenage melodrama than meets the eye. Unlike Yang Tao’s observation in which the story of overcoming hardship with faith, optimism, and hard work resonates by endowing the ordinary with extraordinariness, Xiao Shasha manages to glean pinches of “the relatable ordinary” from *Gossip Girl*’s extraordinary extravagance: perfectly beautiful characters clad in designer clothing busy throwing or attending lavish parties. Xiao Shasha’s focus, in particular, is on the characters who, despite their fantastic backgrounds and theatrical encounters, still ring true to the degree that she and they share similar “hang-ups and frustrations.” This tendency — the ability to peel off the dramatic outer packaging and identify common feelings, emotions, and reactions in otherwise extraordinary figures — has been demonstrated by a number of respondents, including Sun Yang, a 22-year-old double-major at RUC who has cultivated a taste for premium cable TV shows. He explains what his current favorite, HBO’s *The Sopranos*, is essentially about:

> Sun Yang: It’s about a middle-aged man’s life crisis.
>
> Q: Can you elaborate a bit?
>
> Sun Yang: The way I see it, the show is really about a guy’s mid-life crisis. But it becomes interesting because it has the shell of a mob show, and that’s so novel and really draws you in. But if you peel off that shell and look at the people, they’re really just... For example, career-wise, he [Tony Soprano] has a job: he manages the mob and deals with all sorts of people and relationships, like, he has to balance interests of different parties and things along those lines. In his personal life, he has a son and an older daughter...and both have gone through lots of growing pains throughout the six years... He has marriage problems because he’s a womanizing mobster, and yet he has a very loyal wife, and so their relationship is always strained. And there’s also this clash between him and his mom. You see, he has to play so many roles at once, roles only a middle-aged man could have, roles that also throw him into crisis from time to time.
>
> Q: I notice you kept saying “a guy’s mid-life crisis,” but not an *American* guy’s mid-life crisis, or an *American mobster*’s mid-life crisis. I wonder whether you’ve ever encountered any sort of obstacle when watching and trying to understand the show. You know, after all this is a story about an American gangster family, right? So is there any hurdle, cultural or otherwise, that you’ve found hard to jump over?

> Sun Yang: Um, let me first say that I've found a big difference between Western and Chinese popular culture — you know, in things like novels, films, and TV — which is that works from the West tend to dig more deeply into humanity. And humanity, that's something universal, right? And so it doesn't strike me as Western humanity or Eastern humanity. In fact when I see a character on 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. (P. 5-6)

When Sun Yang elaborates on his notion that *The Sopranos* is "really about a guy's mid-life crisis," he downplays the mobster element, which though novel and engaging, is only a "shell." Of course, we should note that this is not necessarily an "interesting" or particularly "Chinese" response, given that many Americans are also drawn to the show because of its brilliant explication of relatable ordinariness in a seemingly extraordinary situation.[21]

But in understanding Sun Yang's appreciation of American TV shows like *The Sopranos*, the reader should keep in mind the domestic TV culture that these young Chinese students grew up in, with its one-dimensional characterizations, predictable plot lines, black-and-white moral codes, and direct ideological preaching. When asked about potential cultural differences encountered in the show, Sun Yang's response does not emphasize national identity, but instead offers a hidden indictment of Chinese television. The resonance he finds with American television is not in American culture per se, but instead in the ability of the medium to explore the richness and nuance of life, an opportunity not offered by flat and dogmatic Chinese serials. Specifically, he has found that Western popular culture, TV included, "tends to dig more deeply into humanity" than its Chinese counterpart. This succinct yet sweeping generalization provides a hint at what contemporary Chinese urbanites hope to explore via TV but cannot achieve by engaging domestic programming.

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[21] For example, speaking of *The Sopranos* in the "Man of the House" episode of PBS's *America in Primetime*, the American writer and producer Tom Fontana says, "You could watch that show just as a family drama. Take all the mob stuff out of it, and it would be as interesting... What the mob stuff does is it adds that element of urgency and life and death, and people often get caught up in the mob part of it. But the heart of Tony Soprano was your basic family man going through these problems." In a similar vein, Edie Falco, the leading actress in *The Sopranos*, says in the same episode of *America in Primetime*, "People would say, 'So, you know, you're in this mob show...' I said, '... I've never thought of it as a mob show. I thought of it as, you know, about a family, or about a man and his family.'"

For Sun Yang, *The Sopranos*, in mixing its painstaking investigation of universal humanity and human problems with the urgency and thrill of a mafia story, is a drama of ordinary life, relevant and relatable, that is nonetheless at the same time exotic and extraordinary. The juxtaposition of extraordinariness with ordinariness, or rather, the discovery of ordinariness where it is least expected, makes the show's characters not just objects of curiosity but flesh-and-blood individuals with psychological and moral depth.

But like many other respondents, Sun Yang scratches his head when I ask whether he thinks what is on *The Sopranos* is "real:"

> I think it is real, given that it goes all out to show you a life. I mean, it really fleshes it out, with all the details... I think it's really meant to depict all the possible happenings in an ordinary life. So why wouldn't you believe it? I mean, why bothering to watch it if you don't think it's credible?
>
> Q: I'm just going to play devil's advocate here, but another show you've watched, *Prison Break*, it also "goes all out to present a life to you," "with all the details." Do you think it's real?
>
> Sun Yang: No.
>
> Q: So?
>
> Sun Yang: Well, my point is, different shows have different purposes and you watch different shows to meet your different needs. So *The Sopranos*, it satisfies my need to explore life.

> Q: What kind of life?
>
> Sun Yang: The life you're bound to have once you hit middle age... I mean, it's not going to be exactly the same, of course. But somehow I feel, at some point in my life I'm going to bump into some of what he's going through. Maybe not exactly the same things or with exactly the same people, but similar stuff... And so the show, to me, is not a mob show; it's a show about family. (P. 10)

As the beginning of this conversation reveals, a nuanced depiction of the ordinary life of a middle-aged man who happens to be a mobster strikes Sun Yang as "real." But when I challenge him with a counter-example, *Prison Break*, he starts talking about resonance in terms of "purposes" and "needs:" *The Sopranos* feels real because it "satisfies my need to explore life." *Prison Break*? Not so much. Sun Yang's specific reasoning confirms the way resonance is generated by the "magic" combination of ordinariness and extraordinariness. Despite Tony Soprano's extraordinary role as the head of a criminal organization, his common desires, motives, fears, and frustrations as a son, husband, and father render him ordinary and resonant, convincing Sun Yang that a connection to this unlikely "role model" can shed light on his own life.

Besides illustrating how resonance is established through identifying with seemingly extraordinary characters, Sun Yang's comment also reveals an interest that is "future oriented." Although it may be hard to see any similarity between an American mobster's life and Sun Yang's life as a Chinese university student, the vast difference does not prevent him from empathizing with the character, imagining himself experiencing similar doubts, concerns, fears, and troubles. Such resonance, spurred by future-oriented self-reflexivity, is the topic of the next subsection.

## Future-Oriented Self-Reflexivity

Jiang Jingzhe has come to deeply appreciate ABC’s *Desperate Housewives*, but this appreciation didn’t happen immediately:

> When I first watched the show, I thought it was simply about the life conditions of a bunch of middle-aged women in their thirties and forties. You know, pretty trivial stuff. But as I kept watching, how can I put it?... Well, my roommate and I often chat about relationships, marriage and family, you know, matters that will come up in the future, and we just think that the show is so relevant. My roommate once said she feels people on that show really struggle in their daily lives, and they cope, sometimes really desperately, just as the title suggests. I think that’s true too. Because the very first episode I watched happened to be about Bree finding out her husband Orson had murdered his ex-wife... And then there’s Susan. She’s getting married but her fiance Mike gets run over by a car. You see, every one of them has problems and troubles, and I just feel... I mean, the show is called *Desperate Housewives*, and I really think it does a great job showing how women have to overcome all sorts of obstacles in this complicated society to survive and fulfill themselves. (P. 2)

I ask Jiang Jingzhe why she feels *Desperate Housewives* carries more resonance for her than *Gossip Girl*, the only other US show she is currently watching, especially since the main characters on *Gossip Girl* are closer to her own age. She says:

> Because I think people are more curious about the unknown, I mean, we’re more interested in things that may happen to us in the future. I think the growing pains depicted on *Gossip Girl* are almost like water under the bridge for us. Really, I almost always watch that show with some sort of “been there, done that” mentality. And once I feel like I’m just watching a *show*, it’s hard for me to get involved emotionally. But *Desperate Housewives* is different. Somehow I feel those characters, their life encounters, their dilemmas, those are issues we ourselves are likely to face and deal with later down the road. That makes you more invested in the show and also brings about greater resonance. (P. 11)

To Jiang Jingzhe, *Desperate Housewives* is more resonant primarily because it is more useful — an argument reminiscent of Sun Yang’s appreciation for *The Sopranos*. The utilitarian tone in the comments of both respondents extracts resonance from what could be merely the jaws of melodrama. In Jiang Jingzhe's case, she is not really concerned about whose story is more exaggerated or dramatic, and therefore not trustworthy: Manhattan's super-rich trust fund babies who never seem to stop partying or suburban housewives whose secrets only get darker as the series proceeds. While one program is just as "campy" as the other, Jiang Jingzhe finds herself relating more to the desperate housewives, or rather, to the adult themes the women embody. After all, their conundrums and quandaries, caricatured as they may be, reveal scenarios that Jiang Jingzhe could possibly encounter in the future. Here perceived resonance goes hand in hand with the intense self-reflexivity experienced by respondents while consuming US TV — the foundational finding of my study and a common thread running through the dissertation as a whole. However, for both Sun Yang and Jiang Jingzhe, the reflexivity prompted by foreign entertainment media is not only introspective but includes a forward-looking gaze. Wei An's discussion of *Desperate Housewives* highlights this observation:

> I think the most important reason (that *Desperate Housewives* is my favorite show) is that I buy into its characterization. The characters are so well-developed and convincingly real that watching them gets me to look into myself. It helps me see my own flaws, some of which I may not be aware of, others I'm just not willing to face. But *Desperate Housewives* helps you face them, you know, by displaying both the flaws and merits of humanity right in front of you. And also, by showing you that you can overcome your flaws with work, and you can make up for your shortcomings with your strong points. To me, that's really empowering, because most of the time it's not that I don't see my problems, but that I get demoralized and lack the confidence and strength to overcome them. *Desperate Housewives* assures you that everyone has flaws, and it's up to you to face up to them and overcome them or to evade them. It teaches me not to get hung up on my shortcomings and to overcome them with my strong points; it loosens me up and helps me see the big picture. (P. 15)

Sounding very much like Jiang Jingzhe, but with more intensive self-reflexivity, Wei An speaks of *Desperate Housewives* character arcs as if their purpose were to offer her an empowering self-help sermon. The conceit that everyone has thoughts and feelings beneath the surface may be trite, but it is also reassuring and liberating. Thus, when Wei An sees how these photogenic, "have it all" housewives have to deal with untold personal flaws, loneliness, and marital strife, all while dodging other kinds of curveball, she is reminded of their essential ordinariness — after all, they are just like us! While watching she gains the courage and strength required to face her own weaknesses and future problems. In the end, the resonance would have been less powerful and sustaining if the show did not feed her self-understanding and restless curiosity about her own future.

In fact, to understand what constitutes this future-oriented resonance between Chinese student viewers and American TV characters (a resonance absent from the former's encounters with Chinese TV icons), there is no need to look further than the words of my respondents. Here is Peng Yu, the philosophy student who has dabbled in various genres of US TV and who is drawn to shows featuring strong, independent women:

> I think the resonance you feel depends on what kind of person you want to become, what kind of life you want to live, and what kind of love and marriage you want... Even though your parents probably don't really want to talk about those things with you...you learn about them on TV, you know, Chinese TV, Korean TV, Japanese TV, Taiwanese TV, Hong Kong TV, as well as American TV. And so which one resonates with you? Well that depends on which one sets up the role model for what you want to become. When I was watching *Desperate Housewives*, I thought a lot about those housewives. I think they're both real and fascinating. You really get to see the joys and sorrows in their lives. You see them making peace with who they are, and you also see as women that they too have confusions and frustrations. What they're all going through is a necessary process, a journey of finding out who they are. And then you think, at some point I'll be

> facing those issues as well; some day I'll get married and have kids too. So what route do I want to go down? I think that's how resonance comes about. (P. 24)

Although the housewives are in many ways excessively dramatic, and while they apparently have little in common with their fans on Chinese college campuses half a world away, Peng Yu's attention, empathy, and imagination are captured as soon as she sees that they are all women faced with difficult choices (between family and career, intimacy and independence, love and sex, etc.). In the end, then, these shows resonate with these students because, in the characters, the students see someone to emulate, someone they might one day be. Or in Peng Yu's words, it all "depends on what kind of person you want to become."

## Summary

For many of the students I talked with, the foundation of a meaningful TV show, regardless of genre, is a sophisticated and non-judgmental approach in defining and presenting its characters. Or, stated differently, the *authenticity* of a show hinges on the development of authentic characters. In this chapter, I have explored the way students engage authentic characterization on American TV by focusing on character complexity and character resonance. Resonance is generated by both a juxtaposition of ordinariness with extraordinariness in character building and the reflexive linking of scripted characters to a future-oriented self.

Characters are seen as authentic if they are complex: complexity requires "dimension" and an "arc." In other words, authentic TV figures are multidimensional and dynamic; they are "real" because they exhibit changing desires and emotions, make complicated and unpredictable choices, and present distinctive, multi-faceted and evolving personalities. For the Chinese youngsters who grew up watching one-dimensional, stiff characters on Chinese TV, the complexity of American TV protagonists renders them especially vivid and compelling. Students are particularly impressed by the porous boundaries separating heroes and villains on US TV, with the good guys harboring a dark side while the bad guys might in the end be redeemable.

Characters also come across as authentic if they balance the ordinary and the extraordinary. While eccentric tics, personal flaws, and frustrations and struggles in the face of crisis make even the most extraordinary characters human and sympathetic, watching ordinary folks transcend limitations and imperfections to achieve the extraordinary can strike a chord that is both uplifting and empowering. Thus, from Chinese students who speak of their favorite non-heroic or anti-heroic role models on US TV, we come to understand the power of emotional resonance and its influence in shaping assessments of reality.

Finally, curiosity and uncertainty predispose students to connect with characters who struggle with life decisions and who ultimately triumph over adversity. Such emotional resonance, rooted in future-oriented self-reflexivity, in turn creates a perception that personalities and situations are real, even when other elements (e.g., setting, costume, dialogue, premise, etc.) are clearly scripted and unrealistic.

If complex characters ring true because they are more engaging and thought-provoking, and grant audiences the pleasure of peeling back the many layers of the onion, then characters with substantial flaws who embark on a personal journey of growth and discovery ring true because they are at once relatable in their contradictions and inspiring in their hard-won transcendence. What enables young Chinese audiences to muster sympathy or empathy for morally ambiguous and complex characters is the relatively deep and even-handed approach to humanity that is found on American TV. That gives each character depth and dynamism, quirks and personality; it does not divide characters into the “good” camp and the “bad” camp. Rather, it conveys the paradox of life by telling compelling back-stories that inform the goals, desires, inner struggles, and behaviors of characters.

# SECTION III

# PERSONAL AUTHENTICITY

# INTRODUCTION

Chinese youth are fascinated by American television; they also trust it. In my last section (textual authenticity), I teased out perceptions that American TV constitutes an authentic cultural representation, particularly in terms of subject matter and character construction. Now I will explore the subtext of those matters and constructions: exactly which messages in American television most powerfully engage the reflexivity of young Chinese urban elites? I will focus on two types of TV messages which grip and inspire my respondents: *how to cultivate an authentic self* and *how to maintain authentic interpersonal relationships*. Before we delve into how students perceive and interpret these two messages, I will briefly revisit the concept of *personal authenticity* which constitutes one of the central themes in my dissertation, and I will then provide an introduction to my working definition of the concept.

In her book *Desiring China*, Lisa Rofel argues that a revitalized sense of human nature in reformed China exhibits the notion of a “desiring subject:” “the individual who operates through sexual, material, and affective self-interest” (2007: 3). Rofel’s ethnography illustrates the way a renewed sense of desire – composed of a variety of longings, aspirations, and needs — among Chinese urbanites is articulated by their continual negotiation of individualism and cosmopolitanism, and their narratives addressing material and cultural consumption, sexual identity, and sexuality.

The university students I interviewed also projected this kind of “desiring self” when speaking of their engagement with American scripted TV. If anything, the intense self-interest that Rofel observed in China's earlier days of reform and opening-up is now more cogently and assertively articulated as post-80s urban elites express their self-oriented hopes, aspirations, and passions.

What single idea or frame could encompass and help explain these intense and intensely introspective responses to US television? Despite the absence of any precisely-corresponding Chinese term, the English word "authentic" best sums up the ideal lifestyle to which contemporary Chinese youth aspire.

To be authentic is first and foremost to be sincere — to be true to others as well as to oneself. Sincerity, referring primarily to "a congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (Trilling 1972: 2), requires one to be both honest and spontaneous, without any "dissimulation, feigning, or pretense" (Trilling 1972: 13). But sincerity takes us only part way; unlike sincerity, authenticity is "implicitly a polemical concept, fulfilling its nature by dealing aggressively with received and habitual opinion" (Trilling 1972: 94). Hence, to sincerity we must add a component of nonconformity, which, in the name of authenticity, accords "a considerable moral authority" to what "culture traditionally condemned and sought to exclude" (Trilling 1972: 11). Finally, our modern notion of authenticity emphasizes self-realization: the idea of self-discovery, self-confirmation, and living up to one's full potenial (Taylor 1992).

While many Western critics see the rising influence of authenticity as an unfortunate "subjective turn" of modernity (Taylor 1992: 26), denouncing it as a self-centered cult plaguing modern consciousness (Potter 2010), the Chinese respondents exhibit a determinedly individualistic approach to authenticity and well-being that is distinct from the corrosive self-centeredness criticized by Western scholars. In particular, respondents expand the core elements of authenticity — sincerity, self-realization, and skepticism toward received opinion — to express a longing for distinctive individuality, admiration for straightforward self-expression, striving for independence and self-direction while still maintaining respect for an other-directed life fulfilled with purpose, passion, and self-realization.

My working definition of personal authenticity has three components: (1) *sincerity*, (2) *self-realization*, and (3) *resistance to received knowledge*. The authenticity narratives of my respondents fall into two more distinct categories: *self-improvement* and *connection with others*. Accordingly, my exploration of Chinese youth's perception of and yearning for personal authenticity will be organized in two parts: (a) cultivating an *authentic self* and (b) maintaining *authentic relationships* with others. A chapter will be devoted to each aspect of personal authenticity.

# CHAPTER VII

# CULTIVATING AUTHENTIC SELFHOOD

As I have suggested, the working definition of authenticity — sincerity, self-realization, resistance to received knowledge — can be further divided into two attributes distinct to the narratives of my Chinese respondents: *authentic selfhood* and *authentic relationships*. This chapter focuses on the first aspect of this ideal of personal authenticity, i.e., an authentic self. Three attributes of authentic selfhood emerged from my interviews with college students in Beijing: (1) *spontaneity*, (2) *nonconformity*, and (3) *self-fulfillment*.

The reader should note that student narratives frequently commingle the components of my broad definition of authenticity. For example, a commitment to *straightforward self-expression* is an important and recurrent topic within discussions of authentic selfhood, but I have found it to be discussed more forcefully in the context of interpersonal relationships. Thus, while I touch on it briefly in the subsection on spontaneity, I reserve a more thorough exploration of self-expression for my discussion of authentic relationships. Throughout my analysis, I have attempted to highlight aspects of authenticity within those narrative contexts where they appear with greatest frequency and significance.

In the following discussion of narrative excerpts, I provide a roadmap for the ways Chinese college students perceive and negotiate the idea of an authentic self by organizing quotations under three inductively developed headings, each of which represents a component of the ideal. Again, they are: (1) spontaneity, (2) nonconformity, and (3) self-fulfillment.

### Spontaneity — Breaking Free and Following My Heart

The word “spontaneous,” according to the Merriam-Webster dictionary, means occurring, proceeding, or developing from “natural feeling or native tendency” without external stimulus, influence, or constraint.[22] Being spontaneous and true to one’s feelings and opinions is a central characteristic of the individualistic subjectivity longed for by respondents. That is, a more desirable self, first and foremost, is one that can brush aside any imposed obligations, follow its heart, and act spontaneously. As Liu Yun puts it:

> I think American culture is very different from Chinese culture in terms of the individualism they value; individual choice has precedence over everything else. They get to do whatever they want to do. If you have a dream, go for it; if you don’t, then you can do whatever pleases you. They are like that. (P. 11)
>
> Q: What is it about a show like *Friends* that makes you think Americans are individualistic?
>
> Liu Yun: Just the way they live their everyday lives. For example, what a person enjoys doing... I mean, compared with our lives here in China, or compared with my own personality and whatnot, I just feel sometimes we sweat too much what other people think about us. It feels like we are almost always constrained, or under some sort of control. I don’t think Americans concern themselves that much. (P. 12)
>
> Q: You mean they are more carefree?
>
> Liu Yun: Exactly. They are more relaxed...compared to us. I feel we Chinese have too many obligations, you know, to the family, to people around us, to school, and to this big, abstract concept of the state. I don’t think Americans have all those

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[22] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/spontaneous?show=0&t=1317490340

> obligations. That's part of the reason that I like watching US TV: it's very relaxing; it emphasizes individualism, openness, and freedom; it doesn't constrain you. (P. 12)

The blitheness of Americans also gets Wei An to root for Edie, the acid-tongued, not-so-popular housewife who lives on the fictional Wisteria Lane in *Desperate Housewives*:

> I wish I could be like Edie, being able to express myself truthfully and shrug off other people's judgment. Letting what others think of me be water off a duck's back to me, that's something I've always wanted to achieve, like Edie. She isn't popular among her friends; no one takes her as a real friend. But she still reaches out whenever they needed her. Plus she never lets how they treat her reflect on herself, nor would she bend herself backward to fawn over other people. She's always true to herself, no matter who she's with. I feel that's the kind of person I want to become: being able to accept myself and express myself, no matter who or what I am. (P. 13)

The wish to be spontaneous and true to oneself is echoed by many others, such as Song Fang, the 20-year-old biology student we first met in chapter 5. Reared in a mid-sized city in Shandong province, Song Fang is planning on graduate study in the US. When telling me about her favorite character on *Friends*, she says:

> My favorite character is Rachel. I like her attitude toward life, because she doesn't sweat the small stuff; she does just as she pleases, even when it comes to running away from her own wedding. She doesn't fret over the consequences before doing something. I think life must be a lot easier for people like her... Rachel's way of living is very relaxed, and I like that. (P. 2)

When asked whether or not her identification with Rachel is based on a perception of shared personality, Song Fang says:

> I think it's actually complementary (to my personality). I feel her life is different from mine in many aspects, and so I'm curious about her lifestyle, you know, it's kind of refreshing. You want to know more about it and sort of dip your toe into it, to change yourself a bit. (P. 2-3)

Later when I ask whether watching *Friends* has changed her, Song Fang continues on about being inspired by Rachel:

> I think I've definitely been affected, particularly by Rachel. I think Rachel's lifestyle is very different from mine, so sometimes I ponder what kind of lifestyle I'll adopt later in my life, or what kind of person I may turn out to be. Sometimes I really try to define myself, and then I hope that in the future I can loosen up a bit instead of pressuring myself more. So I really want to go to America. I feel that watching *Friends* has made me admire America more, I mean, I hope to know more about it, and I really want to go and experience that society myself. (P. 12)

For all three girls, what is most appealing about the American way of living is the freedom it grants. While Liu Yun's comments are more generic and do not zero in on particular protagonists, Wei An and Song Fang are expressive when discussing those characters whose free spirits fascinate them. Like Edie to Wei An, Rachel is to Song Fang a "role model" of a more spontaneous and authentic life. Both heroines are admired because they seem true to their mind, heart, and soul without burdening themselves with external judgments.

## Spontaneity Does Not Mean Irresponsibility

The attraction of spontaneity, however, does not mean that young Chinese students are drawn to flightiness or recklessness. For instance, one of the reasons that Wei An aligns herself with the infamous Edie (on *Desperate Housewives*) is that even though the gossipy housewife is ostracized by neighbors, she still helps when they are in need. To Wei An, what is admirable about Edie is that her ability to shrug off external pressures is grounded in a clear sense of self and self-acceptance, as opposed to pure narcissism or ignorance of others. When Edie lends a hand to those who have excluded her, she is further marked, and marks herself, as a caring person who is comfortable with who she is.

Other respondents similarly distinguish between those whose “spontaneity” is selfish or narcissistic and those whose spontaneity is self-reflective and autonomous. For Peng Yu, letting one’s true feelings out in an honest way does not entail shirking responsibility and running away from problems. Let us compare in this regard her comments about her favorite and least favorite *Grey’s Anatomy* characters. First, assessing Christina Young as strong, independent, and incredibly focused and driven, Peng Yu says:

> Of course, she can be vulnerable sometimes, and that’s when she might hold Grey and cry. That’s a quite different side of her. I seldom see her cry. But only a few days ago, she was fighting for surgeries she didn’t even care about, and she got so frustrated she cried out loud. I just love her personality! You see, deep down she can be sensitive and emotional, but on the outside she stays tough — she tries to keep it together. Really, as tough as she seems, well, why do you think she and Grey are so close? Because she needs a friend, someone who can listen to her and lend her a shoulder to cry on. But she really tries to stay tough, and she wouldn’t cry to just anyone... I think she’s a very interesting figure. Maybe I have a thing for independent women. (P. 12)

And about her least favorite character, Peng Yu says:

> I don’t really like Derek because I think he’s like a spoiled kid... His personality is like, being an adult he still acts like a kid. I mean, really, the way he acts is often very childish, like when he’s dealing with his relationships with Addison, and with Mark... He’s a typical person who doesn’t care about other people’s feelings. You see, he had a life in New York, and then just because his wife had an affair, he threw everything away, and just fled. Not only did he run away, but he lived in an RV in the woods. Talk about an incredible life! And when Addison showed up to talk with him and was shocked by how he was living, he acted like he didn’t give a damn. I think he’s very self-centered, stubborn, and obdurate. (P. 14-15)

To Peng Yu, the key difference between Christina and Derek is “effort.” She accepts and empathizes with Christina’s vulnerability because it comes across as a truthful, alternate side of her seemingly tough exterior. To achieve professional excellence, Christina confronts pressures and relishes competition. The great effort she makes to remain tough and to win, but which also makes her occasionally break down, therefore seems genuine, authentic, and resonant. In contrast, Peng Yu is critical of Derek's letting-go because he chose to run away from, as opposed to dealing with, the problems in his life. This lack of effort and avoidance of responsibility make him appear whimsical, immature, and unrespectable.

## Spontaneity and Self-Expression

Spontaneity is not only about being carefree and able to shrug off external judgment and pressures; it also manifests itself in the expression of true feelings and opinions, whether these are feelings of self-doubt or self-confidence, of frustration or anger, of distress or delight. In an upcoming chapter I will discuss the way Chinese youth perceive straightforward self-expression as a key quality of relational authenticity. However, I include the following quotes on spontaneity here because these statements reveal how candid self-assertion is seen as reflecting individual integrity and authenticity.

Let's first hear from Liang Hai, the hard-core *Friends* fan we first heard from in chapter 5. Chatting with me about American TV for nearly three hours, Liang Hai is a warm-hearted, articulate, and at times almost "sappy" boy. Always wearing a wide smile, he does not come across as dark or brooding. However, he has apparently been working on self-assurance for a while:

> I was pretty active and extroverted in high school. But when I first got into Peking University, I felt everyone around me was superior. I mean, everyone seemed so

> ambitious and competitive that I didn't dared to open my mouth. But then I started watching American TV, and somehow it got me to realize that everyone is unique. They may be better than me in some respects, but I'm special in others. What I need to do is to learn from them and make some progress. (P. 15)

When asked about just how watching US television made him more optimistic and self-assured, Liang Hai uses the show *Desperate Housewives* as an example:

> Although *Desperate Housewives* is full of black humor, when the protagonists bump into bad luck or have an awful encounter, they find a way to adapt as opposed to becoming hysterical, whining, or drowning in gloom and doom. They try to cope through communication — like talking with friends, sharing with friends — or the learn to make peace and accept what's happened. I think that spirit really helped me through my freshman-year misery — you know, I just got here and was friendless. I remember in my freshman year, my roommate said to me, 'why are you always on the phone?' Well, I was talking to my friends back home. I mean, really, communication is very important. You shouldn't bottle everything up. They say Americans don't have secrets. On *Desperate Housewives*, even though everyone has secrets, they eventually tell someone. They speak out and work things out openly. (P. 15)

From his personal experience, Liang Hai is deeply concerned with opening up about his true feelings and securing some self-assurance in a highly competitive environment. However, extending his understanding of spontaneity and candor to a more abstract level, he suggests that these traits are crucial in differentiating the American national character from the Chinese:

> I think Americans are true free-spirits. They're very self-confident, really self-confident. For example, if you compliment an American and say, "you are very pretty," she'd say "thank you!" But if you tell a Chinese woman "you are very pretty," she'd say, "Aw, don't say that! It's not true!" I remember I was once in an international student camp. We were having some sort of competition and the referee yelled, "Do you want to win?" I remember smiling at him but not saying anything; I was too shy. In fact, when asked "do you want to be number one," Chinese people do want to but we wouldn't say anything. Americans on the other hand say everything out loud; I mean, they say whatever's on their minds — "Yes, I want to be number one!" — just like that. That's too forthcoming in Chinese culture; it doesn't give enough "face" to the other party, or something like that.

> Americans don't have a filter; they don't conceal themselves very much. Although some Americans fake things, their fakeness is usually apparent and it's very easy to tell. The Chinese are more subtle and sometimes you simply can't tell what's fake and what's real. In comparison with our over-cautiousness and indecisiveness, I just feel Americans are much less complicated. (P. 19)

Peng Yu similarly compares American straightforwardness to avoidance of self-assertion in China:

> I think Chinese people don't dare to say the word "I" out loud. Our generation is probably a lot better, which is why we've been heavily criticized. But in fact, I think traditional Chinese culture doesn't speak of the "self;" it emphasizes "we." And sometimes, I mean, I also talk that way myself — sometimes even though something is my *own* idea, I might not dare to say that it's mine or something. I'd say, um, "we think so and so." I just sort of mumble out the "we," as if when people hear "we," they'll think a bunch of people think that way and so they are more likely to buy into what you say, although in fact that opinion is really my personal idea. (P. 16)

She also offers an understanding of differing cultural norms regarding self-expression that very much echoes Liang Hai's view:

> I think the difference is huge. To begin with, we avoid being too straightforward or loose-lipped. The Chinese abhor straightforwardness — you have to talk appropriately. Growing up, we were taught to speak politely and appropriately. I think Chinese people are like this. Say you show an apple to an American. If he really wants it, he'll say, "I want it." But if you ask a Chinese person, however much he wants it, he'll hem and haw. Even if you ask him point blank, "Do you want this apple?" He'd be like, "Yeah, but, maybe I shouldn't, maybe it's not appropriate..." Blah, blah, blah. You see, in China you're trained to be indirect, to be appropriate, to be polite; you have to be well-behaved all the time. It's part of our traditional virtue. (P. 12)

Given this, it should come as no surprise that Peng Yu embraces Christina Young as her favorite character on the medical drama *Grey's Anatomy*:

> I've always liked Christina. She's very straightforward, sometimes even blunt; she just says whatever's on her mind. She also fights for what she wants. She doesn't care how other people see her. (P. 11)

## Self-Assertion is Not Always Embraced

Although this celebratory tone in discussing American straightforwardness is loud and clear, there is another, more-subtle aspect to the way candid self-assertion is received. As an example, let's consider 20-year-old Ke Song who we first met in chapter 6. Her favorite character on Fox's medical drama *House* is Dr. James Wilson, House's colleague and probably only true friend:

> (I like him) first of all because he's a good person. As a doctor he shows tremendous respect for his patients; and he's very considerate... Meanwhile, he's straightforward — he's able to speak his mind. He follows his instinct to do things the right way. He also doesn't sweat much, you know, like the Chinese do. And so in that sense, I mean, although he's probably one of the biggest worriers on the show, he's still pretty American in that sense. (P. 4)

Interestingly, when I ask Ke Song about her least favorite character on the show, she says:

> I don't really like the black guy, Foreman. I mean, I don't dislike him, but he strikes me as a bit too straightforward. For example, he wrote and published a paper based on a case they had together. Cameron was pissed because she finished a draft based on the same case *first*, but because she left the paper with House who never signed it for her — they probably require a signature before your paper gets published... So Cameron accused Foreman of stealing her paper. But Foreman didn't think he'd done anything wrong. He's like, this was the team's case, and although you finished your draft first you didn't get the signature, so you didn't get published. Deal with it. I think that's a typical American way of thinking. I mean technically, you can't say he's wrong, but if that happened to me, I'd be mad too. Maybe it's my Chinese way of thinking or something, but I think he's a bit over the top, I mean, he's too aggressive... He knows exactly what he wants and he just goes for it. For instance, he'd go to the chief and say, "I want to be in charge; I want to take House's position." Just like that. I guess he strikes me as being too aggressive, which makes it hard for me to like him. (P. 5)

Why is straightforwardness both a reason Ke Song likes Wilson and the main reason she does *not* like Foreman? Moreover, why doesn't the often offensive and outrageous straightforwardness of the almost-misanthropic Dr. House make *him* Ke Song's least favorite character? Our conversation develops as follows:

> Ke Song: I think Foreman's straightforwardness is very obvious. I mean, he's apparently driven by his self-interest; you know, I'm getting what I want. Plus, what Foreman wants is what everybody wants, which is not the case for House. For example, to solve a case, House would risk his own career. How can I put it? I mean, I feel you can see through Foreman and understand his motivation pretty easily. But with House, most of the time you don't understand why he does what he does. I mean, you wouldn't see House do something aggressive for the sake of getting a promotion or getting published. What he wants tends to be bizarre. Like, he wants the answer, that's it, it's that simple. Although he's also motivated by something in himself, that something is different from what we commonly see in people like Foreman. (P. 6)
>
> Q: You mean House is less concerned with worldly matters that concern most people?
>
> Ke Song: Yeah. He's peculiar; and he's very straightforward in expressing his peculiarity. Whereas Forman is after things that everybody wants and he's pretty obvious. (P. 6)

For Ke Song, straightforwardness can be a double-edged sword. Wilson's candidness makes him likable; House's bluntness makes him strangely charming; Foreman's assertiveness only makes him "too-eager a beaver." He wants "what everybody wants," like "getting a promotion or getting published." Putting House and Foreman side by side, Ke Song suggests that, while both are highly driven to solve medical puzzles, House is motivated by his "bizarre" craving for an answer; that peculiarity makes him authentic and fascinating. In the case of Foreman, however, being overly concerned with worldly matters such as climbing the corporate ladder makes his straightforward bluntness off-putting.

If we examine other comments about spontaneous characters on American television, we clearly see that *the origin of spontaneity makes a difference in its* *desirability*. For example, Wei An applauds Edie (on *Desperate Housewives*) because she is “always true to herself;” she does not “bend herself backward to fawn over other people.” And most significantly, when someone needs assistance, she reaches out to help even those who have ostracized her. Similarly, Song Fang roots for Rachel (on *Friends*) to escape her wedding since this is a sign that the character is listening to her heart, following her true feelings. Finally, Peng Yu identifies with and looks up to Christina (on *Grey's Anatomy*) because she “fights for what she wants” and “doesn't care how other people see her,” even though she can be vulnerable and breaks down in front of her best friend. What makes these characters relatable, lovable, and estimable is that their spontaneity springs from a clear sense of self. Moreover, these characters are all in some sense nonconformists who confront societal expectations and stand up against external pressures in order to be true to themselves.

Compared to those beloved protagonists, the disliked Derek Shepherd (on *Grey's Anatomy*) and Eric Foreman (on *House*) are notably individualistic. Their nonconformity, however, is *not* directed against some oppressive force. For example, both Rachel (on *Friends*) and Derek (on *Grey's Anatomy*) escape marriage (or a potential one). But in Rachel's case, Song Fang describes this run-away bride as “brave and true to herself,” whereas in Derek's case, Peng Yu interprets his separation from his unfaithful wife as him “throwing everything away,” “fleeing,” “acting like a child,” and not “caring about other people's feelings.” Both protagonists part ways with an unwanted partner, but Rachel is admirable because she actively fights against a fallacious arrangement, avoiding a mistake, while Derek passively evades responsibility by dodging the effort required to correct a mistake.

Christina (on *Grey's Anatomy*) and Foreman (on *House*) are both competent, competitive, and hard-working doctors. But Christina is adored because she fights for *her own* passion to become a great healer, whereas Foreman is despised because he strives for what *everyone* wants, and in striving to get to the top he doesn't hesitate to step on others. In this sense, Foreman is a conformist who caves in to social expectations; he pursues worldly desires like power and status. For my respondents, characters are praised when they are brave enough to brush aside societal expectations and stay true to their own vision. By contrast, those characters who come across as being selfish or irresponsible, or who all-too-easily conform to societal notions of value or power, are disliked.

## Individuality and Nonconformity

Images of individualistic heroes — isolated, misunderstood, facing almost universal mistrust and hostility — predominate in American popular culture. The mold historically fits cowboys such as the "lone ranger," a number of modern detectives (Bellah et al. 1985), the soloist terrorism fighter Jack Bauer (*24*), and such superheroes as Spider-Man and Batman. Bellah and colleagues observe that, without exception, the quintessential American hero is a loner, a completely autonomous individual who never fits in or settles down. They argue that this isolated heroism inevitably and ironically "ends in absolute nihilism" since social outsiders have to forego opportunities for moral redemption.

While critics such as Bellah et al. see the solitary hero as exemplifying the inner ambiguity of American individualism, Chinese college students seem to favor the nonconformity manifested by a number of oddball protagonists on US TV. We saw that pattern in the last subsection on spontaneity, where phrases like “I like her/him despite/precisely because of her/his character...” were used to claim support for a number of nonconformist protagonists. For instance, Wei An stresses that Edie is *not* popular among fellow housewives. By the same token, Song Fang sees Rachel’s flight from her wedding as a demonstration of authenticity (as opposed to impulsiveness) and bravery (as opposed to immaturity). Identifications with and admiration for nonconformists are widespread among my respondents. Many speak admiringly of the individualism personified by rebellious, controversial, or morally provocative characters. Thus, in this subsection, I distinguish and discuss two types of nonconformists: the *rebel* and the *challenger*.

### The Rebel

A rebel is someone who holds unorthodox opinions or acts controversially. They are independent, strong-willed, and isolated from others. I have found that my respondents applaud and aspire to, rather than frown upon, the distinct, albeit problematic, individuality and controversial actions offered through a number of TV protagonists. That respect is sustained as long as the protagonist has the courage and strength to stay true to himself/herself. Li Bing, a 19-year-old Beijing girl studying international communication at CUEB, is representative here. Explaining why her favorite character on *Gossip Girl* is Chuck Bass, an archetypical playboy who displays some serious vices, Li Bing's reasoning is concise and snappy:

> (I like him) precisely because he's a badass. He's got character and he's good looking! (P. 3)

Another big fan of *Gossip Girl*, Li Jia, who is also 19 years old and studying communication at CUEB, explains her attraction to the same character in a similar way:

> Although many people feel Chuck is even more fickle than Nate, I think he is super clear about who he is and what he wants. Whether he does something good or bad, he knows exactly why he does it; he understands his purposes. For example, the reason he opened that strip club was to show his dad "I can do this." Even though that was something intolerable to his dad, Chuck did it and did it well — the club was doing great. I think although people around him thought that opening that club was heinous or outrageous, for him it was to show his ability, especially to his dad because his dad had always believed he was just a playboy, a dandy who only knows how to spend his dad's money. He couldn't stand his father seeing him like that, and so he did it, to prove himself. And also, I really started liking him when he told Blair, "We are both players. So if we're together we are doomed to hurt each other." From what he says to Blair you can see that he has a very clear sense of self — he knows what he's like and what he wants. He knows what kind of life he wants to live, and so he doesn't want to hurt the girl he truly loves. (P. 3-4)

Both Li Bing and Li Jia find Chuck likable and even estimable even though he is a privileged, bigoted womanizer. Despite the character's vices, what is refreshing and riveting for both respondents is his clear sense of self and his ability to stay true to his real character even though that involves being confrontational and aggressive, which courts criticism.

Of course, one does not have to be as extravagant and flamboyant as this spoiled New York Upper-East-Sider to have character. Take the following comment by Yang Tao, whose favorite character on *Gilmore Girls* is Jess Mariano, the small town's outcast bad boy who stirs up the young heroine Rory's otherwise peaceful romantic life. Because I wasn’t familiar with the show at that time, Yang Tao is here filling me in on Rory’s vacillation between her first boyfriend and Jess:

> I like him (Jess) because...well, he seems to everyone to be a jerk, an idler. And his coming to town is a total fluke. I mean, he came to town because his single mom couldn’t discipline him so she sent him down there to live with his uncle. He’s angry and cynical, and feels abandoned by his mom and out of place in that small town... Then he met Rory and they were both surprised to find out that despite the seemingly huge differences between them, they both love reading and they have very similar tastes in books. I’m an avid reader myself, and I think people who love the same books can really empathize with each other. So Rory’s like, if this guy loves reading and he reads these books, he’s not as bad as he seems. And so she really looks at him differently than other people in the town do. (P. 12)
>
> Q: So why exactly do you like Jess?
>
> Yang Tao: I like him because I think he’s brave; he has guts. You see, deep down these two (Rory and Jess) are really alike... I mean, I think if it was me, I’d act more like the girl: I’d see and approach everything with love. But the boy is like, his ideal world is like this, reality is like that, so he has a beef with the way things are, and so he ends up having a strong sense of tension and conflict. The way he deals with tension is to challenge, to rebel. For example, he feels stifled at school, so he stops going. But the girl is different. Of course there are classes she loathes too, but she thinks she has to go and so she keeps going; she’s more compliant. The boy, on the other hand, approaches everything in a more rebellious and confrontational way... I just think he’s really brave and he sticks to what he believes. (P. 12-13)

Early in our conversation, Yang Tao tells me that *Girlmore Girls* was recommended to her by a friend, someone who was sure she would like the show and insisted that she watch it. That friend turns out to be right: in just a few months, Yang Tao devoured the whole seven seasons of *Gilmore Girls*:

> The reason that I relate better to it (*Gilmore Girls*) now is that I’ve recently just graduated from college and so I really feel for that girl when I watch her growing up and getting more mature throughout the show. And the mother too. Watching her deal with her relationships, I find myself really appreciating her personality and the way she handles them. (P. 3)

And yet it is Jess, the troubled, rebellious, and misunderstood boy, that Yang Tao likes most. That is, while she relates to the thoughtful but compliant Rory and sometimes sees herself reflected in the heroine, she admires Jess's courage to show his frustration and his willingness to go against social norms to be true to his feelings. Laced with intensive self-reflexivity, Yang Tao's comments also display an undertone of wishful self-reinvention.

## The Challenger

A challenger is someone who fights against social establishment. Bearing some resemblance to the imagery of Bellah et al.'s cowboy or detective, a challenger usually fights alone or against some powerful authority, or both. Take this example from Shen Beili, the sociology student who has decided to go to law school in part because of watching *Boston Legal*. I ask Shen Beili what, in her eyes, is the basic moral of *Boston Legal*, and she says:

> To me, other than equality and justice, that show is about challenging authority. You see, when they pick cases, they opt for litigation against the government, or the FDA, or other political or business tycoons. I'm not sure whether that's just something completely made up by the writers or producers, you know, something cathartic for themselves, but to me, it's a gesture of challenging authority, which at the same time suggests that the authority is challengeable. But in China, I've never been exposed to that idea (of questioning authority) at school, not to mention watching the government get blamed or sued on TV. No, I've never seen that. So seeing it on American TV really impressed me. (P. 12)

Echoing Shen Beili, Lu Hao offers another example of the way nonconformity manifests itself by challenging social authority. When I ask what he thinks the biggest cultural difference is between China and the US, Lu Hao brings up the issue of social authority by mentioning two American shows, *NCIS* and *Castle*:

> Um, what's the biggest difference? I'd say it's that if they are investigating a crime in the military, no matter how high your rank is, you're going to have to sit here and cooperate with the investigation. That's very different from us. If we're doing an investigation, say, I'm investigating an admiral, do you dare to just ask the admiral to come in and be interrogated? You don't. But they do. For the sake of truth, they are like "Go the distance, no matter how far."[23] They do whatever it takes to achieve something. Every time I encounter something like that on US TV, I think, we can't pull that off in reality here, and our media won't tell such stories either... There is another show called *Castle*. I remember in one episode someone from a New York senator's family committed a crime. So the senator went to the police to try to pull some strings, but ended up being called out by the chief of NYPD. When I was watching that part, I thought, what if that was in China? Say I'm a sheriff in a small county and am looking into something. Then one day I get a phone call from the governor of our province telling me to stop investigating. What would I do? Of course such tensions exist in China as well, but we seldom see them on TV... I mean whatever the reality is, American TV always reflects a distrust of and challenge to authority, whereas Chinese media basically dodge the issue. (P. 21)

When asked which approach to authority he prefers, Lu Hao is forthcoming:

> I prefer the American approach. Authority is needed, but we can't worship it superstitiously. Nobody is perfect. Say someone is an authority in academia, that only means he's done more, but doesn't necessarily mean he's always right. We have to be iconoclastic to move forward. Similarly, in the political realm, I think we can't trust the government unquestioningly. Because I'm afraid such unconditional trust would make the government lose its incentive, like, "Everybody trusts me; I'm perfect." A sense of urgency can drive a government to reform and improve. "Thrive in anxiety and perish in ease."[24] It's that simple. I think the American government has always had a sense of urgency. Does the Chinese government have a sense of urgency? In some sense yes. But most of the time that sense of urgency comes from above, not below. (P. 22)

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[23] Here, Lu Hao switches into English; his original quote reads "How far you will go, they don't care." I have altered his quote to better represent his idea as I understand it.

[24] This is a quote from *Mencius*.

From both Shen Beili's and Lu Hao's statements, we can begin to see a reflexivity spurred by plot lines that question social authorities. Although we do not know if either respondent actively envisioned each US scenario of questioning authority happening in China when they were watching the shows, both do bring the issue up here without being directly cued. Meanwhile, by pointing out the importance of reflecting suspicions of and challenges to social authorities on television, both respondents touch on the significance of textual authenticity, as discussed in chapter 5 (regarding subject matter). In other words, regardless of the factual reality at hand, what impresses and intrigues both Shen Beili and Lu Hao when they watch American television is a healthy dose of skepticism, especially given that this approach is largely missing from mass media in China.

Sometimes, however, challenging social authorities does not involve such radical measures as suing or investigating the authorities; it can simply mean that different voices speak and are heard. For example, discussing his favorite American show, *24*, Bai Tong says that he finds the show engaging in part because it offers a variety of definitions, practices, and debates regarding patriotism:

> I remember one episode where the real conspirators behind a dark plot are Americans themselves — a senior advisor of President Logan's. It would later turn out that the advisor wasn't the principal schemer either — Logan was. Before being executed as a scapegoat, the advisor said to Jack Bauer, "We *are* patriots. We did what we did only to get more strategic resources for our country." You know, stuff like oil. And before killing him, Jack responded by saying something about the guy's definition of patriotism being wrong. So on that show you get to see conflicts, clashes between different understandings of patriotism. I think that provokes contemplation. It feels kinda like a debate. How exactly should patriotism be pursued? By propping up foreign countries, by starting a war, just to grab more strategic resources for one's country — is that patriotism? Or does patriotism have ethical and moral premises? I find the show fascinating in bringing up those questions. (P. 8-9)

> Q: Interesting. Do you see any difference between American patriotism and Chinese patriotism?
>
> Bai Tong: The difference... I think we have two kinds of patriotism in China: mainstream patriotism — you know, the so-called "mainstream melody" patriotism — and, I quote, the "inharmonious" patriotism. Those are the two versions of patriotism I see in China. The "mainstream melody" patriotism is the patriotism that's sung out loud in our National Anthem...or played up in our National Day fireworks. It's pretty hollow. It's the same as our democracy, like a token, a vehicle of political propaganda. I hope this isn't too sensitive, but I think it's a vehicle of political propaganda. (P. 9)
>
> Q: What about the "inharmonious patriotism" you just mentioned?
>
> Bai Tong: That's something abuzz on the Internet these days. People are bolder online, you know, thanks to anonymity — although not too bold, or your posts might be deleted, but still. So for example, just because a Japanese character was introduced on *Heroes*, some people online were like, "What's the deal with the little Jap?" Blah, blah, blah. And some even started cursing. Also, when the Chinese ambassador got killed on *24*, some people were like, "I'll never watch that show again, ever!" To me those are rather radical over-reactions. They suggest that Chinese people's national self-esteem, our national pride, has long been suppressed, or else people wouldn't react to some insult in such a radical way, like, using those malicious words. (P. 9)
>
> Q: Suppressed by what?
>
> Bai Tong: By the "mainstream melody" patriotism of course! You see, when everybody is singing the "mainstream melody" out loud and labeling other, different voices as "inharmonious," the "inharmonious" voices don't have a space, and so they just keep brewing and accumulating, eventually becoming jarring and radical. (P. 9)

When I remind Bai Tong that patriotism is also understood and realized in various, even conflicting, ways in the US, or at least it appears so on American television, he exclaims:

> That's exactly the point! I think what's respectable about America is that they're open about everything. For a country to stay united and strong, patriotism is understandably a key notion. Americans are brave and honest enough to face up to the conflicting understandings of that notion among themselves. I mean, it is a

> serious matter. If a country's leaders can't agree upon what patriotism means and involves, I imagine it's going to be a messier, blurrier idea for the rank and file. But in our country, we take every opportunity to avoid facing the problem or even to think about it, to shut people up. That's what we are like. Comparing the two approaches side by side, I feel our country is even laughable. (P. 10)

Echoing Shen Beili and Lu Hao, Bai Tong is here making the argument that even though the conflicts and confrontations he sees on American television are clearly scripted and may well be exaggerated, the fact that they even get portrayed and disseminated via mass media such as television indicates that in America different voices are encouraged, confrontation is relished, and nonconformity is valued. Such ideas of tolerance and openness are also brought up, as we saw in chapter 5, whenever these students declare that the diversity of American scripted TV's subject matter renders it more authentic and respectable. The finding relevant to this chapter is that nonconformity, personified by rebel and challenger protagonists on US TV, is embraced and celebrated by Chinese students. Indeed, this embrace seems proportionate to their sense that individuality, tolerance, and political skepticism are largely absent, as well as urgently needed, in China's political, social and cultural realms.

## Self-Fulfillment

One of the most written about achievements of modernity — or problems, depending on one's perspective — is the creation of the autonomous individual driven by self-fulfillment. Modernity embraces and nurtures the ideal of self-direction and self-realization. As many critics of contemporary American culture observe, Americans' early desire for freedom from oppressive rules would increasingly be focused on freedom for the individual to think and act independently of others, to do whatever it takes to be successful (Tocqueville 1845; Bellah et al.1985; Taylor 1992). While Taylor dubs this new form of inwardness "self-determining freedom" and sees it as more extreme than "negative liberty" — the idea that one is free to do whatever one wants regardless of societal norms and others' influence, so long as one does not infringe on the free activity of others — many of my respondents voice genuine wish for greater autonomy.

In particular, the self-determination that students long for consists of the freedom to dream one's dream together with the passion and perseverance to carry one through the pursuit of that dream. As Liu Yun, the sociology graduate student who believes that in the US individual choice trumps everything else, suggests, the realization of the American Dream is the primary theme in most American TV shows: "like *Ugly Betty*... Very inspiring... And *Friends* too. For example, the plot line where Rachel pursues her dream to work in the fashion industry." (P. 11)

Like Liu Yun, Peng Yu is also inspired by the theme of professional accomplishment on American television. Considering herself as having "a thing for independent women," Peng Yu has a penchant for shows with strong, professional female protagonists, such as *Sex and the City*, *Lipstick Jungle*, and *Cashmere Mafia*. Speaking of her current favorite, *Grey's Anatomy*, Peng Yu tells me her favorite character on the show is Christina Yang, the driven, workaholic Korean-American resident at the fictional Seattle Grace Mercy West Hospital:

> I love Christina. She's very direct, very straightforward, and she doesn't have a filter. She works her butt off to be successful and she doesn't care how other people look at her... I think there are several things about Christina that are quintessentially American. First off, she longs for success. And she's a

> workaholic, incredibly focused and driven. She works extremely and unreservedly hard in order to achieve her goal, to succeed. And she doesn't care how other people see her. She's very independent, and she does everything on her own. She never thinks she should be like this or that because she's a girl. Never. She never thinks that as a woman she should behave in certain ways. She's always like, "I can do this!" (P. 11-12)

Male respondents are equally drawn to the optimism bubbling up on American TV, as is the case with Sun Yang. Asked whether watching US TV has in any way affected his sense of self and what kind of person he wants to become, Sun Yang gives an absolute, positive answer:

> Yes, definitely. I am now sure that I won't even consider being a state employee; I'm aiming for a job at a foreign company.
>
> Q: Why's that? What's it about foreign companies that's so attractive to you?
>
> Sun Yang: The question should probably be why the idea of working in a state institution or state-owned enterprise turns me off. I tell you what: in my own experience, and by word of mouth, that kind of life is really unappealing; plus it goes against many of my worldviews. I mean I don't want to spend my whole life muddling along or treading water. I want to actually do something, and I want my effort and my value to be recognized by people and society. I want to live a fulfilled life. But that doesn't mean I have some sort of ultimate goal, like craving power or whatever. I don't think it's like that. (P. 17)

Sun Yang goes on to tell me about his summer internship in a state bank in Shanghai: "I spent the whole summer there and, boy, was I bored to death!" His work involved arbitrating between the state bank which he worked for and a local private accounting firm. Having spent time in both organizations, he says:

> Even though that accounting firm is a small local company — it's not foreign-owned — at least it's an enterprise; it's a lively, dynamic organization. In comparison, the big, state-owned bank is... You just feel the difference in terms of work ethics between the two places is humongous. (P. 17)

Finding myself engaged but a bit lost, I say, “That’s a very interesting personal experience. But what does that have to do with your positive impression of life in America?” Sun Yang responds by mentioning the NBC political drama *The West Wing*:

> For example when you watch *The West Wing*, you feel that in that administration, I mean, in such a high-level state institute, people are still so driven and passionate; they are upright and have such strong sense of duty when fulfilling their obligations; and they are equally serious about their own rights. I find that respectable. I think one should live one’s life that way. (P. 18)

I remind Sun Yang that he is comparing what is on American TV with his real-life experience in China. “Is that ‘fair’?” I ask. And he answers:

> Um, I realize that too. But you see, that’s the truth. I see what I see and feel what I feel in China, you know, like my experience at the Shanghai Bank. As for things on US TV, at least they give me some hope. So even though I’m not sure they are real, it doesn’t hurt to long for something better, and at some point to try to live a life like that. (P. 18)

While Liu Yun, Peng Yu, and Sun Yang all discuss the American Dream in terms of professional fulfillment, others speak of the American Dream in a more generic manner, referring to it as an American national ethos that emphasizes the freedom and strength to follow one’s heart, to get what one wants, and to pursue happiness. An example is from Zhao Nan, a 22-year-old communication student at PKU. Here Zhao Nan tells me that a central message of ABC’s comedy drama *Desperate Housewives* is that true grit leads to achievement:

> I feel the women in that show are very much affected by their American Dream. Whatever difficulties or obstacles they bump into, they hang in there and fight to work things out. You can say they’re selfish, but if they want something, they get it, by all means. They are tough and not afraid of setbacks, determined to get what they want... They are straightforward when doing everything. I think the American Dream is about working hard and striving for excellence — just like

> they faced all sorts of adversity in their Westward Expansion and just kept fighting and striving, kept moving westward. (P. 8)

To further demonstrate the importance that young Chinese urban elites place on personal dreams, I want to quote from the two big *Gossip Girl* fans we met earlier in this chapter, Li Jia and Li Bing. The take-home-messages both girls glean from the CW teen soap overlap considerably.

To Li Jia, one of the two basic morals of *Gossip Girl* is that "you have to have dreams and never ever give up on them" (P. 6). When asked to elaborate on this, Li Jia comments on her American counterparts' freedom and persistence in pursuing their dreams, as depicted on the show:

> Blair, Serena, Nate and Chuck were all born rich and live plush lives, and so there shouldn't be anything for them to worry about. I mean, you'd think they are supposed to, like, comply with their parents' wishes, like taking over the family business or something. But in fact every one of them has their own dreams, even though some dreams may seem vain. For example, Serena isn't adapting well in college and she's upset that her dad's been ignoring her. You see, Serena's dream is quite simple — she just wants to find her dad, she wants his attention and love. Although her way of getting that is a bit extreme, the point is that you see a very persistent girl and that makes you feel for her, for her pain and struggle. And then there's little J. Little J is actually the best example. She's passionate about fashion and designing. She has failed, learned her lesson, but she keeps going. And now that she has her own ideas, she's not as wild as she used to be. But think about it: if she gave up after that fiasco, or if she caved in to her dad's insistence that she stay out of the fashion industry and be a good school kid, there wouldn't be this little J; I mean, all the sparks about this character would be gone. (P. 6-7)

When I ask the other girl, Li Bing, what it is about *Gossip Girl* that appeals to her the most, her response echoes Li Jia's in many ways:

> I think one is their emphasis on individuality; they're not afraid to show their uniqueness, their striking personalities. Another is their emphasis on independence. These are the two things most appealing to me.

> Q: Can you elaborate a bit more?
>
> Li Bing: Take little J's devotion to fashion design. I find that to be tremendously independent, insightful, and persistent. In China, people her age, or even older kids, wouldn't have the guts. Same with Serena. After being admitted to college, she decides to defer entering for a year to find out where she really belongs. I think what she does is just like little J's example; it's very independent, self-directed, and true to herself. (P. 9)

To put the Chinese reception of *Gossip Girl* into perspective, I have looked into both positive and negative responses to the show in the US. On the negative side, media watchdog groups such as the PTC (Parents Television Council) accuse the show of being an inappropriate rendition of teenage behaviors and of promoting a "hedonistic irresponsible lifestyle" (Freitas 2007; PTC 2007). On the positive side, critics relish the show's trendy and hip re-packaging of teen rebelliousness and other forms of exaggerated "teen-soapy goodness," but overall they describe the show as a guilty pleasure rather than a worthy must-watch with weighty morals (Goodman 2007; Maynard 2007). Given that American *Gossip Girl* fans mostly consider themselves to be taking a "guilty plunge" whenever they savor the show's outrageousness, it is interesting to see the same show offering solemn life lessons to young Chinese viewers. Because of the extremely small sample size in this case — two students — I will not argue for *Gossip Girl*'s pedagogical value for young, educated Chinese urbanites. But the fact that the only two respondents who chose to discuss *Gossip Girl* both stressed that the show encourages self-direction and perseverance in pursuing one's dream tells us a thing or two about what concerns Chinese youth and about the values they are drawn to at this point in their lives.

To shed more light on why the cluelessness, impulsion, and obduracy of the trust fund babies of *Gossip Girl* strike these two Chinese viewers as supportable and even commendable, I provide more quotes from our conversations. Here is Li Jia telling me about her real-life frustration of being confused about her dream and passion while feeling obligated both to live up to her parents' expectations and to conform to social conventions:

> I feel that when I was little I had dreams, and as naive as they might have been, we dared to say them out loud. And parents were happy to hear them. For instance, I'd say I wanted to be a scientist, or I wanted to be a doctor and make my parents live forever, or something like that. But the older I become... Well, I'll speak for myself. It's really obvious that I got very confused after junior high — I didn't know what my dreams were. I feel I didn't have dreams at all. Probably my only so-called dream was to go to a good senior high school and then go to college. But that is a path that everyone has to walk. Sometimes I feel it's more about my parents than about myself. How can I put it? Well, let's just say I hope to live up to my parents' expectations, yeah, it's like that. In fact that kind of thought is deeply ingrained in lots of kids today. Really, in China it's quite obvious. It's like, my parents want me to go to a good college, then land a stable job. But they don't care whether I truly want to walk that path; they don't care if I'm really into the major they want me to study or if I'm up to it. (P. 7)

Li Jia's assessment stems not only from her own experience, however, but also from observing others. After clarifying for me that her parents did not actually force her to apply for majors that promise better-paid jobs, she says that some of her classmates are not so lucky:

> Many friends of mine have such (controlling) parents. I have a girlfriend; her language ability is really strong and her English rocks. But her mom is an accountant and was like: "you gotta do this (accounting). This is an iron rice bowl and it's a gravy train. And even if you may not be super rich, you won't lose your job." And she just forced her to learn accounting. I think that's really stifling. (P. 8)

When I ask Li Jia about her take on emphasizing personal dreams and self-direction, she says:

> I identify with American culture in that regard because I think if a person doesn't have dreams and she can't even figure out what route she's going down, then she's like a puppet, always having her strings pulled by others. Living a life like that sucks, because she never considers what she herself wants... Somehow I feel Americans are clearer about what route they want to go down; they have a better sense of what they want. But with the Chinese, I think we need to go through something really frustrating, or traumatizing, before we can reach that kind of epiphany. (P. 8)

Similarly, Li Bing, who had said earlier that she adores Chuck Bass on *Gossip Girl* precisely because he is a "badass" with "character," reasons as follows when she considers why there are so few Chinese people like her favorite character:

> I don't think there are many people like him [Chuck] in China, at least I've seen very few in my life, you know, people with character, like mavericks. They're kind of badass, have their own opinions, and dare to try anything. Such people are rare animals in China.
>
> Q: What about in the US?
>
> Li Bing: I think there will be more [people like Chuck] there.
>
> Q: Why is that?
>
> Li Bing: I think that has to do with a fundamental cultural difference between China and America. The Chinese speak of *zhongyong* ("the middle way"), a culture of social conformity. That is, it requires everyone to be the same, to follow the same direction of development. That's why I think there might be fewer people in China with their own individuality; even those who were once mavericks eventually lose their edge after years of being tempered in society, or, even if they still have the ideas, they lose the guts to act on them. But I think in the West, individuality is encouraged, having your own ideas and opinions is encouraged. So I think there are more people like that [with individuality] in the West. (P. 3)

Like Li Jia, Li Bing's appreciation for the teen wildness portrayed on *Gossip Girl* originates from being reflexive and looking inward while watching the show:

> I really admire their lives, you know, being able to make your own decisions. Well, maybe not really being able to make your own decisions; it's more like

> being able to break free and do something different. Somehow I feel the current by-the-book sort of life isn't what I really want. I'd rather… for example, in high school, from the 10th grade to the 12th grade, I had hoped there would be a year or half a year, or even just 3 months, where we could go out, enter society, and just do whatever, experience whatever, be it setback or success, just to try out different jobs. And through doing all that, we'd find out what else we need to learn. Then we'd go back to school, prepare for *gaokao* (the National College Entrance Exam), and choose a major we really wanted to study. I think that kind of development would be a lot better than the current disciplining, test-oriented education in China. (P. 9)

For both respondents, what is enticing and engaging about a show like *Gossip Girl* is that everyone on it has his/her *own* agenda and everyone is extremely persistent in getting what they want, or, for those who don't have specific goals, they get to find out about themselves on their own. Their dreams do not have to be lofty or even legitimate: they may well be "vain," impractical, or age-inappropriate, like Jenny's dream of becoming a high-school dropout fashion designer; or their dream might be ridiculed by others as a childish obsession or confusion, as with Serena's going all out to get her dad's attention or her whimsical decision of putting off college. But to these young Chinese viewers, no matter how trivial or ridiculous these dreams may be, what is precious about them is that they are one's own — they originate from within rather than being prescribed and imposed from the outside. Instead of gasping at how their American peers' lives are depicted on television as being comfortable and glamorous, we hear them longing for the freedom of choice apparently enjoyed by American youth, and we hear them lamenting the predictability and monotony of their own life trajectories. Even while being entertained, these Chinese youth are able to reach under this American teen drama's glittering surface and pick some weighty lessons out from its triviality. The pleasure they get may well be as inspirational and educational as it is "guilty."

## Why is American Grit More Authentic?

Under scrutiny, there is something odd about this celebration of American grit — the committed and tenacious exertions toward self-fulfillment — by Chinese youth. For one, being motivated and hard-working is a universal modern value. In fact, parental pressure to succeed in academics and career has been associated with Asian culture for some time (Kristof 2011) and has been widely seen as an important factor in the (at times stereotypical) over-achievement of talented Asian kids.[25] For another, the young people I interviewed are students at top-notch or second-tier universities in Beijing, a position most of them have earned by working hard over the years and surviving rounds of fierce academic competition. So what is it exactly that those American TV figures do that the driven and hard-working young Chinese admire and aspire to?

In trying to solve this puzzle, I have come across a couple of quotes that are particularly enlightening. The first quote is from Zhao Nan, the communication student at PKU. After Zhao Nan suggests that the basic moral of *Desperate Housewives* is to emphasize tenacity and perseverance in pursuing one's dreams, I ask her if such "grit" is to her "an American thing" or if she also notices it in Chinese culture. She replies by offering the following:

> We have that too, but I think there are differences between the two cultures in that regard. Chinese people tend to make an effort silently. We are diligent and content with our lot and devote ourselves quietly; we work hard but don't feel comfortable asking for any return directly, you know, that kind of sacrifice. But Americans are different. For example, her [an American woman's] husband may not allow her to work outside the house, but she wants to. I mean, they are not obedient to their husband in every matter. But obedience seems to be emphasized

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[25] See, for instance, Amy Chua's (2011) memoir *Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mom*.

> in Chinese culture. They [American women] have their own thoughts. Sometimes I even feel they have just about the same role as men do in the US. (P. 11)

Zhao Nan certainly is not alone in noticing that in Chinese perseverance emphasis is placed on self-sacrifice and devotion while for American grit the accent is on self-identity and self-realization. Here is Peng Yu, making a similar point:

> I'm not a fan of how my parents live their lives. My parents are very traditional, you know, they dated, got married, had me, raised me, sent me to college, just like that; they don't have much time just for themselves as a couple; I don't want to live like that. I don't want to have kids right after getting married, you know, since before I know it, my kids would leave for college and I'd be in my forties or fifties! At that age I'd no longer be passionate about enjoying life with my husband as a couple. No, I don't like that... When I watch *Desperate Housewives*, I notice that although those housewives are busy around the house they still have a clear sense of self. In fact, while being wives and mothers, they are constantly pursuing their self identity — they emphasize a sense of self all the time. Take Lynette as an example. In advertising she used to be a "mad woman," as capable as her husband. Then she got married and had kids and was forced to return home because one of them had to take care of the kids. But she still call the shots at home, I mean, she wears the pants. (P. 25)

Both respondents talk similarly about two types of fortitude, valued in China and the US, respectively. On the one hand is Chinese culture's emphasis on diligence, endurance, and self-sacrifice; on the other hand is American culture's stress on strength, outspokenness, and noncompliance driven by self-interest. To both students, working hard and being persistent is *not* what makes American grit more appealing or admirable. Rather, *the difference lies in what drives and sustains the effort*. While Chinese perseverance emphasizes, at least in part, suppressing the self's true feelings and desires, American tenacity is driven by the pursuit of one's needs and wants, and toward the fulfillment of one's own dreams.

For students like Zhao Nan and Peng Yu, what is admirable is not so much a protagonist's hard-work or persistence as her ability to stay true to her own vision while facing pressures from immediate and general social surroundings. In fact, when I later ask Zhao Nan where she personally stands on the matter, she says:

> I really admire it. But I think I lack that kind of fearlessness and perseverance, partly because of my own personality — I'm kind of introverted and indecisive. But there is also a social factor. You have to think about how society would judge you if you go for whatever you want at all costs. When you are going downhill, like Gabby (on *Desperate Housewives*), when her family went bankrupt and her husband went blind, she didn't really care how other people might think of her. She didn't dwell on the question: "How did I end up like this?" Well, maybe a little, but she managed to live her life as usual, even if she had to sell her car, her brand-name clothes and jewelry, and she couldn't eat as well as before. But Chinese people would care much more about what other people might think about them. We are concerned about "face." If I was going through Gabby's situation, I'd worry about what my friends would think of me and say about me behind my back. That would definitely affect how I behave and make my choices. In fact, this is exactly the case in our university. If you want something desperately and pursue it with a "whatever it takes" attitude, other students would say you're too eager, too utilitarian, too ambitious, that kind of stuff. I don't think that's the case in America, because it (pursuing what you want) is considered normal, even glorious. It'll definitely affect your decisions and behaviors. (P. 8)

Clearly, what Zhao Nan appreciates and admires is American tenacity under *and* despite pressures from social conventions and external judgment. What she says about Gabby Solis, the vain yet extroverted housewife, resonates with the favorable reception of other TV figures among respondents — Lynette Scavo (on *Desperate Housewives*), the tough, resilient, and sometimes matipulative mom of five who navigates her family through thin and thick; the four heroines on *Sex and the City* who radiate self-confidence and unabashedly embrace their sexuality while striving at the same time to find true love; and the happy-go-lucky Rachel (on *Friends*) who runs away from her wedding at the last minute in the spirit of staying true to her heart. These heroines strike a chord not only because of the determination and strength they show during hard times, but, more importantly, because they wear authenticity on their sleeves. They are true to themselves even when that involves ignoring external impositions, challenging social norms, or raising eyebrows.

But lurking behind students' celebration of the authentic American TV figures is their acute awareness of a cultural difference between China and the US that allows Americans greater leeway to seek this authenticity. In fact, my respondents' answers to the question "What do you think is the biggest cultural difference between China and the US?" resonate with one another in a remarkable way. Here are three quotations that demonstrate this overlap. First, here is Sun Yang, the 22-year-old Shanghai native double-majoring at RUC:

> I think the biggest difference would be how much the notion of "self" is emphasized in the two cultures. The Chinese stress the concept of family, or some other group or collective. You know, the idea that you are a social animal; you are a social being in every single aspect of your life. Like it or not, you need to live in this environment. But in the US, their life is depicted as... You just feel each individual has so many choices, very diverse choices. And whatever he chooses, he doesn't have to worry much about other people's judgments. He can ask (and answer) himself more truthfully: "Deep in my heart what exactly do I need and want?" You know, rather than being forced to make important choices in his life under pressures from tradition, society, public opinions, etc. (P. 19)
>
> Then there is Liu Yun, the 22-year-old graduate student of sociology at RUC:
>
> That'd be individualism. I think Americans are freer and less constrained when it comes to personal choices, be they about hobbies or professions. Maybe that's just TV, but compared with my own experiences in China, I mean, when I look at my own life, from the beginning going to primary school, to choosing which major to study in college, to getting a job and getting married in the future, I feel there are all kinds of constraints. Maybe constraint is the wrong word. What I mean is that you have to consider what other people would say, you have to consider your family's opinions and suggestions, and all these things affect you. I mean, those forces are with you every step of the way throughout your life... In comparison,

> Americans are freer, more casual and autonomous. Whether in terms of personal choice or self-expression in everyday life, they can take it easy and make choices on their own volition. (P. 19)

Finally, the following comment is made by Jiang Lin, the 21-year-old human resources student at RUC:

> I think it's in personal space and freedom, which are connected to each other. The Chinese have so much on their shoulders: obligations to the elderly, to kids, and lots of concerns about interpersonal communications. But individualism makes Americans less concerned with other people's opinions or judgment, and makes them freer in the heart... In comparison, I think the Chinese are too constrained, and our relationship networks tend to be very complicated. And everybody knows that our freedom of speech isn't really free, so it feels like everybody is kind of timid and hesitant. Of course, now we are a lot more open, but still, people are timid and hesitant... I think Americans are truly free-spirited. They just do whatever they want to do, and they don't sweat many things. (P. 16-17)

To all three respondents, what is appealing and engaging about American culture as portrayed on television is the freedom it grants individuals. In their minds, cultural leniency in the US allows Americans to live their lives in such a way that they are accountable only to themselves. This unanimous, somewhat stereotypical, and certainly media-influenced impression of America as a free land of individualism is a defining feature of Chinese youth's collective imagination of the Western world.

In sum, this chapter explores young Chinese urban elites' perception and interpretation of one aspect of the ideal of personal authenticity when engaging American scripted TV — the cultivation of an authentic self. I have illustrated three central attributes of an authentic self that the students themselves tease out and largely identify with on American television: *spontaneity*, *nonconformity*, and *self-fulfillment*. Specifically, students celebrate personal spontaneity as a sign of self-confidence, passion, and bravery when individuals are confronted with external judgment or adversities.

However, they are also cautious to draw a line between spontaneity, which is based upon clear self-knowledge and self-assurance, and impulsiveness, which arises from irresponsibility and selfishness. In terms of the second attribute of personal authenticity — nonconformity — many students are fascinated with rebels and challengers to social authority on American television. Some explicitly applaud and aspire to the nonconformists' courage to go against the grain, whereas others stress the importance of tolerating alternative opinions and voices in a society. Finally, students are drawn to the theme of professional accomplishment that prevails on American television as a particular form of self-realization. While their hopes resonate with characters who are driven, hard-working, and persistent in applying themselves, respondents are especially inspired by characters who cherish and stick to their own dreams, no matter how irrelevant those dreams may seem to others.

Underlying the three elements defining authentic selfhood is the predominant theme of advocating for the self, which is a relatively novel yet increasingly salient message in transitional urban China. As they struggle to find their footing in a society where individualism is on the rise but collectivism has shown little sign of tapering off, my respondents find on American television role models who are truthful about their feelings and desires, who disregard restraining expectations or obligations, and who spare no effort in pursuing their dreams. They turn to these characters to inspire and empower their own attempts at cultivating an authentic self. But personal authenticity is not solely an internal process; it also frames how one conducts oneself around others and guides one's interpersonal relations. This will be the topic of the next chapter.

# CHAPTER VIII

# FORGING AUTHENTIC RELATIONSHIPS

We have seen that college students in Beijing strive for self-discovery and reveal a yearning for personal growth when talking about their favorite American TV shows. In particular, I have noted the ways students long for an authentic self — a persona that is spontaneous and expressive, confident and nonconforming, autonomous and independent. But as Bellah et al. (1985: 85) suggest, "'finding oneself' is not something one does alone." Our sense of self is established and maintained through interacting with people around us and seeing ourselves through their eyes. Likewise, the self-image we hope to achieve is obtained through managing our relationships accordingly. In this chapter, I focus on the *relational* aspect of the concern for personal authenticity among young Chinese urban elites. I begin by exploring students' perceptions and conceptions of authenticity in interpersonal relationships, focusing on comparisons between American straightforwardness and Chinese concerns about "face" in interpersonal communications. I will then discuss three particular kinds of relationship: (1) friendship, (2) parent-child relationships, and (3) sexual and intimate relationships.

## Relational Authenticity and Face

### Relational Authenticity

As an existential condition, authenticity is often conceptualized in terms of qualities attached to an ideal self: being individualistic, self-assertive, and autonomous. However, scholars in both sociology (e.g., Bellah et al. 1985) and psychology (e.g., Harter 1999) have advanced the relational dimension of the concept, calling attention to features of interpersonal relationships that either facilitate or impede authentic action. For example, in a study of the impact of adolescent girls' relational authenticity on their self-esteem, Impett et al. (2008: 722) define relational authenticity as "the congruence between what a girl thinks and feels and what she does and says in relational contexts." Similarly, but in a gender-neutral manner, other psychologists define relational authenticity as "acting and expressing oneself in ways that are consistent with inwardly experienced values, desires, and emotions" (Neff & Suizzo 2006: 441).

This "congruence between avowal and actual feeling" (Thrilling 1972: 2) is similar to the notion of *sincerity* I explored in the preceding chapter. In other words, relational authenticity is achieved when, in interpersonal communication, the expressed feelings, thoughts, and opinions agree with what one really feels and thinks. Understood in this way, relational authenticity can actually be opposed to the Chinese notion of "*mianzi*" (face), which, according to Lin Yutang, one of China's greatest 20th-century writers, is "abstract and intangible" and "yet the most delicate standard by which Chinese social intercourse is regulated" (Lin 1938: 200).

## **“Face”**

“Face” (*mianzi*) is a deeply ingrained cultural concept with profound implications for all aspects of the Chinese society. An early study of the Chinese concept of face defines the concept as “the respectability and/or deference that a person can claim for him/herself from others, by virtue of the relative position he occupies in the social network and the degree to which he is judged to have functioned adequately in the position as well as acceptably in his social conduct” (Ho 1976: 883). Similarly, Susan Brownell (1995) differentiates two kinds of “face:” “moral face” (*lian*) and “prestige face” (*mianzi*). The former hinges on a person’s moral status, whereas the latter refers to “a reputation achieved through getting on in life, through success and ostentation” (Hu 1944: 45, cited in Brownell [1995: 296]). In my study, “prestige face” (*mianzi*) predominates in respondent comments. For example, one is considered to have “lost face” (*diu mianzi*) if one is publicly embarrassed through exposure of weakness, violation of dignity, direct confrontation, etc. In contrast, one “gains face” (*zheng mianzi*) when publicly honored or glorified, or otherwise when one’s dignity or reputation is enhanced.

The Chinese notion of face is different from the Western concept of ego. Although no one, regardless of cultural background, wants to look bad, the Chinese obsession with preserving face differs from the Goffmanian “impression management” in that it is a collective-oriented concept. For instance, while children in the West are raised to develop a strong sense of individuality and personal integrity, Chinese children are taught to behave and achieve in order to enhance the “face” of the family, community, hometown, or even the whole country. Simply put, whereas the Western notion of ego is self-oriented and emphasizes individual personhood, the Chinese face is other-directed and communal in nature.

Nearly all of the college students I talked with describe the differences between Chinese culture and American culture in terms of differences of self-expression and "face" management in interpersonal relationships. Among my respondents, nine directly use the Chinese expression for the word face — "*mianzi.*" Overall, students concur that concern for preserving "face" motivates Chinese people to cover up their true feelings, misrepresent real thoughts, and sugarcoat opinions. All respondents touching on this issue are critical of interpersonal relationships in China which they see as generally promoting "two-facedness," "beating around the bush," "social masquerading," etc. I explore this cultural self-criticism by analyzing these students' perception of and admiration for the American focus on straightforward self-expression and candid interpersonal relationships.

## "We Need to Talk" — Frequent and Straightforward Interpersonal Communication

Concern with "face" prevents the Chinese from expressing a whole range of emotions and feelings, be it positive ones (e.g., desire and joy) or negative ones (e.g., disagreement, regret, and anger). The former situation — reluctance to express positive emotions — is illustrated by some of the statements quoted in chapter 7. For example, here is an excerpt from Liang Hai's comment about self-expression being thwarted by the Chinese concern with "face." He complains that even if Chinese people do want something,

> we wouldn't say anything. Americans on the other hand say everything out loud; I mean, they say whatever's on their minds — "Yes, I want to be number one!" — just like that. That's too forthcoming in Chinese culture; it doesn't give enough "face" to the other party. (P. 19)

Something similar occurs with the joy of receiving a compliment. Again, here's a recap of a quote from Liang Hai:

> If you compliment an American and say, "you are very pretty," she'd say "thank you!" But if you tell a Chinese woman "you are very pretty," she'd say, "Aw, don't say that! It's not true!" (P. 19)

Respondents frequently discuss cultural differences relating to the way "hard feelings" or other negative emotions are expressed in interpersonal communications, especially Chinese culture's relative avoidance of conflict and emphasis on harmonious relationships. For example, Song Fang observes the following difference between Americans and Chinese when it comes to managing disagreements:

> I feel Americans are very frank and direct; they don't have a filter. They'll point out your mistakes right to your face, like, saying "you are wrong" out loud. They won't sugarcoat or speak in a roundabout way to save your "face." For example, on *Friends*, if a friend does something they think is wrong, they bring it up directly. They're pissed and at the drop of a hat they won't talk to you; or they move out spur of the moment... That communication style, that kind of transparent and candid expression feels really American. (P. 4)

For Jiang Lin, US TV has encouraged her to aspire to practice the American way of resolving conflicts through speaking out and tackling them head on:

> I admire their interpersonal... Well, I think it's all about a way of living, one that's positive, brave, and optimistic. Of course, it's not in all American shows, but... Although sometimes Americans give off aggressive vibes, I see that as their attempt to be positive and optimistic. And they are very straightforward and unpretentious in interpersonal communications; they never beat around the bush. They're very direct, like "We need to talk" or "Let's sit down and talk about it." That's different from in China, where everything feels vague, as if behind a mask. That's what I've always aspired to. (P. 16)

The above comments by Song Fang and Jiang Lin are not unfamiliar. In fact, they jibe with many quotations from previous chapters, such as Wei An's admiration for Edie's genuine bluntness (on *Desperate Housewives*) and Peng Yu's appreciation for Christina's direct self-expression (on *Grey's Anatomy*). But speaking one's mind and following one's heart — characteristics of the forms of self-expression I discussed in chapter 7 — are not the same as "being direct" *with others*, with a friend or family member, for instance. For example, in the above quote by Song Fang, she calls attention to the need to work things out between two people. In other words, in the case of relational authenticity, self-expression means resolving conflict through honest discussion.

Additionally, while embracing American-style relational authenticity, many students express frustrations over the Chinese concern for "face," seeing it as a great obstacle to relational authenticity. Take the following statement by Zhao Nan:

> I think I identify more with American straightforwardness. The more I watch American TV, the more I hate the two-facedness of the Chinese. You know, saying one thing publicly to save face but trashing people behind their backs; I just hate it. But in reality, I'm Chinese after all and I don't think I can really act like an American. For example, if I come across something I don't like, I do want to voice my opinions. But I think maybe that can happen when there are just a few people around; I can't pull it off when there are lots of people around. But when watching US TV, I see many characters doing stupid things at formal occasions and they don't seem to freak out about it because I don't think they give a damn about "face." They think what's most important is their feelings. (P. 12)

In a similar vein, Ke Song says:

> I think Americans emphasize "self" whereas the Chinese emphasize "relationship." By emphasizing "self," I mean they don't care as much about "face" as the Chinese do; they wouldn't be like, "oh, if I do that I'd lose 'face'," or "that'd make others lose 'face'." Plus there seems to be a mutual understanding among them — I mean everyone in that culture understands and agrees that one is free to proceed with his life in the way he pleases. But for the Chinese, it's so easy

> to do something inappropriately. I mean, we get bogged down with so many worries and concerns even when doing something simple. An American wouldn't sweat that much; his "self" comes first. (P. 21)

Both Zhao Nan's and Ke Song's comments bring out the other-directed nature of Chinese "face," a direction which they suggest actually undermines the achievement and maintenance of authentic relationships with others. As they see it, free from concerns with "face," Americans are able to focus on "self" and protect their inner voice from being drowned out by external ones. This integrity contributes in turn to healthier, more authentic interpersonal relationships. In the following subsections, I examine respondents' appreciation for such relational authenticity through three kinds of relationship frequently found on US TV: (1) friendship, (2) parent-child relationships, and (3) sexual and intimate relationships.

### Friendship

Many students pick up on the candor and straightforwardness that are typical of relationships among American TV friends. Whether in their daily interactions, expressions of love, or as they deal with conflicts, Americans maintain their friendships — at least as understood by Chinese students watching through the lens of American television — by putting everything on the table. Here "getting things on the table" can take different forms, such as intimate sharing, exhibiting a willingness to disagree and resolve conflict, apologizing or owning mistakes, and so on.

To begin with, authentic friendship involves sharing, but in a way that enables each person to retain his/her individual identity. Sometimes this means literal sharing, as in “going dutch” when dining out together. Here is Zhang Que, a 20-year-old biology student at PKU, making an observation about the everything-on-the-table form of friendship he sees on the show *Friends*:

> They (Americans) are very clear with their friends when it comes to money. I remember an episode, the one before Rachel lands her job at Ralph Lauren, when Joey is struggling as an unknown actor and Phoebe doesn’t have a job either. I mean, at the time, Monica, Chandler, and Ross have higher incomes, and the others aren’t faring as well. Anyway, one day, they have dinner together at a restaurant, after which they “go dutch” when paying the bill. I remember Ross pays for the dinner, and then he does the calculation and says to everyone else at the table, “you each owe me 30 or so bucks.” Just like that! That’s so different than in China, where we don’t split bills. Here, say a few people eat out together, when paying, no matter how much the bill is, everyone will fight to pay it. Even though you can’t really afford it, you strive to pay, because you want to save “face.” (P. 5)

But more often than not this American sharing goes beyond the monetary to reference the frequent and honest communication among friends and the help they generally give each other as they face life’s vicissitudes. Take as an example this statement from Wang Xiao, a 22-year-old economics student at CUEB, whose favorite American show is *Desperate Housewives*. Wang Xiao first tells me about her understanding of *Desperate Housewives*’ central theme:

> I think it’s about friendship... You see, the show presents four housewives, each with her own life, her own social network, her own understanding of love, and her own career. Their lives intersect on that street, in that neighborhood. But overall, each of them contributes as part of a friendship circle. So, for example, something happens to each of them, and they all end up confiding in others, and all of them learn something from this sharing. So it’s really about friendship, about sharing joy and shouldering pain with one another.
>
> Q: Do you think the friendship depicted on *Desperate Housewives* is realistic? I mean, does it match your impression of friendships in the US, whatever that impression is?

> Wang Xiao: I think so. You see, each housewife has her secrets. She keeps secrets to protect her children, to protect her husband, or simply to avoid feeling guilty for, say, faking pregnancy. Everyone has secrets. But all those secrets eventually come to light when they get together and open their hearts to one another. For example, the woman who had cancer, what's her name again? Right, Lynette. When Lynette first learned about her cancer, she didn't want to be pitied, so she lied to her friends and covered her illness up. But when everyone finds out about her cancer, they put their hands together and vow to keep no secret from one another. Whatever comes up, no matter how terrible it is, they will face it and deal with it together, because "we are friends"... I think that really gets to the essence of true friendship, you know, through thick and thin. (P. 6-7)

Living in a culture where airing one's dirty laundry even to close friends is a "face"-tarnishing social taboo, Wang Xiao is encouraged by the sharing of secrets among friends on American TV. However, other respondents tap into an even-trickier problem that arises in maintaining friendships in China — resolving disagreements and conflicts with friends. In this regard, "talking" is a particularly appealing and effective strategy that Americans use to work out their disputes with friends. Here is Li Jia on the friendship between Serena and Blair, the privileged "frenemies" on *Gossip Girl*:

> Some people think the friendships on *Gossip Girl* are phony. But I think... Take Serena and Blair as an example. Although when Serena first came back [from boarding school] Blair tried really hard to oust her, eventually they managed to sit down and talk everything through. And in the end, because of their strong bond — I mean, after all they'd helped each other through the harshest phases in their lives — they were able to revive their friendship... I think that kind of friendship is really precious. (P. 4)

Li Jia and Jiang Lin agree that talking openly and owning up to one's own mistakes make it much easier to smooth the waters with friends. At the beginning of this chapter, we saw Jiang Lin describing her impressions of and admiration for American straightforwardness in general: "That's what I've always aspired to," she says. When asked where this idea came from, she proceeds with an example about friendships from *Desperate Housewives*:

> In *Desperate Housewives* there are often conflicts among the housewives, but I really like it that they are upfront in admitting their own faults. They have the guts to say "I was wrong and I apologize to you. Let's not let this ruin our friendship." Like Bree. She'll knock at her friend's door with a basket of muffins or something [to apologize]. I like that. It's different from friendships in China, where people are not as willing to open up and communicate when there are conflicts. This might be something small and concrete, but I think deep down it's about truthfulness. Americans tend to present themselves truthfully; they like to be open and frank about everything. That makes things less complicated; everything is clear and simple. (P. 16)

It should be noted that, beyond apologizing to one's friends or having a heart-to-heart talk, open and honest communication sometimes involves direct confrontation. For instance, to Zhao Nan, engaging in open altercations can be a more authentic way to handle conflicts than avoiding altercations by concealing one's true feelings:

> Gabby and Susan (on *Desperate Housewives*) might bicker with each other because, say, their kids had a fight. In China, the parents would be like, "Oh well, let's not make a fuss," or "let's just let it pass," or something like that. I think it goes back to the issue of straightforwardness I just talked about. Chinese people are really concerned about their "face," so they pretend. Like, she might say, "I'm so sorry. It's my kid's fault. I'll spank her and teach her a lesson," or something like that. But when she's back home she'll badmouth the other family. I think American people are more straightforward in such situations. They'll speak their minds, like, "why did you hit my kid?" or "no matter whose fault it is, you shouldn't have hit my kid!" They fight for their interests unabashedly, asking questions point blank and even doing absurd things. But in China, for the sake of "face" or whatever, people put up a good front, but who knows what they're going to do behind closed doors? (P. 11)

Still others apply the conflict management style they see on American TV directly to their own lives, as in Liu Yun's case. Answering my question about how she has been influenced by American TV, Liu Yun says:

> Certainly. But I think the effects are subtle and are exerted imperceptibly over time. I think, if I try to peg myself down now, I definitely belong... Hmm, I'd use these words [to describe myself]: "democratic," "free," "valuing personal choice and individualism." I definitely relate to those ideas. I think American TV has definitely played a role here. (P. 17)
>
> When probed for some concrete examples, Liu Yun continues:
>
> I mean, its influence isn't obvious or direct, but it's happening, it's there. Let me tell you an interesting story. When we were watching *Desperate Housewives*, you know, our entire dorm was crazy about the show for a while, then one day my roommate and I went to take a shower together. I remember we were fighting over something, and then we started shouting at each other just like how they fight on *Desperate Housewives*. We yelled "shit," "shut up," and things like that at each other, all in English. And we made up shortly after. I think that's definitely something that came out of watching US TV. I remember we later started laughing together. Really, thinking about the whole process — the two of us starting a fight on our way to the shower, and yet by the time we were out of the shower we'd made up already — we just started laughing and we were like, gosh, we've really been affected by American TV! You know, it's like we've started picking up how they act. But sometimes I consciously want some change. I mean, I'll want to change myself to be more like them. For example, when I'm with my friends now, I'll want to be less inhibited and more communicative. I mean, if I'm upset with them, I'll be straightforward about my feelings instead of holding myself back. (P. 17)
>
> Q: Like more direct and expressive?
>
> Liu Yun: Exactly. I think it's better for interpersonal relationships; it's better for everyone involved. (P. 17)

Similarly, when I ask Shen Beili about the ways American TV has changed her impression of the US, she digresses to tell me about a change in the way she manages her friendships as a result of consumption of US TV:

> American TV has made my impression of the US more concrete. I used to feel Americans were selfish, self-centered, always putting their own interests above others'. Many shows further demonstrate their emphasis on self-realization. Also, even among friends, they are like, if you did something wrong, I'd bust your chops and not bother sparing your feelings. That kind of candidness also shows up a lot on US TV. But I want to say that those are all positive things. I no longer

> think of self-centeredness as a negative thing, in fact I now think that's a validation of self value. For example, I'm not sure this is relevant, but I think this is a big impact that American TV has had on me: I'm different now with my college classmates than I used to be with my high school classmates. With my friends in college, say that two of us have a shopping date, if she's late, I'd say to her, "You're late, again." And she'd probably explain herself. But back in high school, I wouldn't have said anything. In high school I was more concerned with keeping the relationship on good terms, whereas now in college I'm more organized. (P. 18)
>
> Q: More organized?
>
> Shen Beili: Um, I mean, now I'd think, well, I'm not obligated to do as much. Say my friend and I plan to go shopping at 3, and she hasn't shown at 3:30; I'd call her and tell her I'm not going anymore. I'd say, "I've waited for you for half an hour and you still haven't shown, so I just changed my mind. I'm going somewhere else." If she says, "I just got out and I'm already on the bus now," I'd say, "Well, you can go shopping by yourself. I'll join you some other day." But back when I was in high school, mostly likely I'd say, "Oh, then hurry up. I'll wait." And then I'd just keep waiting, even it was already 4 o'clock. But now it's different. I mean now I value my own time more; I value myself more. (P. 18-19)
>
> Q: Interesting. You think that change has to do with watching American TV?
>
> Shen Beili: Well, not *Boston Legal* maybe, but some other shows. For example, in *Gossip Girls* similar things happen a lot between Serena and Blair. They are very good friends, but they fight sometimes. I mean watching that show has affected me a lot. I used to think good friends should never fight and should always be tolerant with each other, even when you feel wronged or upset. Then I realized that's totally not going to work out. If you feel upset and she doesn't know that, it's not going to do your friendship any good. Things are better off if people are open about them. That's something I now pay particular attention to when making friends in college. Plus, people actually buy that, I mean it's a mutual thing. It feels like we are all grown-ups, and we are being more mature with one another. I learned about that culture from American TV, especially from *Gossip Girl*, if not *Boston Legal* in particular, and I use it and find it useful in my life. (P. 19)

Liu Yun's and Shen Beili's stories reveal the conscious efforts of both girls to cultivate more authentic relationships with friends, particularly through overcoming their concern with "face" by disclosing their true thoughts and feelings. While maintaining authentic friendships involves being honest with friends, such honesty is to be achieved, in part, by looking inward, listening to one's own heart, and expressing oneself freely. Even though friendships are mutual and being honest with friends involves telling them the truth, for both girls, honesty and candor are discussed more in terms of being true to, advocating for, and valuing one's self. This is an important bridge, for it is in this sense that building authentic *friendships* is part and parcel of the identity work of fostering an authentic *self*. Further, both respondents don't just idealize the honesty and direct confrontation among friends on US TV, but they actually apply it in their lives. This suggests that, in addition to providing a new way of making sense of disagreement and conflict — seeing honest conversation as natural and healthy — American TV actually prescribes action for these respondents by giving them models for managing interactions with friends.

## Parent-Child Relationships

Besides friendships, the young Chinese urbanites in my study emphasize family relationships. Indeed, since many are single children (the result of China's single-child policy), they talk most about their relationships with their parents. My work in the preceding chapter touched on some of the issues in parent-child relationships. For example, Li Bing and Li Jia, the two girls who share similar readings of *Gossip Girl*, both speak admiringly of young Americans' independence from parents in their pursuit of their dreams. In this subsection, I look more closely at how respondents talk about relationships with their parents, focusing both on the way they perceive and describe the parent-child relationships on US TV and on the way American parenting comes across as providing support for the cultivation of personal authenticity.

The juxtaposition of the open, cool, and friend-like American parent against the forceful, authoritative, and "helicoptering" Chinese parent seems to be a cut-and-dry image for the majority of my respondents. This assumed cultural difference inclines these students to process plot lines through a particular lens, encouraging assumption-based comments even when not cued by character or plot. For instance, when I ask Wei An what she thinks the biggest cultural difference is between Chinese and American culture, one of the contrasts she points to is the parent-child relationship:

> Let me think. Um, what would you call this, the parent-child relationship? Anyway, I feel Lynette's family is the closest to a Chinese family. I mean, all her kids seem to be pretty obedient to her. But others, like Susan and her daughter, and Bree and her son and daughter, they are different from us. And what's different is not only their (parent-child) relationships, but the way they educate their kids. They don't seem to stress academic achievement too much. I mean, nobody forces you to go to college; nobody forces you to study, study, and study more; you don't see that (on TV). And nobody pushes you to master an expertise or something like that. You can do whatever interests you. I remember an episode when Lynette's twins were still little. They had a tree house which was about to be torn down. To protect the tree house, Lynette had to run for president of Wisteria Lane's homeowners' association because anyone else elected might tear it down. And so she made a lot of effort just to protect the tree house, which suggests that she cares. I mean, it says a lot about how much she cares, values, and goes all out to protect her children's nature... I'm not saying American kids don't study, but they're not forced to do so by their parents. Especially Julie (Susan's daughter). It's true that she's a good kid to begin with. But you see, she does everything of her own volition — you never see Susan chasing her around saying, "Go do your homework!" When it comes to picking her college, she chose Stanford. Wait, no, it's Princeton. And she went off to college on her own. I mean, she does all these things on her own terms. And as her mom, Susan just stands by her, feeling happy for her and supporting her. She doesn't choose for her; in fact you seldom see her expressing her opinions, like, "I think this is good;" "I don't think that's a good idea;" or, "I like this, I don't like that;" and so on. I think that's very different from us. (P. 14)

Similarly, in answering the same question, 21-year-old Xu Jie, a senior majoring in social work at RUC, says:

> The biggest cultural difference? You know, when I watch American TV, like *Friends*, I'm always struck by how much their lives are focused just on themselves, like, they only worry about their own generation. And that's not the case here in China. For example, Rachel's dad is not happy about her running away from home, but her parents still accept her; they still encourage her and wish her the best in living an independent life. But according to Chinese culture, I think Rachel has kind of made her parents lose "face." You know, she'd probably be seen as irreverent in China. Also, things like Ross quitting his job are considered huge in China. You know, things like getting a divorce or getting married are big deals that you should discuss with your parents. But you don't *have* to in the US. I just feel their life is very self-centered, very carefree, and not so stressful. (P. 26-27)

Echoing Xu Jie, and commenting on the same show, Song Fang marvels at the freedom young Americans enjoy and the independence they demonstrate:

> I think this show, you see, its name is *Friends* and so of course it's about friendship. But you can also learn something about their family relationships... They don't seem to emphasize filial piety as much as the Chinese do; they are pretty laid back about it. I can really see how Americans handle their friendships and their family relationships on *Friends*. I think in America, once you step into society, you leave your parents and start working, you hang out more with friends. I mean, if you don't live with your parents, you would probably just visit them every once in a while, like once a week or something like that. On a daily basis, you spend a lot more time with friends. (P. 6)
>
> Q: Are you saying this is what you see on *Friends* or what you believe is the case in the US?
>
> Song Fang: I think Americans are really like that. I think that Chinese society is being affected by the West. I mean, as society progresses, our lifestyles change too; we're moving toward them. But in that regard Americans are still far ahead of us, I mean in terms of kids' independence. Now in China, even if you're already 18, as long as you're in school, parents still treat you as a child. They might call you everyday and be like, "What did you eat today?" or "It's getting cold; bundle up!" and things along those lines. You feel like you're still a baby! But I think it's very different in the US: once you turn 18, you can drive your own car to school,

> you can move out of your parents' place, you can have your own life. You just have a much wider space of independence. (P. 6)

Whether giving concrete examples like Lynette's effort to protect the tree house for her children (on *Desperate Housewives*), like Susan's hands-off approach to Julie's development (on *Desperate Housewives*), like Rachel's parents' acceptance and support of her independence (on *Friends*), or while making more generic comments about loose and laid-back family relationship in the US, my Chinese respondents are fascinated by how much American parents respect their kids' personal space. In fact, it turns out that my respondents all resoundingly yearn for a space for themselves that would be free of constant parental supervision or intervention. Further, to some students, when parents grant their sons and daughters greater freedom and allow them more individual space, this is not just a sign of parental tolerance or lenience but, moreso, it signifies parental compassion and respect. For example, Li Jia, one of my two hardcore *Gossip Girl* fans, tells me that watching *Gossip Girl* has reinforced her belief that Americans, compared with Chinese people, are more tolerant and open to new things and novel ideas, and that this is manifested in the American parent-child relationship. When pressed to be more concrete, she says:

> One example is Serena's mom, Lily. Some of the things Serena does may seem normal to us — you know, young people are bolder and more open-minded — but in her mom's eyes this may be too much. But after Serena explains and clarifies herself, her mom understands why she does this or that. And there's the example of little J. In China, if a kid tries to quit school to pursue some dream, the parents see this as frivolous, there is no question that the parents would blow a fuse, and would probably even get violent. Not little J's dad. Although he's pretty upset with Jenny at the very beginning — especially when she sort of ruins Lily's charity gala — he eventually comes around. Lily's lenience and rhetoric definitely helped bring him around, but his recollection of his own youthful whimsies and impulsive behaviors also helps him understand where Jenny is coming from. So

> yeah, maybe what I really mean is not so much their [American parents'] tolerance of new things as that of the thoughts and behaviors of our generation.
>
> Q: It seems you are touching on the differences in parent-child relationships between the two cultures.
>
> Li Jia: Yeah, the relationship between the two generations, the older generation's tolerance and understanding of the younger generation... People always talk about how American parenting differs from that in China: how it gives kids more freedom, makes them more their parents' equals, and liberates their nature, you know, things along those lines. But I had never given it too much thought, that is, until I started watching *Gossip Girl*. Watching that show makes me feel it's not just about giving you enough freedom. More than that, I feel American parents really try to be friends with their kids; they try to put their feet into their kids' shoes and try to understand why kids do certain things from a kid's perspective. Or they imagine themselves being young and recall how crazy and reckless they used to be. On the other hand, I feel Chinese parents would never lower themselves to their kids' level; they always think from a parent's perspective. (P. 11)

To Li Jia, what is most appealing about American parenting is the way parents in the US really try to treat their kids as equals. She stresses that good parenting goes beyond just setting kids free; rather, it involves compassionate understanding and respect, which she sees in the ability of American parents to "come around." This "coming around" denotes more "authentic" parenting because it indicates that American parents are willing to let their children grow and gain insight through trial and error. Parents themselves are able to face their own (old and new) mistakes and are open to changing their views since they are willing to step into their kids' shoes and try to see things from kids' perspectives.

Even though, as I argued above, all respondents who comment on family relationships end up talking about liberal American parenting and authoritative Chinese parenting as indisputable "fact," about half of the respondents deny that their own relationship with their parents is typically Chinese. For example, when I ask Li Bing how she describes her own relationship with her parents, she says, "[It's] more Westernized... I'm happy about it" (P. 8). Similarly, lamenting the loss of her childhood dream and her confusion about the future, Li Jia does not blame her lack of passion and autonomy on her relationship with her parents: "In fact my parents are fine... [They] wouldn't force me to learn something, things that would get me on the gravy train, like finance, economics, or something like that" (P. 8).

Despite feeling that their parents don't fit the typical mold, about half of the observers yearn for parental understanding and respect, a yearning which they voice with a deep self-reflective tone. Consider the following conversation between Song Fang and me:

> Q: What's your own take on this cultural difference? Do you identify more with the close-knit Chinese family relationship, or the looser and more independent American style?
>
> Song Fang: I identify with the latter, and very much so. But I know my situation is certainly one of the former. You know, I actually think about this a lot. I think maybe this is all due to the social environment in China. I think I'm constantly surrounded by my parents. Even though now I'm in college and I don't live with them, I feel they always want to intervene in my life — like, know more about what I'm up to, sometimes even regarding things that are very private. I also find myself being ambivalent about it. I mean, if I don't tell them everything, it feels like I'm not giving them enough respect. You know, like, they've done so much for me and yet I'm keeping things from them; it's like I'm not living up to being a good kid. But if I tell them certain things, I feel like my private space is invaded. In any event, I don't think it's because of my own family; I feel the whole society is like this. I think this is really common among my friends. I've rarely seen parents around me who really set their kids free and let them go after their dreams. Whatever you want to do, they just have so many things to worry about, like, the safety issue, and so many others. And they try to stop you or set up tons of rules. I think it's probably very different in the US. I think American parents can really let go, you know, let their kids do what they really want to do, give them enough space to develop themselves. I think that's really good for kids'

> development. I mean, even though you'd probably bump into walls and stumble a lot when trying new things, at least you tried, and you learn your lessons. I think the things you learn from experiencing them yourself would leave much deeper of an impression than those preached at you by your parents. (P. 6-7)

Here Song Fang is very introspective. Torn between sharing everything with her parents and maintaining her privacy, she longs for greater independence and autonomy while worrying that doing so will hurt her parents' feelings, falling short of the conventional Chinese standard of being a good child. Echoing Song Fang but speaking in a generic and hypothetical manner, Sun Yang offers the following comparative comment on family relations in China and the US. I begin by challenging Sun Yang's earlier comment that "the Chinese stress the concept of family," whereas Americans emphasize the notion of self:

> Q: You mentioned that the Chinese really emphasize the concept of family. But it has occurred to me that many American shows revolve around family issues and dilemmas and they really highlight family values. What do you make of that? Do you think that's somewhat...
>
> Sun Yang: Paradoxical?
>
> Q: Yeah.
>
> Sun Yang: To straighten this out, I think we first need to discuss the question of whether emphasizing the self and valuing the family are antagonistic to each other. I think, generally speaking, they are not opposites in the US, but in China they are. Don't you think so?
>
> Q: What do you think?
>
> Sun Yang: I think this may be the case. For example, if I'm an American, and I decide to work for the government even though that's not what my parents would have hoped, chances are we still can be on good terms with one another; I mean, they'd respect my choice. I may not turn out to be a banker or an otherwise rich guy as they had expected, but I serve the public, I serve the country, right? And I can still maintain a good relationship with them, right? But if this is in China,

> once you go against your parents' will, you'd end up causing family conflicts and disharmony, right?... Loyalty and filial piety, that's what it's all about in China. Here we emphasize obedience, compliance, and putting group interest above each individual's. I think it's different in the US, where I can love you while still respecting your choice. Of course, I'm not saying Chinese parents don't love us or respect us, but... I don't know. But it does feel different, I think. (P. 19-20)

Although talking hypothetically, Sun Yang utters concerns similar to those of Song Fang — that if you follow your heart, you may end up disappointing your parents or causing family conflicts. While neither of the students expresses any doubt about their parents' love, both find the attention a bit stifling, especially to the degree that it infringes upon their privacy and autonomous decision-making. By comparison, both students envision American parenting as allowing kids personal space, respecting decision-making, and trusting them as reasonable and responsible equals (as opposed to treating them as impulsive and vulnerable minors who require constant watch and protection). As such, American parenting is seen as cherishing kids' independence and appreciating their own opinions, even when the decisions of young people go against parental hopes and expectations. For my respondents, it is in this sense — that parents are sincere in helping their children discover who they are and achieve self-actualization — that American parent-child relationships come across as authentic.

Finally, it is important to note that what is novel and engaging for my respondents is not the way American kids seem to enjoy hands-off parenting where they could act whimsically and irresponsibly, but rather — and in some sense quite to the contrary — the way the general American orientation encourages breaking away from dependency and increasing reliance on self-actualization. For instance, when I ask Zhang Que if watching US TV has in any way reaffirmed his pre-existing impression of American culture, he says:

> Yes. I've heard a lot about, I mean, they say an American would feel ashamed if he still lives with his parents after he turns 18. That seems to be true. For example, Monica (on *Friends*) runs into her high school crush — she was fat and didn't have a boyfriend back in high school. Anyway, when this hot guy sees Monica is all slimmed-down and everything, the two go on a date. At the end of the date he offers to give Monica a ride home, and Monica sees that he still rides the same motorcycle he had in high school, which, you know, she finds "cool" at first. And then in the course of their chit-chat, the guy lets out that he still works at the same movie theater [where he worked part-time in high school]. Monica is shocked...and she says something like, "It's getting late and you should go home." And the guy's like, "Oh, no worries, my parents now let me stay out as late as I want!" — meaning that he still lives with his parents! Monica is blown away and she later says to Rachel, "you know how I always wanted to go out with this guy in high school? Well, tonight I actually went out with him in high school." I remember that plot very clearly; I remember I was like, wow, it seems like Americans are really big on being independent. (P. 10)

That same scene also catches the eye of Du Qun, a 25-year-old male who works as a student activities coordinator at RUC. Du Qun's current favorite American show is *The West Wing*. However, when I ask him to expand on his previous comment that Americans are more individualistic, whereas the Chinese are more collectively oriented, he says:

> Take *Friends* as an example. You see, those six people, no matter how close or distanced they are to their families, they all live away from their parents. That's different from in China where we are so used to living with our parents. I remember one episode, and who's that again? Let me think. Oh, right, Rachel.[26] So Rachel runs into someone she went to high school with, you know, that guy. And he still rides the same motorcycle and says he still lives with his parents. Yeah, that plot line; do you remember it? Anyway, they really look down upon that guy, like, "How could he still be living with his parents?" It's pretty obvious. But (here in China) if we go around telling people that we still live with our parents, it's not a big deal and no one judges you for that. (P. 20-21)

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[26] It is actually Monica who runs into her high school crush and tells Rachel about it. Here Du Qun misremembered.

Like Zhang Que and Du Qun, Xu Jie is attentive to the same facet of American values:

> In terms of family relationships, growing up we see our parents living with our grandparents, and so we kind of take for granted that we're supposed to stay with our parents instead of living on our own. But sometimes I think in America... For example, on *Friends*, they only visit their parents occasionally, just to say "Hi." You don't have to take care of your parents, nor do they support you anymore. When you make your life decisions, you can tell your parents, but you don't have to. I feel each American is first and foremost an independent individual before they go about building their social relations. (P. 27)

Finally, by making the following comment on the familial drama on *Gossip Girl*, Li Bing picks up on the idea of "separation and individuation," which is deeply engrained in the American social and cultural fabric:

> I was pretty shocked by the parent-child relationships on *Gossip Girl*. I mean, how kids in Dan's family and Serena's family deal with the marriage mess of their parents — they are really open and tolerant and that totally blew me away. Because I think in China if parents aren't getting along or are getting divorced or something, kids wouldn't be so cool about it. When watching *Gossip Girl*, it just strikes me that when parents are having their issues, well, I'm not saying American kids aren't affected, but they are not affected that much. It's not like they couldn't live their lives if their parents left each other or something like that; they simply go on with their lives as usual.
>
> Q: What do you mean when you say you were blown away? Meaning you thought it's untruthful and that it wouldn't happen in real life? Real life in China or in the US?
>
> Li Bing: I guess both. But I think in reality Chinese kids would be more affected by their parents' problems than American kids would.
>
> Q: What's your take on such matters?
>
> Li Bing: I like the American way. I think it's better that parents and kids have their respective lives and try not to stick their noses too much into the others' lives. I like more individual space. (P. 7)

Interestingly, while American TV reviewers tend to be critical of the ways parental discord is depicted on *Gossip Girl*,[27] young viewers in China find the clearer boundaries between the lives of kids and parents in the US eye-opening and instructive. At the same time, for Li Bing, greater individual space is not simply a unilateral demand directing parents to be less strict or intrusive with their kids. Instead, what she and many others long for is greater interpersonal space, which boils down to the idea that all people, regardless of age and social status, are independent and autonomous individuals.

All in all, to many of the respondents, American television displays a type of familial connection — especially that between young people and their parents — that is refreshingly supportive of the individualistic ideal of becoming unique, independent, and self-directed. Further, these students do not see their criticism of coercive parental authority and their demand for more personal space simply as a matter of shedding parental control so that they can act simply on their own free will. Rather, they recognize that self-determination involves not just freedom from parents but support and respect from them as well. Their ideal in the long run, however, is centered on self-direction. This idea of taking personal control, which entails both self-realization and suspicion of received knowledge, recalls our working definition of *personal authenticity*, a formulation that endows parent-child relationships depicted on American TV with halo of authenticity.

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[27] For example, see the recap and review posts by *Los Angeles Times'* show trackers on *Gossip Girl* at http://latimesblogs.latimes.com/showtracker/gossip_girl/

## Sexual and Intimate Relationships

In comparison with the shared belief in and widespread acceptance of authenticity in both friendships and parent-child relationships in the US, comments regarding sexual and intimate relationships are much more divided and ambiguous. The exception, of course, is the shared baseline perception that when compared with the Chinese, Americans — at least as they are represented on TV — are much more open and casual about pre-marital sexual relationships. All respondents frown on this perceived sexual permissiveness, although some respondents are more vocal and absolute ("That's beyond my understanding... We're not animals, right?") than others ("I'm OK if other people do it but I wouldn't do it myself.")

This overall negative approach to American TV sex does not easily fit with my understanding of the longing of Chinese youth for authentic relationships. Specifically, as I have demonstrated, what my respondents most admire about the friendships and parent-child relationships they see on US TV is the alleged American emphasis on spontaneity and freedom from concerns about "face," as well as being able to follow one's heart and speak one's mind in an authentic way. This emphasis on spontaneity, freedom, and being true to one's own vision and feelings fits our working definition of personal authenticity (sincerity, self-actualization, resistance to received knowledge). However, when it comes to sexual relationships, these students are much more reluctant to subscribe to the supposed American traits of informality and independence. In other words, under the conceptual framework of personal authenticity as developed in this dissertation, "authentic" sexual freedom is largely rejected by Chinese youth.

Why is American TV sex *not* a model for achieving the ideal sexual self? Why do Chinese students want freedom in other parts of life in order to pursue a more authentic self, but not when it comes to sex? How can authenticity accommodate individual freedom but not unrestrained sex? While further data are needed to adequately tackle these questions, theories of modernity and identity shed some initial light. Specifically, identity scholars have taught us that even though modern identities are constantly in flux, individuals must still honor the past and cannot simply change their identity at will (Giddens 1991: 53-54). Cross-cultural media reception studies have also shown that despite the remarkable power of global media in challenging local identity, especially among younger people, certain aspects of identity are simply more deeply anchored in tradition; sex is one of those identity nodes where traditions hold sway (Butcher 2003; Kim 2005).

Given my concern with identity negotiation via media use, I approach the questions raised above by considering sex as an asymptotic facet of Chinese youth identity: it defines the limit of cultural assimilation. Unlike other identity components, sex is one aspect of identity where my informants cannot bring themselves to identify with the TV-modeled "American way." To illustrate my point, let me quote Li Bing, who, a loyal fan of *Gossip Girl*, feels the sexual content of the show is a bit hard to swallow:

> The relationship stuff is messy, I mean way too messy. My friends and I always chat about relationships on *Gossip Girl*, and we are like, if you draw a chart or something, almost everyone has been with everyone else, even if just for a short while. So that part actually doesn't feel very real, especially when you think they're just high-schoolers.
>
> Q: Have you every felt uncomfortable watching the messy relationships on *Gossip Girl*? I mean where do you stand morally?

> Li Bing: Sometimes, yea. I'm not quite OK with their fast-paced hookups and breakups and the messy relationships among them. (P. 5)

Echoing Li Bing but discussing a more "adult" show, Qian Wen, a 24-year-old economic geography graduate student at PKU, has some reservation about her favorite show, *Desperate Housewives*. When I ask what strikes her as the biggest cultural difference between China and the US as she watches the show, she says:

> I think American sex culture strikes me as being the most different from China... For example, it seems that Susan's ex-husband has slept with every woman around him. And that woman who's now dead, I forget her name.
>
> Q: Edie?
>
> Qian Wen: Yeah, Edie. She seems to have had sex with every man around her. I think that definitely goes against our values. I mean, you can marry twice; you can marry someone and divorce him/her and remarry, that's fine. But you cannot get married but keep sleeping with all sorts of different people! That's the most shocking cultural difference, I feel. (P. 8)

Guys are equally uncomfortable with American TV sex. For example, when I ask Xiong Haoran if there is anything he personally cannot accept while watching US TV, he says:

> Yeah. When I watch *Friends*, sometimes I feel they are too open — like about sex and some other things — they are too casual, and I can't identify with that. For example, I remember in one episode the three women were together on the balcony, and they were spying on a guy and his date with binoculars. They made comments while watching and told adult jokes. I'm sure there are such things in China as well, but I feel Americans are more casual about it. Another example that just came to my mind is a scene on *Band of Brothers*: the moment the Americans landed in Germany, they started hooking up with German women. I can't really accept that. I mean I can't really identify with that; it's too casual, I think. (P. 25)

While the respondents quoted above are expressing their personal difficulties with the casual sex they see on American TV — “I’m not quite OK with their fast-paced hookups and breakups and the messy relationships among them;” “I can’t really identify with that;” etc. — others note that their friends have similar reactions to highlight that the discomfort is more than personal. Take another *Gossip Girl* fan, Li Jia, as an example. When I ask if there is anything that makes her uncomfortable while watching *Gossip Girl*, she says:

> Well, sometimes I feel their approach to love is too casual.
>
> Q: Um, do you mean their approach to love is too casual or their approach to sex is too casual?
>
> Li Jia: Both. In terms of sex, I think Nate is the most obvious. In terms of love, well, for example, Serena, I mean she did love Dan at the very beginning, but maybe because of the messy romance between their parents, they can’t be together. Now in the third season, out of nowhere comes Carter. I just feel Serena... I just don’t understand how she can change so fast. I mean in the second season she’s all about Dan; now, barely into season 3, lo and behold, she’s into Carter!... I’m like, seriously? How could she? I feel like in China, if a girl once loved a boy that much, it’s probably very hard for her to accept someone else. At least my girl friends are like that. Even if she eventually moves on, it takes time. But they’re like, just a summer and everything has changed. I just feel that’s a rather quick change of heart.
>
> Q: Such casualness about sex and love, does it bother you?
>
> Li Jia: Sometimes, yes. I tell you what, my roommates — I mean we all watch *Gossip Girl* together and talk about it a lot — everybody seems to find it somewhat uncomfortable. In fact, one girl in my dorm room stopped watching after episode 15 of the second season — cuz she found these changes (of heart) too quick. (P. 15)

Here Li Jia talks hypothetically about what a Chinese girl would have done in a similar romantic situation, adding that “at least my girl friends are like that.” Also, when I ask if sexual permissiveness on *Gossip Girl* bothers *her*, she answers by telling me that not just she but also all of her roommates are uncomfortable about it, and one even quit watching the show for that very reason. This inclination to speak in terms of "us" vs "them," as opposed to "me" vs "her," betrays a tendency to frame different approaches to sex in terms of cultural distinction rather than personal preference. Here is a more illustrative quote by Song Fang who, upon my request, offers more details about her take on sex and intimate relationships as depicted on her favorite show, *Friends*:

> I think in China, especially in more traditional families, or for people of my parents' generation, dating someone is a big deal; it's like dating someone means you're going to marry him. And so parents constantly warn you that you have to be really careful when seeing a guy, that you can't just decide to be with him casually or impulsively. When people see your date, they automatically think he's the one you're marrying. I mean, people think love and marriage are the same thing. But I think it's different in the US. When I watch *Friends*, I feel like their approach to love… I mean they don't date someone thinking they're getting married or something. You probably date someone just because you like him, feel drawn to him, or something like that. Also, there're a lot of stuff about sex on *Friends*, like, sometimes people make love the first night they meet and then break up the next morning! They seem to be really open in that regard, not giving a damn. The difference is more obvious with women. I think Chinese women, well, maybe because I'm still young and haven't experienced much, but I just feel everybody is really careful about it. Like, we'd want to save the first time for the night of our wedding day or something. It's like, if you've already done it before getting married, you are not pure, or you are a bad girl or something like that. But I think it's very casual in America; like, they simply don't have that concern or some sort of rule about it. And so if a man and a woman hang out overnight, something's gotta happen, and the next morning they act like nothing has happened. Especially the woman, she doesn't feel like being taken advantage of or having lost something important simply because a guy's slept with her and then left. They don't think that way. It's very different in China... For example, Rachel and Monica (on *Friends*) would both say something like, I went out with my boyfriend and made love with him. And then a few days later, they'd break up! I feel like they just don't give it much thought, like, am I with the right guy? It seems to them going out automatically means making love... I feel like they use sex to get to know each other. If it doesn't turn out right, or they don't enjoy it, they just break it off. (P. 7)

When asked which approach to sex and love she is more identified with, Song Fang is not ambivalent about her stance at all:

> I'm more prone to the Chinese approach. Because I think, well, maybe it has to do with how I was raised growing up, I think one should be serious and careful when it comes to love. Because to me, love is something that's sublime. If you go in with a playful attitude, I think it's a waste of time for both yourself and the other person; plus it's a waste of your affection too. I don't think that's fair for either party, and so I opt to be more serious.
>
> Q: Have you ever felt uncomfortable while watching *Friends* because of the way sex and relationship matters are depicted on it?
>
> Song Fang: Yeah, definitely. I'm like, wow, how could they be like that? I feel it's hard to understand, especially the women's lifestyle, their casual attitude toward love, marriage, and sex. There are things I simply can't accept. (P. 7)

Despite her lengthy comment, Song Fang mainly speaks categorically in terms of "us the Chinese" vs "them the Americans:" *in China everybody* is really careful about sex; *we* want to save the first time for *our* wedding day; I'm more inclined to *the Chinese approach*. By contrast, the language of "me," that is, stories about herself — which she does offer a lot when, say, expressing her views about Chinese education or parenting style — are largely missing from the narrative regarding sex. Moreover, even when sharing her opinion that "one should be serious and careful when it comes to love," Song Fang does not forget to highlight the divergence as cultural, as opposed to personal, pointing out that her attitude probably "has to do with how I was raised growing up."

In addition to the casualness of American sex culture and the frivolity of US dating, some students are particularly concerned about related issues of commitment, responsibility, and the institution of marriage. For instance, when I ask Wang Xiao if she has ever experienced any cultural discomfort, or even cultural shock, while watching her favorite show, *Desperate Housewives*, she says:

> I think one big cultural difference is about sex, and how people understand and approach sex. I really feel that difference is huge; at least to me it's the most shocking. I actually was kind of prepared before watching American TV. In fact, I wanted to broaden my horizon and enrich my knowledge of America by watching American TV... I mean, I already knew things about America, but I was like, maybe I have been too old-fashioned (about sex); maybe I should try and correct the way I see the matter. But (when I actually watch the show) I still think it's a bit too much.
>
> Q: You mean when you watch *Desperate Housewives*, you feel its portrayal of sex is too much, too flagrant?
>
> Wang Xiao: Maybe not as much as *Sex and the City*. But by Chinese standards, it's a bit too much.
>
> Q: Are you OK with it?
>
> Wang Xiao: I'm OK watching it; but in real life, I couldn't accept it... I mean, I think they (Americans) are a bit selfish and irresponsible when it comes to relationships. Maybe this has to do with their cultural tradition and education. For example, if they fall in love, they're really smitten; but if they fall out of love, they aren't very concerned with matters of responsibility, family, and things along those lines; they just leave or get a divorce. I think they lack a sense of responsibility, you know, for family, and for their kids. I can't accept that. I think if you choose to be married, to have a family, then your responsibility for your family shouldn't just vanish the second you stop loving your spouse. (P. 17-18)

Like Song Fang, Wang Xiao also stresses that different sexual behaviors are culturally informed: "Maybe it has to do with their cultural tradition and education." In addition, it is important to note the interesting evolution of the topic from matters of sex to broader issues about relationships as our conversation proceeds. When I ask Wang Xiao if she is OK with the sexual content of *Desperate Housewives*, we were talking about sex; but in answering my question, she ends up talking about "relationships," about which she thinks Americans are "selfish and irresponsible." Almost naturally, her discussion expands from sex to include such collectively-oriented and morally-laden notions as responsibility, marriage, and family. Here, apart from the tendency to omit personal stories and to speak categorically, we can see another mechanism for de-personalizing sex. That is, instead of talking about sex as a personal matter of expressing and experiencing desire and intimacy, Wang Xiao links sex to other-oriented ideas: loyalty to marriage, responsibility to family, etc.

To more clearly demonstrate Chinese youth's commingling of sex with a broader range of relationship matters such as responsibility and family, I will quote a respondent who is especially bold in discussing intimate relationships. To the philosophy student Peng Yu, *Sex and the City* is at the same time one of her first American shows, one of her favorites, and one of those she claims has had a great impact on her:

> *Sex and the City* has changed my attitude about pre-marital sex. I now think pre-marital sex is a must — you shouldn't wait until after getting married! Because the truth is that nowadays people get married a lot later in life... That's why you can't begin exploring it (sex) when you are already in your thirties; you simply can't wait until after getting married... (Sex) is a crucial part of real life... You can't really sidestep it, because it is *huge*. If a couple has problems in that regard and they can't talk about or solve them, in the long run it definitely would affect their marriage. (P. 21)
>
> But when I ask if she has any reservation about the show, Peng Yu bursts out:
>
> Yes, yes!
>
> Q: Tell me more about it.
>
> Peng Yu: Well, sometimes it's kind of over the top with sex. For example, when it's the weekend, (a woman) goes to a club to have fun, like, to find a guy or something. I don't think I can accept that. And I'm not OK with one night stands either. There's a lot of that kind of stuff in there. Because they're all women in their thirties, you know, the so-called cougars... Maybe it's OK for them to go

> have fun from time to time, to go crazy every now and again. But to me, I don't think I can accept that. (P. 23-24)

Despite her earlier proud claim that watching American TV has convinced her of the propriety — and moreover, the necessity — of pre-marital sex, here Peng Yu is quite clear that she cannot accept the casual approach Americans take to sex even though in some cases she can understand it. The apparent contradiction between her unequivocal denunciation of casual sex and her equally decisive endorsement of pre-marital sex is not really puzzling if we look more closely at the things she considers refreshingly novel and reasonable as opposed to those that are completely off-limits. On the one hand, randomly picking up sexual partners at clubs or having one night stands just to "go crazy" or "have fun" are unacceptable. On the other hand, early sex and pre-marital sex are both OK — in fact even critically helpful — if the fundamental purpose of the engagement is to ensure the quality of long-term relationships or marriage. Again we see the immediate association of sex and marriage on Peng Yu's part. In her rationalization of pre-marital sex, marriage immediately becomes part of the equation: "pre-marital sex is a must...you can't begin exploring...after getting married." Further, when she later argues that "(sex) is a crucial part of real life... It is *huge*," she does not shore up her argument by associating sex with, say, self-exploration, self-expression, or self-fulfillment, which she has been extremely passionate about in the rest of the interview. Rather, once again, she champions pre-marital sex on the grounds of benefitting marriage: "If a couple have problems in that regard (sex) and they can't talk about or solve them, in the long run it definitely would affect their marriage."

## Summary

The preceding chapter explored Chinese students' longing for the authentic self through their admiration for the spontaneity, non-conformity, and "go-getter spirit" in self-actualized American TV characters. This chapter investigates how young people pursue authenticity from a relational perspective, by looking at the way they perceive and receive the American relationship ethos depicted on US TV. Discussing self-consciously the Chinese notion of "face" and contrasting its other-directed nature with the American focus on honest self-expression, the majority of the respondents favor the (alleged) US view, aspiring toward interpersonal relationships that feature direct self-expression, honest exchange of opinions, and greater personal space.

I explore the three types of relationships that most frequently came up in my interviews: friendship, parent-child relationships, and sex and intimate relationships. Authenticity means something different in each type of relationship. Authentic friendships require sharing — opening up to friends and letting them in on one's true feelings and thoughts. In comparison with the Chinese norm of denying tensions, covering up hostilities, and avoiding confrontations, students find the honesty among friends on American TV refreshing, touching, and liberating. Students also find the American parenting style they see on US TV appealingly authentic, primarily because it values young people's uniqueness, prioritizes their individual interests, respects personal space, emphasizes independence, and encourages self-realization. Comments on both types of relationships are peppered with respondents' personal stories and references to their own hopes and yearnings, as well as to regrets, uncertainties, and frustrations. Such personal storytelling once again substantiates the intense reflexivity that characterizes student engagement with American television.

However, their celebration of freedom, autonomy, and independent self-realization does not carry over into their discussions about sex and intimate relationships on US TV. Quite the contrary, respondents unanimously perceive American TV sex as “too casual,” and they all take issue with sexual permissiveness. While this stance might seem to fly in the face of their desire to be more true to themselves in relation to friends and family, upon closer examination, it emerges as an important aspect of their identity negotiations. To understand apparent incongruities in the ways students perceive and receive American TV, we must approach each piece of the puzzle through the lens through which we approach the phenomenon of the Chinese consumption of US TV as a whole, namely, how Chinese youth mobilize US TV in their everyday maintenance of identity and navigation of social life.

As I demonstrate in the last subsection of this chapter, respondents’ talk about American TV sex reveals two interesting patterns. First, none of the respondents speak of the sexual relationships they see on US TV as a natural, bodily expression of personal feelings and desires, nor does anyone talk about sex as an intimate way of experiencing and participating in love. Instead, sex tends to be discussed in conjunction with notions laden with other-oriented moralities, such as “responsibility,” “love,” “marriage,” “family,” etc. In other words, instead of talking about sex as a means of *self*-exploration or *self*-fulfillment, as with students’ comments on the more “authentic” friendships and parent-child relationships they identify on US TV, American TV sex is usually first perceived as “casual” and then condemned for not living up to the ideals of connection, interdependence, obligation, and devotion.

Second, references to self are exceptionally reserved in conversations about sex. Whereas students are eager to share personal stories about how *their* ways of conducting *themselves* around friends have changed due to watching US TV, or what *their* relationships with parents are like and whether *they* are satisfied with such relationships, etc., these narratives about self are typically absent from their comments about sex-relations. Other than making declarations such as “I can’t accept it,” or “It’s too much to me,” students rarely talk about their own experience or personal understanding of sex. Instead, they reference sexual permissiveness as part of Americanness, and emphasize its categorical difference from the Chinese approach to intimate relationships.

Reticence on personal storytelling and the less personal tone in discussing TV sex is understandable given the sensitivity of the topic and my respondents’ relatively young age. Further, despite increasing sexual permissiveness in contemporary China’s urban space, sexual lifestyles outside the hetero-normative patterns of chaste dating, monogamous marriage, and single-child rearing are actively discouraged in mainstream media, at school, and by parents (Farrer 2002). While these may all have contributed to the way my respondents approach sex, I would advance an identity-based understanding of their particular reception of American TV sex.

Identity is both oriented toward the future and anchored in the past (Giddens 1991). For the Chinese students I spoke with, coming of age in a transitional, globalized urban space highlights the need to construct and maintain a cosmopolitan identity that is also properly Chinese. This means that, during their encounter with portraits of America via transnational media, new boundaries need to be drawn to establish what new elements or depicted activities are desirable and permissible and which elements are a “bridge too far.”

Identity work requires a careful balance. The apparent malleability of the identity of Chinese youth does not entail a disconnection from the past. As Bill Ivey (2008) argues, our “expressive life” is composed of both individual voice and heritage. The former, by challenging conventions and received knowledge, and by encouraging personal creativity, allows us to feel autonomous, accomplished, and cosmopolitan, whereas the latter, through symbolic content that grounds us in history and space, gives us a sense of connection and continuity. Just like “a high quality of life depends on the uncomfortable coexistence of both components of expressive life” (Ivey 2008: 23), a dynamic and sustainable identity necessitates both a sense of belonging and the hope of becoming.

Individual freedom and authenticity have been the central rhetoric in my respondents’ identity narratives, a rhetoric permeating their TV talk. But unlike other types of relationships such as those with friends and parents, sex is the point of orientation and differentiation students draw on to demarcate their Chineseness. This particular approach to and ways of talking about American TV sex can thus be seen as a cultural strategy of identity that students deploy in navigating the liminality they inhabit and in balancing their progressively globalized identity.

# CONCLUSION

*If I, as a person who has lived under China's autocratic system for more than thirty years, want to reflect on the fate of humanity or how to be an authentic person, I have no choice but to carry out two critiques simultaneously. I must:*

1. *Use Western civilization as a tool to critique China.*
2. *Use my own creativity to critique the West.*

— Chinese Nobel Prize-winning writer Liu Xiaobo (Leys 2012)

This dissertation studies young Chinese urban elites' engagement with American scripted television as part of their reflexive identity exploration. In the preceding chapters, I have demonstrated that for the young Chinese, American programming is not merely entertainment but can be a mirror for self-imaging, a repertoire for role models, a guide for self-improvement, and more. In other words, it triggers and deepens youth's reflexive identity work.

In the foregoing analysis, I bring theories of identity and modern reflexivity together to better understand respondents' perception, interpretation, and utilization of Western media. In doing so, I approach identity not as a pre-defined category that dictates interpretation, but rather as an interactive, dynamically organized, and ongoing endeavor. Chinese youth decode American television based on their culturally-bound assumptions and expectations, but they also re-evaluate and re-negotiate their Chineseness by selectively absorbing and adapting the American ways of life as depicted on television. Such selective absorption and adaptation are partly driven by the personal desires and interests of young Chinese, but they are fundamentally situated in and shaped by the socio-historical contexts of contemporary urban China. In this concluding chapter, I first summarize my major findings, then I discuss the major implications and contributions of the project to cultural reception scholarship, which I follow with some thoughts on the salience of authenticity in young urban Chinese' meaning-making of American television.

## Summary of Major Findings — Encountering Authenticity

Based on 29 in-depth interviews with university students in Beijing, I have discovered that these young Chinese citizens are drawn to American television because it captures and addresses their preoccupations and frustrations with negotiating identity in the context of a world that is liminal, transitional, and full of uncertainty. My respondents' experience with and talk about American television is characterized by intense reflexivity: how to honor one's own desires and goals without disappointing one's family; how to have one's own voice heard without offending others; how to be competitive yet congenial, confident yet discreet, assertive yet respectful; what does it mean to be fashionably cosmopolitan but also properly Chinese? In short, they seek to uncover how to be true to oneself without losing the cultural roots that continue to offer meaning. Reflections on these questions permeated all interviews, during which students engage in self-analysis and self-reinvention while discussing American scripted dramas. To these young Chinese students, American television is engaging not merely because of its storytelling and overall premium production quality — though those are certainly part of the reason — but more importantly because it foregrounds crucial identity puzzles, offers new perspectives and frameworks to think them through, and prescribes action by expanding the extant cultural "tool kit."

More specifically, my data reveals an emerging concept central to understanding the appeal of American television to Chinese youth — *authenticity*. The concept has two dimensions: *textual authenticity* and *personal authenticity*. The former concerns those aspects of American television that give it a quality of "realness" such that Chinese youth regard it as trustworthy and take it seriously. The latter concerns the messages they glean from American television and the characters they find inspiring, empowering, and imitable.

In examining informants' perception and interpretation of American TV's *textual authenticity* (section two), I discovered that the perception that American shows are "real" or "true to life" arises from their distinct approach to *subject matter* and *character construction* in comparison with Chinese TV dramas. Specifically, respondents acclaim the timely and diverse nature of the subject matter featured in American series; they also embrace American programming's penchant for honest and acute socio-cultural critique (chapter 5). Further, my respondents are enthralled by the complex and resonant American television characters, marveling at how those characters are multidimensional, but well-defined; contradictory, but recognizable; flawed, but relatable (chapter 6). In short, with its well-rounded subject matter and sophisticated characterization, American scripted TV has garnered the attention and trust of well-educated Chinese young people as a more authentic form of storytelling. Discontent with domestic TV dramas which are restrained by heavy-handed regulation and stringent censorship, young Chinese viewers are intrigued by American programming's openness to and tolerance of life's messiness.

In section three I investigated the life lessons and role models available to students when watching American TV. As they themselves put it, they are galvanized by Americans' more "authentic" ways of being and relating to others as portrayed on television. Upon closer examination, this longing for *personal authenticity* is articulated with two types of narratives. On the one hand, students admire protagonists who live a life that is in tune with their *authentic self* (chapter 7). Particularly, this means being spontaneous and truthful about one's real feelings and thoughts, sticking to one's own vision and not succumbing to external norms or authorities, and being assiduous and gritty in pursuing self-fulfillment. On the other hand, students also reflect on *authentic relationships* represented on American TV, and their comments cluster around three types of relationships: friendship, parent-child relationships, and sex and intimate relationships (chapter 8). Specifically, their comments reveal a common yearning for friendships that are more transparent, candid, and mutually respectful, as well as relationships with parents that grant youth greater independence, autonomy, and personal space. Here again, students find role models in American dramas for more authentic friendships and parent-child relationships. However, the desire to break free of social concerns and family expectations in order to obtain and maintain uncompromising personal freedom does not characterize students' assessment of American TV sex. Instead, they unanimously reject sexual and intimate relationships depicted on US TV as too "casual" and "irresponsible."

Unrestrained sex appears to be one aspect of TV-mediated America that the young Chinese are not yet ready to embrace in re-fashioning a new, cosmopolitan self.

## Contributions and Implications

Sociologists and media scholars have demonstrated how media consumption is an active practice in which consumers take hold of, work over, and make use of the symbolic materials they receive for their own purposes (Radway 1991 [1984]; Ang 1985; Liebez & Katz 1990; McKinley 1997; DeNora 2000). Such interpretive differences have been linked to the identity-related assumptions, expectations, and preoccupations of audiences, as well as the social circumstances in which they are situated (Radway 1991 [1984]; Liebez & Katz 1990; Press 1991; McKinley 1997). This work, known as the active audience approach, has firmly put to rest the bleak vision of popular culture consumers as passive recipients and cultural dupes. However, most of the empirical studies of “active” cultural consumption harbor a rather restricted and text-oriented understanding of audience agency. Instead of approaching the identity of the audience as dynamic, malleable, and itself transformed during cultural consumption, they tend to treat it as a pre-existing and fixed category that prescribes patterns of meaning-making. The creativity of audiences in making sense of media texts has been well demonstrated and specified, but their active self-analysis and self-reinvention *during* media engagement have largely been left unexamined.

This project contributes to the cultural reception scholarship by *highlighting and clarifying the intersection of transnational media, reflexivity, and self-identity*. My analysis of young Chinese urban elites' engagement with American scripted TV has attested to the familiar argument that media are central to people's everyday reflexivity in modern life (Giddens 1991; Thompson 1995). The transnational nature of media consumption and the focus on this young, urban, well-educated demographic further brings out the exceptional intensity and profoundness of media-spurred identity work in a global context. Finally, the manifestation of heightened reflexivity during media engagement accentuates the identity dynamic that characterizes modern individuals' everyday existence.

In particular, my analysis has demonstrated how American TV spurs and nourishes young urban Chinese elites' reflexivity by providing novel symbolic materials, such as alternative modes of life, that feed their construction of a desired cosmopolitan identity. By demonstrating how respondents integrate narratives about *themselves* and *their own circumstances* into narratives about foreign television, I suggest that young people's TV talk is essentially identity talk. Therefore, the investigation of their reception of American television not only necessitates taking into account their identity preoccupations, but in turn it becomes a fertile site for yielding insights about the ways they are addressing these preoccupations and ambivalences. In the case of transitional Chinese elite youth, the identities-in-the-making prove to be both *hybrid* and *multi-layered*, as I will explain below.

## Absorption, Adaptation, and Rejection — A Hybrid Identity

The emergent identity of young Chinese urban elites is a hybrid one. It is an idealized fusion in which students strive to incorporate the best from both American and Chinese cultures. On the one hand, students repeatedly described to me their desire to cultivate a self that lacks constraints in order to express themselves properly, reach their full potential, and flourish in interpersonal relationships. Their main complaint is that in China individuals are too burdened by custom and social expectations and need greater freedom in order to pursue meaningful lives. Students want more latitude, more openness, more freedom of choice in all aspects of life: from finding their own professional passion to meeting family expectations to being responsible for national needs; from voicing their true feelings and opinions to going after what they desire to striving for harmonious relationships with friends and family. In the words of one student, Liu Yun:

> I feel we Chinese have too many obligations, you know, to the family, to people around us, to school, and to this big, abstract concept of the state. I don't think Americans have all those obligations. That's part of the reason that I like watching US TV: it's very relaxing; it emphasizes individualism, openness, and freedom; it doesn't constrain you. (P. 12)

On the other hand, the desired freedom is not unconditional or uncompromising, and students still attach great importance to connection and responsibility. I have illustrated in chapter 7 (on authentic selfhood) that, in longing for an authentic self, students draw boundaries between *spontaneity*, which arises from clear self-understanding and self-assurance, and *impulsiveness*, which stems from irresponsibility and selfishness. But ambivalence really looms large in handling relationships (as discussed in chapter 8). Despite all the media accusations of China's post-80s generation as spoiled "little emperors," students in my study do not take for granted the attention and love from their doting parents. For 23-year-old Wei An, who is impressed by the role reversal between Susan and her daughter Julie (with Julie often playing the adult) on *Desperate Housewives*, being independent and personally responsible — leaving her mother's protective wings and standing on her own feet, for instance — can be a painful process:

> I always feel that she [my mom] is going to take care of me. I have this mentality of depending on her, and so as long as she's around I don't want to do anything on my own. And I don't think it's all laziness. It's rather because I don't think I can do it as well as she does. (P. 4-5)

For others, ambivalence stems from longing for autonomy but fearing that their decisions might hurt their parents' feelings, as is the case with Song Fang:

> I think I'm constantly surrounded by my parents… I feel they always want to intervene in my life… I also find myself being ambivalent about it. I mean, if I don't tell them everything, it feels like I'm not giving them enough respect. You know, like, they've done so much for me and yet I'm keeping things from them; it's like I'm not living up to being a good kid. But if I tell them certain things, I feel like my private space is invaded. (P. 6-7)

Finally, when talking about TV sex, students take a universally critical stance against the sexual permissiveness they see on American television. The narratives about sex become interesting counter-narratives against the otherwise celebratory approach to American authenticity which emphasizes being true to one's real feelings and expressing one's desires, as if without constraint. As far as sex is concerned, American television provides cautionary tales as opposed to inspirations. As Wang Xiao puts it:

> Their relationship dramas have really pushed me to think about such matters. And now I'm like, if I ever choose to have a family, I'd never be like them... I think

> love begins as passionate romantic love but it eventually grows into familial affection (commitment to family)... It (*Desperate Housewives*) kind of serves as a warning against jumping into marriage. But once you are married, you should be really responsible for your love and your marriage and stop fooling around. (P. 15-16)

Identity work in modern societies involves creating, maintaining, and revising self-narratives — stories about who we are and how we came to be where we are (Giddens 1991). Scholars have pointed out the importance of keeping such biographical accounts coherent and balanced. That is, for identity to make sense to both oneself and others, self-narratives must be both continuous (able to explain the past) and contingent (oriented toward an anticipated future) (Giddens 1991, 1992; McKinley 1997). The lion's share of the comments by my respondents feature an intense yearning to transcend China, to become an authentic, cosmopolitan self that is free from the shackles of tradition and culture. However, intimate relationships constitute one dimension of the personal life of Chinese youth in which they believe other-oriented values such as commitment and responsibility outweigh personal desires and feelings. I therefore see sex as an *asymptotic* facet of the identity development of Chinese youth; it bears out the limits of cultural assimilation. The rejection of sexual permissiveness on American television is a *cultural strategy* through which students demarcate their Chineseness, domesticate cosmopolitanism, and balance their otherwise progressive Westernized identity.

### Contradiction and Ambiguity — A Layered Identity

Linked to its hybridity, the emergent identity of young Chinese urban elites is layered with contradiction and ambivalence. It is charged simultaneously with *a sense of* *cultural superiority*, which arises from their ability to decode and appreciate a supposedly more advanced culture that is truer to human nature, and *a sense of cultural inferiority*, which stems from their awareness that the more authentic life they aspire to will be difficult to cultivate in the problematic conditions of contemporary China. Each layer of this conflicted identity is activated by reflexivity, which in turn is spurred by transnational television.

### Cultural superiority.

First and foremost, being young, urban, and well-educated, my study subjects belong to arguably the most privileged demographic in contemporary China. Compared with the generations of their parents and grandparents, the post-80s urbanites are blessed with unprecedented material comfort and educational opportunities. Compared with their rural counterparts, urban youth are endowed with rapidly evolving information technology and an ever-expanding menu of global culture to sample from. At the center of the "web of global and local networks of *information and communication structures*" (Lash 1994: 120-121, italic original), these young talents have access to representations of life that are vastly different from their own. Meanwhile, being well-educated and relatively literate in English, they are able to decode, digest, and reflect on the different lifestyles portrayed on American television. These skills and privileges combine to open up a rare space in which young Chinese can not only make sense of their own lives in a new light but, by engaging openly with the symbolic West, interrogate and problematize traditional Chinese social practices. Ultimately, these mediated symbolic Western materials become potent catalysts and rich resources for reflexivity; they constitute powerful vehicles for self-exploration and active self-formation by young Chinese persons within the many constraints of their social context.

Mastering English and occasionally showcasing this skill is the first telltale sign of the "superiority" aspect of my respondents' developing identity. All respondents dipped into English at times during our interviews; some really enjoyed throwing in English phrases and expressions here and there when making a comment. Students also take pride in being able to recite in English inspirational lines or dialogues from their favorite characters. But this sense of superiority manifested itself most prominently when students told me that part of their pleasure in watching American television comes from the fact that they "get it." As Sun Yang says about his all-time favorite show, *The Sopranos*, "I understand the show. Although I'm not on the same wavelength, I mean, given my age and everything, I can understand it" (P. 6). Peng Yu makes the same point more elaborately in explaining her resonance with American television in general:

> Most of the audiences (of American television in China) are college students, especially those who go to relatively prestigious universities and have decent English abilities. Basically, just these young people — the post-80s and post-90s generations — are watching US TV. First of all, we live in a globalized age. Second, we are quite open; we are willing to experience things we've never experienced before and accept knowledge which we've been taught differently; because we are curious, we are hooked by the novelty. So it's easier for us to feel the resonance... I've never told my parents that I watch American TV, because they wouldn't understand... They wouldn't get it. (P. 19)

For these students, American TV is enabling and empowering. It is enabling because it extends their horizons of understanding beyond their immediate situation, and it drives their inquisitive search for "differences." Identifying with those differences —

the alternative ways of living and being that only they “get” — allows these young elites to incorporate a novel, “emancipatory life politics” (Giddens 1991: 214) into their carefully fashioned identity. Meanwhile, this TV-triggered reflexivity is empowering in that it is a skilled accomplishment. And its practice depends on a range of skills (e.g., the English language, Internet savvy, etc.) and competences (e.g., basic knowledge of American culture) that can be acquired by only a relatively small group of people in China. Knowing that they are members of that elitist group with both access to foreign media content and capacity to appreciate it can bring status and a sense of self importance.

### Cultural inferiority.

However, reflexivity triggered and deepened by American television does not always bestow Chinese youth with an unequivocal sense of superiority. Instead, by inviting self-scrutiny, reflexivity sometimes induces anxiety and ambivalence, and even engenders a sense of cultural inferiority. At times, this “inferiority complex” manifests itself in the rhetoric of cultural fatalism. In particular, lurking behind students’ yearning for a spontaneous, responsible, and self-determined authentic identity is a keen awareness of their culturally-inhibited ability to realize that ideal self. As Zhao Nan laments:

> [I]n reality, I’m Chinese after all and I don’t think I can really act like an American. For example, if I come across something I don’t like, I do want to voice my opinions. But I think maybe that can happen when there are just a few people around; I can’t pull it off when there are lots of people around. (P. 12)

As such comments reveal, the reflexive exploration of cultural differences does not always highlight the possibility of change. Instead, sometimes it can essentialize cultural difference, reemphasize the limits of release and restraint, and bring about a sense of cultural fatalism. This indicates that media-triggered reflexivity is not a "hermeneutic force" operating independently outside of social context (Kim 2005). For the young Chinese urban elites, their imaginative practice of freedom and reflexive exploration of alternative modes of acting and being are confined, and at times thwarted, by the pervasive social rules prescribed by a collectively-oriented culture. In this circumstance, tradition and locality impose rigid limits upon self-reinvention and reflexivity, and instead of leading to more choice, can bring a painful awareness of the lack of it.

These students also demonstrated a sense of inferiority — or rather, cultural belittlement — when expressing resentment against how China is represented in American dramas. In fact, about two thirds of the respondents mentioned that they are not excited about the roles reserved for the Chinese, and Asians more generally, on American television. "Why was Jack Bauer captured by the Chinese?" "Why did that cowardly thief in *Prison Break* have to be Asian?" "When *Grey's Anatomy* tried to show how generous and kind Izzie was, why did the patient she helped have to be a miserable Chinese girl?" "Why were both of Gabby's housemaids Chinese (on *Desperate Housewives*)? And why were they both calculative and grudging?" "Is that how they see us?" "They don't know China at all!" Students expressed strong emotions when discussing such misrepresentations, which poses an intriguing mirror image of their sometimes rather harsh self-critique: "I hate the two-facedness of the Chinese!" Their reactions are at once spontaneous and reflexive. In gazing at the computer screen, young Chinese are both beckoned by a lifestyle that they see as more authentic and less burdensome, and deterred by jarring stereotypes of China that constitute the very opposite of that idealized authenticity.

## Conclusion

*What kind of person do I want to become? When we were little, we were taught that we should strive to become a useful person for the people. But now that I've been in college for over two years, and after watching American television, more and more I feel that, first and foremost, I need to be responsible for myself, and then we can talk about helping others... I feel like American TV has really played a role here. It has made me realize that whatever you do, you have to be responsible for yourself: you have to face the consequences of your mistakes; you will reap the sweet harvest of your effort; you are not obligated, nor do you have the right, to step in others' business, even if you are extremely close friends. Everyone has her own life.*

— Shen Beili (21-year-old female, social work major at RUC)

This is a crossroads moment for the post-80s Chinese urbanites who have just reached or are approaching their early thirties. Confucius says thirty marks a person's independence (*er li*) and real adulthood. "At thirty, I stood firm," the Master writes.[28] That said, it is clear that globalization has let the genie of modernity out of the bottle in China, embroiling the country in extensive social changes. With no disrespect to the Master, it is suddenly perhaps more difficult than ever to stand firm amidst such irregular and shifting social grounds.

What then is the relevance of culture, especially American culture, during such a transitional moment? My suggestion in this analysis is that culture has a central role to play. Culture is that place where social upheavals are first met. As China's state news agency *Xinhua* puts it, "[A] nation's awakening is always heralded by a cultural awakening" (Yu 2012). The Chinese government seems to recognize this. In an attempt to boost China's "soft power," for instance, the CCP has established hundreds of Confucius Institutes around the globe (Dawson 2010), cultivated China as a "brand" by hosting the 2008 Olympics and 2009 World Expo, sent Yao Ming to the US amidst much fanfare, and embraced their own Miss World.

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[28] *The Analects* Chapter two

Any yet, why do China's elite and educated youth keep looking elsewhere for role models and paradigms of a nourishing and "authentic" life? A combination of "push and pull" factors seem to be at work here. Even as they participate in these processes, the post-80s generation feels pushed by the unsettling and decentering effects of neoliberal market reform and globalization. Grasping for an elusive authenticity in the face of upheaval, they search for values beyond those of school credential and monetary wealth. This, then, is precisely where American television offers its cultural services, its "pull." It provides a window into a set of lives that appear less controlled, less structured, and unburdened by test-taking, rankings, family commitments, and government oversight. The result of these "push" and "pull" factors is that young Chinese urbanites' engagement with American television is exceptionally reflexive. For them, TV viewing is much more than seeking entertainment or escape; it is a journey of researching their own identities and lives, of finding their own voice and roots.

And for many, the journey will soon become more than vicarious, more than virtual. Compelled by the promise of a spontaneous and fulfilled life, a large number of young Chinese urbanites have already come to study in the US (Levin 2010). Indeed, this trend is likely to increase, especially for younger students (Hsu 2012). With their multiple cultural allegiances and eagerness to be interpreters across cultures, this cohort is likely to influence Chinese cultural policy in the future and their values, opinions, experiences, and orientations will be crucial in shaping urban China for years to come. The journey will be ongoing, and change does not happen overnight. But even as they grapple with something apparently small, such as the next episode of an American television show, these students are certainly also grappling with something big. They are not only interrogating the next stages of their own lives but, at least in part, anticipating the direction of the next episodes of Chinese history.

# APPENDIX

## A. SCREENING SURVEY

**Section 1. Please answer the following questions about your background.**

**1.** Your gender Male☐ Female☐

**2.** Year of Birth: 19_______

**3.** Your major ________department/school

**4**. Which year in school are you in now? _______

**5**. Where is your hometown _________

6. What is your mother's highest level of education (e.g., high school, college…) _________

7. What does your mother do ___________

8. What is your father's highest level of education _________

9. What does your father do ___________

10. What is your English language ability?
- ☐ College English Test Level 4
- ☐ College English Test Level 6
- ☐ College English Test Level 8
- ☐ Other____________ (Please specify)

11. Have you taken or plan to take TOEFL, GRE, LAST tests?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

12. Do you have friends whose mother language is English (including pen-pals or Internet based friends)?
- ☐ Yes
- ☐ No

If yes, how often do you communicate with your English speaking friends? (e.g., everyday, a few times a month, once a year…)

13. Do you seek out to learn English outside classroom?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

If yes, which of the following have you tried, specifically with the intent of learning English?
- ☐ Attend classes at New Oriental School
- ☐ Go to English corner(s)
- ☐ English reading (such as newspapers in English, novels or magazines in English)
- ☐ Listen to English radio
- ☐ Watch TV or movies in English
- ☐ Make friends with exchange students who speak English
- ☐ Others ___________ [Please specify.]

14. Do you want to visit America one day if you have the chance?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No

If yes, for what reason(s)? [Please check all that apply.]
- ☐ I want to study there
- ☐ I just want to travel there on vacation
- ☐ I want to work there once I finish my education
- ☐ I want to live there
- ☐ Other __________ [Please specify.]

**Section 2. The following questions are about your experiences of watching TV, especially American TV shows.**

15. Have you ever watched an American TV show?
    - ☐ Yes
    - ☐ No (Please go directly to the last two questions, Questions 30 & 31.)

16. When did you watch your first American show? What was that show's name? Through what medium did you watch your first American show?
    - ❖ The first American show I watched was __________________, and I watched it in ________ (year), when I was ______ years' old.
    - ❖ I watched my first American show [Please circle all that apply and specify "other."]
      (1) online or downloaded it from the Internet
      (2) on VCD or DVD
      (3) on TV

(4) other ____________________

17. Do you watch American TV shows now?
☐ Yes – I watch shows regularly; I try not to miss an episode of my favorite shows.
☐ Yes – I watch shows periodically; I often miss episodes, but will watch when convenient
☐ No (Please directly go to the last two questions, Questions 30 & 31.)

18. Through what media do you usually watch American shows? [Please circle all that apply and specify "other."]
(1) online or download them from the Internet
(2) on VCD or DVD
(3) on TV
(4) other ____________________
Which one of the above media do you use the most when watching American shows? _____________

19. How often do you watch American shows?
☐ I watch American shows every day
☐ I watch American shows a few times a week
☐ I watch American shows a few times a month
☐ I watch American shows once or twice a year.

20. Check all types of the shows you regularly watch
☐ Criminal – e.g., *Prison Break; Bones; Criminal Minds*
☐ Medical – e.g., *Grey's Anatomy; House M.D.; Scrubs*
☐ Comedy – e.g., *Friends; Sex and the City; Desperate Housewives; Gossip Girl*
☐ Drama – e.g., *24; Lost; Heroes*

21. Do you usually watch American shows alone or with others?
☐ Alone
☐ With others

22. Do you usually discuss American shows with others (either in person, over the phone, by email or the Internet)?
☐ Yes
☐ No

23. Do you visit American show websites, such as yyet.net; 1000fr.com; showfa.tv; meijumi.com; or others?
☐ Yes
☐ No

If yes, what do you do on those websites? [Please check all that apply.]

- ☐ Watch American shows online or download the shows to watch later
- ☐ Look for and/or download music of the shows
- ☐ Search for more information about the shows (such as plotlines, information on actors and actresses, or other hearsay)
- ☐ Read other people's discussions of the shows
- ☐ Post my own interpretation and opinions of the shows
- ☐ I volunteer to translate American shows for a website
- ☐ Other __________________________ [Please specify.]

24. How much do you enjoy watching American TV shows? On the following scale from 1-10, please circle the number that best indicates your enjoyment out of watching American TV shows ("1" represents "do not enjoy at all," and "10" represents "enjoy very much").

Do not enjoy at all → Enjoy very much

1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10

25. Give me a one-word or one-sentence reason why you watch American shows. Don't elaborate; just tell me what pops up first when you see this question.

__________________________

26. Based on your fondness of them, rank TV shows (NOTE: not films) from the following countries or areas. Starting from your most favorite to the one you care for the least. Mainland China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japan, Korea, America, Europe (including Britain)

1) _______________________
2) _______________________
3) _______________________
4) _______________________
5) _______________________
6) _______________________
7) _______________________

27. List the names of **5** American TV shows that you feel like you have watched enough to talk about. Starting from your most favorite to the one you care for the least.

1) _______________________
2) _______________________
3) _______________________

4) ______________________
5) ______________________

28. List the names of **5** characters in American TV shows that impress you the most (in a good OR bad way), from your favorite one to the one you like the least. Note: it doesn't matter if they are in the same show or not.

1) ______________________ in the show ________________
2) ______________________ in the show ________________
3) ______________________ in the show ________________
4) ______________________ in the show ________________
5) ______________________ in the show ________________

29. Most Chinese fans of American shows gain access to those shows through the Internet. Have you volunteered or are you currently volunteering to help others watch American shows online?

☐ Yes. I have done or am doing things like translating, organizing or maintaining US show websites, and/or other technical works for the dissemination of American shows in China.
☐ No

Now I would like to know which study activities you want to participate in. This research has two study activities: focus group discussions and one-on-one interviews. You are welcome to participate in both studies, or, you can choose one activity to participate. Please specify below.

30. Would you like to participate in a focus group discussion? The group discussion will last about 100 to 130 minutes. I will pay you 70RMB at the completion of the group session as my appreciation for your support to my research!

☐ Yes
And here is my contact information:
Phone: ___________________________
Email: ___________________________
☐ No

31. Would you like to be interviewed by me in a face-to-face manner? The interview will last about 90 to 120 minutes. I will pay you 90RMB at the completion of the interview as my appreciation for your support to my research!

☐ Yes
And here is my contact information:
Phone: ___________________________
Email: ___________________________
☐ No

## B. INTERVIEW GUIDE

### SECTION I: FOR ALL THREE TYPES OF CONSUMERS (NON-CONSUMERS NOT INCLUDED)

***I have had the opportunity to learn something about you through the screening survey. Now I want to ask a few more questions about you.***

**1.** Are you the only child in your family?

**2.** Where do you live now? (If living in a dorm on campus, ask how many roommates there are.)

*Other questions to be determined based on the interviewee's screening survey answers and, if applicable, his/her statements in the focus group discussion.

**[First American Show]**
**3.** Which was the first American TV show you have ever watched?

**4.** Tell me more about your experience with that first show. (E.g., How old were you then? How did you start watching the show? How did you like the show? Did you have any issue with the show? If so, tell me more about it. Thinking back now, have your feelings about the show changed? Etc.)

**[Favorite American Show. NOTE: conversations in one-on-one interviews will focus on interviewees' favorite American show, denoted as [favorite show] in this interview guide]**

**5.** As of now, which is your favorite American show?

**6.** How many seasons/episodes of **[favorite show]** have you watched?

**7.** Through what media did/do you watch **[favorite show]**?

**8.** Why is **[favorite show]** your favorite? (NOTE TO MYSELF: no need to probe too much here; later questions will touch on this again.)

**9.** Which characters do you like the most and/or the least in **[favorite show]**? Why?

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**10. Different Questions for Different Types -- A, B, and C -- of Interviewees.**

**A. Interviewee has attended a focus group and the show discussed in the group session happens to be his/her favorite:**

*In the previous group discussion you have attended, we talked about the same show.*

**10A.** Is there anything you want to add? (If nothing or nothing interesting is added, probe for elaboration on previous statements that are vague, ambiguous, self-contradictory, etc.)

**B. Interviewee has attended a focus group and the show discussed in the group session is different from his/her favorite:**

*In the previous group discussion you have attended, we talked about [show discussed in group session].*

**10B.** Why do you like **[favorite show]** more than the show we discussed in the group session?

Prompts:

- Main story: relevant to own life?
- Main moral message (value): Do you agree or not, why? (Probe: the cultural/ value clash or compatibility between American culture and the Chinese culture)
- Story-telling: realistic? campy?
- Acting: how is “good” acting defined (good=natural?)?; ask to compare with shows from other countries or areas
- Characters: most and least favorite characters and why?
- Technical issues: production quality?
- Other miscellaneous reasons: beautiful faces, fashion, being a hard-core fan of a particular actor/actress

**C. Interviewee has NOT participated in a focus group:**

**10C.** Why do you like **[favorite show]** the most?

Prompts:

- Main story: relevant to own life?
- Main moral message (value): Do you agree or not, why? (Probe: the cultural/ value clash or compatibility between American culture and the Chinese culture)
- Story-telling: realistic? campy?
- Acting: how is “good” acting defined (good=natural?)?; ask to compare with shows from other countries or areas
- Characters: most and least favorite characters and why?
- Technical issues: production quality?
- Other miscellaneous reasons: beautiful faces, fashion, being a hard-core fan of a particular actor/actress

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***Now let's talk more about your [favorite show].***

**[Perception of the show – central theme (non-affective perception: the "is" question)]**

**11.** Generally speaking, what do you think [show name] is about? Elaborate.
Prompts:

- Romance,
- Good vs. evil, crime-fighter, social justice
- Adventurous saga (often surreal)
- Everyday American life

**[Perception of the show – whether it truthfully represents America]** ***You mentioned [favorite show] is about _________*** (summarize the person's previous answer).

**12.** Do you think in that regard, **[favorite show]** is a truthful representation of the American society?

If no, probe:

- What is America really like in that regard in your mind?
- Where does this perception come from? Why do you think this?
  - Prompts: Do you have American friends who tell you about American life? Have you been to America before? Have you learned about America through the media, e.g., news reports, magazines, books, etc? Also ask what the media sources are – official Chinese media, foreign media, unknown sources on the Internet, etc.

If yes, probe:

- Why do you think the show truthfully depicts America in that regard? Tell me more about what America is like in that regard.
- Where does this perception come from? Why do you think this?
  - Prompts: Do you have American friends who tell you about American life? Have you been to America before? Have you learned about America through the media, e.g., news reports, magazines, books, etc? Also ask what the media sources are – official Chinese media, foreign media, unknown sources on the Internet, etc.

**13. [Perception & evaluative judgment of the show – central moral message (value: the "should" question)]**

- What do you think the show's central moral message(s) is/are? (E.g., never give up; be a good person; enjoy life… NOTE TO MYSELF: it is possible that moral messages have come up in question 11 regarding what the show is "about." If so, say this: "You have already mentioned the show's central moral message – such as… Now I want you to talk a bit more about your own feelings about the messages in the show.)
- Do you think those morals are quintessentially American? Why or why not?

- Where did this perception come from?
    - Prompts: Do you have American friends who tell you about American life? Have you been to America before? Have you learned about America through the media, e.g., news reports, magazines, books, etc? Also ask what the media sources are – official Chinese media, foreign media, unknown sources on the Internet, etc.
- Do you embrace these morals? Why or why not?

**Type A interviewees have already answered questions 11 & 12 in focus group discussions; probe only if elaboration and clarification are needed. Otherwise, questions 11 & 12 are only for type B & type C interviewees [Comparing with Chinese shows of similar themes]**

**14 (B&C ONLY)**. Are there any Chinese shows (including those from Hong Kong and Taiwan) you know of that tell a story that's similar to **[favorite show]**?

If no: Do you think you would watch a Chinese show if it has a storyline similar to **[favorite show]**? Why or why not?

If yes: Have you watched that Chinese show? Do you like the Chinese one better or the American one better? Why?
Prompts:

- Similar story but different moral messages
- Technical issues, e.g., production quality
- Other miscellaneous reasons: beautiful faces, fashion…

**15 (B&C ONLY). [A shot at "effects" – of multiple shows the interviewee feels like discussing. NOTE TO MYSELF: this question is different from the "effects" question in focus group discussions. This one asks about the "effects" of watching American shows in general; whereas the question in group sessions asks about the "effects" of watching a particular American show – the one being heavily discussed.]**

Do you think watching American TV shows has influenced you in any way? In what ways (probe for concrete examples)?
Prompts:

- Life goals and aspirations
- Social relationships – gives you something to talk about with friends, etc.
- Management of relationship with family, significant others, friends, etc
- America's and American people's images in your mind
- The way you think about Chinese culture
- Your everyday behaviors, such as other cultural consumption (what movies to watch; what books to read, what music to listen to) and more general consumption (what to eat, where to eat, beverage choice, dressing style); your self-image, both

physically (beauty standard) and non-physically (sense of self – who do you think you are and/or strive to be)

**16. (ORDINARY CONSUMERS ONLY)** What do you think is the quintessential/ biggest difference between Chinese culture and American culture? In that regard, do you identify more with the Chinese culture or the American culture?

## SECTION II: CONTINUE FOR ACTIVE AND PRODUCTIVE CONSUMERS

A. If the interviewee has attended a focus group:
Probe for elaborations on statements in group discussions that are vague, ambiguous, self-contradictory, etc.

B. If the interviewee has NOT attended a focus group:
**17.** Which American show websites do you usually visit? How often?

**18.** What do you do on those websites?
Prompts:

- Watch American shows online or download the shows to watch later
- Look for and/or download music of the shows
- Search for more information about the shows (such as plotlines, information on actors and actresses, or other hearsay)
- Read other people's discussions of the shows
- Post my own interpretation and opinions of the shows
- Volunteer to translate American shows for a website

**19.** When visiting those websites, are you a "browser" (simply read other people's posts) or "poster" (post messages)?

If browser: Why do you choose not to post your own opinions? Do you post online about things other than American shows? If yes, why do you NOT post anything about American shows?

If poster: How often do you post? Do you also post about things other than American shows? What are your messages generally about? What makes you want to post about American shows? (Prompts: love to initiate discussions; read something interesting or provocative and can't help responding…)

**20.** Do you think your online experience (exploration for extra information, joining online discussions, etc.) has changed your consumption of American shows? If yes, in what ways?
Prompts:

- What shows to watch (Has the online experience made you watch more US shows or more types of US shows? Probe for examples.)
- Understanding US shows
  Prompts:
  - Do you think you are now better at "predicting" the plotlines of US shows? (E.g., "I know that's gonna happen!") If yes, does this increasing "predictability" bother you (prompts: enjoy the shows less, start to feel bored…)? Why or why not?

        - Do you feel the information you get online about a show helps you to better appreciate the show? Explain.
    - Any change in attitude toward and/or understanding of particular shows?

**21. (ACTIVE CONSUMERS ONLY).** What do you think is the quintessential/biggest difference between Chinese culture and American culture? In that regard, do you identify more with the Chinese culture or the American culture?

## SECTION III: CONTINUE ONLY FOR PRODUCTIVE CONSUMERS

**(Because productive consumers will NOT take the screening survey, at the very beginning of the interview I will ask about basic demographic and viewing information. The questions will be very similar to the survey questions, except for minor differences. For example, if the productive consumer is working rather than being a student, ask what she/he does for a living.)**

**22.** Which website(s) have you volunteered/are you volunteering for? What was/is your typical "job" at the website(s)? (E.g., translating, organizing or maintaining US show websites, other technical works…)

**23.** When did you start volunteering? Tell me about how you got recruited.

**24.** Has your offer of voluntary service been turned down by any website? Tell me about that experience.

**25.** What was/is your normal "workload" at the website? How much time did/do you typically spend every week on volunteering?

**26.** Do you have any idea how many people there were/are in your "team"? How many team members do you personally know (by "know" I mean "have had conversations with;" you don't have to have met them in person)?

**27.** Have you met any of your team members in person? If yes, tell me more about your meeting (When? Where? How many joined? What did you do when getting together?)

**28.** Are you/have you been a team leader?

If yes:

- When did you become a team leader? How did you become a team leader (e.g., voted by other group members…)?
- What were/are your main responsibilities as a team leader?

If no:

- Do you want to be a team leader one day? Why or why not?

**29.**

- If the interviewee's job is directly working on shows as opposed to general website maintenance: are you responsible for particular shows?
- If yes (only work on particular shows):
  Which are the shows you have been working on?

    - ○ If this person’s favorite show is among the shows she/he works on, ask: do you think your fondness of **[favorite show]** has anything to do with your voluntary experience with it? Do you work on **[favorite show]** because you like it, or the other way around? Explain more.
    - ○ If this person’s favorite show is NOT among the shows she/he works on, ask: why don’t you get to work on **[favorite show]**? Why working on other shows has not made any of them your favorite? What’s so special about **[favorite show]**? I know you have discussed this before, but could you compare **[favorite show]** with the show (s) you work on in more details?

- ▪ If no (do not work on fixed shows):
  How many shows have you been working on? Do you still remember the names of the shows? Is working on different shows your choice, or is this just the way things are arranged in your team? Do you like this working pattern? Why or why not?
    - ○ If this person’s favorite show is among the shows she/he has worked on, ask: do you think your fondness of **[favorite show]** has anything to do with your voluntary experience with it?
    - ○ If this person’s favorite show is NOT among the shows she/he has worked on, ask: Why, after working on so many different shows, **[favorite show]** is still your favorite one? What’s so special about **[favorite show]**? I know you have discussed this before, but could you compare **[favorite show]** with the show(s) you have worked on in more details?

➢ If the interviewee’s job is general website maintenance:

- ▪ How do you think your voluntary work is different from that of a translator’s?
- ▪ Have you tried to do translation? Why or why not? Tell me about your experience.

**30.** I understand your work at the website is completely voluntary. If money is not the reason, why do you volunteer? (NOTE TO MYSELF: **NO PROMPTS**, just keep encouraging them to think of more reasons.)

**31.** Do you see your work at the website as business or leisure? How do you prioritize your other study/work assignments with your voluntary work at the website? Which one goes first? Which one do you enjoy doing more?

**32.** How long have you volunteered/do you think you will keep volunteering for the website?

**33.** Tell me what about the voluntary experience you enjoy the most (prompts: know more people with similar interest; get access to more US shows; improve English…). Do you have any unpleasant experience related to the voluntary work? If yes, tell me more about it.

**31.** What do you think is the quintessential/biggest difference between Chinese culture and American culture? In that regard, do you identify more with the Chinese culture or the American culture?

## SECTION IV: FOR NON-CONSUMERS ONLY

***I have had the opportunity to learn something about you through your screening survey. Now I want to ask a few more questions about your*** **(Ask more detailed questions to elaborate or clarify the interviewee's survey answers if needed).**

***Now, let's talk about American shows.***
If this person has NEVER watched any American shows:
**1.** Why haven't you watched any US shows, given their popularity in China now? Prompts (NOTE: these prompts are NOT about particular shows, for respondents in this category have NOT watched any. My guess is that very few people would have never watched any American TV shows. For those very few people then, these questions will be used to explore their non-substantial, imagination-based comments on American shows):

- Main story: relevant to own life?
- Main moral message (value): Do you agree or not, why? (Probe: the cultural/ value clash or compatibility between American culture and the Chinese culture)
- Story-telling: realistic? campy?
- Acting: how is "good" acting defined (good=natural?)?; ask to compare with shows from other countries or areas
- Characters
- Technical issues: production quality?

**2.** What do you think is the quintessential/biggest difference between Chinese culture and American culture? In that regard, do you identify more with the Chinese culture or the American culture?

If this person has watched American shows before, but is not watching now: ***Tell me more about your experience with American shows.***
**1.** What was the name of the first American show you have ever watched?

**2.** How old were you then?

**3.** Through what media did you watch the show?

**4.** Why did you watch it? (Probe: key person, key trigger event…)

**5.** What do you remember as the most striking quality of the show – something that stood out for you when you first watched the show? (It doesn't matter if it is good or bad.)

**6.** Do you remember liking the show? Why or why not?

**7.** After you watched the first episode, did you continue watching the show? How often?

**8.** Thinking back now, have your feelings about the show changed?

**9.** What made you stop watching American shows?

**10.** Now that you have told me you do not currently watch US shows, do you consume other American products/cultural products (such as food, music, films, books, magazines, clothes…)? Tell me more about those consumptions.

**11.** In the screening survey, you ranked country or area name's TV shows as your favorite. Tell me why you are attracted to shows from country or area name. What about American shows in that regard?

**12.** Do people around you watch American TV shows?
If no: what do you think are their reasons for rejecting American shows? Tell me more.
If yes: have they tried to talk you into watching certain American shows? Have you followed their suggestions? How did that come out?

**13.** Now think about the American shows you have watched, do you think they truthfully represent the American society?
If no, probe:

- What is America really like in that regard in your mind?
- Where does this perception come from? Why do you think this?
    - Prompts: Do you have American friends who tell you about American life? Have you been to America before? Have you learned about America through the media, e.g., news reports, magazines, books, etc? Also ask what the media sources are – official Chinese media, foreign media, unknown sources on the Internet, etc.

If yes, probe:

- Why do you think the show truthfully depicts America in that regard? Tell me more about what America is like in that regard.
- Where does this perception come from? Why do you think this?
    - Prompts: Do you have American friends who tell you about American life? Have you been to America before? Have you learned about America through the media, e.g., news reports, magazines, books, etc? Also ask what the media sources are – official Chinese media, foreign media, unknown sources on the Internet, etc.

**14.** What do you think is the quintessential/biggest difference between Chinese culture and American culture? In that regard, do you identify more with the Chinese culture or the American culture?

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