

Differences Between Chinese and American Cultures Through the Study of Reality Shows

Hanyi Lu^{1,*}, Ying Han¹, Yijun Wang¹

¹ The Experimental High School Attached to Beijing Normal University, Beijing, China, 100032

¹Overseas Chinese Academy Chiway Suzhou, Suzhou, China, 215000

¹Hailiang Foreign Language School, Zhuji, China, 311899

*Corresponding author. Email: ann_lu2020@163.com

ABSTRACT

In recent years, reality shows are popular all over the world. Reality shows were originated in Europe in the end of the 20th century and spread around the world from the United States with different categories of reality shows in the 21st century. The United States and China are now two of the world's largest producers of reality shows. According to the survey, people are motivated to view reality shows by their curiosity of the privacy of others and those who participate are motivated by their desire to succeed. Under different cultural backgrounds, the popularity of various reality shows in different countries is different which is an epitome of social culture. This paper will conduct a series of surveys and questionnaires on the most popular reality shows in China and the United States to reveal the cultural differences between two countries.

Keywords: reality shows, culture, cultural differences

1. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, with the rapid development of entertainment industry, reality TV shows has become an indispensable part of today's mass entertainment. However, different places have different cultures and preferences, so they come up with different format and styles of reality shows. To learn more about the differences between different cultures, this paper mainly focus on how the reality shows between China and the United States respectively reflect their cultures and identities. In order to make the research more scientific, surveys, reading related books and articles have been used in this paper. After this research, it can be used as the material to learn more about Eastern and Western culture more. Also, it can reduce the information gap and biases between different cultures.

2. THE DEVELOPMENT OF REALITY SHOWS IN UNITED STATES

2.1. Development Status

Due to the fast recovery in the US after World War II, the American reality show had an early industrial maturity. In 1948, the first non-scripted TV program in

the United States, the reality show called *Candid Camera*, made an initial exploration in the field of American reality TV. Once it was launched, the novel program form immediately attracted many audiences. In 1973, the broadcasting of *An American Family* officially opened the era of American reality TV. Placing hidden cameras in a specific space to observe plain people's daily life has become the mainstream form of American reality TV shows. At the same time, it has also been used for reference by many European countries. In 1992, *The Voice* was broadcast, which created the program form of talent show. In the following years, it was introduced into different countries and had a far-reaching impact. In today's American society, the entertainment industry is developed, and the number and form of reality shows are also changing. Many reality shows have lasted for a generation of Americans. For example, the large-scale field survival reality show *Survival*, which began broadcasting in 2000, officially ended after 40 seasons; *Project Runway*, a competition for fashion designers, has been broadcast for 18 seasons since 2009; *Dancing with the Stars* is also a 28 season dance competition reality show. Original reality shows are emerging one after another in the United States, and the market is almost saturated.

2.2. Types of popular reality TV shows in the United States

2.2.1. Documentary

Even under certain circumstances and certain rules, reality TV is different from TV shows, which are strictly scripted, while reality TV is a show that gives the contestants the freedom to play and show their own unique personalities, and is therefore more immersive. Among the hottest reality shows in the US today, they all share the same characteristics - vegetarian protagonists, watched in privacy and judged by the public in real-life situations. For example, *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* are both shows that document the lives of the rich in a way that ordinary people do not experience, thus stimulating people's interest in the unknown and satisfying viewers' desire to pry, even in the reality of life away from reality TV [1]. People still continue to pry and gain access to their privacy. Reality TV is also popular because it truly exposes the cruel and dark side of human nature. For example, the contestants of "the Survivor" all care nothing about morality, trickery, lying and betrayal for the final million dollar prize, and there is no more trust between people [2]. The underpinning of these reality shows is still "personal achievement". According to the definition of the American Dream, everyone can work hard to achieve success, and everyone is equal. As a result, the strong American desire to succeed is often evident in reality TV, where the goal is to win and compete to the death. And the so-called success is not only about material gain, but also about achieving self-worth. "American Idol", "Big Brother" and "the Survivor", for example, all start off on the same footing, and in the course of the competition, someone inevitably loses, and the winner not only gets a huge prize of up to a million dollars, but also gets the strong sense of honor of being a successful winner.

2.2.2. Theatricality

As seen in the US hits *The Bachelor*, *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* and *The Real Housewives of Beverly Hills*, there is a strong sense of drama that attracts the interest of large audiences. Firstly, the real housewives of Beverly Hills invited real women living in Beverly Hills to showcase all aspects of their lives as they competed for houses, cars, partners, clothes and jewelry, in which they counted each other out and caused frequent conflicts and clashes. *The Bachelor* is a famous relationship show in which a dozen women compete for the attention of the same man, using such tactics as hooking up and pretending to be sick. In addition, the Kardashians are the world's most famous family of internet sensations, most known for their hype and carrying a dramatic hashtag at the center of the scandal. Aside from the sisters beating and bickering with each

other and their romance, they often show subversive moves, such as Kris using her daughter Kim's intimate videos to sell to porn sites thus garnering rating and making *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* a hit, these flamboyant and exciting scenarios are addictive to viewers, who as bystanders have a better view than While the participants have no idea what kind of reckoning they've gotten themselves into, the audience can rely on the information to guess the outcome and revel in the thrill of exploring the story line as it unfolds.

2.3. Popular Reality Shows and Cause Analysis

First, it satisfies people's desire for snooping. When *Candid Camera* debuted, it immediately attracted lots of audience, not only because of curiosity about the format, but also because of prying eyes. *Keeping Up With the Kardashians* is one of the most popular reality shows in American society today. In the form of reality shows, the lives of rich and famous people are shown to ordinary people, so as to understand the life they will not experience through the programs and satisfy the audience's imagination of the upper class. Just like the reality show with the same name in the movie *Truman's Show*, audiences from all over the world enjoy the process of snooping on Truman's life and watch the TV program that never stops for 24 hours a day, paying no attention to their daily work and life. In addition to the dramatic hyperbole in the film, it more reflects the prying desire of today's society. This desire is an innate instinct of human beings, but it is amplified by the media of reality shows.

At the same time, reality shows in today's life is not completely unscripted capture, the "show" part is being enlarged. Some reality shows deliberately include conflicts and contradictions between characters in certain plots. The occurrence of these contradictions will naturally make the audience stand on one side, and thus start to debate and even quarrel with each other. The audience is easily attracted by novel and dramatic events, so the program get exposure by discussing these hot topics. For example, *The Bachelor* is a dating and relationship reality show. At The peak of the program, the audience rating even reached 13.95 million. Quarrels, conflicts and playing tricks often appear in this show, these are the plots which are all audience like to see. In order to maintain high ratings, the program team of *The Bachelor* will provide the script and setting conflicts before shooting; deliberately guiding the emotions of the guests during the program; or create conflict by taking words out of context during editing, manually creating quarrels. In movies, the climax is often where the conflict is most obvious, and reality shows are getting closer to that point.

Another reason is that with the development of science and technology, more and more people can participate in reality shows. Marshall McLuhan's *Understanding Media*, published in 1964, proposed the concepts of "hot Media" and "cold Media". Hot media refers to media with large amount of information and low in participation, such as books. Cold media, on the other hand, refers to media with little information and a high in participation, such as television. And he predicted that the future media will become more and more "cold" [3]. As a matter of fact, with the development of the Internet, any video can be discussed by the audience with a strong degree of participation. There are even reality shows that directly construct the concept of "parallel universe", allowing viewers to discuss, comment and express opinions in real time. The reality show *S.K.A.M.* is a good example. When the show is posted at the "same" time as in the United States, viewers seem to be watching live, actively discussing and interacting with the show's guests. Interaction makes more people think that they are part of the reality show, and any comment they make may be replied by others or even directly related to the reality show. To attract more audiences through such strategies is also one of the common techniques of American reality shows.

Finally, reality shows have a wide range of audiences, and people of all ages do not need a certain threshold to watch reality shows. Comparing reading and watching reality shows, there are both ways to relax. However, since the emergence of reality shows, the former is gradually not as popular as before. Reading is an active input process that requires the reader to think. But watching reality shows is a passive input process. Reality shows are automatically played on TV, and most people do not think deeply about an entertaining show. In the book *Amusing ourselves to death*, Neil Postman says, "What is happening here is that television is altering the meaning of 'being informed' by creating a species of information that might properly be called disinformation. Disinformation does not mean false information. It means misleading information-misplace, irrelevant, fragmented or superficial information-information that creates the illusion of knowing something but which in fact leads one away from knowing"[4]. It can be said that the United States is being invaded by such culture, which will affect the way of thinking of the people, and will change from the original calm and rational way of thinking in books to emotional. But the audience does not realize this, so a large number of Americans are attracted to reality shows, which is one of the reasons the industry can grow rapidly.

3. THE DEVELOPMENT OF REALITY SHOWS IN CHINA

3.1. Development Status

With the development of China's economy, people's

living standard has been greatly improved. The consumption of cultural products to fit people's mental relaxation and satisfaction has become an indispensable part of Chinese people's lifestyle. Besides the expense on material products, the consumption demand of cultural products has been increasing day by day which gives rise to the vigorous development of Chinese entertainment, films and television industry. Moreover, with the increasingly frequent cultural exchanges and the capital and investment focus on cultural industry, good cultural products are constantly introduced into China.

At the beginning of this century, reality shows gradually come into people's sight. Since then, major TV channels have been scrambling to launch reality shows with the themes of talent shows, blind dates and intelligence competitions. Originally domestic directors bought the copyrights of foreign shows and then transformed them into domestic reality shows [5]. Nowadays, due to cultural differences and the lack of personalized original contents, Chinese audience have become less interested in foreign reality shows along with the adoption of abundant fresh themes in Chinese context. As a result, locally originated reality shows become more popular because of the unique Chinese culture. For example, the "Chinese Poetry Conference" reality show in year 2016 successfully integrated China's unique poetry culture and enabled more people to participate in the appreciation of Chinese poems in the form of competitions, which also triggered a boom of the study of Chinese traditional culture. In year 2020, the "Deyun Fun Club" reality show from Deyun Comic-Talk Club allowed millions of fans to enjoy crosstalk, a Chinese folk-art form, at home.

3.2. Popular Reality Shows and Cause Analysis

There is a common interpretation of culture in the dictionaries of the east and the west: culture is all the spiritual activities and products related to politics and economy of human beings. Reality shows are one of the representative programs of the emerging cultural industry. The preferences for different types of reality shows reflect the values of people in the society.

To have a view of the current situation of reality shows in China, we conducted a survey in first-tier cities in China and collected more than 1,000 feedbacks on reality shows from the mainstream group aged 20-50. From the questionnaire, we have the following observations:

- Reality shows are still popular in China.

Due to the capital influx into the entertainment market and the fact that more people had to stay at home since the epidemic, more than 100 new reality shows have been launched on various platforms in year 2020 and 2021. The survey also indicated that one out of two people have

followed or are following a reality show, which shows that reality shows are still popular in China.

- Celebrities have fueled the popularity of reality shows in China.

Since ancient times, China has not formed collective religious belief under the influence of Confucianism. Since the reform and open-up of China, the influx of new trends of thoughts has mushroomed and people have been pursuing new ways of entertainment and spiritual relaxation which gives birth to the booming development of the idol and star industry in China.

On the one hand, many stars are no longer satisfied with showing themselves through film and television works and they hope to show their real talents through a reality show. On the other hand, curious audience also hope to find resonance with their idols. As the Figure 1 shows: less than 3% of people like to watch reality shows of ordinary people.

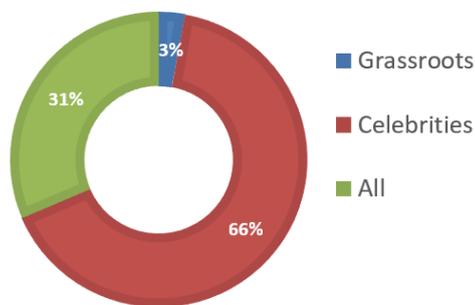


Figure 1 Popularity of realitu shows in China

- Under intense social pressure, reality shows are undoubtedly a panacea for relaxation.

The needs of employment, consumption, and personal and family development have all brought tension and anxiety to people in China along with the economic development and the social involution. As a result, every person feels overwhelming needs for a short relaxation. Compared with other outdoor entertainment activities, watching reality shows becomes a cost-effective choice for most people. Table 2 shows that the key reasons for people to watch reality shows are to relieve pressure, satisfy curiosity and seek resonance.

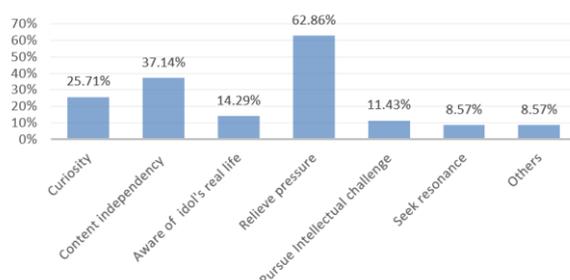


Figure 2 Reasons of watching reality shows

The popularity of entertainment and travel reality shows reveals people's desire to get out of their current anxious environment since people want to forget their troubles and get themselves refreshed. The popularity of talent shows reflects Chinese people's desire to become idols or get familiar with the life and thoughts of idols. It is worth mentioning that educational reality shows are also popular, which shows that Chinese people pay great attention to family education and want their children to be successful.

3.3. Differences between Chinese and American Cultures

There are many cultural differences between China and the United States due to the different political systems, education methods and lifestyles. In terms of Taylor's classic definition from anthropology perspective, "Culture, or civilization, is a complex system which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals and justice. People in the world with different cultural background have different views and values." [6]

American society values the spirit of independence and freedom. The lack of collective consciousness and the emphasis on individual heroism can be seen in Survivor and American Idol which are two of the top 10 most popular reality shows of the US in year 2020. Individual heroism is also a part of the American dream. People in the US believe that all men are created equal. People can eventually live an ideal life with his wisdom and sweat and achieve his dream through the hard work and personal endeavor, even in the face of unknown difficulties. [7]

Chinese culture has always advocated to overcome difficulties with inner strength and flexibility. Chinese people have a strong social conscience since Confucianism pays an important role to cultivate Chinese moral characters. Compared to the reality shows with the same motif - surviving, Survivor is a reality show about surviving in the wild while the Chinese reality show A Life of Longing is about living a simple life in the countryside with friends.

American society has a view that something nice costs them money and they buy a ticket to reveal a problem. As a result, in American Idol reality show, judges often tell contestants that sympathy or other emotions will neither increase nor decrease a contestant's score nor affect their internal judgment. Chinese society values the golden mean, and the Fifty Kilometers of Peach Blossom Grove is a reality show in China which gives people a sense and experience to improve speaking and communication skills.

American idol acts as a platform for many "stars" in the society. In China, the Voice of China reality show attracts more people to watch the performance of the stars and celebrities. The values of American society lead to a

more diversified understanding of success, and thus the social survival pressure is relatively low. The genre of reality shows in the US is more diversified and extensive. Due to the pressure of Chinese society, the popularity of the Chinese reality shows partially depends on the degree of fun of the shows.

4. CONCLUSION

According to previous research, it can be found that American reality shows have more programs on the competition between individuals. While Chinese reality shows are more focus on team and family. Because of the format of the shows, it can be seen that American culture emphasizes the character of independence and competitiveness. However, Chinese culture lays stress on teamwork and collaboration. No matter the form or the content in the reality shows, different countries' reality shows reflect their local culture and identity.

Cultural difference is an inevitable objective phenomenon and must be treated rationally and dialectically. Understanding and analyzing the cultural differences between China and the United States becomes more critical in today's information explosion era. In addition, understanding cultural differences will help us understand and interpret cultures of different countries and locations, improve communication skills with an international view, integrate seamlessly into the international family, and reduce unnecessary conflicts and contradictions.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is completed together by Ying Han, Hanyi Lu and Yijun Wang.

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