

The Research on the Image of Chinese People in the American Sitcom Fresh Off the Boat

Xinya Chen^{1,a,*†}, JiaYing Liu^{2,†}, and YuTong Liu^{3,†}

¹Communication, The Ohio State University, Columbus, OH, 43210, America

²Shanghai Private MinYi High School, Shanghai, 200000, China

³Zhenjiang Maple Leaf Bilingual School, Zhenjiang, 212000, China

a. chen.10121@buckeyemail.osu.edu

*corresponding author

† These authors contributed equally

Abstract: It is critical to reevaluate this representation since the way Chinese people are portrayed in American dramas has altered due to faster globalization and intensifying cultural contacts between China and the West. The first sitcom portraying an Asian-American family to air on an American network in twenty years was *Fresh Off the Boat*. There have only ever been three such efforts by all the major networks combined in the history of American television. Viewers get a clear and unwavering glimpse at Asian immigrants' experiences through *Fresh Off the Boat*. The show features several Asian immigrant families, including those with a decent old-fashioned father, a strong mother, a small boy who behaves well among sheep, and an older son attempting to blend in with American society. Focusing on the ABC family sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*, this article uses content analysis and case studies to investigate how Asian Americans are portrayed in American dramas.

Keywords: *Fresh Off the Boat*, Chinese, American sitcom.

1. Introduction

The sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat*, starring Randall Park, Timmy Wu, Yang Shengde, Wei Zhilin, and Chen Qiye, made its television debut on ABC on February 5, 2015. The series is based on the memoir "First Arrival: A Memoir" by Chinese American chef Huang Yi-Ming, which tells the story of a Taiwanese Chinese family who immigrated to the United States in the 1990s and moved from Washington, D.C.'s Chinatown, to Orlando, Florida. With six seasons, the series is finished.

The Huang family is a Taiwanese American family made up of parents Louis and Jessica, their children Eddie, Emory, and Evan, as well as Jenny, Louis' mother, who relocated from Washington, DC's Chinatown, to open a steakhouse with a cowboy theme in Orlando, Florida. The series is set between 1995 and 2000. The second season follows the family-owned restaurant Cattleman's Ranch explosive growth, Jessica's business partnership with the Huang family's next-door neighbor Honey, Eddie's difficulties, and his relationship with his mother. The Huang family continues to become a part of their neighborhood in season three. While Louis mulls selling the steakhouse, Jessica becomes a citizen of the United States and decides how to raise her son. The fourth season follows

Jessica as she works on her book and Eddie as he begins his first year and supports his neighbor Nicole after she comes out. The fifth season covers Jessica's unsuccessful novel release and events that follow, Honey's pregnancy (who is also Jessica's best friend and lives next door to the Huang family), Eddie's participation in a cultural exchange program to visit Taiwan, and Honey's pregnancy. In the final season, Evan experiences puberty, Louis transitions into a business consultant role, Emory starts acting, and Eddie muses about his future as he prepares to graduate high school.

Maybe it is because of China's rising stature internationally or because people realize how big the Chinese market is. Chinese elements have gradually begun to take center stage in Western motion pictures and television shows. Chinese national pride has significantly increased due to seeing more Chinese images on Western television. Westerners have long regarded traditional Chinese culture as having enigmatic oriental characteristics, full of exotic mystery that has captivated many Western viewers. Western films and television frequently feature elements like Kung Fu, Chinese food, and Chinese medicine. Kung Fu has long been the benchmark for how Chinese people are portrayed in Western movies and television. The Kung Fu element is in charge of changing how Chinese people are portrayed in Western movies. Bruce Lee, who introduced Chinese Kung Fu to the rest of the world, is the first heroic character to appear in American movies. The label "everyone is a martial arts master" has long been associated with the representation of Chinese people in media, and it continues to impact today. Westerners are more interested in learning about the ancient Chinese empire than modern Chinese society. Whether the characters or the Chinese elements in their films, their lenses are always focused on the enigmatic scenes that quickly disappear. Hollywood movies have taken a while to embrace racial diversity gradually, and Western television series have had a tough time doing so. The cultural conflicts and battles between the East and the West that occurred during this time will undoubtedly cause film and television producers to reevaluate their positioning in the Chinese community. Furthermore, it will gradually become a group that cannot be underestimated in the mainstream of Western society.

2. Literature Review

In *Fresh Off the Boat*, people have a lot of different opinions about racial prejudice, about American stereotypes of Chinese Americans. Chang Jiabo, Tian Hao, and Chang Jiang's study emphasize that Asian Americans have a unique identity in the dual cultural field in the mainstream historical and cultural environment of the United States. The show's Asian parents are obsessed with their children's education, forcing them to attend cram schools and learn music. It can be seen that the manifestation of Asian stereotypes in the play [1]. Li Yige also thought that in 1966. An American sociologist William Peterson in the New York Times magazine highly appreciated the Japanese Americans' quality of perseverance and believed that their success in American culture and the same Asian yellow type as a "model minority" is a complete big end. It can reflect their intelligence, hard-working, career success, and pay attention to education. This kind of expression seems to elevate the identity of Asian Americans. It is convenient to build a good image of the United States. It is because it deliberately shows the contradictions of ethnic integration and weakening racial discrimination and treats Asian-Americans as a mythological group, which, together with the hatred of other minorities, intensifies the intensity of exclusion [2]. They argue that *Fresh Off the Boat* creates stereotypes for Chinese Americans and even Chinese people, and sometimes the stereotypes are not favorable to them. Then, according to Cajic's Book Review, instead of defining the experience of Asian immigrants in this book, Huang seeks to break down American stereotypes about Asian immigrants through the author's own experiences. He made a few statements about both bamboo-ceiling and Model Minority, where self-expression and rule-breaking behavior from Asian-Americans are, in his view, intolerable. However, these are more personal observations and

recommendations than prescriptions for policy or reform [3]. Finally, Ruthie LaMay wrote a News on the website. After its release, *Fresh Off the Boat* received many online references for its racist nature and stereotypes. Among them, Eddie Huang, the author of this book, attracted the most heat. He condemned ABC's resistance to including domestic violence in Asian American families. However, this is a highlight of his book. He chose to give up domestic violence and turned it into a family comedy. Because of the stereotype that white people think that Chinese Americans all speak with an accent, there is a vast cultural difference. Therefore, Ruthie LaMay argues that sitcoms such as *Fresh Off the Boat* must be dramatic but rely on stereotypes to alienate their audience [4].

Of course, some of these reports also felt that *Fresh Off the Boat*, an American family comedy, had refreshed white stereotypes of Chinese Americans. In He Ziqing's survey, she took the heroine Jessica as an example. The author shows that although she is not entirely divorced from the image of a Chinese housewife, she also shows her pursuit of equality, independence, and self-improvement. On the one hand, she is frugal in her life and has strict standards for her children's studies. In order to save electricity, she takes her whole family to public places to blow free air conditioning. Nevertheless, on the other hand, she is capable and strong, keeping her Chinese cultural characteristics in the American culture. She puts on a cheongsam and tells her son never to forget that they are Chinese. When her son had a physical conflict with others due to racial discrimination on campus, she took anger for her son and stood up for equal rights [5]. Furthermore, Cui Jie said that the character Eddie Huang, his character shows a second-generation Chinese character's struggle. He was being excluded from the mainstream white culture, obsessed with hip hop music and black subculture, and also lacked Chinese identity to identity at the same time. He will not speak Chinese. When his classmates joke about mocking China, Eddie still chooses to maintain the dignity of the Chinese [6]. Based on the differences in Chinese and American family values, Sun explained it this way. In the play scene, Mrs. Huang asks the children to wash dishes by hand after meals to exercise their ability to do housework. After visiting the American children's homes, the children found that there was a dishwasher in their own home that had been kept unused by comparing the washing methods of Americans. Mrs. Huang did this because different cultural backgrounds have different attitudes toward self-indulgence and desire for restraint. [7]. In contrast to previous stereotypes of Chinese Americans in comics, the writers and directors of the show have allowed more white people to see the diversity of Chinese Americans. Daniel Johnson analyzes that when it premiered, *Fresh Off the Boat* received much praise online because *Fresh Off the Boat* writer Eddie added a lot of comedic elements during a time of culture shock and racism. His caricatures defy Hollywood's stereotypes of Asian-Americans and fully portray the young men as accurate portraits. In the meantime, Daniel Johnson expects the show to continue to portray its characters honestly and adequately and to break through traditional stereotypes about Asian Americans [8]. Moreover, Sun Lianmi had the same point as Daniel Johnson. Although it has entered the 21st century, the Marvel Comics series *Fu Manchu* still brings racial prejudice to Americans, and the sinister and cunning image he brings to Chinese people is still lingering. Although Chinese characters are still portrayed negatively in American TV series, the "polyhedron" of Chinese characters is also shown. Let the audience see a warm and loving Chinese family who does not forget their ethnic characteristics while pursuing the American dream [9]. Finally, Tian Guanhui proposed that the use of Chinese cultural elements in American film and television works has experienced a change from single to multiple, which reflects the process of the American people's unfamiliarity with Chinese culture. Such stereotyped impressions and wrong cognition of Chinese people are jointly caused by the American view of other cultures as "the other," stereotyped impression of China, and cultural misreading in different cultural contexts [10].

3. Research Methodology

This chapter will outline the research design. This work is grounded in a well-liked thought known as interpretivism. The researcher conducted the study using an inductive methodology and a case study to approach this idea.

There were ultimately three steps to the investigation. The researcher started by looking into the Chinese characters in the story. The female protagonist, for instance, was seen purchasing goods from a Chinese store, playing mahjong with Chinese companions, and expressing opinions about Chinese schooling. They questioned some Chinese and Chinese Americans for their opinions on the protagonist's performance. The researchers then searched Chinese social networking sites, including Douban, Quora, and Weibo, for viewer comments. By condensing these remarks, the general perceptions of Chinese viewers about the film were discovered. The investigation concluded the existence of stereotypes and whether these events occurred in the lives of Chinese people.

Most of the data used for the analysis came from comments made by Chinese fans on video-editing software and sequences from the TV show *Fresh Off the Boat*. The Chinese National Knowledge Infrastructure and Web of Science were used to compile the literature review.

Because China and the West have pretty different cultural histories, Westerners have little familiarity with the Chinese. They frequently utilize stereotypes or exaggerated portrayals, such as stigma and discrimination, to characterize Chinese people when they wish to make a point about them. Western preconceptions have diminished as cultural contact between the East and the West has continued. The researchers picked *Fresh Off the Boat* as an illustration as there are still significant cognitive differences between the groups. Since it was first broadcast in the United States, this sitcom has generated much discussion and is an important research subject.

Researchers can better understand how Chinese people are portrayed in the European and American film industries, as well as how Westerners see Chinese people in real life, by examining how Chinese protagonists in sitcoms are portrayed. One of the few sitcoms with a Chinese family is this one. For American audiences, it was novel. However, as the director and most actors were born and raised in the United States, Chinese viewers might have a different perspective on some of the Chinese characters represented in the film. This research allows people to evaluate the veracity of the Chinese visuals in *Fresh Off the Boat*, which will help international viewers comprehend Chinese culture and the everyday lives of Chinese families and provide Chinese viewers with a greater understanding of Chinese families' lives in the United States.

4. Results

There are two results of the research. First one is that American and Chinese parents have very different ideas about what constitutes "defining whether a child is successful or not," which leads them to believe that Chinese children are less free than American children to choose the course of their future lives.

And the second one is Chinese parents are not happy with their children's academic performance, which makes them have the role of being generally perceived as good academic achievers. This is due to the results of the educational differences between China and the West.

5. Discussion

About result the first result, in the fifth season of *Fresh Off the Boat*, the director devoted two episodes to the topic of Chinese education and American education. In one episode, the eldest son's teacher asked for a leave of sickness and was replaced by a male teacher who did not have a syllabus. In class, he encouraged his students to choose topics they were interested in studying. Jessica, one of the student's parents, was furious when she heard that. Because this is not the

traditional way of learning in China, another episode is when the Huang family and his wife come across a new Chinese couple. Although the children of this Chinese couple were admitted to Harvard at 16, and Bill Gates even favored their paintings, he only worked as a taxi driver in the end. This is impossible for a Chinese parent to accept. This stereotype is also created because China was backward in the past.

Most Chinese people are illiterate, so the student who has received a letter of admission from a prestigious university can get their parent's approval. As the country becomes more assertive and with more and more educational resources, parents pay special attention to their children's academic performance. Students not only have to complete many assignments assigned by the school but also bear the pressure of parents who want their children to be successful. Only by going to a good university and finding a good job can let them bring honor to their family. This idea is deeply rooted, and this way of education has gradually appeared in Chinese families in America. They don't have much spare time to take part in extracurricular activities that they are interested in, like foreign children. They can't be like American students. So, for Americans, such a way of education is entirely different from theirs and very impressive. But in modern China, now there are most Chinese parents born in the '80s. Their form of education is more democratic and accessible. After asking some Chinese parents, the researchers learned that this phenomenon is because these parents as a child received such education pressure, which let them hurt. They don't want their children to go through this form of education. Everyone's success should not be defined by others, by their parents, but by themselves.

In result 2, in this clip from *Fresh Off the Boat*, there is about a school scene that reflects stereotypes of Chinese people. It now shows the child, Eddie getting a high score on a test. His mother, Jessica not being satisfied with his score and goes to school to propose making the curriculum harder and organizing a Chinese Learning Center. Then the two main characters show the Chinese style of education, the child's exemplary academic performance, and the characteristics of the parents not being satisfied with the child's score. The characters in this drama thus bring about a stereotype of Chinese people, which the author deduces due to the deep-rooted Chinese idea of peer competition, including the ever-increasing demands of parents on their children. This stereotype is also created for three reasons:

First is because parents want their children to improve. Also, in the eyes of foreigners, Chinese people study hard and are different from them, hence high academic achievement. Last, the parents' strong climbing personality, using their children's studies to make others think the family and children are good, thus creating pride.

This stereotype can also bring positive and negative effects on people. On the plus side, this stereotype will make foreigners think that China is a country with a very rigorous education. It also makes Americans think that Chinese people are excellent. But on the negative side, the stereotype will increase the distance between foreigners and Chinese people, with no common topic and lousy socialization. It can also put invisible pressure on foreign nationals, and the general perception of good academic performance does not match the individual himself. Therefore, China should take advantage of the benefits of this stereotypical influence and continue to maintain it.

Moreover, it should hold its attitude towards learning, respect teachers, and study hard. Everyone should improve the harmful effects of these stereotypes, learning about what individuals are like through their interactions with foreigners rather than being judged by stereotypes. On their side, Chinese people also need to do something to justify the stereotype that Chinese people do well in their studies.

6. Conclusion

This investigation aimed to assess the position of Chinese people and the Chinese community. The second aim of this study was to investigate the ideas of *Fresh Off the Boat* audience. Multiple regression analysis revealed that people's comments on the TV series were not remarkably consistent, with some believing that it did not reflect Asian stereotypes but instead made Americans aware of the diversity and merits of Chinese or Asian American people. Another part of the audience felt that the series added new points of contradiction and stereotyping. In the creation of the Analysis, based on the differences between Chinese and Western parents' perceptions of "defining their children's success", which leads them to believe that Chinese children are less free to choose their future direction in life than American children, and that Chinese children are labeled as "good academic achievers" due to educational differences, the findings are examined in the TV series. "The results of these two studies are examined in the play, which lists the causes, effects and ways to improve the stereotyped image. The findings of this research provide insights into the increasing presence of Chinese people in the United States has gradually begun to change Americans' impression of China. This research provides insights into the traditional prejudices and stereotypes Americans have about Chinese people. The authors believe that Americans should avoid making subjective judgments about the behavior of Asian Americans, that is, stereotypes, and hope that people can be more observant and use their perspectives to break the stereotypes. If not mistaken, the last time an Asian-led American TV show was a soap opera in the 1990s with a Korean lead, and it did not get renewed after just one season. So, *Fresh Off the Boat*, a continuously updated and popular American TV series, has significant research value. The production team worked hard, but there were still incorrect and stereotyped influences. The findings from this study make several contributions to the current literature. From those sources, these authors express their different opinions on whether stereotypes exist among Chinese people. Therefore, the existence of stereotypes needs to be studied again.

References

- [1] J. B. Yang, H. Tian, J. Chang, *The media image of oversea Chinese and Chinese culture: A discourse analysis of the reading practices of the US TV series Fresh Off the Boat*, *News and Communication Review*, 2021.
- [2] Z. Q. He, *Exploring the image of Chinese in American dramas from a cross-cultural perspective- taking Fresh Off the Boat as an example*, *Audiovisual*, 2021.
- [3] L. M. Sun, *On the challenge of the stereotypical image of Chinese by "Fresh Off the Boat" of American drama*, *School News of Mudanjiang University*, 2018.
- [4] F. L. Sun, *Analysis of the Differences in Chinese and American Family Values under the Cultural Dimension Theory-taking "Fresh Off the Boat" as an example*, *Hubei Open Vocational College Journal*, 2021.
- [5] J. Cui, *Using Frame Theory to Analyze the Image of Chinese in American Drama-taking "Fresh Off the Boat" as an example*, *Communication Power Research*, 2018.
- [6] G. H. Tian, *Study on China's image Construction in American Film and TV Series*, *Lanzhou University*, 2021.
- [7] Y. G. Li, *The Chinese image construction in the American TV "Fresh Off the Boat"*, *Lanzhou University*, 2021.
- [8] A. Čajić, *Book Review: Fresh Off the Boat*, *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences*, 2016.
- [9] D. Johnson, *'Fresh Off the Boat' Is an Honest Important New Comedy*, *ScreenRant*, 2015.
- [10] S. Red, *Fresh Off the Boat's Battle with Stereotypes and Sitcoms*, *Medium*, 2019.