

Abstract

In 2004, China Central Television, the Chinese national television network, planned to import the U.S. sitcom, *Friends*, but decided against doing that because of the sitcom's high sexual reference content. That was also the year the curtain fell on *Friends* at NBC (National Broadcasting Corporation) which produced the series. The series has had a long and successful run since 1994, finding popular following in the U.S. and other English speaking worlds. Elsewhere it was translated or subtitled. In these and other ways, this staple of the NBC Thursday night line-up thus found a global audience.

On the other side of the Pacific, television viewers in the People's Republic of China (PRC) first encountered *Friends*, now reportedly one of the most popular American sitcoms to hit mainland China in recent years, as early as the mid-1990s when Pearl TV, a Hong Kong commercial broadcaster picked up the series and broadcast it with Chinese subtitles. Outside Hong Kong, viewers of *Friends* were initially confined to Macau SAR, Guangdong Province and other parts of south China. The reach of the sitcom expanded with the various official releases of *Friends* on DVD formats in the new millennium. In 2006 Hong Kong-based STAR (Satellite TV of the Asian Region) of News Corporation provided a further means of access within and beyond south China. That same year, this station created the *Friends*-inspired "reality TV" program that required chosen participants to live together in an apartment as friends. To qualify, the participants had to demonstrate knowledge of

and familiarity for *Friends*, as well as the ability to imitate *Friends* characters. By now, fan clubs of *Friends* had emerged in Chinese cities, while *Friends* forums mushroomed profusely in the Chinese cyberspace. Illegal circulation, via video piracy or internet download, remained the commonest mode of dissemination for sitcom however. Chinese youth, especially college students and white-collar workers, were apparently the most avid fans of *Friends*; they tended to be English-literate urbanites.

This paper explores the reception of *Friends* in south China. It combines theories of reception (Fiske; Hall; Hartley; Morley; Abercrombie) and TV audience studies (Ang; Liebes; Chitnis et al.), emplacing our study of Chinese audiences in relation to *Friends* within the framework of Olsen's narrative transparency theory (1999) which veritably provides a useful analytical model for elaborating on cross-cultural readings of texts. For our study, the target viewers are heavy watcher of *Friends*, most particularly Chinese youth located in Macau, Guangzhou (Zengcheng) and Shenzhen—all in south China. They range from college students, teachers, office workers and homemakers who come from various parts of the Mainland. Our study also taps and expands on Chitnis et al.'s study (2006) of American (U.S.) and Indian (India) viewers of *Friends*, in a comparative way. Finally our study focuses on the themes of sex and sexualities in *Friends*, while that combined approach enable us to investigate the themes in respect to issues of cultural translation, difference and discount: what was gained or lost in the sender-receiver processes and why? Most importantly this study will add to the field of global audience TV studies concerned with understanding and theorizing the extent of cultural impact, fusion and/or

rejection between U.S. TV shows and Chinese TV viewers. As it is, scarcity of relevant scholarship in this regard has remained characteristic.