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From a Western Phenomenon
to a Global Phenomenon

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in the USA and China

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From a Western Phenomenon to a Global Phenomenon: A Comparative Cultural Analysis of Reality TV in the USA and China

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Abstract: This article examines the globalization of reality television by comparing popular reality shows in the United States and China. This research attempts to transcend common debates concerning globalization (i.e., cultural homogenization and glocalization) by emphasizing what exists on the margins of these arguments. The author instead focuses attention on the micro-level consequences of the globalization of popular culture—the potential anxieties and insecurities facing Chinese and American citizens. The author reviews foundational studies of globalization that pinpoint these anxieties to the increasing disconnect between what people want and state power. Using Schudson's theory of popular culture the author proposes that the reality television content that is popular in these two locales indicate viewer's primary sources of anxiety but also works to remedy these anxieties in accordance with the values and goals of the nation state. The findings of this article are based on a theoretical explanation of what is culturally resonant in each nation and even politically necessary. The author calls for future research to critically engage with both the production of reality television and audience research on the genre as a means to more clearly understand its presence in the political sphere. Overall, this article adds to the literature by exploring the transaction between reality television, politics, and globalization.

Keywords: Reality Television, Globalization, Glocalization, Popular Culture, Reality-Competition, Docusoap

The Global Force of Reality Television

In 2001, Simon Fuller created the reality-competition series *Pop Idol* for British television audiences. Today it is an international franchise. According to BBC News the franchise has the largest collective global viewership in the world. It is shown in localized versions in roughly 150 countries and since its premiere date an estimated 6.5 billion people have watched some version of *Pop Idol*. The world population clock at the time of this writing shows approximately 7.4 billion people on earth. This means that a majority of people have likely heard of *Pop Idol*, making this phenomenon a solid visual example of the basic process of globalization.

A year after the original *Idol* premiered in Great Britain, the United States debuted *American Idol* (FOX). It quickly became one of the most successful shows in USA television history and was then subsequently exported to various cities overseas (Ouellette and Hay 2008). The series follows a weekly elimination format and aligns itself with democratic qualities. *American Idol* saw people come from cities across the USA to audition in front of a panel of judges. Depending on how well they performed they were given the opportunity to compete in Hollywood, and perform live on stage each week. Viewers at home would call, text, or cast their votes online for the best performance. The contestant with the least votes would be eliminated and the winning contestant received a recording contract. The inherently democratic nature of *Idol* has been widely celebrated in the USA given the array of similar talent competition shows on the air today like *America's Got Talent* and *The Voice* (NBC), whereas illiberal nations like China have had different reactions.

Idol was broadcast for the first time in China and throughout the Arab world in 2003. An estimated 30 million people watched the season one finale of *Superstar*, the Arabic version of

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Pop Idol (Kraidy 2006). That same year nearly 400 million people tuned into the season one finale of China's *Idol* show, *Supergirl* (Jian and Liu 2009). Scholars who have examined this franchise agree that part of its lasting success in these parts of the world is because it gave many the opportunity to vote for the first time (see Kraidy 2006; Jian and Liu 2009; Cui and Lee 2010). In June 2015 China banned several reality shows despite big ratings and demanded that the content of these shows promote socialist values, so in spite of *Supergirl's* huge success for over a decade, it was cancelled for being "too democratic" (Cui 2015).

Analogously, *Idol* lasted fourteen years in the USA, ending in January 2016. For years, *American Idol* saw strong ratings, (e.g. 10–15 million viewers), but the last four years of the show delivered less than half of those numbers (Nielsen Ratings). Even though *Pop Idol* specifically is no longer on the air in the USA and China its principles and the basic voter-oriented competition format still dominate television channels in both nations.² While the global reach of reality television visualizes the process of globalization, *Idol's* demise in both the USA and China also serves as a primary example of one of the ramifications of globalization, which as it will be shown next, is the disconnect between what resonates with citizens and state power.

Literature Review

Globalization and Culture

Scholars who have been at the forefront of globalization studies have been discussing this disconnect for decades. Much of this disconnect is related to culture, which plays a huge role in both the macro and micro level impacts of globalization. Giddens defined globalization as "the intensification of worldwide social relations which link distant localities in such a way that local happenings are shaped by events occurring many miles away and vice versa" (Giddens 1990, 64). Central to Giddens' understanding of globalization is the nation-state, which refers to both the nation's political order and the cultural practices that are formulated by and reflected in the rule of law. This makes culture a fundamental, ever-present point of contention in the process of globalization.

Discussion of globalization and in this case, specifically in terms of reality TV, is often enmeshed in debates around the concepts of cultural homogenization and media imperialism. Tomlinson explained media imperialism as the USA domination of cultural spaces (Tomlinson 1991). In other words, dominant cultures infiltrate traditional cultures in terms of spatial—not temporal—relations. Culture is difficult to change; it takes time because it is a stable and fundamental aspect of people's identities, beliefs, and ways of life. When culture changes due to outside forces (i.e., media imperialism by way of globalization) at a rapid pace in accordance with western cultural values, it arouses disconnect and uncertainty in individuals who are left adrift from what they knew about their identity and culture. This is what Giddens referred to as the "reflexivity of modern social life" (Giddens 1990, 38). The idea is that the flow of information overload around the world has placed certain social practices under a microscope, causing them to be constantly reformed and examined. This constant change and sense of disconnect spurs uncertainty and breeds anxiety. Appadurai's work names the reaction to this disconnect, and to globalization on a larger scale, *culturalism*, defined as "identity politics mobilized at the level of the nation-state" (Appadurai's 1996, 15). *Difference* is an integral characteristic of culture and also problematic. Culturalism is a reactionary deployment of cultural differences and is often evoked when discussing refugee status, migration, extra-territorial histories, and in the struggle to gain recognition from existing nation-states (Appadurai 1996).

Appadurai posited that television specifically and other popular culture forms cater to this sense of disconnect because they transform the viewer's sense of time and space, and thus reshape daily life. This in turn alters the global economy, which he views in terms of five global

² At the time of publication, the ABC network announced that "American Idol" will be revived for a 2017–2018 season.

cultural flows: ethnoscaples, mediascaples, technoscaples, financescaples, and ideoscaples. These flows create “imagined worlds” and different nation-states use globalized images often from popular culture to create and control concepts of identity (Appadurai 1996). This idea will be elaborated on in the next section discussing the two main arguments for and against the globalization of popular culture. The above review of foundational studies of globalization pinpoints a disconnect between culture and identity that has citizens feeling anxious and uncertain. It will be argued in this article that one way these tensions and anxieties appear to be remedied is via reality TV.

Think Globally, Program Locally

Reality TV is a popular global product because it fits neatly within the parameters of a global capitalist economy. Reality shows tend to be less costly to produce because they do not need as many writers as scripted shows and the actors they employ are ordinary people who get paid less than actors. Advertisers generously sponsor reality shows because they are given commercial time and granted explicit product placement within the content of the show. In short, reality TV production follows the basic rule of capitalism—it reduces production costs and expands the consumer market (Bielby and Harrington 2008; Jian and Liu 2009). However, just because it is economical does not mean that it is openly accepted everywhere. Scholarly conversation concerning the globalization of western products like reality TV generally flows two ways: one camp argues that glocalization combats homogenization through cultural modification (Robertson 1995; Livio 2005; Bielby and Harrington 2008; Keane and Moran 2008). The other side argues that products cannot be wholly detached from the culture they were created in (Jameson 1991; Brundidge 2005; Van Keulen and Krijnen 2014). The problem exists on the margins of each side of this argument.

Using *Pop Idol* as an example again, Livio’s research on the series in the USA, U.K., Canada, and Israel revealed that it was the way the series constructed perceptions of unity, solidarity, and identity that made the *Pop Idol* format so popular across the globe. However, he also found that *Pop Idol* promoted abstract conceptions of individuality, social mobility, civic participation, and democracy that catered to the local taste of each culture. Such findings highlight the fact that television content is controlled at the level of the nation-state. (Livio 2010).

Straubhaar reinforced the fact that the nation-state structures the basic rules of media, which includes the “national market structures, ownership rules, production incentives and subsidies, financial rules, frequency assignments, technical standards, and content rules” (Straubhaar 2002, 686). It makes sense that a nation like China would reject shows that overtly promote liberally democratic concepts because it is not in the interest of authoritarian leadership. Successful global circulation of television formats is based on programming strategies that “bridge transnational economic interest and national sentiments of belonging” (see Waisbord 2004, 368). This is the basic idea behind television franchising. Today it is easier than ever to regenerate television genres because the formats have been broken down into simple skeleton models that serve as templates for producing shows overseas (Keane and Moran 2008). Keane and Moran named this process “internationalization,” which is actually an offshoot of an easier, more explicit idea advanced by Roland Robertson almost a decade earlier. Robertson viewed globalization as a local phenomenon that occurred alongside *glocalization*.

Glocalization refers to the adoption and fitting of foreign products to meet the needs and taste of the local market (Robertson 1995). Reality shows may be a global cultural force in terms of pervasiveness and reach, yet they succeed in different nations because they are tailored to local cultural values. This idea is what helps build up to the argument here that reality television can then be used as a tool for the nation-state to remedy certain cultural anxieties. Even though glocalization sounds like it solves the problem of media imperialism and cultural homogenization, some scholars say that is not enough. Critics like Jameson and Brundidge add to this position by arguing that the globalization of culture provides a forum for viewers to construct or reshape their identities around the values of capitalism, consumerism, and individualism

(Jameson 1991; Brundidge 2005). Traits that are intrinsically linked to USA culture. Van Keulen and Krijnen's study adds to this critique of glocalization. The authors compared linguistic, intertextual, and cultural codes in the Dutch and Australian versions of the British reality show *Farmer Wants a Wife*, and found that glocalization was "overrated as a protection of cultural diversity" (Van Keulen and Krijnen 2014, 277). They concluded that in looking beyond the manifest content, the shows in each nation were in reality, really similar (Van Keulen and Krijnen 2014). This implies that cultural goods can be tailored to fit the needs of the locality but are never wholly stripped of their western roots. This is not a problem for viewers if the content of the reality show emotionally resonates with the audience (Bielby and Harrington 2008). It may, however, be a problem for those who make the rules for the content. This problem highlights what is missing from literature on reality television in a global context: an exploration of reality shows that have been shown to resonate with audiences but are cancelled anyway.

Research Question

Something in the content of reality shows like *Supergirl* in China resonated strongly with audiences for over a decade. That something posed enough of a threat to state power that *Supergirl* was banned from airing. *American Idol* in the USA strongly resonated with millions of viewers for over a decade as well for the same reason. However, as it will be shown later on, the reality docusoap became more prevalent in the USA, arguably eclipsing reality competition shows because they evoked a newer ideology of the American dream that resonated more with viewers. These two scenarios exemplify that certain shows appear to do better than others depending on the nation, which speaks to Agnew's more recent commentary on the exhausted debate between cultural homogenization and glocalization. Agnew stated that even if people everywhere are subject to the same cultural stimuli, "it is no guarantee that they will react to them the same way" (Agnew 2015, 133). Building on this idea, I argue that the reality TV content that is popular in different nations speaks to different social anxieties facing the audience, and that the content also serves as a tool to reconcile viewers to the values and goals of the nation state. To unpack this argument, and better understand the disconnect between what citizens enjoy and what is being enforced at the state level, it is imperative to compare and contrast reality shows in two distinct nations. The research question guiding the rest of this article is: *what constitutes reality TV in the USA and China?*

Methods

To answer this question a qualitative textual analysis was conducted from October to December 2015 that revealed the most culturally significant reality shows in each area. The most popular reality shows airing in China were determined by extensive online research, which included viewing numerous YouTube videos to understand the format, and an evaluation of the most recent academic literature on the topic. Finding reality shows airing in China was a demanding task. Many of the shows in China were found upon closer examination to have been cancelled because six months prior to collecting this data China's press administration had banned a majority of their reality programs. Given the issue of language, the analysis of the content of the Chinese reality shows is based strictly on what is known about their format, the cultural context of the country, and what could be confirmed by existing scholarly research findings.

Finding reality shows in the USA was much easier, in fact there are so many reality shows that no single definition will encapsulate them all. The most cited definition of the umbrella term *reality television* however, reads, "shows that film real people as live out events (contrived or otherwise) in their lives as these events occur" (Nabi et al. 2003, 304). Different genres include: reality-competition, docusoaps, reality legal programming, self-improvement/makeover, renovation, financial/appraisal transactions, social experiment, hidden camera, supernatural, and hoaxes. The pool of shows discussed here are representative of the two most popular formats, reality-competition and docusoaps. Reality-competition shows have already been discussed at

length. Reality-docusoaps tend to be reality shows that follow ordinary people or celebrities as they go about their daily lives, i.e., *Keeping Up with the Kardashians* (E!), *Real Housewives* (Bravo), *Duck Dynasty* (A&E). The *Appendix* at the end illustrates which shows were analyzed along with the subsequent promoted values that were qualitatively determined.

Theoretical Foundation

Undergirding much of the forthcoming analysis is Schudson's theory of popular culture. Schudson wanted to understand how particular aspects of culture influenced people's thoughts and actions, so he measured the potency of cultural objects to gauge how they worked for people. Potency is measured through five dimensions: retrievability, rhetorical force, resonance, institutional retention, and resolution. Retrievability of an object is its reach or availability across a culture. Rhetorical force concerns whether or not the object makes the public "ponder the deepest dilemmas of the human condition" (Schudson 1989, 165). The resonance of an object is measured by the strong cultural ties it has to public traditions. A simple example is that *Idol* resonated in the USA because it was based on viewer votes, and voting is thoroughly intertwined in our democracy. An object with institutional retention is one that is commonly referenced in public discourse. Resolution refers to objects that facilitate action. A good example of this is an advertisement persuading people to buy products, thereby facilitating an action. According to Schudson, if a cultural object has all five of these dimensions it has the potential to radically alter the overarching culture. If, however, only three dimensions are present, retrievability, resonance, and institutional retention, the culture will not act to fundamentally alter social direction. Or in other words, that artifact of popular culture works within the boundaries of the existing social order and does not inspire social change.

In addition to Schudson's theoretical explanation of culture, the findings in this article are also based on Hall's understanding of high-context and low-context cultural communication styles (Hall 1989). High-context communication styles are utilized in cultures like China, which tends to be group-oriented, collectivist, homogenous, and non-confrontational. This style of communication is derived by the expectation that people tend to share similar experiences, so verbal communication is less explicit, and physical gestures and vocal tone are sometimes considered more important than words. Low-context communicative styles are often utilized in heterogeneous cultures like the USA, where explicit message delivery is usually appropriate and necessary for diverse citizens. Low-context cultures also tend to be more competitive, confrontational, and individualistic. The rest of this article shows what constitutes successful reality shows in the USA and China based on a theoretical explanation that combines these ideas to analyze what is culturally resonant and arguably politically necessary in each nation. Reality TV in the USA is discussed first because these findings will provide context for the discussion of the reality shows that have been exported to China.

Findings

Reality TV in the USA

Reality-competition and reality-docusoaps are the two formats that represent the most ubiquitous reality programming on broadcast and cable networks. Both formats have a larger viewership than other subgenres, and are also the most predominate forms of reality television exported to other nations. For these reasons, reality-competition and reality-docusoaps were determined to be the most culturally significant types of reality programming in the USA.

Reality-competition shows follow a similar format. Usually participants are ordinary people who are placed in contrived settings (i.e., a set, an island, a communal house, or on a stage) and in extra-ordinary circumstances where they demonstrate talent or ability by competing for prizes, sometimes in front of a panel of judges. These shows follow a weekly-elimination format often based on viewers' votes or other contestants' or judges' votes. Shows that follow this format

include: *The Apprentice* (NBC), *Dancing with the Stars* (CBS), *The Voice* (NBC), *Survivor* (CBS), *The Amazing Race* (CBS), *Top Chef* (Bravo), and *Project Runway* (Lifetime). Reality-competition shows tend to be bigger ratings winners than reality-docusoaps because these shows are often featured on broadcast television, which reaches a larger audience than cable.

Based on what was viewed and analyzed reality-competition programs promote teamwork, individuality, mass participation, the American dream, “humilitainment,” and of course competition, given the nature of the format. Some shows strictly promote competition among individuals while others promote competition between teams. The more a contestant can separate herself from the competition by promoting perceived individual, distinct, or unique traits, the greater the chance she will have of staying in the competition. Highlighting individualized traits such as a tragic upbringing, unique style, or certain attitude usually gets the audience’s attention and compels them to vote for that contestant. Viewers’ ability to vote elicits mass participation, which in a large sense gives the viewers power and further draws them into the competition. On the other hand, a contestant with an outlandish personality can also mean big ratings, so in certain circumstances producers may use their power to keep them on the show.

Reality-competition shows also perpetuate the ideology of the American dream by showcasing individuals achieving what they wish via talent and a willingness to work hard, regardless of their circumstances. The general idea that the contestants who win are the strongest, most talented, and/or fastest ties into various ideographs associated with the USA. For instance, contestants have the “freedom” to “participate,” and they show that it takes “hard work” to achieve the “American dream.” All of the words in quotations are vocabulary staples among participants. Put simply, these types of shows are about winning in America because they feature groups of individuals from different social backgrounds who have overcome personal obstacles and were enterprising enough to seize an opportunity.

As much as these shows are about winning, they are also about losing. For instance, competition type shows often film participant’s auditions. Each season of *American Idol* began with people auditioning in front of the judges’ panel to see if they were good enough to advance to Hollywood. Many of the auditions featured people devoid of talent and self-awareness. Such contestants were often mocked by the judges and embarrassed on camera when confronted with the fact that they had no business auditioning in the first place. These are the auditions that would *go viral* and are one of the primary reasons Americans watch reality TV. Bad auditions cater to what Waite and Booker (2005) have termed “humilitainment.” The authors studied season one of *The Apprentice* (NBC) and concluded that viewers enjoyed watching contestants fail. Failure was exacerbated by the ways the former host and current USA President Donald Trump would dramatically declare “you’re fired.” Waite and Booker’s (2005) findings support the idea that this genre creates losers for the audience’s pleasure.

Reality-docusoaps, defined by Andrejevic as shows that “are based not on the documentation of exceptional moments, but on the surveillance of the rhythm of day-to-day life,” film participants doing regular activities, sometimes in contrived settings (i.e., communal homes) and under extra-ordinary circumstances (Andrejevic 2004, 102). The docusoap varies in terms of who is on the show and where the show takes place. Shows like *Real World* (MTV) and *Big Brother* (CBS) place participants in a communal setting. This means that participants have not previously been acquainted and are shown doing mundane activities in pseudo-natural settings. Other docusoaps like *Real Housewives* (Bravo), *Keeping up with the Kardashians* (E!), *Duck Dynasty* (A&E), *Swamp People* (History), and *Alaskan Bush People* (Discovery) film participants in their natural setting, like their own home.

Fallen or B-list celebrities often participate in docusoaps to reinvigorate stalled careers. Singers like Toni Braxton and Mariah Carey are the most recent celebrities filming docusoaps about their lives. More often however the docusoap features ordinary individuals who are either wealthy (in actuality or conspicuously so) or self-described “rednecks.” Research on the *Real Housewives* franchise has shown that there is an aspirational quality for viewers of the series (see Lee and Moscovitz 2013; Psarras 2014). Lee and Moscovitz’s research on the *Real Housewives*

of New York City builds on Waite and Booker's earlier work from 2005 by showing that these types of shows depict the rich women featured as senseless hypocrites for viewers to deride. Their findings illustrate that humilitainment undergirds docusoaps in addition to competition shows. Docusoaps that focus on the conspicuously wealthy also promote a capitalist lifestyle based on consumerism and low-context communicative behavior styles. Much of this behavior is negative. Plotlines on all seven series that compose the *Real Housewives* franchise are driven by confrontations and disagreements between women; their actions and communicative styles tend to contradict what would be appropriate behavior for anyone, especially the wealthy.

"Redneck reality" as it is referred to in the media, tends to focus on people who live in rural areas, shoot guns, speak with a southern accent, and/or wear camouflage. These types of shows, confirmed by Haynes' analysis, reinforce regional identities based on typical stereotypes of race, class, and gender, and even go as far as constructing these individuals as the "horrific other" for the audience to behold (Haynes 2014). The construction of the "horrific other" is apparent on *Alaskan Bush People* and *Swamp People*, two shows that follow particular families because their way of life deviates from the norm. The "horrific other" therefore references another strategy used to create "the loser" for humilitainment purposes and viewing pleasure.

In sum, this analysis revealed that the two most culturally resonant types of reality programming in the USA are reality-competition shows and docusoaps. These programs have distinct formats, yet both types of shows trade on the same two traits—that of winning and losing. The significance of winning and losing on reality television will be elaborated on in the discussion section. The next section will show that the specific content of popular reality shows across the globe varies due to culture and politics.

Reality TV in China

Competition-type shows dominate reality television programming in China. Reality-docusoaps were not found on the air during this research. The reality-competition shows airing in China were broken down into four sub-types of reality competition programs that are referred to here as: Talent-Competition, Business-Competition, Romantic-Competition, Celebrity-Competition.

Examples of talent-competition shows in China are *Super Brain*, *Voice in China*, and *I am a Singer*. Shows like *Voice in China* and *I Am a Singer* follow a similar format to *Pop Idol*, where the fate of contestants is determined by viewers' votes. *I Am a Singer* however differs from *Pop Idol* in that it features celebrities rather than ordinary people who compete against each other. Therefore, this show can also be cross-listed with celebrity-competition shows. China's *Super Brain* is a competition between individuals with superb mental strength who attempt to solve math and science problems. *Super Brain* explicitly promoted knowledge, learning, and education.

Business-competition shows like *Absolute Challenge* and *Win in China* are popular as well. Both of these shows promoted Chinese business practices that revolve around concepts of respect, team-oriented achievement, and cooperation. Li's examination of *Win in China* supports these findings. Li even emphasized in her research that while the show may appear to promote individualism and a desire to be rich it actually, "encourages people to get involved in doing business" (Li 2013, 907). More specifically, Li's critical discourse analysis of the series provided a tangible example of the process of globalization. For instance, if a show like *Win in China* aired in the USA, it would likely frame contestants in a celebratory manner, showing them as enterprising and/or creative individuals. However, Li's analysis revealed that the language devices used on the show specifically underscored the social and collective meanings of business activities (Li 2013). This de-emphasizes individuality and re-emphasizes the importance of traditional Chinese values related to business and team-oriented work.

The most popular romantic-competition show in China is *If You Are the One (IYATO)*, which is based on the Japanese dating show *Take Me Out*. The show features twenty-four women who interview five men throughout the episode to see if they are worthy of a date. Based on what could be viewed of the show on YouTube, *IYATO* appeared to reinforce normative conceptions of gender. Other research on this series in particular supports this finding. Li's study of the series

purported that *IYATO* served a particular purpose for the state. The purpose, she argued, is to reconcile the problem of having too many insecure bachelors who are uninterested in the growing number of successful women in China. In this study based on critical discourse analysis, Li found that *IYATO*'s discursive features were shaped by the "leftover women" phenomenon in China (Li 2014, 526). The "leftover woman" saying is equivalent to the disparaging term "spinster" used in the USA. It describes the large number of women in China who are past their mid-twenties, have successful careers, and are unmarried. This phenomenon, along with its negative connotation are rooted in traditional Chinese understandings of gender and are representative of the tensions between men and women in China. Men in China are thought to oppose marriage to a woman more successful than them and vice versa. Li was highly critical of this show and explained how China's preference for boys and its one-child policy led to a surplus of bachelors. Given this context, Li found that the show was a way for the state to tackle China's uneven sex-ratio and also worked as a means to maintain social stability. Her analysis of the show also revealed that the women on this series were portrayed as subordinates who needed material support from men. *IYATO* is a popular show, but it does not compare to the success of celebrity-competition shows (Li 2014).

Examples of celebrity-competition shows include *Running Man* and *Where Are We Going Dad?* These shows are based on South Korean exports. From what I gathered via internet research and YouTube, *Running Man* is an outdoor competition-based show where two teams of Chinese celebrities compete in challenges. The show *Where Are We Going Dad?* takes five celebrity fathers and their children to a remote location where they compete in various missions. According to Chinese popular culture enthusiast and blogger, Cecelia Miao these shows are popular because they provide the viewer with a glimpse of the "real" celebrity (Miao 2015).

These types of shows also appear to help resolve uncertainty and anxiety among viewers about changing gender roles in China. Miao also shared on her blog that *Where Are We Going Dad?* is an important show because it reflects contentions about Chinese parenting culture by showing fathers who are child-focused. At the time of this research *Where Are We Going Dad?* was the most popular reality show in China. This is important to note because it promotes contemporary ideas about gender, while *IYATO* clearly promotes traditional notions of gender. The show is so popular in China that it was adapted into a movie in 2014—the sequel *Where Are We Going Dad? 2*—came out in 2015. Interestingly, this popular film and television series reflects a major conflict between viewers who like watching celebrity fathers embrace traditionally feminine roles, and the state, which is actively working to dismantle the series. This conflict and the anxieties that accompany it will be explained in greater detail in the discussion.

Discussion

The above findings demonstrate what constitutes popular reality television content in the USA and China. This section discusses how the reality shows that are popular in each nation not only speak to the anxieties of these distinct audiences, but also how the content adheres to the values and goals of the nation state to reconcile said anxieties. The significance about winning and losing on reality TV in the USA will be discussed first.

Reality TV in the USA speaks to the fact that a majority of Americans have been losing for a long time, while only a few have been winning. In other words, reality TV is inherently intertwined with a discussion of social stratification, because winning and losing on reality television are depicted by the achievement of the American dream. Regardless of the format, popular reality shows provide contestants and viewers with some form of security in a time of serious insecurity related to the undeniable inequality, stagnant social mobility, and divisive politics that undergird American culture today. For contestants, security comes in the form of a recording contract, cash prize, or celebrity. For viewers, security is offered in the depiction of winners and losers. Winners are created to show that social mobility still exists, and losers are created to show that there are people out there who are beneath the viewer's station in life.

Since the Great Recession however Americans are more aware than ever of the façade of the American dream. This was emphasized by the most salient talking points of the 2016 presidential election (i.e., the economic gap between the rich and poor and the disintegration of the middle class). Reality television and competition type shows specifically promote the old adage that hard work, mixed with talent and some risk-taking can allow one to transcend the origins of their socio-economic status. For some, this might reinvigorate the belief in such an ideology. However, at the same time, Americans are dealing with such massive anxiety—our polarizing politics and the constant barrage of obstacles being thrown in the face of the disenfranchised are only two contributing factors—that we are privy to the fact that achieving the American dream takes much more than “hard work.” As mentioned in the introduction, there has been a decline in reality-competition shows in the USA. This is likely because these shows promote an outdated version of the American dream and thus fail to resonate with audiences. Voter apathy may also play a role; the right to vote in elections is often taken for granted in America. Perhaps we are less enthusiastic about voting for the next *American Idol* than people in China because they do not have the same liberties. Reality-docusoaps on the other hand are becoming increasingly prevalent and promote a more contemporary version of the American dream.

Regardless of whether the subject is a “redneck” on a show like *Swamp People* or a rich Kardashian, the docusoap is distinct from other reality formats because of its ability to bestow fame upon ordinary people devoid of special talent. This type of programming caters to ideas about the new way to the American dream. In this new version of the American dream success is based on the self-branding enterprising skills of what sociologist Chris Rojek calls the “celetoid-celebrity,” who is primarily known for the “impudent ordinariness” they display on reality television or social media (Rojek 2011, 165). Reality-docusoaps resonate significantly today because they promote the idea that one need only be brazenly unique and media savvy to transcend their social status, which is an idea that might be appreciated by viewers who have exhausted all other options to a more secure life.

In all, reality TV in the USA is a reflection of the people’s social and economic anxieties. We must also keep in mind that the content is structured at the level of the nation-state, so the fact that reality television embodies different versions of the American dream is no coincidence, and instead appears to be one remedy for the anxieties that policy has failed to alleviate. The phenomenon of reality TV works similarly in China, but for different reasons.

Chinese citizens are also facing a multitude of social anxieties that can be pinpointed to a lack of civil liberties, which is what the popular reality TV shows there reflect. *New York Times* correspondent Andrew Jacobs was based in China for the past eight years. In a recent article he discussed his departure and reminisced about the excitement in Beijing during the 2008 Olympics when the government promised to unblock certain websites and open protest zones for demonstrations. The protest zones were never filled and access to the web was only allowed to foreign reporters stationed in the Olympic Village. These broken promises coupled with censorship have impacted citizens. Jacobs supports this by quoting a friend who characterized his peers as “a generation without hope,” adding that everyone he knows “is adrift, even fearful about what tomorrow might bring” (Jacobs 2015).

In November 2015 there was a situation involving Miss World contestant Anastasia Lin that also exemplifies the cultural climate in China. Lin was born in China but moved to Canada when she was 13. She has publicly used the Miss Canada title to advocate for human rights, which agitated the Chinese state. She was supposed to compete in the Miss World contest back in 2015, which was being held in Hainan Island, but she was barred from her connecting flight to Hong Kong. It was at the Chinese Embassy in Canada that Lin was informed that she was not welcome in the competition or in China. *The Washington Post* reported that the only other response Lin received came from the *Global Times*, China’s regime-sanctioned newspaper which stated that Lin had to, “pay a cost for being tangled with hostile forces against China” (Washington Post Editorial Board 2015).

These news features illuminate the anxieties facing Chinese citizens, the anxieties and fears of the nation-state, as well as the tensions between the two. A decade ago, Esarey's detailed report in 2006 for the USA based NGO Freedom House, revealed an array of ways that the Chinese government controlled the media. Censorship in China starts with imposing legal restrictions on journalists, offering financial incentives for self-censorship, and by party monitoring of news content. Given the examples above depicting the struggle between Chinese citizens and the nation-state for human rights and civil liberties, and what is known about the content of reality television, it should not be a surprise that the state still views reality TV as a threat, despite glocalization. Nearly a decade after Esarey's report, media content today is even more tightly controlled at the state level.

In June 2015 China's State Administration of Press, Publication, Radio, Film, and Television (SAPPRFT) demanded specifically that reality TV shows "blend in socialist core values" (Lin 2015). According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the press release disseminated by SAPPRFT says these values include honesty, integrity, resilience, and demands that shows be inspiring, demonstrate right from wrong, and provide constructive solutions to social problems. SAPPRFT also forbid shows from amplifying social conflict, fabricating stories for ratings, and from focusing on individual profit or luxurious lifestyles. Lastly, celebrities with negative reputations (i.e., a history of drug abuse and promiscuity) are banned from appearing on reality shows.

Most of the findings discussed earlier clearly reflect the consequences of these guidelines. For example, the demand for shows to not amplify social conflict, fabricate stories for ratings, or focus on luxurious lifestyles speaks directly to the docusoaps that are so prevalent in the United States. These types of shows operate by doing the exact things the SAPPRFT is trying to eradicate, which helps explain why I did not find docusoaps airing in China.

Interestingly, another demand made by China's SAPPRFT years earlier, as Cui and Lee noted in their research on the show *Supergirl*, was that "judges should not embarrass the participants on the show" (Cui and Lee 2010, 270). The fact that it is forbidden for contestants on reality shows in China to be mocked provides a huge contrast to reality shows in the USA. Since the state will not tolerate "humilitainment" this demonstrates that reality shows in China are not about creating losers for the purpose of reconciling the audience to the status quo. However, it can still be argued that the state is trying to use reality TV to alleviate the stressors concerning human rights, civil liberties, and social mobilization.

In a relatively short time frame in recent history China has experienced rapid economic growth and industrialization. In fact, one of the consequences of this is the "leftover woman" phenomenon, derived by the fact that more Chinese women have been moving to cities for better careers. According to Fukuyama's historic overview of the global political development of liberal democracy, it is the combination of economic growth and industrialization that spur the spread of democracy. Economic growth and industrialization grow the working class, and as this social group gets bigger, their demand for rights increases (Fukuyama 2014). The examples of Miss World and the immense viewership of reality television in China demonstrate the serious tensions present between citizens who are embracing aspects of democracy, like mass participation and human rights advocacy, and the nation-state that is trying to control outside forces, particularly the spread of liberal democracy. Controlling outside forces however is becoming more difficult as China increases its global power.

Liberal democracy however is composed of both liberal rule of law and mass participation. The working and middle classes champion mass participation, and China has a middle-class composed of hundreds of millions of people (Fukuyama 2014). Historically, large middle classes in other societies have been the very force responsible for liberal change, so this huge middle class in China threatens authoritarian leadership. The middle class also composes the majority of reality television viewers—a programming form that promotes only one aspect of liberal democracy—mass participation. Fukuyama posited that liberal rule of law in China will depend on "whether these new social groups can shift the classic balance of power between state and society" which at this time does not appear possible because the state controls everything

(Fukuyama 2014, 385). Simply put, mass participation is the superficial component of democracy and its popularity on reality TV in China does not guarantee that liberal rule of law will follow.

This is because the promotion of mass participation on these Chinese reality-competition shows might provide an illusion of liberal democracy as a means for the state to keep civil rights and social mobility in check. Appadurai's early research on the globalization of media revolved around this idea. He argued that mediascapes are often exploited by nation-states as a means to "pacify separatists or even the potential fissiparousness of all ideas of difference" (Appadurai 1996, 39). Ultimately, the nation-state understands the force of the media and if future research could confirm that the Chinese state was blatantly exploiting the content of reality TV to reconcile citizens to state power and unified conceptions of identity, then it could be said that reality TV is a political necessity.

The same bold statement could be made about reality TV in the USA but this needs more support. Additional support is grounded in explicit discussion of the theoretical perspectives of culture that guided the analysis of this article. Undergirding the analysis of reality TV in these distinct regions were certain theories about culture. Hall's theory of high-context and low-context communicative styles were overtly realized in the findings because the values promoted in the popular reality shows in each country neatly align with his ideas (1989). It is Schudson's theory from 1989 of how popular culture works that really supports the larger argument defined in this article.

Once more, Schudson posited that there were five dimensions that determined the potency of cultural objects: retrievability, resonance, rhetorical force, institutional retention, and resolution. Schudson argued that retrievability, resonance, and institutional retention were the central features of an object's cultural effectiveness. This means that these three dimensions make the object work with and for the culture. If the cultural object only embodies these three dimensions then, "culture will not act fundamentally to alter social direction" (Schudson 1989, 174). Across these two nations, reality TV has retrievability, which is plainly evidenced in its global pervasiveness. Reality TV also has resonance in both regions because the content is extensively re-designed to reflect the shared beliefs, values, and tastes of each culture through the process of glocalization. Reality TV also has institutional retention given the fact that this programming type has been around for decades, so it is referenced in media and popular culture throughout the world.

In both the USA and China reality TV lacks cultural potency in terms of *resolution* and *rhetorical force*. If reality TV had resolution, it would influence action. The only action that reality TV influences in either of these nations is voting. In the USA this action is slowly declining as competition-type shows fade and docusoap-type shows gain momentum. While voting for reality winners in China appears to be a big draw for viewers, we must consider the fact that they are only voting for people to win talent contests rather than political elections. It is because of this that I do not think reality TV in China has resolution. Reality TV is also a programming form that generally does not cause viewers to "ponder the deepest dilemmas of the human condition" (Schudson 1989, 165). This means that reality TV does not have any rhetorical force in either nation. The findings discussed here have already shown that reality TV in both the USA and China work similarly to remedy the anxieties facing each nations' distinct audiences. According to Schudson's theoretical argument then we may be able to say that reality television has the potential to attenuate social mobilization. This argument has significance given the fact that Americans have yet to mobilize effective policy solutions to close the economic gap, and by the fact that democratic participation in China has not mobilized liberal rule of law.

Conclusion

There are of course limitations to this argument. Its limitations are rooted in the fact that it has already been shown that people watch reality TV for a variety of reasons (Nabi et al. 2003; Papacharissi and Mendelson 2007; Baruh 2009; Godlewski and Perse 2010), and a foundational element in the tradition of cultural studies is that viewers interpret messages differently (see Hall 1974). While this argument unfortunately deemphasizes the nuance of individual viewer interpretations of reality television, it still does not mean that the audience is conceived here as a passive mass subjugated to state controlled entertainment. The argument put forth in this article is only intended to highlight broad interpretations of what reality television can tell us about the larger culture in which it is embedded. In fact, at the time of the initial write-up of this article the 2016 USA Presidential bid was in full force and no one could predict the outcome. Given the results of the election, it is more important than ever to lay the foundations of such an argument because reality television is now and forever going to be associated with politics.

The findings discussed in this article were more surprising before the election, but now they speak to the divisive strategies employed by Trump to win the election. Reality television in the USA creates winners and losers for the audience as a means to satisfy the ideology of the American dream. Donald Trump did the same thing. He entered the race as the laughing stock among media critics, political analysts, his own peers, and the general public. Somewhere along the way we forgot to be critical of his actions and Trump capitalized successfully on what he learned about humilitainment from *The Apprentice*. He created the image of the loser in Hillary Clinton and all of his earlier competitors—often times by calling them “losers.” Out of this, he created for himself the winning image of a man who achieved the American dream. For this reason alone, future research must continue to interrogate the phenomenon of reality television. Reality TV has been around for decades but research on the subject is not complete. We must critically explore the strategies employed by reality television producers to garner ratings as a means to educate the public on the distinctions between “reality” and entertainment. We must also continue to conduct audience research that clarifies nuanced interpretations of viewers, this would pave the way for better forms of entertainment that do not assume the audience members are cultural dupes. Critical research is the key to distinguishing between entertainment and politics in the USA at the time of this current political administration.

In summary I have shown what type of reality TV content is culturally significant in both China and the USA and offered explanations for why the content is culturally resonant and even politically necessary. These are preliminary observations. Future research should build on these observations because reality television reveals much about culture. If there are still skeptics after this, take for example what Texas Senator and vocal *Duck Dynasty* enthusiast, Ted Cruz said to the Senate in a September 2013 overnight speech. In this speech about defunding the Affordable Care Act, Cruz stated: “the reason that so many Americans love *Duck Dynasty* is because it represents the America usually ignored or mocked by liberal elites: a family that loves and cares for each other, believes in God, and speaks openly about their faith” (Schow 2013, n.p.). At the time his words were mocked in public discourse. Flash forward to 2017 and these words foreshadowed the large number of silent Trump supporters that surprised political analysts, media critics, and scholars after the election. We may be surprised by what the future holds again, but if research continues in the ways suggested here, we will at least be better prepared to deal with the consequences.

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APPENDIX

Reality Competition (USA)

Reality-Competition shows promoted typically low-context cultural values, i.e., mass participation, competition, talent, individuality, and hard-work.

The Amazing Race (CBS)
The Apprentice (NBC)
Dancing with the Stars (CBS)
Project Runway (Lifetime)
Survivor (CBS)
Top Chef (Bravo)
The Voice (NBC)

Reality Docusoap (USA)

Reality-Docusoaps promoted other low context communicative traits, i.e., capitalist lifestyles based on consumerism, confrontation, and celebrity.

Alaskan Bush People (Discovery)
Duck Dynasty (A&E)
Keeping up with the Kardashians (E!)
Real Housewives (Bravo)
Real World (MTV)
Swamp People (History)

Reality Competition (China)

These shows reflected typically high-context cultural values and democratic participation in the form of voting. Talent Competition shows promoted talent, innovation, education, and learning. Business Competition shows promoted cooperation, respect, and team-oriented achievement. Romantic Competition shows promoted submissive behavior and traditional gender roles, and also celebrated women who had fewer, long-lasting relationships with men. Celebrity Competition shows were child focused, and departed from traditional conceptions of gender.

Talent Competition:

Super Brain
Voice in China
I am a Singer

Business Competition:

Absolute Challenge
Win in China

Romantic Competition:

If You Are the One

Celebrity Competition

Running Man
Where Are We Going Dad?

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