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## American TV and Social Stereotypes Of Americans in Taiwan and Mexico

*'Dallas' and 'Dynasty,' most watched American programs in these countries, may be cultivating negative image of the U.S.*

► The United States continues to be the major exporter of television programs to the rest of the world. In 1983, imported programs constituted about one-third of total programming in more than 70 countries. The United States was the source of about three-quarters of imported programs in Latin America, 44% in Western Europe, and 33% in Asia and the Pacific.<sup>1</sup> Most programming from the United States is entertainment although some educational programs are also exported.

To many foreign audiences, American television is the only or main source of information about American culture and people. It is important therefore to understand how American television is perceived by its foreign audiences, and to determine the images of Americans that American programs are projecting abroad. This study analyzes the relationship between exposure to American television programs and the social stereotypes of Americans held by adult audiences in two countries where American programs are readily available—Taiwan and Mexico.

<sup>1</sup> Tapio Varis, "The International Flow of Television Programs," *Journal of Communication*, Winter 1984, pp 143-152.

<sup>2</sup> Albert Bandura, *Social Learning Theory* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1977).

<sup>3</sup> George Gerbner, Larry Gross, Michael Morgan and Nancy Signorielli, "Charting the Mainstream: Television's Contributions to Political Orientations," *Journal of Communication*, Spring 1982, pp. 100-127.

<sup>4</sup> Hanna Adoni and S. Mane, "Media and the Social Construction of Reality — Toward an Integration of Theory and Research," *Communication Research*, 11:323-340 (1984).

Several theoretical formulations support the expectation that the images of the United States portrayed in American television will be internalized and accepted to be accurate representations of reality by foreign audiences. Bandura's social learning theory, for example, explains how we learn by observation, particularly when the observed event is reinforcing to the viewer. We learn not only behaviors, but also values, stereotypes and beliefs by observation.<sup>2</sup> Gerbner suggests that television is a major influence on audience perceptions of the facts, norms and values of society through selective presentations and by emphasizing certain themes. Gerbner and his colleagues have shown that heavy television viewing is correlated to many real world perceptions — such as fear of crime and estimates of real-life violence — and to common perceptions of economic class membership, political ideology and opinions on specific social and economic issues.<sup>3</sup> Adoni and Mane suggest that television's influence on our social realities depends not only on our dependence on the medium for information, but also on our direct experiences with the response to be learned or assimilated.<sup>4</sup> The influence will be greatest when dependence on the medium is high, and when direct experience with the response to be learned is limited.

Research on social stereotypes, the dependent variable in our study, is not new. Social psychologists have long been

► Alexis Tan is chairperson of the Department of Communications at Washington State University. This study was completed while he was on the faculty at Texas Tech where Sarrina Li and Charles Simpson were graduate students.

interested in the interpersonal and intrapersonal dynamics of social stereotypes and prejudice.<sup>5</sup> Conceptually, social stereotypes are generalized impressions of groups.<sup>6</sup> Operationally, a social stereotype is the collection of traits assigned to the members of a category. When there is consensus in the assignment of traits within a given population of judges, then the stereotype becomes a social norm for describing recognized groups. A single individual's assignment of traits to the group is his or her personal stereotype, regardless of whether there is consensus or not among other judges.<sup>7</sup>

Most early research on social stereotypes was descriptive. The objective was simply to describe stereotypes of various ethnic and religious groups. In 1933, Katz and Braly asked 100 Princeton undergraduates to list the five key traits that would best describe 10 different racial and national groups.<sup>8</sup> They found a high degree of agreement (in some cases, up to 75 percent) on the traits used to describe these groups. Many of the traits chosen, particularly for the Chinese, Japanese, Jews, Turks and "Negroes" were highly derogatory. Americans in general were characterized quite positively—as being industrious, intelligent, materialistic, ambitious, progressive, pleasure loving, alert and efficient.

Gilbert repeated the Katz and Braly survey in 1951 at Princeton.<sup>9</sup> He found that agreement on traits used to describe most of the groups decreased, particularly for those that had been negatively characterized in 1933. In 1967, the survey was again repeated at Princeton, this time by Karlins, Coffman and Walters.<sup>10</sup> The 1967 study showed even less agreement on social stereotypes among the students. Americans were less positively characterized than in earlier studies. The three most common traits assigned to Americans in 1967 were materialistic, ambitious and pleasure loving. Karlins et al. concluded that traditional negative stereotypes of racial and national groups continue to "fade," and that students at Princeton then were more careful in their thinking

and consideration of ethnic generalizations.

Social stereotypes are learned from direct and oftentimes isolated experiences with members of the stereotyped group, and through socialization from family, peers and the community.<sup>11</sup> Another possible source of social stereotypes is television. Considering the pervasiveness of television and its demonstrated influence on audience perceptions of other social realities, it is not unreasonable to expect that the pictures in our heads of racial and national groups can be influenced significantly by the pictures we get of them in television.<sup>12</sup>

### *Procedures and Measures*

Identical questionnaires were administered to purposive samples in Taiwan and Mexico.

One thousand questionnaires were distributed to fixed groups in northern (n =

<sup>5</sup> Gordon Allport, *The Nature of Prejudice* (New York: Addison-Wesley, 1954).

<sup>6</sup> Marvin Karlins, Thomas Coffman and Gary Walters, "On the Fading of Social Stereotypes: Studies in Three Generations of College Students," *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 13:1-16 (1969).

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Daniel Katz and K.W. Braly, "Racial Prejudice and Racial Stereotypes," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 30:175-193 (1935).

<sup>9</sup> George Gilbert, "Stereotype Persistence and Change Among College Students," *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, 46:245-254 (1951).

<sup>10</sup> Karlins, Coffman and Walters, *op. cit.*

<sup>11</sup> Allport, *op. cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Although a "cultural imperialism" argument might suggest that increased exposure to a foreign culture would lead to more favorable affect towards that culture, we have chosen to take a more microscopic view of the effects of exposure to American television on social stereotypes among a foreign audience. Some current theorizing on mass media effects indicates that effects are most likely to be identified when the nature of the stimulus (the message) is specified, and when interpretation of the stimulus by the receiver and subsequent activation of thoughts and memories are taken into account. (See, for example, Leonard Berkowitz and Karen Rogers, "A Priming Effect Analysis of Media Influences," in Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann, eds., *Perspectives on Media Effects* (Hillsdale, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum, 1986), pp. 57-81; also, Alexis Tan, "Social Learning of Aggression from Television," in Bryant and Zillmann, *op. cit.*, pp. 41-55). Given this view, the influence of imported television programs can either be positive or negative, depending on which programs are watched, and the symbols present in these programs. It would not be in keeping with our cognitive models of media effects to look at the relationship between total viewing of all American programs, since conflicting images and symbols may be communicated by different programs (e.g., "Different Strokes" and "Three's Company" certainly do not project similar images of American society.)

400), central ( $n = 300$ ) and southern ( $n = 300$ ) Taiwan. Of these 1,000 questionnaires, 600 were distributed by teaching assistants in universities, where students filled them out in classrooms and dormitories. The remaining 400 questionnaires were distributed by Chinese research assistants to non-students, including teachers and other personnel in high schools and elementary schools, trainees for diplomats who had just passed a "National Test for Diplomats," and persons working in post offices and a bank. The questionnaire was in Chinese and was self-administered. Of the 1,000 questionnaires distributed, 788 were completed and returned by our Chinese research assistants to the researchers in the U.S. by the cut-off date (May 15, 1985).

The Mexican sample consisted of 150 college students attending a university in Mexico City. While this purposive sample is not representative of all college students in Mexico, it consists of persons most likely to assume positions of leadership in their government.<sup>13</sup> The self-administered questionnaire was distributed by Mexican instructors at a general assembly of students in March, 1985. All questions and instructions were in Spanish.

Of particular relevance to this paper are the following variables measures in the questionnaire. (The Mexican and Chinese questionnaires were identical except for the language.)

*Television Use and Exposure to American Television:* Respondents were presented with a list of all American television programs which were then being aired in their countries, and were asked how often they watched each program on a five-point scale. The points on this scale were "every week," "almost every week," "about once a month," "about once in 2 months," and "never or almost never." For the Chinese sample, 57 American programs were listed (in their Chinese translations); 74 American programs were listed (in their

Spanish translations) for the Mexican sample.

Respondents were also asked how many hours they watched television daily, which American television programs they thought most accurately portrayed American culture and people, and how accurately they thought American television programs (in general) portrayed "what the United States is like" and "how Americans act." Responses to the question on accuracy of portrayals were on a five-point scale, from "very accurately" to "not at all accurately."

*Social Stereotypes:* We presented our Chinese and Mexican respondents with a list of 37 adjectives and their definitions (see table 2). We asked them to pick the 10 adjectives which were most descriptive of Americans in general, and then to rank the top ten from 1 (the most descriptive) to 10 (the least descriptive among the top ten.) The list of adjectives and the procedure for scoring to approximate interval scaling are derived from previous studies of social stereotypes.<sup>14</sup>

*Demographics and Other Control Variables:* Respondents were asked to indicate their age, sex, education (in the Taiwan sample), and occupation of head of the family (in the Mexican sample.) They were also asked how often they interacted with Americans, how often they watched American movies, and how often they had been to the United States.

The questionnaire was originally written in English, and then translated into Chinese and Spanish by graduate students in the U.S. who were native speakers of those languages. It was pre-tested for accuracy of translations and local applicability of the scales in Mexico city and Taipei. Minor revisions were made before the final versions were administered to our samples.

## Results and Discussion

The Chinese sample of 788 was 60% female and 40% male. The average age was 24.38 years; the average number of years in school completed was 14.96; 73.1% were students.

<sup>13</sup> The Mexican sample was taken from a university in Mexico city which was attended predominantly by students from high income families.

<sup>14</sup> Karlins, Coffman and Walters, *op. cit.*; also Alexis Tan, "Television Use and Social Stereotypes," *Journalism Quarterly*, 59:119-122 (1982).

Of the Chinese respondents, 96.7% had at least one television set at home; 95% had never been to the United States. Interpersonal contact with Americans was infrequent: 22% did not have any contact at all with Americans, 38.9% had "very little" contact, and 16.8% had "some" contact. On the average, our Chinese respondents watched television 1.7 hours daily and saw 3.02 movies (in a movie theatre) per month.

For the Mexican sample, the average age was 22; 68.5% were females. More than 80% (81.1) understood English; 93.5% had been to the United States, and 79% said they had "frequent" contact with Americans. Almost all of the respondents (more than 90%) listed a profession (e.g., engineer, businessman, doctor, lawyer) as the occupation of their head of household, indicating that respondents came from high income families.

All the Mexican respondents had television sets. They reported watching an average of 2.8 hours of television daily, and saw an average of 9 movies (in a movie theatre) per month.

As Table 1 shows, the most often watched American television programs in Taiwan are "Three's Company," which is watched by 76.9% of the sample "every week," and "Hawaii Five-O," watched by 50.7% "every week." The most popular American television programs in our Mexican sample were "Love Boat," "Magnum P.I.," "Hotel" and "Dynasty."

Our Chinese respondents considered "Dallas" (27.78%) and "Three's Company" (23.22%) to be the programs which most accurately depicted American culture and people. The programs listed most often by our Mexican sample to be accurate depictions of the United States were "Dynasty" (24.74%) and "Dallas" (22.68%).

Most Chinese (66.6%) felt that American television programs were "somewhat accurate" portrayals of Americans and American culture, while most Mexicans felt that American television programs portrayed the United States either "quite accurately" (45.9%) or "very accurately" (13.9%).

TABLE 1

Most Frequently Seen American Television Programs, Ranked by Mean Score<sup>1</sup>

Taiwan	
Program (Rank) <sup>2</sup>	Mean Score
Three's Company (1)	4.033
Hawaii Five-O (2)	3.349
Love Boat (3)	3.341
Mission Impossible (4)	3.103
The A-Team (5)	2.923
Charlie's Angels (6)	2.881
Different Strokes (7)	2.871
Star Trek (8)	2.716
Six Million Dollar Man (9)	2.690
Starsky and Hutch (10)	2.631
Lassie (11)	2.531
Dallas (12)	2.450
Mexico	
Program (Rank) <sup>3</sup>	
Love Boat (1)	2.991
Magnum P.I. (2)	2.983
Hotel (3)	2.856
Dynasty (4)	2.851
Trapper John, M.D. (5)	2.812
Hart to Hart (6)	2.756
Dallas (7)	2.692
Quincy (8)	2.691
Ripley's Believe It Or Not (9)	2.681
That's Incredible (10)	2.658
Fantasy Island (11)	2.633
Walt Disney (12)	2.517

<sup>1</sup>Ranked by mean scores derived from 1 to 5 scale with 1 = never or almost never watched to 5 = watched each week.

<sup>2</sup>57 American programs were rated by the Chinese sample.

<sup>3</sup>74 American programs were rated by the Mexican sample.

The adjectives used most often to describe Americans by our Chinese and Mexican samples are shown in Table 2. The Chinese described Americans as, in order of frequency of mention, individualistic, conceited, practical, athletic, ambitious, scientifically minded, straight-forward, pleasure-loving, mercenary, courteous, materialistic, artistic, argumentative, sensual, aggressive and passionate. The adjectives used most often by Mexicans to describe Americans were, in order of fre-

TABLE 2

Adjectives Attributed to Americans,  
Ranked by Means<sup>1</sup>

Taiwan	
Adjective (Rank) <sup>2</sup>	Mean Score
Individualistic (1)	3.797
Conceited (2)	3.748
Practical (3)	3.701
Athletic (4)	3.563
Ambitious (5)	2.991
Scientifically-Minded (6)	2.562
Straight-forward (7)	2.283
Pleasure-loving (8)	2.053
Mercenary (9)	1.972
Courteous (10)	1.954
Materialistic (11)	1.776
Artistic (12)	1.715
Argumentative (13)	1.668
Sensual (14)	1.626
Aggressive (15)	1.499
Mexico	
Adjective (Rank)	Mean Score
Materialistic (1)	4.621
Ambitious (2)	4.266
Artistic (3)	4.089
Practical (4)	3.815
Industrious (5)	3.460
Efficient (6)	3.210
Individualistic (7)	2.653
Pleasure-loving (8)	2.339
Intelligent (9)	1.895
Athletic (10)	1.750
Aggressive (11)	1.532
Arrogant (12)	1.218

<sup>1</sup>Means were derived from an 11-point scale, from 0 (the adjective is not descriptive of Americans at all), to 10 (the adjective is most descriptive of Americans).

<sup>2</sup>37 adjectives were presented to our Chinese and Mexican samples.

quency of mention, materialistic, ambitious, artistic, practical, industrious, efficient, individualistic, pleasure loving, intelligent, athletic, aggressive and arrogant. Several adjectives appear in both the Mexican and Chinese lists of most descriptive adjectives. These are individualistic, practical, athletic, ambitious, pleasure-loving, materialistic, artistic and aggressive.

<sup>15</sup> *E.g.*, *Newsweek*, Aug. 16, 1982, p. 44; *Newsweek*, June 13, 1983, p. 66; *Newsweek*, Dec. 6, 1982, pp. 136-140.

To find out whether the viewing of American television programs is related to a particular social stereotype of Americans, we identified the programs considered by our samples to be the most accurate portrayals of Americans. We then ran partial correlations between frequency of viewing these programs and the ratings of individual adjectives used to describe Americans in the "real world", controlling for demographic variables and frequency of contact with Americans. We looked at particular programs as predictors, rather than total exposure to American television, since conflicting images may be projected by different American programs. It is much easier to identify the particular images projected by individual programs rather than by *all* American programs. The predictive programs we used in our analysis were those that our respondents considered to most accurately portray Americans. These were "Dallas" and "Three's Company" in Taiwan, and "Dallas" and "Dynasty" in Mexico. These programs were also among the most frequently watched by our Chinese and Mexican samples.

While we did not formally analyze the contents of these three programs, media critics have agreed that "Dallas" and "Dynasty" depict materialism, wealth, aggression, dishonesty and the pursuit of pleasure, while "Three's Company" depicts the pursuit of pleasure and sex.<sup>15</sup>

In our Chinese sample, the frequency of viewing "Dallas" was positively related to characterizations of Americans as materialistic ( $r = .158, p < .01$ ), and negatively related to characterizations of Americans as honest ( $r = -.179, p < .01$ ). These partial correlations controlled for frequency of contact with Americans, frequency of movie-going, age, and education of respondents. Also in the Chinese sample, frequency of viewing "Three's Company" was negatively related to characterizations of Americans as faithful ( $r = -.171, p < .01$ ), and positively related to perceptions that the divorce rate is high in the U.S. ( $r = .083, p < .05$ ), and that there is a lot of "personal freedom" among Americans ( $r = .072, p < .05$ ).

In the Mexican sample, frequency of watching "Dynasty" was positively related to perceptions of Americans as individualistic ( $r = .159, p < .05$ ) and pleasure loving ( $r < .169, p < .05$ ), and negatively related to perceptions of Americans as honest ( $r = -.189, p < .01$ ). Frequency of viewing "Dallas" was positively related to perceptions of Americans as aggressive ( $r = .178, p < .05$ ) and cruel ( $r = .1612, p < .05$ ), and negatively related to perceptions of Americans as honest ( $r = -.2349, p < .01$ ), industrious ( $r = -.1796, p < .05$ ) and scientifically-minded ( $r = -.2331, p < .01$ ). Control variables for these partial correlations were frequency of contact with Americans and frequency of movie-going. Age and income were not controlled for, since the sample was homogeneous on these two characteristics.

While these correlations are modest, a pattern of relationships is apparent in both samples. The images of Americans depicted in the three programs considered by our respondents to be the most accurate portrayals of Americans are projected to some extent to Americans in general by heavy viewers of these programs. And, for the most part, these images are negative, consisting of characterizations of Americans as dishonest, materialistic, pleasure loving, aggressive and cruel. In particular, these results suggest that "Dallas" and "Dynasty," two programs which are becoming increasingly popular in the foreign television market, may be cultivating a negative image of Americans among foreign viewers.

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### LISTENER PERCEPTIONS (Continued from page 808)

3) Relationships were also established between news topic and format preferences. Listeners to classical, religious, beautiful music, adult contemporary and all news formats prefer coverage of a broad range of topics. Surprisingly, this includes soft news stories, which traditionally are

not emphasized in radio journalism. Listeners to these formats also want to hear news regarding politics and local government. Listeners to top 40 and urban black stations prefer crime stories and traffic information.

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### *Violent Programs Losing Popularity*

According to the National Coalition on Television Violence, the popularity of prime-time TV violence is at its lowest point in 20 years. Since the Fall of 1985, the Nielsen Ratings for prime-time violence have fallen off markedly.

"The A-Team," the most popular action program in 1984, is off the air. "Miami Vice," 1985's only crime drama making the list of TV's 20 most popular programs, has slipped from ninth to 23rd.

The only action program in the top 20 now is "Moonlighting," in 12th place, and it has less than half as much violence as "Miami Vice," according to NCTV.

NCTV reports that although the amount of violence on TV has decreased somewhat, 40% of all prime-TV is filled with programs high in violence. NCTV says that the presence of large numbers of violent programs despite their low ratings is due, in part, to the desire of certain advertisers to attract audiences made up of primarily male viewers.