

## **“Harmonious Middle Kingdom and Dangerous Beautiful Country?” Exploring Cultivation Effects of Domestic and U.S.-Made TV Programs on Chinese College Students**

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This study examines cultivation effects of Chinese and U.S. TV content on Chinese college students. It surveyed 112 students from a university in Beijing about their weekly viewing hours of Chinese TV, including China Central Television (CCTV), and U.S.-made TV programming. Participants also reported their perceived prevalence of crime in China and the United States and their estimation of helpfulness, trustworthiness, and fairness of Chinese and American people. Findings revealed that American TV content seems to have a much bigger cultivation effect than Chinese TV programming. CCTV viewing was associated with perceptions that people in China are helpful. Viewing of U.S. programming was associated with heightened perceptions of crime in both China and the United States.

*Keywords: cultivation effects, Chinese college students, China Central Television, Voice of China, media censorship, U.S. TV programming, crime prevalence, social trust, harmonious Middle Kingdom syndrome, dangerous Beautiful Country syndrome*

With unprecedentedly strong financial and policy backing from the ruling party and government starting in 2009 (Zhu, 2012), China’s largest state-run broadcaster, China Central Television (CCTV), and its newer version, Voice of China, is expanding its global presence rapidly (Li & Sligo, 2012; Nelson, 2013). The party and government mouthpiece has drastically increased the number of foreign bureaus, is staffed with far better educated journalists, and is equipped with far better newsgathering and

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broadcasting facilities than ever before (Nelson, 2013). The electronic media giant has tried hard to amplify its voice in America and started producing news programs in English for an American audience (Folkenflik, 2013; PBS NewsHour, 2012). The television station is doing the same thing in Africa (Gorfinkel, Joffe, Staden, & Wu, 2014).

Despite its aggressive plan for global expansion and its striving for Western recognition as a legitimate news outlet, CCTV has continued to be criticized by many for failing to report on domestic and international events fairly and with journalistic integrity. Among notable examples is the station's coverage of the "My dad is Li Gang" incident in 2010 (see; AC Archive, 2010; J. H. Chen, 2010; Chang Liu, 2010; Taishansong, 2010; H. Z. Wang, 2010; Wines, 2010) and its recent practice of televising confessions by crime suspects (see Branigan, 2014; Jiang, 2016; Kaiman, 2016; Lynch, 2015; Zhou, 2013).

CCTV's consistent failure to show both sides of the picture in its coverage of these incidents is not surprising. As China's largest and only national television network, CCTV has to follow the mandate of the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) to help build a "harmonious society" (Fan, 2006) and realize the "Chinese Dream" (Friedman, 2012) for the purpose of maintaining the party's ruling legitimacy. Consequently, party and government censors keep a watchful eye on CCTV programs, including crime news content (Chin, 2013; Luo, 2013), to make sure that news events are covered in a manner consistent with party goals and objectives (Chin, 2013; Luo, 2013). To achieve this goal, the broadcaster tries its best to cast the CCP and government in a positive light in its coverage of domestic news events, although such efforts often fail to accomplish intended results (Chin, 2013; Luo, 2013). For example, after a huge earthquake struck Sichuan Province on May 12, 2008, Chinese media including CCTV was directed by party and government officials to "emphasize the government's proactive response to the disaster and to focus on positive stories that promoted national unity and stability" (Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2008, para.2). On the other hand, CCTV is encouraged to cover international news events in a way that could be manipulated to paint Western powers in a negative light (China Real Time Report, 2009). News items about disasters and corruption scandals from Western countries are especially highlighted and broadcast on CCTV in prime time (China Real Time Report, 2009). This double-standard strategy corresponds to the party's goal to portray Western societies as decadent and dangerous and Chinese society as harmonious and optimistic. Parodies of such CCTV reporting can be easily found on Chinese blogs and social media forums (Kugewang, 2013). At the same time, Chinese viewers avidly watch foreign TV that falls through the cracks of censorship imposed by media regulators who do not want anything foreign to challenge the orthodox view of domestic and world affairs (Armstrong & Ke, 2013; Jacobs, 2012). Such cracks include the use of VPN, buying pirated video compact discs (VCDs) or digital video discs (DVDs), and watching foreign TV on Chinese websites where censorship is enforced less rigorously than for TV stations.

The huge presence of CCTV in China's media landscape, CCTV's reporting policies, and foreign TV's recent foray into the Chinese market have inspired us to ask the following questions: Is the party's propaganda goal achieved? How does the party-manipulated CCTV content cultivate its audiences'

perceptions of the “Middle Kingdom”<sup>2</sup> and the “Beautiful Country”<sup>3</sup> in terms of crime prevalence and social trust? As more and more Chinese citizens are gaining access to foreign TV content, how do U.S.-made television programs help shape Chinese audiences’ perceptions of the prevalence of crime and trustworthiness of citizens in China and America? This study attempts to answer these questions by using empirical evidence and cultivation theory that examines how television viewing reshapes the way viewers look at the world around them.

The goal of this research is to contribute to current theorizing in three important respects. First, cultivation theory was developed in the 1960s in the context of American media and cultural environments. The global media environment has changed considerably since the 1960s, and today we live in a digital world where television is increasingly giving way to the Internet and mobile devices. Consequently, it is important to test the boundaries of this theory to see whether and how this theory could be applied to the contemporary Chinese context.

Second, nearly 500 cultivation studies had been published as of 2008 (Morgan, 2009), and scholarly interest in the topic remains high even today. Cultivation studies have been carried out in many countries including China (Morgan, 2009). Zhang and Harwood (2002) examined television’s cultivation effects on perceptions of traditional Chinese values (interpersonal harmony and hierarchical relations) among a group of Chinese college students. Empirical studies that assess cultivation effects of Chinese and foreign television on Chinese viewers, however, are limited in scope and breadth. Few studies have focused on cultivation effects of Chinese and foreign TV content on Chinese viewers in terms of crime prevalence and social trust.

Third, China is leading the world in social media use and mobile technology (Mozur, 2016). Today, more and more Chinese people are turning to social media and microblogging for alternative descriptions of and commentaries on news events that concern local, national, and global events and issues. Consequently, it is important to examine whether CCTV and foreign broadcasters are still able to cultivate people’s perceptions in desired directions despite the dwindling influence of broadcasting in the digital age.

Because not much of the empirical research has been done on the topic of CCTV and censorship in China from cultivation effects perspective, this project had to, at times, rely on news articles to help make arguments. We want to emphasize that news stories cited in this article are not empirically based studies but objective news reports.

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<sup>2</sup> “Middle Kingdom” is a Chinese name for China (中國, Zhōngguó). It derives from the widely held belief among ancient Chinese people that the country lies at the center of the earth.

<sup>3</sup> “Beautiful Country” is a Chinese name for the United States of America (美國, Měi Guó). It is a literal translation of “Mei” (beautiful) and “Guo” (country). The term has been widely used in the Western world.

### **Evolving Chinese Mass Media System**

News organizations in the People's Republic of China were established on the Soviet Communist model. As part of the party and governmental apparatus, mass media serves as a collective agitator, propagandist, and organizer of the ruling Communist Party (Siebert, Peterson, & Schramm, 1984) and strives to maintain the Chinese society's status quo, like its Western counterpart (Herman & Chomsky, 1988).

To guarantee that news organizations are doing their jobs properly, the party and the government have established a comprehensive censorship system running from the highest central level to the lowest county level (Zhao, 1998). The most powerful censorship machine is the Chinese Communist Party Central Committee Propaganda/Publicity Department, which has authority to censor any news organizations in China (Zhao, 1998).

There have been dramatic political and economic changes in China since the late 1970s when the then isolated country decided to open its doors to Western nations. Market-based reforms have made Chinese mass media increasingly commercialized (Huang, 2003; Lee, 2000; Winfield & Peng, 2005; Zhao, 1998). Media outlets in China today, however, are still under tight party and government control. The party has even tightened its control of the press since 2013 (Bandurski, 2015), and the control has made double standards in news reporting even more prevalent (see Jeffries, 2010; Li, 2013; United States Congressional-Executive Commission on China, 2003). When covering domestic news events, the Chinese media organizations prefer highlighting the good news. When covering international news events, especially news events from major Western powers such as the United States, the Chinese mass media likes highlighting the bad news. As a group of 22 Chinese scholars and lawyers said in an open letter criticizing CCTV, the broadcaster "tell[s] only the good news in domestic coverage and give[s] only bad information when it comes to foreign countries" (China Real Time Report, 2009, para. 22; Zhao, 1998). The author of the letter said to the BBC that "its signatories were fed up with the positive spin on domestic news from the central TV station and the negative tone on international events (Chen, 2009). Even CCTV coverage of entertainment such as Spring Festival Galas and sports that are less politically sensitive have their propaganda goals (X. Wang, 2010). To follow the party line of building a harmonious society in China and defending against admiration for American-style democracy, CCTV programs tend to romanticize China and demonize America. Although the cold war news frame on CCTV is on the decline (Dong & Chang, 2009), its bias against the United States still lingers.

CCTV is one of the most powerful and influential news organizations in China. The broadcaster, merged in March 2018 with China National Radio and China Radio International to create Voice of China (Jiang, 2018; Stone, 2018), is an electronic media conglomerate with more than 10,000 employees and annual revenue of 12.4 billion yuan (\$1.9 billion; SAPPRFT, 2014; Tilt & Xiao, 2010). CCTV is accessible to more than one billion viewers. Its daily 30-minute evening news, *Xinwen Lianbo*, or CCTV Tonight, attracts nearly 500 million regular viewers countrywide (Central Intelligence Agency, 2013).

### **Cultivation Theory and Cultivation Effects of CCTV**

Developed by George Gerbner in the 1960s, cultivation theory has become “one of the most widely known and influential approaches to studying the consequences of growing up and living with television” (Morgan, 2009, p. 69). According to Morgan and Shanahan (1990), “cultivation research examines the extent to which cumulative exposure to television contributes to viewers’ conceptions of social reality, in ways that reflect the most stable, repetitive, and pervasive patterns of images and ideologies that television presents” (p. 1). In a 1968 study, Gerbner found that, compared with light viewers who watch TV less than two hours per day and moderate viewers who watch TV two to four hours per day, heavy viewers who watch TV more than four hours a day were more likely to perceive the real world through the lens of the television world (Potter, 2014). Simply put, people who watch television more are more likely to equate the real world with the world portrayed by television.

Cultivation theory has been tested and supported by many empirical studies (e.g., Diefenbach & West, 2001; Gerbner, 1970; Gerbner, 1996a; Tyler & Cook, 1984; Weaver & Wakshlag, 1986). The term “mean world syndrome,” coined by Gerbner, refers to the idea that heavy consumption of violence-saturated television leads to perceptions that the actual world is more dangerous and threatening than might actually be the case (see Gerbner, Gross, Morgan, & Signorielli, 1980).

Cultivation effects can be divided into two categories: first-order effects and second-order effects. First-order effects are those that indicate a viewer’s cultivated perceptions of the prevalence or probability of events. Such effects were first identified by Hawkins and Pingree (1982) and further explored by many other scholars (Gerbner, 1996b; Potter & Chang, 1990; Rossler & Brosius, 2001; Tyler & Cook, 1984). Second-order effects are those that indicate a viewer’s cultivated attitudes and values (Rossler & Brosius, 2001). For example, researchers have reported that heavy television viewing cultivates acceptance or tolerance of authoritarianism (Shanahan, 1998) and materialism (Shrum, Burroughs, & Rindfleisch, 2005).

Based on the literature review on cultivation effects and Chinese media systems, we reasonably suggest that a frequent viewer of CCTV programming would be cultivated to believe that China is a harmonious society with minimal crime problems and high social trust, whereas America is a dangerous society with widespread crime problems and low social trust. Two hypotheses are thus proposed to examine both first-order and second-order cultivation effects of CCTV programming:

- H1: The more Chinese people watch CCTV programming, the more likely they are to negatively predict the prevalence of crime and perceive a higher level of social trust in China.*
- H2: The more Chinese people watch CCTV programming, the more likely they are to positively predict the prevalence of crime and perceive a lower level of social trust in United States.*

### **Cultivation Effects of U.S.-Imported Media Content**

Many people in China enjoy watching foreign television shows, particularly U.S. ones. For example, Chinese viewers, college students in particular, avidly watch American TV shows such as *House of Cards*, *24*, *Prison Break*, *Heroes*, *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*, *Desperate Housewives*, and *The Vampire Diaries*, either through national and local television stations or via the Internet, VCDs, or DVDs; Wang, 2008). With rapid expansion and avid consumption of global media across national borders, cultivation effects in international settings have become an increasingly important subject.

Many researchers have found support for the idea that foreign TV content influences (or cultivates) individuals' attitudes and cognitions toward the originating country (e.g., Kim, 2007; Vu & Lee, 2013). For example, Tan and Suarchavarat (1988) found that viewing American television contributed to stereotypes of Americans held by students in Thailand (Tan & Suarchavarat, 1988). Similarly, Hetsroni (2008) reported that Israeli heavy viewers of U.S. television news and crime-action dramas held a biased estimation of the prevalence of policemen, lawyers, and salesmen in the United States in a manner consistent with U.S. television content (Hetsroni, 2008). Moreover, Kim's (2007) research found that the frequency of watching U.S. television crime shows correlated positively with the level of fear of crime in the United States among Korean students (Kim, 2007).

In addition to influencing perceptions about foreign countries, exposure to foreign television programs has also been found to influence individuals' perceptions of their own countries. For instance, Jain, Mitra, and Hazen (2011) found that exposure and attention to contemporary Westernized and adapted TV programming cultivated Indian people's attitudes toward equality, sexual behavior, marital relationships, and individualistic values (Jain et al., 2011). In another study, Yang, Ramasubramanian, and Oliver (2008) reported that viewers in South Korea and India, when repeatedly exposed to U.S. television, had an exaggerated estimation of Americans' affluence and thus harbored resentment toward their own societies.

Given these findings, this study also attempts to explore both first- and second-order cultivation effects of all genres of U.S.-imported TV programming on Chinese audiences by proposing the following research question:

*RQ1: Does the level of exposure to various genres of imported U.S. television programs influence the way Chinese viewers perceive the United States and China in terms of crime prevalence and citizens' trustworthiness, helpfulness, and fairness?*

### **Method**

#### ***Participants and Procedures***

To test the hypotheses and answer the research question, 139 students from a major university in Beijing were recruited to participate in a survey, distributed electronically in April, May, and June of 2011. Instructors distributed instructions regarding how to access the questionnaire online, and

participants completed the survey by self-reporting requested data on the questionnaire. Participants were told that all responses were anonymous and that participation in the survey was not mandatory. It took approximately 15–20 minutes for participants to complete the questionnaire. The participants were informed of the purpose of the study at the end. Of the 139 participants, 27 were excluded from the final analysis, as they failed to complete the questionnaire. The final sample for this study was 112.

### ***Independent Variables***

Three question sets were used to measure the two independent variables of this study: CCTV viewing hours and U.S. television programs viewing hours. First, participants were asked to identify how many hours per week that they watch Chinese television programs in the following nine genres: news, comedies, movies, television dramas, sports, music videos, police and crime dramas, reality programs, and others. Then, in the next question, they were asked to specify the estimated percentage of their television viewing that was from CCTV. The hours spent on viewing Chinese television programs in the nine genres were added together, and then multiplied by the CCTV viewing percentage to get a total number of CCTV viewing hours per week.

In addition, participants were also asked to identify the number of hours per week that they watched imported U.S. television programs in the nine genres named above. The total amount of exposure to U.S. television programs was calculated by summing up the answers for the second question. Prior research has suggested that measuring the independent variable (e.g., television viewing) before the outcome variables may sensitize participants to their viewing patterns and the potential role of television in affecting their attitudes or beliefs (see Shrum, 2008). To avoid these problems, television-viewing hours were measured after the dependent variables.

This study employed individuals' estimates of their viewing hours as a viewing percentage. Of course, all self-report measures are subject to questions of validity. This potential problem is not unique to this study, as it is also descriptive of almost all cultivation studies. With this in mind, we believe that this approach to viewing estimation is reasonable, particularly because all participants answered questions using the same approach. Hence, any inaccuracy in the measure is represented across the sample, making it inconsequential in analyses such as regression or correlation.

When selecting the nine genres of television programming, we based the template on prior research examining television consumption and social reality perceptions for variables related in this study. The nine genres were selected to represent a broad array of programming (see Oliver & Armstrong, 1998).

### ***Dependent Variables***

**Perceptions of the prevalence of crime.** Participants' perceptions of the prevalence of crime in China were measured by asking them to estimate the percentage of people in China who will commit a violent crime (e.g., murder, robbery, assault) and nonviolent crime (e.g., theft, vandalism) from 1% (low) to 100% (high). To measure the prevalence of crime in the United States, we used the same set of

questions, and participants were asked to estimate the percentages of crimes that would be committed by White Americans and African Americans, respectively. We asked the participants to answer the questions separately for White Americans and African Americans because we used the template from prior research (see Oliver & Armstrong, 1998). Furthermore, various studies (see Cheng, 2011; Pfafman, Carpenter, & Tang, 2015; Sautman, 1994) show that racial discrimination against Black people has been deeply rooted in Chinese culture and society, and we thought it would be interesting to see if Chinese participants in this study would perceive African Americans as more prone to crime than White Americans. We exclude other races here because White Americans and African Americans constitute the majority of the U.S. population, according to the most recent U.S. census data (United States Census Bureau, 2010).

**Perception of social trust.** In addition to asking participants about their crime estimation, the study also measured their social trust in the two countries as a way to evaluate their social perceptions. We created these survey items for China: "Most of the time, people in China can be trusted," "Most of the time, people in China try to be helpful," "Most people in China would try to be fair." We used the same items for the United States. The three items, "trustworthy," "helpful," and "fair," were developed for use in this study to reflect the conceptual opposite of what Gerbner appeared to mean when referring to perceptions of the mean-world syndrome (see Gerbner & Gross, 1976). In addition, the three items encompassing social trust were borrowed from the Social Trust Index, a measurement widely used in various studies (see Beilmann & Lilleoja, 2015; Hooghe & Vanhoutte, 2011; Pew Research Center, 2007). Reliability tests were performed; however, the results were poor (social trust in China: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .57$ ; social trust in the United States: Cronbach's  $\alpha = .68$ ). Therefore, we decided to test the three items separately instead of combining them to create one scale.

### **Control Variables**

The study also measured some variables that could affect participants' perceptions of crime rate, such as participants' age, sex, and number of years living in a city. In addition, the study also asked participants about the number of times they had visited the United States, the number of close friends they had in America, and the number of relatives they had there. We believe that having these experiences could affect participants' perceptions of the United States, which could, in turn, influence their responses to the same crime-rate and social trust measurement items in this study. Therefore, these six variables are included in the analysis for the purpose of statistical control.

## **Results**

### **Demographics of Participants**

The age of the final sample ( $N = 112$ ) ranged from 18 to 40 ( $M = 22.09$ ,  $SD = 4.42$ ), with 36 (32.1%) males and 76 (67.9%) females. About 95% of these participants had experiences of living in a city for at least one year, and the average score for number of years living in a city was 10.14 ( $SD = 9.40$ ). With regard to participants' experiences of living and travelling in the United States, 9.8% had lived in or visited the United States at least once previously. In addition, 15.2% of the participants



indicated that they had some relatives living in the United States ( $M = 0.42$ ,  $SD = 1.48$ ), and 49.5% of them had some friends living in the United States ( $M = 1.67$ ,  $SD = 3.14$ ).

The participants' average amount of Chinese television viewing and CCTV viewing were 4.38 hours ( $SD = 4.50$ ) and 1.47 hours ( $SD = 3.16$ ) per week. In regard to imported U.S. television viewing, the average viewing hours per week was 2.63 ( $SD = 3.52$ ).

### **Tests of Hypotheses and Research Question**

To test the hypotheses and the research question discussed above, a series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were performed. For each dependent variable, the control variables of gender, age, years of living in a city, number of times visiting America, and number of relatives and friends who have lived in that country were entered in the first step, and the independent variables of CCTV viewing and hours of U.S. TV program viewing were entered in the second step. Before the hierarchical multiple regression analysis was performed, the independent variables were examined for collinearity. Results of this test indicated that the variance inflation factor was always less than 1.41, and the collinearity tolerance was always greater than .71, suggesting that a very low level of multicollinearity was present.

Table 1 summarizes the beta coefficient results of hierarchical multiple regression analyses.

**Table 1. Results of Hierarchical Multiple Regression Analyses.**

<b>Variables</b>	<b><math>\beta</math> (SE)</b>	<b><i>p</i></b>
DV: commit a violent crime (China):		
Amount of CCTV viewing	.06 (.47)	.53
Amount of U.S. program viewing	.44 (.42)	< .001
DV: commit a violent crime (U.S., White American):		
Amount of CCTV viewing	.19 (.58)	< .05
Amount of U.S. program viewing	.41 (.52)	< .001
DV: commit a violent crime (U.S., Black American):		
Amount of CCTV viewing	.11 (.71)	< .28
Amount of U.S. program viewing	.28 (.64)	< .01
DV: % who will commit a nonviolent crime (China):		
Amount of CCTV viewing	-.13 (.59)	.19
Amount of U.S. program viewing	.35 (.53)	< .001
DV: % who will commit a nonviolent crime (U.S., White American):		
Amount of CCTV viewing	-.16 (.59)	.13
Amount of U.S. program viewing	.38 (.53)	< .001
DV: % who will commit a nonviolent crime (U.S., Black American)		
Amount of CCTV viewing	.003 (.77)	.98

Amount of U.S. program viewing	.23 (.69)	< .05
DV: People in China can be trusted:		
Amount of CCTV viewing	.67 (.04)	.55
Amount of U.S. program viewing	.23 (.04)	< .05
DV: People in the U.S can be trusted:		
Amount of CCTV viewing	-.09 (.04)	.04
Amount of U.S. program viewing	.09 (.04)	.38
DV: People in China are helpful:		
Amount of CCTV viewing	.24 (.05)	< .05
Amount of U.S. program viewing	-.08 (.05)	.48
DV: People in the U.S. are helpful:		
Amount of CCTV viewing	-.07 (.04)	.07
Amount of U.S. program viewing	.00 (.04)	.00
DV: People in China are trying to be fair:		
Amount of CCTV viewing	.13 (.05)	.26
Amount of U.S. program viewing	.06 (.04)	.58
DV: People in the U.S. are trying to be fair:		
Amount of CCTV viewing	-.17 (.04)	.12
Amount of U.S. program viewing	.11 (.04)	.29

Contrary to H1, the amount of CCTV viewing was not a significant predictor for participants' estimation of either violent ( $\beta = .06, p = .53$ ) or nonviolent crime rates ( $\beta = -.13, p = .19$ ) in China. On the other hand, CCTV viewing had a significant positive effect on one of the measurement items for social trust in China. To be specific, the more individuals viewed CCTV programs, the more likely they were to perceive people in China as helpful ( $\beta = .24, p < .05$ ). This result suggests that exposure to CCTV programs may increase Chinese viewers' perceptions of China as a harmonious society. Therefore, H1 was partially supported.

H2 tested the effect of CCTV viewing on individuals' perceptions of crime prevalence in the United States. The results of the analyses indicated that the amount of CCTV viewing had a positive influence on perception of violent crimes perpetrated by White Americans ( $\beta = .19, p < .05$ ). Such effects, however, were not found for violent crimes committed by African Americans ( $\beta = .11, p = .28$ ) or nonviolent crimes for either White Americans ( $\beta = -.16, p = .13$ ) or African Americans ( $\beta = .003, p = .98$ ). In addition, CCTV viewing was not a significant predictor of participants' perceptions of social trust in America. Therefore, H2 was partially supported.

RQ1 asked whether the exposure to imported U.S. television programs affected Chinese viewers' perceptions toward the United States and China in terms of crime prevalence and citizens' trustworthiness, helpfulness, and fairness. As can be seen in Table 1, U.S. television program viewing was a significant predictor of participants' perceptions of crime prevalence in both China and the United States. In other words, the more Chinese individuals viewed imported U.S. television programs, the more likely they were to perceive both China

and the U.S. as crime-ridden countries. Interestingly, the amount of viewing of U.S. television programs had stronger effects on participants' perceptions of crime prevalence in China compared with those crime perceptions in the United States. In terms of social trust, the amount of U.S. television viewing did not affect the degree to which viewers perceived the people in the United States as trusted, helpful, and fair. However, the amount of exposure to U.S. television programs was a significant predictor of how much trust participants would have in people in China. Specifically, when individuals viewed more imported U.S. television programs, they were more likely to think that people in China can be trusted.

To summarize the results, although the amount of CCTV viewing did not affect participants' perceptions of crime prevalence in China, it positively affected how much they thought people in China were helpful. In addition, the amount of CCTV viewing positively influenced participants' estimated percentages of violent crimes committed by White Americans in the United States.

Additionally, the amount of imported U.S. television programs was a significant predictor for participants' perceptions of crime prevalence in both China and the United States. Participants estimated a higher rate of violent crimes and nonviolent crimes in China and America when they viewed imported U.S. television programs for a longer period of time. Furthermore, the greater the amount of U.S. television program viewing, the more likely that participants would perceive people in China as trustworthy.

### **Discussion**

This study examined the cultivation effects of viewing CCTV and U.S. television programs on individuals living in China. The results from a survey of 112 college students in China suggest that as individuals increased their amount of CCTV viewing, they were more likely to perceive China as a society where people are willing to help each other. In addition, the increase in CCTV viewing also raised viewers' perceptions of the rate of crime in the United States. The amount of U.S. television program viewing predicted most of the outcome variables in this study, including individuals' perceptions of crime rates in China and America, and their level of trust in people in China. To our surprise, the strength of cultivation effects from U.S. television program viewing on individuals' perceived prevalence of crime in China was much stronger than their perceived prevalence of crime in the U.S. This section discusses the details of these findings. Readers should read the discussion with awareness of limitations, given that the limitations of the study (which will be covered later) were significantly big enough to influence the findings.

First, contrary to our initial speculations, CCTV viewing had limited influence on individuals' crime perceptions for either China or the United States. This may be caused by the fact that the participants in this study were young college students, who tend to have better understanding of media censorship in China than others, and therefore build resistance to the messages from Chinese media. Another reason could be the low level of CCTV viewing among our participants. As noted in the results section, the average hours of CCTV viewing of our participants was 1.47 per week. This is even lower than their average U.S. television program viewing time (2.63 hours per week). Such a limited amount of CCTV viewing may cause a floor effect, resulting in less significant effects of CCTV viewing on crime perceptions for the two countries.

On the other hand, our analyses did indicate partial support for our hypothesis that CCTV would be positively associated with perceptions of China as a more harmonious country, as the higher level of CCTV viewing increased individuals' perceptions that people in China are helpful. However, such effects were not found for the other two items that measured social trust in China, that people in China could be trusted and are fair. We speculate that such results may be partly because of the content of CCTV programs. The survey for this study was taken in the summer of 2011, which was immediately after the Tohoku earthquake and the subsequent tsunami that hit Japan. CCTV broadcast many reports about relief that China sent to Japan, a country with which China has lots of historical and territorial disputes. The exposure to these types of reports during such a special time period may have particularly left viewers with an impression that Chinese people are helpful.

Furthermore, the results of this study found that the amount of imported U.S. television viewing had substantial effects on individuals' perceptions of crime in the United States and China. This result is remarkable, as the amount of CCTV viewing had only a few significant effects on crime perceptions. Perhaps these findings reflect the idea that our participants tended to choose to watch violence-saturated action dramas and movies from the United States, such as *Prison Break* and *Heroes*, because these programs were particularly popular in China. Therefore, participants were more likely to be exposed to violent scenes when viewing U.S. television programs, which in turn influenced their perceptions of crime prevalence in these two sharply different societies.

Interestingly, although the higher amount of U.S. television viewing was associated with higher levels of perceived crime in China, it was associated positively with perceptions that people in China can be trusted. This result seems counterintuitive, as higher levels of exposure to U.S. television viewing made individuals perceive China as crime ridden and harmonious at the same time. In future studies, we could gain some insight into this contradiction from evidence drawn from focus-group interviews with participants. At this point, we can only speculate that such results were caused by the fact that individuals processed U.S. television programs from two different modes, namely heuristic and systematic. According to studies about dual-processing models in social psychology (Chaiken, 1980; Petty & Cacioppo, 1986), heuristic processing refers to a less effortful information-processing mode, whereas systematic processing is a thorough and analytic way of processing information. Heuristic and systematic ways of processing information may occur simultaneously under proper conditions. Social psychologists believe that when motivation and self-efficacy are high, systematic processing may override effects of heuristic processing (Chaiken, Liberman, & Eagly, 1989). This is exactly what happens when Chinese viewers watch violence-saturated TV content produced in the United States. It can be assumed that, on the one hand, violent scenes in the U.S. television programs served as a cue that triggered individuals to make a quick judgment that, in general, violence was prevalent in societies, including China. On the other hand, individuals analytically examined the violent content in U.S. television programs and compared it to their general experiences in China. Participants might feel that Chinese society was not as crime-plagued as that of the United States, and they attributed the reasons to the fact that people in China are more harmonious. As a result, although watching U.S. television programs increased participants' perceptions of crime prevalence in China, it also strengthened their beliefs that people in China are trustworthy.

### Theoretical and Practical Implications

The findings have considerable theoretical and practical implications. This empirical study shows that cultivation theory is applicable to the contemporary Chinese context with different ramifications than in the United States.

**Cultivation effects of CCTV.** This study found that Chinese TV, including CCTV, has very limited cultivation effects, and even more limited effects than U.S. TV. Whereas we found “the harmonious Middle Kingdom syndrome,” where increased exposure to CCTV content contributes to viewers’ perceptions of Chinese people as helpful, and “the dangerous Beautiful Country syndrome,” where increased viewing of CCTV content leads to viewers’ perception of America as crime-ridden, CCTV in general has very limited effects on cultivating perceptions of crime and social trust. The findings here show that government-sponsored propaganda does not have the ability to fully cultivate citizens in the directions desired by the ruling party.

**Cultivation effects of U.S. TV.** This study found that U.S. TV is even more powerful than CCTV in cultivation. The more Chinese individuals watch U.S.-made TV content, the more likely they are going to perceive both China and America as crime-ridden and violence-plagued. We may call this tendency a combination of both “the dangerous Middle Kingdom syndrome” and “the dangerous Beautiful Country syndrome.” We also found that the more Chinese individuals watch U.S. TV content, the more likely they are going to perceive Chinese people as trustworthy. We may call this tendency “the beautiful Middle Kingdom syndrome.” The findings here provide empirical evidence to show that cultivation effects of U.S. TV content are much more powerful and complex than that of its Chinese counterpart.

**Chinese TV versus U.S. TV.** The research findings indicate that foreign media, including U.S. TV, seem to have much bigger effects than domestic media, such as CCTV, which might be explained by the fact that the effect of foreign media can be strengthened by a lack of viewers’ knowledge or direct experience, whereas the effects of domestic media can be lessened with a check with reality.

Most research on Chinese mass media focuses on political, economic, and cultural factors that shape the way that Chinese media works. This study, from a media-effects perspective, sheds light on how media content produced in authoritarian regimes might influence people’s perceptions of reality. It shows that the Communist Party is not always successful in bringing its citizens into its ideological camp. The study demonstrates that Chinese people, especially younger generations, are watching less and less CCTV content. Instead, they are turning more and more to foreign TV content acquired from whatever platforms available to them. Such widespread disenchantment with homemade TV content could be another cause for alarm in the eyes of party and government media censors.

This study also sheds light on how media content produced in liberal democracies such as the United States could cultivate perceptions of viewers living in authoritarian regimes such as China. In the eyes of Chinese top media regulators, some cultivation effects are harmful and some are useful. As the country steps up its efforts to restrict the import of foreign cultural products, including U.S. ones (Boehler, 2014), it may risk throwing the baby out with the bathwater.

### **Limitations and Directions for Future Studies**

This study has some limitations and directions for future studies that are worth noting. First, a larger sample size would definitely increase the statistical power of this study. Our attempt to increase sample size, however, encountered many logistical obstacles, as it is hard in China to recruit students to participate in surveys dealing with sensitive topics such as government censorship. Second, recruiting college students as participants was cost effective, but the sample was clearly not representative of the whole population in China. Today, urban Chinese youth increasingly prefer the Internet to traditional media (Guo & Wu, 2009). The number of faithful viewers of CCTV programs among Chinese college students is on the rapid decline. As a result, college students may be increasingly inappropriate to be selected as participants in future empirical research that examines media consumption and television viewing in particular.

Third, as communication technology advances, the medium through which urban Chinese youth consume foreign TV content is becoming more diverse. Does choice of medium (TV, VCD, DVD, and Internet) by participants have an impact on cultivation effects? How might cultivation effects from watching CCTV (one single medium and one single source) and from watching U.S. TV shows (multiple media and multiple sources) contribute to different results? For future studies, such questions are definitely worth examining.

Fourth, many young people in China prefer the Internet to traditional TV programs, and that was probably why their total exposure to CCTV and TV in general was low. Therefore, it is important to control for this type of exposure in the study. The current study did not control for such variables as the number of hours and the types of content participants accessed via the Internet, especially content pertaining to U.S. media and news. Future studies may wish to control for such variables.

Fifth, the study did not conduct a content analysis of CCTV programs. A content analysis would provide more empirical support for the argument that CCTV is adopting double standards in covering domestic and international news events. Sixth, like all cultivation effects research, this study cannot establish a causal relationship between amount of television viewing and perceptions of heavy and light TV viewers. Surveys are insufficient to validate causality, and experiments are needed. Focus-group interviews with participants in future studies will provide more robust explanations for inconsistencies or discrepancies in the results.

Seventh, this study employed the Internet to distribute the survey. Prior studies show that telephone surveys tend to produce larger cultivation effects than mail surveys (Shrum, 2007), so future studies could replicate the current study by using both mail and telephone surveys to see if different survey methods would result in different cultivation effects.

Eighth, China is currently tightening curbs on foreign TV shows (see Griffiths, 2016; Charles Liu, 2017; Martina, 2016), and today's Chinese media landscape is quite different from that of 2011, when the survey for this study was taken. It is hard to predict when, if ever, the country will relax its foreign TV censorship rules. In the future when Chinese audiences resume their access to foreign TV programs, it would be worthwhile to replicate the study and see if there is a potential spillover effect where watching U.S.

violent shows makes people overestimate the crime rate in their own country and whether watching CCTV could offset such an effect.

In addition, most of the variables in this study were measured using a single item, which could impair the validity of the measurements. Particularly, variables such as social trust are susceptible to construct invalidity and therefore should be measured by using multiple items. This study initially measured social trust using three items. However, we decided to test the three items separately instead of combining them to create one scale because of the poor construct validity. Future studies should consider refining the items to improve the measurement's validity. Lastly, although the survey asked participants about their viewing hours of different genres of TV programs, our study did not specifically analyze how genres play a role in cultivation effects. Future studies could focus on how different genres of TV programs contribute to Chinese audiences' perceptions of the world around them.

To conclude, the results of our study add to the growing literature on international cultivation effects. Our research highlights the importance of examining both local and imported media content on viewers' perceptions and attitudes. By expanding the scope of inquiry, our work demonstrates not only how media operates to influence perceptions of one's own country and of members of other societies but also how deliberate government control of media content serves to moderate individuals' perceptions and beliefs.

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