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How the West is Represented in Modern Fictional Chinese Dramas

The Real Life Political and Economic Influences
Over the Past Decade on Western Representation
in Fictional Chinese Television Dramas

Natalie Lyman Shields

Abstract

Lois Tyson once said, “Neither human events (in the political or personal domain) nor human productions (from nuclear submarines to television shows) can be understood without understanding the specific historical circumstances in which those events and productions occur” (Tyson 2006, 54). To parrot Lois Tyson, in order to understand human productions such as modern Chinese dramas, one must understand the specific historical circumstances set around those story plots. This paper will dive into how the West is represented in modern fictional Chinese dramas. In order to do this, this paper will explore the cultural and political circumstances at the time that affected these fictional stories. When referring to the ‘West’ in this paper, it will include Westerners and their cultural norms from the years 2014 to 2022. In these fictional worlds of modern Chinese dramas, Western education is seen as desirable. However, Western morals are typically portrayed as low. Throughout the past hundred years or so, the Chinese people have traditionally accommodated Westerners, but gradually, the portrayal of the West in fictional dramas has started to shift to where the West is seen to accommodate the Chinese people in terms of language and business functions.

Introduction

Media theorist Denis McQuail explained in 2010 the importance of social media when evaluating a country’s ideologies: “Mass media can often

be thought of as a metaphorical mirror, reflecting myriad events in social and physical worlds . . . media [can] hold up a faithful reflection of the current societal norms, and social structures” (Eastin 2014, 233). While the narratives of these dramas are fictional, this form of mass media is seen as a reflection on the social norms of the times. I have chosen three modern fictional Chinese dramas to illustrate how the West is represented in these stories. While these are fictional narratives of interactions with Westerners, according to McQuail’s claim these dramas demonstrate how China as a country feels about the West. The three dramas chosen span over eight years but all focus on a similar narrative of office romance. The first drama is *Boss & Me*, the second, *Go Go Squid*, and the third is *Master of My Own*. For consistency’s sake, these dramas will be referred to by their English titles.

Boss & Me

The first drama *Boss & Me* in Mandarin is known as *Shan Shan lai le* 杉杉来了 (Gu, 2014). This 2014 drama became one of the most successful dramas up to date. On YouTube it has 17,933,3387 views and over 40,000 likes on the first episode alone. While YouTube is banned in China, it is used here for this primary purpose of demonstrating the international success Chinese dramas have. In terms of domestic comments, *Boss & Me* have approximately 117,521 comments, making it a popular TV show during the year 2014. That same year, the leading actress Zhao Li Ying won Most Popular Actress in a TV show for her role of Shan Shan in *Boss & Me* during the 6th China TV Drama Awards. Currently she is the most watched actor with her dramas combined with over 110 billion views, and has only grown in popularity since 2014. The leading man of the show, Zhang Han, won Most Popular Television Actor at the Star Moon Award Ceremony, along with the Asian Star Award at the 10th Seoul International Drama Awards for his role of Feng Teng in the drama. Between the two stars, *Boss & Me* received major critical acclaim both internationally and domestically.

Boss & Me is a drama following the love life of naive, yet sweet, ingénue Shan Shan who works as an accountant for Feng Teng Company where she meets and falls in love with the devilishly handsome boss, Feng Teng. While he is calm and put together, she is common in appearance and her clumsy attempts at love make her an incredibly lovable character, leaving the audience cheering for her success which she eventually gains during her Cinderella transformation into a competent businesswoman.

The show itself often discusses Western education as six characters in the show received their education from prestigious Western schools such as Harvard, Yale, Columbia, and the University of Chicago. Each of them studied business and returned to China in this fictionalized account

to become successful entrepreneurs who are named among the Shanghai elite of the time due to their Western education that allowed them to get a head up on the business competition due to their fluency in English. As the only character without a prestigious Western education, Shan Shan is often shown struggling in international settings as her status isn't as high without a Western education to back her. This shows how desirable a Western education was to Chinese people at the time.

As Shan Shan starts dating her wealthy boss Feng Teng, he is shown to do all his business transactions wholly in English, without a translator. Throughout the drama, he flies to Western countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom in order to complete business negotiations due to his competent ability in the international business language of English. His interactions with American companies specifically are highly successful. This reflects the financial status between China and the United States at that time. In 2010, China became an international powerhouse, second only to the United States. During this time, China became the most worked-with trade partner to the United States in terms of international business. Consequently, this drama shows economic prosperity and mutual trade agreement between the two countries. *Boss & Me* shows successful business negotiations between the two countries, and throughout the drama the United States is portrayed as a good and honest trading partner whose success has come from a good Western education system.

While the United States appears in this drama to be in China's good graces, Great Britain, on the other hand, is not portrayed as kindly. Chinese dramas of this era typically view Western education as desirable and even necessary for a successful career in elite business; however, Western morals are typically portrayed as low, with Westerners themselves as aggressive. In this drama, Great Britain receives the lowest blow when their morals are portrayed as despicable on the screen.

In episode 19, a young woman named Li Shu, who unsuccessfully vies for Feng Teng's romantic attention, goes to London on a business trip with Feng Teng and his best friend. When Li Shu enters a pub in London, she is approached by a drunk British man asking to buy her a drink and is offended by his approach. In this scene, the young British man is portrayed as aggressive when he boldly asks a young Chinese woman to go for a drink with him. In Chinese culture it is too abrasive to invite an unacquainted woman at a bar to get a drink, whereas in Western culture buying someone a drink at a bar is a fairly common exchange. This interaction between the young Chinese woman and the young British man was not added into the drama casually; this scene sounds similar to the embarrassment of the One Hundred Years of Humiliation which dealt with the

interactions of a young country named Great Britain with an older beautiful country known as Qing China.

In recent years, the slogan “Never Forget National Humiliation” was adopted by the CCP government. Zheng Wang, an associate professor in the School of Diplomacy and International Relations at Seton Hall University and a global fellow of the Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, in his book *Never Forget National Humiliation* evaluates the Chinese ideology by claiming, “The legitimacy of China’s current rulers is highly dependent upon successful performance on the international stage” (Wilkinson 2022, 189). In order to bolster China on the international stage, the idea of legitimacy lands on the idea of dignity which, for hundreds of years, was tarnished by the imperial British (Wilkinson 2022, 6). With the CCP government pushing the slogan forward in 2014, the scene between a young Chinese woman being accosted by a British man was likely put into the drama to reflect the cultural slogan of the time. This slogan specifically targets the British imperialists and portrays the West (in particular Great Britain) with a good education system but with low morals and brutish manners. The popular reception nationwide in China to the drama reflects the government’s resentment towards the West for China’s One Hundred Years of Humiliation and how the people received it openly.

Go Go Squid!

The second fictional Chinese drama to analyze is *Go Go Squid!*, known in its native language *Qin'ai de, Re'ai de* 亲爱的, 热爱的 (Mo 2019). This 2019 drama was an all-time hit and won Drama of the Year at the China New Entertainment New Consumer Annual Summit and Best Drama at the China College Students Television Festival. The main actress, Yang Zi, won the Outstanding Actress at the 6th Actors of China Award Ceremony and Most Watched Actress at the 8th China Student Television Festival for her work in the title role Tong Nian, nicknamed “Little Squid.” Li Xian, the male lead of the show won Most Popular Actor of the Year by GQ Men of the Year China for the creation of his role Han Shangyan. Internationally, the drama won critical acclaim with 12,280,991 views and over 83,000 likes on the first episode. Domestically it was a success as well with 423,824 domestic comments, almost four times more than *Boss & Me*.

Go Go Squid! follows an office drama of a young entrepreneur, Han Shangyan, who creates a company of his dreams and encounters by chance a young content creator, Tong Nian, who is unaware of how Han Shangyan’s business works. In order to curry his favor, she learns the ropes of his business and becomes his trusted confidant. Her sweet attitude and respect for everyone she meets melts his cold demeanor, revealing a caring and understanding boss who only wants the best for his employees.

This drama is one of the first to ever show a foreigner doing business fully in the Mandarin language without a translator or a voice over. The business language is shown for the first time as starting to revolve around Chinese speakers and not catering to foreign businesses in the international business language of English. It should be mentioned that the character Han Shangyan also was fluent in English, with some conversations done in English to demonstrate his Western education and Shanghai elite status.

The introduction of a foreigner speaking fully in Mandarin for business deals is reflective of the economic influence China began to have on the international business scene starting in 2019. Due to economic prosperity, China started attracting foreign businesses in high quantities (Morrison 2015). With such a high demand for business deals with Chinese companies, many foreign companies are starting to use the Chinese language in order to appeal more to the Mainland-based companies. Economically, the following year was also important for China: “Despite a year when the Covid-19 pandemic plunged major world economies into recession, China’s economy expanded 2.3% in 2020” (He 2021). While the rest of the world was economically hit, China was able to expand their economy: “Ning Jizhe, head of the statistics bureau [of China] . . . said in 2020 the size of China’s economy surpassed 100 trillion yuan, or the equivalent of \$15.4 trillion, while GDP per capita topped \$10,000 for the first time” (Cheng 2021). The development of the economy during a worldwide pandemic drew more international business to China, increasing the demand for Mandarin speakers to represent foreign companies in China (National Bureau of Statistics of China 2020).

On January 1, 2020, the Foreign Investment Law of the People’s Republic of China (FIL) came into effect (Chen 2021). The FIL was designed to encourage foreign investment in China and international trade to bolster up the economy (Jiang 2022). In terms of the economy opening more international trade, “the FIL reaffirms China’s basic policy of opening up to foreign investment, encourages foreign investment in China, implements policies on higher-level investment liberalization and proclaims a commitment to building a stable, transparent, reliable and fair market environment” (Chen 2021). The FIL continues to encourage foreign investments in China, which can be seen in this drama. One main foreign investment company is shown in *Go Go Squid*, but multiple are also mentioned through the show as competitors to the foreign company that Han Shangyan works closely with. Due to more foreign companies using Mandarin to do business, international companies were typically seen in a good light by the general public, as this drama shows. Many of the foreigners in this drama even become good friends of the main characters, which is the case in real-life business dealings with foreigners.

Master of My Own

The final drama to analyze is the 2022 drama *Master of My Own*, or in Mandarin *Qing Jiao Wo Zongjian* 请叫我总监 (Hu 2022). Unlike the other two dramas, this drama has yet to receive any awards as no award ceremonies have been held since its recent release as of December 2022. While no rewards have been given yet, it did do fairly well domestically with 46,625 comments. On YouTube as of November 2022, international audiences received it well with the first episode having 18,000 likes and 1,858,710 views alone.

The plot of *Master of My Own* also revolves around an office romance like the previous two dramas, following secretary Ning Meng, played by Tan Songyun, a Forbes China 30 under 30 actress, who leaves her overbearing boss, Lu Ji Ming, played by Lin Gengxin who has appeared in several number one box office hits himself, to become a successful businesswoman herself. Their toxic relationship of boss and employee withers away as they become business partners who respect and deeply care for each other; the story follows their love story until the last episode when they confess their love for each other.

While international trade is indicated through the plot, this is the only drama of the three reviewed that does not show a single Westerner in the drama. This is partly due to Covid-19 restrictions that caused many foreigners to leave China in order to avoid the zero-Covid policies or many who were unable to return to China due to border restriction (Klein 2022). From 2020 to now, the Chinese government has started to push the idea that foreigners are no longer considered vital to the nation's economic progress, and the country should be self-sufficient. One way the government is progressing this ideology is portraying the West in a poor light through fictional media, as seen in this drama. The West is viewed as prejudiced, full of racism, and backwards in thinking in comparison to the open market and intelligent Chinese in recent media. The highly valued Western education that was once viewed as essential to succeed in international business in this drama is portrayed as corruptible. The idea of Western morality as low is reflected in a character in the drama named Jason.

In this drama, the female character Ning Meng becomes romantically involved with a former college classmate of hers named Jason. As a young student at college in China, he was the top student of his class and viewed as extremely honorable and trustworthy. After graduation, he moved to the United States to work on Wall Street before moving back to China for better employment. In episode 11, Jason confides to Ning Meng that he was a victim of racism when finding a job in the United States, and most of his American co-workers looked down on him due to his Chinese morals. This interaction between the two characters demonstrates how the perspective

of Western morals of being low are shown recently in fictional dramas. This show reflects the negative bias the government has been pushing through art lately in China, particularly towards their biggest trade partner.

As current chairman of China Xi Jin Ping put it, the country “will never again tolerate being bullied by any nation” (Buckley 2021). While the United States did not humiliate China like Great Britain did during the Hundred Years of Humiliation, China does not tolerate the United States bullying itself into other countries’ problems, and these politician tensions are starting to be shown in the fictional drama worlds (Mitter 2021).

Jason, as a character, is used to demonstrate how Western beliefs corrupt Chinese youth. As the plot continues, Jason, who worked in the United States, admits to dealing in illegal trades—something he learned from his time in the United States. However, he comes to his senses when his pure Chinese girlfriend Ning Meng, who has no contact with the Western world, reminds him of his trustworthy Chinese-like manner of interacting honorably with people. In a moment of desperation, he is reminded of his upbringing through the Chinese education systems and the morals it taught him. He becomes a decent person and turns himself into the police. As a character, Jason is reflective of the current cultural belief that Western values corrupt the pure Chinese morality. The drama ends with Ning Meng proclaiming her love to a respectable hard-working Chinese man who has no international business dealings with any United States companies, and her Americanized boyfriend, Jason, behind bars.

Conclusion

To summarize, the West was once considered by many as fashionable with its culture and education a decade or so ago and was reflected in dramas such as *Boss & Me*. Some dramas demonstrated respect for the West but also the need for international companies to cater to Chinese needs as seen in *Go Go Squid*. However, due to modern economics and government policy changes, Chinese fictional dramas have started reflecting the view that the West needs to start learning from China as Western ethics and morals are low, as seen in the drama *Master of My Own*.

In conclusion, Lois Tyson stated the following about art:

“[Art] does not exist in some timeless, aesthetic realm as an object to be passively contemplated. Rather, like all cultural manifestations, it is a product of the socioeconomic and hence ideological conditions of the time and place in which it was written, whether or not the author intended it so. Because human beings are themselves products of their socioeconomic and ideological environment, it is assumed that authors cannot help but create works that embody ideology in some form” (Tyson 2006, 55).

Each fictional drama mirrors something politically, socioeconomically, or culturally in its plot, whether the creators did so intentionally or not. As more cultural push and government influence appears in Chinese fictional dramas, it is likely that Chinese dramas will continue to reflect poorly on Western countries and the ideas they represent.

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