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*A Comparative Case  
Study of Chinese  
Symbols Portrayed in  
American Situation  
Comedies: Friends  
and The Big Bang  
Theory*

WORD COUNTS: 92277 CHARACTERS

XING GAO

## Abstract

The topic of my master's thesis is Chinese symbols that are portrayed in two American situation comedies: *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. The reason to conduct this research is that I have been watching *The Big Bang Theory* since college. As one of my favorite American situation comedies, it has brought endless laughter to me. But each time when I see episodes or scenes talking about China or Chinese characters, as a Chinese audience, I have realized that sometimes they are not presented the same as what images I have learned in Chinese culture. In order to figure out whether or not these symbols are presented in a humorous way, I choose *Friends*: another American sitcom that contains Chinese symbols but was produced in earlier time and has different stories and characters to make comparison. I have formulated the following three research questions: 1) How are Chinese symbols portrayed in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*? 2) To what degree do Chinese symbols in the two sitcoms reflect the real manifestations of Chinese culture? 3) In sitcoms that are scripted in different time periods, what are the differences/similarities of portraying Chinese symbols? --- Making a comparison of *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*.

My research strategy is a qualitative research, and it is designed as a comparative case study. Data is collected from transcripts of episodes that have shown Chinese symbols, items or characters in one to ten seasons of *Friends* and one to ten seasons of *The Big Bang Theory*. A table that illustrates what Chinese symbols are portrayed in which season and episode of *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* is included in analysis part of each case. Hofstede's cultural theory, humor theory and theory of semiotics are combined together to analyze data, aiming to answer research questions and examine whether or not Chinese symbols in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* are portrayed in order to create humorous effects.

The analysis and conclusion have proved that most Chinese characters and Chinese languages (in written and spoken) are portrayed in stereotyped ways, in order to make the scenes more hilarious. Chinese food and traditional Chinese clothes are totally corresponded with what they are in Chinese culture. Chinese products are found in several episodes of *The Big Bang Theory*, and some Chinese items are mixed up with Western understandings of cultural meanings. It has also been proved that different American sitcoms scripted in different time periods and with different storylines portray Chinese symbols in different ways, but they also share some similarities.

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## 1. Introduction

Since college, watching *The Big Bang Theory*, one of my favorite American situation comedies, has become a way of relaxation in my leisure time. When I enjoy the laughter it brings to me, I am attracted by some Chinese symbols in the episodes. These symbols are portrayed in a humorous way, but as a Chinese audience, I feel that this is an inappropriate understanding of Chinese culture, instead of humor. Inspired by *The Big Bang Theory*. I intend to conduct an academic research of the phenomenon. After searching for information on the websites and reading some academic journals, I have figured out that Chinese symbols are portrayed in other American sitcoms as well. Among these sitcoms, I decide to involve *Friends* in my study, because it has similar seasons to *The Big Bang Theory*, but the stories and characters are presented differently. Also, these two sitcoms are produced in different time, it will be interesting to research on whether or not Chinese symbols are depicted from different angles.

Situation comedy, abbreviated as sitcom, is categorized as one of the television dramas. It amuses audiences through creating hilarious characters, humorous languages and relaxing atmospheres. Sitcoms usually adhere to the series format, with each continuing for a limited number of episodes (Casey 2002). The stories in each episode of sitcom are independent, all these independent stories are composed as a series in the end. Situation comedy reflects daily lives in a humorous way, audiences are inspired to think about some routine problems while laughing.

*Friends* was aired on the television in 1994. There were ten seasons, 240 episodes in total. *Friends* was a primetime darling, holding a spot on NBC (National Broadcasting Company)'s coveted "Must See TV" Thursday lineup for ten years, and attracting millions of viewers each week (Todd 2011). There were six characters (Rachel, Monica, Phoebe, Joey, Chandler and Ross), telling stories happened among them when they live in New York. This tv series reflects lives of American in different social classes objectively and represents mainstream values in American society. Through watching these episodes, audiences can understand the U.S. culture more comprehensively and experience residents' daily lives in American metropolis and their values. Television plays a predominant role in the lives of most Americans: families organize their living rooms around television set; people arrange their schedules around favorite shows; and fans discuss and dissect what happened on last night's episode (Todd 2011). Not only has *Friends* gained popularity among American audiences, but

also it attracts Chinese audiences' attentions. Learning English is a key reason why so many young Chinese follow American programming, as watching them has proven to be an effective way to learn the language's colloquial form (Zhou 2013). Chinese symbols are portrayed sometimes in the episodes, ranging from Chinese food, clothes with Chinese styles to Chinese people engaged in service jobs, etc.

*The Big Bang Theory* was aired on television in 2007, until now there are eleven seasons in total, the eleventh season keeps updating since September 2017. It mainly tells hilarious stories happened among five main characters (Penny, Sheldon, Howard, Leonard and Raj). Penny is a beautiful girl with blonde hair and blue eyes, working in a restaurant but dreaming to be an actress. The four male characters are talented scientists who are excellent in dealing with scientific work but lack of emotional intelligence in daily lives. Since it was aired on television or watched through the Internet, *The Big Bang Theory* has attracted audiences from all over the world. Over 13million US and 1 million UK viewers have been turning in to follow the adventures of Leonard and Sheldon, together with their buddies, fellow physicists Raj and engineer Howard, and their "normal" neighbor, Penny (Thomas 2010). The CBS sitcom *The Big Bang Theory* officially launched in China on the online video streaming website Sohu TV in 2009 (Peng 2016). The CBS comedy has not only become Sohu's the most popular U.S. show with 1.5 million views, but also all of China's favorite foreign show (Cendrowski 2014). Scenes regarding to Chinese culture are spotted in some episodes, and Chinese symbols in these episodes are reflected through Chinese food and chopsticks, learning to speak Chinese, a Chinese who is the owner of Chinese restaurant, etc.

## **2. Problem Formulation**

- 1) How Chinese symbols are portrayed in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*?
- 2) To what degree do Chinese symbols in the two sitcoms reflect the real manifestations of Chinese culture?
- 3) In sitcoms that are scripted in different time periods, what are the differences/similarities of portraying Chinese symbols?

---Making a comparison of *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*.

## **3. Literature Review**

Quaglio, Douglas & Reppen (2004) conduct a comparative study of languages in American sitcoms and conversations, they have established a corpus that contains

transcripts from nine seasons of *Friends* to compare with American conversation subcorpus of the *Longman Grammar Corpus*. Quaglio (2008) studies on linguistic similarities and functional differences between television dialogue and natural conversation, considering from the perspective of ESL (English as a Second Language) teaching and learning. Y. Chang (2006) demonstrates effectively three characteristics of nonverbal communication, through using video clips from a popular sitcom, *Friends*. Todd (2011) illustrates the influence of television on fans' social perspectives and cultural identities. C.-h. Hsiao (2014) examines the phenomenon of cultural translation in the context of an underground network of Internet-based amateur translators in China.

Van zyl & Botha (2016) and Bednarek (2012) examine the linguistic construction of the character Sheldon Cooper in the CBS sitcom *The Big Bang Theory*. Their linguistic analyses of *The Big Bang Theory* have highlighted Sheldon as a character and his language features. Hu (2013) and Ma & Jiang (2013) analyze verbal humor of *The Big Bang Theory* by using "adaption-relevance theory". Chakravarty (2017) regards humor in *The Big Bang Theory* as an interpersonal communication and analyzes it through non-linguistic strategies. Hu (2012) aims to help Chinese audiences to understand verbal humor in *The Big Bang Theory* with combinative analyses of pragmatics and relevant theories. Yin & Miao (2012) analyze rhetorical devices in dialogues of *The Big Bang Theory*, trying to help improve English learners' awareness and appreciation of rhetorical means in English-based literary works. Peng (2016) explains online resistance to censorship among Chinese fans of *The Big Bang Theory*. C.-H. Hsiao (2017) examines the ethnicity discourses represented in *The Big Bang Theory* and Chinese audience's responses to dialogues involving ethnic issues represented in it.

Current academic researches about *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* mainly focus on linguistics studies and cultural understandings in translation and discourse studies. My research aims to study how culture is interpreted and how symbols that represent the culture are portrayed in some American situation comedies. Even though my study only includes two American sitcoms, it does not focus on linguistic analysis, but pays more attention to explore the relationships between American sitcoms and cultural studies. The aim is to verify whether or not Chinese symbols in the two American sitcoms can be interpreted through humor ways. Although Mills (2005, p. 19) criticizes that "little has been done by Cultural Studies to engage with either broadcast comedy

or social humor”. Because “comedy’s straightforward pleasures may represent an attack on social structures which are rendered toothless by being laughed away” (Mills 2005, p. 19) and the object in cultural studies “is worthwhile inevitably requires that the subject is dealt with seriously, and this is easier to do if you’re dealing with something inherently serious” (Mills 2005, p. 19).

## **4. Methodology**

### **4.1 Research Strategy**

Research strategy in my thesis is mainly concerned with qualitative research. Qualitative research mainly includes episodes (transformed to transcripts) which are related to Chinese symbols in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* are chosen as origins of qualitative data. Qualitative approaches are nonstatistical approaches that tend to be more textually based, often used to gain an understanding of underlying reasons and motivations for social phenomenon (Dunn and Neumann 2016, p. 10).

The epistemological consideration of my qualitative study is interpretivism. It is founded upon the view that a strategy is required that respects the differences between people and the objects of the natural sciences and therefore requires the social scientist to grasp the subjective meaning of social action (Bryman 2016, p. 26). Interpretivism is influenced by phenomenology, a philosophy that is concerned with the question of how individuals make sense of the world around them (Bryman 2016, p. 26). My research is going to explore to what extent Chinese symbols in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* are corresponded with realistic Chinese culture, which is a process to describe Chinese cultural phenomena through being acquainted with Chinese symbols in these two situation comedies.

Considering from ontological angle of my research, it is constructionism. *Constructionism* is an ontological position (often also referred to as constructivism) that asserts that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being accomplished by social actors (Bryman 2016, p. 29). It implies that social phenomena are not only produced through social interaction but are in a constant state of revision (Bryman 2016, p. 29). Such implication is related to my research purpose: how Chinese symbols and culture are interpreted by characters who are mainly Americans in a society that constructed in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. Because these two sitcoms were produced in different time periods, Chinese symbols and culture within this society may be presented in various ways. Instead of seeing culture as an external reality that acts



on and constrains people, it can be taken to be an emergent reality in a continuous state of construction and reconstruction (Bryman 2016, p. 30). It suggests that the social world and its categories are not external to us, but are built up and constituted in and through interaction (Bryman 2016, p. 30).

## 4.2 Research Design

A research design provides a framework for the collection and analysis of data (Bryman 2016, p. 40). A case study and a comparative design are applied as research designs to this thesis. The basic case study entails the detailed and intensive analysis of a single case (Bryman 2016, p. 60). Case study research is concerned with the complexity and particular nature of the case in question (Stake 1995). With a case study, the case is an object of interest in its own right, and the researcher aims to provide an in-depth examination of it (Bryman 2016, p. 61). The thesis aims to research on Chinese symbols in American sitcoms, and Chinese symbols in this context are regarded as a community that represents Chinese culture. The specific type of case study in this thesis is the *representative/typical case*. According to Bryman (2016, p. 62), the notion of exemplification implies that cases are often chosen because either they epitomize a broader category of cases or they will provide a suitable context for certain research questions to be answered. Existing academic researches regarding to *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* mainly focus on linguistic analysis, combined with humor theories and nonverbal communications. My research is not a generalized research but it involves in an in-depth analysis of cultural phenomenon in these two sitcoms, which is a typical case study. Comparative research methods have long been used in cross-cultural studies to identify, analyse and explain similarities and differences across societies (Hantrais 1995). Put simply, this design entails studying two contrasting cases using more or less identical methods (Bryman 2016, p. 64). The aim may be to seek explanations for similarities and differences or to gain a greater awareness and deeper understanding of social reality in different national contexts (Hantrais 1995). The reason to combine comparative design with case study is that there are two stages of comparisons in my thesis. The first stage is to make a comparison of the same or similar Chinese cultural phenomena portrayed in the two different sitcoms. The second stage is to compare how many differences are made between Chinese culture portrayed in American sitcoms and Chinese culture demonstrated in realities. These comparison are made through the same approach to research and to collect and analyze data. Also,

it studies on how Chinese culture is interpreted in American situation comedies: *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*, which is in an intercultural context.

### **4.3 Data Collection & Analysis**

Data collection in my thesis involves qualitative data collection. Data collection and analysis are conducted simultaneously. The data comes from counting the frequencies of Chinese symbols depicted in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* and transcripts that are related to Chinese symbols in these two sitcoms.

#### **4.3.1 Data Collection**

Data is collected from two perspectives: what and how many Chinese symbols are portrayed in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*, and some transcripts that mention the word “China” or “Chinese” and indicate Chinese culture. In order to be comparable, I will choose episodes that include all the Chinese symbols in ten seasons (1-10 Season) of *Friends* and ten seasons of *The Big Bang Theory* (1-10 Season) as the source of data. The Statistics of the numbers and contents of Chinese symbols will be illustrated in tables, including Chinese food, clothing, genders of Chinese characters, and types of jobs that Chinese characters are engaged in, etc. Some Chinese symbols or items without lines in transcripts but are showed in the episodes will be listed in the tables. The tables also will illustrate seasons and episodes that contain all the Chinese symbols. The table about how many and what Chinese symbols portrayed in *Friends* includes a reference of secondary sources from some online forums that present what Chinese symbols are depicted in which seasons and episodes. The online statistics are shown in Chinese. The transcripts are derived and downloaded from websites.

#### **4.3.2 Data Analysis**

Qualitative data is derived from transcripts of relevant episodes in both *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. The method to interpret qualitative data is *semiotics*. It is the study/science of signs, and an approach to the analysis of documents and other phenomena that emphasizes the importance of seeking out deeper meaning of those phenomena (Bryman 2016, p. 285). Theories in my research are used to examine to what extent Chinese symbols portrayed in the two situation comedies are corresponded with authentic Chinese culture in data analysis part. Items that indicate Chinese culture in the scenes but without being described in transcripts will be analyzed through the forms of pictures, with a reference to some information available from online resources. Analysis procedures of *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* are separated cases, but they

are also comparable with each other. Because these two sitcoms were scripted in different time periods (*Friends* in 1994 and *The Big Bang Theory* in 2007), and each of them has shaped different characters and has different stories to tell. Thus, it is possible to explore how Chinese symbols are depicted in two sitcoms with different topics and in the time span of approximately ten years.

## **4.4 Limitations**

### **4.4.1 Generalization**

It is often suggested that the scope of the findings of qualitative investigations is restricted (Bryman 2016, p. 399). Although no qualitative studies are generalizable in the probabilistic sense, their findings may be transferable (Marshall and Rossman 2006, p. 42) Even though *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* are one of the most remarkable American situation comedies, my research fails to choose other American situation comedies that also portray Chinese symbols to compare with them. So, my research cannot be generalized. But my research presents a way to research cultural symbols in American situation comedies, which indicates that sitcoms can be studied not only from language perspective, but also from cultural perspective. And it is possible to become a direction in future research, understanding how Chinese symbols and cultures are portrayed in all the American situation comedies.

### **4.4.2 Replication**

The research of mine is not replicable. In qualitative research, the investigator him/herself is the main instrument of data collection, so that what is observed and heard and also what is the focus of the data collection are very much products of his or her preferences (Bryman 2016, p. 398). As a Chinese, I conducted a research about how Chinese symbols are portrayed in American situation comedies. It is based on my understanding of Chinese culture, which may be different from the ways that individuals from other countries comprehend Chinese culture. Also, my research cannot be applied to understand how Chinese symbols are presented in other American sitcoms; because Chinese symbols vary in different shows.

### **4.4.3 The Research**

In the process of my study, it is impossible for me to communicate with people who produced *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. Data is collected based on existing video clips and analyzed through single qualitative analytical approach. If I was given the opportunity, I would conduct an interview to hear from producers' inspirations and

thoughts to portray Chinese symbols in the shows. In this way, research questions would be studied in a more comprehensive way. Meanwhile, my research addresses on how Chinese culture is interpreted in different scenes of *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. There is another angle to research on the question: audiences. It would be possible to conduct Chinese audiences oriented and American audiences oriented studies, researching on how audiences from different cultures understand Chinese symbols that are depicted in American situation comedies. Data would be derived from semi-administrated questionnaires and focus group interviews. Finally, Besides Chinese culture, Asian images are frequently portrayed in American situation comedies. It would be possible to make a comparative research on Chinese images and Asian images that are presented in American sitcoms.

## **5. Research Background**

This section provides theoretical frameworks for my research questions. It is started with an overview of Chinese mass media development since the 1970s and American attitudes towards China when it starts to export its television programs globally. Then, it is followed by a description that reflects the rising of China's soft power.

### **5.1 Mass Media Development in China**

Mass media is a medium that covers large quantities of audiences. The communication is achieved through radios, televisions, newspapers and books, etc. Mass media not only functions as a tool to produce and distribute information, but also as a method to spread culture<sup>1</sup>. Chinese mass media industry started to be developed in 1978. Since China embarked on the path of economic reforms and opened its door to the west in the late 1970s, the structure and process of Chinese mass communication have increasingly become the central focus in social science research (T.-K. W. Chang 2002, p. xviii). Economic growth had led to higher living standards of Chinese people, and it was affordable for increasing numbers of households to purchase televisions. With the proliferation of broadcasting centers and relay stations as well as the growth of ownership, the size of the Chinese television audience has increased dramatically since the 1970s (T.-K. W. Chang 2002, p.17). Watching television had become an approach to entertain for Chinese audiences, however, from 1970 to 1980, television industry was required to serve for the government. Before the 1980s, Chinese television

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<sup>1</sup> Source: <https://baike.sogou.com/v5168514.htm?fromTitle=dazhongchuanmei> [In Chinese]

programming was limited not only in quantity but also in variety and quality, serving merely as an instrument for political indoctrination and social education (T.-K. W. Chang 2002, p. 18). With the advance of reform and openness and the policies proposed by a new generation of Chinese leader (Deng Xiaoping), Chinese economy had been transformed into market-oriented economy. Mass media in China was defined as the tertiary industry, television programs were no longer responsible for government propaganda, television programming started to entertain audiences through various forms and advertisements. Antiforeignism began to ebb in the 1970s, when China entered the United Nations and established diplomatic relations with the United States and other countries (Chan 1994). This means that China had opened its door, and foreign television programs started to be introduced to Chinese audiences. As China progressed through the 1980s with intensified economic reforms and external openness, more foreign TV programs and a wide array of categories, such as documentary, drama series, variety shows, and sports, etc. filled the Chinese television line-up (T.-K. W. Chang, *TV Programming and Foreign Imports: From Parochial Unity to Multinational Diversity* 2002). In the early 1990s, not only did the volume of foreign TV imports increase many folds from the 1980s, a full slate of programs also became available, with drama series, movies, children's programs, and cartoons most visible (T.-K. W. Chang 2002, p. 71). Integration of foreign and local programs in Chinese television industry reveals the cultural communication among various countries. Chinese audiences have obtained a new access to be acquainted with western cultures, in return, audiences in western countries have aroused the interests to understand more about China.

American cultural and media products, particularly movies and TV programs, have penetrated nearly every corner of the potential global market since the 1950s, including the Asian media market (T.-K. W. Chang 2002, p. 76). In the Cold War era, radio and television programs were incorporated into government sponsored campaigns to spread the American image abroad (Spigel and Curtin, *Introduction* 1997). These circumstances led to wide-ranging disputes about American cultural imperialism through the media (Spigel and Dawson 2008, p. 285). Under the predominance of cultural imperialism, the U.S. left a misunderstanding impression of China. In the 1990s, Chinese journalists and scholars published a book, presenting that the U.S. government and news media have waged a conspiracy to smear or demonize China in the United

States and around the world (Li, et al. 1996). The book was well received and the allegation of demonization has since become a standard Chinese explanation of how and why U.S. news media cover China and its people the way they do (T.-K. W. Chang 2002, p. 214).

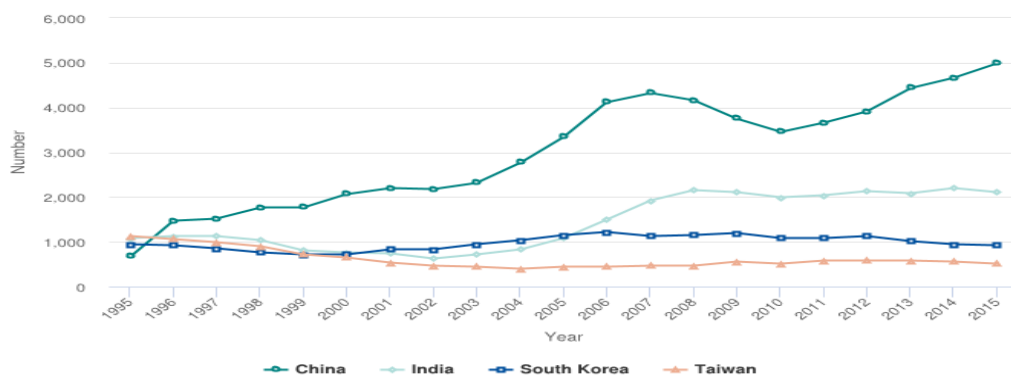
China and the U.S. have different time periods to input and output tv programs. China started to introduce foreign tv programs since the late 1970s, while the U.S. started to output its programs globally since the 1950s. The values and orientations of Chinese and American media are differentiated as well. Chinese media is involved in positive government propaganda, especially before the Reform and Openness policy. American media is making effort to propagate American culture to all over the world. The diversities may lead to different understandings of humor and symbols for Chinese and American audiences while watching the same television programs.

## **5.2 The Rising of China's Soft Power**

The concept of soft power was proposed by the U.S. scholars in the 1990s, after the Cold War was ended. It is an ability for a country to attract or convince other countries, through political values, cultures and diplomatic policies, etc. The idea that power could be derived from non-military assets and the ability of a nation's culture, lifestyle and ideology to appeal to the imagination of those outside its borders was enticing (Roberts 2014, p. xvi). By the late 1940s, the United States was engaged in global Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, and soon with Communist China (Roberts 2014, p. xxi). American culture was influenced by Cold War. On the one hand, the long-time conflict and against between capitalism and socialism blocked the development of globalization. On the other hand, Cold War had promoted the rising of The Third World (including Latin, African and Asian countries). During the Cold War China was a revolutionary power, committed to overturning such international norms as great-power cooperation and the non-use of force (J. Chen 2001). In the first decade of the twenty-first century, as the United States was drawn into expensive morasses overseas, China focused on its own economic development (Roberts 2014, p. xxvii). Economic growth brought about the opportunity to receive higher levels of education for Chinese students. From at least the mid-nineteenth century onward, American missionaries and educators were active in China, wishing to win Chinese converts for Christianity and bring Western knowledge to China (Roberts 2014, p. 126). Besides, some Chinese students were enrolled in academic visits funded by Chinese and American governments. The

hope was that, when these students returned to China, they would remain pro-American and would attempt to introduce American practices and institutions to China (Roberts 2014, p. 127). Figure 1 below illustrates that in the span of twenty years (1995-2015), the number of Chinese students who are pursuing science and engineering doctoral education in the United States is growing continuously. Besides doctoral students, more and more Chinese students choose to pursue high school, bachelor, and master education in the U.S. in recent years. As international students, Chinese students in America have made great contribution to American economy through paying for tuition fees<sup>2</sup>. Enrolling Chinese students in American education has become pillar industry in U.S. export. During their stay in the U.S, Chinese students are experiencing American cultures and values in daily studies and lives. Local Americans are willing to experience Chinese culture as well, including Chinese traditional culture, manners and food, etc.

Figure 2-19  
U.S. S&E doctoral degree recipients, by selected Asian country or economy of origin: 1995–2015



Note(s): Degree recipients include temporary visa holders and non-U.S. citizens with unknown visa status. Data for China include Hong Kong.

Source(s): National Science Foundation, National Center for Science and Engineering Statistics, special tabulations (2016), 2015 Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED).

Science and Engineering Indicators 2018

Figure 1. U.S. S&E doctoral recipients, by selected Asian country or economy of origin: 1995-2015 (National Science Board 2018).

China is making great effort in promoting soft power, through exporting traditional Chinese culture globally. The most prominent feature of this program was the establishment of Confucius Institutes in universities around the world, funded by the Chinese Ministry of Education, to provide classes in the Chinese language and Chinese culture (Roberts 2014, p. xxviii). By the end of 2016, 513 Confucius Institutes and 1,073 Confucius Classrooms had been established in a total of 140 countries ((Hanban)

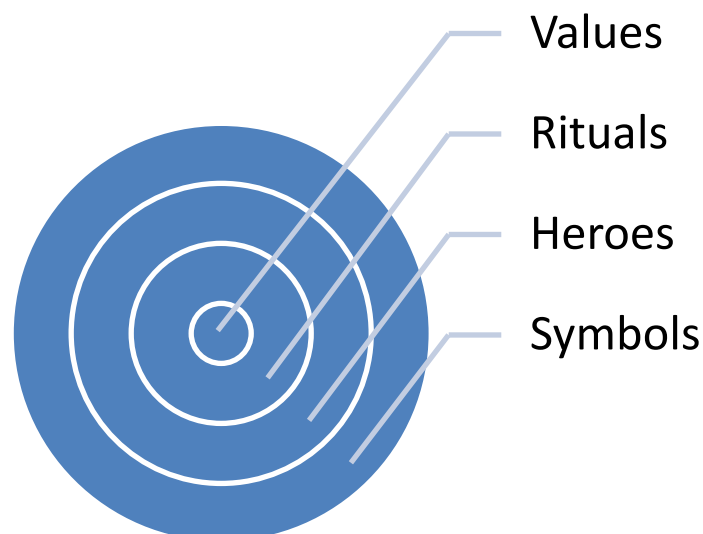
<sup>2</sup> Source: <http://learning.sohu.com/20111208/n328385161.shtml> [In Chinese]

2016). The improved status of Chinese Americans after the Second World War ushered in an era of unprecedented development for Chinese food (Zhang 2014, p. 196). The number of Chinese restaurants increased tenfold, from 4,500 immediately after the war to the current figure of 40,000, surpassing the numbers of McDonald's, Wendy's and Burger King in the United States and Canada combined (Liu and Lin 2009). In the eyes of non-Chinese American groups, Chinese restaurants remain one single entity, symbolizing the invisible Chinese identity (Zhang 2014, p. 197).

Influenced by the Cold War, the United States regarded China's peaceful development as a threat to global order. After China opened the door to the rest of the world and established the friendly diplomatic relationship with the United States, the normalization of the Sino-American relations was witnessed in the nineteenth century. Chinese food culture was popular in the U.S. after the Second World War. In the twenty first century, Chinese students studying abroad in the U.S. had made contribution to American economic growth. The rising of China's soft power indicates the increasing comprehensive national power that cannot be ignored by other countries, which may provide inspiration for scriptwriters to present Chinese symbols in American situation comedies.

## 6. Theory

In my research, culture theory proposed by Hofstede is used to explain how Chinese symbols within Chinese culture are constructed in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. The reason to choose Hofstede's theory is that he has transformed abstract culture into a concrete "onion" (see the following diagram). In his framework, the concepts of culture are divided into several layers, which means that culture can be categorized.





The “onion diagram”: manifestations of Culture at Different Levels of Depth (G. H. Hofstede 2000, p. 11)

As an audience, I am amused by hilarious languages and exaggerated body movements of characters in sitcoms. This may indicate that the funny scenes in sitcoms are based on dialogues among them. So, humor theory is used to examine whether or not Chinese symbols in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* are depicted in a humorous way. Also, because humor can be reflected through individual’s communication, so a pragmatics theory is applied to the study. Furthermore, the theory of semiotics is applied to analyze and interpret Chinese symbols, because it studies signs which cover various aspects in cultures and societies.

## 6.1 Culture

Culture is defined by anthropologists in a variety of ways (Lazear 1999). One well-known anthropological consensus definition runs as follows: (G. Hofstede 2000, p. 9)

Culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts; the essential core of culture consists of traditional (i.e. historically derived and selected) ideas and especially their attached values. (Kluckhohn 1951, p. 86)

Compared with the definition above, Hofstede has a brief explanation of culture: “Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (G. Hofstede 2011). The “mind” stands for the head, heart, and hands- that is, for thinking, feeling, and acting, with consequences for beliefs, attitudes, and skills (G. Hofstede 2000, p. 10). The word *culture* is usually reserved for societies (operationalized as nations or as ethnic or regional groups within or across nations) (G. Hofstede 2000, p. 10). Basically, the word can be applied to any human collectivity or category: an organization, a profession, an age group, an entire gender, or a family (G. Hofstede 2000, p. 10). This means that culture targets at people who share the same values. “Stereotypes always reflect the mind-sets of those judging and sometimes also something real about those being judged” (G. Hofstede 2000, p. 14). Language is the most clearly recognizable part of culture

and the part that has lent itself most readily to systematic study and theory building (G. Hofstede 2000, p. 21). For a deeper understanding of a foreign culture and for the avoidance of ethnocentric blunders, some familiarity with the language is indispensable (G. Hofstede 2000, p. 22). Each culture is corresponded to each value, if a person does not understand value that the culture represents, he/she may understand the culture in an inappropriate way.

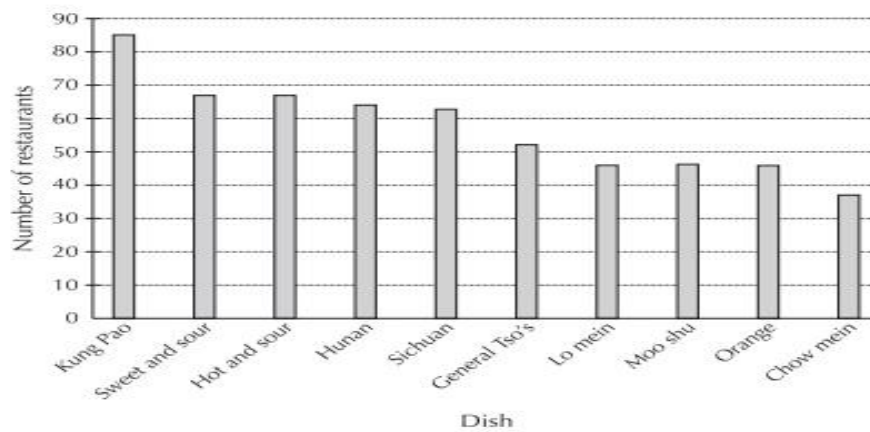
Culture can be represented through different layers: “symbols, heroes, rituals and values”, according to Hofstede’s “Onion Diagram” (G. H. Hofstede 2000, p. 11). Symbols, heroes and rituals are categorized as *practice* and are visible to an outside observer; their cultural meanings, however, are invisible and lie precisely and only in the ways these practices are interpreted by insiders (G. H. Hofstede 2000, p. 10). *Values* are invisible until they become evident in behavior, but culture manifests itself in visible elements too (G. H. Hofstede 2000, p. 10).

That is to say, culture at this stage stands for the inner world, such as thoughts, ideas, and values. It cannot be understood through observations by people who do not belong to this group. Chinese culture, although originating in remote antiquity and undergoing constant transformation, basically take Confucianism as the core of its ideology, since Confucianism is the spiritual fruit of the productive labor and social practice of the Chinese over generations (Wu 1994). Confucianism postdates the central and inceptive ideas and themes which constitute Chinese culture, society and traditions (Lakos 2010, p. 111). *Ritual* has always been one of the descriptors commonly used in relation to Chinese culture and to Chinese history (Lakos 2010, p. 81). Ritual became a social value and a cultural strategy for ordering and restraining society (Lakos 2010, p. 84). The fundamental purpose of ancestor rituals was the incorporation and continuation of the family and its extension to kin and to state- society; it was a strategy for the continuation of Chinese culture (Lakos 2010, p. 84).

*Symbols* are words, gestures, pictures and objects that carry often complex meanings recognized as such only by those who share the culture (G. H. Hofstede 2000, p. 10). In this context, Chinese symbols are featured as food and languages that includes colloquial and written languages. As parts of Chinese culture, these symbols can be acquired through learning and experiencing. Chinese food has played a crucial part in popular life and culture since earliest times (Anderson 1994, p. 36). The Westerner automatically thinks of rice, but a third of China’s people-living in the north and west-

rarely saw rice until recent years and still depend largely on wheat, maize and various millet species (Anderson 1994, p. 39). A major use of wheat is in mantou (large breadlike loaves, usually steamed) and bao or baozi (smaller loaves or buns, filled with various stuffings); smaller relatives of these foods are the various dumplings, collectively jiaozi (Anderson 1994, p. 39). As a symbol, food in Chinese-American society is slightly different from what in mainland China, and there are some representative Chinese cuisines. The rise of Chinese food in America's gastronomical landscape in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is one of the greatest epic stories of cultural exchange in world history (Y. Chen 2014, p. 1). Chop suey, in particular, came to epitomize the Chinese food that prevailed in the American restaurant market (Y. Chen 2014, p. 1). Chop suey was for many years the most famous and most popular of all Chinese dishes in the United States (Y. Chen 2014, p. 139). As non-Chinese patronage grew, however, this motif became a deliberate attempt to satisfy non-Chinese customers' curiosity about the distinct and exotic "Far east" (Y. Chen 2014, p. 123-24). The fortune cookie was invented in San Francisco by the Kay Heong Noodle Factory in the 1930s to attract tourists (Yeh 2004). It was recognized as "one of the most recognizable symbols of Chinese American cuisine" (Yeh 2004). Chinese American food "started being served in oyster pails in the 1950s" (Lapetina 2013). Chinese takeout became a staple of city life and then expanded to the suburbs (Lapetina 2013). The folded paper boxes that were traditionally used to transport oysters also began transporting chop suey and Mongolian beef (Lapetina 2013). There is statistics "that 80 percent of those forty thousand or so eateries serve a limited Chinese American menu- a short roster of dishes like Kung Po chicken, hot and sour soup, eggrolls, beef with broccoli, and General Tso's chicken" (Coe 2009, p. 160). Meanwhile, figure 2 below illustrates top ten "popular dishes appeared at least once on the menu" (Y. Chen 2014, p. 146) at Chinese restaurants in the United States. Besides food, clothes with traditional Chinese styles occupy a position in Chinese-American society, due to historical reasons. The gown conjured up the picture of Madame Chiang Kai-shek attired in cheongsam, a popular image in American society and Chinese American communities during World War II (Yeh 2004). Choosing the cheongsam also indicated an intention to cater to the mainstream stereotype of the Chinese American woman as a China doll (Yeh 2004). Meanwhile, woman in Chinese-American society was depicted that she had "the three degrees of obedience and that she possessed the four

virtues: good behavior, discreet speech, a serene spirit, and industriousness” (Yeh 2004). Also, “Chinese woman should respect: first your father, then your brother, then your husband” (Yeh 2004). This statement indicated that Confucian gender norms resonated with an ideal gender hierarchy (Yeh 2004).



**FIGURE 5** The number of Chinese restaurants in which the names of popular dishes appeared at least once on the menu. (Data from Yong Chen, menu samples)

Figure 2. “The number of Chinese restaurants in which the names of popular dishes appeared at least once on the menu (Data from Yong Chen, menu samples)” (Y. Chen 2014, p. 146).

*Heroes* are persons, alive or dead, real or imaginary, who possess characteristics that are highly prized in a culture and thus serve as models for behavior (G. H. Hofstede 2000, p. 10). Representatives of *heroes* in Chinese culture are mainly depicted in Chinese movies export to Western countries (such as Bruce Lee and Jackie Chan) and animations produced by Dream Works, revealing Chinese spiritual worlds that are different from what in Western worlds (such as *Kung Fu Panda 2*). Since the late twentieth century, Hollywood has witnessed a renewed interest among American audiences in Kung Fu cinema, which was pioneered by Bruce Lee and transformed by Jackie Chan (Yuan 2003). Chinese heroes are the persons who can be around them and exclude the difficulty and anxiety for them when they encounter disasters (Huang 2013). Understanding of Chinese and Westerners to hero has much to do with cultural difference, while the difference is completely embodied in their spiritual pursuit (Huang 2013).

*Rituals* are collective activities that are technically unnecessary to the achievement of desired ends, but that within a culture are considered socially essential, keeping the individual bound within the norms of the collectivity (G. H. Hofstede 2000, p. 10). In other words, *ritual* can be expressed through customs and ceremonies. Chinese people

today often trace contemporary beliefs and practices to the beliefs and practices of Chinese people who lived thousands of years ago (Hamlish 2013, p. 152). There are various aspects of *rituals* in traditional Chinese culture. One of the traditions is Chinese New Year (Spring Festival) celebration that features red color as the symbol of good fortune. The outward and visible signs of passing year are the closing of the shops, the appearance of new red door papers, and the almost continuous detonation of crackers (Buckhardt 2006). Compared with red color, “*white in traditional Chinese language has a metaphoric nature of inferiority, mourning, and death*” (Wang 2013). However, in Western culture, white color has contradictory symbolic meanings. Osgood, Macy and Miron (1975: 328), after a cross-cultural investigation of color affective meaning, found that “with three exceptions: mourning, death and sin, WHITE has +E (high evaluation) associations---virtue, purity, truth, heaven and the like” (Wang 2013). Besides cuisines that are recognized as symbols, there are *rituals* in Chinese food culture. Chinese ceremonial practice has always been centered on rites in which foods and other consumption goods are offered to the entities to whom respect is being paid (Anderson 1994, p. 47). On the other hand, community and a kind of equality are maintained by eating from common dishes, the food being picked out with spoons or chopsticks (Anderson 1994, p. 48). Food-offerings are among the earliest expressions of Chinese religiosity, and the practice of offering food to ancestors and gods continues to the present (Hunter and Sexton 1999, p. 155). Americans are most familiar with the elite culture of what is often describes as “traditional” China-the habits and customs of China’s scholars and government officials (Hamlish 2003, p. 155). The members of this group produced and perpetuated a rich legacy of fine art, including literature, calligraphy, painting, porcelain, and poetry (Hamlish 2003, p. 155). Chinese society is collectivist and concerned about preserving hierarchy, and it is risky for individuals to express opposition to the social order, and open displays of aggression are unusual (Hunter and Sexton 1999, p. 151). Therefore, it is not hard to see that Chinese culture emphasizes team spirit (Huang 2013).

## **6.2 Humor Theory of Sitcom**

Humor, especially verbal humor plays a crucial part in creating the entertaining effect of the comedy (Hu 2013). Verbal humor usually conveys humor through rhetorical techniques such as sarcasm, ridicule, irony, bombast, pun, allusion and other rhetorical skills in certain context (Rong 2010). A commonly accepted classification

divides traditional theories of humor into three groups: the Superiority Theory, the Release Theory and the Incongruity Theory (Hu 2013).

### **6.2.1 The Superiority Theory**

The Superiority Theory of humor is the oldest of the three Humor Theories, dating back at least as far as Plato, the starting point of much Western philosophy (Mills 2009, p. 77). It supposes that people laugh when they feel a kind of superiority, particularly over other people (Mills 2009, p. 77). It is characterized by one's cognitive comparison of self against others on the basis of intelligence, beauty, strength, wealth and in a subsequent personally-experienced elation, triumph or victory as a result of such self-others comparisons (Hu 2013). Debates over stereotyping in sitcom consistently argue that comedy is a political form because it relies on lampooning particular social groups via assumptions about their 'inherent' characteristics (Greene 2007). It is therefore very definitely not the tool of the downtrodden, and sitcom humor may instead be one of the most powerful ways in which unequal social distinctions remain upheld (Mills 2008). In terms of the Superiority Theory, the laugh track is of significant ideological import for it represents social agreement on appropriate comic targets (Mills 2009, p. 81). The laugh track is the aural embodiment of the audience, captured electronically and transmitted alongside the program in order to show that real people found the events on-screen funny (Mills 2009, p. 102).

### **6.2.2 The Release Theory**

The Release Theory examines humor from psychological perspectives (Hu 2013). Relief theory assumes that laughter and mirth results from a release of nervous energy (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004). In this view humor is mainly used to reveal suppressed desires and to overcome sociocultural inhibitions (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004).

### **6.2.3 The Incongruity Theory**

Rather than focusing on the psychological (relief theory) or emotional (superiority theory) function of humor, incongruity theory emphasizes cognition (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004). In this theory, humor involves some kind of difference between what one expects and what one receives (Hu 2013). The pleasure from laughter therefore comes from the surprise of confounded expectations and laughter is the oral expression of such surprise (Mills 2009, p. 82). Because humor often relies on social inappropriacy using, it would seem likely that the possibility of an interlocutor may be increased (Bell 2007). It also makes clear how important expectations and norms are to

humor, for unless a viewer understands the way things are ‘meant to be’, incongruity will be unnoticeable and laughter will not occur (Mills 2009, p. 83). Those aspects of traditional sitcom which most clearly define the genre, such as laugh track, can be seen as signals which make clear to audiences the ways in which they are encouraged to respond to the incongruities within any text (Mills 2009, p. 85). Central to all versions of the Incongruity Theory is the notion of surprise, that is jokes must suddenly be ‘got’ rather than slowly revealed (Mills 2009, p. 86).

#### **6.2.4 Humor Techniques**

According to Berger (1976), there are 45 different techniques to create humor, grouped into four categories: language (the humor is verbal); logic (the humor is ideational); identity (the humor is existential); and action (the humor is physical). All these techniques are depicted in Figure 3 below. Each technique has different definition, however, not all the techniques are connected with humor of portraying Chinese symbols in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. So, definitions of techniques which are related to the research topic are listed as follows. Concrete manifestations of humorous Chinese symbols will be presented and analyzed in detail in the next chapter. Eccentricity refers to ‘someone who deviates from the norms, an odd character’ (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004). In this context, Sheldon, a character from *The Big Bang Theory*, is a typical example. Exaggeration means ‘making an exaggeration or overstatement; reacting in an exaggerated way’ (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004). Imitation is ‘mimicking or copying someone’s appearance or movements while keeping one’s own identity at the same time’ (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004). Irony refers to ‘saying one thing and meaning something else or exactly the opposite of what you’re saying’ (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004). Misunderstanding is equal to ‘misinterpreting a situation’ (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004). Pun refers to ‘playing with the meaning of words’ (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004). Radicule is the action of ‘making a fool of someone, verbally or nonverbally’ (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004). Speed technique of humor is ‘talking or moving in very fast or low motion’ (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004). Stereotype means ‘stereotyped or generalized way of depicting members of a certain nation, gender, or other group’ (Buijzen and Valkenburg 2004).

<u>Language</u>	<u>Logic</u>	<u>Identity</u>	<u>Action</u>
Allusion	Absurdity	Before/After	Chase scenes
Bombast	Accident	Burlesque	Slapstick
Definition	Analogy	Caricature	Speed
Exaggeration	Catalogue	Embarrassment	Time
Facetiousness	Coincidence	Eccentricity	
Irony	Disappointment	Exposure	
Misunderstanding	Ignorance	Grotesque	
Over-literalness	Mistakes	Imitation	
Puns	Repetition	Impersonation	
Repartee	Reversal	Infantilism	
Ridicule	Rigidity	Mimicry	
Sarcasm	Theme and variation	Parody	
Satire		Scale	
		Stereotype	
		Unmasking	

Figure 3. Techniques of humor (Berger, Anatomy of the Joke 1976).

### 6.2.5 Humor Theory in Pragmatics

Pragmatics, with its programmatic lack of boundaries, is becoming the natural place to locate the linguistic side of the interdisciplinary study of humor (Hu 2013). It is a subject that regards the meaning of a language as research object and focuses on studying the comprehension and use of a language<sup>3</sup>. According to Sperber and Wilson (1995), every aspect of communication and cognition is governed by the search for relevance (Hu 2012). The central claim of relevance theory is that the expectations of relevance raised by an utterance are precise and predictable enough to guide the hearer toward the speaker's meaning (Wilson and Sperber 2004). Since the relevance requirement applies to cognition and communication differently, there are two general principles of relevance (Hu 2012). First, the cognitive principle: human cognition tends to be geared to the maximization of relevance (Hu 2012). Second, the Communicative Principle: every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance (Hu 2012). The notion of optimal relevance is meant to spell out what the audience of an act of ostensive communication is entitled to expect in terms of effort and effect (Wilson and Sperber 2004). However, due to differences in personal experiences, cognitive background and communicative abilities between the speaker and hearer, optimal relevance may not be achieved, and thus create misunderstandings and humorous effects on different scenes (Hu 2012).

<sup>3</sup> Source: <https://baike.sogou.com/v7555709.htm?fromTitle=yuyongxue> [In Chinese]



### 6.3 Semiotics

Modern semiotics is said to have started with the work of two authors: Ferdinand de Saussure, a linguist who called his approach “semiology,” and Charles S. Peirce, a philosopher who called his science “semiotics.” (Berger 2011, p. 1266). A science that studies the life of signs within society is conceivable; it would be part of social psychology and consequently of general psychology; I shall call it *semiology* (Saussure 1966). As Berger (2011, p. 1266) stated, Peirce “developed a typology that had three kinds of signs: *icons*, which signify by resemblance; *indexes*, which signify by casual connections; and *symbols*, which signify by convention and have to be learned”. Many semioticians combine Saussurean semiology and Peircean semiotics in their work, especially in fields such as cultural studies (Berger 2011, p. 1267).

The accepted definition of semiotics today generally is phrased as either “the study of signs” or “the study of signs and sign systems” (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 6). Umberto Eco suggested that in his book *A Theory of Semiotics* that signs are anything that can be used to substitute for something else (Berger 2011, p. 1267). As outlined originally by Saussure, each sign comprises a duality, such that it can be understood to have two parts; these he termed *signifier* and *signified* (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 23). The signifier is the sensory impression of the sign: the mental image of a mark on a page, or of sounds in the air, for example (Thwaites, Warwick and Lloyd 2002, p. 31). The signified is the concept the sign invokes (Thwaites, Warwick and Lloyd 2002, p. 31). Signs can be defined from linguistic perspective: “*Parole* (or *utterance*, or *speech*): a given act or artifact of language, such as a spoken utterance, a conversation; and *langue* (or *code*, or *system*, or the *language*): the system which enables such acts of parole to be produced” (Thwaites, Warwick and Lloyd 2002, p. 39). Another discipline that can be used to explain signs is philosophy, because *denotata* derived from the definition is a philosophical term. A sign without either similarity or contiguity, but only with a conventional link between its signifier and its denotata, and with an intentional class for its designatum, is called a symbol (Sebeok 1994). Generally, the short list of what can be used as a symbol includes *objects*, *behaviors*, *texts*, *ideas* and *people* (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 30). Displaying symbols is one way of announcing a particular identity or affiliation with a particular group, whether that be national, occupational, corporate, religious, or gender based (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 34). The final products of those deliberate and artificial signs are symbolic signs (Wang 2013). Symbolic signs

achieve their meanings through a process of convention or social agreement (Wang 2013). One deliberate and artificial system is language (Wang 2013). People in different cultural groups draw on their different cultural models to produce and interpret signs (Wang 2013).

Codes, by definition, always include a group of signs from which at least one is chosen to convey particular information (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 54). If there is a code, then it is possible to encode (to convey information through that code) and also to *decode* (to interpret information from the code) (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 61). Obviously, encoders and decoders who share similar codes (and similar cultural experiences) will encode and decode similar meanings in text; those who have learned different codes as a result of different cultural experiences, will not (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 62). Examination of a code as it exists at a single point in time is called synchronic analysis; examination of a code as it evolves through time is named diachronic analysis (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 64). These two decoding approaches mainly focus on linguistic analysis, decoding of television programs and media studies is different. Hall (2004, p. 125) proposed “*three* hypothetical positions from which decoding of a televisual discourse may be constructed”. The first hypothetical position is that of the *dominant-hegemonic position* (Hall 2004, p. 125). This is the ideal-typical case of ‘perfectly transparent communication’-or as close as we are likely to come to it ‘for all practical purposes’ (Hall 2004, p. 126). This is the position which the professional broadcasters assume when encoding a message which has already been signified in a hegemonic manner (Hall 2004, p. 126). In other words, it means that any ideas proposed by producers of television programmes should be completely accepted by audiences. The second position we would identify is that of the *negotiated code* or position (Hall 2004, p. 126). Majority audiences probably understand quite adequately what has been dominantly defined and professionally signified (Hall 2004, p. 126). “Decoding within the negotiated version contains a mixture of adaptive and oppositional elements:” (Hall 2004, p. 127) on the one hand, it agrees with the majority of what exists in *dominant-hegemonic* code; on the other hand, “it makes its own ground rules- it operates with exceptions to the rule” (Hall 2004, p. 127). Finally, it is possible for a viewer perfectly to understand both the literal and the connotative inflection given by a discourse but to decode the message in a *globally* contrary way (Hall 2004, p. 127). This means that even though the decoder understands the meaning behind the encoding, he/she

establishes a brand new structure that may be contradictory to what the encoder intend to express.

The following typology of codes is widely accepted: (a) *logical codes* (the codes used by science), (b) *aesthetic codes* (the codes used by art), and (c) *social codes* (the codes used by society) (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 67). Examples of social codes are: trademarks, clothing, greetings, food, furniture, objects of any sort, games, and sports (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 67). Aesthetic codes are generally iconic, whereas social and logical codes are generally symbolic (made up of symbols, with an arbitrary relation between signifier and signified) (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 68). A system of symbols is properly a code, and a system of codes forms a culture (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 69). Material culture codes serve as a particularly oblique means of conveying information, allowing culture “to insinuate its beliefs and assumptions into the very fabric of daily life, there to be appreciated but not observed (McCracken 1988, p. 69)” (Quoted in Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 78). Their mundane nature permits food, clothing, and objects to convey messages effectively, yet quietly, without calling und’ue attention to what has been conveyed (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 78). Food functions well as a cross-cultural topic due to the characteristic of being a common human requirement (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 83). For all groups, foods serve to convey social information with some using food as a marker consistently on every occasion of any significance, as the Chinese apparently do (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 85). Chinese use food to mark ethnicity, culture change, calendric and family events, and social transactions (Anderson 1988, p. 199). Knowing that particular foods are understood to indicate particular identities, it becomes possible to use their presence or absence to make deliberate statements about identity (Leeds-Hurwitz 1993, p. 91).

## 7. Analysis

### 7.1 Analysis of *Friends*

#### 7.1.1 Statistics of Chinese Symbols

Season	Episode	What Chinese symbols are portrayed
One	4	A lantern in white color
One	8	Take-away Chinese food (noodles) and a Chinese

		female nurse
One	10	Take-away Chinese food
One	16	Chinese food as dinner and chopsticks
One	17	A Chinese restaurant
One	19	Take-away Chinese food (rice), Rachel and Ross are using chopsticks
Two	3	Phoebe is wearing a cloth with dragon and phoenix on it.
Two	23	A Chinese male co-worker
Three	24	A Chinese male trainer is speaking Chinese
Four	11	A Chinese male professor
Five	21	Rachel is wearing a T-shirt with Chinese characters on it.
Six	22	A Chinese female clerk
Seven	11	A Chinese female guest, her facial expression is wired when she hears the word "blood".
Seven	19	A Chinese female guest
Seven	23	A Chinese male assistant director
Eight	12	A Chinese male student
Eight	23	A Chinese doctor and a Chinese puerpera who is not suffering from much throes.
Nine	12	Rachel is wearing a red

		cheongsam
Nine	19	A Chinese female receptionist; Monica and a Chinese male waiter are wearing Tang suits
Ten	11	Rachel is wearing a black cheongsam
Ten	12	Phoebe's female Chinese Tibetan friend
Ten	13	A Chinese nurse with short hair

### 7.1.2 Transcript Analysis

- **Season One**

Season One, Episode 11 *The One With Mrs. Bing*

[Scene: Monica and Rachel's, Monica and Phoebe are telling everyone about their coma guy.]

Mrs. Bing: (on TV) ... I just get this craving for Kung Pow Chicken. (Junge, Friends Transcripts n.d.)

“Kung Pow Chicken” is a signified, referring to a kind of Chinese American food. It is also a particular food that indicates a particular identity. This scene has illustrated the fact that it is a popular dish ordered in Chinese restaurants in the United States. “Kung Pow Chicken” is encoded as Chinese American food, and the decoding is that it is so delicious that Mrs. Bing is “craving for” it.

Season One, Episode 24 *The One Where Rachel Finds Out*

(Ross goes outside on the balcony.)

Ross: (Sigh) ... I have to go to China.

Joey: The Country?

Ross: No no, this big pile of dishes in my mom's breakfront.

Joey: He's right, man. Please. Move on. Go to China. Eat Chinese food.

Chandler: Course there, they just call it food.

[Scene: Airport, Ross has headphones on, and is listening to a 'How To Speak Chinese' tape. Occasionally, he makes an outburst in Chinese in accordance with

the tape. He is getting on the jetway. The flight attendant is there.]

Ross: (something in Chinese)

Ross: Ni-chou chi-ma! (walks onto jetway)<sup>4</sup>

(A Chinese woman getting off the plane drops one of her bags. Ross gets off next.)

Julie: You don't think they'll judge and ridicule me?

Ross: No, no, they will. I just uh... (Brown n.d.)

“China” in this scene functions as a pun to create verbal humor. Lowercase china means the porcelain; only when it is in capital letter, the word represents name of the country. In situations where Chinese culture is regarded as an exotic culture, “Chinese” is carrying a symbolic expression, the signified is that it refers to anything (including items and people, etc.) that is relevant to China. If it is in a community that Chinese culture is shared among members, the word “Chinese” can be omitted, because the members have represented Chinese culture. Ross is learning to speak Chinese, imitating the pronunciation. The signifier is Ross's pronunciation in Chinese. The signified is that he is going to China, and he hopes that he can communicate with people in Chinese. If it is heard by a Chinese, it is obvious that some of his pronunciations are not as accurate as Chinese native speakers. “A Chinese woman” is encoded as a girl in medium height, and she is with black long hair black eyes and yellow skin, wearing clothes in black and white color. The decoding is possibly developed as girls with such appearances are called Chinese girls. Julie is worried that she will be “judged and ridiculed”, even though she can speak fluent English. Still, she can feel the differences between herself and native American people. “Ridicule” in this scene is a technique to create humor, through making jokes about someone.

- **Season Two**

Season Two, Episode 1 *The One With Ross' New Girlfriend*

[Scene: Monica and Rachel's, the gang is waiting for Rachel to return from the airport with Ross.]

Julie: We're on this bus, that's easily 200 years old...

Ross: 200 at least.

Julie: ... and this guy...

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<sup>4</sup> In the video Ross is speaking Chinese with inaccurate pronunciation, the meaning is similar to “what are you laughing at”?

Rachel: And the chicken pooped in her lap..... (Astroff and Sikowitz n.d.).

Julie and Ross are describing the scenes that they met during their stays in China. “Bus” and “chicken” are signs to signify China as an undeveloped country where infrastructures are under construction, with 200-year-old buses running in the street and someone behaves ridiculously in the bus. Even though China is a developing country compared with the US, such depictions are impossible to happen in real world of China. There is a laugh track and Rachel cannot stop laughing when they describe their experiences, so it is exaggerated to be create humorous effect.

Season Two, Episode 22 *The One With the Two Parties*

[Scene: Monica and Rachel’s apartment. Chandler, Jory, Monica, and Phoebe are setting up for the party.]

[knock at the door, Monika answers to see Mrs. Greene]

Mrs. Greene: Hi Monica.

[Monica slams the door back shut]

Monica: Chinese menu guy. Forgot the menus.

Chandler: So, basically just a Chinese guy. (Junge n.d.).

Monica opens the door and realizes that Mrs. Greene is there, then she closed the door and told others that it’s “a Chinese guy”. The cognition among Monica and others who do not see Mrs. Greene is different, an unsuccessful optimal relevance occurs. When “a Chinese guy” is mentioned in this situation, it will make people misunderstand that there is a real “Chinese guy” standing in front of the door. Actually, “a Chinese guy” is a metaphor to Mrs. Greene. The context is that they do not want Mrs. Greene and Mr. Greene meet with each other. So “Chinese guy” is a sign made up by Monica to resolve the embarrassment through a humorous way.

- **Season Three**

Season Three, Episode 8 *The One With The Giant Poking Device*

[Scene: Chandler and Joey’s, Chandler is throwing darts, as Joey enters.]

Joey: Hey! Y’know how we ah, save all those chopsticks for no reason we get when we get Chinese food?

Joey: Well, now we got a reason.

Chandler: What?

Joey: Well, we’re fashioning a very long poking device. (Chase n.d.)

“Chopstick” is the signified to represent the tableware. The decoding understanding

is that it is a tool used to pick up Chinese, Japanese or Korean food. In the episode, “chopstick” has another signified function: a device to poke someone. This function is invented by characters, and it is not equivalent to the function of chopstick in Chinese food culture.

Season Three, Episode 15 *The One Where Ross and Rachel Take A Break*

[Scene: Monica and Rachel’s, Rachel is lying in front of the bay window, and the phone rings.]

Mark: All right, all right, I’m coming over, and I’m bringing Chinese food.

[Scene: Monica and Rachel’s, Mark is there, opening Chinese food boxes.]

Mark: Wow. I’m sorry. Eggroll?

Rachel: No. (grabs an eggroll) And then ... (Borkow n.d.)

The box used to contain take-away “Chinese food” signifies a classical food container in Chinese-American food culture: “oyster pail”. And the name of Chinese food: “eggroll” is symbolized as a typical dish in Chinese-American food. It has a different name in Chinese dishes: spring roll. The shape and taste of spring roll are the same as what of “eggroll”. The scene illustrates the popularity of Chinese-American food among American citizens.

Season Three, Episode 17 *The One Without The Ski Trip*

[Scene: Chandler and Joey’s, the whole gang is there, except for Ross and Rachel.

Joey is trying to eat Chinese with chopsticks and fails miserably.] (Silveri and Goldberg-Meehan n.d.)

This scene reveals that the characters are not familiar with the correct way to use chopsticks, even though they are eating Chinese food. Chopstick is carrying a signified of a food eating manner that people are expected to use chopsticks when they have Chinese food. The characters have tried to follow the manner but eventually failed.

Season Three, Episode 24 *The One With The Ultimate Fighting Champion*

[Scene: A gym, Pete is training for the Ultimate Fighting Championship, with his trainer, Hoshi.]

Pete: Oh, believe me, I don’t want to get hurt either. I’m being smart about this. See these guys? They’re the best trainers in the world, and Hoshi here used to be a paid assassin. (Hoshi yells at him in Chinese<sup>5</sup>) A house painter! He used to be

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<sup>5</sup> The language Hoshi speaks is Cantonese, one of the dialects in Chinese language. His words translated into English are: “What are you talking about”?



a house painter. (Silveri and Goldberg-Meehan n.d.)

Hoshi is encoded as a man with black hair and black eyes, but has some accent when he speaks English. The scene can be decoded that Hoshi is speaking Cantonese aloud to express his unwillingness that Pete has told Monica about his past experiences. Even though decoders cannot speak and understand Cantonese, Hoshi's feeling is obvious to be detected through his vivid facial expressions and loud voice. Exaggeration, a humor technique, is applied in the scene to make it be amusing.

- **Season Four**

Season Four, Episode 11 *The One With Phoebe's Uterus*

[Scene: The museum cafeteria, Joey is eating with the tour guides as Ross enters.]

Older Scientist: Dr. Geller, there's a seat over here. (Motions to an empty chair at the 'white' table.)

Older Scientist: I'm Andrew, and I didn't pay for this pear. (Kirkland n.d.)

Andrew is encoded as a character with black eyes and grey hair (it explains why he looks "old"). He works in a museum and is a warm-hearted man who reminds Ross (Dr. Geller) that there is an empty seat. But when Ross suggests that there should be no "division between people in white coats and people in blue blazers", Andrew stands up and says that he did not pay for the pear. Decoding of this character is that he is shamed of his behavior, even though his job as a scientist in a museum guarantees him decent salaries.

- **Season Six**

Season Six, Episode 6 *The One The Last Night*

[Scene: Chandler and Joey's, Joey is entering carrying two pizzas.]

Chandler: Oh, I wish I'd know you were going to do that, I ordered Chinese.

Joey: Oh that's okay. Hey, actually in a way it's kinda nice. Me, bringing the food of my ancestors, you, the food of yours!

Chandler: Okay, let's play! The big game, Italy vs. China, apparently. (Silveri n.d.)

"Chinese" in this scene is the abbreviation of Chinese food. Joey thinks Chandler's ancestor is Chinese, because the pronunciation of "Chandler" is similar to the pronunciation of "China". When they start to play the game, Chandler mentions "China" again to cater to Joey's joke. This is a verbal humor, using a pun to play with Chandler and China.

Season Six, Episode 22 *The One Where Paul's The Man*

[Scene: The Dry Cleaner's, Joey has brought in a bunch of laundry in another attempt to get his picture on the wall, but the dry cleaner isn't working right now. Instead, a beautiful woman is working.]

Female Clerk: Can I help you?

Female Clerk: Y'know, there are two people who could put your picture up there. (She makes eyes at him.)

Joey: Oh really? Well, maybe you and I go out for drinks? (Pause) You're the other one, right? (She thinks about it for a second and nods yes.) (Caldirola n.d.)

This "beautiful female clerk" is encoded as a woman with black eyes, long hair and wears makeups on her face. The owner of dry cleaner place is her husband. Traditional Chinese women in Confucian culture are required to be loyal to the family and obey husbands both in verbal communications and behaviors. But this Chinese woman in the episode lures Joey and they have ended up with her cheating on her husband. Such symbol is contradictory to a traditional Chinese woman.

Season Six, Episode 23

[Scene: Joey and Rachel's, Paul and Rachel are getting ready to go out. Paul is entering from the bathroom.]

Paul: Honey I made a reservation at China Garden, is that okay?

[Time lapse, Paul is now weeping uncontrollably in Rachel's arms.]

Paul: Oh, I couldn't eat now.

Rachel: What? Wait! What are you talking about?! You love their Kung Po Chicken! (Reich and Cohen, Friends Transcripts n.d.)

"China Garden" is the signified to signify the name of a Chinese restaurant. "Kung Po Chicken" is encoded for the second time but is decoded with a different meaning. Besides the fact that it is a cuisine in Chinese food culture, it has also reminded Paul to think of his unpleasant experiences with "chicken" in his childhood. A laugh track is accompanied with Paul's description about his miserable experiences. Superiority theory of humor explains the laughter. Because Paul cannot enjoy his favorite "Kung Po Chicken" as other people do, the comparison makes it humorous.

- **Season Seven**

Season Seven, Episode 9 *The One With All The Candy*

[Scene: Central Park, Ross is teaching Phoebe how to ride her bike.]

Ross: Well let there- what if a man comes along and puts a gun to your head and says, “You ride this bike or I’ll sh ... I’ll shoot you.”

Phoebe: Okay, I would ring the bell to distract him and then I would knock the gun out of his hand with a Chinese throwing star. (Calhoun n.d.)

The word “Chinese” derived from the word: “Chinese throwing star” reminds that it is something related to China, even though it is a Japanese weapon. It is encoded to signify a weapon that can hurt people. And it does have some connections with China; its signified interpretation is that it is originated from Chinese spoken and written languages in ancient times. In the episode, Phoebe’s verbal communication has exaggerated her reluctance to ride the bike, and the laugh track signals the humorous effect.

Season Seven, Episode 15 *The One With Joey’s New Brain*

[Scene: Phoebe and Rachel sitting on the couch in Central Park.]

Phoebe: Oh, he left his cell phone.

Rachel: Oh, well, we can hand it to Gunther and he’ll put it in last and found.

Phoebe: Or we could use it to call China. See how those guys are doing. (Reich and Cohen n.d.)

Phoebe wants to make a phone call to China after finding a cell phone left by someone, such reaction has reflected her curiosity and imagination about China. This forgotten cell phone is a sign to signify how American people in that time period wonder what people in that “remote east” are doing and their concerns and curiosities about this country.

Season Seven, Episode 19 *The One With Ross and Monica’s Cousin*

[Scene: Phoebe’s apartment, it’s Monica’s bridal shower and Phoebe is passing out some finger food.]

Phoebe: Who the hell are all these people?

Rachel: Well, I don’t know. I called all the people in Monica’s phone book and these are the only ones who could show up on 24 hour notice.

Phoebe: Hmm, y’know there’s another word for people like that. Losers!  
(A woman approaches.)

Rachel: (to her) Hi! I’m Rachel. This is Phoebe. I’m the maid of honor. How do you know Monica?

Woman: I was her accountant four years ago. (Reich and Cohen n.d.)

In this scene, the “woman” is encoded as a woman who is with black long hair, black eyes and wears makeups. She, together with other guests, are regarded as loser at Rachel’s party. As a former accountant, she is not a real loser, in this context, she is portrayed as being lose through Phoebe’s language humor technique: irony to bring the humorous effect.

- **Season Eight**

Season Eight, Episode 12 *The One Where Joey Dates Rachel*

[Scene: N.Y.U. Ross’s new class, this time he’s actually about to do a lecture.]

Ross: So is everybody here? I got here a little early myself. Let us begin. Now, the hadrosaurids have been unearthed in two main locations. (He moves to the map and we see why he made it to class on time, he’s wearing in-line skates and hasn’t taken them off.) Here. (Points to the map, somewhere in the Middle East, then spins on the skates and points to the map.) Here. (China.) Now as for the hadrosaurs... (Bilising-Graham and Plummer n.d.)

“China” in this scene is encoded as a place where ancient creatures were found. The decoding interpretation is that China is an ancient country with abundant species. It implies that not only Chinese culture is attracting American’s attention, creatures in ancient China are also mentioned in the episode.

- **Season Nine**

Season Nine, Episode 19 *The one with Rachel’s dream*

[Scene: hall of the romantic inn in Vermont]

Receptionist: I am sorry Mr. Bing, there’s no record of your reservation in the computer.

Chandler: Well, that’s impossible, can you check again, please?

Receptionist: I don’t know what to say.

Chandler: Just give us the cheapest room you have.

Receptionist: Unfortunately the only thing we have available is our deluxe suite, the rate is six hundred dollars.

Chandler: (aside, to Ross) What!?! They are totally ripping us off! (Kunerth n.d.)

The receptionist in the episode is encoded as a woman looks like a Chinese: black eyes and black eyes. Chandler’s reservation record is not in the hotel system, so this female receptionist is decoded as a person who rips off Chandler on purpose. Stereotype functions as a humor technique in the scene, through portraying a Chinese (Asian)

woman who may not be honest with her customers.

- **Season Ten**

Season Ten, Episode 12 *The One With Phoebe's Wedding*

[Scene: Central Perk. Phoebe and Joey are sitting on the couch. A waitress brings a coffee and Phoebe wants to pay.]

Phoebe: What harpist? My friend Marjorie is playing the steel drums.

Monica: Ooh... she backed out.

Phoebe: She did? Why?

Monica: I made her. (Phoebe looks shocked) Steel drums don't really say "elegant wedding". Nor does Marjorie's overwhelming scent.

Phoebe: (looking angry) Hey! She will shower when Tibet is free. (Carlock and Klein n.d.)

In this episode Marjorie is encoded as a Tibetan woman with some unpleasant smell. The decoding is that the place where Marjorie comes from is a less developed area where people do not take showers. This is a kind of stereotype technique to make it humorous in a sitcom. Cities and areas in China have been kept being developed since the 1980s. Even though they are not developed rapidly, it may not be real that people cannot shower in that period.

### 7.1.3 Picture Analysis





Picture 1 & 2: White Lantern and Rachel wearing Chinese traditional clothes<sup>6</sup>.

Picture 1 illustrates different cognitions of white color in Western culture and Chinese culture. In Western culture, white color is the symbol of being pure and moral, which are carrying positive meanings. In Chinese culture, white color has contradictory indications, towards unfortunate feelings or suffers. Lantern is one of the elements to celebrate Chinese New Year, and the color is red, which is the signal of good fortune in Chinese culture. Chinese character: “fu” on the lantern means “good fortune” in English. Characters in *Friends* have learnt the partial *ritual* of Chinese traditional festival celebration, but it is mixed up with Western symbolic meaning of white color. So, it is portrayed as an item that features Chinese culture but combined with Western cultural values.

Picture 2 indicates that cheongsam, as a Chinese dress and a *symbol* in Chinese culture, has left a profound impression in American society from historical age to modern time. Hypothetical decoding position of the clothes is *dominant-hegemonic position*, proving that cheongsam has occupied a position in Rachel’s dressing styles.

#### 7.1.4 Reflection

- Chinese food and traditional Chinese clothes (cheongsam and Tang suit) portrayed in *Friends* are components of *social codes* that have symbolic natures. Social codes (systematic codes), together with Chinese written and spoken language (*symbolic*

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<sup>6</sup> Source of pictures: <https://www.zhihu.com/question/28006217> [In Chinese]

*sign*), have formed a sort of Chinese culture that is built upon the understandings of characters in *Friends*. They have learnt *symbols* and partial *rituals* in Chinese culture, but they have some stereotypes about the symbols of Chinese women who are constructed within *Confucian gender norms*. *Values* in Chinese culture are not depicted in the episodes.

- *Hypothetical position of decoding* Chinese food, cheongsam and Tang suit is *dominant-hegemonic position*. They are popular among characters and there are no critical feedbacks about these symbols. *Hypothetical decoding* of characters who look like Chinese in the episodes is *negotiated code (position)*. Because signs can be interpreted differently in various cultures, and most of characters are portrayed as Oriental/Chinese/Asian looking persons who do not indicate their nationalities. Except Hoshi who speaks Cantonese and English with some accent in the episode, other characters can speak fluent English. One of the interpretations is that they are American born Chinese.

- Culture theory cannot be combined appropriately with the analysis of the scene about “Chinese throwing star”, which may indicate that some theories are limited to analyze some single episodes or scenes in *Friends*.

## 7.2 Analysis of *The Big Bang Theory*

### 7.2.1 Statistics of Chinese Symbols

- Chinese food: Characters in *The Big Bang Theory* have unchangeable menus for seven days in one week (The menu is made by Sheldon, they have to follow it), and Saturday is set as Chinese Food Day. They either have take-away Chinese food or sit in a Chinese restaurant (Szechuan Palace). When it is Saturday, the scenes that they are having Chinese food are portrayed in the episodes, from Season One to Season Ten.

Season	Episode	What Chinese symbols are portrayed
One	1	Howard is speaking Chinese (Enjoy your shower) to Penny
One	7	A Chinese restaurant, and a Chinese male waiter
One	17	A Chinese restaurant,

		Sheldon and the Chinese male owner are speaking Chinese to each other
One	9	Two Chinese male students, and Szechuan (the name of a Chinese province is mentioned)
Three	16	Chinese Kungfu and Bruce Lee are mentioned
Five	5	A Chinese sweatshop is mentioned
Five	17	Milk produced in China is on the table
Seven	6	Hubei (the name of a province in China) is mentioned
Seven	10	A Chinese research team is mentioned

### 7.2.2 Transcript Analysis

- **Season One**

Series 01 Episode 07 – The Dumplings Paradox

*Scene: A Chinese restaurant*

Leonard: We can't order Chinese food without Wolowitz?

Sheldon: Let me walk you through it, our standard is, the steamed dumpling appetizer, General So's chicken, beef with broccoli, shrimp with lobster sauce and vegetable lo-main. Do you see the problem?

Waiter: Hi fellas. Oh, where's your annoying little friend who thinks he speaks Mandarin?

Sheldon: He's putting his needs ahead of the collective good. (pointing at waiter) Where he comes from, that's punishable by death.

Waiter: I come from Sacramento. (Ash 2009)

The dishes that Sheldon mentions in the episode are popular in Chinese American



food culture. The waiter is encoded as a man with short black hair and black eyes. He uses verbally ridicule way of humor to make fool of Howard's Chinese. Sheldon thinks that the waiter is from China, and Chinese society emphasizes on "team spirit" and "collectivist"; individual needs should not be beyond what of the group. There is a stereotype of humor technique in Sheldon's language, a laugh track indicates the humor.

Series 01 Episode 09 – The Cooper-Hofstadter Polarization

*Scene: The apartment, Leonard is attaching something to a lamp.*

Sheldon: Someone in Szechuan province, China is using his computer to turn our lights on and off.

*Scene: Captioned "Somewhere in China", two Chinese students watch the video on their computer.*

Student one (in captions): What losers.

Student two: Yeah. Gigantic American geeks. (The light flicker)

Student one: Who's doing that?

Student two: Someone from Pasadena, California named... "Wolowizard."

Together: Awesome! (Ash 2009)

"Szechuan province" is encoded as the name of a place in China, and the decoding is that "someone" in China is involved in some scientific actions together with characters in the US. "Student one" and "Student two" are encoded as two Chinese students who are addicted to information technologies, sitting in front of the laptop and having instant noodles. Superiority Theory of humor explains student one's utterance: "what losers"; because he is laughing at misfortunes in the video. "Student two" is speaking Mandarin in a very low speed, and the laugh track is included in the scene when he speaks.

Series 01 Episode 17 – The Tangerine Factor

*Scene: The apartment living room*

Sheldon: Wo de zhing shi Sheldon.

Howard: No, it's wo de ming zi shi Sheldon. (Makes a hand movement with every syllable.)

Sheldon: Wo de ming zi shi Sheldon. (Copies hand movements.)

Howard: What's this? (Repeats hand movements.)

Sheldon: That's what you did. I assumed as in a number of languages that the gesture was part of the phrase.

Howard: Well it's not.

Sheldon: How am I supposed to know that? As the teacher it's your obligation to separate your personal idiosyncrasies from the subject matter.

Howard: You know, I'm really glad you decided to learn Mandarin.

Howard: Once you're fluent you'll have a billion more people to annoy instead of me.

Leonard: Why are you learning Chinese?

Sheldon: I believe the Szechuan Palace has been passing off as orange chicken as tangerine chicken and I intend to confront them.

Leonard: If I were you, I'd be more concerned by what they're passing off as chicken. (Ash 2009)

Sheldon's repetition of Howard's hand movements while he is learning Chinese implies the humor technique of humor. He is mimicking Howard's body movements, simultaneously he complains that Howard does not remove his personal references during teaching. Howard is being assisted by the verbal exaggeration way of humor to refute Sheldon's statement. "Orange chicken" or "tangerine chicken" mentioned in the episode are representing Chinese American food dishes in the US.

*Scene: The apartment. The guys are playing a board game and eating Chinese food.*

Sheldon: Howard, I'm going to need another Mandarin lesson. I obviously didn't make my point with those people.

Sheldon: I like tangerine chicken, I'm not getting tangerine chicken.

"Tangerine chicken" is mentioned again by Sheldon in the episode, and it functions as a pun. The action of playing with the meaning of words indicates its popularity in Sheldon's eating habits, and also implies his suspicion of not being served a real dish of tangerine chicken.

*Scene: The lobby. Sheldon is listening to an iPod.*

Penny (tapping him on the shoulder): Sheldon.

Sheldon (jumping in panic): Aiee ya! Xia si wo le. (Ash 2009)

Sheldon is expressing his surprise and shocks through an exaggerated utterance in Chinese. Exaggeration technique of humor is combined well with Sheldon's colloquial languages, and the laugh track signals that his exaggerated reaction is entertaining.

*Scene: The University cafeteria.*

Leonard (pointing): Two seats right there.

Sheldon (to two oriental-looking people occupying the other seats): Chong sho sha pwe. (Caption translates to “Long live Concrete”.) Xie xie. (Thank you)

*Scene: The Szechuan Palace.*

Sheldon (in Mandarin): Show me your mucus! Your mucus!

Owner (in Mandarin): Blow your own nose and go away.

Sheldon (in Mandarin): This is not a tangerine bicycle.

Owner (in English): Crazy man. Call the police.

Sheldon (in Mandarin): No. Don't call the library. Show me your mucus. (Ash 2009)

Sheldon thinks that these two “oriental-looking people” are Chinese, and he is trying to speak Chinese to them. But it is not comprehensible to them. In this scene, misunderstanding and stereotype way of humor respectively explains Sheldon's misinterpretation of Chinese language and that “oriental-looking people” are Chinese people. Later at The Szechuan Palace, where is encoded as a Chinese restaurant, his misunderstanding of Chinese and unsuccessful optimal relevance of the dialogue between him and the restaurant owner have brought laughter in the episode. Also, the restaurant owner applied an eccentricity technique of humor, regarding Sheldon as an odd character and calling him a “crazy man”.

- **Season Three**

Series 03 Episode 16 – The Excelsior Acquisition

*Scene: The apartment*

Penny: Um, uh, Stan Lee, oh, he was in those goofy kung fu movies you love so much?

Leonard: That's Bruce Lee.

Penny: Oh. So, is this Bruce Lee's nerdy brother, Stan? (Ash 2009)

Bruce Lee, as a *hero* in Chinese culture, is well-known and enjoys popularity among characters. Penny misinterprets the difference between Bruce Lee and Stan Lee, which indicates that misunderstanding, one of humor techniques, is adopted again in the episode to make it hilarious.

- **Season Five**

Series 05 Episode 05 – The Russian Rocket Reaction

*Scene: The comic book store.*

Leonard: Well, they don't have an Excalibur here, so what do you want to do?

Sheldon: Mm. Tough decision. There's no weaponry from Lord of the Rings, forged in a Chinese sweatshop? (Ash 2009)

Sheldon's response implies his stereotype about the stereotype approach of humor, through expressing the idea that China is a country with cheap labors at the factories and the workers there are forced to be engaged in long hours of working.

- **Season Seven**

Series 07 Episode 06 – The Romance Resonance

Scene: The cafeteria.

Sheldon: Oh, well, thank you. Believe it or not, I just learned a Chinese research team at the Hubei Institute for Nuclear Physics ran a test on a cyclotron, and the results were extremely promising.

Leonard: Sheldon, that's incredible.

Sheldon: Yeah, I know. They called it the greatest thing since the Communist party. Although I'm pretty sure that the Communist party made them say that. I like China. See, they know how to keep people in line. (Ash 2009)

"A Chinese research team" is encoded in the episode, being decoded that they have excellent academic performance in science research. However, Sheldon's language indicates a stereotype humor that Chinese people follow the rules established in Communist party and no one breaks it.

Series 07 Episode 10 – The Discovery Dissipation

Scene: *The apartment.*

Leonard: Well, you're about to be in an even better one. I didn't want to say anything until I knew for sure, but I've been re-running the tests on your element in my lab and I disproved it. Your element does not exist.

Sheldon: Yeah, but what about the Chinese research team? They found it.

Leonard: Yeah, it turns out someone added simulated signals to the data files. They faked the results. (Ash 2009)

Leonard's response indicates a stereotyped humorous depiction of "Chinese research team". They previously had a breakthrough in science research, but they ended up with a "faked" result of the research. Also, it is not corresponded with the *elite culture* of Chinese scholars, which has been accepted in American societies.

### **7.2.3 Picture Analysis**



Picture 3&4. Chinese milk and a poster of characters having Chinese food<sup>7</sup>.

Picture 3 shows that a Chinese milk brand is inserted into the scene, and it fits into the plot. Shuhua milk appeared on *The Big Bang Theory* because the product is lactose-free, so lactose-intolerant Leonard can drink it (Yang 2012). The hypothetical decoding of the picture is *dominant-hegemonic code*. Because it is accepted by all the characters in the show, and they can drink it whenever they intend to.

Picture 4 depicts the popularity of Chinese food, as a *symbol* in Chinese American culture among characters. *Dominant-hegemonic position*, categorized as a *hypothetical position of decoding*, is applied in the picture. Every character is holding an *oyster pail*, smiling and enjoying Chinese food with forks or chopsticks.

#### 7.2.4 Reflection

- *Hypothetical position of decoding* about Chinese food and milk in the episodes is *dominant-hegemonic position*. Chinese food appears regularly in characters' weekly menus, and Chinese milk is suitable for every character to drink. Nationalities of characters are clearly stated in episode, and the hypothetical decoding of these characters is *negotiated code*. Because images of Chinese characters that are depicted are contradictory to Chinese scholars' *elite culture* that is recognized by Americans.

- Characters have learnt *symbols* and some *values* in Chinese culture, but Sheldon has stereotypes about *collectivists* in *Confucianism* and "Oriental-looking people". Chinese culture that is understood by characters is formed in *The Big Bang Theory*, through combining symbolic and systematic *social codes* (Chinese food and trademark

<sup>7</sup> Source of pictures: <http://www.shichangbu.com/article-3556-1.html> [In Chinese] and <http://ent.cntv.cn/program/sheldon/1/index.shtml> [In Chinese]

of Chinese milk) with *symbolic signs* (Chinese spoken language).

- Culture theory and humor theory cannot be used to analyze Chinese milk that appears in the episode, but the product has revealed the fact that some Chinese enterprises have established commercial cooperation with American sitcom, as a medium to propaganda their products.

## 8. Conclusion

- Chinese symbols in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* are mainly portrayed through the following aspects: Chinese food, traditional Chinese clothes, Chinese spoken and written languages, Chinese products (milk), item used to celebrate traditional Chinese festival (lantern) and Chinese-looking characters who are engaged in various occupations.

- In sitcoms: *Friend* and *The Big Bang Theory*, Chinese food and traditional Chinese clothes are manifested totally to reflect what is real in Chinese culture. The item used to celebrate Chinese traditional festival is mixed up with interpretations of Western culture, so it is partially corresponded with authentic Chinese culture. Chinese written language in *Friends* has reflected the real feature of Chinese language culture; but most of Chinese spoken languages in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory* do not manage to show the authenticity in Chinese language culture, mainly because some words are pronounced inaccurately. Thus, they are mostly portrayed through humorous ways in the episodes. There is inconformity with Chinese-looking characters portrayed in the two sitcoms and Chinese people who represent Chinese cultures. Most characters are depicted in stereotyped forms.

- There are similarities of portraying Chinese symbols in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. Firstly, Chinese food appears sometimes in the episodes, and it is popular among characters. Secondly, Chinese spoken languages are involved in episodes and are spoken by both Western-looking characters and Chinese-looking characters. Thirdly, Chinese-looking characters occupy some proportions in acting the two sitcoms.

- In contrast, differences in depicting Chinese symbols are recognizable in *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*. Firstly, clothes with Chinese styles are portrayed in *Friends*, instead *The Big Bang Theory* shows Chinese products in the episodes. Then, Chinese food is more frequently included in *The Big Bang Theory*; the image of it in *Friends* appears sometimes in the scenes. In addition, *Friends* depicts both written and spoken Chinese languages, while *The Big Bang Theory* only includes colloquial

expressions of Chinese language in the scenes. Furthermore, there are both male and female Chinese-looking characters in *Friends*: the majorities of female characters have occupations in service industry, and the jobs that male characters are doing vary from fitness trainer to scientist. Only male Chinese-looking characters are found in *The Big Bang Theory*, except the restaurant owner, the rest of characters are relevant to geek culture and scientific research. That is to say, they accord with the plots of *The Big Bang Theory*. Lastly, the understanding of Chinese culture in *Friends* is superficial. It is mainly reflected through food, clothes, etc. *The Big Bang Theory* has some comprehension of values in Chinese culture, even though the values are portrayed from a stereotyped and critical angle.

- In conclusion, there are some imaginations and understandings about Chinese images in American sitcoms: *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*, and most symbols are interpreted through humor perspectives. The interests that *Friends* and *The Big Bang Theory*, the two sitcoms scripted in different times have in China illustrate China's development since the 1980s and the process of globalization. Also, American situation comedies with different plots and storylines portray Chinese symbols from various aspects.

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<sup>i</sup> “quoted in w, quoted in Nee and Nee, *Longtime Californ*’, 245. The original idea was that a woman should obey her father, husband, and son, not her brother” (Yeh 2004).