

Understand the Misunderstanding:  
A Study Incorporating Uses and Gratifications Theory on  
Why Chinese Film Audiences See America the Way They Do

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**ABSTRACT**

The Uses and Gratifications Theory states that audiences are active and they seek satisfactions when selecting media. This theory redirects the typical theoretical emphasis on media content to an emphasis on the active audience. The present study focuses on this theory by evaluating the gratifications Chinese audiences receive when watching American films. It discovers gratifications Chinese audiences seek in films, in general, and how their gratifications may be fulfilled by watching American films. The preference for American films among a majority of Chinese audiences would likely affect Chinese audiences' understanding of the American culture. To be more precise, the study focuses on some misperceptions Chinese audiences have toward American culture. By studying these misperceptions, the researcher is able to determine the degree American films can mislead Chinese audiences' perceptions about American culture.

The researcher conducted surveys and interviews with five volunteer focus groups in order to accomplish this study. All the participants were native Chinese who had visited and lived in the United States for at least one month. Three research hypotheses were created in order to set a direction for this study. The research hypotheses are: (1) Chinese audiences use American movies to entertain, to gain information, and to participate in social interaction; (2) American films help Chinese audiences construct their perception of American culture; and (3) Chinese audiences change their prior understanding of the interpersonal relationships in American society after they have personally experienced American culture.

After conducting the five focus group interviews, the researcher found that the three main reasons for Chinese audiences to use American films are to entertain themselves, to gain knowledge about the Western culture and the English language, and to relax. After watching American films, the three main negative perceptions Chinese audiences have toward the American culture relate to family issues, safety problems, and promiscuous behaviors. The researcher also finds that after visiting, studying, and/or living in the United States for at least a month, these participants changed their previous negative perceptions toward American culture. The findings reveal three main elements in American films that would attract most Chinese audiences to watch the films. The findings also have a warning purpose to American film producers. If there is continuous evidence that American films give negative influences to audiences in other countries, then there might be a possibility in the future that American film producers might take some measures to counter such influences by producing more agreeable film fare.

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## Introduction

Since the Open Door Policy was instituted in 1978, the People's Republic of China has welcomed Western influences. After 20 years of isolation, China began seeking more awareness of American culture through American films. With its 1.2 billion people, China represents one fifth of the world's population. This number is significant to the film industry. Xin Hua, a news reporter for *People Daily Online*, wrote in the article "Hollywood Movies Dominate Chinese Movie Market as China Increasingly Opens" that China imported almost 2,166 American movies between 2000 and 2004 (Hua). As the door for scientific and cultural exchanges between the U.S. and China opened wide, the differentiations between the two nations' people's perceptions on every aspects of life has opened a new area of study in the communication field.

I am a native Chinese woman who has lived in Beijing, China for the majority of my life. I have also studied in the United States for more than 8 years. This rich cross-cultural experience gave me the motivation and desire to study the differences between the Chinese and American people and their communication preferences. From my past interpersonal communication experiences with people from the two cultures, I have noticed an interesting pattern. When I go back to China, people there always ask me many questions about every aspect of American society. There seems to be an obsession with wanting to know things American.

Even though I have visited more than 20 states and have lived with three American families, I face the challenge of explaining the differences between the real life experience in America and my Chinese friends' perspectives on the American culture. I began to wonder where Chinese people get their impressions about the American society. When I was living in China, I saw numerous American films and I also made several assumptions about American culture. Later on, my previous assumptions about the American culture were greatly modified

by actual cross-cultural experience. I want to find out whether my Chinese friends understand American culture primarily based on their exposure to the culture portrayed in American films.

After talking to my Chinese friends, I learned that their questions about American society arise from three sources. Some of the questions come from pure curiosity; some of the questions come from reading and listening to the news; and some of them, as my Chinese friends told me, come from American films. This finding stimulated a desire to find out the relationship between Chinese audiences and American films. How do Chinese audiences use American films? Do Chinese audiences interpret the American culture based on the movies they watch?

One way to investigate Chinese audiences' different uses of American movies is through open-ended questions in surveys. By asking Chinese audiences why and how they watch American films, one can discover Chinese audiences' motives when watching American films. The path to view the relationship between Chinese audiences and American films is through Stuart Hall's Reception Analysis (56). Reception analysis sees audiences as active and they produce meaning of the media they use. Therefore, there is a strong emphasis on the audiences' discourse. Reception analysis is used as a qualitative method that helps a researcher to learn how the audiences understand a certain medium and what effects that medium has on its audiences.

The study proposed here has an important value in the communication field for two reasons. First, there are numerous studies examining why and how audiences choose certain media to fulfill their needs; however, not many scholars have studied Chinese audiences' motives and satisfactions when they view American movies. Although many communication scholars have studied media effects on the audience; few studies have mentioned how American films affect Chinese audiences' understanding of American culture. Because of these two reasons, I chose to apply the Uses and Gratification Theory developed by Elihu Katz, Jay

Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch to this study (20). Uses and Gratification Theory considers audiences as “active” and focuses on audiences’ motives and satisfactions; by applying this theory, I will be able to find out how and why Chinese audiences watch American films.

There are two purposes for this study. The first purpose is to find out how Chinese audiences use American films. Arguably, the goal of revealing why Chinese audiences see America the way they do is vital for this study. This study aims to find out what role American films play in that process. The information will be gathered through Reception Analysis and analyzed in order to discover audience response. Specifically, an examination of Uses and Gratification Theory will help to understand how Chinese audiences use American films and why Chinese audiences see America the way they do. The following are the research questions and hypotheses:

RQ1: How do Chinese audiences use American films?

RQ2: Do American films contribute to the formation of Chinese audiences’ perception of the American culture?

RQ3: Do Chinese audiences, after they have experienced American culture, change their way of understanding the American society? If so, what exact expectations have changed?

Hypothesis 1 – Chinese audiences use American movies to entertain, to gain information, and to participate in social interaction.

Hypothesis 2 – American films help Chinese audiences construct their perception of American culture.



Hypothesis 3 – Chinese audiences, after they have personally experienced American culture, change their prior understanding of the interpersonal relationships in American society.

### **Literature Review**

#### American Film History in China

Recognition and appreciation for films in China in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century has gradually expanded. In the 1910's, China only had a few movie productions that were mainly short films. The very first theater in China was actually built by an American man, Benjamin Bredsky. According to the film, music, and entertainment business Web site, "The Reporter," Bredsky started the Asian Film Co., which was the first movie studio in China ("Timeline"). After the 1910's, several other theaters were built in Shanghai. The first Chinese film that won an international award was "Son of the Fisherman" directed by Cai Chusheng. It won its prize at the Moscow Film Festival in 1935 ("Timeline").

From 1941-1945, World War II prompted many Chinese film producers to create patriotic, anti-Japanese films. For a very long time, those anti-Japanese films became the only films patriotic Chinese audiences watched. Chinese audiences' passion toward the anti-Japanese and WWII movies have not ceased in modern China, either. Until this time period in Chinese history, Chinese audiences were mainly exposed to native movies.

In 1950, the Chinese government banned almost all American films in China ("Timeline"). Chinese audiences were only allowed to watch films from the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, most likely because the idea of Communism was portrayed in most Soviet Union and Eastern European movies. During the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution in 1966

to 1972, more and more Chinese film productions ceased. Chinese audiences waited until 1973 to be able to watch films from India, Albania, and the Soviet Union.

Chinese audiences were finally allowed to watch American films in 1994. The number of American films was limited by the Chinese government. However, according to the Web site “The Reporter,” China has a “20-a-year quota” for its imported films (“Timeline”). Even though there was a set number for American films, their existence brought fresh perspectives to Chinese audiences.

As the time line keeps extending forward, Chinese society keeps changing rapidly. Beijing, the capital of China, has grown quickly over the years. Beijing’s growth was especially noticeable after Beijing was selected as the host of The Olympics in 2008. Among many changes that were going on in Beijing, there are more and more movie theatres.

By 2007, Beijing contained 30 theatres: (1) New Century Movie World, (2) New Dongan Movie World, (3) Age Movie World, (4) Purple Light Movie World, (5) Young People Palace Movie World, (6) East Circle Movie World, (7) Wu Dao Kuo, (8) Hai Dian Theatre, (9) Rainbow Movie World, (10) Hua Xing, (11) Xing Mei, (12) Sou Xu Movie World, (13) Da Hua, (14) West Palace, (15) Guangan Men Theatre, (16) Chao Yang Theatre, (17) Di Zhi Theatre, (18) Sunlight Movie City, (19) Zhong Hua Movie Entertainment Palace, (20) Victory Movie Theatre, (21) Red Mansion Theatre, (22) Jin Song Theatre, (23) Mu Ou Theatre, (24) Xin Jie Ko, (25) East Palace, (26) Chao Yang Wen Hua Guan, (27) Ying Xie, (28) Dong Tu, (29) Feng Hua Yuan Cars Theatre, and (30) Zhong Ying Theatre. The majority of the posters and advertisements on the outside of these theatres are for American films. All these theatres tend to show more American films than any other films.

It is noteworthy to mention Beijing's highways here, because they are closely related to the placement of the theatres in Beijing. The Beijing highways are made of six circles, and they divide the entire city into different economic levels. Starting from the Tian An Men Square (the first circle), every circle gets wider and bigger as they spread within Beijing. Every person from Beijing knows that it is the best to live no further than the third circle, even though everything is more expensive in these circles. Easier transportation, more job opportunities, and higher life style are all good reasons to start business within the three circles. By looking at the Beijing map, it is clear that the majority of these movie theatres are inside the third circle; only three theatres are outside the third circle. This reason is understandable since many Chinese families do not own cars, and buses and subways are sometimes more convenient for Chinese people.

Chinese audiences do not only look at easy transportation to decide which movie theatre to go to, but other factors as well. The Chinese Movie Fan Club (CMFC) uses numbers of stars to show qualities of those 30 theatres in Beijing. One star means lowest quality and five stars mean highest quality. Qingsong Feng, the owner of Young People Palace Movie World, revealed in an interview that CMFC rates movie theatres based on 13 categories: (1) sound quality; (2) the number of individual theatres; (3) decoration; (4) custom service; (5) quality of the chairs; (6) quality of lovers' seats (a long couch with soft walls block two sides, normally these seats are in the back); (7) cleanness; (8) numbers of handicapped seats; (9) snacks variety; (10) ticket price; (11) convenience for transportation; (12) placement; and (13) parking. After all these considerations, what else draws Chinese audiences to movie theatres? The main attraction is the movies themselves.

China first welcomed American films in 1994. Just like meeting a long lost relative, Chinese audiences have developed a preference for American films. Today, American films are

the leading box offices in Chinese theatres. Chinese audiences are quite familiar with Hollywood films. Jianping He, in his article “Between Business and Culture: A Study on the Forming and Transforming of the Hollywood Film System,” stated that for a long period of time, the native Chinese films’ birth and development somewhat to “copy, oppose, or improve on Hollywood movies’ story telling strategies, film cutting, and moral stories” (1).

While living in China, I found that the majority of Chinese people welcome American films. Chinese movie theatres have mainly American films and Chinese films; once in a while there are Korean or French movies. When the researcher passes by movie theatres in Beijing, American movie posters are always displayed outside the theatres.

Although there are hardly any American film advertisements on television, there are many other ways for Chinese people to learn about American movies. There are mainly three magazines that are solely dedicated to movies. The three magazines are *World Screen*, *Movie World*, and *Movie View*. The *World Screen* contains mostly American film introductions. These include only those so called “big films” that show in Chinese theatres, but also other American films. Its front cover, back cover, and most inside ads are all about American movies. *Movie View* magazine has more Chinese movie information inside. However, its front cover shows mainly American movie stars or American directors.

*Movie World* is one of the oldest magazines in China. It is the magazine that many Chinese look to for authority with regard to film. For this study, I checked the past ten years’ *Movie World* (January 1998 to January 2008) to see if there was a trend for importing American films into China. Just like the other two magazines, *Movie World*’s front covers show American movie stars. In the past ten years, *Movie World* only had two Chinese actresses who appeared on the front cover. On *Movie World*’s back covers, there are usually American movie stars as well.

As the popularity of American films increases in China, more and more Chinese people are studying Hollywood films. According to He, Chinese people tend to focus on three areas when studying American films: (1) different types of Hollywood movies, so people can learn from their culture and social world; (2) Hollywood's directors (famous ones are Alfred Hitchcock and Steven Spielberg); and (3) Hollywood as an industry itself (1-2).

Shaoyong Lu in Beijing Film Academy did a study on American Police-Gangster movies. In his thesis "Hollywood Police-Gangster Films' Narration Mode's Change," Lu found out that there had been 42 American Police-Gangster movies from 1971 to 1998 (1). To make his point, Lu wrote that Hollywood's "typical" Police-Gangster movies have established an important status in the movie history in the world. Hollywood Police-Gangster films continue to influence the world with their success in box offices. Lu also mentioned that Hollywood Police-Gangster films have formed a typical Police-Gangster movies' manufacturing system which have become a model for Chinese Police-Gangster films (1).

#### Illegal American Movies in China

American movies' superior popularity among Chinese audiences has made Chinese theatres successful. This kind of popularity also results in a great amount of illegal copies of popular American films in Beijing. Walking around in Beijing, it is quite easy to find selling of illegal copies of movie. These sellers are normally easy to recognize for the Chinese people. They sit or stand behind a cardboard box; the illegal copies of movies are covered in plastic bags instead of movie cases and the sellers' eyes are constantly looking around. The sellers like to gather around under sky walks, in front of malls' entrances, and by medium sized restaurants. Those illegal DVDs sellers have all kinds of movies such as Chinese, Korean, French; but American films are always placed in the front of the piles of movies. When looking through all

the illegal copies of movies, it is not hard to find that there are more pirated American films than any other countries' films.

Many illegal copies of American movies lay in those cardboard boxes; ironically, a large majority is not even out in the American market. For example, *Ocean's 13* was showing in theatres in the U.S. in June, and its DVD would not be on the market until later on in 2007. However, when walking down the streets of Beijing in May, 2007, people could already buy illegal copies of *Ocean's 13* through illegal movie copiers. In another instance, the movie *300* was nowhere to be found in the American market in June 2007; but at that exact same time, many illegal copies of *300* were for sale in Beijing—only 5 *yuan* (about 70 cents)!

#### Copyright Issues in China

China is trying to stop all illegal trades; however, the process of fighting illegal copies of movie is not easy. According to *Cankao Xiaoxi*, a newspaper that is sponsored by the Chinese government, China is known as the main source of fake products (“Every Country’s Experts Agree that China Works Hard at Anti-Fake Products,” 8). The Motion Picture Association of America (MPAA) says its members have suffered much revenue loss due to many copyright issues in China. According to the MPAA official Web site, MPAA member companies lost more than \$896 million in 2004 in the Asia/Pacific region (“International MPAA”). The Asia/Pacific region includes China, Malaysia, Taiwan, and the Philippines. Among these nations, China has the number one piracy rate. The MPAA states that, in fact, China has the highest piracy rate in the world (“international MAP”).

China’s piracy rate among the world’s profiteers by June 2007 was at 95%, and the majority of the piracies were films discs (“International MPAA”). This number has increased in the past years. In China, MPAA members could lose up to \$280 million within a year. Within

the past 5 years, there has been a \$900 million loss to MPAA members due to copyright issues in China (“International MPAA”). The head officials in China have made it clear that they want to reduce piracy in China; however, local government and law enforcement are implementing their efforts slowly.

### American Culture Influences the World through Media

American films have great power in influencing the world with American culture. In 2006, according to the Motion Picture Association (MPAA), American films made \$16.33 million internationally (“MPAA Snapshot”). When an American film is released internationally, it becomes a reflection of American culture. Sally A. McKechnie and Jia Zhou in their article, “Product Placement in Movies: a Comparison of Chinese and American Consumers’ attitudes,” said that an American movie is able to affect “over one hundred million consumers” through theatres, DVD’s, and television programs (350). In addition, Walter H. Buchsbaum said that “American films are conquering the world, spreading American culture and style as they go” (22). Baran and Davis, in their book *Mass Communication Theory*, stated that “media affect society because they affect how culture is created, shared, learned, and applied” (227).

Michael Pfau and Lawrence J. Mullen in their article, “The Influence of Television Viewing on Public Perceptions of Physicians,” argue that the mass media has the ability to “shape perceptions of social reality” (307). In the recent past, there has been an increase in the study of the impact of media trends on society. Some images that are portrayed in American movies are of lawyers (Pfau & Mullen, 307-330), school teachers (Glanz, 295-297), principals (Swetnam, 30-32), physicians (Pfau & Mullen, 441-458), and teenagers (Steele, 331). In other words, Hollywood uses common American people and creates their drama to show the

American culture to the rest of the world. These images Hollywood has created leave both positive and negative impacts on their audiences. However, many past studies have focused on the negative effects American films have on the audiences.

Michael Medved asserts in his book *Hollywood vs. America*, “America’s long-running romance with Hollywood is over” (3). Further in his book, he explains his disappointment with the negative images Hollywood has been delivering to the world. Such negative images are foul language (176), violence (183), promiscuity (95), and illegitimacy (139). Such negative images leave many audiences with negative perceptions about American culture. Audiences in different cultures also perceive these images in American films differently because of their different backgrounds, especially religious backgrounds. It is not hard to imagine that some Muslim countries would develop a negative attitude toward Americans due to the images portrayed in American films. The way women are portrayed in American films, for example, are very different from the women in Muslim countries. How would Muslim people, who believe women should be covered from head to toes, view American women if they see American women wear provocative clothing, engage in promiscuous behaviors, or using profane language? It is debatable whether or not these “negative” images Muslim believers see in American films can cause terrorism. The act of terrorism must involve hatred; if Muslims see American films showing images that are opposed to their religion, they might engage in terrorism to show their disagreement, anger, and hate.

Alice Hall, Todd Anten, and Idil Cakim conducted a study with Mexican, Turkish, and American students on how their perceptions were changed by media. These authors argue that audiences will more likely rely on American films to understand American society if they have never experienced American culture (440). Hall, Anten, and Cakim conducted interviews with



Turkish and Mexican students currently living in the U.S. to find out their perceptions about the American culture before coming to this country. This study indicated that students understood other cultures based heavily on the media presentations (436). Hall, Anten, and Cakim also had another group of interviewees who had grown up in the U.S. to compare with the Turkish and Mexican students' answers. During their study, Hall, Anten, and Cakim found that young children in other countries are especially influenced by the images American media portrays.

According to their article, "Perceived Typicality: American Television as Seen by Mexicans, Turks, and Americans," children who are not born in the U.S. are more likely to think the people, events, ideas in American movies are the reality (437). Hall, Anten, and Cakim conclude that there are two main differences Turkish and Mexican students see between real American life and the ones that are portrayed by media: "family" and "problems" (450-451). The authors point out that family is more important in Mexican and Turkish cultures than in American culture; therefore, those students pay more attention to family issues (451).

Before coming to the U.S., the Turkish and Mexican students thought that American families all had comfortable lifestyles. After living in the U.S. for a year or longer, they had noticed that many American families had middle incomes, lived in average size houses, and had mothers who were not all housewives and who went to work everyday (440-446). By viewing the media, Turkish and Mexican students tended to think that the characters in films had no hard jobs or serious problems. Some ideas of how Americans solve problems were "going to bars," "shopping," and "gossiping" (446-450).

Interestingly, Liou and Webb also stated in their article that the non-Americans perceived American family problems differently than Americans after watching "American Beauty" (201-213). Liou and Webb wrote, "non-U.S. viewers perceived problems such as workplace stress,

family violence, teenager sex, guns, mental illness, and homosexuality as more common in American families than U.S. viewers” (209). Jennings Bryant and Dolf Zillmann pointed out that if people see the world the way the media is portraying, there can be a lot of misunderstandings (137-138). Further on, they listed many misconceptions people have due to the images in the media. Such misconceptions are about “occupational pursuits,” “ethnic groups,” “minorities,” “the elderly,” and “sex roles” (138).

In his article “Four Decades of Violent Content on Prime-Time Network Programming: A Longitudinal Meta-Analytic Review,” Amir Hetsroni addressed the amount of violence in American media and how it has affected the American society. The author mentioned several effects viewers receive from violence in the media: “aggressive behavior,” “boosted fearfulness,” “distrust,” “desensitization,” “frustration,” and “pessimism” (760). These effects are more evident among young viewers. To some young people, “violence” seemed like a solution for conflict (Hetsroni, 760). Hetsroni said that for most Americans, violence in media is considered “too much” (761). In addition, John Immerwahr and John Doble in their article, “Public Attitudes toward the Freedom of the Press,” said, “Typically, about two-thirds of Americans have agreed (rather than disagreed or confessed no opinion) with the statement that there is ‘too much violence’ on television” (179). Hetsroni also said that many political figures in the U.S. have put much effort toward eliminating violence in American media (774). It appears that cutting violent images has become a part of political campaigns for many political elections.

Violence and its effects on viewers has interested many researchers. Em Griffin, in his book *A First Look at Communication Theory*, mentioned George Gerbner’s Cultivation Theory. According to Griffin, Gerbner believes heavy television viewers, because they are exposed to much violence, would have four attitudes toward the society: (1) “chances of involvement with

violence,” (2) “fear of walking alone at night,” (3) “perceived activity of police” such as misconceptions toward law enforcement workers, and (4) “general mistrust of people” (347-348). In Gerbner’s own words, this effect is called “mean world syndrome” (348).

When studying violence and how it affects viewers, Hetsroni suggested studying this issue by breaking views of “violence” into three types. The first type of violence in media is considered as “body harm violence” (765). This types of violence included gun shooting, cannons, and pistols. The second type of violence in American media is called “exploitative violence,” which includes raping, kidnapping, and physical coercion (765). The last category of violence in media is considered “demographics of violence proprietors” (765), which takes ethnicity and gender into consideration.

Some past studies on such topics have found that people in European countries have a negative feeling toward the safety of the American society. Jan Van den Bulck recorded a study she conducted among 77 Belgian media students in which she found that the majority of the participants would feel things such as “threat,” “assault,” “loitering,” and even “murder” would happen to them on the streets (224). Another study conducted by Suzanne Pingree and Robert B. Hawkins stated that Australian television viewers are concerned about safety issues in the U.S. (97-105). Nevertheless, Hetsroni suggested that violence on television should not be considered as the “most accurate cultural indicator” in the United States (778).

Just like the Chinese government, some other countries also put a limit on American movies’ import. According to Tyler Cowen, countries such as France, Spain, Brazil, and Mexico have put a limit on the importation of American films (“French”). France, for example, even it’s 60 percent of film markets are made of American films, it still has restrictions on American movies in French theatres (“French”). The majority of the reason for doing so, according to

Cowen, is that the French government is building a “bureaucratic barrier” against American culture (“French”). The same idea was also mentioned by Joseph S. Nye. Nye said that France has had “a strand of cultural anti-Americanism” due to the alliance in the two World Wars (“Franco-American”). Among French politicians, some conservatives do not favor what they call “crude egalitarianism” of the American culture. On the other hand, some other politicians see the American economy as “a symbol of capitalist exploitation of the working class” (“France-American”). However, Nye observed that French people still pursued American movies with great passion. This is also true in China. Even though American films in China are limited, Chinese still flock to theatres that play American films.

A great number of past studies have shown that the content in American media affects audiences’ perception of American culture. This broad topic can be limited to focus on American films only. If the story lines in American films have effects on audiences, then would the products in American films also influence audiences’ understanding of the American culture?

#### Product Replacement in American Films

Scholars have found that the products actors and actresses use in American films have some impact on the audience. “Product Placement” has become an advertising strategy many companies use. McKechnie and Zhou gave a definition for “product placement”: “the planned entries of products into movies or television show that many influence viewers’ product beliefs and/or behaviours favourably” (349). In other words, the products would gain popularity through films and the films would gain more realism and revenue through the product they display.

Jianping He stated how the commercial factor took the most important position gradually in Hollywood films (1-5). Moonhee Yang and David R. Roskos-Ewoldsen listed three types of

product placements: in the background of the movie, an item the main actor or actress used, and a part of the story line (470).

Advertisers in the past 50 years have used product replacement as an effective technique to influence audiences (Yang & Roskos-Ewoldsen, 469). The authors found that audiences' feeling toward a brand would most likely to be manipulated if the product were used by a celebrity (470). Yang and Roskos-Ewoldsen also mentioned that even though brand placement is a type of advertising, there have been studies proving that audiences do like brand placement because those real life items make the movies seem more realistic (471). The more audiences see American films, the more they tend to remember the elements in the movies. Yang and Roskos-Ewoldsen said that as time passes, audiences' memories about the movies will have effects on their understanding of future events (473). This result would also apply to Chinese audiences.

In McKechnie and Zhou's article, they discussed the differences between Chinese and American viewers' acceptance of product placement in American films. McKechnie and Zhou believed that different cultural backgrounds between China and the U.S. would create different attitudes toward product placement in films. China, the authors mentioned, is the "last big consumer market" which represents the world's eighth biggest advertising market (354-355). McKechnie and Zhou found that the majority of Chinese audiences pay more attention to the negative images in American films (363). From the Chinese participants, the authors found that images such as guns, cigarettes, unhealthy foods, and alcohol are least acceptable. On the other hand, items such as computers, soft drinks, bicycles, and "stereo equipment" are considered most acceptable by Chinese audiences (McKechnie and Zhou, 364).

The amount of film viewing affects the Chinese audiences' attitudes toward product placement. McKechnie and Zhou divided all products appear in films into two categories: ethical and unethical (363). The ethical products are items such as sunglasses, mobile phones, racing bicycles, computers, and cameras. The unethical products are items such as fatty foods, cigarettes, alcohol, and guns. McKechnie and Zhou pointed out that "consumers who more frequently watched movies would be more likely to find product placement acceptable across products than those who watched movies less frequently" (364). In other words, if a Chinese audience member often watches American films, he or she would be more likely to accept the product placement, even if the product placement shows negative images such as guns, unhealthy food, and alcohol.

If Hollywood is the center of American film, then what message is Hollywood sending to China?

#### American Films' Influences on Chinese Audiences

*The Fugitive*, the first imported American film in 1994, opened Chinese audiences' eyes to a whole new culture—the American culture. This first imported American movie caused much trouble for Chinese distributors because they believed the movie would cause disagreement in the Chinese society. However, thirteen years later, there is an increasing number of Chinese audiences who are fascinated with the "Western" image. BBC News believed that this favoritism toward Hollywood films was due to the "hi-tech production techniques" used (2003). Thus, American movies are not treated as "threats" anymore.

A. J. Scott stated that over the past 20 years, there has been an increase in the number of American films exported to China (970). Time-Warner and the Chinese government film agency signed an agreement in 1994 to limit the numbers of Hollywood films exported to China to only

ten per annum. However, J Wang points out that the Sino-U.S. trade negotiations in 1996 disqualified this agreement (Wang 1997). Even though the Communist party still has control over Chinese media freedom, it is evident that American films have greatly influenced Chinese people in many ways.

The article “The Utopian Imagination of American Life” stresses the idea of how Hollywood pictures affect Chinese viewers’ perception on American life: “These stories and pictures demonstrated a fancy and colorful world far away from ordinary Chinese people’s daily life, but sparked their curiosity and imagination” (24). No doubt, the images in American films affect Chinese audiences’ perspectives. Alan Rubin in 1994 wrote about how media perceptions and people’s behavior relate to each other. Rubin observes: “Media perceptions and expectations guide people’s behavior; besides needs, motivation is derived from interests and externally imposed constraints; there are functional alternatives to media consumption; and media content plays an important role in media effects” (431-432).

American films might also have the power to influence Chinese audiences’ view of beauty in the U.S. culture. Martin S. Remland states that films can “play a significant role in the modeling of attractiveness, not only by presenting various images of beauty but by creating in consumers the desire to emulate those images” (398). In addition, American scholars Laura K. Guerrero, Joseph A. DeVito, and Michael L. Hecht point out that the mass media has made “thin” to be a standard for beauty (92-98).

Chinese government might also put restrictions on certain American films if the films show any kind of political contentious. For instance, “Rush Hour 3” was banned in mainland Chinese theatrical release. This might seem a bit odd, given the fact that the star of the movie, Jackie Chan, is very popular in mainland China. China Film Group explained the reason for it

was because they did not think this film would be popular in China. In other words, they do not think “Rush Hour 3” would become another “American Big Movie.” Another reason for such a decision was that “Rush Hour 3” fell into a bad time slot because China only allowed 20 American films per year. However, some people believed it was because of its portrayal of organized crime in China. According to Clifford Coonan, the issue of organized crime is “politically sensitive in China as greater economic openness has been accompanied by the emergence of triad-style gangs in big cities” (“China's censors”).

Natalie Finn agreed with Coonan. In addition, she listed another reason for forbidding “Rush Hour 3” in mainland China is that Chinese government censors did not like the language Chris Tucker used in this film (“No Rush”). In other words, Chinese government censors did not like the racial jokes in “Rush Hour 3.” It seems that the Chinese government tries to block its citizens from negative images in American films as well as some political issues that have negative views on China.

In order to study Chinese audiences’ perceptions about U.S. culture and their expectations about the American society based on American films, Uses and Gratification Theory is an appropriate theory to use.

#### Uses and Gratification Theory

Stephen W. Littlejohn, the author of *Theories of Human Communication* (2001), praises Uses and Gratifications theory as “one of the most popular theories” in the field of mass communication (323). Another author who has the same view, Carolyn A. Lin observes that Uses and Gratifications Theory is one of the pioneer theories that can actually claim its own in the field of communication studies (574). John Carvalho calls Uses and Gratifications Theory a “fruitful” theory in the mass communication research field (5). In addition, Thomas E. Ruggiero



pays tribute to this theory by calling it a “cutting-edge” theory because scholars study the Uses and Gratifications Theory in order to learn media effects (1).

Uses and Gratifications Theory receives such distinction because it focuses solely on the audiences instead of the media content itself (Littlejohn, 323). While many past studies mentioned prior to this section have put the blame on American media, Uses and Gratifications Theory switched people’s focus on audiences instead of the media content. Certainly, Uses and Gratifications Theory does not place blame solely on the audiences for negative media effects but rather, it promotes the idea that the audiences share responsibility for choosing to experience such films. Jay Blumler, Elihu Katz, and Michael Gurevitch are the initial theorists for the Uses and Gratifications Theory. According to these theorists, the Uses and Gratifications Theory “highlights” the audience as “a source of challenge” to media producers to provide more suitable products to fit the audience’s needs.

Blumler, Katz, and Gurevitch say that the audiences are “active” and responsible for selecting media in order to satisfy their desires (19-32). Blumler, Katz, and Gurevitch explain the original idea of the Uses and Gratifications approach as the following:

Compared with classical effects studies, the uses and gratifications approach takes the media consumer rather than the media message as its starting point, and explores his communication behavior in terms of his direct experience with the media. It views the members of the audience as actively utilizing media contents, rather than being passively acted upon by the media. Thus, it does not assume a direct relationship between messages and effects, but postulates instead that members of the audience put messages to use, and that such usages act as intervening variables in the process of effect (12).

Much research on uses and gratifications have been done in the past. Among these studies, Blumler, Katz, and Gurevitch pointed out that they differ in three main areas: “different level of study,” such as the particular medium or the content of the medium; “different materials,” such

as the different types of programs on television; and “different cultures” (22). These three main areas show that the Uses and Gratifications Theory not only can be applied to a great number of audiences, it can also be studied within many types of media.

Ruggiero concludes with the basic reason why scholars study the Uses and Gratifications Theory. According to Ruggiero, scholars aim to find the reason people choose certain media and what kind of gratifications people get from that media (16). Furthermore, Carvalho states that audiences make decisions on which type of media to use based on their attitude toward that media’s usefulness (15). In other words, audiences look for the type of media that would best fulfill their need.

Stanley J. Baran and Dennis K. Davis in their book *Mass Communication Theory* say that uses and gratification approach did not exist until the 1970s (268). Before this approach, researchers focused only on the media and the effects media had on audiences. Later on, the uses and gratifications approach went through two revivals. After the two revivals, this approach became more and more popular among researchers. Baran and Davis list two “revivals” of the uses and gratifications approach. The first revival involves one methodological development and two theoretical developments (268). These three developments are (1) the appearance of “new survey research methods” and “data analysis techniques” providing broader ways to study and understand an audience’s uses and gratifications; (2) some scholars in the 1970s noticed that audiences are active because audiences choose certain media to use based on their needs; and (3) scholars are worried that effects studies focus too much on the negative effect media has on audiences and forget about the positive effects media have on people (268-269).

The uses and gratifications approach’s second revival came from the expansion of the World Wide Web (Baran and Davis, 269). Due to this new medium, many scholars have used

the Uses and Gratifications approach in their studies. Baran and Davis argue that the reason for researchers to use this approach is because the Internet has the characteristic of “interactivity” (269). In addition, Baran and Davis quote Ruggiero that “computer-mediated” communication has three characteristics: “interactivity,” “demassification,” and “asynchronicity” (269).

Before examining this theory in depth, it is vital to understand the term “gratification.” The *American Heritage Dictionary* gives meaning to “gratification” as an act of “gratifying,” the stage of “being gratified,” a “reward,” and/or a “gratuity” (“Gratification”). Additionally, according to the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, “gratify” means “to afford pleasure to” (315). Elihu Katz, Jay Blumler, and Michael Gurevitch, the theorists of the Uses and Gratifications Theory, have their definition for “gratification.” According to these theorists, “gratification” simply means “satisfaction” (3).

Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch develop five basic assumptions of the uses and gratifications model. These five basic assumptions include that (1) the audience chooses what media to use because the audience is active and goal-directed; (2) “the initiative in linking need gratification and media choice lies with the audience member;” (3) media are not the only source for gratification, there are other sources audience can use as well; (4) audiences are able to provide researchers with accurate descriptions of their mass media use because they are aware enough of their own media use, interests, and motives; and (5) “value judgments about the cultural significance of mass communication should be suspended while audience orientations are explored on their own terms” (21-22).

Carolyn A. Lin praises this theory as one of the pioneer theories that can actually claim its own in the field of communication studies (574). In addition, John Keeler honored the Uses and Gratifications Theory as a “framework” for scholars who study media audiences (204).

Scholars are able to uncover the reason people use particular media in their daily life by using Uses and Gratifications Theory (Keeler, 205).

According to the theorists Blumler and Katz, there are three foundations that Uses and Gratifications Theory is based on: (1) the audiences are active; (2) they are goal driven in their actions, and (3) they know what they need and choose media to satisfy their needs (20). “Active audience” refers to a larger range of people. Jay G. Blumler, one of the theorists for Uses and Gratification Theory, lists four characteristics of active audiences (270). The first is “utility”: people see the purposes of media and use media for different purposes. Next is “intentionality.” That means people determine which medium to buy based on their goals. Thirdly, “selectivity”: media choice reflects a person’s character. Last is “imperviousness to influence”: the audience has the ability to avoid the media they want to ignore. In other words, even though media influence people, people have the choice of not receiving negative influence.

Abraham H. Maslow says in his classic book, *Motivation and Personality*, that there are two fundamental psychological needs for the audiences: “deficiency” and “non-deficiency” needs (201). Stone, Singletary, and Richmond state that deficiency needs are desires that “derive from internal dissatisfaction, and rely mostly on other people for need-fulfillment” (201). They explain the non-deficiency needs such as “self-actualization needs . . . can be fulfilled by sources independent from others and may help enhance one’s self-development” (201).

Blumler refers to media use needs as self-actualization needs (41). These self-actualization needs can be divided into five types in the field of media study: (1) cognitive needs, such as needs to understand something or someone; (2) affective needs, such as needs to reinforce emotional experience; (3) integrative needs, such as needs to gain knowledge and credibility; (4) needs that deal with helping contact with friends and family; and, (5) needs to

relax and release tension (Katz, Gurevitch, and Haas, 164-181). These needs can be further broken down into different categories.

Stone, Singletary, and Richmond list ten dimensions that audiences' motives for using media can fall into: (1) entertainment, to look for fun, enjoyment, and pleasure; (2) surveillance, to view the media as a source for news; (3) information, to gain knowledge; (4) diversion, to "redirect one's attention to the media reality"; (5) escape, to ignore a problem situation; (6) social interaction, to have something to talk about with others; (7) parasocial interaction, to "talk back" to the characters media presents; (8) identity, to recognize self with other people; (9) pass time, to "kill" time; and (10) companionship, to "reduce the feeling of loneliness" (202). Even though these ten reasons would explain why audiences use certain media, Jarmila Horna, however, stated that most audiences select certain media due to only three reasons: to entertain, to relax, or to escape (283-301). Horna also wrote that the majority of people thought "leisure" and "mass media" were almost identical (283). Additionally, David Giles in *Media Psychology* also gave three reasons why people choose to use a certain media. According to Giles, audiences use media first to "understand" the world around them by providing information; secondly, audiences use media for "orientation," in other words, the media helps the audience to decide what action to take; lastly, audiences use media as a reason for "play," which means media allows the audience to relax and to socialize (24). An examination of which dimensions Chinese audiences fall into can find out what category of American films is the most preferred by Chinese audiences.

Scholars also have taken audiences' media use activity into consideration. Mark R. Levy and Sven Windhal teach that there are three stages of media use activity process: pre-exposure activity, during-exposure activity, and post-exposure activity (51-78). Pre-exposure activity may

ask questions such as where do the audiences go when they make choices for media exposure. During-exposure activity to a certain degree reflects how well the media content grabs the audiences' attention. Post-exposure activity explains both short-term and long-term effects on the audience after they have viewed the media. An understanding of these activities would help to understand the depth of American films' influence on Chinese audiences.

Richard C. Vincent and Michael D. Basil did a study in 1997 using Uses and Gratifications Theory to test the relationship between college students and their news media use. They made a suggestion that a college student's motive will determine his media choice. Once that college student makes a media choice, the actual viewing of that particular medium will determine his knowledge about the world around him (2). Vincent and Basil have also said that younger generations will most likely use media to "pass time" or to "escape" (1). They conducted a quantitative study of a sample of 1209 students in a university. Vincent and Basil were able to find out that age was not a factor on whether or not a student uses media to "escape," get rid of "boredom," and to entertain (4). Gender, however, was the main factor for media choice; males had a higher level of using news media to escape and to entertain (4). Interestingly, Vincent and Basil also pointed out that for those students who liked entertainment, their choices for watching news would likely be television rather than print (6). Their study might suggest that people who have higher entertainment needs would more likely use television or movies as a source of information.

Ruggiero had a different assumption. He believed that since we live in an "information age," people use media to "seek information" (7). Ruggiero also strongly criticized Uses and Gratifications Theory. Elihu Katz approved Ruggiero's point, arguing that there were four areas scholars needed to keep in mind when studying Uses and Gratifications Theory: (1) the theory

mainly focuses on “self-reports,” (2) this theory does not study the audiences’ “social origin of the needs” in details, (3) the theory was not significant of the “possible dysfunction both for self and society of certain kinds of audience satisfaction,” and (4) Uses and Gratifications Theory was “too captivated by the inventive diversity of audiences used to pay attention to the constraints of the text” (525-545). Even though there might be flaws associated with Uses and Gratifications Theory, many scholars still chose to study media effects by using this theory.

Since some recent studies focused on how college students use news media (Vincent and Basil, 1-11), usefulness of internet advertising among vacation seekers (Yang, 430-442), and why some people prefer southern gospel music (Graves, 201-209). Some studies mainly focused on how the audience used the media, while some mainly focused on the consequences of using certain media. In 1963, Joseph T. Klapper brought up the idea that scholars should focus on “consequences” of using the media rather than why audiences used that certain medium (515-527).

Interestingly, Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch mentioned in their book that audiences use media to “connect” themselves with things that are around them such as friends, family, and nations (23). When a Chinese audience uses an American film, it connects itself with the American actors and actresses. More fascinatingly, the Chinese audience could build a connection with the American culture through the American films it watches.

Katz, Blumler, and Gurevitch also said that past studies have shown the gratifications audiences receive from media come from three sources: the content of the media audiences have chosen, the amount of exposure audiences get from the media, and the “social context that typifies the situation of exposure to different media” (24). When a Chinese audience watches an American film, the content of the film, the genre of the film, and the audience’s Chinese cultural

background all would affect individual gratifications gained from the American film. If the Chinese audience gains the gratifications he or she seek from American films, then he or she would come back and watch more American films that have the same content and belong to the same genre.

Due to the increasing popularity of Uses and Gratification Theory, Baran and Davis have found out an important pattern among active audiences. According to Baran and Davis, “people actively impose meaning on content and construct new meaning that serves their purposes better than any meaning that might have been intended by the message producer or distributor” (270). If a Chinese audience member who has never been to the U.S. uses American films to fulfill a certain purpose, there is a possibility that the American films would affect his or her understanding of the American culture.

#### Chinese Culture vs. American Culture

Fred E. Jandt observes that “culture” was a popular term in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to describe Western civilization (6). According to E. B. Tylor, the forefather of modern anthropology, culture or social norm is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, customs, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (301). It is not hard to understand the reason Tylor refers to “culture” as a “complex” term. David Matsumoto and Seung Hee Yoo in their chapter, “Culture and Applied Nonverbal Communication,” provided a simple definition: “a shared system of socially transmitted behavior that describe, define, and guide people’s ways of life” (257).

Jandt points out that “culture” is related to four aspects. These aspects are “a community or population sufficiently large enough to be self-sustaining,” the entirety of “that group’s thought, experiences, and patterns of behavior and its concepts, values and assumptions about



life that guide behavior and how those evolve with contact with other cultures,” “behavior learned from birth in the family and schools over the course of generations,” and “members who consciously identify themselves with that group,. . .or the identification with and perceived acceptance into a group that has a shared system of symbols and meanings as well as norms for conduct” (7). In addition, H. Ned Seelye said that social norms are expectations about what behavior, thoughts, or feelings are appropriate within a certain group within a particular context (96). Barry Brummett also gives all cultures three characteristics: they are “overlapping,” they involve “consciousness” or “ideologies,” and people experience them by using texts (27). Since this study will involve examining people from two different countries, it is essential to know the differences between the two cultures.

American people and Chinese people have different languages, hygiene, foods, rituals, folklore, ethics, religion, and schools. They live in different geographical regions and have different governments. Therefore, China and America are two different nations that have different views on the self. China and America have different cultures and social norms. Seelye supported this idea by stating that China and America differed in many aspects in life, especially in interpersonal relationships (79-84).

Perhaps the greatest difference between the Chinese culture and American culture is that one is highly collectivistic and one is highly individualistic. The Chinese culture is collectivistic. Collectivistic cultures treasure the value of groups. According to Gannon, Chinese people value togetherness (390). For collectivistic cultures, it is always appropriate to sacrifice for the well being of the group. The individualistic cultures, on the other hand, value the individuals. The U.S. is a great example of an individualistic culture. In individualistic cultures, people tend to be only close to their immediate families.

Geert Hofstede in his official Web site explains the differences between individualistic cultures and collectivistic cultures:

Individualism on the one side versus its opposite, collectivism, that is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups. On the individualist side we find societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him/herself and his/her immediate family. On the collectivist side, we find societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts and grandparents) which continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty. The word 'collectivism' in this sense has no political meaning: it refers to the group, not to the state. Again, the issue addressed by this dimension is an extremely fundamental one, regarding all societies in the world. (“A Summary”)

Hofstede says that among all Asian countries, China has the lowest Individuality (“Geert Hofstede”). On the other hand, the U.S. has a significant high score of Individuality (“Geert Hofstede”). M. Chen states in *Inside Chinese Business* that from a Chinese point of view, people live only in “relationship to others” (6). H. Ned Seelye supports this idea in his book *Teaching Culture* by stating that China and America differ in many aspects in life, especially in the ways people see themselves (79-84). To be more precise, Edward T. Hall, an anthropologist, points out that Chinese people have “tremendous latitude” and “great stability” in the society (161). Hall also finds individuality, minor dissent, and clashes of personality in the Chinese culture are “handled by pretending that they do not exist” (162).

Although not one hundred percent dissimilar, the American culture is quite different from the Chinese culture. Martin J. Gannon lists the uniqueness of the American culture: “Equality of opportunity, independence, initiative, and self-reliance are some of those values that have remained a basic degree of individualism” (209). In addition, Gannon pointed out that “the common belief in America is that individuals are capable of doing anything they want to accomplish” (217). In order to clarify his point, Gannon uses American professional football as

a metaphor for the American culture. In comparing NFL football, Gannon finds that the characteristics of “competitive specialization,” “high levels of emotional intensity,” and “aggressiveness” are some of the main traits among Americans (209). In comparison, Gannon’s metaphor for Chinese culture was “family altar,” a symbol for the unity of the family (389). According to Gannon, “roundness,” “harmony,” and “fluidity” are three characteristics of Chinese culture (391). Chinese people value the importance of having a complete family (extended and immediate families), having a balance within family and the society, and having the ability to adjust to changes without changing tradition (391).

#### Importance of this Study

Conducting this study is vital to today’s society. As technology grows rapidly, the distance between people becomes smaller. Both economic and educational exchange has increased between China and the United States of America. This change can bring positive results to individuals and organizations in these two countries. Gregory Moorhead and Ricky W. Griffin listed two reasons why many American organizations are going multicultural: the rapidly growing minority population in the U.S. and the fact that many American companies are sending products, employees, customers, and services outside America (53-54). This is especially true with American film industries.

There are negative aspects as well. Moorhead and Griffin stated that cultural differences cause “unhealthy” conflict between two people (76). Learning another culture can help to eliminate the conflict. Of course, understanding another culture fully is not a simple task. Judith N. Martin and Thomas K. Nakayama confirmed this point in their book *Intercultural Communication in Contexts*. They pointed out that there is not one list of rules people can follow in order to be effective intercultural communicators (113).

The misunderstandings between two people are normally because of cultural differences. A study on how Chinese people select American films can help to ease the cultural differences. It is stated that “human needs are influenced by culture, not only in their formation but in how they are gratified” (Ruggiero, 15). Therefore, one must research and study the intercultural differences and similarities. The study presented here can help to find the cause of some Chinese people’s misunderstanding toward the American culture.

Martin and Nakayama also quoted Richard Brislin on his study of the four elements of how people interact with each other based on their past experience. These four elements are: childhood experiences, “historical myths,” the language a person speaks growing up, and “recent, vivid” events (141). American movies in China would be considered the fourth element. Media effects are very powerful. Films connect Hollywood with the 1.3 billion Chinese people. If Chinese people choose American films based on their personal needs and form their understanding of the American culture based on those American films they saw, then the results of this study can help people from these cultures to communicate with each other more effectively. The results of this study would help Chinese people and the American people know how to better communicate with each other. Also, it would inform the movie industries in the U.S. about the consequences of their films on Chinese audiences.

Chinese people have noticed the importance of American films in China. Graduate students in Chinese universities have started doing their theses on the topic of American movies and their Chinese audience. At present, the National Library of China (NLC) does not contain many works that deal with American movies’ influences in China. According to NLC’s record, from 1994 to the present (2007), there were only nine theses that dealt with American films. By looking at these theses’ titles, it is not hard to tell that a topic that deals with American movies

and the Chinese audience is a field of study that not many scholars have dealt with yet. These theses are the following: (1) Linlin Chen's *Jews under the Status of Liberty* in 1994, (2) Chen Wang' *Against Racism: Black People in Movies* in 1994, (3) Feng Mei's *Voyeurism in Hollywood* in 1998, (4) Di Wang's *A Study on Steven Spielberg* in 2000, (5) Jianping He's *Between Business and Culture: A Study on the Forming and Transforming of the Hollywood Film System* in 2002, (6) Pingping Jiang's *American Movie Industry in the 90s'* in 2002, (7) Hongxing Guan's *Narrative in American Scary Movies* in 2002, (8) Shaoyong Lu's *American Police-Gangster Movies* in 2003, and (9) Haiyan Chen's *An Analysis of Feminism in American and Chinese Movies* in 2005.

From looking at those theses titles, it was interesting to see that Chinese scholars have studied narratives and strategies of story telling in American movies a great deal. Also, the first thesis that dealt with American movies was written in 1994, the same year American movies first legally entered China. This study is important to understand how American movies have influenced the Chinese audience. It will also help to reveal how Chinese audiences understand American culture through the films they watch.

Last but not the least, this study is important because if there are many negative effects Chinese audiences gain from American films, then this study also serves a warning to American film producers. David Barboza from *The New York Times* reported that Chinese government only allows 20 American films per year and this number is not satisfactory for Hollywood producers. Hollywood has been trying to gain a greater access to Chinese theatres and their effort is not showing any positive result. The American films show in Chinese theatres all have to pass Chinese censors, and Barboza emphasized that most of those imported American films are "often edited heavily" ("Suspicious"). To many Hollywood producers' surprise, China did

not show any American films in Chinese theatres in December, 2007. Additionally, when American movie industry officials tried to submit films for Chinese government's approval for showing in the early months of 2008, those American films were "either not accepted by regulators or the requests were ignored or delayed" ("Suspicious").

This event has caused a stir among American movie producers, especially the ones work for Sony Pictures Entertainment, Warner Brothers and Walt Disney. Dan Glickman, chairman of the Motion Picture Association of America, admitted to Barboza that if Chinese government in fact put a block on American films, then there "would be a strong step backwards" for American film industry ("Suspicious").

Chinese government has already limited the importation of American films due to their negative images and harmful contents. If American films producers do not care about the content of the films but only care about the amount of money they can make, Chinese government might ban more American films or put a restriction on all American films. If that ever happens, American film producers would lose a significant percentage of revenue, totally opposite from their initial attempt. Maybe American film producers should consider effects films have on international audience. If American film producers change R-rated movies into PG-13 rated and even lower ratings, they would actually be able to reach a broader audience. That way, not only American film producers would receive less blame on negative effects, they also would gain more revenue.

### **Research Problem**

Scholars have found that audiences are active and they choose what media to use based on their needs and goals. Therefore, Chinese audiences have a goal and/or a motive in mind when they select American films. This directs me to the first category of research questions. I aim to find out the main reasons that Chinese audiences choose to watch American films. When facing many choices for movies, what makes a Chinese audience member want to watch an American film? In other words, why do Chinese audiences let American movies satisfy their needs more often than films from other countries?

Past research has shown that American films leave a great amount of impact on their viewers. That leads me to my second category of research questions. I want to know why Chinese audiences see America the way they do. Do American films contribute to Chinese audiences' perception of the American culture? If the answer is "yes," then to what extent do American films affect Chinese audiences' understandings of American culture? What elements in American movies have the biggest impact on Chinese audiences? In addition, I want to find out whether or not Chinese audiences, after they have experienced the actual American culture, change their way of understanding the American society. If so, what exact expectations have changed?

With these research questions in mind, I have compiled three hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1 – Chinese audiences use American movies to entertain, to gain information, and to participate in social interaction.

Hypothesis 2 – American films help Chinese audiences construct their perception of the American culture.

Hypothesis 3 – Chinese audiences, after they have personally experienced American culture, change their prior understanding of the interpersonal relationships in the American society.

In attempt to discover the validity of these hypotheses from a broad pool of data and information, it is vital to choose an appropriate study methodology.

### **Presentation of Study Methodology**

#### **A Qualitative Methodology**

According to Joann Keyton's *Communication Research*, when a researcher wants to study "performance," "process," and "practice" of people, qualitative methodologies are ideal (248). Keyton's suggestion best fits what I want to study. Also, qualitative methodologies best fit my personality. I am very interested in people and have always enjoyed the interaction with others. Qualitative methodologies allow a researcher to have personal relationships with the participants; in other words, the researcher is able to interact "directly" with the participants (Keyton, 248).

Keyton points out that a researcher's background, such as ethnicity, age, and gender can directly affect the interpretation of the data (265). Because I will be interacting with Chinese participants with whom I have the same cultural background, I will have a better understanding of their responses. Keyton points out another important factor for qualitative methodologies. "As a researcher," Keyton says, "the amount of similarity between your physical and cultural attributes and those of the people whom you are observing will also affect your comfort level" (265). Being a person from China, I have a high comfort level with Chinese people.



The way of presenting the qualitative methodologies fits my writing style. Keyton lists four writing styles a researcher can use when writing a qualitative report: the Realist, the Confessional, the Impressionist, and the Critical Scholar (320-324). Among these four writing styles, only the Realist writer avoids using first person. Keyton warns us that when using the third-person pronouns, a researcher might give readers the impression that he/she is presenting an “objective truth” (319). Moreover, Keyton says that if the researcher wants descriptive interpretation, he/she should consider using the first person (319).

I recognize the need to present my results in a way that readers know I am responsible for the findings. I want to let the readers sense that I am the one who is presenting the conclusions; therefore, the first person style of writing is preferable for this study. I also want to draw the readers deeply into my findings by creating a sense of closeness between the readers and me. I agree with Keyton that the first person style of writing creates intimacy between the author and the reader (321).

#### Reception Analysis as the Method for This Study

I believe using Reception Analysis is the most appropriate method for this study. I am attempting to find out the effects American films have on Chinese audiences and how Chinese audiences create meaning about American culture by watching American films. The Reception Analysis method helps to discover whether or not mass communication is the social production of meaning for its audiences. According to Klaus Bruhn Jensen, Reception Analysis presumes that “effect” and “meaning” are closely linked (135). In other words, without “meaning,” we cannot discover any “effect.”

Reception Analysis has three characteristics. First, the researcher focuses on the audience side in the process of data collection. Second, the researcher uses linguistics and

rhetorical criticism when analyzing interviews and audience discourses. Third, when studying audience experience of media, there are no major differences between the “analysis” and “interpretation” (Jensen, 140). Jensen has also pointed out three approaches scholars use in Reception Analysis: interviewing individuals or groups, observation, and “historical sources” (139).

Stuart Hall first developed the Reception Analysis approach. Stanley J. Baran and Dennis K. Davis in their book *Mass Communication Theory* praised Hall as Birmingham University Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies’ “most prominent scholar” (275). Hall’s Reception Analysis, according to Baran and Davis, pays most attention to the audience, who is responsible for interpreting the media content (276).

Hall’s work was first published in *Culture, Society, and the Media*, edited by Michael Gurevitch, Tony Bennett, James Curran, and Janet Woollacott. In the chapter “The Rediscovery of ‘Ideology’: Return of the Repressed in Media Studies,” Hall suggests that media does not affect people directly; but rather, it affects people indirectly through “other social processes” (58). Things such as cultural background, age, education level, and gender can affect how an individual interprets the media content. Hall also mentions that the true meaning in mass media should be examined from the audiences’ point of view (75). In Hall’s opinion, the Reception Analysis approach allows researchers to listen to participants’ discourses. “Discourse not only referenced themselves in the structure of already objectivated social knowledge,” Hall points out. “But established the viewer in a complicitous relationship of pragmatic knowledge to the ‘reality’ of the discourse itself” (75). To further explain his point, Hall says that reality is “in the evidence of one’s eyes” (75).

This study deals with how Chinese audiences see American culture through its films. The participants are Chinese audiences who have experienced American culture for at least one month. They discussed their personal experiences with American films, gave personal examples, and interacted with other participants. Also, the participants' Chinese background might have had an effect on their attitude toward the American films. Due to these reasons, the Reception Analysis would be the appropriate method for this study.

### Focus Groups for Data Collection

As I mentioned earlier, my research questions are how do Chinese audiences use American films and why do Chinese audiences see America the way they do? The methodology that I will use in discovering answers to my research questions is that of focus groups. As the researcher, I served the role of a "facilitator" for the focus groups (Keyton, 276). In other words, I lead the conversations, but let participants express themselves freely with each other.

There are many studies that have used focus group interviews. Here I present some recent examples. John Keeler in 2004 conducted focus group interview in order to find out why some people enjoy listening to Southern Gospels. Keeler's focus group contained thirteen adults with different Christian backgrounds (209). During the interview, the thirteen participants answered many questions that dealt with how and why they listened to Southern Gospel, along with how often they used the Bill Gaither videotape series. Tom M. Lin, Pin Luarn, and Yun Kuei Hang also incorporate the method of focus groups. From listening to their participants' conversations, these authors were able to find out the relationship between consumers' book purchasing decisions and on-line book reviews (461-468).

Keyton lists four advantages of collecting data using focus groups: (1) participants can talk among themselves besides talking to the researcher; (2) focus groups provide the opportunity for researchers to “capture the ideas and perceptions of difficult-to-reach populations”; (3) each one of the participants can compare their ideas with others’ opinions; and (4) the focus group is a great way to learn about “group effect” (276-277). All of these advantages were appealing to me as valuable from the interaction of my focus groups. I plan on inviting 25 Chinese film audiences to form five focus groups. All of my participants would have experienced American culture for at least one month.

#### Group Interview Questions

Prior to the focus groups, I had all the participants write down their demographic background. The reason for doing so was because I did not see the need for the participants to discuss their personal backgrounds with each other. I developed an interview guide after reviewing the literature and determining the area of my study. During the group interview sessions, I asked participants 12 meaningful questions that served the purpose of finding the relationship between American films and Chinese audiences for my research.

First, I wanted to get a grasp of the relationship between my participants and American films. I asked the participants questions such as “Do you enjoy watching American films?” “Do you watch American movies more than Chinese movies, or about the same?” “How often do you watch American movies?” “Where do you watch American movies, at home or in theatres?” and “What type of American movies do you enjoy the most?” These questions served the purpose of finding out the popularity level of American films in China, the frequency the Chinese audience used American films, and the types of American films that attracted Chinese audiences the most. I believed different types of American movies influenced Chinese audiences in different ways.

For example, family films might affect the audiences' understanding of the American families; action movies might affect audiences' view of safety in the U.S.; and comedy films might help audiences to understand the American humor style.

Then I asked my participants a key question I created after studying the Uses and Gratifications Theory. The question, "Why do you watch American movies?" helped me to see if I could find a connection between Chinese audiences' motives, needs and American films. I assumed I would get several different answers for this question from all my participants. By comparing the different answers, I had the opportunity to discover what were the first, the second, and the third major reasons Chinese audiences used American films.

I also had several questions that I developed for the purpose of studying the effects of American films on the Chinese viewers. I planned on asking my participants: "Before you came to America, what were your expectations about this country based on the American films you watched?" After my participants answered this question, I was able to see whether or not Chinese audiences, if never experienced the U.S. culture in person, formed their understanding of the U.S. culture based on the American films they watched.

If the result was positive, then I would ask the following questions: "Now that you have seen the real American culture, have your expectations changed?," "Do you notice any differences between the real American society and the one that is portrayed in American movies?," and "Do you now believe American movies accurately depict the American society?" These questions would help me to find out whether or not there was a difference between the U.S. culture these participants have personally experienced and the one that they have seen in American films. At the same time, I attempt to find out what exact issues in the U.S. were twisted, exaggerated, or eliminated in American films. To be more precise, I wanted to find out

that, because of the unrealities shown in American films, whether or not Chinese audiences formed a misunderstanding of the people, lifestyle, and culture in the U.S.

During the groups' interviews, I allowed participants to give some of their real life examples. Even though I was not using Narrative Analysis for this particular study, real life stories could help me to interpret participants' feelings and understandings of the U.S. culture. In addition, I did not ask any leading questions that suggest the participants give a certain answer. The nature of these questions was to let the participants express their opinions freely with me and with each other.

After I gathered all the data, I was able to determine whether or not the Uses and Gratification Theory applied to the frame of mind dealing with how Chinese audiences use American movies for their needs and goals; and at the same time, determine if American films help Chinese audiences construe their reality about the American culture. I came up with the term "the ongoing spiral" as a metaphor to describe this kind of relationship between Chinese audiences and American films, due to their ability to inspire each other and possibility to expand. Discovery of both negative and positive results would possibly be beneficial to the communication field.

If there was an ongoing spiral between Chinese audiences and American films, then I can ensure the noteworthy value in this study. I could label this study as a contribution to the American film industry and intercultural scholars, especially scholars who study the relationship between China and the U.S. It would not be easy to stop this ongoing spiral because the two factors are closely linked with each other. However, it would be a benefit to both Chinese and American societies if we can use this concept of the ongoing spiral to its full advantage.

It would be ideal to have contextual equivalence. Matsumoto and Hee Yoo mentioned in their book that one concept could mean different things across cultures; therefore, participants might give definitions that are non-equivalent (266). Non-equivalent data is not useful for any types of researches. Since I am the researcher and I am a native Chinese, I was able to ensure contextual equivalence. I planned to develop the interview questions in English, and then translate them into Chinese by myself. During the interviews, I asked my participants to answer interview questions in Chinese. After I gathered all the information from my participants, I back-translated the Chinese into English. After comparing the answers in both languages, I did not find any major inconsistencies.

### Participants

My plan was to conduct five focus groups that were composed of 25 Chinese people who have had previous studying or living experience in the U.S. These 25 participants would be the sample size of my study. I hoped to invite people who were willing to participate and be honest in their opinions. Therefore, I would carefully examine people's personalities, both verbally and nonverbally, before asking them to participate in a focus group.

Each focus group would last approximately 40 minutes to an hour. Before conducting each focus group, I planned on befriending all of the participants through small talks. As a result, all of the participants were eager and enthusiastic to respond in the interviewing sessions. Additionally, it was ideal that all participants get to know each other before the focus groups, so they were open and honest with each other during their conversations. One way to accomplish that was to let all participants chat with each other before the focus group. The participants formed interpersonal relationships after socializing with each other. Overall, the atmosphere of the five focus groups was relaxed, responsive, and pleasant.

I planned on conducting two focus groups while I was currently living in Central Virginia. I have made friends with many Chinese students here in Virginia who are presently attending American schools. I facilitated the other three focus groups when I got back to Beijing, China this summer. There were a couple of places where I could contact Chinese students who study in the U.S. I have known some Chinese students in America through family members and/or friends, travel agencies, and the U.S. Embassy.

I believed five focus groups would provide adequate information for this study. Certainly, the five focus groups had similarities and differentiations. They were similar because all the participants were Chinese people who have been to the U.S. Additionally, all the participants have been exposed to American films. The focus groups were also different from each other. Since every participant had his/her own personality, each focus group would have a distinctive character. Also, my participants would have different demographics that affect their perspectives. All the similarities and differentiations would offer a stable database for my research.

During June, July, and August in 2007, I was able to gather 25 Chinese volunteers for this study. Each one of the five focus groups was individually conducted within these three months. All participants had previous experience studying, living, or staying in the U.S. for at least a couple of months. All of them had also acknowledged that they had watched American films; in fact, all of them enjoyed watching American films. Among these participants, there were 12 males and 13 females. The average age among the participants was 21.18 years old. The average years these participants stayed in the U.S. was 1.5 years.

I conducted the first focus group interview in a large private University in Central Virginia. The five participants included a senior, a post graduate, a seminary student, a junior,



and a freshman. They were friends with each other prior to the interview for at least one year. Among participants in focus group #1, participants watched an average of two American movies per week.

The second focus group contained a broader variety of age level and occupation. Among these five participants, there were two graduate students in a larger university in Washington state, an educator and his wife on a business trip, and a business man traveling the U.S. for vacation. These participants got to know one another while waiting in the Tokyo airport for five hours due to a hurricane delay. They watched 2.5 American films in average per week.

All the participants in focus group #3 were colleagues who worked in Beijing Institute of Technology. They have traveled to the U.S. as a group for a business convention six months prior to this study, and they were planning to obtain returning visas for another business meeting in August. These participants had been working with each other for at least two years. These participants watched an average of three American movies per week.

Focus group #4 was also made up of five colleagues. They were waiting in line in front of the U.S. Embassy in Beijing, China to obtain their visas. These participants worked together in a Chinese national magazine company. The nature of the magazine was mainly focused on the new technology around the world and how the new technology could affect businesses. Per week, among these participants, their average American films' viewing time was 3.5 hours.

The last focus group was conducted in Central Virginia. These participants all attended the same church and had known each other for half a year. They watched an average of 2 American movies per week.

I considered these participants to be representatives for Chinese audiences. Their different personalities, ages, education, occupations, and family backgrounds should be able to

reasonably reflect the general population of movie goers in China. According to Franklin Paul, a writer for CNN Money News, the population of movie goers in China is 1.24 billion (“Hollywood Eyes China”). These Chinese movie goers bring Hollywood \$200 million in 1999 alone. This number is still increasing. In this article, Paul records that Robert Bucksbaum, President of Reel Source, says that Chinese movie goers are not just “gold mine” but rather “diamond mine” (“Hollywood”). The participants in this study would be a small reflection of the “diamond mine.”

I understood that among these focus groups, there were likely to be differences in the ways of how American films affected their understanding of the U.S. culture. Depending on each participant’s preference, some elements in American films might be more appealing than others. Thus, not all elements in American films were able to actually help Chinese audiences construe their understanding of the U.S. culture. I planned to pay most attention on the elements these participants focused on for this particular study.

## **Analysis of Research**

### **The Reasons Chinese Audiences Watch American Films**

In this study, all the participants enjoy watching American films; in fact, they watch more American films than any other films. The first research question explored reasons Chinese audiences chose to watch American films. Among the 25 participants, all of them acknowledged that they have gained gratifications from watching American films. In responding to the question why do they enjoy watching American films, Chi Ming, a seminary student, shared his sentiments that others in his focus group also expressed:

Well, they [American films] are interesting, they are fun to watch. I mean, they [American films] are foreign, so that's something I don't see all the time back home [in China]. Also, they [American actors and actresses] have better acting. . .When I first watched American films, it was because they were popular among us. Later on, I knew that I will be coming here [the U.S.] to study, so I watch to learn English. To learn the Western culture is another reason. (male, 25, 4 years in the U.S.)

Another participant, Zhu worked in a major car sale company located in Beijing. He presented a pattern that is similar among these participants. "I generally don't watch movies that often, because I'm always busy." Zhu said. "But if I do watch them, I watch mainly American films, because they are more fun to watch" (male, 32, 1/2 year in the U.S.). Many of these participants have busy schedules; however, when they have time to watch a movie, they choose to watch an American film.

During the interviews, all of the participants articulated that American films are able to fulfill their entertainment needs. Many elements of American films are very entertaining in these participants' eyes. For instance, the technology that is used in American films is more advanced than many other films. This was the reason Jian watches American films. Jian has been working in the education field for more than ten years and has traveled to many states in the U.S. "I would say it is for entertaining," Jian said. "To see all the special affects." (male, 34, 1 year in the U.S.).

An administrator in the Beijing Institute of Technology, Jing explained why she enjoys American films. "[American films have] better pictures and acting. . .generally are the story lines in those American films. I watch more American films because I don't see the same ideas are played in Chinese films or any films" (female, 22, 2 years in the U.S.). To add to Jing's idea, Jing's coworker Cai expressed that American films are entertaining because the scenery in the films is "beautiful," and the actors and actresses are "pretty looking" (female, 30, 1/2 year in the

U.S.). By examining their nodding and smiling, I know that Cai's statement is supported by her focus group members.

A similar idea came up in another group as well. All the participants were having a discussion about what kind of American films Chinese people enjoy the most. During their conversations, some participants voted that romance movies are the most popular in China; some chose action movies; and some picked suspense movies.

The real debate started when Yang, a junior in college, suggested that the selection of American films shown in Chinese theatres "depends on which one would bring the most money to Chinese theatres" (male, 22, 2 years in the U.S.). Yang's classmate, Lu, further explained their idea of what kind of American films would bring a great amount of money to Chinese theatres. His suggestion is supported by his focus group members:

Films have movie stars bring more audience. More audience means more money. If they [American movie stars] are in the movies, then the theatre will show those movies. Stars like Brad Pitt, Matt Damon, Mal Gibson, Julia Roberts, Angelia Jolie. . .like them. The more the stars, the more audiences. Um, also, the ones who have won rewards. (male, 21, 3 years in the U.S.)

Lu's answer is a clear illustration of how Chinese audiences choose to watch American films because of their famous movie stars. Special effects, beautiful scenery, intriguing story lines, and famous actors and actresses seem to be the elements Chinese audiences look for in American films when using them for an entertaining purpose.

Interestingly, the topic of good looking American actors and actresses make American films pleasant to the eyes comes up in another focus group as well. Sha is currently employed in a national magazine company and she brings up a very interesting point of view. After stating that watching American films is entertaining, Sha explained her understanding of why Chinese people like Hollywood stars:

Hollywood stars are very famous over here [China], too. You can see that in magazines. . . some Chinese magazines even have Hollywood stars for covers. I walk pass the newspaper and magazine stand every morning to catch the bus and what do I see? American stars on so many magazines' covers. *Cosmopolitan, Health, Elle, Good House Keeping*, even many men's magazines. I have to say, majority of us think those Hollywood stars are beautiful; they are good at acting as well. (female, 32, 1/2 year in the U.S.)

Sha's answer was responded with "I agree," "yes," and "true" by her focus group members. It almost seems like some of the participants develop interest in American films due to their advertisements in Chinese media. For example, Nan, a first year graduate student in Washington University, has noticed that there are more American films advertisements than Chinese films. Here is her statement with which I believe the majority of the participants agree:

Before an American big movie comes out, there is information about that movie everywhere. They hang the posters outside the theatres and you read descriptions about it in magazines or newspapers. Sometimes you can even see the trailer on television. Like usual, American movies' trailers are well made. . .at least better than the Chinese ones. That can create curiosity about the movie. I am sure those advertisements can make people want to watch the movie. (female, 25, 1 year in the U.S.)

Megan, a participant in another focus group also has a similar idea. Her personal experience can represent the participants in her focus group:

There is a show on Zhongyong Channel 6 called "*Ying Mi (Movie Fan)*." The host is an animation person and he introduces American big movies the majority of the time. He will talk about things such as "The top 10 best Hollywood movies in 2006." Yes, you don't see many Chinese movies in this show; however, my family and my friends enjoy watching the show. It gives us an idea about what kind of movies are showing in the U.S...because you know; we don't get to watch half of those films in China. Now I wonder how come he [the host] doesn't talk about Chinese movies that often. I think the reason for that are Chinese audiences like American films better. (female, 22, 4 years in the U.S.)

When Chinese audiences say “American big films (*Mei Guo Da Pian*)” they are referring to certain type of American movies. This term can be explained by Cai: “They cost a lot of money, use many famous American movies stars. Some of them have world famous directors” (female, 30, 1/2 year in the U.S.) From the researcher’s personal experience, movies such as *Spiderman*, *Titanic*, and *The Legend of Zorro* all can be considered as “American big movies.” The word “big” alone shows us the importance level of American films. Thus, they have a great possibility to influence the Chinese audiences.

There are other gratifications Chinese audiences seek from American movies, as well. For the majority of the participants, their curiosity of the Western culture drives them to watch American films.

Chen has just come back from his vacation to the U.S. He admitted that American films are his favorite to watch among all films. When asked about the reason he watches American films, Chen expressed that, “To see the other culture. To me that is interesting. . .and a lot of time is for entertaining. After all, American movies are fun to watch. I used them to learn English, too” (male, 30, 1/2 year in the U.S.). Jian agreed with Chen on his opinion that American films are entertaining; however, Jian later added his main reason for watching American films:

I use them first to understand this society. Like its business, politics, society, and its people. Then the second reason for watching American movies is to relax. My family likes to go to theatres to watch American films; it’s a good way to spend time with family members. . .we only watch American films. (male, 34, 1 year in the U.S.).

Jian’s opinion is supported by Lee, his wife. “Besides to relax and to entertain,” Lee said, “I can learn the American society through their movies” (female, 33, 1/2 year in the U.S.). Zhu also presented a common response by his peers, “I watch them [American films] to get a

view on American culture, American people's way of life and their traditions" (male, 32, 1/2 year in the U.S.).

There are many other comments about learning American culture through American films. Clearly, Chinese audiences are very interested in learning American culture. "American films are a good source for information about America," said Sha who expressed a common belief among her group, "Before the first time I have ever been to the U.S., I got my idea about its culture from its movies" (female, 32, 1/2 year in the U.S.). Sha's comment was supported by Shao, her coworker. "American culture interests me," Shao added. "Movies are a good way to know this country [the U.S.]" (male, 26, 2 months in the U.S.).

Xiao, another administrator in the Beijing Institute of Technology, told the researcher that he watches some American movies to learn oral communication in English (male, 28, one month in the U.S.). Another participant, Ray, has been studying in the U.S. for two years. He shared his story when asked about seeking information from American films before coming to the U.S.:

I watch many American films. Maybe once a week or so, because American movies industry is the best in the world. But that does not mean their movies are always the best. I do watch American movies more [than Chinese movies]. Because I always keep the goal of improving my English, both in speaking and listening skills in mind when I watch those movies. And also, with the goal of learning Western culture as I watch the movies. Media is so important; it lets me to get to know American people's way of life. (male, 22, 2 year in the U.S.)

Here is an example of how a Chinese audience uses American films as "study materials." Another participant, Xiao, works in Beijing Institute of Technology. He admitted that after knowing his training will be held in the U.S., he began to watch American movies to improve English speaking and listening skills (male, 28, 1/2 year in the U.S.).

It appears that the second main reason for these participants to choose American films is to gain information. There are two kinds of information these Chinese audiences seek from American movies: to understand the American culture and to improve English speaking and listening skills. Out of these 25 participants, each one of them has mentioned the use of gaining information from American films. Almost half the participants expressed their need of learning English from American movies.

It is fascinating to see all of the participants agree that American films, at least in one point, help them to learn American culture and the English language. The researcher was curious to know that among these participants, how much information about the American culture comes from American films. To satisfy the curiosity, the researcher asked the participants what percentage of their knowledge about the American culture comes from American films. In every focus group, this question made every participant think for a while. “Your question really makes me to think about how American movies have influenced me,” Yong smiled. “They [American films] influenced me a great deal” (female, 23, 1 year in the U.S.). After a few seconds, Yong’s focus group has the most energy when sharing their answers:

Yong: Before I came to the U.S., I have to say the information American movies give me about this country takes about 50% or even more percent. Other sources are just small, like magazines and news.

Nan: Like 80%? That’s not even high enough, I think. Other sources. . .I don’t really read news everyday, so movies are my most sources.

Chen: I would say about 50% to 70%. I read newspapers, but that can only give me so much information about American families.

Jian: I agree. I watch news everyday and listen to the U.S. news on the radio when I drive in my car. But films give me about 60% or even more information, because after all, movies are longer than news. Plus, good movies stay on audiences’ mind for a very long time.



Lee: About 50%. I think movies are the best source for information about this country before I ever came here. But I still check internet for their public information.

The other focus groups also provide the researcher an idea of how much information Chinese audiences seek from American films. It is fascinating to see that movies have more power than television news, internet, magazines, books, or even the participants' friends who have been to the U.S. previously. Cai's comment can represent this pattern: "Other people are a good source for me. I read a lot of American magazines and I also read news everyday. But from movies are the most, like 80 percent" (female, 30, 1/2 year in the U.S.). This is a clear illustration of how much power American films have when influencing Chinese audiences' perception of the American culture.

Before conducting all of these focus groups, the researcher predicted that "to relax" is one of the main reasons Chinese audiences use American films. Based on the researcher's observation, Chinese people face a lot of stress in their lives. School, workplace, and family responsibilities. . .all of these can be stress triggers for Chinese people. Just as the researcher expected, the participants did talk about the use American films "to relax."

A senior in a large American university, Megan, described how she uses American films as a tool to relax:

I always have a lot of homework and study to do, so I can't watch movies as much as I would like to. During the semester, I was always so busy. . .I hardly had time to hang out with friends that often. Still, I watch American movies about once a week. Of course, a lot of time I can't finish them. Sometimes I watch just parts of it [an American film] during my dinner time. . .so I can relax and get out of the study mood for a bit. (female, 22, 4 years in the U.S.)

Martin goes to the same school with Megan but graduated one semester earlier. He agreed that watching American films is a good way to relax. "I have tons of American movies

on DVD's," Martin said. "I would watch them if I need to relax and just have some time for myself" (male, 26, 7 years in the U.S.) Megan and Martin's opinions show the researcher how some Chinese students use American movies to relax. Then what about the working participants?

Jian articulated that work can be very stressful. His statement can represent a common response from the working participants:

After working long hours, I just want to relax. I do want to spend time with my family when I get home, just in a relaxing way. Going to the movies is my favorite way to relax...besides playing golf. A lot of times we watch movies at home, all of us. (male, 34, 1 year in the U.S.)

The same idea is also reflected in remarks from Ting, a business salesman. "When I go home from work, I like to watch television, especially movies," Ting said. "American movies are very entertaining, so they are good for relaxing" (male, 32, 1 month in the U.S.). Shao later on agreed with Ting by stating, "They [American films] are interesting to watch, that is a good way to relax" (male, 26, 2 months in the U.S.). "To relax" seems to be the third main gratification these Chinese participants seek in watching American films.

Some of the participants said that watching American movies is a great way to have social interactions. Their social interaction involves hanging out with friends, dating, and spending time with family members. For instance, Martin told his group members that if his friends want him to go watch movies with them, he will go, too (male, 26, 7 years in the U.S.). Jenny is a second year college student and she had the same reason. "My friends like to go to the dollar theatre here so I go with them quite often," Jenny said. "Watching movies is a good way to hang out with friends, especially if everyone is tired from school and work" (female, 20, 1 year in the U.S.).

Another example of using American movies as social interactions is dating. “Going to the theatre and watching an American film is a common dating idea back home [in China],” Megan recalled. “Especially among the Chinese young couples” (female, 22, 4 years in the U.S.). The same idea is also expressed by Jie, who works in a magazine company. Jie articulated that when she was dating her husband, they used to go to see American movies very often. Watching the same movie, according to Jie, can give them many topics to talk about (female, 32, 1/2 year in the U.S.).

Interestingly, two participants point out American films satisfy their desire for experiencing “something new.” Since only two participants said that American films satisfy their need for experiencing new things, the researcher does not attempt to make this a common gratification Chinese audience gain from American films.

All of these participants have expressed their reasons for using American films. This finding matches the core idea of Uses and Gratifications Theory. The researcher can see that all these participants are active audiences and they have used American films for their own needs. Clearly, American films are able to provide these participants the gratifications they seek; that is why all of these participants enjoy watching American films. The researcher summed up the results and formed three main gratifications these participants seek in American films: (1) to entertain, (2) to gain information, and (3) to relax. Two other reasons are “to have social interaction” and to experience “something new.”

#### Chinese Audiences’ Understanding of the American Culture through Films

The second research question aimed to find out how American films help Chinese audiences construct their perception of the American culture. In other words, before these Chinese participants have ever visited the U.S., do they create expectations about this country

from its movies? Study participants all have been exposed to American films by theaters and television many times in their lives. Consequently, they should have developed some kind of understanding of the American culture through the mass media.

Yong's opinion can represent a common theme among the participants. "I thought this country [the U.S.] is open and modern and its people are really humanistic," Yong said. "They have a different life style than the Chinese people. You know how some European countries do not like outsiders? I felt the U.S. welcomes people from everywhere" (female, 23, 1 year in the U.S.). Nan has a similar idea about the U.S. before she comes to the states to study: "I thought this country is very fascinating. This country is made of many different colors of people from everywhere" (female, 25, 1 year in the U.S.).

The researcher has noticed that "humanistic" is an adjective these participants like to use when describing the American people in films. Jian gave an example of how he uses an American film, *Saving Private Ryan*, to understand American people's way of thinking:

When I first watched the movie *Saving Private Ryan*, I thought it was not worth it to save one man by sacrificing 100 men's lives. In China, when this movie first came out, people would think this kind of sacrifice is not reasonable. Those 100 men died for saving Ryan are 200 people's sons. As the Chinese society changes. . .now I think about that movie again, I can see the humanistic nature of the American culture. "The importance of man" is always shown in American films. Another example, *Titanic*, when the ship was sinking and the Captain made all women and children to board the life boats first. . .that is very humanistic. (male, 34, 1 year in the U.S.)

It is fascinating to see Jian mentioned the individualism and collectivism differences in his response. Jian's reaction toward *Saving Private Ryan* transitions from rejecting to understanding is very interesting. Just like Jian has mentioned, "as the Chinese society changes," the researcher assumes many Chinese people's understanding of the American culture is gradually changing. China is becoming a more and more open country; therefore, many

Western ideas presented in American films become more and more acceptable. Also, as the communication flow gets wider between the two countries, more and more Chinese people would start living a Western life style.

The researcher trusts the positive image of the American people is pleasant to hear. These participants also point out some problems they have seen from American movies. Maybe it is the Chinese culture and its high family values; all of my participants have formed perceptions about American families. Among all these participants, family issues such as disciplining children, family life style, and family members' closeness are key elements they pay most attention to.

Having worked in the Chinese education field for years, Jian felt the family education American parents give their children is disappointing. Jian's statement is a clear reflection of many participants' opinions:

I feel that American parents do not discipline their children. When I watch American films, I see that American parents let their children do many things as they please. . .that is not good. Oh, some children in the movies call their parents by first names? I think that is horrible. Parents should have respect from their children, at all times. (male, 34, 1 year in the U.S.)

Another participant, Megan, has also commented on parents and children relationships in American movies. "When they [American parents and their children] are in a disagreement, the children raise their voice and question their parents' authority," Megan reported. "Sometimes they [American children] even talk badly about their parents to others. This is very uncommon, even unheard of in Chinese families" (female, 22, 4 years in the U.S.).

Jing presented what the researcher finds a common idea among his focus group members:

From watching movies I also feel this is a very open country, you can see that from American parents teach their children. It seems like they don't care if their children are dating at a young age...or even having sex. To me, that is impossible in Chinese families. (female, 22, 2 years in the U.S.)

All of these participants have pointed out specific things they have watched in American films. The researcher can see there is a strong contrast between the traditional Chinese families and American families they see in films. Chinese culture has taught all of these participants the importance of honoring elders, educating children, and obeying parents. If American films portray American families in the ways these participants described, it is understandable for them to think negatively about the relationship between parents and children in the U.S.

Out of 25 participants, there are two participants who think American families in films are just like the Chinese families. After hearing other participants' statement about American families, Jie presented her thought:

I thought all the American families in the movies are very close to each other. American people always think about their family whenever they do something. I always admire how in movies, American parents can be so open with their children about how do they feel as adults. . .even if their children are only 4 or 5 years old. (female, 32, 1/2 year in the U.S.).

Xiao is another participant who has the same opinion. Xiao believes that from watching American movies, American people are "not that different from Chinese people." Xiao further explained the reason they seem the same is because American people all "go to work everyday and treat their families as their most important thing" (male, 28, 1 month in the U.S.).

It is noteworthy to see that when describing Chinese families, both of these participants bring out the importance of family members being close to each other. There are numerous G and PG American movies that emphasize the importance of family; however, they are not what

Chinese audiences call “American big films.” In other words, those G and PG American films are not as promoted as the PG-13 and R rated American movies. If the majority of American movie highlights the value of family, the researcher believed it is more likely to get positive feedback from Chinese audiences.

Safety issues are also something these participants pay a lot attention to. Listening to the participants’ conversations, the researcher has noticed that many of these ideas about safety in the U.S. come from action movies. Megan expressed that from watching American movies, “American people seem to do a lot of bad things” (female, 22, 4 years in the U.S.). Further to explain the phrase “bad things,” Megan described it as “shooting at a person if that person gets you mad.” Ray also expressed the similar idea by stating “people might shoot me if I get them mad” (male, 22, 2 years in the U.S.). Their statements can represent the majority of the participants’ expectations.

Jian expressed that it seems like every American has a gun, and they carry the guns with them everywhere (male, 34, 1 year in the U.S.). Comparing that to the fact that it is illegal to own a personal gun in China, it is indeed not a safe feeling to imagine every American carrying a gun. A similar response by another participant, Zhu, stated that the U.S. seems to have “a lot of violence,” due to many exposures to guns and gangs he sees in American films (male, 32, 1/2 year in the U.S.). His response is what the researcher finds common among participants on the topic of safety.

Lee brought up the expectation she gets from American movies that the researcher finds can represent some others. “American movies show a lot of gun shots,” Lee explained why she thought the U.S. might not be very safe. “. . .and they have too many car crashes” (female, 33, 1/2 year in the U.S.). Interestingly, a couple of other participants also mentioned the amount of

car crashes in American movies. The special effects in movies can make them seem more intense; however, they might become scary images for those who have never been to the U.S.

Love is truly universal. The participants all agree that action, comedy, and romance movies are most popular in Chinese theatres. Since China and the U.S. are two distinct countries, people in these two countries must have different ways of expressing their love. Other than the warm feeling, romance movies can create other illusions, as well. Jian shared his understanding of romantic relationships in the U.S. based on the films he saw; this best represents a common theme among participants:

About those romance movies, the ones that have a lot of emotion stuff in it. . . I think the majority of American people tend to “love at first sight.” Like those American people know who to spend the rest of their lives within the first three seconds they see the other person. As the movie goes on, you see those two people start living together a day after they have met. Also, American people seem very brave. They are very straight forward. They say whatever is on their mind. As Chinese people, we are not verbal. Sometimes Chinese people can be lovesick, but still won’t say a thing. We tend to keep our feelings for others inside ourselves until we get to know the other person for a long time. (male, 34, 1 year in the U.S.)

Here is a clear example of how romance movies help Chinese audiences form their understanding of American people. The researcher can see that American romance movies have created both positive and negative images of American people in these participants’ minds. Some positive impressions these participants have about American people can be best concluded by Megan:

I thought American people are all very romantic. . . especially the men. I love watching “chick flicks” and the people in them are all good looking. When a guy is pursuing a girl, he always says the perfect things to her. Also, at the same time, they happen to be rich, handsome, and young, as well. I had the feeling that once an American knows who they love, they don’t change their mind about it. They would do anything to get the persons they love. (female, 22, 4 years in the U.S.)



Some negative images, especially the idea of promiscuous behaviors, also come from watching American films. In Jian's earlier statement, the idea of promiscuous behaviors of American people exists. Cai also expressed her observation. "American films are very open," she stated. "They show that American people always live together after they are dating. There are also a lot of teenagers in dating relationships" (female, 30, 1/2 year in the U.S.). Cai's impression can represent a shared opinion among the participants.

#### The U.S. in Films vs. the U.S. Experienced

The last research question examines whether or not Chinese audiences, after they have personally experienced the American culture, change their prior understanding of the interpersonal relationships in the American society. Among 25 participants, all of them have visited the U.S. in person, ten of them have actually lived in the U.S. Thus, these participants are able to compare the image of the U.S. they see from films with the U.S. they have experienced.

The positive image of American people's humanistic nature has not changed in these participants' eyes, or, at least it was not mentioned. Nevertheless, the topic of family is once again brought up among the participants. To many participants, the American families they see in the U.S. are very different from the ones they see in films. Ray recalled his experience when he was an exchange student in an American Christian family:

When I lived with an American family for a year, I watched how this family lived. They were not poor, but they were not rich either. They are Christians and they have three children. The wife was pregnant and she went to work. The husband tried his hardest to feed his family. American films never tell this kind of families to audiences. Our society is that whatever makes the most money is better. So, this kind of film is forgotten. There are some films tell stories of this kind of families, but I don't know how much money they made. (male, 22, 2 years in the U.S.)

Another former exchange student, Megan, shared her story when she was living with a Christian American family:

American parents do discipline their children. When I lived with my American family, the parents would spank their children if they have done something wrong. They care about whom their children hang out with. Their children weren't allowed to date anyone until they go to college and their daughters couldn't wear certain type of clothing. I think that family was pretty conservative, unless the families in the films. . .very open about everything with their children. They [the American parents] always made sure if their children have done their homework. . .almost like the normal Chinese parents. However, they are only close to their own immediate family. . .they are not that close to the grandparents like the Chinese people (female, 22, 4 years in the U.S.)

Jing has stayed with American families on her previous trips to the U.S. She expressed that even though American parents are not as strict to their children as the Chinese parents; American parents do educate their children with effort. These three participants' stories are good examples of the differences between the American families in films and the ones in real life.

The participants do recognize the different levels of strictness and closeness between American families and Chinese families. For instance, Yong's opinion is what the researcher finds a common theme among the participants. "I think American families are just like Chinese families on the view of importance of family," Yong articulated. "They are close to their family members; just not as much as the Chinese—we are close to everyone in our family circle" (female, 23, 1 year in the U.S.). Another participant, Ting, gave a similar view:

One thing I think is very different from the movies is how families operate in the U.S. A lot of movies show parents are very open with their children. . .like talk to children just about anything. . .but [the parents] don't really discipline them. When I was in the U.S. and I visited three American families, I saw that they do discipline their children. . .maybe not as much as some Chinese families, but definitely not as loose as the ones show in the movies. (male, 30, 1 year in the U.S.)

Many participants, interestingly, acknowledge that it is a culture difference when looking at American families. For example, Sha admitted that she cannot compare which one takes family most seriously between Chinese and American people, because these two countries have different values (female, 32, 1/2 year in the U.S.). The individualistic culture in the U.S. contrasts with the collectivistic culture in China. Some participants are able to recognize this fact; therefore, they do not have negative feelings toward the differences.

Safety issues appear to be not as bad as the participants thought before they ever visited the U.S. Tie's opinion can represent a common response from the majority of the participants. "I have never seen gun shots in the streets," Tie articulated. "Of course I am not saying that there are no crimes in America. . .I am saying there is not as many violence I have seen in the movies" (male, 25, 1 year in the U.S.). The same idea is also expressed by Sha:

I have never heard gun shot in the U.S. However, I do know that American people can have guns and there are shootings in the U.S. Like that one shooting incident in this campus in Virginia. . .that was very sad. I also heard about other campus shootings. But when I walk on the street, I don't see that much violence going on. (female, 32, 1/2 year in the U.S.)

Jian also recalled his experience when he visited the U.S. He said in the American movies, "the scenes that show cars and buildings blow up. . .I have never seen those in the U.S." (male, 34, 1 year in the U.S.). Many other participants also expressed their feeling of safety in the U.S. However, Chi Ming has a different opinion. He went on and shared a story he has heard:

Even though I am safe at where I live in the U.S., I know there is much violence going on other places of the U.S. I have a friend who is going to school in Chicago and I just talked to him two days ago. He told me his apartment is in a not so safe area and occasionally he can hear gun shots. You know what happened? Two days ago, when he was about to leave the apartment to go to a class, he saw a man, dead, in front of another

apartment complex. Apparently, someone has shot that man. The police came later on that day but seems like that kind of things happen a lot in that area. That shows the U.S. is not a very safe country, it's just we have never experienced violence. (male, 25, 4 years in the U.S.)

Chi Ming's story brings a fresh point of view. From the researcher's understanding, many Chinese people travel to the U.S. for purposes such as studying, business trips, or personal leisure. Many places Chinese people go are considered "safe areas" in the U.S. This fact might limit the amount of experiences these participants have.

The participants have different opinions on whether or not promiscuous behaviors shown in American movies depict the reality. The majority of the participants do not think promiscuous behaviors in the U.S. happen as often as in the movies. They acknowledge that is a selling point Hollywood is using in its films. Martin presented what the researcher finds a common theme among those participants: "Hollywood is trying to tell people that if there is no sex, there is no love" (male, 26, 7 years in the U.S.). Another participant, Yong said that she has noticed many differences between the real American culture and the one experienced. "When they [American people] are dating," Yong explained. "They are not as crazy as they are in the movies" (female, 23, 1 year in the U.S.).

Being in college provides many participants the opportunities to observe American young people. One of these participants, Jenny, stated her finding:

I don't think American people are that open. . .many people are very conservative and they save themselves for marriage. Many of my American friends are dating and they do not live with their boyfriends or girlfriends. I stay at an apartment with two girls and we even have a house rule: we cannot bring boys home to spend the night. . .I mean, yes, there are American people out there who are very promiscuous in that area, but in the movies it seems like every American is doing it. (female, 20, 1 year in the U.S.)

Jenny's opinion is supported by many other college participants. Nevertheless, ten college participants attend one same Christian university. In other words, there are only two college participants who attend public universities. What kind of university these participants enroll in definitely has an effect on what kind of American people they meet. The researcher can almost assume a different kind of opinion would be given if the participants all attended public universities.

There is a small group of three participants who think the promiscuous behaviors shown in American films reflect the American society. One of them, Jie shared her opinion:

They [American people] do have something called "one night stand Websites." People can log on and find other people in the area for one night stands. . . Website like MySpace, also have links to this kind of things. There are always people using perverted languages. . . I know many American people don't agree with the idea, but many Americans still do. (female, 32, 1/2 year in the U.S.)

Even though the three participants have the similar idea with Jie, they all agree that there is still a large amount of Americans who are not engaging in promiscuous behaviors. The researcher thinks the real problem here is that Hollywood movies make it look like every American is sexually promiscuous.

The majority of the participants agree that American films do not depict American society they have experienced. For example, Jian, recalling his travelling experience to the U.S., stated his recognition for the differences between the actual American society and the one that is on the movies. "After all, movies are an art form," Jian stated. "They came from the real life and they expand on the real life" (male, 34, 1 year in the U.S.). Another participant, Yong, expressed a similar response: "Of course, movies do exaggerate" (female, 23, 1 year in the U.S.).

Jing articulated a common idea in her focus group when asked about exaggerations in American films:

Yes, I think they [American films] are very exaggerating, of course, that is because American movies are full of imagination. . .and, exaggeration must exist, because movies are an art. Therefore, there must be differences between the real thing and the movies (female, 22, 2 years in the U.S.).

Even though these participants acknowledge the fact that American films do not correctly depict the real American society, the gratifications they gain from American films are able to let them think about the movies as an “art form.”

Each of these participants acknowledges the fact that American movies do not depict the real American society. These participants’ responses suggest that American films do, in different degrees, affect their understanding of the American culture.

Even though much misunderstanding is created through watching American films, some participants acknowledge the fact that many American films do truly reflect the real American life. Unfortunately, those movies are not widely shown in China.

The researcher suggests that some of these misinterpretations of the American culture are caused by the Chinese government’s strict limitation on American films. Comparing the focus group data, the researcher finds that these participants watch a majority of three kinds of films: action, romance, and comedy. These types of movies are also shown the most in Chinese theatres. Since there is a limit on what American movies Chinese people are allowed to watch, there is a possibility that the effect of American movies in general is limited.

## Conclusion

Hypothesis one is partially confirmed. Chinese audiences use American movies mainly to entertain, to gain information about the American culture and the English language, and to relax. However, “to participate in social interaction” is the fourth main reason Chinese audiences use American films. It appears that because American films are very different than Chinese films, they are able to satisfy Chinese audiences’ need for experiencing something new, as well.

This result suggests that Chinese audiences seek different kinds of elements when choosing films. At the same time, American films are able to give Chinese audiences the gratifications they need. Chinese audiences, when choosing films, first want to be entertained. American films are able to entertain Chinese audiences through their attractive actors/actresses, intriguing story lines, high-tech special effects, and beautiful sceneries.

Besides seeking entertainment, Chinese audiences also look for information about the Western lifestyle in American films. Topics such as families, work places, education, romance, and personal conflicts in the U.S. interest Chinese audiences; therefore, Chinese audiences pay special attention to these issues. Chinese audiences also tend to remember these issues the most after watching American films.

Hypothesis two was confirmed. American films indeed help Chinese audiences construct their perception of the American culture. After watching American films, Chinese audiences form both positive and negative perceptions of the U.S. Positive perceptions include the humanistic nature of the American society, the persistence of the American people when pursuing love, and the openness between American parents and their children. However, several negative images are also planted in the minds of Chinese audiences. Such negative images are

lack of closeness within American families, less or an absence of respect toward elders, frequent violent actions, and promiscuous behaviors. If a Chinese audience has never been to the U.S., he or she would likely think the American films depict the real American society. Thus, misunderstanding is created.

Hypothesis three was also confirmed. Chinese audiences, after they have personally experienced American culture, change much of their prior understanding of the interpersonal relationships in the American society. In Chinese audiences' eyes, problems such as of the lack of closeness in American families, violence actions, and promiscuous behaviors might still exist in the U.S. society, just not as much and often as seen in American films.

These results show that American films which often exaggerate or eliminate the real U.S. culture, could totally change Chinese audiences' understanding of the American society. Often times, this misunderstanding created from watching American films are negative perspectives on the American culture.

### **Need for Future Research**

This study may open the door for new intercultural studies on the mass communication medium of film. A study could focus on the different genders of Chinese audiences, for example. The researcher could determine if there are significant differences on audiences' perceptions of Americans based on viewers' genders. Would Chinese male audiences, if they do watch more action films than female audiences, be more concerned about safety issues in the U.S.? Or, would Chinese female audiences pay more attention to family, love, and friendship issues when comparing the American culture in real life and the one in films? An even deeper and more specific study can help answer these questions.



Age can also be the focus for an intercultural film study. One hypothesis might be that a person's maturity level predicts the way he or she interprets media content. A young audience, not having developed much critical thinking skills, might not question media content as much as a more mature audience. In other words, younger audiences might be more likely to think the American culture portrayed in American films depicts the real American culture. If the result proves this hypothesis is true, then American films have an even greater influence on young Chinese audiences than on older Chinese audiences.

Besides American films, one can also conduct studies on other mass media Chinese people use to gain information about the U.S. Since audiences are active when choosing which medium to use, then they certainly do not only use American films for information about American culture. In order to expand on this topic, the researcher could conduct surveys among a variety of Chinese people to determine their use of all media. The researcher could also conduct focus groups for this study. The same interview questions can be used in the new study; as long as the researcher focuses on other American media's influences instead of films. After analyzing the data, the researcher could compare results from the other media with the results found in this study to determine which medium has the greatest power to influence Chinese audiences' view of the American culture. If only choosing one medium, one should consider studying television. Since there are a numerous studies by Gerbner and others, television is viewed as having a monumental impact on the worldviews of countless millions. It would be worthwhile to compare this study's result with a study of television viewing.

The study presented here shows that Chinese audiences use American films to entertain, to gain information, and to relax. This creates an opportunity to find out what other American media serve the same purposes for Chinese audiences. For example, when a Chinese audience

watches an American television show, does he/she do so in order to fulfill the need of entertainment, information, or relaxation? What about American magazines? If the researcher finds out other media Chinese audiences use that would also satisfy their need of gaining entertainment, information, and relaxation, then the researcher can further discover why or why not American films are the most popular medium among Chinese audiences.

One can also take the amount of American film's exposure into consideration. The researcher could structure a study to determine whether or not the amount of American films and/or the hours spent on watching American films affects Chinese audiences' understanding of the American culture. It would be interesting to find out the least number of American films a Chinese individual has to watch before he or she develops an understanding toward the American culture. A quantitative methodology in such a study could determine the relationship between movie viewing hours or numbers of American films and audiences' perspectives on the American culture.

In this study, the participants mentioned the beautiful actors and actresses in American films that attract them to this medium. When a Chinese audience chooses to watch American films to entertain, he/she often considers the attractive actors/actresses in American films as an element that makes American films entertaining. Additional research could expand on this topic. Some questions can be asked, such as what is considered "beautiful" for Chinese audiences? How can the perception of what is "beautiful" affect Chinese audiences' choices of American films? Chinese and American people have very different physical appearance, so where do Chinese audiences get their preference for Western beauty? Do American films affect Chinese audiences' understanding of "beauty"?

When examining the American movies in China, one must take into consideration that the number of American films in China is limited by the Chinese government. As China is growing fast into a more and more open society, this restriction might change. If the restriction ever changed, more American films would be able to be shown in Chinese theatres. There might even be a possibility of R-rated movies showing in China. More violence, sexuality, and profane language might appear in front of Chinese audiences. How will that affect the future Chinese audiences' understanding of the American culture? Perhaps Chinese audiences will form more negative images of the U.S. society or, totally opposite, Chinese audiences might not think too much about the violence, sexuality, and profanity shown in American films. Research conducted every five years could reveal the changes in Chinese audiences.

Not only is the Chinese society changing, but American society is also constantly changing, as well. People, technology, and communication in the U.S. will gradually change; therefore, the American culture will not remain the same. In several years, the Chinese audiences might see other things appear, or disappear in American movies. When Chinese audiences travel to the U.S., they will experience a different U.S. society. It would be interesting to have conversations with the 25 participants in this study again in five years to see the differences in their understanding of the American culture based on the movies they saw five years ago. Research could also be conducted with new groups of participants in five years. After all data is collected and analyzed, it would be fascinating to see what new issues are brought up by the participants, what old issues are ignored by the participants, and what old issues in American films remain the same for the participants.

It is also important to take a deeper look at the amount of time these participants spend in the U.S. Participants could be grouped into time periods that they spend in the U.S. Maybe a

participant who has spent longer time in the U.S. would have a better understanding of the real American culture; as a result, he/she would be able to compare the reality and films in a more accurate way. On the other hand, if a participant has not yet spent much time in the U.S., he/she might see much difference between the real U.S. society and the one portrayed in American films.

The same concept can also be applied to the different places these Chinese participants have visited in the U.S. The different areas in the U.S. might have different effects on their views of the American culture. Participants who have seen big cities such as New York City, Chicago, and Detroit might see the real America differently than the participants who have only been to few areas of the U.S. Again, participants could be grouped according to the places they have visited in the U.S. It would be interesting to see what issues the participants would bring up from the areas they have visited. In addition, future researchers could conduct studies that focus on certain areas of the U.S. to find more specific results.

Another possible study would be focusing on Chinese audiences who have not yet had any previous experience in the U.S. By asking the first research question, “why do you watch American films,” new ideas of why Chinese audiences use American films might be found. The Chinese audiences who have already had experience in the U.S. might have a bias on their reasons of using American films. If the bias does exist, then focusing on the Chinese audiences who have no intention on traveling to the U.S. might avoid such bias.

During focus group interviews, participants brought up the idea that American films are useful for learning the American culture. Since Hollywood has a distinct and largely secular worldview, the long-term effects of this pattern will be interesting to study. Many Chinese audiences consider anything “western” is good; if they watch many Hollywood films and do not

ever get a chance to see the “real” America, would they label American films as standards for what is “good”? A study done on Hollywood films’ long-term effects on Chinese audiences should expand more on this topic.

The current study focuses mainly on Chinese audiences. There is a need to examine the entire process of American films being exported worldwide. Is it possible that American depravity in films is going to influence an entire planet? Maybe there can be studies conducted with audiences in other cultures, using the same research questions, to find out the consequences of American films worldwide.

The current study used Uses and Gratifications Theory to examine the reasons Chinese audiences choose to use American films, and how American films could affect their understanding of the American culture. To entertain, to gain information about American culture and the English language, and to relax are the three main reasons for Chinese audiences to use American films. The current study also suggests that American films affect how Chinese audiences understand American culture. From conducting focus group interviews, the researcher was able to find three main problem areas Chinese audiences see in American films: family, safety, and romantic relationships. The future research provides several paths for those who wish to explore this topic.

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