

9/9/2015

Chinese Westernization: A Study in Scarlet

In China, there is a highly popular game show whose title in English is “If You Are the One”. The premise is simple. A contestant, one man, selects from twenty four young women a girl whom he is particularly interested in — the “heartbeat girl” — with his selection not being revealed until the end of the show. Until then, the hosts play video clips showing aspects of the contestant’s life and his interests to the women, who are standing at individual podiums. While this is happening, the women have the option to signal their lack of interest in the man by turning off a light at their podium. After all the videos have ended, the man then turns off the lights of the girls he is not interested in until there are only two girls left. From there, the heartbeat girl is revealed. If the heartbeat girl is among the two women, the show ends there with a date between the contestant and that woman. Otherwise, the contestant has one chance to win the heartbeat girl over, and if he does, the show ends with a date as well.

I know this all for sure, since my grandmother watches this show regularly at the dinner table as our family eats with her. The show is immensely popular not only in China but among the whole Chinese diaspora, achieving record viewers and becoming China’s highest rated dating show currently. This is all despite the reservations of the Communist Party, which is suspicious of the show. Ostensibly, they dislike it due to it promoting “the degradation of Chinese social values” as the state media has said, but perhaps they dislike it more so for its pernicious Western elements. The contestant, women, and hosts dress in ways inspired by Western fashion. The show format is based off that of Western dating shows. The music has Western influence: the twenty four women walk onstage to Jessie J, Ariana Grande and Nicki Minaj’s song “Bang Bang” and the male contestant enters to Jean-Roch’s song “Can You Feel It” - both are songs from the Western world. Even the songs in Chinese often have English

phrases used for effect. Furthermore, the people involved in the show have a certain Western presence about them. One of the most famous rejections of a male contestant by a woman on the show involves her saying she would “prefer to cry in a BMW” as opposed to riding on a bike with him on a date. BMW is, of course, a Western automaker.

As millions of Chinese people around the world watch “If You Are the One”, they absorb these Western elements. Even if they speak English poorly, or even not at all, they will invariably absorb what “If You Are the One” is making cool. And as they watch Western shows, buy Western products, and hear Western phrases, they will invariably become more Western themselves. My grandmother, who speaks only functional English, is no exception



to this rule. Like any Chinese citizen, she is taking the occidental touches that “Chinese” culture offers her. It is clear that there is a strong trend of westernization in China.

The surface of such westernization can perhaps be best seen with the actions of the Chinese nouveau-riche, which practically try to imitate the West. In Briana Bosker’s *The New Yorker* article “China’s Butler Boom”, she describes the Western trappings within the excesses China’s millionaires take, stating that “Chinese real-estate developments with names like Majesty Manor and Top Aristocrat package themselves as enclaves of Old World opulence, their properties complete with moats, replicas of Buckingham Palace gates, and mansions modelled after Versailles,” and that “such status symbols lend a recognizable veneer of Western-style aristocracy.” (Bosker 1) The efforts by the Chinese nouveau-riche to emulate the Western rich reflects the extent of westernization in China. Being Western is seen as being

something desirable, and the more Western a Chinese person is, the more refined and prestigious they are.

Westernization in China is not limited to rich industrialists and their children, however. According to a graphic created by The Observatory of Economic Complexity. "Where Does China Import From?", created by R. Hausmann and Cesar Hidalgo, China imports 162 billion dollars' worth of goods from North America., and 255 billion dollars' worth of goods from Europe (Hausmann and Hidalgo). Together, the two Western continents comprise 26% of all of China's imports, a large proportion that is only surpassed by the proportion of imports from all of Asia. This large proportion of imports from the West means that Western products are making a huge impact on all people living in China. Such an impact affects all people living in China, since the mere presence of these Western goods in Chinese markets is enough to promote Western culture in China. "If You Are the One" promoting BMW is a product of the large amounts of Western imports in China, and that promotion is seen by all viewers of the show, rich or poor.

Even the Chinese government is, to a degree, accepting Chinese westernization. Historically, there has been a push for the Chinese government to westernize since Western powers started posing a threat to Chinese interests. The cultural-China article "The Westernization Movement" describes various attempts, from the Tongzhi Restoration to the Self-Strengthening Movement, to fit Western systems and technology onto Chinese institutions. (The Westernization Movement 1). Only recently, the government showed Western aspect of itself via its intervention in the stock market crisis in 2015. Notwithstanding how the fact that China has a robust stock market indicates a Western element itself, in the The New Yorker article "The Real Risk Behind China's Stock-Market Drama", the author, Evan Osnos states that Chinese premier Xi Jinping has assured the population that if it plays by the rules, then "it will be free to pursue the "Chinese Dream"—his [Xi Jinping's] recipe of prosperity, pride in China's rise, and a menu of state-sanctioned freedoms, including travel and entertainment." (Osnos 2) This

government-sponsored “Chinese Dream” is a clear modification of the American Dream, and the ideas conveyed behind it are similar as well.

The case may be made that there is a great amount of resistance to westernization within China. Certainly, the Communist Party, which is suspicious of the West, is not receiving such changes too warmly. After all, they have banned various Western TV shows. There is also distrust of the West among a large proportion of the Chinese population.

However, it should be noted that this proportion is enlarged mostly by the Chinese old guard - senior citizens and the Communist Party - and that a much larger proportion of Chinese, especially the youth, find Western culture attractive.



According to PBS correspondents, Brands such as Starbucks and Buick are highly popular in China, and skateboarding is growing in popularity among the youth. The correspondents also note how the anti-Western sentiments of the government only serve to divide it from the people (Why China’s Youth Find Western Culture Attractive 1). This shows that there is a great drive towards westernization led by the Chinese people, despite the efforts of senior citizens.

It may also be argued that the term westernization is inappropriate to apply to China, since the Chinese do not truly understand the nature of Western culture. As an example, in the article “A War on ‘Westernization’ in China”, the author Kevin Slaten states that “McDonald’s is a ‘classy’ eatery; Western music is often blasting in stores without people understanding a single word; Playboy is a popular clothing brand among moms; many people, despite English knowledge, have had too little practice in daily conversation to use it on the street.” (Slaten 1) However, this does not imply that westernization is not occurring. In Briana Bosker’s *The New Yorker* article “China’s Butler Boom”, an article which I have mentioned before, Bosker

describes how the Chinese nouveau-riche are not accustomed to using butlers and tend to use them in awkward or humorous ways. However, she further goes on to state how China is warming to Western culture and how the aforementioned nouveau-riche are slowly getting better at emulating Western ways (Bosker 3). Natural mistakes are merely a part of the cultural spread of the West and as time passes less mistakes will be made by the Chinese until they match Westerners very well.

Finally, it should be noted that westernization is most prominent among Chinese expatriates in the West, which, unlike expatriates from other countries, largely ignore their own culture and adopt a completely Western lifestyle. In Jiayang Fan's *The New Yorker* article "The Golden Generation", she describes Chinese expatriates in Vancouver, the stars of the Canadian reality TV show "The Ultra Rich Asian Girls of Vancouver", who are obsessed with Western goods and a Western lifestyle. The author herself says that "The West is the plan for many of China's new rich." (Fan 3), which corroborates points I have previously made. The Western obsession that these expatriates have is an effect of the Westernization in China, and they are merely the tip of the westernization iceberg.

China is a rising power, poised to challenge even the United States, and so it's important to understand the changes that its culture is undergoing, not just to understand the Chinese people within China, but also to understand its large diaspora, which includes people like my grandmother. It simply goes to show that China is westernizing, and westernizing fast. It's evident in Chinese expatriates, it's evident in Chinese TV, it's evident in Chinese products, it's evident in Chinese youths, it's evident in the Chinese nouveau-riche, it's evident in the Chinese middle class, and it's even evident in the Chinese government. China's 1.3 billion strong populace is attracted to the West.

There is, of course, the fact that there is great opposition to westernization in China and the fact that Chinese people do not truly understand Western culture. There is the assertion that China is too deeply rooted in its culture to truly be influenced by the West and that the

government would step in to prevent too much influence from taking hold. I like to think of the example of my grandmother when seeing such things. She spent most of her life in Beijing, and is still a fan of the Communist Party despite living in the U.S. Yet, she still watches "If You Are the One" almost religiously at the dinner table, absorbing all the heathen Western influences the show contains. She doesn't care at all. Indeed, there is a conscious resistance against Western culture, but there is no subconscious resistance. There is no stopping, government or otherwise, what Chinese people are individually inclined to: the culture of the West. And with this, there is no denying the palpable and growing influence the culture of the Western world has on the Middle Kingdom.