The Impact of Foreign Programs on Taiwanese Youth
and the Significant Role of Media Education

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Abstract

As cable television channel bloomed and grew in Taiwan, more and more teenagers watched a wide variety of foreign TV programmers through hundreds of channels. The impact of this media trend among Taiwanese youth stresses the importance of research to assess whether local college students learn from foreign television programming. In this research, which supports the theoretical discussion in this paper, the nature of these learnings was analyzed as well. In general, this study aims to explore the relevant literature and examine whether college students engage in critical thinking when viewing foreign television programs. This research used a popular Korean series shown in Taiwan to examine various perspectives and views related to the issue. Based from the gathered findings, college students appear to pay more critical attention to the program script, character, rhythm, plot and cultural differences. In relation to aesthetic, ideology and cultural identity issues, less response on the educational impact of the program was obtained from the participants. This confirms the claim that Taiwanese youth view television as an entertainment medium rather than an educational one. For this reason, the role of media education, specifically the integration of visual literacy and critical thinking, is highly significant to generate less passive television viewers.

Keywords: Korea series, Impact, Foreign programs, Media education

1. Introduction

Media has been part of the people and the world. As a significant part of most people's lives, media had undergone extreme transitions making it a progressive industry. In Taiwan for instance, there are 451 newspapers, 7,220 magazines, 174 radio stations and 5 non-cable television stations, and 80% of television households have cable access accounting for about 23 million people (GIO, 2007). In developed countries such as the United States and Japan, the media industry has greatly progressed as well. In most parts of the world, television is considered as the most popular and ubiquitous public medium, offering diverse and accessible entertainment that remains unmatched by print media (Abu-Lughod, 1993, p. 509). Mass media, and television in particular, are forces which provide audiences with ways of seeing and interpreting the world—ways which ultimately shape their very existence and participation within society.

Many viewers choose to ignore or actively oppose television's representations of the world (Brookfield, 1987). Hence, various researchers have conducted numerous reception studies so as to discuss the decoding process applicable to TV viewing (Fiske and Hartley, 1978; Hall, 1980). In 1974, Hall (1980) had initially mentioned the process involved in the encoding and decoding theory in television discourse. In this interpretation, three positions were pointed out in interpreting audience message. These are dominant-hegemonic position, negotiated code or position and oppositional code. In fact, the three positions can be seen as a process of audience constructing. Each can be associated with life experience and the sense of reading by the audience themselves. An audience with a high level of education may be inclined to the situation of oppositional code. Dominant values are broadly accepted but are interpreted within the viewer's idiosyncratic context (Brookfield, 1987). In addition to analyzing the audience, television viewing is also analyzed based on conceptualism. This served as a useful analytic tool in understanding how audiences perceive television as a medium (Zettl, 1990, 1998; Barker, 2000).

Among the number of people viewing television, the children perhaps are the most directly affected by its influences. In addition to their absorbent young minds, children in general are easily influenced by what they see. Moreover, television programs contain certain cultural context that teaches young viewers cultural norms and expectations. This in

turn teaches the youth ways to interact in daily life, specifically those that are related to dating and establishing intimate relationships (Moran, 2003).

Television drama is undoubtedly a significant source of informal learning related to love, sex and relationships. In some instances, television programs are capable of implying explicit situations related to these aspects (Buckingham, 2004, p. 157). In gradual process, the youth can easily imitate and learn the values, behaviour and attitude implied by these foreign series through the characters' acting. Thus, Buckingham mentioned that television, which is largely perceived as entertainment, can encounter certain difficulties when used for the purpose of education (Buckingham, 2004, p.157).

In relation to this, there is a strong tendency for people to be easily manipulated by media. This creates concern for the youth who needs to be educated on appropriate TV program selection and perception. Being in the process of becoming educated and skilled, the youth should be prevented from being manipulated by media. The prevalence of this practice will make the youth less opinionated, making them less creative and independent as thinkers. Rather than increase the number of passive viewers among the youth, television viewing should be promoted as more than just a medium for entertainment.

2. Television and the Taiwanese Youth

The progress of the Taiwanese media industry was partly brought about by the introduction of Cable TV in 1990s. In addition, globalization has simultaneously flourished during this time, making foreign exchange a common trend among nations. As cable TV companies want to cater for large numbers of channel requests on programs, Taiwanese cable programming became more internationalized. This in turn made it significantly easier for foreign cultures to enter the Taiwanese society. In Taiwan, most of the television programs are characterized by Western and other Asian influences. American films, Japanese and Korean series are the most common programs shown on cable TV. According to Taiwan magazine Global Views Monthly magazine survey in 2007, in Taiwan, over 95 percent people watch TV every day, and above 18 years old spend 16.94 hours every week on TV, 2.42 hours every day, which is very similar to the situation in the UK where children and young people watch TV for an average 148 minutes per day (GVM, 2007; Johnson, 2006; Livingstone, 2002). This makes the impact of television and foreign programs strong among the Taiwanese audience. In fact, it was stated by a committed teenage group and Taiwan Media Watch in Taiwan that television in the country is an essential medium among the locals (TMW, 2008). This means that appropriate program selection is no longer an issue among the viewers.

Survey result has shown that about 50% of the teenagers significantly relate to these television series and have a strong tendency to imitate how these series characters' behave and act (Nielson Report on Television, 1988). This led to the growing number of new idols Taiwanese teenagers admire. In addition, consumer products associated with these new idols became very popular. These include pop music, clothes, mobile phone, hello kitty dolls, computer games, electric products, and published items. The Korean or Japanese series locations used for the programs became popular destinations for Taiwanese fans as well. Thus, anything related to these foreign programs become popular commodities among local consumers. The results of this survey further emphasized the great impact television has on its viewers.

Aside from consumer identity effects, many researchers view television as a negative influential medium for the general population, particularly among children and teenagers, directly affecting civic engagement, racial attitudes, gender role perceptions and violence issues (O' Bryant and Corder-Bolz 1978; Mackey and Hess 1982; Rosenwasser, Lingenfelter, and Harrington 1989; Shively 1992; Putnam 1995a, 1995b, 1996a, 1996b; Felson 1996; Pescosolido, Grauerholz, and Milkie 1997). The phenomena with regard to popular foreign series in Taiwan as well as their growing impact among the youth calls for considerable attention as many relevant inquiries needs to be addressed. For instance, what are the specific effects of foreign television programs to the youth? Why do young viewers pay more attention to program factors such as the script, character and idolism rather than to the programs' aesthetic properties and ideology? What is the reason behind the growing interest and preference of the Taiwanese youth for foreign series? What is the degree of youth critical viewing involved in viewing foreign series?

3. The Invasion of Korean TV series in Taiwan

In Taiwan, television viewing is one of the most popular type of past time activity and perhaps one of the most accessible form of media, particularly among the youth. This makes television viewing highly influential. For example, one form of TV program that has greatly influenced Taiwanese youth is the introduction of drama series and soap operas. An example of which is the popular Korea series "Dae-Jang-Geum" that has been rating 4.5% as the highest rating of foreign series in July 2004 in Taiwan. (Nielson Report on Television, 2004) Before it was able to reach high ratings in the country, there are already a number of Korean fans in Taiwan. According to the head of MBC Television station, the export of Korean series has been raised 46% for US 43,000,000 in 2003 and US 130,000,000 in 2005. (MBC, 2006) Hundreds of Korean series proliferated in Cable or Series TV since July of 2000; many TV stations now import not only Korean series but Japanese series and American series as well due to the successful ratings representing a new industry trend.

Research spanning 50 years since Herzog's (1944) classic study of daytime radio or Television soap opera listeners indicates that emotional release, fantasy fulfilment, and information seeking still represent major reasons why people are interested in soap operas (Allen, 1995; Matelski, 1988). In addition to these, Korean series contains visual atheistic culture interests as well as cultural accessibility with its characters are some of the major contributory factors that make these soap operas popular. Korean series are also created with new Korean idols generating a number of young avid Taiwanese fans all over the country.

Considering this trend in Taiwan, the effect of popular foreign television series becomes clearer and more evident. Based from the discussion on effects of television to the youth, the pervasion of Korean series in Taiwan will naturally result in cultural effects that can change the cultural landscape of Taiwan in terms of media viewing. Media has remained an efficient medium in maintaining status quo or creating cultural changes whether in the material or non-material cultural sphere. It is recognized as one of the monumental institutions of society aside from the family, religious, and economic ones (Robertson et al., 1987).

As claimed by several researchers, television generates informal learning among the viewers and makes them adaptable and resilient to what characters portray on these series (Buckingham and Bragg, 2004; Ang, 1985; Moores, 1993, p. 43). While this is the current trend and situation among young TV viewers in Taiwan, much emphasis must be placed on what they are learning from these programs other than entertainment. The youth should be able to learn and decipher the real message behind the entertaining program they prefer to watch. Moreover, much emphasis must be place on the effort and responsibility on educating the youth to integrate essential skills as active viewers. Considering the effect of television on the youth as well as the impact of the Korean series to Taiwan, it becomes clear that the Taiwanese youth audience needs certain factors to buffer the impact of foreign television programming, particularly on visual literacy and critical thinking.

4. The Way towards Smart Television Viewing

4.1 Visual Literacy

An art critic needs visual literacy; a music critic needs aural literacy; and a television critic needs what some analysts describe as television literacy. This use of the word 'literacy' is, admittedly, metaphoric. There is no evidence that our comprehension of television is analogous to our comprehension of printed words. The tendency for media manipulation can be prevented through proper education of television literacy. Furthermore, television literacy also serves as a means of detoxifying television which in turn generates active viewers with a more holistic understanding of the television (Wu, 1996). If you are aware of the medium's behind-the-scenes realities, then one will not be so stunned or manipulated by its message. At this point, watching TV actively is an essential skill for being a member of civil society.

In television literacy, what the television does to its viewers is not the core issue. Rather it is what the viewers do to television (Brookfield, 2001). Television literacy can help in preventing media manipulation as it provides the necessary abilities TV viewers must possess. According to Hefzallah (2002), television literacy produces educated active viewers by equipping them with the ability to analyze everything that is seen on television, the ability to define the difference between real world and television world, the ability to assess and judge various television programs, and the intellect to use leisure time. In other words, television literacy is an essential skill to create a smart audience. Television literacy become an essential skill for everyone and one of the most focused issues and therefore gains most of the attention from researchers. Television literacy is indeed essential for educating the audience to equip them with the abilities that will help prevent media manipulation. For this reason, the integration of critical thinking becomes a necessity.

4.2 Critical Thinking

Critical thinking is the ability to make reliable judgments when identifying, analyzing, comparing, contrasting and evaluating arguments. This ability is more than the act of receiving things through reckless and passive means. If a person is not able to critically understand a message and receive them in a reckless way this means that the individual lacks the ability to defy authority. This makes the person submissive to power. Through critical thinking, the individual is enabled to think beyond what is given by those with power. These makes people independent in thoughts and views.

Critical thinking is not only a skill or ability but it can also be described as an attitude with the urge to pursue the truth (Ennis, 1996; Siegel, 1988). First all, to challenge unfair practices, oppression and so on, is not dependent on the individual. The power derives from the combined voice of a group of people. The power of critical thinking as Freire emphasizes is associated with critical conscious and requires practice (Freire, 2003). Literacy is a key point connected to the consciousness of being critical. The lack of television literacy as well as the consciousness of being critical directly affects the audience, making it difficult for them to identify unrighteous practices shown on television. Maletzke in 1963 was sharply critical of elitist thinking behind the whole concept of 'mass society,' pointing out that industrial society of his day allowed a greater degree of individual variation in tastes, opinions and values than at any previous time. He concludes that the whole idea of mass culture is rather a product of the isolation of intellectuals than of observation of society (Maletzke, 1963, pp. 26-27); it matched that critical thinking requires on criteria epistemic

adequacy. Apart from enough knowledge to judge, the most important factor is critical thinking spirit that gives people courage to discover any unfair phenomena. Critical spirit is the foundation and key to practice the principle of critical thinking. As Freire mentioned, the process of critical thinking involves not only theory but also action (Freire, 1970). Combining thought and action creates an effective critical thinking sprit.

To acquire the literacy of critical thinking, the most important tool lies in education. Certainly, it shall be acquired in the process of growth during childhood but also as an adult. Many researches have cited that critical thinking is generally conceptualized as an intellectual ability suitable for development by those involved in higher education (Drake, 1976; Young, 1980; Meyers, 1986; Stice, 1987). Empirical studies of the development of critical thinking capacities focus on young adults (Kitchener, 1986; King, Kitchener, and Wood, 1985) or college students (Perry, 1970, 1981). This suggests that adults play a significant role in educating the next generation regarding television program viewing. Thus, to educate the youth as critical thinkers is a way of avoiding the tragedy of media manipulation.

Recently, educators have been aware of the risk for media manipulation and started to educate students in critical thinking but the practice on pedagogy still has a long way to go especially critical thinking of television for media. In 2002, the media policy released by the government emphasised the need for people to have television literacy so that they can access, evaluate, analyze and assess television when in a chaotic environment. Critical thinking plays a very important key to interpret the media message.

The Taiwan government issued a white paper in October 2002 asserting the importance of improving media literacy by enhancing the ability to judge and interpret media messages. Although television literacy class is not as advanced as in the U.K., where it has been included in the National Curriculum since 1989, more educators recognise its importance in education. In 2002 research, Sophia Wu cited four abilities on television literacy in Taiwan: (1) manage viewer's behaviour while they are watching (2) define the reality of Television programmed (3) convince by supportive evidence and truth (4) understand the media organization. So to be a critical thinker means that the television viewer is able to be skeptical about the accuracy of media depictions of what are portrayed as 'typical' families, or of the neutrality and objectivity of television's reporting of political events (Brookfiedl, 1987). When the Korean series and foreign series gradually "invaded" Taiwan, young viewers discussed risks of TV idols overly influencing their decisions to buy products related to the series; the degree of critical thinking of television literacy could be a possible resolution for this risk.

In order to emphasize more on the need for media education among young Taiwanese audiences, the researcher finds it necessary to identify the specific perceptions of the youth toward television viewing by means of conducting a study.

5. Research method

This research is focused on the feeling of watching Korean TV series on university level of Taiwanese audiences through focus group discussions (FGD). The researcher formed one focus group for discussion after watching the popular Korea series "Dae-Jang-Geum" for one hour. The focus groups are comprised of seven 18 year old respondents including two male students and five female students. The similarity of the composition among the respondents will strengthen the validity of the data gathered.

Using a questionnaire that the researcher has prepared (Appendix), the first batch of respondents (the Korean series fans) was invited for the FGD in a classroom. The classroom was chosen as the location for the study FGD due to its convenience. The respondents and researcher were seated in a round table for ease in facilitating the discussion. Before the FGD started, the respondents were initially familiarized on what the study was all about. After the brief introduction of the research objective and purposes, the FGD was conducted. They were all very enthusiastic to answer the questions so it was not difficult to gather information. In order for the researcher to conduct proper documentation, the participants were asked to respond one at a time.

In addition to the FGD, the researcher also classified the different themes that dominate Korean television series. This enabled the researcher to compare it with Taiwan's culture to confirm if it fits with it or otherwise. These themes also help in evaluating how Korean series affect Taiwanese women in terms of their behaviour and lifestyle. The discussion that will follow shows evidences of the learnings derived from watching the series. This process will also help in assessing the level of the participants' critical thinking.

6. The message of "Dae-Jang-Geum"

The story of "Dae-Jang-Geum" is about a young woman who grew up in a lower class family who later became an excellent doctor in the living quarters of a monarch in a palace. The story fulfils the spirit of invincibility among women especially since the story is based on old century Korea where women are regarded as lower class people. The characteristic of "Dae-Jang-Geum" can be discussed as following:

6.1 High class society

High class living is always emphasized in Korean series, especially during the old century Korea. The young lady named Jang-Geum plays the role of a court lady who obeys the empress dowager of the higher class. During this time, women belonging to the lower class are not allowed to go against the law. Misery will bestow upon those who try to defy authority; those who work for the palace will naturally be moved out of the palace. This old practice is the reflection of social context within the Korean community. Power is always a factor to divide social class.

6.2 Stereotype image of lower position and weakness of woman

Exchanging roles and sharing power are not encouraged in traditional Korea. Aside from being born from a poor family, Jang-Geum is a woman. During this period, sexual discrimination and labelling is a common practice in treating men and women. Women are forced to sacrifice their careers under the patriarchal system/community. This apparently reflects the sexual ideology in Korean society.

6.3 Strong family connection consciousness

Influenced by Confucianism, Koreans value harmony within the family, community, and society as a whole. They consider themselves as members of a large family, and often regard the welfare of the family as more important than the individual. This has been evident when Jang-Geum tried her best to do her mother's wishes on her deathbed. This meets the values that Rosengren and Windahl (1989) mentioned: family welfare is always the first priority for Koreans. It reflects the culture of Korean society and the producer's identity values.

6.4 The strategy of idolism for promoting series

According to cultural ministry of Korea, the purpose of promoting series idols is to attract viewers as well as to enhance consumer identity among fans. Once people identify with these idols, viewers tend to relate every life instance and experience to their idols. It matches Baudrillard's theory on the concept of simulations. It is not appropriation but rather extends the value of symbolism (Jian Miao Ru, 1998, p. 30). It reflects on consumer products associated with these new idols becoming very popular like pop music, clothes, mobile phones, computer games, electric products, publishing, and even Korean sightseeing destinations. Thus, anything related to Korea have become popular commodities for consumers through the value of symbolism.

6.5 The storyline of love affair is a hypnotic or a tear gas catalyst

Emotions are naturally evoked from watching these television series, making the viewers deeply attached to its story and characters. Thus, the turn out of various events in the series can greatly affect the outlook of its viewers towards life's challenges. In a way, watching a television series serves as an inspiration to several viewers. As Hobson pointed out, watching television is a deep phenomena for family; woman will feel happy because they have cultural economy and cultural competence, so that they are able to enjoy the meaning delivered by the series (Hobson, 1982). In Korean series, love is unrealistic and illogical for the storyline. In spite of this, the viewers see it as reality, giving them hope and encouragement.

7. Analysis of the Respondents

It is beyond the scope of this short assignment to provide an account of the detailed responses of the participants (as would be possible in a longer thesis). However the following account provides a summary of the main issues which emerged in order to illuminate the theoretical discussion.

Based on the survey FGD conducted with seven selected south Taiwan university participants, the following important points are summarized below:

Firstly, none of the respondents pointed out the implications of cultural issues (e.g. high social class, strong family connections and stereotyping) found in the series. This suggests that the respondents were not critically conscious of the Korean culture depicted in the drama. Apparently, the respondents were more interested in the nature of the characters' lifestyle including the fashion trend during that time. The manners in which the characters dress up are far more interesting to the selected participants. The manners, etiquette and customs shown by the empress were pointed out by the participants as a similar practice characterized in Chinese culture. However, no further points of relating this observation to Korean society were given. It is possible that watching more Korean series can help familiarize the viewers with the Korean culture and history.

Secondly, the respondents of the study appear to be influenced by idolism. Ying Ai Lee is a very popular actress who played Jang-Geum in the series. She has many Taiwanese fans from the first Korean series previously shown in Taiwan. As the respondents are able to identify with the popular actress, more young viewers are interested in watching Korean series. Interestingly, idolism greatly affects the respondents as they are also interested in knowing more about the series and its characters. Although the respondents do not want to be Koreans, they want to visit Korea and visit the place where their idol has been. They also have consumer identity related to their idol. The audience has been manipulated by

idolism that the series producer had intended; the producer's goal for influencing the way of behaviour, values and attitudes had obviously been achieved. One of the respondents stated, "I watch "Dae-Jang-Geum" because of Lee Young Ae." This is one of the most obvious evidences of manipulation through idolism.

Thirdly, the series exaggerates the stereotype of the woman's lower position, such as Jang-Geum's mother. The fatalism of woman reflects weakness of a woman's position by traditional values of following and obeying the man. Respondents seem to be unaware of gender equality. They just absorb the insensible storyline to fulfil their imagination. But some respondents commented on the illogical, fantasy storyline. One of the respondents stated, "I feel the storyline is fake, but I enjoyed the sound track." Most respondents gave less critical views on fake, insensible and illogical storylines but are more interested in finding enjoyment in the series, such as music, fashion and Korean cuisines. This apparently is one of the evidences of media manipulation among audiences. According to the current scenario illustrated above, viewers are more interested in a series' entertainment factor rather than concentrating on its critical elements.

Fourthly, television has had a profound effect on the information environment and the culture of society (McLuhan, 1964; Postman, 1982). In a chaos media environment, much effort is clearly necessary to resolve the problems of television programming within Taiwanese society. Of course, the identification of the problem is not sufficient. Means of integrating proper identification abilities, television literacy and critical thinking will help in understanding the message being delivered by various foreign television series. How will the youth know that the influence derived from television viewing should have limitations? How does media manipulation affect the youth's viewing interpretation? Are the youth equipped with the abilities to evaluate and interpret the message delivered by television programs? These questions will have to be answered so as to resolve the issues on the impact of television programs among Taiwanese youth.

In general, the youth are not particular about the problems of cultural identity. Although many respondents enjoy watching Korean series, they enjoy the series primarily because of the new idol and the growing interest in cultural differences. They may learn from the history and culture of Korea, but they basically perceive its story as old fashion characterized by slow rhythm. From this perspective, it is obvious that today's young viewers watch foreign TV series as entertainment that requires less critical thinking. In this case, Taiwanese young viewers are unconsciously manipulated by consumer identity, symbolism and idolism.

In order to resolve this concern, instructors must be engaged in reflective teaching (Consideine and Haley, 1999, p. 8). Through reflective teaching, questions about ideology, power and social relations are constructed, carried, and conveyed by media representations which require commitment to both critical thinking and a critical pedagogy. Len Masterman said, "It severely undermined the hierarchical role of the teacher as the accredited expert and purveyor of approved knowledge within the classroom. The role of the teacher in this process becomes one of organizing and guiding learners in activity leading to the acquisition and mastery of knowledge, skills, beliefs, values….cultural capital" (Consideine and Haley, 1999). Thus, media education and instructor support can be a key for improving critical thinking among young Taiwanese viewers.

8. Conclusion

Literature had proven that television programs can greatly influence viewers and has the tendency to instil new beliefs and insights, which later become societal norms. This trend can be a problem, particularly among youth, as it can substantially deprive their ability to think and act independently. Media, as described by various authors and researchers, has the ability to manipulate and affect its audience negatively. In turn, this problem leads to the generation of passive or unresponsive media users.

In Taiwan, cable television has paved the way for more foreign programs. In effect, this had affected the way in which Taiwanese youth perceive visual media. Based on the study findings, signs of media manipulation are evident among the respondents. Using a popular Korean TV series as an example, the respondents typically find television viewing as a mere form of entertainment. Although most of the respondents enjoy watching the Korean series, they enjoy the series primarily because of the new idols and growing interest in cultural differences. From this perspective, it is obvious that today's young Taiwanese viewers watch foreign TV series for entertainment that requires less critical thinking. In this case, Taiwanese young viewers are consumers unconsciously manipulated by identity, symbolism and idolism.

This finding further stresses the need for integrating television literacy and critical thinking among young passive viewers. In order to attain this objective, the significance of media education should be emphasized. This can be attained by the active participation of adults, particularly educators, in teaching the essential values and skills that youth need for more meaningful television viewing. Visual literacy as well as critical thinking should always be part of media education so as to prevent audience manipulation among Taiwanese youth. In general, the problem of media and youth can be resolved primarily through coordinated efforts and unified objectives.

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Appendix

Name   Gender   Age

1. How many Korean series have you watched on television in the last five years

a. 1~3

b. 4~6

c. above7

2. Usually, do you watch Korean series regularly?

a. almost every episode

b. occasionally

c. rarely

3. Do you buy goods which are presented in Korean Series?

a. yes, very often

b. occasionally

c. never buy it

4. What is the reason you like watching Korea series?

a. the actors or actresses

b. the story line

c. others_____

5. Have you ever watched "Dae-Jang-Geum" soap opera?

a. yes, every episode

b. occasionally

c. only a few episodes

d. never

Back up question during focus group

1. What is your feeling about this episode of "Dae-Jang-Geum" after watching it? Why do you like it? Why don't you like it?

2. Will you recommend it to your friend? Why?

3. If there is another Japanese or foreign series on another channel, will you consider changing channels?

4. What is your view on the popularity of Korean series in Taiwan? Why does "Dae-Jang-Geum" reach a high rating?

5. What is impact on Korea series for Taiwanese audience (example "Dae-Jang-Geum" promoting Korea tourism and food...)

6. Are you more interest in Korean culture since you watched this episode of "Dae-Jang-Geum"? What do you want to have further understanding?

7. What is your view about foreign culture imported to Taiwan by TV series?