

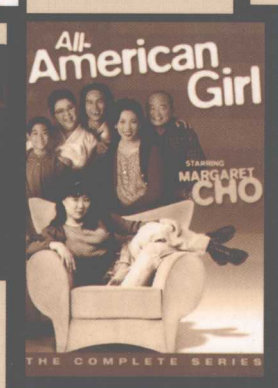
New Topics in Contemporary Cultural Studies

当代文化研究新论

毛思慧 主编 MAO Sihui

# Representations of Ethnicity in American Sitcoms in the 1990s

by Peng Qigui



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九十年代美国情景喜剧中的

彭启贵 著

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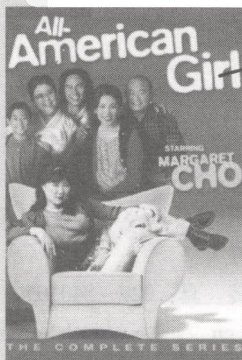
Shandong University Press

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广东外语外贸大学学术著作出版基金资助出版

中山大学出版社  
· 广州 ·

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图书在版编目 (CIP) 数据

九十年代美国情景喜剧中的种族性再现 = Representations of Ethnicity in American Sitcoms in the 1990s / 彭启贵著. —广州: 中山大学出版社, 2009. 3

(当代文化研究新论丛/毛思慧主编)

ISBN 978 - 7 - 306 - 03272 - 0

I. 九… II. 彭… III. 电视剧—种族主义—研究—美国  
IV. J905.712

中国版本图书馆 CIP 数据核字 (2009) 第 019969 号

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出 版 人: 叶侨健

策划编辑: 熊锡源

责任编辑: 熊锡源

封面设计: 楚 天

责任校对: 赖艳艳

责任技编: 黄少伟

出版发行: 中山大学出版社

电 话: 编辑部 020 - 84111996, 84113349

发行部 020 - 84111998, 84111981, 84111160

地 址: 广州市新港西路 135 号

邮 编: 510275

传 真: 020 - 84036565

网 址: <http://www.zsup.com.cn> E-mail: zdcbs@mail.sysu.edu.cn

印 刷 者: 佛山市南海印刷厂有限公司

规 格: 880 mm × 1230 mm 1/32 11.25 印张 313 千字

版次印次: 2009 年 3 月第 1 版 2009 年 3 月第 1 次印刷

印 数: 1 - 2 000 册

定 价: 26.00 元

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本书如发现因印装质量问题影响阅读, 请与出版社发行部联系调换

## Series Editor's Preface

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Mao Sihui

The basic editorial strategy of the series *New Topics in Cultural Studies* is to present a broad yet focused spectrum of thinking on contemporary literary/cultural studies and to challenge our conceptions of what postcolonial and feminist cultural studies in China and the West is and how we should think about it in the age of “globalisation” — the dual process of globalisation and localisation. By presenting as many voices as possible, one of our major aims is to create a discursive space for (re)viewing and (re)writing about linguistic, literary and cultural texts in relation to our changing social, historical and ecological environment. Indeed, we want the series to open up our readers' mind about cultural studies beyond the confines of its linguistic and literary origins. This group of research projects reflects our concerted efforts in critiquing and combining certain insights of poststructuralism with certain insights of postmodernism, feminism, psychoanalysis, semiotics, and postcolonialism.

*Literature, Culture and Postmodern Transformations: Eight Case Studies from William Shakespeare to James Bond* by Mao Sihui, Wang Hong and Chen Xiangyang serves as a general introductory project to this series, covering new studies of theatre, poetry, fiction and cinema, with two case studies on each genre. Part I “Theatre” looks at Shakespearean transformations and mutations in the postmodern cultural

context and the subversive nature of the postmodern stage in Ortonesque farce. Part II “Poetry” deals with the postmodern in British poetry in general and the world of the postmodern psychosomatic in Ted Hughes’ narrative epic poem *Gaudete* in particular. Part III “Fiction” explores the importance of being paranoid while critiquing Thomas Pynchon’s *The Crying of Lot 49* and also re-examines the colonial passions and betrayals from a postcolonial perspective in T. E. Lawrence’s *Seven Pillars of Wisdom, A Triumph*. Part IV “Cinema” reflects on the representations of Chineseness in Wayne Wang’s major films and decodes the semiotic empire of Hollywood with James Bond as a seductive symbol of British and American visual hegemony.

In *Representations of “Otherness” in Disney Animated Films*, Peng Baoliang argues that Disney cinema as a semiology can be a path for tracking down “Otherness”, but the system should not be treated as an impersonal scientific structure. Rather, it is an artificial product, a social activity. Traditionally, a Disney film is invariably received as a purified and exorcized form of art which perpetuates and validates universal values and truths that transcend time and space, and the audience is eventually mandated to see it from a distance so that the authority established by the discourse remains safe and sound.

Looking at “Otherness” in relation to history, racism, sexism and mythology while closely reading Disney films such as *Snow White and Seven Dwarfs*, *Cinderella*, *Sleeping Beauty*, *Beauty and the Beast*, *Aladdin*, *The Lion King*, *Pocahontas*, *Mulan*, and *Tarzan*, this book attempts to demonstrate that these animated films rationalise Western values and mindsets such as white supremacy, Eurocentrism, masculinity, imperialism which (un)consciously justify and windowdress inequity, inequality, repression, exploitation, prejudice, transgression, appropriation and

hegemony that are pervasive of all the present social relations. Although these stories are of different cultural origins and of all geopolitical spaces such as Europe, the Middle East, China, and Latin America, once adapted and cast by Disney Studio, they serve unanimously the interest of the “white supremacist capitalist patriarchy” as bell hooks once put it. Structurally this book is divided into six chapters — semiology, gender/sexualisation, the way of reading (mythology), history writing, and the way of thinking (ideology) with the first chapter as an introduction. In this postcolonial feminist project, Peng Baoliang offers an excellent study of some of the semiotic activities within the Disney cinematic apparatus. Behind the complex structure of a society and all sorts of social relations and productive activities there lies a kind of momentum which, in the form of Disney animation, generates as well as constructs a whole set of “self-other” relationships. Whether it resides in racism, sexism, mythology or ideology, the momentum flows from the “self” to the “Other”.

Ding Shaoyan's book *The Construction of Meaning: A Cultural Study of Female Representation in American Magazine Advertising in 2002* is a three-faceted analysis of American advertising, the meaning of women, and American culture with ample texts from popular American magazine advertisements. Ding Shaoyan holds that after more than thirty years of vigorous feminist movement and with the rise of Cultural Studies in the 1990s, the female body in American advertising is now represented with plurality and sophistication, embodying complex power relationship in American society. As an interdisciplinary study, this book makes extensive use of Michel Foucault's theory of power and knowledge and Stuart Hall's analysis of media representation. Other schools of thoughts such as feminism, neo-Marxism, postmodernism,

postcolonialism are also drawn in combination with the theories of culture, in addition to the recent studies of popular culture: the theories of fashion, subculture, television, and the culture of consumption. Different languages/meanings constructed in advertising are measured in relation to race, gender and sexuality and identity. Three analyses are employed for more exact measurement of discourse: a content analysis, a qualitative analysis, and a semiotic analysis. One of the main findings of this project is that women in advertising are generally represented as white and heterosexual with exhibitionist sexual appeal. Female images other than this category are marginalised: they are characterised by fetishisation, sexualisation, fragmentation, objection, underrepresentation, trivialisation, negation, commercialisation, in addition to a racialised and gendered representation. Female representation in advertising is saturated with the power of domination by the social institutions which represent the white supremacist capitalist patriarchy of the United States that always attempts to maintain its social, cultural, economic and political power by fabricating and dominating the "Other". One particular strength in Ding's project is her deliberate complication of this "Self-Other" relationship. She holds that advertising is also a realm where multiple powers contest for existence. The voices of the oppressed and marginalised are also articulated in the representation of advertising. Not only are there changes in the representation of women, but there also appear new elements which represent resistance to the dominant discourse of women in advertising by the subculture images, lesbian images, transgender images as well as female images of multiple, ambivalent meanings, which are commercialised by capital in order to magnify the market. Moreover, female audience are able to construct multiple levels of meanings in the process of consumption. Therefore,

the social discourse of women is destabilised by the multiple articulations of the resistance as well as women when consuming these images. Power domination encounters power destabilisation in dialogic and dynamic relation. In addition, this characteristic of power politics in advertising illuminates the empowerment of women in consumer society as well as the resistance strategies to stereotypical representation of advertising. It is argued that more effective resistance is possible for women in everyday life and enlightening women through diverse representation and education is important for social transformation. Ding also argues that the identity of women represented in advertising is fragmented, not only because of the multiple identity of resistance politics but also due to the increasing power of the audience/consumers, who construct their own meanings/identity according to their needs, pleasure and social conditions in relation to race, gender, identity. Consumption becomes the crucial process for meaning construction, which offers the opportunity for the reconstruction of the meaning for individual woman in everyday life. Therefore, the female identity is more fluid than rigid.

In *Reconstructing Images of Chinese Peasantry: A Cultural and Linguistic Study of Zhao Benshan's Comic Sketches, 1995~2000*, Chen Kaiju makes innovative use of contemporary postcolonial theories in his detailed examination of Zhao Benshan's comic sketches in the reconstruction of images of Chinese peasantry, the cultural strategies, and the linguistic strategies adopted in Zhao's major comic sketches. The thesis of this project is that different from the traditional representations of peasantry in Chinese literary and cultural texts, there has appeared since 1990s a significant cultural phenomenon of Zhao Benshan and his series of comic sketches whereby new images of

Chinese peasantry are represented with unprecedented sympathy, understanding and humour, offering a comprehensive balance between their positive and negative aspects. While the significant linguistic and cultural strategies used in Zhao's comic sketches are analyzed in detail in Chapters Two and Three, and related discussion on the power of representation and his effective articulation for the Chinese peasants are included in Chapters One and Four, pertinent background is reviewed in "Introduction", which looks at the representation of peasantry images in traditional Chinese cultural works, the related cultural and linguistic theories, the overview of Zhao himself and his representative comic sketches. Following the theory of Spivak's "Can the subaltern speak?", Chen Kaiju points out that the problem with the prejudiced images of Chinese peasantry constructed and circulated in traditional Chinese literary and cultural works lies in the very existence of "subalternity". The ultimate solution to the problem of prejudiced images depends on the eradication of inequality which fosters arrogance of the social privileged toward the peasants as the social subordinate and inferiority complex in the latter. It is in this sense that we claim the cultural credit in Zhao's reconstruction of images of Chinese peasantry — they are treated as "us" rather than "other". But the struggle against the traditional prejudiced representations has never been easy as various cultural and linguistic strategies have been tactfully used in the form of popular culture. Zhao's artistic career as a popular comedian has been so successful that he himself has risen to a status of national celebrity. However, as many of his works have been highly popular in the whole country, Zhao himself has become a hegemonic figure, at least in the field of comic sketches. With the change of social status, Zhao's original role as a true spokesman for the Chinese peasants has gradually

changed accordingly.

Li Yufeng's project *The Other Looks: Interrogating Chineseness in Hollywood Cinema 1980 ~ 1999* takes us from China back to Hollywood with her insightful examination of the cultural representations of Chineseness, the cinematic apparatus of Hollywood and her interrogation of such representations from early 1980s to late 1990s. By reviewing Chineseness as the "exotic", the "marginal", the "Other" in the Hollywood context, Li Yufeng seeks to find certain knowledge and also construct a set of critical discourses about the clashes, conflicts as well as confrontations between the two cultures in the world of cinema, thus providing us with the necessity and foundation for a dialogue between the two different cultures. Making use of different schools of thoughts and discourses such as postcolonial theories, feminist perspectives, Said's Orientalism, Stam and Shohat's critique of Eurocentrism, Metz's cine-semiology, Foucault's theory of power and knowledge, Bhabha's views on "Otherness", Mulvey's on spectacle and visual pleasure, and Kaplan's on "looking relations", this study is an interdisciplinary critique of some representations of Chineseness in contemporary Hollywood cinema. Li Yufeng argues that a fairly great portion of the images of the Chinese, as one part of the "unspeakable" minorities in the American mainstream culture, can be read as the representations of the "Other" to the Anglo-Americans, and such "Otherness" can be interpreted in relation to the issue of identity politics and power imbalance. The portrayals of the Chinese males in films such as Rob Cohen's *Dragon: the Bruce Lee Story* (1993), Brett Ratner's *Rush Hour* (1998), Michael Cimino's *Year of the Dragon* (1985), Richard Donner's *The Lethal Weapon 4* (1998), and Antoine Fuqua's *The Replacement Killers* (1997) are often manipulated by the

Hollywood hegemonic discourse into stereotypical imagery charged with mysticism, exoticism, irrationality, primitivism, fancifulness and/or malevolence, into the demonized, alienated, and marginalized “Other”. For the part of the Chinese females in Hollywood films, such as Daryle Duke’s *Taipan* (1986), Michael Cimino’s *Year of the Dragon*, and David Cronenberg’s *M. Butterfly* (1993), one can see that they are positioned as the “Other of the Other”, since they are not only the racial and ethnic Other, but also the sexual Other in the imperial and patriarchal contexts. While exploring how Chineseness has been perceived and represented in relation to power, racial politics, identity politics, occidental and oriental relations, visual spectacle and imperial gaze, centrality and marginality, Li Yufeng’s project constantly refers to the Otherized Chineseness in her reading of theoretical as well as cinematic texts in order to demonstrate how Chineseness has been reproduced and exploited for historical, ideological, commercial and cultural reasons by the Hollywood narratives. One of her major objectives is to conduct fresh interrogations into the problematic construction of Chineseness as the mysterious, heathen and alien Other in Hollywood cinema. Representations of Chineseness as the object of spectacle and gaze, of exotic pleasure and alien threat in the Hollywood “Dream Factory” are fabricated with colonial discourse and power constellations, reiterating a need for a genuine understanding of Chineseness and its identity politics as an affirmed Otherness, an empowered minority discourse, for ideological, political, and cultural progress.

In the so called melting pot of multi-ethnic societies, racial relations in the United States have ever remained the most controversial issue in reality and a terrain of contestation in mass media. Sitcom, as

the most popular and durable television drama in the United States, has been witness to the shifting politics of racial representations on the small screen. In the book *Representations of Ethnicity in American Sitcoms in the 1990s*, Peng Qigui makes an original exploration of how ethnic groups are represented in the American sitcoms. Building on the previous studies of sitcoms in relation to the issue of ethnicity, this study, combining both content and textual analysis, focuses its attention on the representations of ethnicity in sitcoms in the 1990s by examining some of the most influential and popular black, yellow and white sitcoms. Peng Qigui attempts to respond to the following specific questions: Which ethnic groups have been represented and how have they been represented in these popular shows? What are the features or trends that characterize the sitcoms in the 1990s in terms of racial or ethnic representation? How have these forms of representation contextualized themselves and what are the social, economic, political, and cultural intentions and implications behind these constructions of the images of the ethnic minorities? How has the genre of sitcom been employed and exploited to serve the purpose of conforming to and/or subverting the dominant WASP (White Anglo-Saxon Protestant) ideological hegemony in representing ethnicity? And what could be expected from future sitcoms in representing ethnicity? In Chapter One "The Making of Sitcom", the author introduces the genre of sitcom and discusses its characteristics and social ideology. Chapter Two "Representations of Ethnicity from 1950s to 1980s" examines the representations of ethnicity in sitcoms before the 1990s while Chapter Three "Representations of Ethnicity in Non-White Sitcoms in the 1990s" explores the representations of black Americans and Asian Americans in "black" and "yellow" sitcoms. In Chapter Four

“Representations of Ethnicity in White Sitcoms in the 1990s”, the focus of this study shifts to the representations of ethnicity in two of the most popular and influential sitcoms in the 1990s — *Seinfeld* and *Friends*. And the last chapter “Sitcom Situates Ethnicity” further looks into the relationship between comedy and ethnicity and concludes that sitcom, as an important part of televisual culture, challenges and even subverts dominant ideologies, thus empowering discourses of marginalised ethnicities.

When addressing the question of agency in *The Location of Culture* (Routledge, 1994: 171), Homi K. Bhabha points out, “Postcolonial criticism bears witness to the unequal and uneven forces of cultural representation involved in the contest for political and social authority within the modern world order. Postcolonial perspectives ... intervene in those ideological discourses of modernity that attempt to give a hegemonic ‘normality’ to the uneven development and the differential, often disadvantaged, histories of nations, races, communities, peoples.” With these New Topics in Cultural Studies, thanks to the vision and understanding of the editors at Sun Yat-sen University Press, especially Mr. Xiong Xiyuan and Chutian, we wish to present to our readers an opportunity to hear a variety of voices in postcolonial and feminist cultural studies, voices that explore the socio-cultural significance of different discourses and personal meanings of the act of literary and cultural critique in the age of globalisation, the age of uncertainty and the age of transformation. Let me conclude this Preface with a quotation from the “Epilogue” of *Gaudete* (Faber, 1977:177–178) by the late British Poet Laureate Ted Hughes that still speaks powerfully to us today:

At the top of my soul

A box of dolls.

In the middle of my soul

A circus of gods.

At the bottom of my soul

The usual mess of squabblers.

In front of me

A useful-looking world, a thrilling weapon.

Behind me

A cave.

Inside the cave, some female groaning

In labour —

Or in hunger —

Or in fear, or sick, or forsaken —

Or —

At this point, I feel the sun's strength.

I take a few still-aimless happy steps.

And I firmly believe that these postcolonial and feminist cultural

projects will enable us to take some further steps towards a theory of cultural hybridity and polyvalence, thus ushering in a certain transformation in our “glocalised” understanding of social, geopolitical and cultural differences which would hopefully go beyond the polarities of Self and Other, Chinese and West.

## Acknowledgements

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The accomplishment of this project has at its very core the encouragement and support of many teachers, colleagues, friends and relatives. Hereby it is my honor and pleasure to thank the various people who have helped me one way or another to accomplish this challenging but exhilarating project.

First and foremost, I would like to thank my supervisor, Professor Mao Sihui, for his patient academic guidance, vigorous intellectual enlightenment and enduring emotional support. It is his enthusiastic and insightful lectures of Comparative Cultural Studies that ushered me into the fascinating field of Cultural Studies and inspired me to explore further under his guidance and supervision. I was not only informed but also enlightened and empowered by the knowledge imparted by him in and after class. But more personal and patient instructions and guidance followed when I began to do the Ph. D project. In the course of these five years, apart from numerous emails and telephone calls, he sacrificed most of his weekends commuting between Macao and Guangzhou to meet us in person. Doubtlessly, every tiny progress of this project is inseparable from and the result of his professional instructions, critical inspirations and caring encouragement. Without him, I would not be doing Cultural Studies today, and without him, this study would not have achieved the present shape. It is my conviction that his pursuit of

excellence in academia, his sense of intellectual responsibility and his love for all the people around him will continue to influence me even after the completion of the project. I owe my greatest debt to him for his supervision and support in the course of this project. And responsibility for whatever flaws that still exist rests with myself.

In addition, I would also like to express my sincere gratitude to my home school, School of English for International Business, Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, for their kindness to reduce my teaching workload and to grant me the opportunity to be a visiting scholar at the University of Central Lancashire in the UK. Their help and support has provided me not only with more focused time but better conditions for the study.

Furthermore, I want to thank some of my colleagues and friends at Guangdong University of Foreign Studies, who have constantly shared with me their brilliant ideas and precious resources. They are Professor Ran Yongping, Dr. Peng Baoliang, Dr. Wu Na, Dr. Cheng Kaiju, and Dr. Ding Shaoyan. Their advice and support have helped me to proceed much more smoothly.

Besides, my thanks also go across the national boundary to some of the foreign colleagues and friends in the Department of Humanities, University of Central Lancashire. I benefit tremendously from their informative lectures and talks on films, television, cultural theories, and cultural criticism. The list of names includes John Joughin, John Mundy, Susan Sydney-Smith, Glyn White, Allen Rice, George McKay, and Paul Humble.

I would particularly like to extend my heartfelt thanks to Dr. Priscilla Roberts, who has generously offered me a six-month stipend from the Center of American Studies at the University of Hong Kong. The advanced facilities and rich resources at HKU equipped me with