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# Is it funny because it's not true? Chinese people's perceptions of aggressive female characters in Asian comedies

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**Is it funny because it's not true?  
Chinese people's perceptions of aggressive female characters  
in Asian comedies**

by

**Yin Xia**

A thesis submitted to the graduate faculty  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
**MASTER OF SCIENCE**

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Program of Study Committee:  
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**ABSTRACT**

Scholars and cultural critics have criticized the mass media for underrepresenting women. Feminist media theory, which focuses on how women are depicted in the media as well as how the depictions affect reality, claims that the media fail in representing “women as women” (Parry & Karam, 2001). Based on feminist media theory, this thesis focuses on how Chinese audiences perceive aggressive female characters in Asian comedies. A total of four focus groups were conducted, audiotaped and later transcribed and translated. The findings show that participants saw the characters as sassy and aggressive yet pretty and easygoing. Also, while some participants believed the characters to be a reflection of reality, others argued that depicting females’ aggressiveness as a joke in comedies implied a social expectation that women should not be aggressive. This thesis examines the reasons behind the participants’ perceptions and the implications of women’s portrayals in media.

## CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

For years, researchers have been studying women's portrayals in media, namely, how women are depicted in television shows, movies, advertising, music videos, and magazines (Atkin, 1991; Dominick, 1979; Mackey & Hess, 1982; Seggar, 1975; Schick, Rima, & Calabrese, 2011). Many studies have found that women are more likely than men to be shown in domestic activities or romantic relationships and less often in professional roles (McArthur, 1975; Seggar, 1975; Dominick, 1979; Downs, 1981; Mackey & Hess, 1982; Lovdal, 1989; Atkin, 1991; Glascock, 2001; Gorman, 2005; Walsh & Jefferson, 2008; Feng & Karan, 2011; Siu & Au, 2011; Huang & Lowry, 2012; Brown, Zhao, Wang, Liu, Lu, Li, & Zhang, 2013; ). Meanwhile, studies have shown that media portrayals of women influence audience perceptions as well as behavior. For example, exposure to media content that promotes thinness tends to have a positive relationship with eating disorder symptomatology among women (Harrison & Cantor, 1997; Wilcox & Laird, 2000; Bair, Kelly, Serdar, & Mazzeo, 2012). Other scholars argue that media influence people's attitudes in terms of gender through portraying women and men in stereotypical ways, potentially prescribing the right way to behave. For instance, Fox and Renas (1977) found that the gender stereotypes presented in magazine and TV commercials, in which women had low-status jobs, had an impact on women's career choices.

Nevertheless, women today are depicted in a greater variety of social roles, such as companies' CEOs, doctors, professors, and leaders in government. Elasmara, Hasegawa and Brain (1999) found that compared with previous decades, women in U.S. prime-time television programs in the early 1990s were less likely to be depicted as domestically involved (i.e., being housewives and caring for children) or as crime victims. Some contemporary media content features various kinds of heroines fighting for justice and saving their friends, families or even

the world (i.e., Xena from *Xena: Warrior Princess*, Diane Russell from *NYPD Blue*, and Katniss Everdeen from *The Hunger Games*). Television series like *King of Queens* and *According to Jim* portray wives as “physically and intellectually superior to their husbands” (Walsh, Fürsich, & Jefferson, 2010, p. 123).

Although academics have published many articles analyzing these relatively newly emerged female characters, fewer studies on audience perceptions have been done. Given that the way in which media portray women has a potential impact on audience perceptions of women or even on women themselves, it is critical to pay attention to how audiences perceive female characters. Making use of feminist media theory, described in the literature review, this thesis focuses on Chinese audience members’ perceptions of assertive Asian female characters.

Yue (2010) found that Chinese women’s portrayal in Chinese magazines changed over time such that women were depicted as “both public servants and homemakers” (p. 80) before the Cultural Revolution (1949-1965), “strong and physically able” during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976), and mothers and wives who can handle both work and family after 1976 to date. Yue argued that the social transformation impacted women’s image significantly. On TV, women in Chinese prime TV series from 1979 to 2008 were likely to be depicted as “young, attractive, independent,” (p. 68) “with a high school to vocational-technical school education (1979 to 1990)” or “with a junior college to college education (1991-2008)” (Zheng, 2011, p. 68). Of the 298 female characters selected from 63 TV series, none of them was depicted “as working in the most advanced and sophisticated areas” (p. 67). Though research about Chinese women’s portrayal in magazines and prime-time TV can be found, few studies concerning the image of women in Chinese comedies and even fewer about audience perceptions can be found.

In Asia, a new type of female character has emerged in comedies that focus on young people's daily lives. These series typically feature a group of men and women who either work together or live together. There are often romantic relationships going on among them. These shows depict a new type of female character whom other characters consider to be rude, unreasonable, and even violent. A famous Korean movie, whose title translates to "My Sassy Girl," features a leading female character who treats her boyfriend rudely, such as slapping him in the face in front of people when they are playing a game on a train. She also makes her boyfriend trade his sports shoes for her high heels in public because her high heels were making her uncomfortable.



**Figure 1.** A poster of the Korean movie *My Sassy Girl*. Retrieved from <http://subscene.com/subtitles/my-sassy-girl-yeopgijeogin-geunyeo>

This movie became extremely popular, especially in East Asia, after its release. It was recorded as the second-highest-selling film in South Korea in 2001, with 4,852,845 tickets sold in 10 weeks. It also won five movie awards, including best Asian film from *Hong Kong Film Awards*,



best foreign language film from *Hochi Film Awards*, and one nomination for best foreign film from *Awards of the Japanese Academy* (“The Best Selling Films of 2001,” n.d.) This film was also “selected as the fashion symbol of 2002 by Chinese avant-grade rank organized by *News Weekly*, *Sina.com*, *Sun TV* and more than 40 other media institutes” (Wang & SikYingHo, 2007, p. 623).

Not long after the debut of *My Sassy Girl*, similar movies portraying sassy girlfriends were released in China (i.e., *The Lion Roars* directed by Joe Ma, *I Love You* directed by Yuan Zhang, and *Very Romantic* directed by Xiaoguang Liu) (“Analyzing the Phenomenon of Derivative Movies in China’s Movie Industry After *My Sassy Girl*,” 2003). On January 2, 2006, a Chinese television comedy called *WuLinWaiZhuan* had its debut on Channel 8 of China Central Television (CCTV 8).



**Figure 2.** A photograph of the Chinese TV comedy *WuLinWaiZhuan*. Retrieved from

<http://www.hunantv.com/c/20130517/1126572788.html>

Situated in a fictional historic context, the story was basically about the daily life of the hotel owner of TongFu Hotel (Xiangyu Tong), her niece (Xiaobei Mo), a waitress (Furong Guo), a

waiter (Zhantang Bai), an accountant (Qinghou Lv), and a chef (Xiulian Li). There were 81 episodes in total, of which each episode lasted for about 47 minutes. This show gained a viewership rating of 1.95% the first day of its release but the number soon increased to 4.26% and it reached its highest (9.49%) within a week, compared to the highest rating of 10.3% scored by a Chinese drama named *LiangJian* in 2005 (“*WuLinWaiZhuan*’s Raising Ratings and Polarization in Audience’s Reaction,” 2006). Furong Guo from *WuLinWaizhuan*, one of the target characters of this research, was the daughter of a well-known Kung Fu master. She left home to pursue a name of her own yet did not succeed in doing so because she was actually inept at Kung Fu. Speaking in an interview with Sina, the director, Jing Shang, described the show as a mixture of trends (i.e., pop songs, newly created words) and complicated relationships. He believed the show to be more popular among the young than elder Chinese because of the pop culture references. In describing the characters, he said Furong Guo was created to be a sassy girlfriend who was also amorous in romantic relationships (“Director Jing Shan Talking about the Secret of Success of *WuLinWaiZhuan*,” 2006). In this show, Furong barely reads and is considered rude and irrational by the other characters. She can do Chinese Kung Fu, which she uses to protect herself. Most of the time, however, she actually uses Kung Fu to threaten others, especially her boyfriend. Furong Guo injures or threatens her boyfriend, who is well educated and knows nothing about Kung Fu, whenever she is not satisfied with him.



**Figure 3.** A photograph of Furong Guo (played by Chen Yao) from *WuLinWaiZhuan*. Retrieved from <http://ent.people.com.cn/GB/8222/42057/57640/4036212.html>

Another Chinese television comedy, *i Apartment*, had its debut on August 5, 2009, on the channel Jiang Xi. It features the life of a group of young and single people living in the city of Shanghai, China. There are four seasons of this show, each of which includes 20 to 24 episodes. Each episode lasts about 50 minutes. Unlike *WuLinWaiZhuai*, *i Apartment* was not very popular at the beginning. As the producer, Yuan Wang, recalled: “No one was interested in this show (at that time) and we had to sell it for a very low price” (“How Did *i Apartment* Become Legendary,” 2014). But this situation changed dramatically in 2012 when the third season was released. Its highest viewership rating reached 1.54%. Despite the criticism of plagiarism (“*i Apartment = Friends & How I Met Your Mother*,” 2009), the fourth season remained popular and ranked the highest viewership rating compared to the other shows played on AnHun Channel, a Chinese national channel, during the same period (January 17, 2014–January 28, 2014).



**Figure 4.** An image of characters from *i Apartment*. Retrieved from <http://yule.sohu.com/20090730/n265596309.shtml>

Yifei Hu from *i Apartment*, one of the target characters in this research, was a university instructor holding a Ph.D. She was described as sassy, aggressive, sexy, open, outgoing and abhorring injustice on its official webpage at sina.com (“Yifei Hu from *i Apartment*,” 2009). In an interview with hunan.com, the actress, Yixiao Lou, who played YifeiHu, described the character as persistent, optimistic, and careless (“Yixiao Lou: I’m Not Silly as Yifei, Xiaoxian Zhang is Just a Friend,” 2012).



**Figure 5.** Yife Hu (played by Xiaoyi Lou) from *i Apartment* in a Karate class. Retrieved from [http://gb.cri.cn/30944/2012/08/17/3765s3814351\\_3.htm](http://gb.cri.cn/30944/2012/08/17/3765s3814351_3.htm)

Despite these sassy, aggressive female characters on screen, women in China still seem to be experiencing gender inequality. The estimated population of China was 1,366,718, 015 by the year 2011, with 48.5% of them women (“Women in the Labor Force in China,” 2012). Meanwhile, of the total employment in China (2011), 54.7% of them were men whereas 45.3 were women.

At the same time, Hausamann, Tyson and Zahidi’s statistics (2011) showed women in China were paid an average of 69% of what men were, for a pay gap of 31%. Other studies found the gender pay gap in China grew from 15.6% in 1988 to 17.5% in 1995 (Gustfsson & Li, 2000), and increased to 27.2% in 2004 (Zhang, Junsen, Jun Han, Pak-Wai Liu, and Yaohui Zhao, 2007). In contrast, the gender pay gap in the United States decreased from about 40% in 1969 to about 25% in 1997 ( “Explaining Trends in the Gender Gap,” 1998) and further to 21% in 2014 (Hill, 2015). In the Global Gender Gap Index reported by the World Economic Forum (2014), China ranked 84 out of 142 countries with a score of 0.6830, while the

United States ranked 20 with a score of 0.7463. (The Global Gender Gap Index is created and reported by World Economic Forum to indicate a “country” s performance in closing gender gap.” ) Based on the statistics, we have reason to believe that the social status of women in China may be lower than that of women in the United States. In addition, it was reported that the gender gap in rural areas in China was more significant than that in urban areas. For example, while 87% of males and 78% of females in China have an education level of junior high or higher, in rural areas only 61% of males and 43% of females have attained this same level of education ( “The Education of Chinese Women,” 2006). Li (2004) observed that 79% of women in a rural county called Diandong in Yunnan, China, “had no say in decisions about selling a major household product (i.e. livestock)” (p. 698), and 45% to 55% of them needed their husbands’ permission to go to a clinic or market.

This thesis focuses on Chinese adults’ (age from 19 to 33) perception of aggressive female characters in Asian comedies. All of the participants were registered students at Iowa State University, of which 12 were master’s students, 15 were Ph.D. students and one was a post-doctoral student. Focus groups were conducted to learn what Chinese people think of this new type of character and whether they think these roles reflect or construct reality. For example, do they believe the presence of these strong female characters indicates that women’s social status has improved in China? Or are these characters laughable because they are not accurate? Do Chinese people enjoy these characters and find them likeable? Are these characters believable? Why or why not? Little research has been done on women’s portrayals in Asian comedies. This thesis may provide a preliminary understanding of how Chinese people view women and make

sense of their portrayals on television. Thus, this thesis may be a contribution to China's media studies.

## CHAPTER 2 LITERATURE REVIEW

Feminist media theory provides a lens through which scholars analyze media presentations of women and seek to explain or even challenge perspectives related to gender, race, ethnicity, and other social categories that are commonly taken for granted (Parry & Karam, 2011). Feminist media researchers have argued that media have failed in presenting “women as women” (Parry & Karam, 2011), meaning women often have been depicted in one-dimensional stereotypes (i.e., caring moms, unhappy professionals, etc.), and have argued media should make efforts to present women in more diverse ways. This thesis uses feminist media theory to examine how audience members perceive aggressive female characters in Chinese TV comedies.

Researchers have demonstrated frequent gender stereotyping in media, especially on television. Among some early studies, McArthur and Resko (1975) examined the portrayals of men and women in American television commercials. They selected a sample of commercials drawn from CBS, NBC, and ABC and coded them based on characteristics such as who was the central figure (either male or female) and what was the basis for the credibility of the central figure (product-user of authority). According to the results, while 57% of the central figures were male, 43% of them were female. Also, among female central figures, only 14% of them were depicted as authorities. Female central figures tended to be depicted in domestic settings, whereas male figures were more likely to appear in occupational settings. The researchers concluded that compared to males, females were less likely to be portrayed as having independent identities and more likely to be depicted in a “relatively unfavorable manner” (McArthur and Resko, 1975, p. 209). Later researchers found that commercials tended to emphasize career advancement as a purchasing reward when the product-user was male but emphasized social advancement as a purchasing reward when the user was female (Mazzela,



Durkin, Cerini, & Buralli, 1992). Some relatively old studies are included here first, offering an overview of research on women's images in media, and second, exploring changes in women's portrayals from researchers' point of view.

In an examination of sex-role stereotyping on prime-time television, Downs (1981) concluded that while males on television tended to "solve their problems" (p. 253) independently, females were more likely to seek help. Lovdal (1989) studied 353 prime-time commercials and found that most women were presented in stereotypical roles, such as mothers, wives, brides, waitresses, or actresses. The author also found that women were depicted in a narrower range of occupations than men. Lovdal (1989) thus concluded that women were presented by the media in an inaccurate way. While Glascock (2001) found that women on prime-time television in 1996–97 were presented in more occupations than before, they were also more likely than men to be portrayed in low-income jobs.

Perhaps not surprisingly, the portrayals of women in Asian media have been as stereotypical as in U.S. media. Siu and Au (1997) examined 1,045 television commercials from China and Singapore. They found that females in these commercials tended to be portrayed as young, independent, low-level workers and inactive in sports or physical activities. A similar pattern was found in Hong Kong's television; females were more likely to be depicted as product-users, involved in domestic activities and dependent (Furnham, Mak, & Tanidjojo, 2000). Furnham, Mak and Tanidjojo (2000) argued that compared with the findings of gender roles in Western countries, this pattern seemed to be more significant in Asia. Citing newer research showing women in Western media were being depicted in a more diverse way, Furnham, Mak and Tanidjojo (2000) concluded that "gender-role stereotyping seems to be declining in Western culture, but not in Asian culture" (p. 2353). Tan, Ling, and Theng (2002)

“found a significant gender-role stereotyping in both Malaysian and Singaporean television commercials” (p. 859), where men were more likely to be portrayed with occupations while women without. When they were shown in nonoccupational roles, men were more likely to be engaged in relaxing activities, such as eating and reading, while women were more involved with domestic activities, such as cleaning and cooking. Kang and Xu (2009) found that the female characters who appeared most often on women’s channels in mainland China were pretty actresses, meaning those channels failed to present the varieties of real women’s roles. Also, even though women were presented in workplaces, most of them were depicted as secretaries or managers’ assistants (Kang and Xu, 2009). And although the women’s channels claimed they concentrated on providing information for “modern women,” their core content was mostly about diet, makeup and fashion, with relatively less about work.

One of the major reasons why so much attention has been paid to gender stereotyping in media is that research findings suggest gender stereotyping in media affects audience attitudes and behaviors, especially among young people. A study by O’Bryant and Corder-Bolz (1978) concerning television’s effects on children’s stereotyping of women’s work roles found that first, children did learn gender stereotypes from TV, and second, children who were shown commercials portraying women in traditional roles reported that “the roles were appropriate only for women” (p. 241), whereas children “who saw women in reversed roles declared many of the traditional male jobs shown as appropriate for women” (p. 241). O’Bryant and Corder-Bolz also found that girls reported higher preferences for “male jobs” after watching reversed-role-commercials. Thus, the authors suggested media content that portrayed both genders in more diverse ways might lead to more varied occupational aspirations. Similarly, Pingree (1978) found that children who saw television commercials with women portrayed in nontraditional ways

tended to have less traditional attitudes about women. This held true more strongly for girls than for boys. In addition, children's attitudes were less stereotypical if the children were given instructions before they were shown the commercials, such as if they were told the people they saw on TV were acting. Pingree (1978) therefore suggested future research on "nontraditional images of women and men on television" (p. 276).

Researchers have found evidence of a relationship between television viewing and traditional attitudes about gender. A study by Davidson, Yasuna and Tower (1979) examined the effects of television cartoons on girls' perception of sex roles. They found that among five- and six-year-old girls, those who viewed a low-stereotype program reported a significantly lower score for sex-role stereotypes than those who watched high-stereotype and neutral programs. McGhee and Frueh (1980) conducted a research in which they focused on the relationship between children's television viewing and learning of sex-role stereotypes. The participants included both males and females in grades one, three, five, and seven. The researchers found a significant correlation between television viewing and the maintaining of sex-role stereotypes among children. Specifically, the more time the children spent watching TV, the more stereotypical their gender perceptions were. However, McGhee and Frueh (1980) also found that stereotypical attitudes toward males declined steadily with increasing age among heavy viewers, while they were strengthened among light viewers. Stereotypical attitudes toward females stayed steady among both light and heavy viewers. A similar pattern was found among adolescents. Morgan (1982) studied the relationship over time between the amount of television adolescents watched and how strongly they believed in sex-role stereotypes. The author found that television viewing was significantly associated with girls' stereotypical perceptions of sex roles but that while "sexism foreshadows greater viewing among boys" (p. 947), there was little evidence that

television viewing affected boys' attitudes toward sex roles. Nonetheless, the study showed that "overall, students who watch more television tend to be more sexist" (p. 951). Some of the studies cited above are relatively old, yet they were among the preliminary studies on audiences' perceptions of the portrayal of women in media, and the research served as a guide to some subsequent studies (i.e., Behm-Morawitz & Mastro, 2009; Nathanson, Wilson, McGee, & Sebastian, 2002). Thus they are included here to offer a look into what has been built in the field over time. Also, since those studies were done with different groups of people (i.e., children, adolescents), they could help build the significance of this study in terms of demographics.

Scholars have also examined how gender-stereotyped television commercials affect women's self-perception. Fifty-two college women participated in a study by Jennings-Walstedt, Geis, and Brown (1980), in which the women were shown either commercials in which women were depicted in a stereotypical way or an identical scenario with the roles "portrayed by a person of the opposite sex" (p. 203). The results showed that the group that viewed the reversed-role commercial (such as a husband serving dinner for his wife) reported higher scores on tests of independence of judgment and self-confidence. The authors thus concluded that television commercials presenting women as independent, confident, dominant, and active have positive effects on women's self-perception. Davies, et al. (2002) found that women who viewed gender-stereotyped television commercials tended to underperform on a math test or even avoid quantitative work. The researchers concluded that "experiencing stereotype threat repeatedly in a given domain may eventually lead from action to chronic adaption strategies" (p. 1627).

In sum, some researchers working in this area believe that 1) people do learn stereotypes from television; 2) television content with women depicted in traditional sex roles appears to strengthen stereotypical attitudes; 3) people tend to have less traditional attitudes about women if

they are shown women characters in nontraditional roles; and 4) television and other media should make efforts to portray women in more diverse ways.

While TV is said to reinforce gender stereotypes, gender stereotypes are also found to influence people's real-life decisions (Lapan, Shaughnessy, & Boggs, 1996; Gorman, 2005; Bernstein & Russo, 2008; Dickson, 2010). For example, DiDonato & Strough (2013) found that gender stereotypes affected college students' career choice. Interestingly, DiDonato & Strough (2013) also found that students appeared to "hold gender stereotyped attitudes about the occupations that are appropriate for men, but not about the occupations that are appropriate for women" (p. 547). Thus, there is reason for scholars to keep examining women's changing images in the media and audience perceptions in terms of gender.

Recent examples show that women are being depicted in more nontraditional roles. For example, Xena from the television series *Xena: Warrior Princess* is a tough heroine who fights crimes; Katniss Everdeen from the film series *The Hunger Games* is a smart and physically strong girl who participates in a fight-to-the-death game voluntarily to save her sister; on television's *According to Jim*, Cheryl is more intelligent and physically attractive than her husband. This raises a question: If, according to research results, women being depicted in nontraditional sex-role decreases the likelihood that women will be perceived stereotypically, how would characters like these contribute to perceptions? Do they count as portraying women in a more diverse way?

While some nontraditional female characters are no longer limited to domestic activities or portrayed as crime victims, some researchers are not optimistic enough to say they serve as a breakthrough in women's image in the media. Douglas (2010) discussed characters like Xena in her book *Enlightened Sexism*. She observed that warrior women in TV shows who were verbally

and physically tough had both feminist and antifeminist attributes. They were, on the one hand, physically strong enough to use weapons, fight with criminals and save the innocent; on the other hand, they were sexually attractive and conformist. Meanwhile, the author argued that the power of those characters, which forced them to give up a normal life “of dating, relationships, domesticity” (p. 98), was actually imposed on them and thus indicated “they didn’t all want it or like it” (p. 98). Walsh, Fürsich, and Jefferson (2008) examined gender roles in sitcoms featuring mismatched couples. They found that even though the wives and husbands were portrayed in a seemingly nontraditional way (namely, the wives were more intelligent and physically attractive while the husbands appeared to be overweight and dumb), the shows often reasserted the husbands’ dominance by having the wives give in and agree with their husbands at the end of an episode. Also, while the husbands appeared to be socially incapable, they tended to be involved with outdoor and working activities more often than their wives, who were unhappy with their professional lives. Walsh, Fürsich, and Jefferson observed that “characters that deviate from traditional gender roles are portrayed as unhappy and pathetic” (2008, p.128). For instance, a female character who has a successful career is more likely to fail in romantic relationships. Most importantly, the authors argued that by having the wives make the jokes and the husband get laughed at, these shows appeared to “mollify patriarchy and trivialize everyday movements of feminist empowerment” (p. 131). Also, “as the male protagonists remain likable characters, sexism is reduced to only a momentary digression, easily laughed off, as opposed to part of a systematic repressive ideology” (p. 132).

Shows depicting women as strong and tough have remained popular with audiences. Like Douglas (2010), Lavin (2010) also argued that such shows offered audiences, especially women, the fantasy of power. Lavin (2010) claimed that, especially to women viewers, it was more of a

pleasure to see women be able to take revenge than to be victims. At the same time, Lavin wrote of her concern that this new stereotype of women “comes with the possibility imagining one’s own full and messy and excessive potential of aggression” (p. 122).

Compared to the quantitative studies of women’s portrayals in the media, fewer studies have been done on audience perceptions of female characters. Oppenheimer, Goodman, et al. (2003) examined audience perceptions of strong female characters on television. They had the participants rate the characters on variables like attractiveness, sexuality, and humor using a seven-point scale and found that strong female characters were considered neither attractive nor unattractive. One of their hypotheses, that strong female characters would be more likable among females than males, was supported, although the statistics were not always significant. However, the authors also wrote that the female participants “would seem to be unlikely to emulate the behavior of the characters” (p. 170). This result was not further explained by the authors, but an alternative explanation could be that the female participants believed some challenges were not worth taking to be as strong as the characters. Greenwood’s research (2007) on college women’s perception of female action heroes showed that compared to perceived similarity, idealization (wishful identification) was more strongly associated with aggressive tendencies among participants. Put simply, college-age women who wished they were more like the action characters also tended to reported greater aggressive tendencies. Taylor and Setters (2011) noted that both the attractiveness and the aggressiveness of an aggressive female protagonist affected college students’ expectations for women. They found that participants tended to hold more stereotypically feminine and stereotypically masculine expectations for women after being shown video clips featuring a woman who was aggressive and stereotypically attractive. However, one result of the Taylor and Setters (2011) study was that female participants were

more likely to report stereotypical expectations than male participants, which was different from the findings of both Pingree (1978)—who found girls were less sexist—and Morgan (1982)—who found that sexism superseded content in influencing boys’ viewing. This could be due in part to differences in the type of content participants were shown. Pingree (1978) and Morgan (1982) were examining the influence of less-stereotypical images of women, while Taylor and Setters (2011) showed women with stereotypically feminine and masculine traits. The findings of Taylor and Setters (2011) are consistent with those of Calvert, Kondla, et al. (2001), who argued that both men and women were more likely to like the female hero Xena from *Xena: Warrior Princess* when they perceived her as physically attractive. Also, women tended to see Xena as a role model when they were fond of both of her masculine and feminine characteristics. Furthermore, Xena was perceived as using her understanding, compassion, and other feminine qualities rather than her physical power to solve conflicts. The authors wrote: “the female hero only fights as a last resort, when all other methods have failed” (Calvert, Kondla, et al., 2001, p. 50). They also argued that, based on the results, the formula of portraying a female hero as having both stereotypically masculine and stereotypically feminine qualities may be the most attractive depiction for the audience.

One thing that needs to be addressed is that most of the studies cited are U.S.-based instead of China-based. The reasons are: First, few China-based studies on audience perceptions of the portrayals of women can be found; second, though most of studies and the feminist media theory are U.S.-based, they might help examine a global pattern that this thesis intends to explore. To summarize this research, the findings suggest 1) media contribute to reinforcing gender stereotypes; 2) watching stereotypical images of females appears to be associated with holding stereotypical attitudes towards women; 3) nonstereotypical portrayals of women seemed



to decrease stereotypical perceptions; and 4) audiences expect a female hero to be both masculine and feminine. In addition, researchers have expressed concern that smart, tough, sexually attractive, and seemingly nontraditional female characters in action movies and comedies have not served to break the stereotypes for women but, on the contrary, have emphasized them (Douglas, 2010; Lavin, 2010, Walsh, Fürsich, & Jefferson, 2008). These studies offered an overview of what has been done (i.e., women's portrayals in certain TV shows, effects on children/adolescents' perceptions of women) and what needs to be explored further (i.e., audience perceptions of masculine/aggressive female characters) in this field. They also helped foresee what could be expected in this study (i.e., audiences might prefer female characters with both feminine and masculine features) as well as offering some possible explanations for the findings of this study. Given there have been relatively few studies of people's perceptions of aggressive female characters, which, according to previous research, have the potential to change people's attitudes and behaviors, this thesis may serve to provide a preliminary look into this area. The research questions guiding this thesis are listed below:

RQ1: How do these adult Chinese students perceive aggressive female characters in Asian comedies?

RQ2: What do they think is the relationship between these portrayals and reality?

### CHAPTER 3 METHOD

The objective of this research was to examine people's perceptions of strong Asian female characters. Focus groups were conducted in order to reveal people's thought processes and interpersonal communication as they watched these TV shows (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013). While it would not be suitable to generalize the results of this thesis to larger populations, this study provides preliminary information for further studies (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013).

The author was the moderator of the focus groups. A purposive sample of Chinese people living in Ames, Iowa, was invited to a conference room at Iowa State University to watch a clip of an episode from a Chinese television comedy containing at least one aggressive female character. The moderator was with the participants during the whole procedure. After that, the participants were asked a set of questions that were prepared before this discussion. However, instead of simply asking questions and receiving responses, the moderator encouraged the participants to say whatever was related to the topic in order to reveal themes that might not have been expected before the research.

Both males and females from China between 18 and 35 years old were chosen for the groups for the following reasons: First of all, compared with younger people, this group of people may be more capable of expressing their ideas clearly because of their education and social experiences. Besides, while younger people may simply perceive TV comedies as "something funny," people with a higher education level and more social experiences may be able to evaluate social phenomena in media content. For instance, information about whether women are treated equally in the workplace is more reliable if it is provided by a person with an occupation. Admittedly, there are people under 18 who also have jobs. But since they are in the minority, this group of people was not considered for this research. Second, while young people

are more willing to accept innovations, elders may tend to criticize new things simply because they do not seem to fit tradition. For example, it was reported that one of the chosen TV comedies was criticized severely by some middle-aged and elderly Chinese people who did not approve of the way it mixed the contemporary age with ancient times (Zhao, 2006). People between 18 and 35 were believed to be more capable and willing to provide and discuss their ideas.

Since this research could not provide a numerically representative sample of the larger population, snowball sampling was used as the sampling method. According to Wimmer and Dominick (2013), at least three focus groups should be conducted “to help eliminate part of the problem of selecting a representative group” (p.135). Four focus groups were held for this study, each containing eight participants. To encourage participants to talk openly, each group was composed of only females or only males.

The author first recruited some respondents who met the criteria and then asked for the names of others who also fit the criteria and might be willing to participate. Then the referrals were contacted by email, phone, and social media to determine whether they were suitable for the study (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013, p 94-95). Considering that one separate group was needed for pretesting the questions, this process was finished when 32 participants (16 females and 16 males) in total were selected. To attract participants and thank them for participating, each participant received \$5, and snacks were served during discussions.

One characteristic of effective qualitative research is that it is reflexive, meaning a research design might be modified early in the process if results indicate this is necessary (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013; Jensen, 2013;). For this reason, one of the four focus groups was randomly chosen for the pretesting to ensure the procedure and questions would be successful.

The pretesting was conducted in the same context as the later focus groups. This group of people was invited to a conference room in Hamilton Hall at Iowa State University, where they watched a clip of one episode from a Chinese TV comedy. After that, questions were asked and discussion began. (A list of guiding questions is included in Appendix A.) The discussions were audiotaped, and the moderator took notes. Of the 32 people recruited, 28 showed up for their assigned focus groups and contributed to the discussions. The pre-test group, which consisted of six female participants, was conducted on October 10, 2014, in Room 004C at Hamilton Hall at Iowa State University; the second group, of seven males, was held October 13, 2014, in the same room; the third group, consisting of eight females, was conducted on October 16, 2014; and the last one, consisting of seven males, was held October 17, 2014. All of the groups were conducted at 7 p.m. After assessing the data from the pretest, the researcher made some adjustments to the procedure and revised the guiding questions to facilitate better discussion.

From the pretest, the author learned that using only one video clip from one TV series limited the scope of the discussion, so a presentation was added to subsequent focus groups in which two more similar characters were introduced to the participants (The PowerPoint is provided in Appendix B). In the presentation, the moderator showed pictures of the movie *My Sassy Girl*; the lead female character, Yifei Hu, from *i Apartment*; and another character, Furong Guo, from *WuLinWaiZhuai*. She encouraged participants who were familiar with these characters to introduce them to others who had not seen the movie or the TV series. For example, in each group, the moderator asked one of the participants who claimed to have seen the movie *My Sassy Girl* to introduce the leading female character. She/he then briefly described the plot and the character; the same procedure was followed for the TV series. This gave participants the opportunity to describe these characters in their own words. Another change made after the pre-

test was that the moderator included a female who was then a graduate student enrolled in Iowa State University, who was knowledgeable about Chinese historical fiction, occasionally mentioned by the participants in the pre-test. She explained the general storyline of a fiction, if mentioned, to the moderator and some participants who did not know about the fiction; she also helped check the iPhone at times to make sure the recording was going. All of the discussions were recorded into audio with an iPhone 5, then transcribed using the software ExpressScribe. It needs to be mentioned that the moderator was planning to take video of the groups, not just audio. However, several participants reported that videotaping made them feel insecure and uncomfortable. In addition, considering that the moderator was able distinguish the participants by their voices, she decided to make audio recordings only. This decision respected the feelings of the participants and encouraged open discussion, consistent with the objectives of qualitative research (Morgan, 1997; Wimmer & Dominick, 2013;). *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* and online sources (listed in references) were used for translations.

After the presentation, a video clip of approximately one and a half minutes was shown to the groups. This clip was chosen from episode 22 of the TV series *WuLinWaiZhuai*. In this clip, the boy, Xiucai Lv, had a crush on the girl, Furong Guo, and was about to confess this to her. However, noticing that Furong may have feelings for another boy, he then confessed in an angry instead of a romantic way. He yelled at Furong: "Guo Furong, come here!" but then said in a weak but unquestionable tone: "Will you marry me? Yes or no!" Being talked to in this way, Furong grabbed his arm, twisted it behind his back and pushed him against the table, saying: "Do you dare to talk to me like that again?" After the group watched the video, the moderator briefly talked about the scope of the topic. The discussion began after this introduction. All participants were encouraged to ask questions, answer questions and talk with other participants.

As mentioned above, the responses were collected by audiotapes and handwritten notes. Then the related (or valuable) information in videos was transcribed into text, and the notes were typed. Following the instructions provided by Wimmer and Dominick (2013), the responses were arranged in chronological order, according to the time the discussion was conducted. The data then were arranged into a preliminary category system. For instance, one type of comment was categorized as “dislike the character” while another type of comment was categorized as “find the character funny.” Later, the categories were reanalyzed, and similar categories were combined, allowing a set of themes to emerge. To enhance the validity of the findings, the author used the method of member checks, also called member/informant feedback. At the end of every discussion, the participants were asked to read the moderator’s notes to see if “the moderator had accurately described what they said” (Wimmer & Dominick, 2013, p. 137). The audio recordings and notes were transcribed and typed soon after each discussion was finished.

For research question 1, adjectives found in the transcripts were paid the most attention in order to examine how the participants would describe the characters. Adjectives that are listed in the findings of the RQ1 are words that were mentioned for at least three times by different participants. For research question 2, the transcripts were firstly divided into “the characters are reflective of the reality” and “the characters are not reflective of the reality.” Reasons behind the thought were later approached and representative comments (repeated or supported by at least other two participants) are presented in the findings.

## CHAPTER 4 FINDINGS

The findings can be summarized generally in the following way: First, the target female characters were thought to be aggressive and willful, yet boy-like, straightforward and independent. Second, the audience believed the actresses' being pretty was very important for the characters to be liked, or at least not to be hated. Third, there was disagreement about whether these portrayals reflected the reality of women's social status in China. Some participants claimed that the fact that this kind of character appeared in the media showed women could be aggressive, while others stated the opposite—that while these female characters are aggressive in the media, women in reality are actually a vulnerable group and thus the characters served as fantasies for women.

RQ1: How do adult Chinese students perceive aggressive female characters in Asian comedies?

Participants' comments could be divided into two general categories: the way they described the female characters and the assumptions they made about the characters, even when there was little evidence in the clips for those assumptions. In this research, description is defined as how the audience described the target character as seen in the video clip, and each description can be matched to certain behavior appeared in the clip. Idealization is defined as assumptions the participants made about the character was with few examples could be given. The concept of idealization was firstly inspired by Greenwood (2007), who defined idealization as “wishful identification” and examined the relationship between idealization and the participants' perception of female action heroes. An example of idealization is a response such that “I wish I could be more like her”. Greenwood (2007) found that the idealization (how much

one wishes to behave/be like the character) is significantly associated with the respondents' enjoyment watching the programs of female action heroes and "affective and behavioral aggression" (p.730). However, idealization is defined differently in this research. Instead of "wishful identification", it is defined as "wishful personality" which means the characters' pleasant personalities that were expected by the participants yet not supported by the video clip shown in this research. If one participant was not able to provide a plot of his/her description, the description would then be categorized as idealization as well.

Words that were often used in describing the characters were: aggressive, willful, tough, reckless, abrupt, pretty, boy-like and weak-inside. Words that were often used to describe no-plot-supportive personalities were: straightforward, broad-minded, tolerant, independent, sincere, honest and casual.

## I. Descriptions

"NvHanZi," a Chinese saying that means "a male soul in a female body," or a "tomboy" in American English, was mentioned several times by the participants as they described the characters.

**Male, Focus Group 2:** "I remember, I'm not sure, I remember the guy liked... he liked... he chased the girl, but the girl was very aggressive, she bit him a lot. But... the girl has got a hot temper, but she's actually very kind-hearted. She definitely has a sense of justice, kinda of like "NvHanZi" (a male soul in a female body).

**Female, Focus Group 1:** "Well, she's aggressive, especially to her boyfriend and she one of those... the so-called NvHanZi (a female soul in a male body). And then, she's... she's also pretty unreasonable and violent."



**Male, Focus Group 4:** “I think the selling point of this movie is that, you know, Korean girls are considered to be gentle and kind and meek, but this one is totally different. She is very aggressive, willful, and... she has no problem at all beating...slapping her boyfriend in his face on the street in front of people, but the guy just loves her, he stills loves her no matter what.”

One from Group 3 defined “NvHanZi” as “*being capable of doing things and probably sloppy.*” Some agree that the word is more often used by girls themselves in a sarcastic way in telling people that “*they’ve been single for so long that they are now capable of fixing their computers, they can now live independently just like guys.*”

Some others, even though they did not use the word, described them as “boy-like” in a more specific way. One girl defined the characters’ personalities as “*straightforward, just like a guy.*” When asked what “boy-like” personalities should be like, she said: “*they (boys) don’t hold grudges, they are broad-minded, and tolerant. Girls can be fussy, but guys don’t care.*” Another male from Group 1 expressed similar thoughts. He believed that these characters would be more popular among boys than with girls “*’cause their personalities are more like guys’, not girls’.*” Answering the question of “what aspects of their personalities make you think they are more like guys,” he said: “*like being casual, she’s like one of those who would go play basketball with you... they don’t seem like those who like knitting or shopping or things like that.*” Another participant believes girls like that are easier to deal with since “*they are reckless and abrupt, like guys.*”

**Male, Focus Group 4:** “If I had a girlfriend, if I did something wrong, she won’t just tell me, right? She wants you to guess. And later you notice she’s being weird today and ask her what have I done wrong, she will be like, ‘You are fine, you are totally fine.’

Something's wrong? Nothing's wrong!'... Well I think, for example, Furong Guo, if I apologize after I realize what I have done wrong, like I'm 5 minutes late for our date, I'm sorry, go ahead and give me a punch, and then everything's fine, right? I think that's a good deal for guys."

It is not hard to see that in their views, being straightforward, broad-minded, independent and unfussy are characteristics of men, not women. A woman with the qualities mentioned above is then thought to be "boy-like." Few of them commented that women should not be like those in the discussed comedies, but the characters' personalities and especially their behaviors appeared to conflict with participants' expectations for women. The responses suggested that most of the participants shared similar expectations for men and women, and the aggressive female characters did not appear to meet their expectations in terms of gender. A line between female and male was drawn by the participants. They labeled those women whose personalities did not fit with their expectations, either in a good or bad way, by using the phrase "boy-like" or "NvHanZi," which mirrors gender stereotypes; Girls are "fussy," while boys are "unfussy"; girls hold grudges yet boys do not. Some participants said the term "NvHanZi" was used as self-sarcasm by women who think they have been single for so long that they have to take care of things that are supposed to be a man's job. In fact, it can be seen that this line works both ways. The term "NvHanZi" gives males credit for being capable of things, but this creates a form of pressure as well; a male should be capable, independent, tough, and unfussy—the opposite of a woman—in order to be considered a "real" man.

While the majority of participants believed or did not disagree with the thought that the characters were "boy-like," two males offered different thoughts. One of them said it was quite rude to use "NvHanZi" in describing girls: *"you are actually denying a girl's feminine*

*characteristics, and that's just impolite.*" The other one, who disagreed that "sassy girls" are straightforward, said: *"I think however aggressive a girl is, she will react the same way (in romantic relationships). I mean, they won't be straightforward as you think, they will make you guess what they are thinking."* Thus, to them, being aggressive did not necessarily mean a woman would be straightforward with her thoughts. For another participant, being aggressive did not mean a woman would be mentally independent, either.

**Male, Focus Group 2:** "She seems tough, but probably not that tough deep inside... I think, I think a female needs someone to depend on. Well, mentally, I mean, probably not physically or economically, you know, females are pretty independent these days, they make money, but she mentally needs a man to protect her, making her feel secure."

This participant later recalled an episode in which Furong Guo had become more gentle toward Xiucan Lv (the boy that had a crush on Guo):

*"You'll see in the following episodes. Xiucan somehow got hurt, she (Furong Guo) is very concerned, she yielded. So I think she's actually pretty soft inside. And that's sort of female characteristics."* Using the plot as evidence, this participant believed that however strong or aggressive a female might be, she would eventually yield or need a man to depend on.

## II. Idealizations

It was interesting that even though few comedy plots regarding female characters' capability and independence were mentioned during the discussions, most participants made the assumption that a female's aggressiveness came with being capable and straightforward. Except for the participant above, who believed that women in romantic relationships would always play mysterious, nobody doubted these characters were straightforward or sincere. Respectively, girls

who are not aggressive, which somewhat fit in the traditional gender roles are yet straightforward.

**Female, Focus Group 3:** “Cause this kind of person has got characteristics, she’s straightforward, she dares to love or hate.”

**Female, Focus Group 1:** “She seems rude in the show, but actually being rude means being straightforward, and she’s sincere and honest.”

Most participants preferred the characters keep their aggressive behaviors within a private context, namely, settings between their boyfriends and themselves. It was also found that most of the participants believed the characters were only being aggressive to their boyfriends and thought it would be acceptable to be friends with such women as long as they kept their aggressive behaviors private. Some participants even recalled their own experiences. One female participant told a story about one of her friends throwing coffee at her boyfriend in public.

**Female, Focus Group 3:** “I have a friend, and she’s just violent to her boyfriend. I remember once we were having dinner together with friends, I remember her boyfriend said something that she very much disliked; she then threw her coffee on him. Yes, in public... We were all surprised. But the friend is very nice to all of us. We also thought that was between them, so it didn’t affect our friendship at all. I mean, I don’t dislike those aggressive girls cause that (being aggressive) is only to their boyfriends.”

She then used the quotation, “*the punishment is skillfully given by one and gladly accepted by the other*” to describe this type of romantic relationship. This quotation comes from a story in a Chinese historical novel, *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*. In the story, a warlord from the country of Wei, Cao Cao was about to attack the country of Wu. As Wu’s military advisors, Gai Huang and Yu Zhou decided to trick Cao Cao into believing Huang wanted to

surrender. To make it look real, Zhou punished Huang harshly after Huang sent Cao a letter of surrender. They successfully tricked Cao. When Huang was approaching Cao with his army, Cao was not prepared to fight and was then attacked by Huang and Zhou. This war ended with Cao being defeated and Huang and Zhou successfully protecting their country. Agreeing with another participant ---- *“I think it’s more like they complete each other. You see, not both of them has a hot temper, the reason why they can be together is that even one is violent, the other is mild”*, this participant used the same quotation while nodding. They believe that what happens in the relationship stays in the relationship, thus they have no problem having them as friends. Some mentioned that they would love to have friends like them for that *“they are those who create fun, happy atmosphere at parties.”*

One participant said she would love to have a friend like that *“as long as she is not way too aggressive, or over the line or way too unreasonable.”*

This theme was repeated in other comments by participants who found aggressive behavior by women tolerable as long as certain conditions were met. For one participant, this meant he wanted his “aggressive friend” at least to be well-educated.

**Male, Focus Group 4:** “If the girl is well-educated, that I can accept. But if she’s not, if she’s just aggressive in an unreasonable way, then she’s just being vulgar, guys won’t like that.”

Two other participants agreed their degree of tolerance of aggressive female characters was closely related to how pretty the women were. Moreover, participants tended to emphasize the characters’ “other” characteristics, even not fact- or plot- supported, if they claimed to like her. Being aggressive makes a female character different, but it is the other aspects of her

personality that make her likeable. It may be more accurate to say the participants like the stereotypical ones rather than those presented on the comedies.

A few male participants said it would be all right to have a girlfriend like the characters since their aggressive behaviors, they believed, were exaggerated and therefore not true. A male from Group 2 had a similar thought:

**Male, Focus Group 2:** “It’s OK to be friends with her, but like what we just said, she gotta be careful with how aggressive she can be. Like in the video, she grabbed that guy’s arm and pushed him against the table, that’s not possible (to accept).”

Answering a question about whether the characters’ appearances matter, most of the participants laughed out loud and said: “Of course.” They laughed even louder trying to picture an unattractive lady playing an aggressive character. For most of them, aggressive female characters should at least be pretty, or else they would be unacceptable. A woman could not be perceived as ugly and aggressive at the same time, according to these participants, because it would simply leave no reason for them to watch.

Comedy producers are likely aware of such attitudes. Taking a look at the comedies that were part of this study, all of the actresses playing the aggressive characters meet the modern beauty standards. While the participants may have expressed their preference for beauty in a joking way, it was essential for them. One participant explained that watching comedies was supposed to be relaxing, and that seeing an ugly actress playing an aggressive character would be neither relaxing nor comfortable. One pretty character may be hated, the participants said, if she is aggressive and evil-hearted, but a character perceived as ugly may not even be seen at all.

RQ2: What do they think is the relationship between these portrayals and reality?

The responses were mixed on this issue. While about five participants stated clearly that they thought these comedies were based on reality, others doubted they were an accurate reflection. To put more specifically, some participants believed that the gender equality in Asia were yet to be achieved and women were among the vulnerable. Thus women being aggressive to men seemed to be laughable for it did not match the reality. On the contrary, a man being aggressive to a woman may not be as funny as the former since it happens in reality, most of the time, unpleasantly and even violently. Therefore pilots like that were not being made into comedies as laughing matters and it may even make the audience feel uncomfortable to watch.

**Male, Focus Group 2:** “I think it’s not just being funny, it somewhat reflects that there are this kind of people in reality, not that exaggerated though. It represents girls, some girls.”

Another one said that those aggressive behaviors “*happen a lot in real life, yet not fun.*” He was not the only one with this perspective. “*I think, in reality, if a girl is aggressive, it’s more likely that things are going to be unpleasant than funny,*” said one participant from Group 1. Some others thought these characters reflected reality in an ironic way, meaning while women were portrayed to be aggressive and sassy in comedies, they are actually a vulnerable group.

**Female, Focus Group 3:** “I think making movies is like making dreams, and there are two types of dreams. The first one is something you want to do in real life but you don’t have the chance to, another one is supposed to be resonatory. And the movie (My Sassy Girl) is definitely not the second one. Instead it proves that women are vulnerable.”

The fact that these characters only seem to exist in comedies is the major reason why these participants believed the portrayals to be a form of irony. One from Group 1 said: “*It’s a joke, this kind of things has always been jokes. The woman is too aggressive, the husband is too*

*weak, it's a joke. See, these stories are made into comedies to make people laugh.*" This participant believed these comedies to be successful and funny specifically because they depart from the reality; if it is not true, then it can be a source of laughter. The basis for the joke is that the plots are fantastical. He later developed this idea by saying: *"No one would laugh at a guy being aggressive, sassy, independent cause that's how they are, there's nothing to laugh about."* Others with a similar perspective used their perceptions of women's status in South Korea and Asia as evidence for this idea.

**Male, Focus Group 4:** "My Sassy Girl is a Korean movie. Compared to China, Korean females have lower social status, tons of housewives, right? It is very much understandable that this movie came from South Korea. In China, well it may not be that popular. In America? Americans won't even understand this movie. Why are you beating me? Should I call the police or ... they may not understand."

**Male, Focus Group 4:** "In Asia, (girls) being aggressive can be made into a movie, it's because of the contrast (to reality)."

**Female, Focus Group 1:** "There may be similar movies in western countries, I don't know, but it doesn't seem like there's a bunch of this kind of characters, it actually means feminism in the west is more developed."

The logic here is that context matters; the shows' contrast with reality serves as the humorous foundation for comedies with aggressive women. In this perspective, a society with women who remain socially vulnerable provides these comedies the essential conditions from which they are created. Building on this idea, one participant added that even in comedies, these women are restricted to *"so-called traditions"* regardless of how aggressive they appear to be.



**Female, Focus Group 3:** “I think being aggressive, or sassy or whatever remains on the surface...it’s not rebellion... The Japanese drama I just saw is about a housewife’s life. She doesn’t have a job, her husband works hard and gradually the passion’s gone. She then goes out and starts dating different guys, but she can handle both her marriage and her affairs. One of her most famous remarks is ‘only if I enjoy people’s love can I come back home and treat my husband gently’, and that’s called rebellion, (simply) being aggressive is not.”

Similarly, another participant said aggressive female characters who function as a source of comic relief “*are not new.*”

**Male, Focus Group 4:** “See, we have a ancient story called ‘HeDongShiHou’(A lion is roaring by the east of the river. It’s originally from a poem written by the poet, Shi Su in the 11<sup>th</sup> century. The poet made fun of his friend being afraid of his wife, whose yelling, he described in the poem, was like a lion’s roaring. This story was also made into TV series and movies.), it was a joke too, it was something people talk about for fun. We actually have had this kind of culture for so many years.”

The two participants above believe significant process has not been made in pursuing gender equality in Asia, based on the ideas that aggressive female characters can still fit in with traditional values and that they are not even new to the Asian culture. Yet they did not comment on whether or how further steps of pursuing gender equality should be taken.

It needs to be mentioned that the demographic of the focus groups may have influenced the findings. It was reported by Hester (2005) that compared to British college students, Chinese college students tended to be more tolerant of domestic violence. Sun, Wu, et al. (2011) examined the American and Chinese college students’ perception of police attitudes towards

domestic violence. They found that Chinese college students were more likely to favor a traditional response, which they defined as “non-supportive attitudes towards police intervention and an endorsement of passive response to domestic violence” (p. 83). Therefore, we have reason to believe that the aggressive female characters appear to be more acceptable to these focus groups than other demographic groups, such as American and British students. In fact, several participants mentioned that those aggressive behaviors were acceptable as long they were kept within the dating relationships.

## CHAPTER 5 DISCUSSION

The purpose of this study was to examine how audiences perceived aggressive female characters in Chinese comedies. It was found that participants in general described the aggressive female characters as aggressive, boy-like, and tough, and believed them to be straightforward, independent, easygoing and sincere. Most participants found the characters to be pretty and claimed their physical attractiveness to be important for the characters to be liked.

While some participants believed these characters reflected reality since they knew women who acted like this, others thought that female characters being aggressive was a joke and did not reflect the actual relationships between females and males in Chinese society. Some of the participants were concerned that girls might imitate those aggressive behaviors, which did not appear to be likable qualities from their perspective. However, this did not seem to be the overall consensus. Some other participants thought that those behaviors could easily be interpreted as laughing matters by the audience, meaning they believed audience usually had a fair sense of what was acceptable and what was not in terms of social interactions in reality.

While researchers tend to criticize media for featuring women—even those with successful careers and who are physically and verbally aggressive—in stereotypical ways, participants in this research were more likely to associate the aggressive characters with non-stereotypical descriptions of women (i.e., unfussy, independent, straightforward). According to some previous studies, in addition to being depicted as housewives, moms, crime victims and product users, women with successful careers were often portrayed as unhappy for they always failed in romantic relationships. This depiction was believed to reinforce the stereotype that females are often associated with romance. Moreover, female heroes in television shows and movie series such as *Xena: Warrior Princess*, *Hunger Games*, some of whom can fight like men

and are seen as physically and verbally aggressive, are also claimed to be conformist and wear outfits that emphasize their sexuality (Douglas, 2010). Meanwhile, women with non-attractive husbands in TV comedies, though intelligent and beautiful, often yield to their husbands in making important decisions, giving the males the dominance in families. This did not match the perspectives of participants in this study. Most of the participants saw these aggressive characters as straightforward, easygoing, and independent. However, considering that the participants also tended to associate aggressiveness with men, their idealizations in fact reflected gender stereotypes and demonstrate the enduring power of these beliefs..

This research echoes that of Taylor and Setters (2011) as well as Calvert, Kondla, et al. (2001), who found that participants tended to hold stereotypically feminine and stereotypically masculine expectations for women. It seemed that while participants observed the aggressiveness shown in the clip of video, the gender stereotypes they hold also played a major role in how they made meaning from the characters. Most of them claimed the female characters to be straightforward in those TV shows and movies, especially in romantic relationships, not to hold grudge (unlike other women, in their opinion) and to remain independent, even though few of those characteristics were actually reflected in the clip. One alternative explanation is that people tend to relate attractiveness to desirable personalities (Dion, Berscheid, et al., 1972). Another possible explanation is that since the participants were likely to associate aggressiveness with males, they may try to make meaning of the characters' personalities based on the expectations they hold for males.

Based on earlier studies (i.e., Davies, et al., 2002), the media's failure to represent women's diverse roles in real life reinforces audience members' stereotypical expectations of women. Researchers (Siu & Au, 1997; Kang & Xu, 2009) have observed that media tended to

portray females as sexually attractive, and, indeed, most of the participants seemed to enjoy the fact that these actresses met conventional standards of beauty. In fact, some participants mentioned, only part-jokingly, that a girl's aggressive behaviors could not be forgiven if she was not attractive. For most of these participants, being pretty seemed to serve as an essential condition for being aggressive. Again, the results echo the findings of Taylor & Setters (2011) and Calvert, Kondla, et al. (2001) that participants tended to prefer the female characters, if aggressive, to be feminine at the same time.

Thus, it is reasonable to conclude that the fact that the aggressive female characters included in these comedies are also attractive contributes to an attitude among audiences that sets attractiveness as a prerequisite for accepting a female's aggressiveness. Yet, it is also worth mentioning this does not necessarily mean audiences do not enjoy seeing non-stereotypical female characters on TV; this study did not provide evidence that participants *disliked* the non-stereotypical characters, only that the characters were not accepted unconditionally. Because scholars have shown that non-stereotypical female characters have the potential to decrease stereotypical attitudes toward women, media are encouraged to do so from an ethical point of view.

Another important finding of this research is that most of participants did not necessarily find the portrayals to be reflective of reality. Scholars such as Douglas (2010) and Lavin (2010) have viewed aggressive female characters as offering a fantasy of empowerment that appeals to a female audience. Similarly, some participants in this research thought these characters, who appeared to be aggressive, fussy and unreasonable, provided women with a "dream" of an imagined ideal romantic relationship. No matter how aggressive these female characters were, their boyfriends would stay with them and try to fulfill their requests, offering an opportunity for female viewers to imagine themselves as unrestricted by male expectations. Nevertheless, even

though some female participants saw themselves as similar to the characters, few viewed the characters as role models. This finding is similar to that of Oppenheimer, Goodman, et al. (2003) that female participants did not seem likely “to emulate the behaviors” (p. 170) of nontraditional characters even if they found them to be likable. One explanation is that those aggressive behaviors did not match participants’ social expectations that women should be gentle and polite, or at least not aggressive. Therefore, they had no motivation to emulate the behaviors. Another possible explanation is that those aggressive behaviors mostly served as jokes instead of solutions to problems, and characters actually got into trouble for acting that way. For example, in *WuLinWaiZhuai* (“The Story of WuLin”), Guo, the aggressive female character, would be subdued by the male protagonist, lectured by the female one, or else she eventually realized that she should not have behaved the way she did. In this case, these behaviors were not encouraged, even within the shows.

In addition, similar to previous studies (i.e., Mazzela, Durkin, Cerini, & Buralli, 1992; Glascock, 2001), the participants in this study generally did not believe these characters marked a breakthrough in women’s portrayals in the media. On the contrary, they related this phenomenon to their perception that only if women remain vulnerable can their acting aggressively be considered funny—hence why the shows became popular. They compared women’s social status in Asia with that in Western countries, asserting that women had a lower social status in Asia and interpreting these aggressive female characters as further evidence of a lack of progress. This result is consistent with Furnham, Mak and Tanidjojo (2000), who concluded that gender stereotypes did not seem to be declining as quickly in Asia as they were in Western countries.

It was also reported by several participants that aggressive behaviors were personal matters and were acceptable as long they were kept within dating relationships. This finding was consistent Hester (2005) and Sun, Wu, et al (2011)'s who found Chinese students were more tolerant in domestic violence. Participants in this study may see those behaviors in the TV shows as playful, but similar events happen in reality (i.e., a girl threw coffee in her boyfriend's face in public) were also seen as personal and not appropriate for others to get involved.

Finally, most of the audience's perception seem to be consistent with the reported gender inequality (data provided in Introduction), meaning sassiness does not necessarily seemed as power by the audience; the perceived reality played an important role in how they make meaning of the characters. In conclusion, the formula of a depicting an aggressive female character with stereotypically feminine features (i.e., being pretty) could still attract the Chinese audience. However, for screenplay writers who intend to involve more varieties of female characters may need to be cautious with seeing aggressiveness as a breakthrough in female portrayals.

This study is limited by the fact that all of the participants were Chinese students studying at a large Midwestern university in the United States, including master's students, Ph.D. students, and post-doctoral students. Their perspective has likely been shaped by their decision to study in a Western country and may not reflect the perceptions of Chinese on the mainland. As was mentioned before, compared to American and British college students, Chinese students have more tolerance toward domestic violence. Thus the results should not be generalized to other demographic groups who find domestic violence less acceptable. Another limitation of this study was that about three of the participants, though encouraged to talk, felt uncomfortable talking in the focus group and did not contribute much to the discussions. They sometimes agreed with others' opinions but rarely offered different ones. Therefore, other possible

perceptions could be left out from the data. Future research might look into how other audiences, especially children and teenagers, perceive this type of female character.

Yet, in spite of its limitations, this research provides a preliminary look into how Chinese young adult viewers perceive aggressive female characters in Asian comedies. According to these results, it appears the physical attractiveness of an actress is still playing a critical role in making an aggressive female character popular or even acceptable among audience members. Viewers' perceptions of what they see in the media continue to be shaped by longstanding binary stereotypes related to gender. However, comedy writers should still be encouraged to include a wider range of varieties of female characters. Women acting aggressively, unreasonably, and inappropriately are still underrepresented. This study shows women can be funny—even if the way they are portrayed reinforces existing social expectations.



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## APPENDIX A: FOCUS GROUP DISCUSSION PROCEDURE

Before the focus group discussions, the moderator had a chat with the participants to make sure they were aware of who the moderator was, the purpose of this research, and the voluntary nature of their participation. They were informed that the whole process would be audiotaped in order to record data and were also told that their privacy was protected.

Here are some questions that guided the discussion:

1. Have you ever watched this comedy before?
2. If yes, how did you watch it? Online, on TV, or any other way?
3. Do you like it?
4. If yes, why do you like it? If not, what makes you dislike it?
5. Who is your favorite character in this episode, and why?
6. What do you think of the lead female character? (In order not to cause bias, the moderator will avoid using the word “aggressive”). Please explain why you like or why you don’t like this character.
7. What do you think of her behavior? Appropriate or not?
8. Do you think this character is funny? Please explain why you think she is or isn’t funny.
9. Do you think this character reflects reality? In other words, do you think what she does really happens in real life? If not, please explain why this kind of woman does not exist in reality while she exists in TV shows.
10. Do you have any friends, relatives or workmates who are similar to this character? If yes, how do you describe them? If not, would you mind having a friend, relative or workmate like that? Why or why not?

## APPENDIX B: PRESENTATION SLIDES FOR FOCUS GROUPS

## An Introduction of the Research

Group 4 (male)  
7:00 pm 10/17/2014  
Room 0004C  
Hamilton Hall



•What do you think?

Note: The number, gender and conducting time of a group in the first slide were changed accordingly.