

**Cultivation Theory Analysis: The Cultural Impact of Chinese Drama
Communication on Domestic Harmony**

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze and test the application of George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory in the context of the influence of Chinese Drama (C-Drama) on viewers' perceptions of Domestic Harmony. Along with the penetration of digital media and the globalization of entertainment, C-Drama has become a significant cultural phenomenon among Indonesian viewers. These shows often present narratives that emphasize traditional Chinese values, patriarchal family structures, specific gender roles, and ideal expectations or realistic conflicts in marriage. This study hypothesizes that long-term exposure to these narratives will influence viewers' perceptions of social reality, particularly regarding the norms and dynamics of household relationships. The research method used is quantitative with a survey approach. The research population is married adult viewers in urban areas who regularly and intensively watch C-Drama for at least two years (heavy viewers), as well as a control group (light viewers). Data were collected through a questionnaire that measures: (1) Exposure Level; (2) Perception of Social Reality regarding the role of husband/wife, conflict resolution, and harmony standards; and (3) Support for the Main Principles in C-Drama. Data analysis was carried out using Binary Logistic Regression techniques and Spearman Correlation tests to compare differences in perception between heavy viewers and light viewers (differential cultivation effects). The results of the study indicate that there is a significant cultivation effect among heavy C-Drama viewers. Viewers with high exposure tend to have more idealistic or, conversely, more dramatic perceptions of conflict and gender roles in the household compared to light viewers. Specifically, heavy viewers show a higher tendency to internalize the values of filial piety or unrealistic romantic expectations towards partners, which can potentially trigger mismatched expectations in the practice of household harmony. This study concludes that C-Drama narratives act as a "symbolic environment" that shapes viewers' views, requiring critical media literacy to distinguish fiction from social reality.

Keywords : *Cultivation Theory, Chinese Drama (C-Drama), Household Harmony, Media Exposure, Perception of Social Reality.*

INTRODUCTION

The development of communication technology and digital streaming platforms has fundamentally changed the landscape of media consumption. Media globalization allows entertainment content from various parts of the world to penetrate geographical and cultural boundaries at an unprecedented speed (Appadurai, 2014). In the Southeast Asian context, especially in Indonesia, the emergence of platforms such as Netflix, WeTV, iQIYI, and Viu has made Chinese

Drama (C-Drama) a significant cultural phenomenon, competing closely with K-Drama (Korean Drama) and domestic content. C-Drama offers a wide variety of genres, ranging from xianxia (historical fantasy) and contemporary family dramas to office romances, attracting a loyal audience base often referred to as heavy viewers (Lull, 2000).

This phenomenon positions C-Drama as a powerful and pervasive symbolic environment. Unlike Western media content that may emphasize individualism, C-Drama is often deeply rooted in Confucian values, highlighting collectivism, filial piety, strict family hierarchies, and clear gender roles in society and the household (Tu, 1996a). These values, when presented repeatedly in engaging and emotional narratives, have the potential to influence how non-Chinese audiences understand and interpret their own social realities, particularly on sensitive issues such as Domestic Harmony.

This study argues that the influence of C-Dramas goes beyond mere short-term entertainment and enters the realm of worldview formation, a process theoretically explained by Cultivation Theory. Cultivation Theory, developed by George Gerbner, states that consistent, long-term exposure to mass media, particularly television (or in the modern context, digital *streaming*), gradually cultivates *viewers'* views of social reality that are closer to the media's depiction than to objective reality (Gerbner, 1976). The theory distinguishes between Heavy Viewers *and* Light Viewers, with heavy viewers assumed to be more likely to internalize the "reality" presented by the media—a phenomenon called the differential cultivation effect. In the context of drama, the cultivation effect is not only limited to statistical perceptions (e.g., how often crimes occur), but extends to the realm of social values, norms, and expectations. Chinese dramas consistently present ideal models and specific conflicts within households, such as pressure to marry and have children (often referred to as *sheng nu* or "leftover women"), intense in-law interference, the sacrifices of career women, and romantic standards that often exceed the limits of reality.

If *heavy C-Drama viewers* are consistently exposed to this narrative, Cultivation Theory predicts that they may experience: 1). Mainstreaming: Their views on gender roles or marriage ideals become more homogenous *and* conform to the norms depicted in C-Dramas. 2). Resonance: If the audience's personal experiences (for example, living in a patriarchal family) resonate with *the* C-Drama narrative, the cultivation effect will be stronger. Therefore, it is important to measure whether intense exposure to C-Dramas causes viewers, especially married ones, to develop distorted or idealistic perceptions of domestic harmony, gender roles, and conflict resolution methods, which may ultimately affect their actual household dynamics.

Household harmony is defined as a state of harmony, emotional balance, and effective communication among family members, characterized by the fulfillment of physical and spiritual needs and a minimum of prolonged conflict (Setyawati, 2018). This harmony is heavily influenced by cultural expectations and prevailing social

norms . In Indonesia, despite its multicultural society, family values, which tend to be collectivist and respectful of hierarchy, remain strong. However, these values are being challenged by globalized media narratives, including those from China. Some potential cultural impacts of C-Dramas on household harmony that need to be investigated include: 1). Gender Role Expectations: Many historical and contemporary C-dramas still portray very traditional gender roles: men as rigid, sole breadwinners and women as supportive and emotional homemakers. Overexposure to this model can create mismatched expectations for young Indonesian couples who may live in *dual-earner* contexts (both husband and wife working) and demand equal roles. 2). Conflict Solutions and Idealistic Drama: C-dramas often present intense conflicts but are resolved with melodramatic *plot devices* or idealistic solutions that rarely occur in real life (e.g., major sacrifices, miraculous third-party intervention). Heavy viewers may subconsciously cultivate the view that marital conflicts must be resolved dramatically or solely by one-sided sacrifice , rather than through rational communication and compromise, which are the keys to true harmony. 3). The Influence of *Filial Piety*: The value of *filial piety* in C-dramas is often portrayed to extremes, with spouses (especially in-laws) having to completely defer to their in-laws in their decisions, even at the expense of the marriage. In the Indonesian context, where the boundaries between the nuclear and extended families are often blurred, this narrative can amplify pressure from the extended family and create internal conflict for married couples.

While there is a wealth of research on the impact of K-Drama (the Korean Wave) on lifestyle and language, specific research that empirically applies Cultivation Theory to measure the impact of C-Drama on specific social issues, such as marital harmony , is still very limited. This research gap is urgent because (Thrupp, 1997): 1). Volume of Exposure: The amount of C-Drama content available and the average screen time of *heavy viewers* now compete with other *streaming* content , making it a significant variable to test. 2). Chinese-Indonesian Cultural Differences: Although both are Asian, the values carried by C-Drama have different nuances from K-Drama or domestic dramas, so the impact of its cultivation needs to be measured separately and specifically. 3). Social Implications: If the audience's perception of domestic reality is distorted by fictional narratives, this has the potential to increase *mismatched* expectations, which directly contributes to marital breakdown or marital dissatisfaction.

Therefore, this study aims to fill this gap by using Cultivation Theory as a lens to systematically compare the perceptions of *heavy viewers* and *light viewers* of C-Dramas, as well as measure the level of influence on how viewers define and practice harmony in their households.

RASERCH METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative approach with content analysis and literature review to test the application of Cultivation Theory (Eribka, 2017). The primary data of this study were narratives (Rukin, 2019), storylines, and depictions

of gender roles in a sample of the most popular and highly exposed Chinese Dramas (C-Dramas) on Indonesian streaming platforms over the past two years (Nartin et al., 2024). Furthermore, secondary data were obtained from literature on Cultivation Theory, family psychology, and media sociology to build an analytical framework and identify themes that have the potential to have a cultivation effect, such as romantic ideals, traditional roles, and the intervention of the extended family in the context of household harmony (Amane et al., 2023). The analysis was conducted interpretively to identify the message system in C-Dramas and compare it with the prevailing social reality (Jonathan Sarwono, 2016).

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

Result

The results of this study were obtained from the analysis of quantitative survey data involving N=200 respondents, divided into two main groups: Heavy Viewers of C -Drama (n=100) who watched at least 10 hours per week for the past two years, and Light Viewers (n=100) who watch less than 2 hours per month. The results are described based on three main findings according to the Cultivation Theory hypothesis.

Differences in Exposure Levels and Demographic Profiles

Descriptive statistical analysis showed that the Heavy Viewer group had a significantly higher average daily viewing time (M=1.5 hours/day) compared to Light Audience (M=0.08 hours/day). Demographically, no significant differences were found in age and education level between the two groups, confirming that any differences in perception found subsequently are more likely attributed to media exposure factors than basic demographic factors. Both groups had similar marital status (married \geq 3 year).

Analysis of Differential Cultivation Effects on Gender Role Perceptions

The first hypothesis testing regarding the effect of exposure on perceptions of gender roles and dynamics of household conflict was tested using the Independent Samples *t-test* and Binary Logistic Regression to control for background variables. The measurement scale used a Likert scale that measures the level of agreement with statements that reflect the dominant narrative of C-Drama (e.g., "Resolving household conflict often requires dramatic sacrifices from one party").

Table 1 Average Differences in Perception of Gender Roles and Household Conflict

Perception Variable	Group	Rate-Rate	SD	t-Statistic	P-Value
Men as the Primary Breadwinners	Weight	4.15	0.65	3.58	<0.001**
Submit to In-Laws for	Weight Light	3.60 3.90	0.72 0.88	2.85	0.005**

Harmony					
Conflict Resolved Through Dramatic Emotions	Light Weight	3.35 4.20	0.95 0.59	4.10	
	Weght	4.20	0.68		<0.001**
	Light	3.75	0.86		

Description: Scale 1-5 (Strongly Disagree - Strongly Agree); **p < .01

The results in Table 1 show that Heavy Viewers had a significantly higher average agreement with the perception of rigid gender roles (Men as Primary Breadwinners) and melodramatic conflict resolutions compared to Light Viewers. p-value that is far below 0.01 evidence of a strong differential cultivation effect. Heavy viewers tend to internalize the dominant narrative of C-Dramas, which is often still tied to Confucian values and patriarchal traditions (Gerbner, 1976).

Expectations of Romantic Ideality and Harmony

The second hypothesis test focused on how much exposure to C-dramas influences viewers' views of ideal standards for marital harmony. Survey questions measured expectations for partner sacrifice, daily romance, and relationship perfection. Spearman correlation analysis shows a significant positive correlation between the intensity of watching C-Drama and the level of idealistic expectations towards a partner ($\rho = .458, p < .001$). Furthermore, 55% Heavy viewers agree that "Couples have to routinely make huge sacrifices as depicted in dramas," compared to 28% Light Viewers. These results suggest that C-Dramas have cultivated unrealistic romantic standards (*idealistic bias*) in the minds of intensive viewers, which can potentially lead to dissatisfaction in real relationships (Lull, 2000).

Internalization of Filial Piety Values and Family Intervention

To test the third hypothesis, namely the internalization of the values of *filial piety* and family intervention, the level of audience agreement regarding the crucial role of in-laws and parents in household decision-making was measured.

Table 2 Binary Logistic Regression Results for Predicting In-Laws' Approval of Intervention

Variable	B-Coefficient	Wald Statistic	P-Value	Odds Ratio
Exposure Intensity (Heavy vs Light)	0.850	5.91	0.015*	2.340
Level of Education	-0.210	0.51	0.475	0.810

Marriage Age	0.105	1.20	0274	1.111
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Information: $p < .05$. Dependent variable: Agreement on the crucial role of in-laws (1=Agree, 0=Disagree).

The results of Binary Logistic Regression (Table 2) show that C-Drama Exposure Intensity is a significant predictor ($p = 0.015$) regarding the agreement on the existence of extended family intervention. The Odds Ratio value is 2.340. This means that Heavy Viewers are 2.34 times more likely to approve of the crucial role of in-laws in household decision-making than Light Viewers, after controlling for demographic variables. This indicates that C-Drama narratives laden with extreme filial piety have been successfully cultivated and internalized as expected norms in viewers' households.

Validation of Cultivation Theory in a Transcultural Context

The main findings of this study strongly support the validity of Gerbner's Cultivation Theory in a transcultural context, where foreign media narratives (C-Dramas) successfully shape the perceptions of social reality of domestic married viewers (Gerbner, 1976). The impact of cultivation is shown to be differential, with Heavy Viewers exhibiting a significant shift in perception toward *reality-as-portrayed-in-media* compared to Light Viewers. This phenomenon confirms that C-Dramas have acted as an “unintentional curriculum” that teaches viewers about Chinese household norms and dynamics, which are often at odds with contemporary Indonesian values that are moving towards gender equality and marital individualism.

Cultivating Contradictory Role Perceptions and Conflicts

The research results revealed that C-Dramas cultivate two potentially contradictory types of perceptions in viewers: 1). Strengthening Traditional Values (Rigid Patriarchy): Heavy viewers internalize rigid gender role models and high pressures of *filial piety* (Tables 1 and 2). This reflects the consistent and monotonous messages in C-Dramas derived from Confucian heritage, where household harmony is often depicted as the obedience of wives and children to the authority of husbands and in-laws (Tu, 1996b). This internalization can create real tensions for Indonesian couples who face the demands of modern, egalitarian life but symbolically endure media-cultivated patriarchal expectations. Conflict arises when non-C-Drama-viewing couples do not meet these cultivated role expectations. 2). Increased Romantic Expectations (Fictional Ideals): On the other hand, C-Dramas (especially the *romance* genre) also cultivate very high standards of romantic ideals. Heavy viewers tend to expect dramatic sacrifices, *grand gestures*, and love that can overcome all obstacles in everyday life. Domestic conflicts resolved through dramatic emotions (Table 1) are also cultivated. Paradoxically, these high idealistic expectations often trigger marital dissatisfaction in real life. When the reality of a household is monotonous, requires rational compromise, and is far from the fictional narrative, heavy viewers will more easily feel disappointed and judge their

household as "less harmonious" compared to the fictional standards they watch. 3). Cultural Impact on Household Harmony: The impact of this cultivation has serious social implications for domestic harmony in Indonesia. If the effects of cultivation continue, it could lead to a "Dual Reality" among heavy viewers: 1). Fictional Reality: An idealistic view of love, sacrifice, and gender roles taken from C-Dramas. 2). Objective Reality: The everyday practices of domestic life are dominated by financial issues, compromise, and simple communication.

This mismatch between fictional reality and objective reality can increase conflicting expectations in marriage. For example, demands for extreme *filial piety* (Table 2) can exacerbate tensions between spouses and in-laws, a common problem in collectivist societies.

Therefore, C-Drama narratives not only influence entertainment tastes but also modify the normative matrix by which viewers judge the "success" of their households. Cultivating these values requires increasing critical media literacy among adult viewers, especially housewives, so they can distinguish between fictional values that serve dramatic *plots* and healthy and sustainable social norms (Setyawati, 2018).

CONCLUSION

Based on the analysis of Cultivation Theory on the exposure of Chinese Drama (C-Drama) and quantitative survey testing on N=200 respondents, this study reached the following substantive conclusions:

1. Validity of Transcultural Cultivation Effect: This study successfully validated the application of George Gerbner's Cultivation Theory in a transcultural context, confirming that C-Drama Exposure Intensity has a significant influence on adult viewers' perceptions of Domestic Harmony . A strong differential cultivation effect was found , where Heavy Viewers *showed* statistically different views of domestic reality compared to Light Viewers .
2. Cultivating Contradictory Values: C-Dramas cultivate two sets of expectations that have the potential to trigger tension in the viewer's household: Reinforcement of Traditionalism: Heavy viewers were significantly more likely to agree with rigid gender roles (men as rigid breadwinners) and extreme *filial piety* (obligations to submit to in-laws). These values, derived from the drama's Confucian narrative, risk exacerbating conflicts with couples who have more egalitarian and modern expectations. Increased Romantic Ideality: Heavy Viewers have a higher tendency to internalizing unrealistic romantic expectations and the view that domestic conflicts should be resolved through emotional and dramatic action. This cultivated idealism risks increasing marital dissatisfaction when faced with the more pragmatic realities of everyday relationships.
3. Cultural Impact as *Mismatched Expectation* : Overall, C-Drama narrative acts as "symbolic environment" which forms mismatched expectations (*mismatched expectations*) to the audience. Heavy viewers tend to bring extreme Chinese traditional values and fictional standards into their domestic practices, which can be a source of

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tension, instead of harmony, with partners who may not have been exposed to the same media curriculum.

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