

Cultural Imperialism

Communication Issues

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7th February 2003

Part 1

Television programmes: Moulmein High (local) VS Smallville (imported)

Moulmein High and Smallville both have a target audience that consist predominantly of teenagers. Both the programmes cover issues regarding friendship and love – two issues that teenagers often grapple with.

Moulmein High is a show about a group of secondary students and their constant struggle with teenage woes. The show tries to reflect the way society perceives today's teenagers to be. Singaporean teenagers are viewed as being very open-minded with a strong preference for Western culture instead of their traditional Asian culture. The characters in the show reflect that very well by trying to speak with a slight American lilt, using American colloquial and dressing (in clothing other than their school uniform) like a typical American teenager.

Smallville on the other hand, is an adaptation of the age-old classic Superman. Every episode shows how the main character, Clark Kent tries to find balance between leading a normal life, and using his special gift to save people in need. Surprisingly, Smallville is different as compared to typical American teenage programmes in its definition of beauty. Normally, the main actor would be blonde, blue eyed and a football captain of the school. Similarly, the main actress would be blonde, blue eyed and a head cheerleader in the school. However, in Smallville, both the main actor and actress have dark hair and eyes. Furthermore, the main actress is of mixed heritage.

The irony of these two programmes is that the local programme is trying to be more westernised whereas the Western programme is trying to break away from conformity.

However, the two programmes do share certain similarities. One of the episodes in Smallville showed how an overweight girl suffered under the insults of her peers. Similarly, an episode in Moulmein High depicted a female character struggling with anorexia. These two episodes show that both locally and in the West, the ideal woman's body is slim, or rather skinny.

Also, both programmes show that the teenagers have respect for their parents because they obey their parents' wishes. The difference is that in Smallville, the teenagers can talk to their parents and treat them like friends. If there are disagreements, the parents and

teenagers would discuss and talk things through unlike in Moulmein High where there is no discussion because the parents claim they know what is right and best. Therefore, although the value of respect is reflected in both programmes, Smallville depicts the fact that respect is earned whereas in Moulmein High, respect towards parents seems like a norm.

In both Smallville and Moulmein High, couples are seen being intimate and fond of public displays of affection. This reflects the open mindedness and bold behaviour of today's (both in the local and foreign context) teenagers as compared to the past generation, where any form of affection only happened behind closed doors.

As an Asian and living in an Asian society, Western media can influence our perceptions and behaviour. However, even if Singapore is considered modernised and in the forefront of economic and business trends, there are still things deemed "normal" in Western culture that our society will frown upon.

For example, although Singaporeans are exposed to many Western films and movies, public displays of affection should still be kept to a minimal. Holding hands in public is acceptable but kissing or cuddling in a public place will either draw stares or make onlookers look away in embarrassment.

Our society supports the fact that teenagers should be respectful towards their elders. However, I don't think it will like the idea of a teenager talking to his or her parents in the same way and manner as he or she would talk to friends. This would oppose the West's belief that the relationship between a parent and child should be that of a casual and friendly one.

Unfortunately, being in an Asian and Chinese society supports the fact that a beautiful woman should be one that is petite. Although I personally disagree with that fact, the typical Oriental beauty is one that is petite, fair and bestowed with exquisitely small and defined features.

Part 2

a) Cultural imperialism happens when a powerful or stronger nation believes its culture to be 'the right and only one'. This results in the imperial nation pushing her culture and influencing another weaker nation to adopt it. Culture imperialism can happen by force, i.e. in the case of military imperialism, for example, when the English wanted to eliminate the use of native languages like Welsh. Culture imperialism can also happen just by the stronger nation's dominant influence for example in Taiwan, where all things American are considered popular. Although cultural imperialism can happen with force or at the own free will of the weaker country, it originated from military imperialism. It happened when the stronger empires conquered the weaker ones and forced their culture on them.

As stated in the previous week's notes, culture "should be based on shared memories and a sense of continuity between generations". Culture imperialism is the exact opposite of that statement. Furthermore, cultural imperialism can create resistance between people or lower an individual's self-esteem. Resistance can happen between the people who embrace the new culture, and those who want to keep the old one. An individual's self-esteem can be lowered when he practices self-hatred. That can happen when he is forced to obey and carry out things he does not believe in.

b) It is very evident how the invasion of Western media has affected the culture of our society. A very good example is the term 'fashion'. The people responsible for setting the fashion agenda and coming up with fashion statements come from the West! For example, the bleaching of hair by Asian girls, the low-rise jeans movement (started by pop princess Christina Aguilera) that has spread throughout Asia and Asian teenagers' desire for American denim wear brand, Levi.

Furthermore, Asian teenagers are constantly picking up American slang like "loser", "get a life" and even "are you kidding?" This attitude of white supremacy can be attributed to the easy access to the numerous Western shows and movies available in the media. Movie star fans or pop group fans imitate their idols by copying their hairstyles, speaking their lingo and wearing the same brand or type of clothing they wear.

Traditionally, Asian women have been seen as submissive and demure. Needless to say, this has greatly changed. Asian women are now as demanding and as independent as their Western counterparts. This change is definitely due to the increased levels of education Asian women receive as compared to the past and also due to the way women in Western movies are portrayed. The strong female characters were definitely role models to many Asian women. An example would be Audrey Hepburn. Many women looked up to her because she was not only beautiful but also talented and smart.

Needless to say, because of this love for Western things, the media in Asia constantly tries to accommodate that. For example, there was a movie produced in Hong Kong where the main actor dressed and acted like Keanu Reeves in the Matrix. Also, movie companies employ Pan Asian or Caucasian actors to act in their movies, hoping to add that allure for movie buffs.

Worryingly, Western media can strongly influence the behaviour of people. Violent fighting scenes showing death defying stunts in Western movies and wrestling shows (World Wrestling Federation a.k.a WWF) have been proven to make children more violent in their behaviour. Furthermore, some movies show in detail how a murder is carried out and worst, the ease of it. These misleading scenes have the possibility of confusing individuals who are already disturbed and in need of help.

Although Asians still have their rich culture to bind them together and yet separate them from Westerners, traditions are slowly forgotten. Now, looking at many Asian teenagers and young adults, the only thing that sets them apart from a Westerner, is the colour of their skin.

c) No. The Internet might have the ability to churn out a vast amount of information for anyone with an Internet connection but as easy as information can be retrieved from the Internet, it can also be posted on the Internet.

Therefore, although the Internet can be an aide in cultural imperialism, it cannot be a source. Information on the web is too varied and there does not seem to be a particular culture or country that dominates it.

For example, a search on Western pop culture could generate many websites devoted to it. It could also generate as many websites bad mouthing pop culture.

As for satellite television, there are many shows on cable from India, Taiwan, Australia and Hong Kong. Although the more popular channels may be from America, like the premium movie channels, it is not evident that cable is being dominated by Western culture and movies.

Furthermore, there will always be a digital divide and a divide between the rich and the poor. This fact shows that even in a particular community, not everyone will have access to the information and the influence of Western culture.

The Internet is a communication tool that is hard to control therefore making it impossible to dominate. Satellite television on the other hand allows smaller countries to produce their own movies and shows for sale and to air on cable. To conclude, I feel that new media cannot be a source of cultural imperialism.