

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

In analyzing the representation of Chinese culture in *Fresh Off the Boat*, the researcher uses a semiotic theory developed by John Fiske that is appropriate and relevant to this topic. In this case, to obtain research results in accordance with the topic, this chapter discusses John Fiske's semiotic theory, Chinese culture and values, the all thirteen episodes of season 1 of the *Fresh Off the Boat*, and the previous studies.

B.1 Representation

In cultural studies, the concept of representation plays an important role because it connects meaning and language with culture. Representation means using language to convey something meaningful about the world to others. The use of language, signs, and images to represent or indicate something is an important part of the process in which meaning is created and exchanged among members of a culture (Hall, 1997). The semiotic approach states that the way words function as signs in language determines representation. However, to begin with, meaning often depends on larger units of analysis, such as narratives, statements, and groups of images. The entire discussion is covered in various texts, a field of knowledge about a topic that has become very popular. Semiotics appears to restrict the representation process to language, viewing it as a closed and relatively static system (Hall, 1997).

In this study, the concept of representation in the series *Fresh Off the Boat* is analyzed through how the series interprets and depicts Chinese culture, particularly through the character Jessica Huang, who plays the role of the mother in the Huang family. The character Jessica Huang serves as the main medium of representation, where various aspects, such as appearance, environment, behavior, speech style, body language, expressions, and other elements, function as markers of Chinese culture as depicted in this series.

B.2 John Fiske's Semiotic Theory

Semiotics is the science of signs and how they work and discusses the signs themselves, the codes or systems that are organized and the culture that depends on the existence of codes and signs operating (Fiske, 2011). All semantic models have more or less the same form. Each model refers to three elements that must be included in some form in the study of meaning. These elements are (1) the symbol, (2) what the symbol refers to, and (3) the user of the symbol. The focal point of this concern is the sign. Semiotics, or semiology, is the study of signals and their functioning, which will serve as the alternate emphasis of this book. Semiotics encompasses three primary domains of symbol (Fiske, 2011):

1. Signs are human constructs whose meanings depend on their use and interpretation.
2. Codes are systems that organize signs to fulfill the communicative needs of a society or to utilize available channels of transmission.

3. Culture is sustained and shaped through these codes and signs, which enable its existence.

The system of meaning used simultaneously by people in a culture or subculture is called a code. Codes consist of signs, which are physical signals that represent something other than themselves, and rules or conventions that determine how and in what contexts signs are used, as well as how these signs can be combined to produce more complicated messages. Some figures of semiotic theorists such as Ferdinand de Saussure, Charles Sanders Peirce and John Fiske have different concepts of semiotics, but basically as a new way of understanding texts. The main focus of semiotics is text, which can be interpreted broadly, not just written text. Any text that has a communicative sign system can be considered a written text; examples are movies, soap operas, quizzes, advertisements, photographs, and football matches (Fiske, 2007).

According to John Fiske's theory, the codes produced not only shape reality but are also processed by viewers based on their references. As a result, individuals see the code in different ways. Television conveys meaning in a similar way to film, using techniques including camera angle, lighting, background music, and cutting frequency. Specifically, music is employed to elucidate and occasionally generate the shot's connotative meaning. The use of traditional suspense music might evoke tension and fear when a guy is about to open a door, or the lighting and music can

evoke either eerie or peaceful feelings when a shot of an empty room is shown (Fiske, 2003).

John Fiske's model is not limited to the analysis of television programs; it can be used to analyze other media text content. This also applies to how we encounter other forms of cultural media, such as songs, movies, books, and newspapers. Essentially, television textuality is intertextual (Fiske, 1987). According to Fiske, an event within a television show becomes a television event when it is encoded by social codes, which are constructed in three stages, namely reality, representation and ideology as television coding levels. These three levels of coding, along with their respective elements, can be applied to analyze the components presented in a film. An event to be televised is already encoded by social codes such as those of (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004):

1. Level one, Reality: appearance, dress, make-up, environment, behavior, speech, gesture, expression, sound, etc. these are encoded electronically.
2. Level two, Representation: camera, lighting, editing, music, sound which transmit the conventional representational codes, which shape the representations of, for example: narrative, conflict, character, dialogue, setting, casting, etc.
3. Level three, Ideology: which are organized into coherence and social acceptability by the ideological codes, such as those of: individualism, patriarchy, race, class, materialism, capitalism, etc.

In addition to exposing the intricacy of meanings concealed within what is commonly perceived as superficial and shallow, this research suggests that the audience is greatly impacted by this nuance and complexity. It suggests that the diverse range of codes all come together to offer a single set of meanings that support, legitimize, and normalize the prevailing patriarchal capitalism worldview (Rivkin & Ryan, 2004).

Compared to other semioticians, Fiske pays close attention to fundamental aspects of social phenomena, such as the culture of social circumstances and cultural populations, which have a great impact on the understanding of encoded meanings. Whatever a person does or makes contains codified signs from their culture, and the way a person does or makes it is largely determined by their cultural conventions (Fiske & Hartley, 2003). In short, the culture we live in is one kind of reality, and television is another. However, we see both in the same way, and therefore we interact with each other (Fiske & Hartley, 2003).

In this study, *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015) is the main object analyzed using the levels of television coding in John Fiske's semiotic theory, namely the levels of reality, representation, and ideology. Through this approach, the research seeks to identify and represent Chinese culture in the character of Jessica Huang.

B.3 Chinese Culture

According to Yue (2020), from the perspective of anthropology and sociology, the definition of culture is very broad. Various academic and popular texts use the term "culture", encompassing everything from fashion to ancient costumes, from

handicrafts to traditional rituals, from long-standing habits in homes and families to revered symbols in national palaces (Pan et al., 1994).

One of the oldest cultures in the world is the Chinese civilization, which has existed for 5,000 years. Chinese culture spread to various parts of the world through trade routes, diaspora, and migration. The Silk Road became an important link between China and Central Asia, the Middle East, and Europe, bringing cultural, religious, and artistic influences. In the 19th century, a massive wave of Chinese migration occurred due to economic and political factors, such as poverty in rural China and job opportunities abroad, especially in Southeast Asia, North America, and Australia (Wang, 1991).

In the United States, Chinese migration began in the mid-19th century, primarily to work on large projects such as the construction of railroads. Despite facing discrimination, such as through the Chinese Exclusion Act (1882), the Chinese community continued to preserve their culture through communities like Chinatown, traditional ceremonies, and family-run restaurants and businesses (Takaki, 1998). The spread of this culture shaped the unique identity of the Chinese diaspora: blending ancestral traditions with adaptations to local culture.

Entering the 1990s, the representation of Chinese culture in America underwent significant dynamics. On one hand, there is an increase in cultural openness and recognition of diversity, but on the other hand, the Chinese community still faces stereotypes, such as the "model minority" or cultural

exoticism. Popular media such as films, television, and advertisements play a significant role in shaping the image of Chinese-Americans in the eyes of the public.

In this decade, Chinese-American figures began to appear in the entertainment industry, although they were often still confined to stereotypical roles. Films like *The Joy Luck Club* (1993) brought Chinese-American family narratives to the mainstream, while television series featuring Chinese characters were still limited in number. The series *Fresh Off the Boat* (2015) became a significant work that challenged this stereotype by portraying the lives of Chinese-American families in a complex and authentic manner. Although aired in the 2010s, this series highlights the context of the Chinese-American community in the 1990s, which is relevant to the theme of this research (Cheng, 2019).

The presence of Chinese figures in the American entertainment industry not only highlights the dynamics of ethnic representation but also opens up space to explore the cultural richness underlying their identity. The narratives presented in media such as *Fresh Off the Boat* depict not just the lives of Chinese-American families but also reflect the cultural values that are deeply rooted in their lives. This shows that understanding Chinese culture cannot be separated from the social context that shapes its character and community dynamics.

In line with this, the research then identifies four main aspects of Chinese culture that influence behavior and character values in the series. These four aspects include elements of tradition, which are evident in the celebration of Lunar New

Year, eating habits, and the appreciation of family values based on Confucian teachings. According to Shils (1981), tradition is a cultural pattern passed down through generations via specific social practices and symbolism, which not only shapes identity but also strengthens family bonds in Chinese culture.

This research is supported by four main aspects of Chinese cultural elements that are relevant to the behaviors and values displayed by the characters. The four aspects are as follows:

1. Tradition

Scenes depicting the Lunar New Year celebration, eating habits, and family values in Confucianism are forms of cultural tradition representation in Chinese culture. According to Shils (1981), tradition is a cultural pattern passed down from generation to generation through certain social practices and symbolism. Tradition reflects the core values of a culture and is often manifested in the form of rituals or celebrations. In the context of Chinese culture, traditions such as the Lunar New Year celebration and ancestor worship have been passed down through generations and have become an important part of strengthening family identity and values.

2. Behavior

According to Kwick (1972), behavior is the action or deed of an organism that can be observed and even studied. In a cultural context, a person's behavior is often guided by the values and traditions prevailing in society. Ting-Toomey (1999) states that behavior in Chinese culture is greatly influenced by the principles of social

harmony and collectivism. For example, the way someone speaks to their parents or shares a meal together as a form of togetherness is an example of behavior shaped by cultural values.

3. Value

In the view of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck, a value system is a series of principles arranged in specific patterns that distinguish one value system from another. For example, Chinese and American societies value family stability. However, in traditional Chinese culture, family stability is built on the highest priority of one's obligations to ancestors, clan, and parents (Pan et al., 1994). Chinese culture has been greatly influenced by three Chinese philosophical teachings: Confucianism, Taoism (Daoism), and Buddhism (Dekabrskiy, 2019; Ye, 2014). These three teachings not only shape the belief system of Chinese society but also influence various aspects of life, including family values, social ethics, and the way individuals interact within their communities.

Confucianism, for example, emphasizes the importance of social hierarchy, harmony, and respect for family and ancestors. Meanwhile, Taoism teaches the balance between humans and nature, as well as a life in harmony with the Dao (Way) (Kohn, 2009). Buddhism, which entered China via the Silk Road, brought the concepts of karma, reincarnation, and liberation from suffering, which then acculturated with local traditions. The influence of these three teachings can still be found in the lives of the Chinese community to this day, including in popular cultural representations such as the television series *Fresh Off the Boat*.

4. Norms

According to John J. Macionis (2001), norms are the rules and expectations by which a society guides the behavior of its members. In Chinese culture, social norms are often rooted in Confucian teachings, which emphasize hierarchical relationships within families and society (Hwang, 1987). For example, research written by Huo and Zhong (2022) states that the habit of Chinese people to settle debts before the Lunar New Year is an important manifestation of the norms internalized in the workplace.

According to Pan et al. (1994), changes can occur in some areas of social relations, but there will be cultural lag in other domains, and the fundamental dimensions of the value system may not always change. This is related to the research by Pleumpanya (2020), titled "*Modern Overseas Chinese Image in Thai Literature and Soap Opera*" which shows that Chinese traders succeeded in Thailand's economy and international trade because of their talent and work ethic. In fact, overseas Chinese would not have been able to achieve such high economic positions in foreign countries if they did not possess a strong work ethic. Chinese culture and capitalism are crucial to the success of Chinese businesses. The overseas Chinese have supported the colonial economies of Southeast Asia from the very beginning. After globalization, the Chinese colonial tradition evolved into capitalism.

In this research, it is shown that capitalism has become one of the traditions interconnected with Chinese culture. In this study, it was found that China's economic success in Thailand and internationally is due to their strong work ethic

and capitalist approach, which significantly contribute to the country's economic growth and globalization.

Considering how Chinese cultural values persisted despite social and economic changes, this research analyzed the representation of Chinese culture through the character Jessica Huang in *Fresh Off the Boat*. As a figure who upheld discipline, hard work, and traditional values, Jessica reflected the deeply rooted principles of Chinese culture in the lives of the community. Through John Fiske's semiotic approach, this research revealed how the character Jessica Huang represented these values in family dynamics and her efforts in achieving success.

B.4 Fresh Off the Boat TV Series (Season 1)

The television series *Fresh Off the Boat* aired on the American television station ABC, with its first season premiering in 2015 and concluding with its sixth season in 2020. Set in the 1990s, the first season, consisting of 13 episodes, introduces Jessica Huang a strict, ambitious, and passionate mother committed to preserving Chinese cultural values amidst American life.

This study focuses only on the first season because it introduces the main characters and storyline that form the foundation of the entire narrative and central themes before the storyline develops in subsequent seasons related to the topic of this study, making this season relevant for identifying the cultural values presented from the outset.

Episode 1 “Pilot”

In this episode, the Huang family starts a new life in Orlando after Louis opens a steak restaurant called Cattleman’s Ranch. The suburban environment, where white residents predominate, makes Jessica feel out of place. Meanwhile, their eldest son, Eddie, is having difficulty adapting to the new school, especially because his music and food preferences are different from his classmates’.

Episode 2 “Home Sweet Home”

Jessica feels that the education system in public schools does not intellectually challenge students. She decided to teach her children herself after school as a form of control over their education. On the other hand, Louis is trying to build relationships with the local community to attract more customers to his restaurant.

Episode 3 “The Shunning”

Louis and Jessica are trying to fit in with the surrounding community by attending local events in their neighborhood. On the other hand, Eddie starts pursuing his first love while trying to adapt and build relationships with his new friends at school.

Episode 4 “Success Perm”

Louis and Jessica felt intimidated by Jessica's sister's achievements, who was going to visit their house, so they looked for ways to make their family appear more successful, including following the success perm hair trend as a status symbol.

Episode 5 “Persistent Romeo”

Jessica held a sexual harassment seminar for employees at the Louis restaurant. Meanwhile, Eddie is starting to attract the attention of his new friend by inviting her to stay over at his house.

Episode 6 “Fajita Man”

Eddie started working at his father's restaurant to earn extra money to buy video games. On the other hand, Jessica is trying to sell a house for the first time as a real estate agent.

Episode 7 “Showdown at the Golden Saddle”

Jessica began to investigate further to uncover the truth about the actual condition of Louis's restaurant and compare it with Golden Saddle, their competitor. At the same time, Eddie is trying to get closer to a woman named Nicole who has caught his attention while looking for ways to make a good impression.

Episode 8 “Phillip Goldstein”

Eddie befriends Phillip Goldstein, the only other Asian student at the school. However, they realized that they shared the same ethnicity, but their backgrounds and interests were very different. Meanwhile, Jessica found out that Eddie had another Asian friend, and she really liked him.

Episode 9 “License to Sell”

Jessica decided to become a real estate agent and compete seriously with her friends, supported by Louis. Meanwhile, Eddie asked his father, Louis, for advice on how to approach Nicole.

Episode 10 “Blind Spot”

When Jessica's ex-boyfriend named Oscar came to visit her house, Jessica tried to make Louis feel jealous. Meanwhile, the chickenpox disease began to spread, starting with Evan, who was the first to be infected.

Episode 11 “Very Superstitious”

Eddie suffered a broken bone in his hand due to falling at Louis's restaurant. On the other hand, Jessica believes that the number 4 is a symbol of bad luck, whereas Louis does not believe in such superstitions.

Episode 12 “Dribbling Tiger, Bounce Pass Dragon”

Louis became the coach of the children's basketball team and implemented strict discipline, but this approach made the children, including Eddie, feel pressured and uncomfortable.

Episode 13 “So Chineez”

Eddie started to feel that he was not 'Chinese' enough and considered other countries more interesting. Therefore, when given a school project assignment, he chose Jamaica over China. That became one of the reasons Jessica wanted to instill Chinese cultural values in her children again.

B.5 Related Studies

To strengthen the argument in this research, a review of relevant previous studies was conducted, particularly those analyzing the representation of Chinese culture in various media contexts. The researcher uses John Fiske's semiotic theory, so the literature reviewed includes writings that share similar subjects, concepts, theories, or at least aligned topics and issues. This review aims to present various perspectives from previous research and to highlight the contributions and uniqueness of this study compared to earlier studies.

Here are some articles related to the research conducted by previous researchers. The first one, written by Hang & Thanh (2018), is entitled '*Fresh Off The Boat*' and the Model Minority Stereotype: A Foucauldian Discourse Analysis. This research analyzes the TV show *Fresh Off the Boat* through Foucauldian discourse analysis to explore how the show represents and challenges the model minority stereotype associated with Asian Americans. The author uses Michel Foucault's concepts of power, knowledge, and discourse to analyze how the narrative of this series influences societal perceptions. Although the analysis is deep and well-supported, it may feel dense for readers who are not familiar with Foucault's work,

and a broader context comparing other media representations could enhance the analysis.

The second article, written by X. Chen, (2023), is titled *Analysis of Fresh Off the Boat from the Perspective of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions*. The researcher conducted an analysis of *Fresh Off the Boat* from Geert Hofstede's perspective, focusing on the cultural differences between China and America. This research identifies six cultural dimensions: power distance, individualism vs collectivism, masculinity vs femininity, uncertainty avoidance vs uncertainty acceptance, long-term vs short-term orientation, and indulgence vs restraint. This study also examines the extent to which these dimensions manifest through interactions and conflicts within the Huang group and their broader social environment. This research provides a structural understanding of cultural differences in *Fresh Off the Boat*.

The third article, written by HE Yi (2023), is entitled *Acculturation Gap Between Two Generation Immigrants: An Analysis of Fresh Off the Boat*. This research examines the generational differences in the acculturation process of the Huang family in the TV show *Fresh Off the Boat*. This study focuses on how first-generation immigrant parents and their second-generation children navigate and adapt to American culture. By analyzing the Huang family's interactions, this article provides insights into the broader issues faced by immigrant families, such as identity formation, cultural clashes, and generational divides.

The fourth article, written by Khalizah et al. (2022), is entitled *Jhon Fiske Semiotics Analysis In The Theme Of Gender Equality In The Film "Mulan"*. This research investigates how the film "Mulan" raises the theme of gender equality using John Fiske's semiotic analysis framework. By examining the signs, symbols, and codes in the film, the author explores how "Mulan" challenges traditional gender roles and promotes the message of gender equality.

The fifth article, written by Arlina & Nuraeni (2022), is entitled *John Fiske's Semiotic Analysis: Representation of Social Criticism in Pretty Boys*. This research explores how the film "Pretty Boys" uses semiotic elements to convey social criticism. Using John Fiske's semiotic analysis framework, the author examines the signs, symbols, and codes in the film to express its commentary on social norms and issues. This analysis focuses on how "Pretty Boys" critiques gender stereotypes, beauty standards, and the superficial nature of fame. By analyzing the visual and narrative components, such as character portrayal, dialogue, and cinematography, this article reveals the subversive messages of the film.

The six article, written by Sabarini (2021), is entitled *John Fiske's Semiotic Analysis in the Spotlight Film*. This study examines how the film "Spotlight" uses semiotic elements to convey its themes and messages. By applying John Fiske's semiotic analysis framework, the author explores the signs, symbols, and codes embedded in the film to understand its representation of investigative journalism and the exposure of institutional corruption. This analysis delves into key aspects

such as the use of visual metaphors, character development, and narrative structure to highlight the journalists' relentless efforts in uncovering the truth behind the child abuse scandal in the Catholic Church.

The seven article, written by Shafira and Rui (2023), is entitled *Semiotics Analysis of Representation Chinese Culture in Sony Pictures Animation Film Wish Dragon Movie*. This article conducts a semiotic analysis of the representation of Chinese culture in the film "Wish Dragon" using Roland Barthes' semiotic framework. This research analyzes various aspects of the film, focusing on the denotative and contextual elements that represent Chinese elements. This research identifies symbols and motifs that are inseparable from Chinese culture, such as the dragon, which is a traditional Chinese icon. The structural framework of the film and its development were also examined to understand their resonance with traditional Chinese values, such as family, community, and identity.

The eight article, written by Xinyi (2024), isentitled *(Mis)Representations of Asian in Two Comedies Chinese Burn and Fresh off the Boat: A Textual Analysis*. This article examines how the two television comedies depict Asian characters and culture using textual analysis, where the author investigates the themes, characterization, and narrative in *Chinese Burn* and *Fresh Off the Boat* to assess their accuracy and impact. The article discusses the potential consequences of this portrayal on audience perception and the importance of authentic representation in the media.

The ninth article, written by Febryningrum and Hariyanto (2022), is entitled *John Fiske's Semiotic Analysis in Susi Susanti's Film -- Love All*. This article explores the representation of nationalism in the biographical film featuring the main character, Susi Susanti. By using John Fiske's semiotic analysis, this study identifies three levels of semiotic analysis: the level of reality, the level of representation, and the level of ideology. This research uses a descriptive qualitative approach, analyzing various codes and symbols in the film that convey nationalist sentiments. Overall, this article contributes to the understanding of how cinematic narratives can encapsulate complex social issues, using Fiske's semiotic framework to dissect the layers of meaning embedded in the film.

The last article, written by X. Chen et al., (2023), is entitled *The Research on the Image of Chinese People in the American Sitcom Fresh Off The Boat*. This research examines the image representation of Chinese people in the American sitcom *Fresh Off the Boat* with an interpretivism approach through case study and content analysis, and additional data from viewers' comments on Chinese social media. The focus is on how stereotypes related to parenting, academic pressure, and East-West cultural conflicts are shaped in the series. The results show that although the series presents a more humanized picture of Asian-American families, a number of cultural stereotypes remain reproduced and need to be critiqued.

Several related studies that discussed similar theories assisted the researcher in applying the theory and highlighted the differences between this study and previous

research. Based on the related research mentioned above, most of the subjects of study were films and narratives, focusing on issues such as gender, masculinity, immigration, etc. The theories used were mostly based on Roland Barthes, Hofstede, Foucault, etc. Meanwhile, this research specifically analyzed the representation of Chinese culture in the series *Fresh Off the Boat*, focusing on one main character, Jessica Huang. By applying John Fiske's semiotic theory, *The Codes of Television*, this research offered a different approach to exploring the construction of Chinese culture in the context of Asian-American media.

