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Abstract:

A content and thematic analysis of 109 episodes (94.9 hours) of prime-time dramas examined the portrayals of aging and the nature of intergenerational interaction involving older adults on Taiwanese television. The content analysis revealed that older characters, regardless of sex, appeared less frequently and in less prominent roles than other adult characters, but not in comparison to adolescents and children. The older characters who did appear, however, were predominantly portrayed as cognitively sound and physically healthy. The thematic analysis provided a different picture, showing that older characters talked about age explicitly, strategically linking it to death and despondence, to influence younger characters. Communication behavior themes identified included supporting, superiority, and controlling for older characters, and reverence/respect for younger characters. Findings are compared to those from similar studies of U.S. media and discussed from a Cultivation Theory perspective in terms of their reinforcement of Chinese age stereotypes and the traditional values of filial piety and age hierarchy in the context of globalization and culture change.

Key words: Portrayals of Aging; Intergenerational Interaction; Prime-Time Television; Taiwan

Text of paper:

Older Adults in Prime-Time Television Dramas in Taiwan: Prevalence, Portrayal, and Communication Interaction

Shu-Chin Lien

Department of Radio & Television

National Taiwan University of Arts

59 Da-Kuan Rd., Section 1, Pan-Chiao Taipei, Taiwan, R.O.C.

Yan Bing Zhang

Mary Lee Hummert

Department of Communication Studies

102 Bailey Hall, 1440 Jayhawk Blvd.

University of Kansas, Lawrence, KS 66045-7574

e-mail and phone: shuchin.lien@msa.hinet.net (Lien: 011-886-2-22722181)

ybzhang@ku.edu (Zhang: 785-864-9678)

mlhummert@ku.edu (Hummert: 785-864-9881)

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Guided by media effects theories such as social learning theory (Bandura, 2001) and cultivation theory (Morgan & Shanahan, 1997), previous studies focusing on the socialization role of stereotypical

portrayals of social groups (e.g., sex, ethnicity, age) have demonstrated that television portrayals can influence viewers' perceptions and attitudes toward other social groups and their own groups (Ford, 1997; Mastro, Behm-Morawitz, & Ortiz, 2007; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000). In addition, the ethnolinguistic vitality theory (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977) argues that mass media portrayals of social groups (e.g., prevalence, role prominence, and valence), as a form of institutional support, reflect their relative strength and value in society (Abrams, Eveland & Giles, 2003; Harwood & Anderson, 2002). Propelled by these theoretical perspectives, considerable research in the last two decades has examined older adults' prevalence, role prominence, and age stereotype portrayal in mass media (e.g., Gerbner, Gross, Signorielli, & Morgan, 1980; Harwood, 2007; Raman, Harwood, Weis, Anderson, & Miller, 2008). Comparatively, however, little attention has been paid to the nature of intergenerational interaction and how older adults talk and are talked to on television (Harwood & Giles, 1992; Zhang, Harwood, Williams, Ylänne-McEwen, Wadleigh, & Thimm, 2006). In addition, this line of research has been predominantly conducted in Western cultures, especially in the United States. In general, findings indicated that older adults are underrepresented, marginalized, or stereotypically portrayed on television programming (e.g., Robinson & Skill, 1995; Zhang et al., 2006). This pattern of negative characterizations may not hold true cross-culturally, especially in cultures where an explicit age related cultural value of filial piety or *Xiao* is upheld. The current study therefore extends this line of investigation by examining the prevalence and age stereotype portrayal of older characters, as well as the nature of intergenerational communication, on prime-time television in Taiwan.

Television Portrayal of Older Adults in the West

Previous studies examining the prevalence of older characters on prime-time television have yielded a rather consistent finding: Older characters, especially older female characters, were underrepresented in the television population compared to census figures. For example, as was true

in the 1970s (e.g., Aronoff, 1974) and 1980s (Vernon, Williams, Phillips, & Wilson, 1990), Signorielli (2004) examined 5,214 characters appearing on prime-time network television and found that older characters, at less than 3% of the total television population, were underrepresented in comparison with their 12% representation in the actual population in 2000. Signorielli also found that older male characters outnumbered older female characters. Similar patterns have been reported in other studies (Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Robinson & Skill, 1995; Signorielli, 2001).

Content analyses of US media portrayals have shown that across diverse media older adults tend to be portrayed less frequently than would be expected by their presence in the population (Robinson, Skill, & Turner, 2004). Portrayals tend to be negative in most media content (Robinson et al.), but somewhat more positive in advertising images (Roy & Harwood, 1997). Overall, compared to older men, older women are extensively under represented and negatively stereotyped.

In addition to the prevalence of older characters, research has examined the role prominence and the image portrayals of older characters. Findings have shown that older characters are less likely to be cast in a main role than are characters in other age groups (Robinson & Skill, 1995; Signorielli, 2001). For example, of the 275 total main characters coded in Robinson and Skill's (1995) study, older characters age 65 or above constituted only 1% of the main role population while characters under 50 and characters between 50 and 64 comprised 85% and 14% of the main role population respectively. In addition, findings from some studies document negative portrayals of older adults (Gerbner et al., 1980) consistent with negative age stereotypes of incompetence and dependence. However, some studies found that the images of aging were relatively favorable and positive (Vernon et al., 1990). For instance, Vernon et al. (1990) reported that older characters were more likely to be associated with favorable stereotype traits than unfavorable ones, hence suggesting a more positive picture about age stereotypical images on prime-time television.

Content analysis is effective for examining categorical representation and providing insights into the ways in which stereotypes are invoked in communication. A few studies have examined communication interactions involving older characters on television (Dail, 1988; Harwood & Giles, 1992; Northcott, 1975). As with portrayals, some findings identified negative interactions as predominant (Northcott, 1975), while others found that interactions with older characters were portrayed more positively than those with middle-aged characters (Dail, 1988). Using a discourse analysis approach, Harwood and Giles (1992) examined the dialogues among characters from six episodes of *The Golden Girls*, a situation comedy about older women. Of over 200 age markers coded, 90% were in the humorous context. Given the salience of the overlap of counter-stereotypical portrayals of older characters and humorous effects, they argued that even seeming positive portrayals of older characters might serve to perpetuate existing stereotypes, suggesting that intergenerational communication warrants a qualitative and in-depth approach in future research.

Filial Piety, Age Attitudes, and Media in Taiwan

The studies of Western media provide a context for this study in terms of research questions and methodology. Older adults were found to be underrepresented in comparison to other age groups, and were portrayed stereotypically (albeit positively so in some cases). Whether a similar pattern of results will be found in the Taiwanese culture that values filial piety (i.e., a Confucian principle that mandates respect, care, obedience, and material support to one's elders especially parents and grandparents) and elder respect (i.e., care, obedience, and respect for older adults in general) (Ho, 1996) is an important research question. Children in Taiwan are educated to respect older people from a very young age at both family and societal contexts (Sung 2001). The positive influence of filial piety was established by prior research. For example, Yen (1991) reported that Taiwanese health consultants perceived older persons favorably on several dimensions, such as

social value, ability, family life, and personal relationships. However, the practice of elder respect is being challenged by the social and cultural changes taking place in the East (e.g., Ingersoll-Dayton & Saengtienchai, 1999; Mehta, 1997). For example, Mehta (1997) examined young people's attitudes toward elder respect and concluded that elder respect is shifting from obedience and subservience to courtesy and kindness. Consistent with Mehta (1997), Ingersoll-Dayton and Saengtienchai (1999) suggested that "while traditional expressions of respect for the elderly are changing, the value of respect remains stable" (p. 128). If the Taiwanese society does indeed have positive views toward older adults and respect for older people, then it is reasonable to propose that these positive and traditional cultural values will be translated into and reflected in the popular media such as prime-time television.

Although limited and peripheral, issues related to older adults in mass media have started to receive some attention in Taiwan. Liu (1987) analyzed 13 hours of drama programs aired in 1986 in Taiwan to examine the prevalence and representation of older adults on television. In addition to compare the ratio of older characters on television with their census figures, Liu also measured the amount of time older characters appeared on television. Consistent with prior research in the West (e.g., Robinson & Skill, 1995; Signorielli, 2001; 2004), older characters on Taiwanese prime time television were also underrepresented measured by both characters numbers and screen time. Specifically, older adults comprised 4.07% of total program population compared to 5.05% in census figures. The 21 older characters identified occupied 25.7 minutes (i.e., 4.08%) of the total program time of 630.4 minutes.

Using a similar coding scheme developed by Petersen (1973), Liu (1987) also examined older adults' images on television regarding their physical and cognitive abilities, health conditions, socioeconomic status, and personality traits. Results in general showed that older characters were positively portrayed, but were depicted fairly often as stubborn and as unhappy with family

relationships. Although studies examining communication interaction are rare, Lay, Chiang, and Yang's content analysis (2001) examined parent-child filial conflict management in Taiwanese prime-time dramas. Results indicated that television in Taiwan promoted a very traditional style of filial conflict management. Specifically, children, especially daughters, shown on television were likely to sacrifice their own welfare to promote parents' satisfaction, even when the children felt that the demands were immoral, unethical, or impossible to meet.

Current Study

Previous research examining the prevalence of older adults on television found that older characters, especially older female characters, are underrepresented when comparing their television population to census figures and considering the total screen time of older characters shown on television. These findings lead to our first two hypotheses.

H1: Older characters on Taiwanese prime-time television are underrepresented in comparison to characters from other age groups.

H2: Older male characters are more prevalent than female characters on Taiwanese prime-time television in terms of frequency and screen time.

Previous research investigated the positive or negative characterizations of older adults on television by examining two variables: role prominence and image portrayal. Using role prominence as an indicator of the importance of the character to the story line, previous research conducted in the West and in the East indicates that older characters are more likely than younger characters to be cast in minor roles. In addition, the majority of studies examining the aging image on television have focused on the stereotype traits or characteristics associated with older characters and provided a mixed picture of the quality of portrayals pointing to the improved and more positive direction, especially in their cognitive and physical abilities (Roy & Harwood, 1997). Further more,

Liu's (1987) content analysis of Taiwanese prime-time dramas also revealed that older female characters were less frequently seen on television than older male characters with only 3 out of 21 older characters who were female. This pattern of underrepresentation of older women is consistent with previous studies conducted in the United States, and other cross-cultural studies (Gerbner et al., 1980; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Harwood & Roy, 1999; Robinson & Skill, 1995; Vernon et al., 1990; Singnorelli, 2004). These findings help structure the second and third research hypotheses in the Taiwanese cultural context.

H3: Older characters are more likely to be cast in less important roles than younger characters on Taiwanese prime-time television.

H4: Older characters are positively portrayed in terms of their cognitive and physical abilities on Taiwanese prime-time television.

H5: Older female characters are portrayed less positively in terms of their cognitive and physical abilities than older male characters on Taiwanese prime-time television.

One of the main aims of this study is to examine the nature of communication interactions involving older characters on television. Research in the West and in the East has shown the importance of examining the communication interaction in the portrayal of social groups on television (e.g., Dail, 1988; Harwood & Giles, 1992; Lay et al., 2001; Mastro & Greenberg, 2000), but little work exists examining the nature of intergenerational communication depicted on television. Our research question addresses the nature of intergenerational communication on prime-time television.

RQ1: How is intergenerational communication involving older adults portrayed in Taiwanese prime-time television programs?

Method

Sample

All prime-time weekday television programs showing on Taiwan Television Company (TTV), China Television Company (CTV), Chinese Television System (CTS), and Formosa Television (FTV) were videotaped from April 22, 2005 to May 13, 2005 and from September 24, 2005 to October 12, 2005. The four commercial wireless television stations were chosen because they have continued to capture the majority of viewers of the prime-time segment in Taiwan since the 1970s (Lin, 1999). Imported programs, news programs, specials, variety shows, talk shows, game shows, and commercials were not considered in the study. After these procedures, a total of 94.9 hours of dramas (109 episodes) remained as the sample for the main study.

Content Analysis

Content analysis was used to address Hypotheses 1, 2, 3, 4 and 5. The coding process started with coder training followed by a pilot study¹. For the purpose of coder training, two episodes of prime-time television programming were randomly videotaped from each of four wireless television stations (Taiwan Television Company, TTV; China Television Company, CTV; Chinese Television System, CTS; and Formosa Television, FTV) in February 2004. These 8 episodes were used only for the coder training and were not included in the pilot study and the main study. At the beginning of the training process, the coders (2 graduate students from Taiwan) carefully read through the coding protocol and familiarized themselves with the variables and definitions. Then, the two coders practiced coding together on four of the episodes and discussed coding protocol revision in order to achieve validity and reliability. Finally,

¹ Twenty-eight episodes (7 episodes from each of four wireless television stations, representing 30 hours of programming randomly selected) were used for pilot coding before the main study. Both coders (coder A and coder B) were graduate students from Taiwan studying in the States. They independently analyzed all 28 episodes on each variable. Inter-coder reliabilities (Scott's Pi) for the age group, sex, role prominence, mental lucidity and physical ability variables were .98, 1.00, .86, 1.00, and 1.00 respectively.

the two coders independently coded the remaining four episodes and discussed results of the independent coding. Disagreements were recorded and discussed. Coding problems were resolved through discussion among the principal investigator and the two coders and category definitions were changed to reduce such problems in the pilot and the main study. For instance, in order to increase coder agreement in determining a young character's age category, certain specific references (e.g., a typical young adolescent is a junior or high school student, and a young adult may be a college student instead) were added.

For the main study, each coder was randomly assigned to code 50 percent of the episodes (54 and 55 episodes) independently. Inter-coder reliabilities were computed using percent agreement and Scott's Pi. In the middle (i.e., both coders finished half of the coding task) and at the end of the coding task, each coder randomly coded one episode from the other coder's sample to check that the coders were reliable throughout the coding process in terms of applying the coding scheme.

Major variables. To address Hypotheses 1 and 2 regarding the prevalence of older characters, each character with a speaking role in an episode was coded with respect to sex (percent agreement = 1.00) and perceived age (i.e., child -12 or under; adolescent -13-19; young adult - 20-39; middle-aged - 40-59; older adults - 60 or above; percent agreement = .98, Scott's Pi = .97). Criteria for the specific age group coding followed Neuendorf (2002), Robinson and Skill (1995), and Roy and Harwood (1997). The total screen time that each older character appeared on screen was measured using a stopwatch.

To address Hypothesis 3, all characters with a speaking role in an episode were coded into three categories: main, supporting, and minor role. Main characters were defined as characters cast as the stars of the story, recurring characters, and ones who were the central focus of the story (Robinson & Skill, 1995). Supporting characters were defined as characters cast as regular characters and important to the story line, but not ones who were the central foci of the story (Robinson & Skill, 1995). Minor

characters were defined as characters having a brief appearance (e.g. speaking once or twice, having minimal screen time), who might provide background information to the show, but have a minimal impact on storyline. These characters tended to be those who were cast in roles such as waiters/waitresses, janitors, servant, or clerks. Inter-coder reliabilities for role prominence were good (percent agreement = .86; Scott's pi = .82)

To address Hypothesis 4 and 5, two categorical variables, measuring the valence of mental lucidity (percent agreement = 1.00) and physical ability (percent agreement = 1.00) were used to examine the stereotypical portrayal of older characters. An older character was coded as mentally oriented if the older character could articulate his/her thoughts and feelings appropriately. On the other hand, an older character was coded as mentally disoriented if the older character was portrayed as forgetful, mentally unclear, or confused (Dail, 1988; Roy & Harwood, 1997). For the physical ability variable, an older character was coded as being in good health if the older character was portrayed as free from impairment, physically competent, moving without assistance, and without using ambulatory aids (e.g., cane, wheelchair). On the other hand, an older character was coded as being in poor health if the older character was portrayed as using ambulatory aids, having serious illness, slow moving, weak or hospitalized.

Thematic Analysis

Thematic analysis was used to identify the major themes on aging talk and intergenerational communication in order to address Research Question 1. Boyatzis (1998) defines thematic analysis as a process of encoding qualitative information, involving the identification and interpretation of themes systematically. A theme is defined as a main idea, a recurrent behavioral pattern and/or communication style embedded in "conversation topics, vocabulary, recurring activities, meanings, feelings, or folk sayings and proverbs" (Taylor & Bogdan, 1984, p. 131). In order to maintain the validity and reliability of

the thematic approach used in this study, the authors and another bilingual person went through several major steps such as transcription, theme identification and interpretation, and translation.

Transcription. The entire scene containing an intergenerational interaction (i.e., any interaction between an older character and another character with a minimum of one verbal exchange) was transcribed, even if the intergenerational interaction constituted only a small portion of the scene. This contributed to the validity of the thematic analysis by enabling the investigators to consider the context for the interaction. Two hundred and sixty-two (262) intergenerational interactions were identified across the 109 episodes, and these interaction scenes were transcribed verbatim in Chinese from the captions. The interactions varied in length from a few verbal exchanges to two full pages.

Theme identification and interpretation. The theme identification process followed the inductive procedures outlined by Potter and Wetherell (1987). The first two authors examined the Chinese transcripts, took interpretation notes of each implicit/explicit age talk and intergenerational interaction independently, and then discussed their interpretations with the third author. In the interpretation process, relevant text on age talk and intergenerational communication was considered in terms of semantics and contextual cues. The three authors discussed their opinions over emergent themes and meanings associated with each theme, a main idea that appeared repeatedly across different older characters and interaction scenes. We moved back and forth between the data and interpretations, and consulted another bilingual Taiwanese graduate student studying in the States occasionally for validity checks on the interpretation of the theme. This process involved numerous revisions of the categories/themes identified. In addition, the identified themes were referenced to the communication and aging literature (e.g., Coupland & Coupland, 1990; Harwood & Giles, 1992; Zhang & Hummert, 2001).

Translation. The age talk and intergenerational communication excerpts presented in this study were translated from the Chinese transcripts. The principal investigator translated them first from Chinese to English. To ensure the validity of the translation, the second author examined the Chinese and the translated texts in terms of semantics. Minor modifications were made based on the discussion among the three authors.

Results

Prevalence and Portrayal of Older Characters: Content Analysis Results

Hypothesis 1 stated that older characters were underrepresented on Taiwanese prime-time television in comparison to characters from other age groups. Across the 109 episodes of Taiwanese prime-time television programming sampled, 1,720 characters were identified (see table 1). Chi-square analysis revealed that these proportions differed significantly across age groups, $\chi^2(4, N = 1720) = 2197.42$, Cramer's $V = .57, p < .05$. Supporting Hypothesis 1, older characters (5%) appeared less frequently than young adult characters (57%), $\chi^2(1, N = 1063) = 750.19$, Cramer's $V = .84, p < .05$, and middle-aged characters (36%), $\chi^2(1, N = 704) = 405.05$, Cramer's $V = .76, p < .05$. However, older characters were more likely to appear than child (1%) and adolescent characters (1%), $\chi^2(1, N = 104) = 41.89$, Cramer's $V = .63, p < .05$. A secondary chi square analysis established that older adults were significantly underrepresented in this sample of programs compared to their presence in the Taiwanese population (i.e., 9.6% in 2005), $\chi^2(1, N = 1720) = 39.39, p < .05$, Cramer's $V = .95$; test of difference of proportions, $z = -6.28, p < .05$.

Hypothesis 2 predicted that older male characters were more prevalent than older female characters in terms of frequency of appearance and screen time. Contrary to our hypothesis, chi-square analysis revealed no significant difference in the frequency with which older male (60%; $n = 51$) and female characters (40%; $n = 34$) appeared, $\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 3.40$, Cramer's $V = .02, p > .05$. A secondary

analysis was conducted to examine whether this pattern held true across all age groups. Results revealed that there was also no significant difference in the proportion of male and female characters across age groups, $\chi^2(4, N = 1720) = 8.71, p > .05$.

[Place Table 1 Here]

The total screen time for the older characters in the 109 episodes was 410.93 minutes (6.85 hours). This represented 7.2% of the total program time of 94.9 hours. A t-test for independent samples indicated that there was no significant difference in the screen time for older male ($M = 4.84$ minutes, $SD = 3.51$) and older female characters ($M = 5.42$ minutes, $SD = 4.38$), $t(83) = -.676, p > .05$. Thus, both measures of prevalence showed no evidence of differential representation of older male and female characters on Taiwanese prime-time television.

Hypothesis 3 predicted that older characters were more likely to be cast in less important roles than characters in other age groups. Cell frequencies are presented in Table 2. Child characters were excluded from analyses in relation to this research hypothesis because that age category contained an empty cell (see Table 2). Chi-square analysis indicated that there were significant differences in the proportion of adolescent, and young, middle-aged, and older adults in main, supporting, and minor roles, $\chi^2(6, N = 1701) = 61.21$, Cramer's $V = .13, p < .05$. Follow-up analyses provided only partial support for Hypothesis 2. Although older characters (83.5%) were more likely to be cast in supporting roles than middle-aged (59.6%), young adult (48.4%), and adolescent characters (47.4%), $\chi^2(3, N = 923) = 22.93$, Cramer's $V = .09, p < .05$, they were less likely to be cast in minor roles than middle-aged (20.5%), young adult (29.8%), and adolescent characters (47.4%), $\chi^2(3, N = 430) = 32.92$, Cramer's $V = .16, p < .05$ and equally likely to be cast in main roles, $\chi^2(3, N = 348) = 5.44$, Cramer's $V = .07, p > .05$.

[Place Table 2 Here]

Hypothesis 4 predicted that older adults were portrayed positively on Taiwanese prime-time television in terms of their mental lucidity and physical ability. Supporting our hypothesis, all of the older characters (100%) were portrayed as mentally oriented and the majority of older males (88.2 %) and older females (70.6%) were portrayed as being in good health. Supporting Hypothesis 5, Chi Square analysis indicated that older females were more likely to be portrayed in poor health (29%) than were older males (11.9%), $\chi^2(1, N = 85) = 4.16$, Cramer's $V = .22$, $p < .05$.

Themes in Intergenerational Interactions: Thematic Analysis Results

Research Question 1 asked how the characteristics of intergenerational interaction involving older adults were portrayed on Taiwanese prime-time television, particularly focusing on how they talked about aging and the communication behaviors portrayed. Several themes were identified in the 262 interactions involving the 85 older characters.

Thematic Analysis Results for Communication Behaviors in Intergenerational Interactions

Intergenerational communication behavior was the focus in the thematic analysis of Taiwanese television. While four themes were reflected in older characters' talk to younger characters: supportiveness, superiority, control and despondence, three themes emerged in the talk of younger characters: caring, respect, and *lao hu tu* (old and confused).

Intergenerational Themes of Older Characters. A *supportiveness* theme was evident when older characters were attentive to the feelings, needs, or views of younger characters, providing helpful suggestions and insights to younger characters as exemplified in the following extracts.

Extract 7: An older man (Tien-Yow) is comforting a young man (Da-Chun) about past mistakes.

1 Tien-Yow People say that mistakes are inevitable, because you are a human being.

A *superiority* theme was observed when older characters framed themselves as being more experienced or knowledgeable than younger characters. Older characters were portrayed as if they felt it is their responsibility to teach younger people proper behaviors, as exemplified in the following extracts.

Extract 9: A retired female professor is talking to two young women on Teacher's Day.

- | | | |
|---|-------------|---|
| 1 | Professor | ...Both of you, two young women, don't just hang there and waste your |
| 2 | | time! Right? Go to visit your teachers on Teacher's Day. Did you hear |
| 3 | | people say "Once you are a teacher, you are a father all of your life." |
| 5 | Young women | (silence) |

Extract 10: A male older adult (Tien-Yow) is lecturing a young man (A-Pao) about how to behave in public.

- | | | |
|---|----------|---|
| 1 | Tien-Yow | Youngsters should be humble in talking. Consider the situation first, and |
| 2 | | then choose your words. Don't go overboard. Or you may die without |
| 3 | | knowing why. |
| 4 | A-Pao | Yes |

Extracts 9-10 illustrate that older characters regardless of their gender were not shy in expressing their opinions or providing suggestions for younger characters. By using such forms of address as "youngster" or "young woman" (line 1, extract 9; line 1, extract 10), older characters strategically claimed superiority by virtue of their age and experience. In turn, they appeared to feel the strong obligation to guide younger characters toward appropriate behaviors in these and similar scenes.

The theme of *control* also referenced the hierarchical structure of intergenerational relationships in Taiwan, but differed from the superiority theme in the intensity with which older characters imposed their opinions on younger characters. In doing so, older characters completely denied younger characters' views, feelings or needs, as shown in extracts 11 and 12.

Extract 11: A son (Chao-Yuan) is asking his father (Chin-Chuan) not to interfere with his romantic relationship with his girlfriend.

Chao-Yuan Hsiu-Yueh and I really can't separate from each other. Why? Why are you trying to break us up?

Chin-Chuan You have to break up with her even if you don't want to. As long as I have a breath, you and Hsiu-Yueh will never have a chance to be together.

Extract 12: A middle-aged son (Shen-Wen) is explaining to his mother on the telephone why he will not be able to spend his birthday with her.

1 Shen-Wen Mother, I have already promised Tsung-Da (Shen-Wen's son) to stay with
2 them (Tsung-Da and his wife, Chiu-Pin) to celebrate my birthday.

3 Mother Are you Chiu-Pin's son or my son? I risked my life to give birth to you. A
4 mother wants to celebrate her son's birthday with him. Do I have to beg
5 you?

6 She-Wen Mother...

7 Mother Don't talk anymore! Come over here, right now!

8 She-Wen Okay...

In these extracts both male and female older characters used their positions in the age hierarchy to coerce younger characters into accepting their orders, suggestions, or decisions (e.g., "You have to break up with her"). Older characters overtly addressed the sacrifices they had made for their children (e.g., "I risked my life to give birth to you") to create a sense of debt, and to use that sense of obligation to force their children to obey them unconditionally.

The theme of *control* was also salient when older characters not only associated age with death, but also used death strategically as a guilt appeal to prevent rejections from others and/or elicit desired reactions from younger characters as in Extracts 2 and 4 below.

Extract 2: A grandmother and her grandson (Tsung-Da) are discussing her son (Tsung-Da's father) who moved out of her house.

- | | | |
|---|-------------|---|
| 1 | Grandmother | Grandma is so sad. I am old...Pretty soon, I will die in my house and |
| 2 | | nobody will know, just like other old people who live alone |
| 3 | Tsung-Da | Grandma. Take it easy. I will ask my father to come home. |

Extract 4: An older mother is trying to persuade her son (Chao-Yuan) to tell his comatose father that the son will marry the woman preferred by the parents, but not by the son.

- | | | |
|---|-----------|--|
| 1 | Mother | Chao-Yuan, you should tell your father that you will marry Fu-Mei while |
| 2 | | he still has a breath. Quickly, say it. Tell your father. Chao-Yuan, you |
| 3 | | have to finish his wishes before he dies. If you tell him now, probably he |
| 4 | | can hear it and he will wake up. Quick... Tell your father that you will |
| 5 | | marry Fu-Mei... |
| 6 | Chao-Yuan | Father, I will marry Fu-Mei. Did you hear me? I will marry Fu-Mei |

Extracts 2 and 4 are typical in that older characters used death to make guilt appeals primarily in interactions with their family members in serious context (i.e., not humorous context). Young characters' needs and desires in these situations were secondary or neglected in order to fulfill older characters' expectations.

Similar to the *death/control* theme, the theme of *death/despondence* was mainly exhibited by the older characters in the interaction. Extract 2 above and Extracts 5 and 6 below illustrate this theme.

Extract 5: A father (Chin-Chuan) is explaining to his daughter-in-law (Hsiu-Yueh) why he is unable to help her with problems within the family.

- | | | |
|---|------------|---|
| 1 | Chin-Chuan | I am old and sick. As you are aware, I am not the head of this family |
| 2 | | anymore? |
| 3 | Hsiu-Yueh | I understand... |

Extract 6: A company male president is complaining about his family life to a middle-aged female manager.

- | | | |
|---|-----------|--|
| 1 | President | ...Both money and career are unable to bring me a warm family. Even my |
| 2 | | wife won't stay around me in my old age. What can I expect from the |
| 3 | | remainder of my life? |
| 4 | Manager | President, don't feel this way... |

Extracts 2, 5 and 6 demonstrate how older characters expressed their sadness about the consequences of aging such as loss of influence (line 1-2, extract 5) and disappointment with family (line 1-3, extract 6). On the other hand, younger characters coped with this type of talk by offering

comforting comments by showing understanding (line 3, extract 5; line 4, extract 6) and providing supportive comments to ease older characters' worries (line 3, extract 2). Some younger characters tried to avoid the talk of death by ignoring the topic or shifting to other communication topics. No younger characters expressed negative feelings or exhibited negative communication behaviors towards this talk of death. Together, the themes of death/control and despondence reflect negative views of aging on the part of older characters, but they also show older characters using the consequences of aging to control others.

Intergenerational Themes of Younger Characters. Caring was expressed in younger characters' concerns for older characters' emotional or physical health.

Extract 13: A son (Sheng-Chih), seeing his mother watering the vegetables, says:

- | | | |
|---|------------|---|
| 1 | Sheng-Chih | Mom, let me water. You go there and take a rest. |
| 2 | Mother | It is okay. I can do it. |
| 3 | Sheng-Chih | Mom, take a rest. Do you know that your dowager's back is getting |
| 4 | | worse? |

Extract 14: A daughter-in-law (Hsiu-Yueh) is pushing her older father-in-law in a wheel chair at the park and asks him:

- | | | |
|---|---------------|--|
| 1 | Hsiu-Yueh | Father, are you tired? Do you want to go home and take a rest? |
| 2 | Father-in-law | No, let me stay outside for a little bit longer. |
| 3 | Hsiu-Yueh | Do you feel cold? Is the wind too strong for you? |
| 4 | Father-in-law | It is okay for me. |

In these and similar interactions, younger characters showed great concern for older characters' and physical well-being through offers of assistance (line 1, extract 13) and solicitous questions (lines 1 and 3, extract 14).

The theme of *respect* for elders permeated the majority of intergenerational interactions in both family and non-family contexts. Younger characters demonstrated their respect in numerous ways, such as expressing their concerns about older characters' well-being (e.g., extracts 13 and 14), seeking their advice about important decisions (e.g., extract 7), and obeying their wishes (e.g., extract 12), even when obedience required sacrificing the younger characters' own needs, interests, or happiness (e.g., extract 4).

In a few instances, however, younger characters used the theme of "*lao hu tu*" (old and confused to stereotype older characters). The following extracts reveal this theme in both implicit and explicit ways.

Extract 15: A retired professor is complaining to a younger man about his students' attendance.

- | | | |
|---|-----------|---|
| 1 | Professor | These days are different than before. I told my students yesterday. I don't |
| 2 | | take roll in my class. They can decide whether they come to class or not. |
| 4 | Man | What happened then? |
| 5 | Professor | Nobody showed up. I felt strange. So I went to see the director, and asked |
| 6 | | him if I went to the wrong classroom. |
| 7 | Man | Did you go to the wrong school? [referring to <i>lao hu tu</i>] |

Extract 16: An older adult (Tien-Yow) is talking about his business situation to his younger girlfriend (Li-Ching).

- 1 Tien-Yow I have heard that Tong-Hai is going back to Taiwan to take over the
2
3 lumber market. That is why I mentioned to Kuen-San that he should look
4 for someone who has the potential to be trained...
- 5 Li-Ching You really are "*lao hu tu*". You are afraid Tong-Hai will take over the
6 lumber market, so why are you still supporting Da-Chun's (Tong-Hai's
7 son) in running for the head of the Lumber Council?

In Taiwan, the phrase "*lao hu tu*" is used to express a range of feelings toward older adults from teasing to disagreement. However, it is seldom used if the older adult shows evidence of cognitive decline or senility. The examples in the programs conformed to this standard. "*Lao hu tu*" was implicitly referenced in a joking fashion by the younger character in Extract 15 to suggest that the older professor was so forgetful that he went to the wrong school (line 7, extract 15). In Extract 16 it was stated explicitly by the businessman's girlfriend to indicate her disdain for his decision (line 5, extract 16).

Discussion

This study employed content analysis and thematic analysis to provide a more comprehensive picture of the portrayal of aging in Taiwanese programming. The content analysis provided partial support for our hypotheses regarding the prevalence and portrayal of older characters, but also highlighted how those issues reflected unique aspects of the Taiwanese culture. The thematic analysis of intergenerational communication provided critical insights into the characteristics of age talk and of the complexity of intergenerational communication that further illuminated the cultural context of Taiwanese television.

Images of aging on Taiwanese television

Results of this study of Taiwanese television were in some cases similar to those of previous studies conducted in the United States by confirming the pattern of low representation of older characters (as well as adolescent and child characters) in comparison to young adult and middle-aged characters (Robinson & Skill, 1995; Signorielli, 2004). Child (1%), adolescent (1%) and older characters (5%) were the most underrepresented groups on television. In addition, the screen time measure showed that older adults as a whole occupied 7 percent of the total broadcast time, indicating that the proportion of screen time allotted to older characters was nearly the same as the proportion of characters who were classified as older.

In a number of ways, however, results differed from prior research, highlighting the unique characteristics of the Taiwanese culture. First, older females were not significantly underrepresented in comparison with their male counterparts (by both measures of counts and screen time), whereas a consistent finding reported by U.S. investigators is that older females were seriously underrepresented on television in comparison with older males (Aronoff, 1974; Gerbner et al., 1980; Harwood & Anderson, 2002; Vernon et al., 1990). These findings are somewhat surprising and unexpected, given the commonly held cultural norms that older women in Chinese society occupy a lower status than older men (Mehta, 1997). One possible explanation is that the visibility on television may be a combined effect of the materialistic nature of a society and the program and target audience characteristics. Essentially, the selective nature of television programming makes it reflective and deflective of reality simultaneously. Second, although as predicted few older characters appeared in main roles, they were cast most often (84%) in supporting roles rather than in the minor roles (3%) hypothesized. In contrast, studies conducted in the U.S. have found that older characters were most likely to be cast in minor roles (Northcott, 1975; Robinson & Skill, 1995). Third, despite their low representation, when older characters appeared they were presented in a

relatively positive light. The older characters were depicted as cognitively alert and physically competent.

Age Salience and Age Talk on Taiwanese Television

Consistent with the findings in Western research (Harwood & Giles, 1992), the thematic analysis revealed that age was salient in the portrayal of intergenerational interactions involving older characters on Taiwanese prime-time television. Older characters disclosed their age and classified themselves as old people quite frequently.

One general observation with respect to the talk of aging on Taiwanese television was that older characters talked about aging using an egocentric, ritualized, and highly goal-oriented style. The talk of aging was predominantly initiated by older characters. Whereas talk of death is socially taboo in the U. S. (Sexton, 1997), the Taiwanese older characters explicitly referenced their own death in conversation. Further, the older characters used talk of death as a control strategy with younger characters. There was one consistent sequence used by the older characters to deliver this type of talk. First, older characters mentioned with regret that they were old and dying. Then, they asked for help to fulfill their dying wishes from younger characters, who were then shown agreeing to provide that help. The talk of aging on Taiwanese television reflected older characters' negative views about age and aging processes, on one hand, but, on the other hand, showed them martialling those views strategically to impose their will on younger characters. Ironically, their declarations of powerlessness in the face of age and death promoted their power over younger characters, reinforcing the age hierarchy in the Taiwanese culture.

Filial Piety, Age Hierarchy and Age Stereotypes on Taiwanese Television

The communication behaviors portrayed in the intergenerational interactions on Taiwanese prime-time television strongly endorsed the traditional value of filial piety. As Ho (1996) stated, "The

attributes of intergenerational relationships governed by filial piety are structural, enduring, and invariable across situations within Chinese culture” (p. 155). Older characters were portrayed as supportive and controlling authority figures with higher status and more power than younger characters, often simply by virtue of their age. Younger characters were portrayed responding to these older authority figures with the politeness and obedience consistent with their lower status as “young”.

At first glance, these findings indicate that older characters are presented in a quite positive light on Taiwanese television (i.e., influential, powerful, cognitively alert, and healthy, and respected by other characters). However, this conclusion would be only partially correct. A full consideration of the results reveals that the portrayal of intergenerational interactions on Taiwanese television can be characterized as unidimensional and incomplete in that it reinforces age hierarchy and age stereotypes.

First, our results show that Taiwanese television presents blind obedience from younger people to their parents and grandparents as the norm, even when the demands of the older family members are unreasonable or delivered in a patronizing manner (e.g., “Father, I will marry Fu-Mei...”, extract 4). This type of blind obedience is also known as *Yu Xiao* (foolish filial piety) in Chinese culture (Ho, 1996). At times, older characters mentioned the sacrifices they made for their younger family members, which entailed an obligation on the part of younger characters. Younger characters’ comments often echoed this notion of an obligatory relationship between young and old. Younger characters in these situations appeared powerless: The only thing they could do was to obey absolutely and give up their own happiness, which was integrated into and promoted in Taiwanese drama programming (see also Lay et al., 2001). By presenting blind obedience of young people to the wishes of their elders as the norm, the portrayal of intergenerational interactions on Taiwanese television not only reinforced the traditional age hierarchy, but also reinforced an extreme interpretation of the behavior required by filial piety.

Viewers of the shows analyzed in this study might conclude that filial piety means that aged persons should be revered regardless of their manner of address or the substance of their requests.

These portrayals do not reflect the shift in cultural values that has occurred in Chinese and other East Asian cultures. Although respect of elders remains a central value in Chinese societies such as Taiwan, absolute obedience to elders has become less valued, especially by young people, as social and economic values from the West have been introduced. For example, Zhang and Hummert (2001) reported that although younger adults endorsed the concept of elder respect, they also expressed a desire for equal status with older adults in intergenerational interactions. It seems that respecting older persons, but not necessarily obeying them blindly is a new cultural protocol in Chinese societies.

This study revealed that culture is an important factor in the portrayals of prevalence and role prominence of older adults, aging talk, and intergenerational communication on Taiwanese television (Zhang et al., 2006). Although underrepresented, in the world of Taiwanese television, being old was associated with a higher social status, abundant life experiences, and the ability to exert interpersonal control, and thus is portrayed in a rather positive light. This portrayal of older adults, however, propagates the view that they have absolute authority over younger family members, thus reinforcing age hierarchy and age stereotypes. By conducting both a content analysis to examine patterns of age representation (i.e., who is on TV, what are their traits, what are their roles, etc.) and a thematic analysis to examine the nature of the intergenerational interactions (i.e., what does the talk reveal about how age is enacted, about expectations for intergenerational behavior, etc.), this study provided a more complete understanding of the portrayal of intergenerational communication on Taiwanese television than would be achieved by either analytic method in isolation.

Limitations and Future Research

One of the limitations of this study relates to the sample of programs analyzed. It examined only drama programs from the prime-time segment and these programs were selected using a systematic, not random, approach. On a similar note, only the fictional dialogues between older adults and younger characters in this sample of programs were included in the thematic analysis. As in any other content analysis study, these sampling decisions may limit the scope of generalization for the findings of this study.

To gain a complete understanding of how older adults are portrayed on Taiwanese television, future research should continue to examine the aging image represented in different program genres or in different time segments to see if there is a particular genre of program featuring more older characters than the others, or if there is a difference in the quality of portrayal (e.g., stereotype portrayal) in different program genres. For advertising purposes, it is worth examining if there is a particular time segment featuring older characters than the other.

Future research should continue to combine different research approaches to study how older adults are characterized on television, how they talk about aging, and how characters use age talk as a persuasive mechanism to achieve their age identity and communication goals.

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Table 1

Character age distribution by character sex

Age	Male	Female	Total
	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Child (12 or under)	10 (0.60%)	9 (0.52%)	19 (1%)
Adolescent (13-19)	7 (0.40%)	12 (0.69%)	19 (1%)
Young Adult (20-39)	582 (33.83%)	396 (23.02%)	978 (57%)
Middle-Aged (40-59)	397 (23.08%)	222 (12.90%)	619 (36%)
Older Adults (60 or above)	51 (2.96%)	34 (2.00%)	85 (5%)
Total	1047 (60.87%)	673 (39.13%)	1720 (100%)

Table 2

Characters' role distribution across age groups

	12 or under	13-19	20-39	40-59	60 and over
Role	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)	N (%)
Main	0 (0%)	1 (5.2%)	213 (21.8%)	123 (19.9%)	11 (13.0%)
Supporting	1 (5.3%)	9 (47.4%)	474 (48.4%)	369 (59.6%)	71 (83.5 %)
Minor	18 (94.7%)	9 (47.4%)	291 (29.8%)	127 (20.5%)	3 (3.5%)
Total	19	19	978	619	85

Note. The characters age 12 or under were excluded in the analyses.

Columns total to 100%