



TRADITIONS, BELIEFS, AND IDENTITY: CHINESE CULTURE IN FRESH OFF THE BOAT

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| <p>Info Article</p> <p>Received : 12 Agustus 2025</p> <p>Revised : 10 September 2025</p> <p>Accepted : 15 Oktober 2025</p> <p>Publication : 30 Oktober 2025</p> | <p>Abstract: <i>The aim of this research is to identify and interpret signs of Chinese culture as manifested in the character of Jessica Huang. This study utilizes a descriptive qualitative approach. Data were collected through a comprehensive analysis of all 13 episodes from the first season of the series. Using Fiske's three-level semiotic framework, reality, representation, and ideology, the study examines how cultural signs are encoded through Jessica's actions, language, clothing, and behavioral traits. Specific attention is given to cultural elements such as traditional utensils, attire, rituals, beliefs, linguistic features, communication styles, and frugality, as portrayed in the episodes. Findings indicate that Jessica Huang embodies both authentic cultural expressions and recurring stereotypes, contributing to a complex portrayal of Chinese culture in the American media landscape. The study underscores the role of television in constructing cultural meaning and demonstrates the value of semiotic analysis in unpacking the layered representations within popular media texts.</i></p> |
| <p>Keywords: Chinese Culture, Fresh Off The Boat, Semiotics</p> <p>Kata Kunci: Budaya Tionghoa, Fresh off the Boat, Semiotika</p> | <p>Abstrak: Tujuan dari penelitian ini adalah untuk mengidentifikasi dan menafsirkan penanda budaya Tionghoa yang termanifestasikan melalui karakter Jessica Huang. Penelitian ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif deskriptif. Data dikumpulkan melalui analisis menyeluruh terhadap 13 episode dari musim pertama serial ini. Dengan menggunakan kerangka kerja semiotika tiga tingkat dari Fiske yaitu realitas, representasi, dan ideology, penelitian ini menelaah bagaimana tanda-tanda budaya dikodekan melalui tindakan, bahasa, pakaian, dan sifat-sifat perilaku Jessica. Analisis terutama dikhususkan pada elemen-elemen budaya seperti peralatan tradisional, busana, ritual, kepercayaan, ciri kebahasaan, gaya komunikasi, dan sifat hemat yang ditampilkan dalam episode-episode tersebut. Temuan penelitian ini menunjukkan bahwa Jessica Huang mewujudkan ekspresi budaya yang otentik sekaligus stereotip yang berulang, sehingga memberikan gambaran kompleks tentang budaya Tionghoa dalam lanskap media Amerika. Penelitian ini menegaskan peran televisi dalam membangun makna budaya dan menunjukkan nilai analisis semiotik dalam mengungkap representasi berlapis dalam teks media populer.</p> |
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INTRODUCTION

Television, as a prominent form of cultural production, plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of ethnicity, identity, and cultural values. More than just entertainment, it serves as a medium through which ideologies are constructed, contested, and circulated (Hall et al, 2024). In multicultural societies like the United States, television narratives often reflect and influence how immigrant communities are viewed, experienced, and understood. These portrayals are embedded with symbolic representations that speak to broader issues of belonging, identity negotiation, and cultural adaptation. Within this context, the depiction of Chinese culture in American media has undergone significant transformation.

Chinese civilization, with its roots along the Yellow River and a history spanning millennia, is rich in philosophical traditions, mythology, and social practices (Chan & Lau, 2020). Through centuries of migration, Chinese cultural values have extended globally, becoming deeply embedded in diasporic communities. In the U.S, Chinese-American representations have historically been shaped by limited and often stereotypical media portrayals, such as the “model minority” narrative, which portrays Asian Americans as industrious, disciplined, and academically successful (Yu, 2024).

Although the “model minority” stereotype was initially used to emphasize positive traits, it has also served to homogenize diverse experiences and obscure social challenges. In recent years, efforts to portray more nuanced and authentic Chinese-American identities have emerged, particularly across digital and broadcast platforms. However, concerns around stereotyping and cultural misrepresentation persist. Accurate and multidimensional portrayals are essential not only for combating prejudice but also for fostering empathy, affirming identity, and promoting intercultural understanding.

One notable example of Chinese-American representation in popular media is the television series *Fresh off the Boat*, adapted from Eddie Huang’s 2013 memoir. Airing from 2015 to 2020 on ABC, the show follows the Huang family, a Taiwanese-Chinese-American household, as they relocate from Washington, D.C., to suburban Orlando in the 1990s. The series offers a humorous yet pointed depiction of immigrant life, assimilation, and cultural friction. Central to this narrative is Jessica Huang, the strong-willed family matriarch, whose parenting style, worldview, and cultural sensibilities provide insight into the complexities of preserving one’s heritage in a new cultural environment.

Jessica's character functions as a lens through which broader themes of cultural identity and negotiation are explored. Her insistence on educational excellence, emphasis on frugality, and commitment to traditional values illustrate both her efforts to uphold Chinese cultural principles and the tensions that arise in doing so. As the show progresses, Jessica navigates various cultural dilemmas from clashing communication styles to intergenerational expectations, highlighting the challenges faced by many first-generation immigrant parents seeking to retain their heritage while raising children in a different cultural context.

While existing research has explored Chinese culture in film, animation, and historical narratives (Shafira & Rui, 2023; Qian & Tang, 2023), fewer studies have analyzed Chinese culture in American television sitcoms, particularly those that focus on everyday immigrant experiences (Chen, 2023; Chen et al, 2023; Hang & Thanh, 2018; Xinyi, 2024). Television series, unlike films, offer longitudinal storytelling that allows characters and cultural dynamics to evolve over time. This makes them especially valuable for cultural analysis, as they capture subtle changes and negotiations that unfold within ordinary domestic and social life (Hall et al, 2024).

To address this gap, the present study examines Chinese culture through the character of Jessica Huang in the first season of *Fresh Off the Boat*. Employing John Fiske's semiotic theory which analyzes media at the levels of reality, representation, and ideology. Hence, this research investigates how Chinese cultural signs are encoded and communicated through Jessica's characterization. Specifically, it seeks to answer two questions: (1) What semiotic signs and codes are used in Jessica Huang's characterization to represent Chinese cultural values? (2) How is Chinese culture represented through Jessica Huang's character in the series?

METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach, applying Fiske's semiotic analysis to examine how *Fresh of the Boat* season 1 represents Chinese culture through the character Jessica Huang. Semiotic analysis focuses on signs and their meanings, making it suitable for analyzing visual media.

Selected screenshots from all 13 episodes were used as primary data, each interpreted narratively through descriptive sentences following Creswell's (2014) guidelines for qualitative analysis. Secondary data included scholarly articles and books

relevant to cultural representation and semiotics, which supported the interpretation process and added theoretical depth. The study focused on key elements such as visual cues, language use, clothing, setting, and cultural practices that reflect Chinese identity.

Data collection was carried out through observation and documentation, offering real-time, context-rich materials for analysis. Thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Braun & Clark, 2012) was employed to identify recurring patterns and themes within the data, allowing for a structured presentation of findings. This method facilitated an in-depth understanding of cultural representation embedded within the narrative and visual elements of the series.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Several cultural elements found in Season 1 include symbolic traditions, traditional beliefs, frugal behavior, traditional cuisine, traditional medicine, values, and norms. This is illustrated through the following table.

Table 1. Elements and Episodes

| <i>Elements</i> | <i>Episodes</i> |
|----------------------|---|
| Symbolic Tradition | Episode 1 Pilot |
| | Episode 4 Success Perm |
| | Episode 9 License to Sell |
| Traditional Belief | Episode 11 Very Superstitious |
| | Episode 13 So Chineez |
| | Episode 1 Pilot |
| Frugality | Episode 2 Home Sweet Home |
| | Episode 4 Success Perm |
| | Episode 5 Persistent Romeo |
| | Episode 6 Fajita Man |
| | Episode 7 Showdown at the Golden Saddle |
| | Episode 8 Phillip Goldstein |
| | Episode 11 Very Superstitious |
| Traditional Cuisine | Episode 12 Dribbling Tiger |
| | Episode 1 Pilot |
| | Episode 3 The Shunning |
| Traditional Medicine | Episode 13 So Chineez |
| | Episode 10 Blind Spot |
| | Episode 11 Very Superstitious |
| Values | Episode 1 Pilot |
| | Episode 2 Home Sweet Home |
| | Episode 5 Persistent Romeo |
| Norms | Episode 8 Phillip Goldstein |
| | Episode 1 Pilot |
| | Episode 13 So Chineez |

Symbolic Tradition

Chinese culture emphasizes the significance of symbolism that symbolizes riches, happiness, longevity, prosperity, and good fortune (Wang, 2001). A symbol is a distinctive sign structure that signifies the sacredness and polysemy of a specific cultural phenomenon. It is a culturological constant that generates meaning, facilitating the reflection, consolidation, and transmission of a value or ideal in a sensually perceived image (Fung Kei, 2021).



Figure 1. Jessica uses round table as a place to eat with family
Episode 1 minute 05:36 – 05:51

This element of symbolic tradition appears in episodes 1, 4, and 9. In episode 1, there is a scene showing Jessica using a round table placed in the kitchen and dining room as a place to eat. The round table itself in Chinese culture signifies that when eating together, social status is not considered. In Chinese culture, dining at a round table symbolizes equality, as its circular shape ensures that no individual's social status, whether high or low, stands out during the shared meal (Li & Ye, 2020).

In episode 4, Jessica and Louis are shown placing a fake lemon tree in their house to give the impression of wealth and luxury. Meanwhile, in episode 9, Jessica shows a keychain with the Chinese inscription “fācái” (发财), meaning "Get Rich," in bright gold and red colors which is a combination culturally associated with prosperity and good fortune to her colleague from Sunshine Realty.

Although symbolic cultural elements are found in all three episodes, this study focuses only on analyzing data from episode 1. This decision is based on the limitation of space within the scope of this research, which requires a narrowed focus to allow for deeper analysis. Episode 1 is selected because it provides a clear and culturally rich depiction of symbolic meaning through an everyday domestic object, the round table, making it both representative and analytically significant.

Jessica represents Chinese culture through simple elements, one of which is the use of a fake lemon tree in the house that has symbolic meaning. In Chinese culture, dining at a round table symbolizes equality, as its circular shape ensures that no individual's social status, whether high or low, stands out during the shared meal (Li & Ye, 2020). Although living in a multicultural environment, Jessica adheres to traditionalism by maintaining the use of symbolically meaningful furniture as an effort to preserve her cultural heritage.

Traditional Belief

Traditional beliefs in Chinese culture are an important foundation that shapes the society's perspective on life, death, family, and human relationships. This belief system is not only rooted in major religions such as Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, but also in local practices and ancestral heritage passed down through generations. One of the most significant world religions is Buddhism. Siddhartha Gautama's teachings in the sixth century B.C.E. in India are the source of its origins. In the subsequent years, it disseminated to the majority of Asia via China, Korea, and Japan, and ultimately to the West Yu (Agarwal, 2015).



Figure 2. Jessica refused to sell the house
Episode 11 minute 01:07 – 01:23

This element of traditional cutlery appears in episodes 11 and 13. In episode 11, there are several scenes showing Jessica avoiding the number 4, such as in the first scene where she is offered to sell a house with the address "44 West 44th Street," where, in Chinese culture, the number 4 is considered unlucky because its pronunciation is similar to the word for "death" (死 – sǐ) in Mandarin. Meanwhile, in episode 13 is Jessica put a picture of Buddha on her wall to strengthen her belief in Buddhism.

Although both episodes contain visual representations of traditional beliefs, this study focuses solely on the analysis of episode 11. The decision is based on space limitations and the need to maintain a focused analysis. Episode 11 is chosen because it

illustrates a culturally specific belief deeply embedded in everyday life, namely tetraphobia (fear of the number 4), which offers a rich and contextually grounded example for semiotic interpretation.

In a scene set in a real estate agency office, Jessica wears a formal red dress that symbolically represents good luck in Chinese culture while maintaining a natural makeup look that reflects simplicity and traditional values. Even though she was in a professional workspace, Jessica displayed behavior that reflected ancestral beliefs by firmly rejecting the offer to sell the house numbered 44. This number in Chinese culture is associated with death and considered unlucky. Her spontaneous and emotional reaction, demonstrated through gestures of throwing away documents and expressions of fear, affirms that this belief is not merely symbolic but still alive in daily practices.

This scene emphasizes that the representation of Chinese culture is not only displayed through symbols but also through behavior and belief systems that are alive in the characters' actions. Through Jessica, the audience is shown how traditional values remain a guide in decision-making even in a modern environment

Frugality

Frugality has deeply rooted itself in Chinese society. Research shows that from 1979 to 2015, the official discourse on frugality in China has evolved, yet it has maintained its essence as an important cultural value. Although there was a transformation from a planned economy to a market economy, the value of frugality was maintained to adapt to the political and economic conditions of the time. Thus, understanding frugality in the context of Chinese culture helps us see how this value influences individual behavior and overall social dynamics.

The element of frugality is depicted in numerous episodes of this series, including episodes 1, 2, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 11, and 12. In episode 2, Jessica's frugality in her daily life is highlighted through several scenes—for example, when she limits the use of ingredients at her husband's restaurant by using only a single sprig of parsley for a dish. She is also shown meticulously checking the expiration dates on restaurant coupons and plugging half the holes in the pepper shaker to minimize usage, as the restaurant had not yet turned a profit in its first month of operation.

Although this cultural value appears in multiple episodes, this study focuses solely on analyzing episode 2. This decision is based on limitations of space, the need for a focused and in-depth analysis, and the risk of redundancy that may arise from analyzing

similar patterns repeated across different episodes. Episode 2 is selected because it offers a vivid and concentrated representation of frugality, making it an ideal episode for semiotic interpretation of this cultural value.



Figure 4.a. Jessica told Nancy that the coupon was expired



Figure 4.b Jessica admonished the waiter to use parsley



Figure 4.c Jessica told Louis that the restaurant was not profitable

In this scene, Jessica's behavior of strictly controlling the restaurant's expenses, such as using only one piece of parsley to decorate food, double-checking expired coupons, and plugging holes in pepper containers, reflects the ideology of capitalism in the form of microeconomic practices. These actions show that Jessica adopts the principles of efficiency, economic rationality, and resource optimization to sustain her business.

As a representation of an Asian-American family, Jessica's value of frugality reflects how the principles of capitalism are applied at the business level. In her profit-oriented restaurant business within a capitalist system, she fulfills the roles of both a mother and a profit manager. Thus, the ideology of capitalism is evident in how Jessica manages minimal resources to achieve maximum profit.

Traditional Cuisine



Figure 5. Jessica cooked traditional food

Source: Episode 13 “So ChineeZ” minute 07:25 – 08:12

China, as a vast country, has a long history spanning more than 5,000 years. The dissemination of culinary culture in China, as a form of culture and art, has its own scientific value in studying artistic clues. Traditional Chinese cuisine is an important part of the cultural heritage of this nation, deeply rooted in history, philosophy, and regional diversity over centuries.

The traditional Chinese food element in the series appears in several episodes, namely episodes 1, 3, and 13. In episode 1, there is a scene where Jessica provides her children, including Eddie, with traditional Chinese food in the form of noodles to take to school. Then in episode 3, Jessica makes a Chinese dish called stinky tofu to eat with her friend, Honey, when they watch a movie together. Meanwhile, in episode 13, a variety of Chinese food is shown, such as the baozi (包子) and youtiao (油条) that Jessica prepares as breakfast for her children before school; the chicken leg dish she cooks for dinner; and the thousand-year egg she plans to buy.

Although all three episodes feature different traditional food elements, this study only analyzes data from episode 13. This decision is based on two main considerations: firstly, the limited space in this study requires the analysis to be focused on one main piece of data in order to provide a more in-depth and targeted discussion; and secondly, episode 13 presents a wider variety of food types and cultural contexts than the other two episodes, thus providing the potential for a richer semiotic analysis. Therefore, the discussion is focused on the data contained in episode 13.

In this scene, Jessica is wearing a blue cheongsam and natural makeup while cooking baozi and youtiao for her children, showing her pride in Chinese culture and her efforts to preserve traditions. With a medium shot and natural lighting, a warm

atmosphere is created that strengthens the emotional connection with ancestral culture. At the ideological level, this scene promotes traditionalism, emphasizing that food is an important means to strengthen cultural identity and maintain the continuity of values amidst modernization.

Traditional Medicine

Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) is a medicinal knowledge system established by the Chinese. This technique emphasizes attaining equilibrium between humanity and the natural world. This encompasses visual data, cognitive tasks, utilization of natural resources, and physiological health regulation (Ma et al., 2021).

This element of traditional medicine appears in episodes 10 and 11. In episode 10, a scene is shown where Jessica gives white flower oil to her son, Evan, who is suffering from chickenpox. The administration of this medicine reflects the use of traditional medicine in the Huang family as part of their efforts to address health issues.



Figure 6. Jessica used white flower oil
Episode 10 “Blind Spot” minute 05:22 – 05:34

Meanwhile, in episode 11, a similar use of white flower oil is also depicted when Jessica heals Eddie's hand after he trips on the cord of the mechanical bull in Louis's restaurant. However, only the data from episode 10 is selected for analysis. This decision is based on two considerations: first, the limitation of space in this study requires a focused and in-depth discussion of the most representative data; and second, analyzing both scenes may lead to redundancy, as they convey similar meanings without offering significant variation in context or symbolic depth. Therefore, to maintain clarity and analytical sharpness, this study focuses on the data presented in episode 10.

The scene where Jessica applies white flower oil to Evan shows how the values of Traditional Chinese Medicine (TCM) are still highly regarded in the daily lives of Asian-American families. Jessica chose traditional medicine as a form of a mother's love and care, and it also reflects her belief in a cultural heritage that she considers still relevant.

The medium shot in this scene emphasizes the emotional closeness between mother and child, reinforcing the idea that traditional practices are an important part of the family's identity. The ideology of traditionalism is clearly visible when Jessica relies more on white flower oil than modern medical services, showing her belief that ancestral methods are still effective to this era.

Values

In Chinese culture, values become an important foundation that shapes the way of thinking, acting, and interacting in daily life. Values such as harmony (和), respect for parents and ancestors (孝, xiao), hard work, and frugality (节俭, jie jian) serve as life guidelines passed down through generations. In Confucian moral philosophy, the principles of Ren (仁, benevolence) and Li (礼, ritual propriety) were fundamental, regulating personal conduct and social interactions. These values were profoundly ingrained in the rituals and culture of China (Din, 2024). Understanding these values is crucial for interpreting how Chinese culture is reflected in daily communication and behavior.

The element of value appears in most episodes of this series; there are episodes 1, 2, 5, 8, and 13. In episode 5 with the title “Persistent Romeo”, Jessica did not apologize to her son Eddie after hitting him with a large doll because she felt there was no need to apologize to the child born from her womb.



Figure 7. Jessica refused to apologize to Eddie
Episode 5 minute 19:36 – 19:53

Although multiple episodes depict the presence of Chinese cultural values, this study focuses solely on episode 5. The choice is based on limitations of space and the need to maintain analytical focus. Episode 5 is selected because it offers a strong and explicit representation of the value of filial respect and authority within the family structure, making it a relevant and rich example for a semiotic analysis of Chinese cultural values.

This scene reflects the values of Confucianism, particularly the principle of filial piety, or respect for parents. Jessica shows a traditional view that as a parent—who has given birth to and raised her child—she is in a position where she does not need to apologize to her child, even when she makes a mistake. This ideology places parents as figures who are respected, and children have an obligation to respect them unconditionally. Although this causes emotional conflict with Eddie, for Jessica, maintaining the family hierarchy is an important part of the moral values and etiquette that must be upheld. This view aligns with Confucian teachings that emphasize the importance of an orderly social structure, the role of parents as holders of moral authority, and children's obedience as a form of respect and gratitude for their parents' sacrifices.

Norms

In Chinese culture, social norms play an important role in shaping individual behavior and maintaining societal harmony. These norms include unwritten rules that govern how one behaves in the context of family, community, and business. For example, Chan & Lau (2020) shows that Confucian values, such as trust and interpersonal justice, significantly contribute to the work ethic of civil servants in China.

These norms are often based on Confucian teachings that emphasize the importance of interpersonal relationships, moral obligations, and social stability. Understanding these norms is important for comprehending communication patterns, interactions, and decision-making in Chinese society.

The element of norms appears in most episodes of this series; there are episodes 1 and 13. In episode 13, titled "So Chineez." In this episode Jessica changed many rules at home, such as no shoes in the house, having to use Mandarin more often, and enrolling all her children in Mandarin courses.



Figure 8. Jessica ruled the house
Episode 13 minute 07:33 – 08:06

Although both episodes contain meaningful depictions of Chinese social norms, this study focuses solely on episode 13. This decision is made due to limitations of space, the need for focused analysis, and the greater density of relevant data found in that episode. Episode 13 provides a concentrated portrayal of how Chinese social norms are consciously reinforced within the family setting, making it a strong and comprehensive source for semiotic analysis.

In this scene, Jessica represents Chinese culture by changing the house rules to instill cultural norms in her children, such as not wearing shoes indoors, using Mandarin more often, and requiring them to take Mandarin courses. These actions reflect Confucian values, particularly the importance of parental roles in morally educating children and preserving family cultural heritage, so that even while living in a Western environment, her children continue to appreciate and not forget their Chinese cultural identity.

CONCLUSION

This study finds that Jessica Huang's character in *Fresh off the Boat* effectively represents Chinese cultural identity through a range of visual, verbal, and behavioral signs. These include her traditional clothing, use of Mandarin, parenting style, household practices, and adherence to symbolic traditions and beliefs. Each of these elements reinforces her deep connection to ancestral values despite living in a modern American setting.

The use of medium shots, warm lighting, and naturalistic scenes enhances the cultural authenticity of her portrayal. Jessica embodies Confucian principles such as filial piety, hierarchy, and traditionalism, which guide her actions and decisions throughout the series.

This semiotic analysis demonstrates how immigrant identities are constructed and maintained through media representations. Jessica's character becomes a meaningful site where cultural preservation and adaptation are portrayed simultaneously, offering a nuanced perspective on Chinese-American identity.

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