

# //↗ you need to be RUTHless //: Entertaining Cross-cultural Differences

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This paper presents an analysis of the potential problems of importing media communication in the form of a television programme from another culture. In Hong Kong, as elsewhere in the world, the local television companies frequently buy successful television programmes from, for example, the USA or Britain with the expectation that they will be similarly successful in Hong Kong. One such example in Hong Kong was a quiz show that was bought from a British television company and then replicated in Hong Kong using local Hong Kong Chinese as the contestants and quiz show host. This show has been a huge success in Britain and it was anticipated that this success would be repeated in Hong Kong by following exactly the same format and presentation. In fact, this did not turn out to be the case. Our analysis helps to reveal the problems experienced and a cross-cultural analysis offers explanations for them. It is shown that media communication can be perceived very differently across different cultures and the findings demonstrate that a better understanding of the dynamics of cross-cultural and intercultural communication would be useful for our television programmers and others working in the mass media.

本文分析以電視節目形式從另一文化引入傳播媒介之潛在問題。與其他國家相同，香港的電視台購入和播放外地製作的電視節目，深受香港電視觀眾歡迎。但當其中一個電視台購入一個英國製作的問答遊戲節目，以同一模式進行，但主持人和參加者均為香港人，節目播出後惡評如潮。研究結果顯示不同文化對傳播媒介之觀感可有極大之差別，並且證明深入理解多種文化及不同文化間溝通之模式對電視節目製作人及其他傳媒工作者是有幫助的。

**Keywords:** *The Weakest Link*, cross-cultural communication, media communication, discourse intonation, quiz show in Hong Kong

## Introduction

There is a popular quiz show in Britain called *The Weakest Link*, which is produced by the BBC. Hosted by Anne Robinson, the show features eight contestants who answer questions as a team and vote off the 'weakest link' at the end of each round. The two remaining contestants compete head-to-head until one person wins the game. As commented on the Quiz Players website, the quiz show is regarded as 'an interesting concept' as it 'detracts from the friendly, consolation-prize based culture that has been around for many years'. After a number of successful seasons in Britain, the BBC has marketed the show overseas, and in 2001 it was sold to NBC in America and a Hong Kong television company (TVB). In fact, Hong

Kong was the first Asian buyer of this particular quiz show. In the deal, it was stipulated that the Hong Kong version of the show had to follow exactly the same format and presentation as the British version, except that the show was given a Chinese name with the word *out* used as a verb (jet7 bet7 out siu1, translated literally, it means 'Completely Wiped Out'). Nothing remarkable about this one might think. After all, television shows are bought and sold around the world all the time in this age of globalisation.

*The Weakest Link*, however, is not typical of quiz shows in which contestants usually compete in various ways to win cash or other prizes watched over by a supportive or at least benign or impartial quiz show host. In fact, in Britain, at a maximum of just £10,000<sup>1</sup> (approximately US\$15,000) in prize money for the winner, *The Weakest Link* is neither about big winnings or magnificent prizes nor the tension and excitement that come with them. What makes *The Weakest Link* different, in fact what constitutes *The Weakest Link's* defining characteristic, is that the host is neither supportive nor benign. In *The Weakest Link* the host is as nasty as she is pivotal to the whole show. Her role is to belittle, humiliate, intimidate, berate, insult, deride and ridicule the contestants, and to incite disharmony and criticism among and between the contestants.<sup>2</sup> All this is done in the original British version of the show by a middle-aged woman, Anne Robinson, dressed in black complete with a black leather coat, who seems to be both dominatrix and nightmare school teacher rolled into one. This is no accident, as the creators of the show, Fintan Coyle and Cathy Dunning, wanted the show to be a 'dark and menacing quiz show'.

What is so interesting about *The Weakest Link* is that in both Britain and the USA, it has received polarised reviews and ratings, as shown on the websites of BBC News, SurfWax and Rate It All. This is not surprising, given the 'ever-changing linguistic and cultural diversity in the United States' (Pan, n.d.: 1), and growingly so in Britain. As shown on the website of the BBC entertainment reviews, for instance, TV viewers who are in support of the show compliment the show as being 'fast paced and interesting' and 'great fun'; and the hostess being 'quick-witted', 'scary and hilarious', 'cruel without being vicious' and 'firm and uncompromising in her quest for perfection, yet gives praise when praise is deserved', and so on. Those who do not enjoy the quiz show criticise it as being 'absolutely pathetic' and 'cheap', and they detest the hostess's 'condescending, antagonistic approach', her rudeness, ignorance and racism. Others criticise the show as being unnatural and the hostess's insults being heavily scripted. However, while the show is not universally liked in Britain, *The Weakest Link* remains successful, having run for a number of years, and so appeals to a substantial British audience.

When the authors learned that *The Weakest Link* was to be imported in its entirety to Hong Kong, we were interested to see how this quiz show, which was unique in terms of the very mixed reviews and ratings in the UK and the USA, would be received by the viewers in Hong Kong who have quite different cultural expectations in communication and behavioural norms compared to those in the UK and the USA.

## Cultural Similarities and Differences between Britain and Hong Kong

The authors' doubts about whether *The Weakest Link* would be successful in Hong Kong were not based on our intuitions, but on a large number of cross-cultural and intercultural studies that have identified a range of differences between British and Chinese cultures among others. The work of Hall (1959, 1976), for example, describes 'high-context' and 'low-context' cultures. In a high-context culture, including much of the Middle East, Asia, Africa and South America, communication is covert and implicit; messages are internalised; there is a lot of nonverbal encoding; reactions are reserved; ingroups and outgroups are distinct; and interpersonal bonds are strong. Conversely, a low-context culture, including North America and much of Western Europe, is characterised by a preference for overt and explicit communication, plainly coded messages, verbalised details, plain reactions, flexible ingroups and outgroups, and fragile interpersonal bonds. Storti (1991), who draws heavily upon Hall's (1959, 1976) concept of high-context and low-context cultures, places the UK more than halfway towards the low-context end of the continuum, and China much more towards the high-context end.

Asian and Western cultures are believed to differ in their perceptions of interpersonal and social relationships. For instance, Asian cultures support the 'interdependent conception of the self' more than Western cultures (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994). The interdependent construal of self is more likely to pay attention to the group when forming opinions and attitudes, to attach importance to preserving their own and others' 'face', and emphasise harmony and cooperation in the in-group. The self's orientation to others' needs, wishes and expectations is essential to the development of the Chinese self (Gao, 1996; King & Bond, 1985; Sun, 1993). The importance of 'other' in defining the Chinese self is also reflected in cultural norms such as modesty and humility (Bond *et al.*, 1982), reserve and formality, as well as restraint and inhibition of strong feelings. Dissimilar to Asian cultures, Western cultures support the 'independent conception of the self' more than Asian cultures. The 'independent self' is more likely to be willing to enter into confrontation and competition, be willing to express open criticism, and be disposed to express individual, unpredictable views (Markus & Kitayama, 1991, 1994).

Hofstede's (1980, 1983, 1984, 1991, 1994) groundbreaking study of cultural differences in work-related value orientations, conducted in the late 1960s and early 1970s, surveyed approximately 100,000 IBM employees in over 50 countries. The study covered a worldwide scope, and the results showed the ways the cultures of these countries resemble and differ from each other. By providing four dimensions of culture, namely individualism–collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity–femininity, as well as numerical scores, Hofstede has provided both a theory for differences between national cultures and a way to cross-check those differences. The individualism–collectivism dimension, indicating how far a society focuses on self-reliance instead of group support, most distinctly differentiates Western cultures from Eastern cultures, and has been a focus in many East–West cross-cultural or intercultural studies (see, for example, Triandis *et al.*, 1993;

Yang & Bond, 1990). The power distance dimension is about the culture's belief regarding equal distribution of institutional power. Hofstede's (1991) ratings of 50 countries show that Hong Kong prefers medium power distance and medium collectivism, while the USA, Australia and Great Britain prefer a low power distance and individualism. The uncertainty avoidance dimension describes the relative cultural preference for and tolerance of ambiguity and change. Hofstede's study found that Hong Kong is much more tolerant of ambiguity and willing to accept change, dissent and deviance, compared to Australia and the USA. Great Britain is, however, not widely different from Hong Kong in uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1991). Finally, the masculinity–femininity dimension is about the degree to which a culture values such behaviours as assertiveness and the acquisition of wealth, or caring for others and the quality of life.

Bond (1986) researcher based in Hong Kong, developed cultural dimensions to better describe Confucian-based cultures such as those of China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Taiwan, Korea and Japan. These dimensions comprise the following:

- (1) Integration: a culture's social order and stability are based on unequal relationships. For example, ruler–subject, father–son, husband–wife, older brother–younger brother, senior friend–junior friend. The senior of the two provides protection and consideration while the junior owes the senior respect and obedience.
- (2) Human-heartedness: a preference for gentleness and compassion. This virtuous behaviour towards others consists of 'not treating others as one would not like to be treated oneself'.
- (3) Moral discipline: a sense of restraint and moderation. A person is not primarily an individual but a member of a family. Children must learn to restrain themselves to overcome their individuality so as to maintain harmony in the family (one's thoughts however remain free). Harmony is achieved through the maintenance of everybody's face (i.e. dignity, self-respect and prestige).
- (4) Confucian work dynamism: a long-term orientation towards life and work. People should be skilled, educated, hardworking, thrifty, modest, patient and persevering. (Bond, 1986)

The first three dimensions were found to be positively correlated with three of Hofstede's dimensions, namely integration with individualism–collectivism, human–heartedness with masculinity–femininity, and moral discipline with power distance. Confucian work dynamism, which was an 'extra' to Hofstede's dimension, was later incorporated into Hofstede's work. Non-Confucian-based cultures, such as Britain, according to Bond (1986), tend to emphasise other values such as individualism, open and frank debate, competitiveness and personal achievement.

Bearing in mind the above cross-cultural studies and the nature of the quiz show in question, we will now look in more detail at the British and Hong Kong versions of the show and the cultural values manifested in them.

## The Present Study

The study reported in this paper makes critical comparisons of the quiz show in Britain and that in Hong Kong as 'similar' communicative events, considering the restrictions placed on their presentation format and style, situated in diverse cultures. Specifically, the paper examines the relation between media and culture, and addresses the questions: 'What is the mediating role of culture? Does culture constrain the media, or do the media alter culture?' (White, 1983). The research methods adopted in this study were the qualitative textual analyses of extracts of data taken from the quiz shows, and the analysis of the communicative role of discourse intonation. The extracts used in the study are all orthographically and prosodically transcribed. The prosodic transcriptions were subjected to rigorous cross-checking involving three trained individuals in order to achieve inter-rater reliability.

## Discourse Intonation

The system used for the prosodic transcription is that of discourse intonation devised by Brazil (1985, 1997). This system is particularly useful for those seeking to describe the intonation of naturally occurring stretches of discourse as it allows for the analysis of intonational choices made by speakers within four subsystems: tone, prominence, key and termination. In the extracts, each of these intonational subsystems is indicated by various typographical means: prominence is shown by upper case letters; tone is indicated by the arrow(s) at the start of each tone unit; key and termination are identifiable by whether the text is above, on or below the line (i.e. high, mid and low respectively). The tone units are enclosed within double back slashes and the tonic syllable (typically the last prominent syllable in a tone unit), where the termination choice is made, is underlined.

According to Brazil (1997), each one of these four subsystems may add a different layer of information, and decisions concerning which of them to employ are made by speakers on the basis of their ongoing real-time assessment of the progress of the discourse. Within the prominence subsystem, speakers can choose to make a syllable(s) (and thus the word it is in) prominent and so indicate that it is an informative item in that particular context. In terms of tones, speakers can basically select between 'referring' (fall-rise/rise) or 'proclaiming' (fall/rise-fall) tones based on their perception at that point in the discourse as to whether the information is common ground between the participants or new. A speaker's choice of high, mid or low key serves to indicate contrastive, additive or equative information, respectively. Lastly, the choice of high, mid or low termination at the end of a speaker's utterance impacts the subsequent interaction so that high termination constrains the hearer to respond, mid termination imposes no constraint and low termination does not predict a response.

## Comparing British and Hong Kong Versions of the Quiz Show

Despite many similarities, from the outset, there were three significant differences between the two versions of the show. First of all, the Hong Kong version is in Cantonese, the predominant dialect of the Chinese in Hong Kong. In Hong Kong, they chose a younger female host for the show, and the maximum prize money was 25 times greater than that in the British version (approximately US\$375,000 or HK\$3 million). Other than these, the two versions were similar in terms of the format and presentation, the ruthless 'school teacher' role played by the hosts, and the sombre atmosphere of the show. Both shows required the contestants to vote off one of their fellow contestants at the end of each round in a very public way, with the hosts demanding to know why they had selected a particular individual and also asking that individual to comment on the fairness of the decision. The decision to vote off a particular contestant is not necessarily to remove the 'weakest link'. In fact, it is a common strategy for contestants to vote off a stronger player in order to remove a rival who might eventually win in this 'winner takes all' show.

It was reported that the distributor of the show believed the Hong Kong version of the quiz programme would be a hit with an Asian audience despite its ruthlessness and would still impress relatively reserved Asians (*SCMP.com*, 18 August 2002). It was speculated whether the quiz show would 'turn off viewers or pander to Hong Kong people's worst and basic instincts', as in their daily life Hong Kong people try to 'avoid being the target by acting too smart and avoid being thrown out due to stupidity' (*SCMP.com*, 18 August 2002). However, after the first two or three episodes had been broadcast, the Hong Kong version was seriously criticised by the public and television critics writing in the local Hong Kong newspapers.

Major criticisms directed at the show were that the mood of the show was too tense and was devoid of 'humanity' (*Sing Tao Daily*, 21 August 2001). Criticisms directed at the host were that her look was stern, her demeanour was excessively serious, and her approach was mean, harsh and strident (*SCMP.com*, 28 August 2001). She was also criticised as being 'acid-tongued' and 'sharp-tongued' (*Hong Kong iMail*, 24 August 2001).

On the whole, the host's harsh and strident approach was not well received by the Hong Kong audience. For example, such conscious image design which is 'meant to demand from the contestants deference to authority, conformity to norms and obedience to others' (*SCMP.com*, 21 August 2001) did not work for the Hong Kong contestants and viewers. The host was also criticised for failing to use black humour, which is what makes the British version of *The Weakest Link* so successful (*The Sun*, 26 August 2001).

The local Hong Kong contestants and viewers seemed to be concerned about someone losing face and being made to look foolish (*SCMP.com*, 1 September 2001) and only a minority may enjoy the sarcasm and witnessing people being abused (*SCMP.com*, 18 August 2001). For most of the contestants, they did not want to risk losing face and did not enjoy taking the insults (*SCMP.com*, 18 August 2001). In one newspaper, a female loser of the game was quoted as feeling ashamed and worried that her friends and colleagues would

laugh at her and that she would become 'the butt of "stupid" jokes' at work after the show had been aired on TV (*Hong Kong iMail*, 24 August 2001). Generally speaking, the average Hong Kong citizen will avoid being the target of ridicule and insults and go to considerable lengths to avoid being thrown out due to stupidity (*SCMP.com*, 18 August 2001) and the resultant public loss of face. The quiz show was also criticised as encouraging distrust among contestants, which created tension and hostility (*Hong Kong iMail*, 23 August 2001), and as running in contradiction to the preferred Chinese values of modesty and humility (*Hong Kong Economic Times*, 27 August 2001). It can be seen from the media that the general reaction to the show was negative and this reflected the clash of cultural values manifested on the show and those of mainstream Hong Kong Chinese society.

After viewing the host's performance in the first week, and in response to the overwhelmingly unfavourable public feedback and viewing index, TVB Jade made an unexpected, drastic decision to relax the BBC-required cool and stern presentation. Consequently, the host's role was radically changed in order to 'tone it down and put on a smile in forthcoming episodes' (*SCMP.com* and *Hong Kong iMail*, 28 August 2001). The changes that were implemented in order to save the floundering quiz show are interesting as they reflect some of the differences described in cross-cultural and intercultural studies concerning attitudes, values, beliefs and meanings often associated with Asian and Western cultures such as Hong Kong and Britain.

Before discussing the changes made to the format of the Hong Kong version of the quiz show, it is worth pointing out that even the original version differed to the British version in certain respects. As summarised in Table 1, while the British host has no qualms when it comes to insulting contestants' age, appearance or occupation, these were not a source of insults in the original Hong Kong version of the show. Similarly, while the contestants on the British show readily seize on the opportunities afforded to them to openly criticise fellow contestants or to boast of their own performance, these kinds of behaviour were far rarer and, even if they did take place, far milder in nature in the original Hong Kong version. Given how prevalent personal insults are in the British show, it has to be assumed that when the television producers in Hong Kong were putting together the original Hong Kong show, it was a conscious decision to exclude what for Hong Kong Chinese would be viewed as extremely face-threatening, aggressive and 'mean' behaviour (*Hong Kong Economic Journal*, 24 August 2001). Nonetheless, the original Hong Kong show, while milder in certain respects, was by and large faithful to the British version and drew substantial criticisms from viewing audiences and the media.

Table 1 compares the revised Hong Kong version with the British and the original Hong Kong versions after the changes were hurriedly put in place and these are then discussed in relation to the respective cultures of Hong Kong and Britain. It details the format and presentation changes that were made after the first week of the show being broadcast in Hong Kong as a direct result of these criticisms. It can be seen that the changes are substantial and provide evidence of the producers of the Hong Kong version of the show attempting to meet the need for the quiz show to suit the local Hong Kong audience and

**Table 1** Differences in format and presentation among the three versions of the quiz show

<i>British and original Hong Kong versions of The Weakest Link</i>	<i>Revised Hong Kong version of The Weakest Link</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>British host: Insults are aimed at contestants' performance, appearance, occupation, behaviour, etc.</li> <li>Hong Kong host: Insults are mainly aimed at contestants' performance.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Host does not insult the contestants.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>British host always invites or incites contestants to criticise themselves and one another.</li> <li>Hong Kong host sometimes invites or incites contestants to criticise themselves and one another.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hong Kong host rarely invites or incites contestants to criticise themselves and one another.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>British contestants sometimes seize the Initiative and answer back and this kind of banter is encouraged as it opens up opportunities for more insults from the host.</li> <li>Hong Kong contestants engage in banter with the host, which can be at the host's or the contestant's instigation and does not lead to her insulting the contestants.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hong Kong contestants engage in banter with the host, which can be at the host's or the contestant's instigation and does not lead to her insulting the contestants.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>British contestants openly boast of their achievements and put down their fellow contestants.</li> <li>Hong Kong contestants are reluctant to boast of their own prowess or to criticise their fellow contestants.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hong Kong contestants are reluctant to boast of their own prowess or to criticise their fellow contestants.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>British and Hong Kong hosts play a stern, harsh and mean 'school teacher' role.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hong Kong host plays a gentler 'school teacher' role.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>British and Hong Kong hosts never smile.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hong Kong host smiles throughout.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>British and Hong Kong hosts shout at contestants.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hong Kong host never shouts at the contestants.</li> </ul>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>British and Hong Kong hosts offer no encouragement or support and take every opportunity to belittle and criticise the contestants.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Hong Kong host asks contestants to explain why they answered wrongly and the host provides words of encouragement and support.</li> </ul>

culture in order to be accepted. Gone are the insults from an unsmiling hostile host and the berating of contestants by shouting. The host changed to become amiable. She smiled constantly, adopted a gentler, supportive role, and rarely invited the contestants to criticise themselves and one another.

## Analysis of Data from the British and Hong Kong Quiz Shows

In the following, extracts taken from the British, the original Hong Kong and the revised Hong Kong versions of the *Weakest Link* are discussed with a view to comparing the format and presentation of the three versions and the ways in which discourse meanings are conveyed by the respective hosts.

To begin with, Extract 1 taken from the British version captures very succinctly the ethos of the quiz show. The host summarises the result of the round that has just finished and asks the contestants to cast their votes to eliminate the weakest link.

### Extract 1 (British version)

(‘H’ stand for host; ‘C’ stands for contestant.)

- POUNDS
- 1 H: // ↘ a HUNdred and THIRty // ↗ is ALL // ↘ you WON // ↘ things  
ARE
- 2 DESperate // ↗ I sugGEST // ↗ you LIGHten // ↗ the LOAD // ↗  
DOES
- 3 enHANCE your BANK balance // ↘ KINDness not // → COUNT // ↗ you
- 4 need to be RUTHless // ↘ to be RICH // ↘ TIME to VOTE off // ↘ the weakest //  
LINK

Extract 1 illustrates the ethos of the quiz show when the host spells out what needs to be done to be a successful contender in the game. The contestants are told they need to *lighten the load*, that *kindness does not count* and that *to be rich* at the end of the game they *need to be ruthless*. The host is also very damning of the contenders’ performance in the preceding round and she mocks the amount they won (GBP130) and declares *things are desperate* as a result. It can be seen that she says all of this very directly and aggressively and, in terms of intonation, her choice of high contrastive key on Line 2 underlines that what she is saying runs contrary to expectations. Her choice of high termination on ‘pounds’ (Line 1) and ‘does’ (Line 3) indicates that such information will come as a surprise to the hearer(s). These tone units in the host’s utterance are also said with proclaiming tone, which serves to indicate that they are perceived by the speaker to be new information to the hearer(s).

### First change: The demeanour of the host

Several changes with respect to the format and presentation of the changed Hong Kong version of the show have been observed. One of the most immediately evident changes was in the demeanour of the show’s host. In the new version, the host now smiled readily and the cool and stern facade that had drawn so much criticism was replaced with a gentler and more contestant-friendly approach. The pace of the questions slowed, thus reducing the stress on the contestants. The questions were now posed by the host employing a more neutral style of delivery. Previously, questions had been delivered at a rapid, aggressive pace and in a generally abrasive fashion. These changes in the host’s behaviour are in line with a culture that places priority



**Extract 4** (British version)

- 1 H: // → IIM // ↘ with NO hair exCEPT his POnytail //
- 2 C: ((laughs))  
staTIStically
- 3 H: // ↗ you were the WORST PLAYer // ↗ and with FIVE votes // ↗  
ARE
- 4 TO you it's been deCIded that you // ↗ the weakest  
LINK //

On Line 1 of Extract 3, the host mockingly asks *is that a new hairstyle*, to which the contestant rather falteringly answers that he has had his ponytail for 16 years. Later in the show, the contestant is voted off and the host again taunts him about his hair (Line 1, Extract 4), or rather lack of it. She also very directly states that the contestant is *the worst player*, choosing high contrastive key on *statistically* (Line 3). Although she has earlier mocked the contestant's hairstyle, here on Line 1 the host chooses proclaiming tone (fall tone) to declare as new to the hearer(s) that he has *no hair except his ponytail*. This is another example of a speaker exploiting tone choice to add to the impact of what is said. The rest of her utterance is said with referring tones (rise tones), indicating that the rest is assumed by the speaker to be common ground.

Extract 5 shows the host in the original Hong Kong version of *The Weakest Link* mocking the performance and the aspirations of a contestant in the quiz show.

**Extract 5** (original Hong Kong version)

- H: tai2 ng4 ceot1 nei5 hai6 gam3 siu2 zi3 hei3 ge2
- 1 H: // ↘ REAlise hardly you are SUCH low ASpirations – ptl<sup>4</sup> //
- sap6 saam1 maan6 jat1 zau6 giu3 zou6 gau3 naa4
- 2 ↘ hundred and THIRty thousand ONE is deemed eNOUGH – ptl //

(H: 'I hardly realise you have such low aspirations. A hundred and thirty-one thousand you say it is enough.')

In Extract 5, the contestant has expressed satisfaction with the money won in the previous round and the host pours scorn on him. The host exclaims in disbelief that someone who could have *such low aspirations* and with prominence chosen for *such* and *aspirations*. She then restates the amount won and incredulously states that it *is deemed enough* by the contestant, selecting prominence on *thirty-one* and *enough*. This utterance is said with mid key, which has additive value and mid termination, indicating that what is said should not come as a surprise to the hearer.

In the new revised version of the Hong Kong quiz show, the host does not insult the contestant. This change again accords with Bond's (1986) notion of the primacy of Confucian values in cultures such as that found in Hong Kong encapsulated in the dimensions of human-heartedness and moral discipline. Also the work of Markus and Kitayama (1991, 1994), which describes the differences resulting from interdependent versus independent conceptions of

self would help to explain a change that attaches importance to the preservation of 'face' and the maintenance of group harmony. Doing away with very direct and open verbal attacks by the host on the contestants also fits better with a high-context culture in which communication is not overt and explicit (Hall, 1977).

### Third change: The verbal support from the host

The third main change was that in the new revised Hong Kong version the host offered verbal support and encouragement to the contestants (see Extract 6); whereas in the original show the Hong Kong host never helped, supported or consoled the contestants, in fact the very opposite was the case.

#### Extract 6 (revised Hong Kong version)

- C:           teng 1 co3 zo2 nei5 man6 man6 tai4  
 1 C: // → heard wrong you ASK // ↘ QUEStion //  
 H:           gam3 gan2 zeong1 haa5  
 2 H: // ↘ ↗ so NERvous – ptl //  
 (C: 'I have misheard your question.'  
 H: 'You were so nervous.')

In Extract 6, the host can be seen to be sympathetic to the contestant on hearing that he misheard her question. The host says with referring tone (rise tone) that the contestant is *so nervous* with which she assumes this to be common ground, and with mid termination to indicate that this is not unexpected information. Such a display of empathy is in stark contrast to the ridicule usually heaped on contestants who perform badly.

In a show in the revised Hong Kong version, a voted-off contestant said that he was impressed by the 'friendship and humanity' when the smiling host invited all other contestants to bow to him upon his leaving the stage (*Macau Daily*, 25 August 2001). When interviewed, the host said that it was necessary to change the format of the quiz show in order to accommodate the preferred style of interaction of Hong Kong people, which is chatty, friendly and carefree (*Wen Wei Po*, 20 September 2001). She had reservations about transporting the British culture into Hong Kong, and she was of the view that the Chinese will usually express sympathy to losers and give praise to winners, especially at times of economic hardships (*Wen Wei Po*, 20 September 2001). This change also conforms to the pattern of changes already discussed with reference to Markus and Kitayama (1991, 1994). The original version was very face-threatening and to make matters even worse, the contestants lost face in a very public forum. However, in the revised show the emphasis shifted to face-saving strategies. The show was nonconfrontational and maintained group harmony. This change also embraces the three cultural dimensions put forward by Bond (1986) for Confucian-based societies: integration, human heartedness and moral discipline.

#### Fourth change: The absence of audience banter with the host

The fourth most important change to the Hong Kong version of *The Weakest Link* was that contestants were engaged in banter with the host, which could be at the host's or the contestant's instigation and usually did not lead to the host insulting the contestants. In both the British and the original Hong Kong versions, contestants sometimes seized the initiative and answered back; and this kind of banter was encouraged as it opened up opportunities for more insults from the host. A British example is discussed in Extract 7. One source of insults for the British host is to deride the contestant's occupation, and here the host pokes fun at a contestant who is a student of acting.

#### Extract 7 (British version)

- 1 H: // ↘ you're an ACting STUdent // ↘ AREN'T you //
- 2 C: // ↘ YES //
- MISS
- 3 H: // ↘ and ARE you an ACting conTEstant //
- 4 C: // ↘ i'm TRYing to be //
- 5 H: // ↘ are you going to GO on SAYing PASS // ↘ to everything i ASK you //
- 6 C: // ↘ it's my FAavourite ANswer //
- 7 H: // ↗ you're very SURE // ↗ of //
- yourSELF

On Line 1, the host confirms the occupation of the student but sets up the possibility to exploit a pun (i.e. does *acting* mean 'a student of acting' or does it mean 'not a genuine student'). This ambiguity is then exploited on Line 3 when the host asks *and are you an acting contestant*. The reason for asking if the contestant is an acting contestant is given on Line 5 by the host who points out that he has passed on all of the questions she has asked him. This extract illustrates the extended banter that is encouraged on the show with the contestants 'answering back' to the host. On Line 2 the contestant replies *yes Miss* confirming the teacher-like status of the host in the minds of the player, and he continues to answer back on Line 4 (*I'm trying to be*) and Line 6 (*it's my favourite answer*). This kind of banter is much enjoyed by a part of the British audience, although a similar portion of the British audience do not enjoy it. In this case, the host invariably has the last word. In terms of intonation, throughout the first six lines, proclaiming tone (fall tone) is selected, but on the last line the host chooses referring tone (rise tone) when she remarks sarcastically *you're very sure of yourself*, indicating that this information is common ground. The use of low termination by the host at the end of her utterance on Line 7 has the effect of closing down the topic.

In Extract 8, the Hong Kong host in the original quiz show ridicules the contestant that he has mixed up some important and well known criminal cases. The contestant tries to talk back but he only invites more ridicule in return.

## Extract 8 (original Hong Kong version)

- H: P\_ nei5 zou6 me1 gung1 zok3 gaa3  
 1 H: // ㄨ P\_ // ㄨ you do WHAT job-PTL//  
 C: er (.) jip6 mou6 jyun4  
 2 C: // →ER// (.) ㄨ sales OFFicer //  
 H: jip6 mou6 jyun4 dou1 jau5 lau4 ji3 haa5 si4 si6 gaa3 gam3 gaa3 haa5 waa2  
 3 H: // ㄨ SALES officer // → ALso // ㄨ ㄨ pays attention TO CURrent affairs RIGHT-ptl//  
 C: er siu2 siu2 laa1  
 4 C: // ㄨ er a LITtle - ptl //  
 H: nei5 zeong1 D on3 gin6 ham6 baang6 laang6 gaau2 dou3 lyun6 saai3 lung4 wo  
 HAVE  
 5 H: // → you those CRIminal cases ALL // ㄨ MIXED up - PTL //  
 zi2 hap6 cong4 si1 on3 nei5 ne dong3 zo2 hai6 lxx gxx wxx zou6  
 6 ㄨ CARton BOX // → hide corpse CRIME // ㄨ you TAKE as L\_ k\_ w\_<sup>5</sup> COMmitted  
 gee3  
 7 - ptl //  
 C: dou1 hai6 caa1 ng4 do1 ze2  
 8 C: ((laughs)) // u ALso // ㄨ DIFference not -ptl //  
 MUCH  
 H: caa1 ng4 do1 zau6 gam3 joeng6 zau6 ling6 dou3 nei5 dei6 D zoeng2 gam1  
 DIFference  
 9 H: // ㄨ not MUCH // → because of THIS cause your WINnings  
 to1 dai1 saai3 laa1  
 10 to -PTL //  
 DROP  
 (H: 'P\_ what do you do?'  
 C: 'Er (.) sales officer.'  
 H: 'Sales officer also pays attention to current affairs, right?'  
 C: 'A little.'  
 H: 'You got all the crimes mixed up! You said the crime concerning hiding a corpus in  
 a carbon box was committed by L\_ K\_ W\_'  
 C: 'They are more or less the same.'  
 H: 'More or less the same? Due to this your winnings have been pulled down.')

In Extract 8, the host picks up on the occupation of a contestant and implies that an effective sales officer should know about current affairs. She also says this with referring tone (fall-rise tone), indicating that this is common ground, and ends with a confirmatory tag *right*. This is a less direct criticism of a contestant than the kind of very direct and personal criticisms of contestants by the British host and may reflect the more indirect culture of Hong Kong. As Hall (1976, 1977) suggests, high-context cultural patterns are associated with indirectness in communication. However, it would be understood by the audience as an attempt to belittle both the contestant's performance on the show and at work. When the contestant tries to explain his confusion (Line 8) in terms of there not being much difference between the cases, the host very directly confronts him (Lines 9–10). The host exclaims that his explanation is far from adequate and that his performance was the cause of the winnings having dropped. The host chooses high contrastive key on *difference* and low termination on *drop* to close the topic.

Extract 9, taken from the new revised Hong Kong version, shows a contestant engaged in banter with the host. The banter is instigated by the contestant. The host, rather than taking advantage of the banter to insult the contestant, enjoys the banter and actually praises the contestant for initiating it.

**Extract 9** (revised Hong Kong version)

- bat1 gwo3 ne1 nei5 jau5 jat1 joeng6 je5 ne1 gang3 ng4 co3 ge2  
 1 H: // BUT - ptl // YOU have one // → thing - PTL // Even not BAD - ptl //  
 nei5 zau6 zi1 dou6 ne1 hoeng2 san1 zaat3 si1 hing1 jap6 min6  
 2 → you did know - PTL // → IN NEWly promoted police officer IN //  
 zou6 gou1 lou2 cyun4 go2 go3 giu3 lei5 fong1 sei1 jin4 ne1  
 although  
 3 → play TALL guy chuen THAT one called L\_F\_ // PTL //  
 zan6 daap3 dak1 ci4 D  
 4 → ANswered LATE a  
BIT //  
 hei1 ngo5 bun2 loi4 gei1 ng4 hei2 gaa3 bat1 gwo3 gin3 dou2 nei5  
 5 C: // HEY // I oRiginally REcall not - ptl // (.) // → BUT SAW you  
 ngo5 gei3 hei2 laa1  
 6 I recalled - PTL //  
 ho1 aa1 zik6 dak1 zaan3 zik6 dak1  
 7 H: // HO // AH // HA // ((claps hands)) // → DEserve PRAISE // deserve  
HO  
 zaan3  
 8 PRAISE //  
 9 C: ((laughs))

(H: 'But then there is an even better thing about you, and that is, you knew that the one who acted as Tall Guy Chuen in Newly Promoted Police Officer is called L\_F\_')

C: 'I didn't recall in the first place but when I saw you I did.'

H: 'Ho ho ah ha ((clap hands)) you deserve praise you deserve praise.'

C: ((laughs))

On Lines 1–4, the host can be seen to be giving a mild compliment to a contestant who got a question correct. The compliment is qualified with *although* said with high contrastive key as the contestant was a bit slow in answering. This kind of support to contestants was one of the changes in format in the new version of the show. It can be seen that the support from the host continues. The contestant explains that the presence of the host had helped him to recall the answer (the actor in question is the boyfriend of the host). This causes the host to applaud the contestant and to invite the audience to do the same (Lines 7–8), and this is said with mid termination which denotes that what is being said is not unexpected, but within the context of the original version of the Hong Kong show, it would have been unexpected indeed.

### Comparing Hong Kong contestants' behaviour in both Hong Kong versions

The revised version of *The Weakest Link* did not differ from the original version in all aspects. Despite the major changes discussed in previous paragraphs, there was one area which more or less remained unchanged, and that is when the Hong Kong host sometimes invited or incited the contestants to openly criticise themselves or the other contestants; this was done in a relatively light-hearted, rather than hostile, manner. The contestants in both of the Hong Kong versions behaved in a rather mellow manner when they criticised other contestants. Cultures differ in the extent to which they are geared toward verbal confrontation, in that some cultures are 'extremely averse to such conflicts and prefer silence to a heated, tendentially interesting (but also potentially face-damaging) conversation' (Mey, 2001: 270). High-context cultures are believed to avoid confrontation (Hall, 1976, 1977). In conflict management situations, such sociocultural factors as individualism –collectivism, societal values of harmony, face and the loss of face, and power distance have been attributed to orientations to conflict and conflict management (Yuen, 1992). According to Yuen, Asian societies stress collectivism, 'face' and harmony; and the 'preferred conflict-resolution styles are likely to be compromising (the middle ground, with neither side having to suffer a loss of "face"), avoiding (not address the conflict, a strategy used to avoid a possible loss of "face") or collaborating (satisfy the concerns of both parties), (Yuen, 1992: 376). Kirkbride *et al.* (1991) investigated the conflict styles of 981 Chinese respondents in Hong Kong, and the findings have confirmed the researchers' predictions based on Chinese cultural values. They have found that the conflict management styles of the Chinese in Hong Kong are, in order of preference: compromising, avoiding, accommodating (satisfy the other party's demands even at the expense of his/her personal concerns), collaborating and competing (pursue his/her own concerns at the expense of the other party).

However, in the British version of the quiz show, contestants are actively encouraged to criticise or to complain about their fellow contestants and they are encouraged to talk up their own achievements in the game at the end of each round. They are found to openly boast of their achievements and put down their fellow contestants. In Extract 10, a contestant who has just been voted off comments on her reaction to her ejection from the game by her fellow contestants.

#### Extract 10 (British version)

- 1 C: // ↘ I would like to see JENny voted off NEXT // ↗ she CAME here i think  
 2 TOtally believing she was going to win the SHOW // ↘ but i ACTually think  
 3 somebody deSERVES it a lot better than SHE does //

On Lines 1 and 2, the British contestant very bluntly gives her opinion about another player (Jenny), whom this contestant wants to see voted off next as Jenny is viewed as overly confident of her abilities while others are more

deserving of final victory. It is interesting to note that the contestant chooses proclaiming tone (fall tone) to inform the hearer whom she would like to see voted off next and that others are more deserving as the speaker perceives this to be new information to the hearer. The choice of tone for stating that Jenny is overly confident is said with referring tone (rise tone) which conveys that this part of the utterance is common knowledge between the speaker and the hearer; in other words, the speaker assumes it is already known that this is the case. Intonation can be exploited in this way by speakers to lend credibility and so emphasise the veracity of what is being said.

In Extract 11, the Hong Kong host in the revised version invites the contestant to explain why he wants to vote off a female contestant nicknamed 'Cat'.

### Extract 11 (revised Hong Kong version)

- C: gam1 jat6 aa3 aa3 mau1 ne1 zau6 ci5 fu4 hai2 ne1 go3 wui4 hap6 ne1 biu2 jin6 dak1  
 1 C: // u toDAY ah // u AH CAT - ptl // → SEEMS in THIS round - ptl // → has performed  
 hou2 sat1 zeon2  
 2 very LOSE STANdard //  
 H: ng4  
 3 H: // ∽ MM //  
 C: gam2 ngo5 ngam2 keoi5 hou2 gan2 zeong1 aa1 so2 ji5 jing1 goi1 jau1 sik1 haa3  
 4 C: // → then i think SHE // ∽ very NERvous - ptl // → THEREfore SHOULD rest a LITtle //  
 H: ng4  
 5 H: [// ∽ MM //  
 H: jau1 sik1 haa3 mou4 dak4 jau1 sik1 gaa3 laa1 jat1 OUT zau6 OUT gaa3 laa1  
 6 H: // ↗ REST a LITtle // → no REST - ptl PTL // → once OUT be OUT - ptl ptl //  
 mou4 dak1 faan1yun3 tau4 gaa3 laa1  
 7 → no REturn - ptl PTL //  
 C: keo1 hou2 ho2 nang zoi3 camm1 gaa1 gwo3  
 8 C: // ↗ she very LIKEly re- parTicipate aGAIN //  
 (C: 'Today 'Cat' seemed to be performing not up to standard in this round.'  
 H: 'Mm.'  
 C: 'I think she was very nervous [and so she should rest a little.'  
 H: 'Mm'  
 H: 'Rest a little? There can't be any rest. Once she is 'out', she is 'out'. There is no return.'  
 C: 'She is very likely to participate again.')

Extract 11 again shows the softer gentler approach of the new version of the show. When asked to directly criticise a fellow contestant, the contestant hedges his reason with *seems* and *I think* (Lines 1 and 4) and his voting off Cat from the game is worded as *she should rest a little* (Lines 4–5). Also, the poor performance of Cat is ascribed to nerves rather than ability. When being reminded that there will be no return for Cat, the contestant suggests that Cat is very likely to participate in the game in the future (Line 8). This utterance is said with referring tone (rise) with the meaning that this is shared knowledge, and with mid termination that it is also an expected comment. This more mellow contestant-friendly style became the norm on the new version of the show to replace the older version where comments were more direct.

### Outcome of the revised Hong Kong version

The revised version of *The Weakest Link*, which was characterised by 'more entertaining humour', was well received by the viewers, with viewer numbers increasing significantly (*Sing Tao Daily*, 28 October 2001). The changes were in line with suggestions made by many critics and viewers, one of whom is a local showbiz celebrity, who suggested that the quiz show should be adapted to suit the local cultures and entertainment should take priority over format and presentation requirements laid down by BBC (*Apple Daily*, 27 August 2001). Based on the above analysis of the revised show, in theory it should have gone down better with the viewing public and the television critics in Hong Kong, as the changes that were made can be seen to have brought it more in line with the mainstream cultural values of an Asian culture based on Confucian values such as Hong Kong. The new version of the show was more conducive to group harmony and it was more gentle and compassionate with a sense of moderation and restraint. However, the removal of the aggression, directness, trading in insults and open competitiveness took away the very essence of what the original show is all about. The quiz show lost its attraction as a quiz show and 'degenerated (or transformed) into an entertaining chat show' between the host and contestants (*Wen Wei Po*, 13 November 2001). It was discontinued after its first season.

Further evidence for what has been argued in this study is provided by different countries that have broadcast *The Weakest Link*. For instance, the Indian version of *The Weakest Link* was also heavily criticised and the unfortunate host was the recipient of hate mail for the perceived cruelty exacted on the contestants (MacKinnon, *Newsweek*, 16–23 September 2002). In Thailand (<http://www.twl-online/news/arc1-2002.shtml>), the show has received an official verbal warning from the Prime Minister's office for being 'unbecoming and contradictory to Thai culture and morality'. Mrs Lalita Rirksamran, a member of Thailand's parliament, complained that the programme encouraged viewers to 'point accusing fingers' and promoted selfishness rather than generosity, rivalry above teamwork and brought stress rather than entertainment. In the Lebanon (<http://www.twl-online/news/arc5-2002.shtml>), the stern manner of the host has caused a huge outcry from viewers who watch the show via cable in Arab countries where women 'traditionally defer to men and rarely answer back'. Even in Germany (<http://www.twl-online/news/arc2-2002.shtml>), which is a low-context culture and so closer culturally to the UK than to Hong Kong, the show was dropped by the German TV company RTV due to declining viewer numbers because viewers thought the host was too rude to the contestants. From these examples, it would seem that the kinds of problems associated with a clash of cultural values described in this paper are not isolated although, no doubt, the precise nature of the clashes will vary depending upon the cultures concerned.

### Conclusions and Implications

The differences between Hong Kong and British viewer attitudes towards the show should not be exaggerated. The two cultures were not 'black and

white' revealing clear and absolute differences in their reactions to *The Weakest Link*. The main difference between the two cultures is best characterised in the following way: in Britain the show has proved to be enduringly successful but by no means universally liked by everyone, whereas in Hong Kong the show proved to be sufficiently unsuccessful to last no longer than one season. However, this is not to say that in Hong Kong it was universally disliked by every member of the viewing public even after the essential features of the show were hastily removed. In other words, while there exists in Britain an audience to sustain a show heavily reliant on the entertainment value of direct, aggressive face-threatening behaviour, this proved not to be the case in Hong Kong. Our conclusions suggest that the reasons for this can be found in deep-rooted cultural values that impact viewer attitudes towards this kind of behaviour.

What, then, are the lessons to be learned from this experience? What is the mediating role of culture? Does culture constrain the media, or do the media alter culture? Through the media communicative event in the form of the quiz show examined here, this paper concludes that importing culture-bound television programmes based on cultural values that are very different from the local cultural values is potentially a recipe for disaster. This paper is not suggesting that the British audience thinks that rude and humiliating behaviour is acceptable, but that a substantial number find such behaviour potentially entertaining when situated in a television quiz show. The popularity of *The Weakest Link* in Britain may be attributable to the television viewing behaviour in Britain. As pointed out by Curran and Liebes (1998: 13), in Britain, despite multiple TV channels, the content of television is mainly national rather than global, the mass audience remains largely cohesive rather than fragmented, and 'broadcasting is still dominated by a public service system committed to inform as well as to entertain'. BBC Broadcasting Research (1996) has found that British people spend nine-tenths of their time watching just four TV channels, two of which – BBC1 and ITV – occupied over two-thirds of all TV viewing, and nearly three-quarters of peak time viewing (Curran, 1998). In the BBC Annual Report and Accounts (2003/2004: 138), it was shown that the total BBC television share alone amounted to 37.8%. The mass audience in Britain 'still talks, laughs, agrees or quarrels primarily through two channels' (Curran, 1998: 176) that have existed for over 40 years.

Another reason may be related to the kind of vicarious enjoyment provided by the quiz show, or the media context provided for both contestants and audience to indulge in behaviour which would have otherwise been sanctioned in the real-life social context. Undoubtedly, some of the Hong Kong audience may have enjoyed the original Hong Kong version of the quiz show for those reasons, but it was clear that in Hong Kong, unlike Britain, their numbers were insufficient to support a show based on such behaviour.

From the overwhelmingly negative reaction from the audience and the media reviews levelled against the original Hong Kong version, with the reasons given, coupled with the resultant changes in the revised version, the paper has offered cultural differences as possible explanations. As

remarked in SCMP.com, 1 September 2001, one aspect of *The Weakest Link* is that the contestants try to vote off the smarter people they think will be a threat to them winning the prize at the end. Different from the viewers in the UK and the USA, those in Hong Kong did not seem to be able to understand this concept and to realise it as part of the game. Instead they seem to be concerned that someone may lose face and be made to look foolish. Relative to Britain, Hong Kong may be more concerned about 'the interactional dynamic of facework' which is 'positively reciprocal with both parties engaged in mutually shared orientation to negotiate, elevate, and attend to each other's face as well as one's own face' (Zhang, 1995: 85), and 'face-balance', which means giving face to others face simultaneously enhances one's own face and depriving others' face simultaneously damages one's face (Zhang, 1995: 85). This notion of facework is very much connected with the interdependent conception of the self, and results in more restrained social behaviour.

Another conclusion the paper draws is that to try to remove the elements that might be problematic when those very elements are the mainstay of the programme may not help. In the case of *The Weakest Link*, the result of changing the show was to take away its essence and to then end up with an ordinary and lacklustre quiz show. Arguably, it was not enough to simply eliminate the central features of the imported show. The producers needed to then reinvent the show by replacing them not with a diluted and nondescript version of the original but with something equally unique and special and which did not conflict with Hong Kong's cultural values. The recommendation is therefore that television programmers and producers should become more aware of the importance of the relation between media and culture, and specifically cross-cultural aspects of media communication, and so be better informed as to the potential problems involved when buying and/or selling television programmes across diverse cultures.

### Acknowledgements

The work described in this paper was substantially supported by two grants from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (Project Nos. A-PC72 and B-Q396). The authors are very grateful to June and Bevan Willgress for their kind and generous help in the preparatory stages of this study.

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### Notes

1. The maximum prize is £10,000 on BBC2 (UK) and £20,000 on BBC1 (UK).
2. The BBC's website for *The Weakest Link* has links to the host's nastiest 'putdowns' directed at the contestants.
3. *u* stands for 'unclassified' and it is equivalent to 'inaudible'.

4. 'ptl', which stands for a Cantonese particle, is represented in the lower case in order not to be confused with the upper case letters that are used to represent prominent syllables in this paper.
5. l\_k\_w\_ is the name of a murderer who was sentenced to life imprisonment.

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