

# The Character Construction of American TV Series and Its Enlightenment to Domestic TV—Taking the “Better Call Saul” as an Example

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“Better Call Saul” is an excellent American television series. As a spin-off of “Breaking Bad”, it continues its excellent character design and intriguing plot development, giving audiences around the world a treat to talk about. However, while “Breaking Bad” has a huge audience and the film and television industry has done a lot of research on it, “Better Call Saul” has not been studied in domestic academic circles. This paper takes several main characters of the play as the research object, analyzes how their characters are designed, and how they complement each other with the dramatic conflict of the plot, so as to explore a new angle of character design. Through the study of the characters in this American drama, this paper can provide a reference for the Chinese film and television industry. The results show that Chinese TV dramas can learn from this American drama to improve the depth of character design and avoid designing stereotyped and labeled characters. This may ultimately improve their artistic literacy and bring more excellent works to Chinese audiences.

*Keywords:* TV drama, role construction, characteristic, impact

## Introduction

Compared with the West, China’s TV series and film industry started late and developed slowly. To accelerate the development of China’s film and television industry, people can learn from advanced Western films and television works, among which character design is a major theme. Take “Breaking Bad” and its spinoff “Better Call Saul” for example, both of which have excellent character design. “Breaking Bad” has also won a large number of film and television awards and nominations (Baidu Encyclopedia, n.d.). However, all of them are excellent TV series. “Breaking Bad” has a large number of papers on China National Knowledge Architecture (CNKI) to analyze its merits, while “Better Call Saul” has very few articles, with a large number of research gaps. Therefore, this paper analyzes the important characters in “Better Call Saul” respectively, observes their behavior and psychology, and understands how the characters are portrayed in this TV series, to bring more inspiration to China’s film and television industry.

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Douban.com is a well-known book, video, music, and music community website in China. Since 2013, its monthly coverage of independent users has reached 200 million (Wang, 2012). Its website score has a relatively high influence and reference value in China. This paper refers to the top 20 Chinese TV series to analyze the characteristics of Chinese character design and make a comparative study with American TV series. Among the 20 domestic TV series, there are three classic adaptations, such as “A Dream of Red Mansions”, two as the period of the Ming dynasty, the six fantasy science animations as the ROM black us, 2 department of suspense, the previous one situation comedy, one fantasy drama “The Biography of Reed {Langya}”, the remaining five are the main melody series, accounting for 20%. In terms of genre composition, a major feature is that there are 13 dramas set in the old era or fictional old era, accounting for 65%, and because it is set in such a background, many of the characters’ thoughts will have the shadow of the conservative ideas of the old era, for example, the concept of love in “Show the Sword” and the interpretation of family and personal development in “Parents Love”. Compared with some famous foreign TV series such as “Breaking Bad”, the characters with this characteristic are very traditional. In today’s fast-changing thinking, domestic characters have been a little thin, many are still limited to the role image in black and white stereotyped thinking, and because of that, this paper is divided into two parts, mainly to explore the characteristics of different characters in the American drama “Better Call Saul”, and explore the differences from Chinese dramas.

### **The Character Construction of American TV Series**

#### **The Basic Introduction of “Better Call Saul”**

“Better Call Saul” is an American television series created and produced by Vince Gilligan and Peter Gould that aired in 2015 (Douban, n.d.). The show is a spinoff of another popular series, “Breaking Bad”, and is also based on crime.

It tells the story of Jimmy McGill before he became a famous minx lawyer. Jimmy was an articulate, intelligent, and talented man, but for various reasons, he was unable to stretch his legs and fulfill his ambitions in the profession of law. In an accident Jimmy and drug dealers were involved in the relationship and began to fight for all sorts of guilty people, a different path began the journey of his lawyer.

#### **The Character Construction of “Better Call Saul”**

**Protagonist A: Jimmy.** The protagonist Jimmy, is a fledgling lawyer who rents an office on the corner of a nail salon and struggles to get by with a public defender’s office to defend minor cases. He has a smooth tongue, a tenacious vitality, and does not give up easily. Because of an accident, he also took care of his brother who got an electromagnetic wave allergy, and he gradually close to the dark side of society after a series of growth, became a lawyer who walked in the gray area, dealing with criminals and suing bad people. The main character is very subtle. Shi Qinya once said that since crime drama is a unique type of drama, the image design of the characters should not only be accepted by the moral norms of the audience but also be diversified to be unconventional (Shi, 2017). In many crime dramas of the same type, the main character is a positive character, brave and resourceful, and stands for justice. Although such images are common and easy to empathize with the audience’s sense of justice, the character design will be thin and the plot will become simple. Jimmy, on the other hand, has a complex and volatile personality. Writers of “Better Call Saul” know that human nature is complex and deep. Jimmy is smooth, but he takes his job very seriously. He was not disciplined, but he had great

perseverance in persuading his clients. He was weak and mediocre, but he excelled at many critical moments. Many of his characteristics seem to be contradictory but reflect the complexity of human nature.

In addition to the diversity of human nature, the protagonist's moral code can also be cleverly designed. The small town Jimmy lives in is like a microcosm of American society, with solidified classes and lack of class mobility, various criminal infringements that exploit legal loopholes emerge endlessly, and people who know the law have malicious intentions. It is this kind of society that creates the "villain" image like the main character Jimmy (Lou, 1992). In the first season of the story, Jimmy promotes his law firm by copying a famous firm's advertisement and staging a rescue scene. This seems to be an opportunistic, crooked approach, but hidden in a heart of justice. To get business, Jimmy put on a show to woo the elderly in the nursing home. When he found out that the old people had been embezzled a large amount of pension money by the nursing home, he became indignant. Despite the pressure from the nursing home, he filed a class action lawsuit to get justice for the old people. This plot reflects that the protagonist's design cannot be confined to the perfect and great image of justice, but can create contradictions in his character.

**Protagonist B: Kim.** Kim is the heroine of "Better Call Saul", and she has similar life experiences like Jimmy. In a way, Kim and Jimmy have a lot of similarities in personality. Kim's overall character development is progressive, from the beginning of the pursuit of justice to the pursuit of personal justice. And then she even allows Jimmy to use some improper means to achieve their goals.

In the beginning, Kim was like many inspirational characters in movies and TV shows, driven, smart, and kind, completed the study at HHM Company on a work-study basis and got the opportunity to work. When everyone is difficult for Jimmy, Kim has been quietly helping Jimmy and persuades Jimmy to be a good lawyer on his way, to help Jimmy have better development in his lawyer career. However, when Kim's career in HHM was hindered later, Kim's mentality changed and she began to cheat like Jimmy, and even got out of control. Kim knew what she wanted to pursue in her heart and would not change because of other factors.

It can be said that Kim's ability in all aspects is as good as Jimmy's and even better than Jimmy's. For example, Kim shows superb skills and meticulous thoughts in the process of "cheating" with Jimmy, but Kim did not pressure their male master, but with the male master mutual help, mutual growth.

**Protagonist C: Chuck.** Jimmy's brother Chuck is an important character in the show. Jimmy entered the law profession because his brother Chuck had set an example for Jimmy to follow in his brother's footsteps. It was also Chuck who set Jimmy on the path to being a minx lawyer, so it's fair to say that Chuck influenced Jimmy's life trajectory.

Chuck is a very complicated character in the play. On the one hand, Chuck tries his best to help Jimmy get rid of his unconscionable life as a gangster. On the other hand, Chuck has strong jealousy and hatred toward Jimmy.

Chuck is also a very intelligent and capable person. He graduated from a prestigious university and came from an ordinary family. He established a famous law firm, HHM. However, he did not win the love of everyone around him. Instead, his younger brother Jimmy easily won the approval of his parents, wife, and partner, so Chuck was jealous of Jimmy and didn't want to see Jimmy succeed.

In the show, Chuck sits by his mother's hospital bed, but the mother keeps talking about Jimmy's name. At this moment Chuck's heart was full of hatred for Jimmy. He thinks he has helped the whole family live a better life, but his parents love Jimmy the most, and he is paranoid to blame Jimmy for the failure of his father's business.

Chuck puts Jimmy on the right track with his legal knowledge and helps Jimmy with redemption to cover up his jealousy and resentment, but when Jimmy starts to make efforts to change, Chuck is not willing to see it. He did not want to see Jimmy succeed, for fear that Jimmy would steal the attention of everyone around him. Chuck kept pushing Jimmy down, pretending he cared about Jimmy to the outside world, even after being exposed in the face of hypocrisy, also desperate to “beat” Jimmy.

Chuck’s personality is very contradictory. He is smart and hardworking, but at the same time, he is hypocritical, selfish, and deceitful. His love for Jimmy is based on Jimmy’s failure. Only when Jimmy fails and is miserable can Chuck feel good in his heart and think that he can save Jimmy and make people around him more “like”.

Chuck’s contradictory personality and the lengths to go to deal with Jimmy captivated many viewers and made them think about the character. The complex human design proves that the characters are multi-faceted and more exploitable. When the audience excavates the characters, they will also feel many *deja vu* plots or scenes in life (Zhihu Column, 2018). This is why all the characters in “Better Call Saul” are so beloved and memorable.

### **Differentiation From Chinese TV Dramas**

As a Chinese proverb goes, if good law is established in the world, the world will be governed. This means that fairness and perfection of the law is one of the preconditions for peace in the world. People can positively do this, or you can do it negatively, like in “Better Call Saul”. Jimmy is not inherently evil. He was born into a happy and kind family, and his inner evil side is bred by rigid and unfair laws, thus confirming the worldview and values of the show. This is a great inspiration for domestic TV series.

### **Female Character Characteristics**

The design of female characters like “Better Call Saul” is very rare in the domestic market. One reason for this is the stereotyping of female characters in Chinese TV dramas. The female images of different forms in Chinese TV dramas are used as a tool to promote the development of the story and follow the mainstream ideological rules, so the female characters are constantly typed and stereotyped. In repeated publicity and broadcast, the stereotype of the female role is formed (Xu & Han, 2012). Therefore, the female characters in the current film and television works are all too single, and a certain thing is deliberately used to show the character. As a result, many films and TV dramas have a feeling of deliberately expressing the theme, without seriously paying attention to women’s issues and new roles.

At present, many domestic films and TV dramas are themed with female protagonists, but the female characters are not portrayed as female protagonists. Although female themes seem to reflect the problems encountered by women in society on the surface, there are very few dramas based on the perspective of women, and the homogenization of female characters is becoming more and more serious (Zhihu Column, 2021).

### **Genre Type Setting**

American dramas represented by “Better Call Saul” are very different from domestic dramas in terms of subject matter. “Better Call Saul” is a crime-themed show about how Jimmy, as a lawyer, helps drug dealers or other guilty people get off. Take pictures from the perspective of criminals, it is difficult for dramas of this theme to be recognized in China because the Chinese film and television market focuses more on “teaching”, which conveys life philosophy and truth to the audience through film and television. It is difficult for TV dramas that

focus on criminals to convey positive content to the audience. Domestic TV series are more based on realistic problems as the theme, there are few such novel themes.

On the contrary, American TV series pays more attention to the experience and pleasure brought to the audience by the integrity of the story, so the theme is richer than that of domestic TV series, and the story content is more novel. The leading role and supporting role of image shaping is full and has its unique style characteristics. There is no great reason, no preaching, there are roles and roles between the entanglements and contradictions. This is why American TV series attract more people's eyes.

Scriptwriter Wang Hailin believes that there is something wrong with the purchase and sale system of domestic dramas. China is now an actor-centered system, putting actors first, while America is a playwright-centered system, putting scripts first (Zhihu, 2018). The two different methods lead to a very different production, and the actors will be more suitable for the characters according to the script.

In addition to being actor-centered, domestic films and TV dramas have mixed various business models. Therefore, the cost of characters' costumes and setting up scenes has been reduced, because the actors' salaries have accounted for a large amount. One or two lead actors can make up 50 or even 70 percent of the production cost. In contrast, the total remuneration of actors in Korean and American dramas is generally 20%-30% (Zhihu, 2016), so much of the production cost goes into the actors' salaries that it's hard to spend it elsewhere. As a result, the story is not creative. Due to the reduced cost, the final product has to be made within the budget cost. Gradually, domestic films and TV dramas become more and more stereotypical.

### Conclusion

Understanding the content construction method of American TV series can give some inspiration to Chinese TV series. At present, the main purpose of shaping female characters in domestic dramas is to promote the plot and make the plot more conflicted and dramatic, but they do not depict the image and character of the heroine, which leads to the emergence of many fake heroine dramas. The image and personality of the characters are inconsistent, and what they do is completely inconsistent with the human set. Moreover, Chinese TV dramas pay too much attention to "education", ignore character creation, and only pay attention to the final result. As a result, domestic dramas are too stereotyped and shot by unified popular routines. Even dramas that focus on realistic issues tend to embellish and lose the sense of empathy and reality by focusing only on the results of education.

"Better Call Saul", by contrast, has very distinct characters. Jimmy, Chuck, and Kim were all designed by the crew to be multi-dimensional and impressive. Jimmy is a smooth talker with a sense of justice who litigates against bad people. It's hard to judge him purely as good or bad. As Jimmy's older brother, Chuck wants to help Jimmy clean up his act and stop being a punk. On the other hand, Chuck is extremely jealous of Jimmy's success in the law profession. Kim is smart, ambitious, patriarchal, and vengeful. The characters of the three protagonists, all of whom are hard to define with a single term, prove that human nature is multifaceted and complex, in sharp contrast to many Chinese dramas whose characters are thinly portrayed. Writers and directors of Chinese dramas can learn a lot about character design from "Better Call Saul". This paper complements the research on "Better Call Saul" on CNKI and hopes to provide some contributions to future scholars in this field. In addition, this paper only makes a simple analysis of the characters from the perspective of the plot, without dissecting the characters from the perspective of the director. Future scholars can pay more attention to this aspect and conduct in-depth research.

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