

6 FIRST TV SET

“Damn it! Come on!” Mr. Ma frantically pounded the TV to make the picture clearer. It was in the middle of a popular show.

“Moving the antenna this way can help. It happens many times,” his wife said, jumping off the couch to help. The two put their heads together and moved the TV set and the antenna around for quite a while, but there was little improvement.

“How old is this TV?” I asked.

I was visiting Mr. Ma and his wife. Mr. Ma was a doctoral student in the Physics department. His wife had joined him a few months earlier. They lived downstairs in the same apartment building as me. I had overheard others saying that Mr. Ma was lucky to have the best TV among all the Chinese students.

“Who knows? We got it from a garage sale. I swear it was very good just yesterday,” Mr. Ma said, pounding

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the TV set and moving the antenna again. The fuzzy, distorted images remained fuzzy and distorted.

I saw his wife rolling her eyes.

“Is that where all other Chinese got their TVs?” I asked.

At the first party I'd attended in the U.S., people talked about certain TV shows as if they had all watched them. That gave me the impression that every Chinese student had a TV.

That would be a significant improvement in the lives of these people who came to the U.S. from China. TV sets were still considered luxury items for many Chinese households then.

The first time I watched television was in the mid-1970s, in my early teen years. A 9-inch, black-and-white TV set stood on the windowsill in a community center, facing an open yard. People brought stools, chairs, and benches to the yard. More than 30 people gathered. Young children were ordered to sit on the ground up front. Grownups neatly staggered themselves so everyone could manage to see the small screen. I was awestruck. Even though we only watched images of the countryside or people working in a factory as part of a news briefing, seeing moving human beings on that tiny screen was magical.

By the late 1970s, after the Cultural Revolution, China started to open up to other countries to exchange ideas, experiences, goods, and business development. Some government workers had the opportunity to make overseas trips. As a reward for their service, these people were given a purchasing

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allowance of two items from a luxury goods list, including TVs, washing machines, refrigerators, watches, and stereos. No one else could buy them without those allowance tickets, even if they had enough money. Upon returning home, the workers would go to the Overseas Service Department to pick up their requested items. Some were made in China, and some were imported. The most popular watches were made in Switzerland. For refrigerators, Siemens from Germany and Toshiba from Japan were hot brands. The most desirable color TVs were made in Japan.

In the mid-1980s, government allowance and restrictions disappeared. People could buy TVs from department stores freely if they had the money. Most available TV brands were made in China. They had fluffy images and were of lower quality than the imported ones. Still, many households needed more spare money to buy luxury items. Some could only afford black-and-white or a small color TV made in China. A household's socioeconomic status was symbolized by whether it had a set and, if so, what type.

"Yes. Of course. Everyone gets TVs from garage sales," Mr. Ma said with a surprised expression as if saying, "What kind of a question was that?"

"How much did you pay for it?" My curiosity increased.

"We paid \$50 and got a really good one," Mr. Ma's face lit up.

"Others would pay somewhere between \$30 to \$60. It is not guaranteed to be good," his wife added.

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This one was not good at all.

What's the point of having a TV but constantly struggling with the signal? To people like us, whose native language was not English and who had no cultural background in the U.S., we needed every opportunity to learn, including watching TV without interruptions. A good TV seemed like a necessity. The money should be considered well spent.

When my first paycheck of \$850 for being a Teaching Assistant came, I asked a friend with a car to take me to Walmart. Among the displayed units, I found a 21" RCA color TV a good choice due to its quality ratio to price. It was priced at \$199 plus tax.

Since the living room of my apartment was used as a third bedroom, I had to put the new TV in my bedroom. This was a perfect setting because it allowed me to watch during every spare moment I had.

Two days after I bought the TV, Professor Parry chatted with me before class.

"I heard you got a brand-new RCA TV," Professor Parry said.

"Yes, I did. Did you hear it from Lily or Jason?"

"No, I heard it from two other Chinese students."

"Oh, interesting. I guess people talk."

"Yes, they do. But, you know, you are one unique Chinese person, very different from the others."

"Because I bought a new TV?"

"Yes, and more. You've done other things too that few Chinese have done."

Okay then. I would ask him later what he was referring to. But I did hear from others that I was

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different, doing things like mingling with Americans from the first moment I arrived in the U.S., going to the bank myself to open an account, and registering for courses without checking with others about how difficult the professors of those courses might be.

The 21" RCA color TV was with me for the next twenty-six years, though the remote control gave up eventually. That TV always had the sharpest image of all the sets I owned. In 2016, I gave it away for free at a neighborhood garage sale because no one in my home watched TV anymore. It was still working and still sharp.



Fig. 6.1. A brand-new RCA. 1990. Las Cruces, NM.