

A Cross-Cultural Study on the Film the Treatment from the Perspective of Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

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Abstract. With the deepening and development of globalization, all-round exchanges among countries are increasingly strengthened, and the importance of intercultural communication in the contemporary international environment becomes prominent. The film *The Treatment*, starting from the controversy over traditional Chinese therapy “skin scraping”, known as “Gua Sha”, in the United States, shows a series of cultural differences and conflicts between China and America. The present paper critically examines this cross-cultural movie to demonstrate the differences and integration of Chinese and American cultures from different aspects. Geert Hofstede's theory on cultural dimensions provides basic analytical frame for the current study.

Keywords: Intercultural Communication; Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions; *The Treatment*.

1. Introduction

1.1 Introduction to the film *The Treatment*

Xu Datong, the protagonist, has been in the United States for eight years. He is a successful game developer with a beautiful wife, a lovely son and a father who just arrived in America. At the awards ceremony, Datong said he had fulfilled his American dream. But something unexpected may happen any time. One day, his son Dennis and his father were at home, and Dennis suddenly had a stomachache. Because Datong's father could not read the English on the medicine bottle, he gave Dennis a scraping to relieve the pain. Later, a nurse found bruises on the child's back. Assuming Dennis was being abused, she called the Bureau of Child Welfare, which sued Datong for chronic child abuse. The judge ruled that Datong should never have contact with Dennis again. After many twists and turns, Datong's father told his son's boss as well as friend Quinlan the reason of the matter. Quinlan experienced the treatment himself and found that scraping was not abusive. He went to the judge to explain clearly, so that the family could be reunited finally.

1.2 Introduction to Geert Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Geert Hofstede's theory of cultural differences in value orientation offers an approach to understanding the range of cultural differences (Xu Lisheng, 2013). To identify the principal values of different cultures, Hofstede surveyed about 116,000 employees of IBM, a large multinational business organization, in seventy-one countries. Through the further extension of his original research together with theoretical reasoning and statistical analyses, Hofstede pointed out five cultural dimensions: individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term versus short-term orientation to time, which provide an effective and reasonable summary of the relationship between cultural values and social behaviors.

2. Literature Review

The film *The Treatment* is a cross-cultural work that fully reflects the cultural conflicts between China and the United States in intercultural communication. As soon as the film was released, it attracted the attention and resonance of countless overseas Chinese. A number of scholars at home and abroad have studies cross-cultural conflicts manifested in the movie from various perspectives.

2.1 Differences between Chinese and American family values

As is known to all, family value, which refers to an individual's perception and understanding of family affairs, has impact on everyone like the blood in the vein or our DNA. That is to say, the value of the two countries with different systems depends to a great extent on their national family views.

In the Difference of Family Value Between China and America, Li Peng (2021) discusses the difference between China and America particularly in terms of family value, which means an individual's view, attitude or belief in family affairs and therefore affects how people deal with family-related matters. To be specific, family value in China has a strong affinity and cohesion. Chinese people regard the family construction as the essential life goal. The core value embodies the essence of traditional family value obtaining general recognition in the society, and it becomes the basic criterion of family civilization. However, family value in America featuring individual independence, personal rights, equality and freedom encourages citizens to be more adventurous and innovative. There are fewer authoritarian relationships between parents and children, which suggests that they are equal most of the time.

In A Comparative Analysis of the Cultural Differences between China and America from a Cross-Cultural Perspective -- A Case Study of the Film Scraping, Xu Chenxi and Yang Xue (2018) point out that the protagonist Xu Datong, fully embodies the traditional Chinese virtue of attaching great importance to family ties. But Americans tend to be more rational than emotional. In court, for example, Xu's tearful remarks about how much he loved his son were described by the prosecution's lawyer as an act, because bruises on his son's back are more credible evidence of abuse in the eyes of Americans than Xu's unfounded claims.

2.2 Differences between Chinese and American educational philosophy

In A Comparative Analysis of Chinese and American Educational Ideas from the Perspective of Cross-Cultural Communication -- A Case Study of the Film Scraping, Xu Wenli (2020) argues that movies are the product of a specific culture and reflect specific cultural values. In Scraping, Xu Datong's father's educational method and Xu Datong's educational method as a first-generation American immigrant reflect the difference and influence of Chinese and American educational ideas. In the form of case analysis, the author analyses the differences between Chinese and American educational philosophy as well as their advantages and disadvantages reflected in the movie.

In general, Chinese educational philosophy is influenced by collectivism and fosters children who are not self-centered. At the same time, influenced by Confucianism, Chinese people value family ties, which is conducive to family stability and social harmony. However, excessive parental care is not conducive to the independent growth of children. On the contrary, American educational philosophy focuses on cultivating children's sense of autonomy, innovation and independence. Nevertheless, if children become independent too early, they tend to lack the sense of responsibility to take care of the elderly, and the parent-child relationship will be relatively weak when they grow up.

2.3 Cognitive Differences of Chinese Elements between China and America

Xu Chenxi and Yang Xue (2018) report that there are differences between Chinese and American understanding of scraping therapy, a typical Chinese element. Scraping is a traditional Chinese medicine treatment. But in the United States, scraping has no written instructions, that's why the traditional Chinese therapy with a history of thousands of years is illegal in America, which implies that different cultural backgrounds cause different perceptions.

In Cultural Conflicts and Differences under the Perspective of Orientalism -- A New Discussion on the Movie Scraping, Zhang Yang and Zhang Xia (2018) propose that scraping, as the most significant Chinese element in the movie, presents a paradox: it is not only a good recipe for the older generation in China to treat diseases, but also a reason and source for the West to suppress China. It symbolizes not only the spirit and culture of the Chinese nation, but also the prejudice and suspicion of the West towards the East.

Besides, Zhang Yang and Zhang Xia (2018) also demonstrate Sino-American differences in acceptance of the image of Sun Wukong, the Monkey King. "Sun Wukong" is the carrier of traditional Chinese culture, and in the film, it is the symbol of the ideological entanglement between the East and the West. *Journey to the West* is one of the four great classics in China, and has a high value of communication in China and even the whole East. Chinese readers regard Sun Wukong as a kind and righteous positive image and hero, representing traditional Chinese values and moral norms. However, western readers misinterpret Sun Wukong as an evil figure who only uses violence to solve problems, regardless of others' lives. They believe that Sun Wukong is a naughty and rude Chinese monkey who will mislead children to commit violence. Therefore, just like *Scrapping*, Sun Wukong is also a major image to show the differences between Chinese and American cultures.

2.4 Barriers, Cultural Vacancy and Acculturation in Sino-American Cross-Cultural Exchanges

China represents 5,000 years of civilization, with a history recorded more than 1,500 years before the beginning of Christianity, while the United States is an ethnically and racially diverse country as a result of large-scale migration from many countries throughout its history. Currently, global integration promotes the increasing of cross-cultural communication, but the different cultural deposits in it also inevitably lead to cultural collision and conflict. Acculturation based on mutual understanding and respect for each other's cultures is the core link of intercultural communication, which plays a crucial role in filling cultural gaps and thus improving the communicative effect.

In *Intercultural Communication Barriers. China and the USA, The Difficulties of a Dialogue*, Oana-Antonia ILIE (2019) discusses the main obstacles that individuals of various cultures and heritages may face during the intercultural communication process. In particular, the author takes a close look at the cultural differences between China and the USA, and points out that barriers such as anxiety, language, stereotypes, prejudice, discrimination, ethnocentrism, and assumption of similarity instead of difference are the most significant ones to consider.

In *On the Gap between Chinese and American Cultures in the Film Scrapping -- from the Perspective of Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Model*, Zhang Xiuhua and Chen Qingqing (2018) introduce the concept of cultural vacancy, which denotes the phenomenon that the cultural idea of one nation does not exist in another nation, leading to information asymmetry in the process of communication between the source culture and the target culture. Cultural vacancy is the manifestation of cultural differences, which makes it hard to achieve reasonable, smooth and effective communication among countries. In addition, the phenomenon of cultural vacancy in cross-cultural communication is inevitable. Hofstede's cultural dimension model makes a quantitative analysis of cultural differences by ranking and scoring, which provides more targeted support for the study of cultural gaps. At the end of the movie, Quinlan realizes the absurdity of the "child abuse" conviction through his own experience of scrapping therapy. Through communication, he filled the cultural gap, cleared up misunderstandings and facilitated a happy ending of the story. Therefore, in the process of cross-cultural communication, enhancing cultural sensitivity is the key to achieving cultural integration, notwithstanding the collision and conflict.

In *Acculturation Analysis of Films with Cross-Cultural Themes Based on Cultural Adaptation Theory -- Take the Treatment as an example*, Wang Feifei argues that cross-cultural films involve various conflicts arising from cultural differences and the adaptation process of sojourners. According to intercultural adaptation theory, the process of acculturation can be divided into five stages: honeymoon stage, crisis stage, self-adjustment stage, adaptation stage and reverse culture shock stage. Cross-cultural themed films can reflect some stages according to the intention of the director or the needs of the plot so as to achieve the purpose of conflict and plot advancement in different stages. Taking the film, *The Treatment* as an example, the author focuses on the first four stages the protagonist goes through from the perspective of intercultural adaptation theory.

3. Research Questions and Significance

In recent years, “white supremacy” was strengthened in the United States, intensifying racial antagonism. Amid the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, Asian Americans are frequently discriminated against, and ethnic minorities are in a difficult situation.

Inspired by the questions: What are the differences between Chinese and American cultures? What are the reasons behind these differences? How to narrow and bridge the gap between nations and achieve truly effective cross-cultural exchanges? This paper, under the theoretical framework of Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions, takes the movie *The Treatment* into detailed examination, and analyzes the cultural differences between China and the United States in conjunction with the survival plight of Chinese immigrants.

In terms of theoretical significance, the present paper promotes the application of Hofstede's cultural dimension theory in the research fields of Chinese immigrants' identity and cross-cultural communication to a certain extent. In terms of practical significance, the present paper shows the multiple cultural conflicts between China and the United States reflected in the movie, traces the survival dilemma of the first generation of Chinese immigrants, and is of positive importance for the current reflection on the increasingly severe racial discrimination in western society, pushing forward the construction of a bridge for Sino-U.S. exchanges, so as to achieve effective intercultural communication, develop cultural diversity, and promote world peace and development.

4. Methodology

Taking the misunderstanding triggered by traditional Chinese scraping therapy as the main line, the film *The Treatment* tells the story of Chinese immigrants in America falling into various difficulties due to the conflict between Eastern and Western cultures, and finally breaking through the obstacles thanks to people's sincerity and love.

4.1 Quantitative Research

Professor Geert Hofstede conducted a comprehensive study of cultural differences. By aggregating his findings over a number of efforts, Hofstede developed a model that identified five dimensions to assist people in viewing different cultures. The present paper cites a graph containing many specific data, which compares Hofstede's cultural dimension values for the United States to those of China to identify cultural differences between the two countries.

4.2 Qualitative research

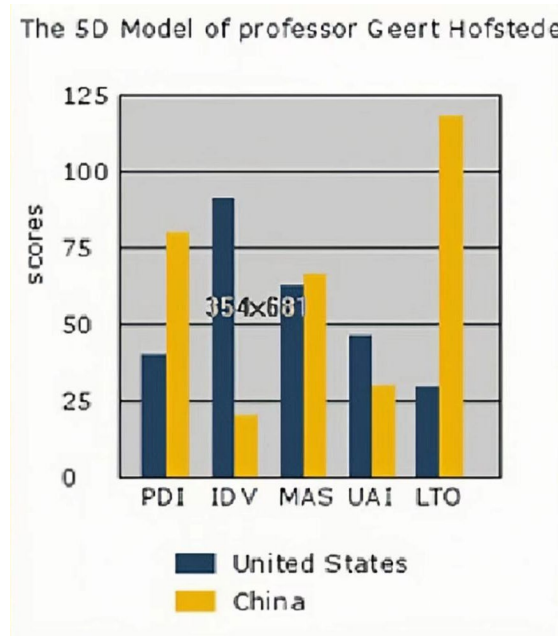
The present paper adopts the method of discourse analysis to depict cultural differences between China and the United States, which means both overt and covert messages are discussed in this paper, including characters' utterances and body languages. In addition, case study as a method is used to vividly manifest the different reactions of Chinese and Americans to the same thing in the same situation, and then analyze the underlying reasons.

5. Analysis

Geert Hofstede's five cultural dimensions can be used to correlate the cultural and religious paradigms between countries. The scores of each dimension for each country are backed up by survey data from 46 countries and regions, updated and expanded in 1991, 2001, and 2005, and continues to be widely cited and used by scholars and researchers (Shi and Wang, 2010). Results of the cultural comparison between China and the United States are indicated in Figure 1 below. As indicated in the graph, among the five categories, the differences in scores between China and the United States mainly lie in the three dimensions of power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and long-term versus short-term orientation, indicating some very different cultural characteristics exist

between the two countries. The present paper discusses and analyses cultural differences between China and the United States in the movie *The Treatment* from these three dimensions.

Figure 1. Cultural Comparison of China and the United States
(<http://blog.hemartin.net/2010/01/geert-hofstede-kulturdimensionen-china.html>)



5.1 Power Distance

The power distance index (PDI) measures the degree to which the culture believes that institutional and organizational power should be distributed unequally and the decisions of the power holders should be challenged or accepted. that less powerful members of a team accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (Xu Lisheng, 2013). Figure 1 shows China's PDI score (78) is much higher than the U.S.'s score (40), indicating the Chinese more readily accept the fact that power is distributed unequally. Therefore, China belongs to high PDI cultures while America belongs to low PDI cultures.

From the perspective of family, Chinese families attach importance to the order, and children are expected to obey their parents, while American parents attach importance to equality, and tend to establish equal relations with their children. At the beginning of the movie *The Treatment*, Xu Datong's son Dennis and Paul, the son of his boss Quinlan, fight while playing games. Without figuring out the truth, Xu forces Dennis to apologize to Paul. After Dennis refused to obey, Xu Datong slaps him in public. Xu Datong's father comforts his grandson with "To beat is to care, to scold is to love". Corresponding to this is the practice of American father Quinlan, who persuades Datong not to intervene and let the children deal with their own affairs. It can be seen that Xu Datong actually regards Dennis as his own property and does not respect Dennis' independence as a person, which hurts the child's self-esteem. Interestingly, Dennis' answer "the father who beats children is not a good father" is the embodiment of the American educational idea he has accepted as a second-generation immigrant.

From the perspective of the workplace, Xu Datong slaps his son in public to show his respect for the boss. This first reflects that Chinese people are insensitive to the unequal distribution of power, and identify with authority as well as hierarchy. Secondly, it implies that the Chinese people have a strong sense of face. However, the boss Quinlan believes that this is a messy Chinese logic, which can also reflect the low power distance in the United States, where the hierarchical system exists for the more efficient operation of the company, and the staff pay more attention to personal capability rather than status.

5.2 Individualism versus Collectivism

Cultures vary in their tendency to encourage people to be unique and independent or conforming and interdependent. The individualism - collectivism dimension refers to the degree to which a culture relies on and has allegiance to the self or the group (Xu Lisheng, 2013). Hofstede has created an individualism index (IDV) to assess a culture's relative location on this dimension. The high scores (90) of IDV for the U.S. in Figure 1 indicates high levels of individualism where ties between individuals are loose, and everyone is expected to look after themselves. While China's low score (20) indicates more of a collectivist characteristic, implying the Chinese are more willing to be integrated into cohesive groups with loyalty to other group members. Meanwhile, the group is expected to look out for its individual members.

Rooted in the cultural notion of collectivism, China emphasizes public face rather than individual wishes. However, influenced by individualistic cultural ideas, Americans' shows the emphasis on personal face, personal freedom of action and the satisfaction of personal aspirations. In the movie, Xu Datong openly slaps his son in order not to embarrass the boss and to protect the boss's public face, while the boss himself believes it is a rude and unreasonable behavior that will damage the child's personal face. This is precisely influenced by the different outlook on face under the difference between collectivism and individualism.

Datong's boss Quinlan's testimony in court is extremely detrimental to Datong. In Datong's view, Quinlan, as his friend, should try every means to safeguard him, though Quinlan later explains, "I'm just telling the truth." Growing up in an American society, Quinlan is puzzled by Datong's resignation, because not letting private affairs interfere with public duty is another prominent feature of American individualism. On the contrary, China upholds collectivist values and attaches importance to emotional interpersonal relationships based on the interdependent relationship between family and friends, presenting a Chinese "human society". Chinese traditional virtues emphasize that filial piety comes first. Xu Datong believes that he has the obligation to "accept it on behalf of his father" and to protect the collective interests of the whole family, so he shoulders the responsibility without hesitation in court. But when Quinlan learns the truth, he cannot understand at all. Xu's wife Jian Ning merely uses one sentence: "because he is a Chinese" to explain, which highlights the differences in cultural values between China and the United States.

5.3 Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation

The time-orientation dimension refers to a person's point of reference about life and work (Xu Lisheng, 2013). As is shown in Figure 1, China's LTO score (120) almost exceeds the scale compared to the meager U.S. score (30), which indicates the Chinese values involve thrift, perseverance and deferred gratification of need much more than the United States.

Countries of long-term orientation focuses on long-range goals and the future, while countries of short-term orientation pay more attention to immediate interests. Influenced by Confucianism, China is a country that attaches great importance to long-term commitments. As stated in *Intrigues of the Warring States*, "parents love their children, and their plans for children are far-reaching." The United States is mainly short-term oriented. Americans prefer adventure and take "living in the present" as their life philosophy.

In the film *The Treatment*, Xu Datong and his wife insist on speaking English even at home in order to enable their son Dennis go to the top private primary school in the United States. In the face of allegations of child abuse, both agree to take the child home first at the cost of the separation of husband and wife, and then try to reunite in the future. In addition, Xu Datong once chose to keep his wife's life when she had difficult labor, which reflects the long-term guiding philosophy of "where there is life, there is hope", literally meaning "staying on the green hill, not afraid of no firewood".

In sharp contrast, a midwife accuses Xu Datong of depriving the baby of his right to life because Xu's choice of saving his wife. In addition, for the American prosecution lawyer, winning this lawsuit is the goal. In order to win, all means can be used, such as deliberately demonizing the image of

Monkey King to provoke Xu Datong, which manifests America's emphasis upon expectation of quick results following one's actions and immediate gratification of one's needs.

6. Conclusion

The movie *The Treatment* takes cultural differences as the core, clustering the respects of family values, educational philosophy, traditional Chinese elements, ethnic identity of the first and second-generation Chinese Americans, cultural vacancy, acculturation, and so on. It fully presents the emotional state, survival condition and cultural inheritance of the Chinese nation while compared to those of the United States. Taking this wonderful film with the theme of cross-cultural communication as the research object, the present paper provides a detailed analysis of various cultural characteristics exist between China and the United States from the perspective of Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions, particularly in terms of power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and long-term versus short-term orientation.

6.1 Limitations

The present paper has some limitations that require further improvement. First, with the rapid development of the times, Hofstede's research data are not fully adapted to today's society. Second, it should be noted that every culture is a intricate and complicated organism. The conclusion of cultural differences based on Hofstede's theory of culture's five dimensions conforms to the vast majority of people in a society, but it does not represent the characteristics of all people in the culture. Third, this paper focused on such dimensions as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and long-term versus short-term orientation, while the two remaining dimensions, namely, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity versus femininity, are not included. The further discussion could take them into consideration in the analysis of cultural differences and integration between China and the United States.

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