

An Interpretation of The Farewell from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: The Farewell, directed by Wang Ziyi, was released in the United States and China and received wide acclaim. The film shows the great differences in values between China and the United States. From this point, this paper will analyze and interpret the cultural differences in the film from the perspective of intercultural communication with the help of Hofstede-Bond's value dimensions and Hall's high-and low-context orientation.

Keywords: The Farewell; Intercultural Communication; Value Dimensions; High-and Low-context Orientation

As the development of internationalization and globalization, people of different cultural backgrounds are now living in this world of global village. While different cultural backgrounds lead to different values and lifestyles, so there may produce conflicts during the intercultural communication. Therefore, it is very important to know cultural differences and improve the awareness and ability of intercultural communication.

In order to make the most of a loved one's last days, is it a good idea to hide from her that she's dying? Different cultures may reflect different perspectives to this question. The film The Farewell is adapted from the family story of a Chinese-American female director Wang Ziyi. And it has a larger response in the North American market, being one of the examples of intercultural communication. The story happened in a Chinese-American family, whose grandmother's suffering from cancer, but the family members choose to hide her and decide to go home to see her for the last time in the name of a wedding. But the granddaughter Billi, who grew up in New York, disagreed with the rest of the family, saying that Nai Nai had the right to know her real condition. Thus, the American culture represented by Billi and the Chinese culture represented by other elders have triggered a series of conflicts, which reflect the differences in values between China and the United States. This paper will analyze and interpret the cultural differences and the reasons shown in the film with the help of Hofstede's value dimensions and Hall's High-and Low-context orientation.

1. Chapter one Hofstede's value dimensions

Hofstede is a theoretical founder and forerunner in the field of intercultural communication. On the basis of his research, he proposed four dimensional model of culture values of different countries, laying a solid foundation for relevant cultural value theories. The four value dimensions are: Individualism vs. Collectivism, Power distance, Uncertainty avoidance and Masculinity vs. femininity.

1.1 Individualism vs. collectivism

Of the four dimensions, individualism vs. collectivism is the most widely researched. Individualism usually puts more emphasis on "I" than on "we". According to Hofstede's study, the US ranked number 1 in individualism worldwide. For individualists, each person is separate from others, children learn to think in terms of "I".

Collectivism emphasizes common interests, conformity, cooperation and interdependence. For collectivists, it is important to maintain harmony and avoid confrontations. China is a country of collectivism. For thousands of years, the Chinese nation has only known absolute power, so the cultural values of individuals are less. The political history of the

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West is the combination of right and power, and the political system has formed the democratic system, and the personal value is more reflected in the traditional western culture.

In the film *The Farewell*, Billi doesn't want to live with her parents, even if she can't pay the rent. This is a form of individualism. As a child, who grew up in American culture, Billi is quite independent, so for her it is a pleasure to do much by herself as possible. While in fact, in China, for those unmarried children, it is common to live with parents.

In the film *The Farewell*, when Billi knows Nai Nai's dying, her first reaction is to call her. But her father denies it, let's take the following dialogue for example:

Father: She doesn't know. The family thinks it's better not to tell her. So you can't say anything.

Billi: I don't understand. She doesn't have a lot of time left, she should know, right?

Billi's comments reflect in the American culture patients have a right to know and are deeply concerned with individual rights and interests. Only the patient has the right to decide what to do with the rest of his or her life, which shows a strong individualism.

1.2 Power distance

Power distance refers to the attitudes toward differences in authority. It reflects the degree to which the culture accepts the unequal distribution of power. Meanwhile, it describes how individuals with a certain community view power, consequently, their role in decision making.

1.2.1 High power distance

Cultures with high power distance accept the fact that power is distributed unequally, that is, some members have greater resources and influence than others. Owing to the specific natural, economic and political reasons, China belongs to the country with high power distance. As Chinese, we all know we should be obedient to our parents, that is filia piety is one important value in China. China and Japan all belong to the culture with high power distance.

1.2.2 Low power distance

In cultures with low power distance, power is distributed equally. People in cultures with low power distance will fight for equality, and they long for fair cooperation and independence. They seek a role in decision making and question decisions and orders in which they have no input.

1.2.3 The reflection of power distance in the film *The Farewell*

In the film *The Farewell*, when Billi sees her father and her uncle are smoking out of the rooms in the hotel, she says: "Dad, are you smoking? I thought you said you quit." Especially, when her uncle continues passing cigarettes to her dad, she quickly says: "Stop giving him cigarette!" To Billi, it is quite common to control her father, because in her American culture everyone is equal. It's ok for her to control her father. But to his uncle, who was born and grew up in China, then worked in Japan, he has adapted to the culture with high power distance, so what Billi said is quite overly aggressive, quite unacceptable. Therefore the uncle says in a bit angry voice: "Don't control him. He's your father. You shouldn't try to control him."

2. Chapter two Bond's long-term versus short-term orientation

Based on the Rokeach Value Survey, Michael Harris Bond's study was the Chinese Value Survey. It reflects how strongly a person believes in the long-term thinking promoted by the teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius. On the long-term orientation one finds values oriented towards the future, like thrifty (saving) and persistence. On the short-term side one finds values rather oriented towards the past and present, they look for quick payoff. Western industrialized cultures are much more focused on short-term results.

2.1 Long-term orientation reflected in the film

Mother advocates frugality and advises Billi to save money. It's really about the long-term interest. It reflects the long-term cultural orientation. The reasons can be traced back to ancient China. The traditional small-scale peasant economy with low productivity, create wealth more slowly; Only living frugally can ensure the continuation of the individual and family life, so under the influence of this kind of mode of production, China has formed a long-term oriented culture, which also reflects on consumption characteristics of future oriented.

2.2 Short-term orientation reflected in the film

Americans tend to live in the present and have an open consumption outlook. For example, Billi often overspends and still uses her credit card to buy the air ticket back China even though she owes two months' rent. These plots show that she is influenced by the short-term oriented culture and pursues the satisfaction of current needs and interests. It is because of the great influence of the industrial revolution in the West.

3. Chapter three Hall's high- and low-context orientation

The anthropologist Edward Hall distinguishes among cultures on the basis of the role of context in communication. People from different cultures process and disseminate information differently. And Hall categorizes cultures as being either high-context or low-context.

3.1 High-context cultures

For people from high-context culture, their communication tends to be imprecise, with as much attention paid to the surroundings and their environment. And the speaker think it's listener's responsibility to encode the meaning. People from high-context cultures like to get as much additional information as possible. Japan and China all belong to high-context cultures. In fact, the Chinese name of the film is a kind of high-context culture.

3.2 Low-context cultures

People from low-context culture are much more precise in their communication, providing mountains of detail, and the speaker think it's my own responsibility to make everything no difficulty to understand, clear to listener. Low-context countries, such as the United States, Britain, focus more on what is being said rather than on who is saying it. So according to the theme, the English name of the film is *The Farewell*, which directly expresses a kind of goodbye to the dying Nai Nai.

3.3 The reflection of the high-and low-context orientation in the film

In the film, during a dinner party, the aunt says that it is easier to make money in China than in the United States, but she still insisted on sending her child to the United States. The following dialogues make Billi confused, because they are speaking in the high-context culture:

Aunt: You guys don't have to worry. Billi will make big money when she becomes a famous writer! Right now you're investing in her talent!

Mom: So raising a kid is like playing the stock market?

Billi: What's that mean?

Father: They say you're a stock investment and you're gonna make us a lot of money.

Mom: But we can't expect that from you right? You are a losing stock.

Meanwhile, when aunt Yu Ping criticize the two brothers don't do their duties to care for the mother, she just use the cryptic expression "You all may think the moon is rounder outside China. But have you considered your mother? Growing old without kids around."

4. Conclusion

This film *The Farewell* throws out the proposition of truth and lies in different cultural backgrounds, but the emotion between the family members finally dissolve the cultural barriers. This paper analyze the film through Hofstede-Bond's value dimensions and Hall's high-and low-context orientation. Due to natural, economical and political differences, there are cultural differences between China and America. We should respect different cultures and face the essence of different cultures with an open and inclusive mind.

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