



Cultural Differences between China and the United States from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication-Taking the Film “Don’t Tell Her” as an Example

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Abstract. Don't Tell Her, a film produced and directed by Chinese-American director Wang Ziyi, compares the differences in culture and values between China and the United States, and shows the love and understanding of family members under the cultural differences. The film mainly tells the story of a Chinese American family in which the grandmother is suffering from terminal cancer. Billie, a girl living in the United States, wants to tell her grandmother about her real condition, but the family chooses to hide her condition and let the whole family spend the last time with her grandmother in the name of a wedding. This paper analyzes the clips related to the conflicting and exclusionary cultural differences between China and the United States in the film, compares and highlights the differences between Chinese and American cultures and concepts, and puts forward some suggestions for better cross-cultural communication between China and the West, which will help people better understand the cultural differences between China and the West and thus promote better coexistence and harmonious development of the world.

Keywords: Don't Tell Her; cross-cultural communication; Chinese and American culture; differences

1 Introduction

With the progress and development of the times, economic globalization has become the main trend of world development, and in the context of the development of global integration, cross-cultural communication among countries has become more and more frequent, and the cultural collision and intermingling between China and the West has become a relatively thorny issue. Due to the different cultural characteristics of each country, different political concepts, economic systems or geographical conditions, the differences in culture are large. Hofstede wrote in “Culture and Organization: The Power of Mental Software” that “the so-called ‘culture’ refers to the ‘common mental programs’ that people in the same environment have, and this mental program is a way for members of one group to distinguish themselves from members of another group.

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members distinguish themselves from members of another group as a reflection of their collective thinking” [1]. Thus, it can be seen that culture is a “mental program” shared by people who have the same educational experience and live in the same society, and the “mental program” held by different countries and different social groups may also be different. Against the background of cultural differences between China and the United States, the film *Don’t Tell Her*, adapted from the story of Chinese-American female director Wang Ziyi, shows the cultural conflict between China and the United States, and explains the director’s own understanding of the cultural differences between China and the West. In the course of the film, Billie goes through the process of initial incomprehension and resistance to gradual understanding and finally acceptance of the family’s practice. From this, we can see that only through mutual understanding and tolerance can we seek common ground while reserving differences, and build a bridge of identity between the two countries, thus realizing cultural integration.

2 Comparison of Cultural Differences between East and West in the Film *Don’t Tell Her*

2.1 Collectivism in China and Individualism in America

Hofstede mentions the theory of cultural differences in *Culture and Organization: The Power of Psychological Software*, and one of the dimensions is “individualism and collectivism”, which he defines in his book as: Individualism is a kind of loosely-integrated social organization structure, where interpersonal relationships are loose and everyone only pays attention to their own values and needs. values and needs [1]. Collectivism, on the other hand, refers to a tightly knit social organization in which each individual is bound to a strong internal group with strong collective cohesion.

In the film *Don’t Tell Her*, Billie wants to tell her grandmother after she learns that she has terminal cancer. Billie grew up in the United States, and is deeply influenced by the American concept that everyone should have the right to know, and that her grandmother has the right to know about her condition. This individualism is more focused on one’s own interests and pursuits [2]. In the film, Billie learns that her grandmother is seriously ill and insists on deciding to return to her home country despite her parents’ objections. In addition, in the United States, Billie also chooses to rent a room by herself and refuses the help of her parents, which also reflects her strong independence. After learning that her grandmother is seriously ill, she returns home alone despite her parents’ objections. All these phenomena show that the American concept is more concerned with the rights and enjoyment of the individual. On the contrary, the family’s approach is a kind of well-intentioned lie in which everyone believes that the grandmother should not be told and that this will relieve her psychological pressure. The family members gave up their studies and jobs to arrange a “fake wedding,” the main purpose of which was to bring the family together and to make the grandmother happy. Each member of the family gave up his or her own interests and worked together for the collective good. At the same time, the image of the three generations of Grandma Billie’s family having dinner together also highlights the cohesion of the family and the

sense of collectivism. In the film, the day before the wedding Billie once again mentions about whether or not to tell her grandmother about her condition, and her uncle says that the family left for the West a long time ago because they see life as individual, which is precisely the problem of the cultural difference between the West and the East, where life is seen as collective [3].

2.2 Differences in Views on Life and Death between China and the United States

The concept of life and death refers to people's views and attitudes towards life and death, which will be experienced in the whole life experience, which is the natural process of the existence and demise of all life [4]. Different countries, different cultures and different values will lead people to have different views on life and death.

In the film, the first clip that highlights the concept of life and death is when Billie's family is having dinner with American friends at the table, and her father tells a joke: when his wife comes back from a business trip, Mr. said that the cat died, and his wife was very angry and thought that he was very abrupt, and that he should be guided slowly to tell the bad news. A few months later, his wife goes on another business trip, and when she comes back, the gentleman learns his lesson this time and says, "Your mother ran up on the roof" when she walks in the door. The joke at the beginning of the film shows the difference between Chinese and American cultures on the topic of death, and Americans do not understand the avoidance and ambiguity of the concept of death in Chinese culture.

The Analects of Confucius reads, "Ji Lu asked about ghosts and gods in the world. The son said, 'How can I serve the ghosts if I fail to serve the people?' He said, 'I dare to ask about death.' He said, 'How can you know death if you don't know life?'" [5] Confucius here put forward the "unknown life, how to know death" point of view can also be seen in the traditional Confucian concept is to attach importance to life, avoid death, and the Chinese people's concept of life and death is also deeply influenced by Confucian culture. Chinese people are accustomed to avoiding the cruelty of death by using euphemisms, and usually adopt "good intentioned lies" to wrap up the fear of death. In the film, Billie's mother says to Billie, "Whoever gets cancer is sentenced to death." "It's not the cancer that kills them, it's the fear."

For the United States, they are more inclined to "face death and transcend death", and are more concerned about death [6]. Americans tend to think of death as a turning point in life, not the end. Since most Americans are religious and believe that good people go to heaven when they die, death is seen as a journey to another higher stage of life. This attitude makes Americans relatively optimistic and calm in the face of death. In the United States, students are also provided with appropriate life education, through the provision of death-related courses, so that students can enhance the awareness of death, the correct face of death, more positive and optimistic about their own lives [7]. In the film, Billie has communicated with her family many times about wanting to tell her grandmother about this fact. When Billie and her aunt are massaging in the massage parlor, Billie asks if she should tell her grandmother about her condition, and what if she wants to say goodbye; her aunt thinks that saying goodbye to her is too

painful a thing to let her grandmother go through, and that if she tells her grandmother, it will ruin her mood. In the hospital, Billie asks the doctor if she shouldn't tell the truth, to which the doctor replies that most Chinese families choose to hide it, and that a lie is a lie is no more than a well-intentioned lie.

2.3 Differences in Views on Privacy between China and the United States

Regarding privacy, China favors more group privacy and the United States focuses more on individual privacy. The Confucian classic "Rites of Passage" reflects the Chinese view of privacy, for privacy Confucian concept of privacy is based on the group rather than the independent individual. In the context of Confucian culture, personal privacy is often regarded as part of family or social relations rather than a completely independent individual right, so the boundaries of personal privacy are relatively blurred [8]. In his book, Kong Yingda does not believe that individuals have independent privacy, the so-called "private matters" do not need to be protected and avoided, only between the group there will be corresponding privacy, which needs to be avoided by others [9]. In China, people's concept of privacy is relatively weak, and they may not be too shy about sharing personal information with strangers when communicating with each other. For example, Chinese people usually greet each other with "Have you eaten?" "Where are you going?" "What are you doing?" Such greetings are often accompanied by personal questions about one's age, occupation, and marital status, which can also become topics of conversation.

In 1980, Warren and Brandeis defined privacy as "the right to be alone" in their paper "On the Right to Privacy", which is the first time that the concept of "privacy" has been systematically explained and summarized in writing [10]. The United States tends to pay more attention to the individual's right to privacy, which is also the essential difference between the privacy culture and that of China. In the film, when Billie checks into the hotel, the hotel receptionist helps him carry his luggage upstairs, and in the process the receptionist asks her many questions, such as "Are you from abroad?" "Which country?" "Why did you come back?" "What does your father do in the U.S.?" "Do you think it's better to be in America or in China?" etc. In China, this is a way of expressing friendship with the other person, but for Billie, who lives in the United States, she pays more attention to her privacy, and is therefore very discreet in her answers, as can be seen in her eagerness to close the door at the end.

Americans place a high value on individual privacy, and in their conception, privacy covers a wide range of areas, including time, space, rights, and so on. The American view of privacy is mainly based on the protection of individual freedom and rights, and emphasizes the autonomous control of personal information [11]. Therefore, in the face of these greeting questions, Americans will show resentment and consider it as an infringement of the right to privacy.

3 Solution Strategies for Facing Cultural Differences between China and the U.S

3.1 Respect Cultural Differences and Downplay Ethnocentrism

The concept of ethnocentrism refers to the concept that a human group puts itself in the center of the surrounding world, mainly to affirm its own achievements and values, and deny the values of other cultures. In the process of communication, it is easy for people to ignore the differences in cultural differences between the two sides, measure the culture and values of other countries with reference to the culture and values of their own countries, and make wrong behaviors and judgments in communication, thus affecting the results of communication [12]. Everyone may not be able to avoid ethnocentrism completely in cross-cultural communication, and people's behaviors, conversation styles, and living customs will be shown in the communication. In intercultural communication, mutual understanding and adaptation are needed. For example, in the film, when Billie talked with the receptionist in the hotel, the receptionist asked some greeting questions, which Billie thought it was a violation of her privacy. Therefore, in the face of different cultural differences in other countries, we should learn to minimize our ethnocentrism and understand and respect other cultures.

3.2 Adapt to Cultural Differences and Build Up Cross-Cultural Communication Awareness

In a diverse social and international environment, the ability to understand and adapt to the differences of people from different cultural backgrounds, and to communicate effectively with them, is increasingly becoming a necessary skill. This not only enhances mutual understanding and respect, but also promotes cooperation and reduces misunderstanding and conflict [13]. In cross-cultural communication, it is inevitable to encounter cultural differences, in order to eliminate cultural differences, we must first learn to adapt to cultural differences, recognize the plurality of the world's cultures, give enough respect and understanding of other cultures, and choose the appropriate solution according to the actual situation. For example, in the film, Bili, who is deeply influenced by American concepts, at first wants to tell her grandmother the truth and opposes her family to hide her illness from her grandmother, but after getting along with her family and grandmother, she finally chooses to maintain the "good intentioned lie" with her family, and in this process, Bili has gradually agreed with her family, and at the same time, she feels that the Chinese people attach great importance to the collective and the Chinese people's sense of responsibility. In this process, Billie has gradually recognized her family's practice and felt the importance and cohesion of the Chinese people to the collective. Cross-cultural communication is an inevitable trend in the development of all countries. Taking the initiative to understand each other's culture and communication, and maintaining the principle of seeking common ground while reserving differences, will promote cultural exchanges between the two countries and enhance the ability of cultural adaptation.

3.3 Eliminating Stereotypes and Looking at Culture from a Developmental Perspective

In her book *Intercultural Communication*, Zu Xiaomei explains the term stereotype: “Stereotypes, also known as ‘preconceptions’ or ‘stereotypes’, are generalizations about the characteristics of members of a group” [14]. When communicating across cultures, stereotypes can affect our ability to recognize and understand cultures; therefore, we must learn to look at cultures from a developmental perspective and should not view them as stereotypical and fixed. For example, in the film, when ordering the wedding dishes in the restaurant, the grandmother said that Billie’s father had brought champagne from abroad, but Billie’s father’s brother said that Chinese people don’t drink champagne, so it would be better to order white wine. After the family has eaten, Billie and her mother argue in the hotel, and her mother talks about how she didn’t show too much emotion when her father died, and she mentions that not crying in China is a sign of not loving your family, and that some people professionally hire weepers to show their sadness, which she feels disgusted by the posturing. What is reflected in the film is the stereotyping of Chinese habits and customs, which can have a negative impact on Chinese culture. We need to be aware of the existence of stereotypes, change our simplistic way of thinking, reach out to people of different cultures, and avoid making simplistic generalizations and conclusions about a particular culture.

4 Conclusion

The film “Don’t Tell Her” not only reflects the cultural differences between China and the United States in different aspects, but also highlights the importance of promoting cultural exchange and integration in the context of globalization. Cultural differences between different countries are inevitable in the process of communication, and it is necessary for us to face up to the cultural differences and treat the differences and conflicts between different cultures objectively, while maintaining our own cultural self-confidence and independence. We call on all sectors of society to pay more attention to intercultural education and jointly promote the harmonious coexistence of global cultures.

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