

# The Collision and Integration of Chinese and Western Cultures in the Movie “Pushing Hands”

Wei Liu

Jilin Radio and Television University  
Changchun, China

**Abstract**—The movie "Pushing Hands" describes the estrangement faced by a Chinese family immigrating to the United States, and shows the confrontation and collision between Chinese traditional culture and American modern civilization. With effort, people with different cultural background understood each other at last. Only by respecting, understanding and tolerating each other's culture can cross-cultural exchanges be promoted.

**Keywords**—cultural collision; cultural integration; intercultural communication

## I. INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural communication refers to the communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. Differences of cultures influence the efficiency of communication. With the acceleration of global economic integration, exchanges between China and the West become increasingly frequent. There are great differences between Chinese and western cultures in many aspect, such as life style and way of thinking. People with different cultural backgrounds will inevitably encounter cultural conflicts in communication.

The movie "Pushing Hands" directed by Ang Lee tells a poignant story that an old man came to the United States to enjoy his old age with his son. The movie uses "pushing hands" to discuss the balance of interpersonal relationship. "Pushing hands" originated from a two-person simulated exercise in tai chi in China. When people meet for the first time, they should shake hands politely, not push hands. A metaphor is used by Ang Lee to express the collision between Chinese and western cultures.

## II. THE COLLISION OF CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURES EMBODIED IN THE MOVIE “PUSHING HANDS”

The movie is about an elderly person, Mr. Zhu, who is good at Taijiquan (a kind of traditional Chinese shadow boxing). He went to the United States where his son worked after he retired in China. Due to cultural and lifestyle differences, many conflicts have arisen between the elderly and Martha, his daughter-in-law who grew up in the United States. Since then, there were many quarrels in the family. Later, Mr. Zhu left his son's home and lived alone in Chinatown. In the movie, Mr. Zhu said: "Sharing weal and woe is easy, but sharing happiness is difficult. What cultural

differences and conflicts prevent Mr. Zhu from living in his son's home? I will make an analysis from the following aspects.

### A. Different Attitudes Toward the Elderly

Filial piety is the first thing in all the virtues. Filial piety is respected in Chinese traditional culture. When parents are old and infirm, their children take care of their parents carefully to make them live comfortable. Almost every Chinese will do the same. From the point of Chinese traditional view, the elderly live with their children and the family members share the happiness. That is the ideal family model.

"Filial piety" can not be understood by westerners. U.S culture believes in individualism, advocates individuality and independence, and people wouldn't rely on others. Children left their parents and be self-sufficient when they grow up. Parents also need to earn their own living, and parents would not live with their children when they are old. They would receive allowance by the government. Americans do not live with their elders, their children and grandchildren rarely look after their elderly parents. In the movie "Pushing Hands", Martha showed her rejection about Mr. Zhu's arrival.

### B. Differences in Family Values

First of all, there are differences in family structure. China's family structure is complex, Chinese people like to live together, and it is common for three or four generations to live together. The grandparents occasionally help take care of the children, and the children amuse the grandparents. The family members care for each other, love each other and live happily together. That is the traditional family model in China. The family structure in the United States is relatively simple, which consists of parents and young children, called nuclear families. Children won't live with their parents when they have grown up. Old people are not used to living with their children either. Thus, we understand why Martha is so disgusted with her father-in-law living in her home.

Secondly, there is the difference in the need for family space: in China's family concept, co-existence means sharing, each family member will do his own thing with ease and will not feel embarrassed or disturbed. Therefore, when Mr. Zhu spent his time in his son's home with his daughter-in-law, he leisurely practiced tai chi and watched movies without realizing that his behavior had affected his daughter-in-law.

Americans believe in individualism, emphasize self-need, self-will and oppose interference and restraint from others. They prefer a relaxed and free living environment, and do not want to be influenced by others, so, they still need their own space at home. Martha is a free writer, she needs a quiet environment. The arrival of Mr. Zhu affected her writing activities, which directly affected her career. Contradictions were intensified and quarrels became inevitable. Embarrassed situation made the son who was integrated into American culture in a dilemma between his wife and father, struggling in the crevice between China's "filial piety" ethics and America's pursuit of an independent and free life.

### *C. Differences in Lifestyle*

Mr. Zhu and Martha have totally different living habits. They speak different languages, having different hobbies and different eating habits. In the details of life, they have nothing in common.

In the movie, many cultural symbols representing Chinese tradition can be found in Mr. Zhu's life. Wearing double-breasted cloth unlined upper garment and cloth shoes, loving tai chi, go and calligraphy, which are almost unique to China. These symbols seem to be out of step with the modern living environment of his son's family. Western-style luxury villas, fashionable open kitchens, Martha writes books by computer typing and chooses running and boxing as sports. At the beginning of the movie, the Chinese traditional civilization and the western modern civilization are interwoven under one roof. The conflict from the two civilizations is inevitable.

The differences between Chinese and western food culture are also vividly shown in the movie. China's food culture has a long history. Since ancient times, it has emphasized the taste, flavor. However, western countries pay more attention to food science and nutrition collocation, and western food cooking is carried out according to the standard process and measurement.

Bowl and chopsticks are the main tableware in China. But Americans mainly use knives and forks. In terms of food selection, Chinese attach great importance to cooking techniques and pay attention to the coordination and consistency of color, aroma, taste, shape and utensils of food. Chinese people like cereal grains and pay attention to nutrition balance. Mr. Zhu in the movie is also very particular about "eating" and every meal is carefully cooked. He took a large bowl containing rice, meat and various side dishes, and ate happily with chopsticks. Westerners pay more attention to nutrition and health care in their diet. They pay special attention to the nutritional components of food, whether carbohydrates, proteins, fats, vitamins and other nutritional elements are properly matched, whether calorie intake exceeds the standard, etc. These are the first things they consider when cooking food, while color and aroma are secondary. Martha's eating habits are Americanized diet. Many Americans try to lose their weight and prefer low-calorie foods. In terms of material selection and cooking techniques, Americans usually eat raw vegetables. Raw vegetables are be made into salads. However, in Mr. Zhu's

opinion, salad is like a dish of rabbit food, it's impossible for him to accept it. Generally speaking, the two persons have nothing in common in diet and can only eat their own food respectively.

### *D. Differences in Educational Methods*

Westerners believe in freedom and equality. All people are equal and have the same rights. In western educational concepts, children are independent individuals, and parents give their children freedom and their choices and personalities were respected. Nobody could impose his will on his children. Children are equal to their parents. When parents educate their children, they cannot beat or scold them.

In China, many parents impose their own will on their children. Parents habitually teach their children to obey the elders and listen to their elders. Otherwise, they will be considered disrespectful or even unfilial to their elders. Obedience is an important guideline in education. When parents educate their children, they often use the words like "you should... They usually tell their children what to do and what not to do on the basis of their own life experience. When children are naughty, some parents will use corporal punishment as well. In this way, children wouldn't express their thoughts and wishes, they obey their parents blindly, and easily become timid.

In this movie, the difference of Chinese and western educational methods is evident. Martha believed in American education. She gave her child freedom and did not restrict him too much. In the movie, when Jamie was naughty, Martha might patiently talk to him. When Jamie drew a violent picture, Martha might kiss him and encourage him. But, in grandpa's view, the American cartoons were not suitable for children for they're violent and would have a negative impact on children, so he taught him to paint Chinese ink paintings. In a word, ways of education in China and the West are also different.

## III. THE INTEGRATION OF CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURES EMBODIED IN THE MOVIE

After the conflict came into being, Ang Lee let the protagonists from two different backgrounds think about the difference and integration of the two civilizations, which can be seen as the reconciliation of Chinese and Western cultures.

### *A. Americans' Recognition of Chinese Culture*

Martha didn't understand why Xiao Sheng wanted Mr. Zhu to live together with them, until Mr. Zhu was lost, and Xiao Sheng lost his temper and blamed herself. Martha realized that his father was so important for Xiao Sheng that she tried to understand the old man. After Martha's book was published and received high praise, she apologized to Mr. Zhu. At the end of the movie, Martha also cooked Chinese fried spring rolls, which can be regarded as a compromise for American culture and Chinese culture.

### B. Chinese Understanding of American Culture

After Mr. Zhu came out of prison, Xiaosheng wanted to take the old man home. But Mr. Zhu decided not to disturb his son any longer for his son's happiness. Mr. Zhu decided to live in the Chinatown and be self-sufficient by teaching Taijiquan. The traditional Chinese family ideal has made a compromise in the western cultural environment, which is a fusion of Chinese culture and western culture. This integration is also reflected in the fact that while the younger grandson is learning English, he is also learning Chinese, Martha and Linda use Chinese tea sets together, and American students appear in the Taijiquan class. At the end of the movie, Xiao Sheng and Martha imitated the pushing action that their father was good at, implying that family members achieve mutual understanding.

## IV. CONCLUSION

The movie *Pushing Hands*, through the reappearance of the details of the life of a Chinese family who immigrated to the United States, triggered the audience's deep thinking on the cross-cultural communication conflicts caused by the cultural differences between China and the West, and highlighted the importance of raising the awareness of cross-cultural communication.

Cultural differences exist; they cannot be changed or ignored. They resulted from the complicated social factors. In cross-cultural communication, we'd better attach importance to various cultures. We should treat different cultures with an inclusive attitude, understand cultural differences, learn to adapt to them and accept them, and minimize obstacles in communication.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Edward Taylor. *Primitive Culture* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Literature and Art Publishing House, 1992.
- [2] Liang Yong, Liu Dezhong. *Intercultural Foreign Language Teaching and Research*[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1999.
- [3] Li Shilei. *British and American Culture Expo*[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai World Book Publishing Company, 2000.
- [4] Wu Youfu. *Foreign Language and Cultural Studies* [M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2004.
- [5] Wang Enming. *Contemporary American Society and Culture*[M]. Shanghai: Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 2007.
- [6] Lu Lei. Cultural Identity Construction in Cultural Differences between China and the West-Analysis of Movies *Pushing Hands* and *Wedding Banquet* [J]. *Journal of Honghe University*, 2011 (01).
- [7] Zhou Zhigao. Differences between Chinese and Western Movies from the Perspective of Culture [J]. *Writer*, 2011 (04).