

Analysis of the Cultural Dimensions in the Intercultural Film

-- Take *The Wedding Banquet* as an Example

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Abstract

Directed by Ang Lee, the film *The Wedding Banquet* is an excellent intercultural work that reflects the differences between the East and the West. This paper analyzes the cultural values in *The Wedding Banquet* through the detailed analysis of the movie plots based on the cultural dimensions of Geert Hofstede and probes into the cultural differences of Chinese and American culture embodied in the film.

Keywords

The Wedding Banquet, intercultural communication, cultural dimensions.

1. Introduction to the Wedding Banquet and Cultural Dimensions

1.1. Introduction to the Wedding Banquet

The film was directed by Ang Lee in 1993. Simon and Wei Tong are a gay couple living together in Manhattan. However, Wei Tong's parents don't know that their son is a gay. They keep urging him to get married quickly. To defer the suspicions of Wei Tong's parents, Simon suggests a marriage of convenience between Wei Tong and Wei-Wei, an immigrant in need of a green card. When Wei Tong's parents come to America for the wedding, they insist upon an elaborate banquet, resulting in several complications (Tan 2014, Xin 2013).

1.2. Cultural Dimensions by Geert Hofstede

Geert Hofstede, a Dutch sociologist and intercultural scientist, conducted an extensive study of employees who all worked for the same multinational corporation IBM, but in forty different countries. He identifies five cultural dimensions (Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism/Collectivism, Masculinity/ Femininity, and Long/Short-Term Orientation) that are influenced and modified by culture (15).

Hofstede's work was one of the earliest researches to explore cultural values using extensive statistical data. In his research, Hofstede surveyed 116,000 respondents within subsidiaries of one large multinational business organization (IBM) in 72 countries. After careful analysis, Hofstede depicted four cultural value dimensions (Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism/Collectivism and Masculinity/Femininity) that provide an interesting way of analyzing and understand cultures (79-341). Subsequent research involving participants from twenty-three nations revealed a fifth dimension (Long/Short-Term Orientation) (351-70) and these countries were ordered 1 through 23. These rankings not only offer a clear picture of what was valued in each culture, but also help people see comparisons across cultures (Wilhelm 2016).

According to Hofstede's research, the index scores of the above five cultural value dimensions manifested in China and America were published in his book (Powell 2006). In the Individualism cultural value dimension, the result reveals that China is a low-individualism

country and the U. S. is a high-individualism country relatively (China vs America 20:91). In the Uncertainty Avoidance cultural value dimension, the result reveals that China features higher Uncertainty Avoidance and the U. S. features lower Uncertainty Avoidance relatively (China vs. America 60:46). Regarding the Power Distance cultural value dimension, the result reveals that China features higher Power Distance and the U. S. features lower Power Distance relatively (China vs. America 80:40). In the Masculinity cultural value dimension, the result reveals that China features higher Masculinity and the U. S. features lower Masculinity relatively (China vs. America 50:62). With regard to the Long-Term Orientation cultural value dimension, the data reveal that China features Long-Term Orientation and the U. S. features Short-Term Orientation relatively (China vs. America 118:29).

2. Interpretation of Cultural Differences in the Film Based on the Theory of Cultural Dimensions

According to Hofstede's study of cultural dimensions, the cultural differences between China and the US in the film will be interpreted below through cultural dimensions and its sub cultural dimensions.

Table 1. Film Scenes Analysis Based on Cultural Dimension (Power Distance) and Sub Cultural Dimensions

Cultural Dimension	Sub Cultural-dimensions	Film Scenes
High Power Distance	Subordinates influenced by formal authority and sanctions.	Wei Tong reprimands and threats against subordinates with salary deduction. (High Power Distance)
Low Power Distance	Subordinates influenced by bargaining and reasoning.	
High Power Distance	Respect for parents and older relatives is a basic virtue and lasts throughout life.	Wei Tong let his father eat first when having dinner; When Wei walks with his father, he just follows his father and dares not speak. (High Power Distance)
Low Power Distance	Children treat parents and older relatives as equals.	
High Power Distance	Authority based on traditions; Subordinate-superior relations polarized, often emotional; Respect for parents and older relatives is a basic virtue and lasts throughout life.	The boss of the restaurant is the subordinate of Wei Tong's father, the father was the general before. As the hierarchical system is very obvious, the boss is reverent and respectful to his father; Wei Tong's father speaks to Wei Tong in a superior way when advising him something. (High Power Distance)
Low Power Distance	Authority based on secular-rational arguments; Subordinate-superior relations pragmatic; Children treat parents and older relatives as equals.	
High Power Distance	Children not seen as competent until at a later age.	Wei Tong's parents send a lot of commodities to Wei Tong who is alone abroad but already 30 years old. (High Power Distance)
Low Power Distance	Children expected to be competent at a young age.	

Source: Hofstede, Geert. Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations, 2008.

Table 2. Film Scenes Analysis Based on Cultural Dimension (Uncertainty Avoidance) and Sub Cultural Dimensions

Cultural Dimension	Sub Cultural-dimensions	Film Scenes
High Uncertainty Avoidance	Older people are respected and feared.	A look of respect and awe as Wei Tong listens to her mother's recording. (High Uncertainty Avoidance)
Low Uncertainty Avoidance	Younger people are respected.	
High Uncertainty Avoidance	Children protected from the unknown.	Wei Tong's Parents send a lot of commodities to Wei Tong who is alone abroad but already 30 years old. (High Uncertainty Avoidance)
Low Uncertainty Avoidance	Children exposed to unknown situation.	
High Uncertainty Avoidance	Parents behave emotionally.	Parents come all the way to officiate at their son's wedding; Before Chinese traditional wedding, parents will bless the couple with the blessings such as "live together until old age" ; Close family relationship. (High Uncertainty Avoidance)
Low Uncertainty Avoidance	Parents control their emotions.	
High Uncertainty Avoidance	Conservatism, law and order.	Since Americans are more open-minded, their home furnishings are more open photos. In order to meet the aesthetic standards of Wei Tong's family, Wei Wei changed the furnishings into calligraphy as a decoration; Respect for etiquette, tradition. (High Uncertainty Avoidance)
Low Uncertainty Avoidance	Openness to change and innovation.	

Source: Hofstede, Geert. Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations, 2008.

Table 3. Film Scenes Analysis Based on Cultural Dimension (Individualism/Collectivism) and Sub Cultural Dimensions

Cultural Dimension	Sub Cultural Dimensions	Film Scenes
Collectivism	Criteria for marriage partner: right age, wealth, industriousness, and chastity of bride.	Mother enrolls her son into the best singles club. (Collectivism)
Individualism	Criteria for marriage partner: not predetermined.	
Collectivism	Marriages often arranged.	
Individualism	Marriage supposed to be love based.	
Collectivism	Low public self-consciousness.	Wei Tong's classmate keeps talking to him without paying attention to he is in a hurry. (Collectivism)
Individualism	High public self-consciousness.	
Collectivism	Openly sharing with a person one's feelings about him or her spoils cooperation.	When Wei Tong sees Wei Wei's painting, he does not express his feeling directly although he doesn't like it. (Collectivism)
Individualism	Openly sharing with a person one's feelings about him or her may be productive.	
Collectivism	Harmony should always be maintained and direct confrontation avoided.	Wei Tong and Simon express their affection directly between each other. Wei Tong parents do not telling him about his father being ill in hospital because they don't want Wei Tong to worry about that. (Collectivism)
Individualism	Speaking one's mind is a characteristic of an honest person.	
Collectivism	Strong family ties, frequent contacts.	Wei Tong's Parents send a lot of commodities to Wei Tong who is alone abroad but already 30 years old. (Collectivism)
Individualism	Weak family ties, rare contacts.	
Collectivism	A marriage without children is not complete.	Wei Tong's parents want their son to get married and have a son as soon as possible. They want him to carry on the family line. (Collectivism)
Individualism	Choosing to have no children in a marriage is a socially acceptable option.	
Collectivism	Financial and ritual obligations to relatives.	Wei Tong's parents give their daughter-in-law a gift at the first meeting. (Collectivism)
Individualism	Financial independence of relatives; few family rituals.	
Collectivism	Collectivity orientation	Wei Tong's parents insisted on holding wedding banquet for the new couple because Chinese people place a high value on establishing, evaluating, or saving face. (Collectivism)
Individualism	Self-orientation	
Collectivism	"We"consciousness	
Individualism	"I" consciousness	
Collectivism	Opinions predetermined by in-group.	In the America's wedding ceremony, the host will ask if anyone is opposed to the new marriage. (Individualism)
Individualism	Personal opinions are expected.	
Collectivism	Gemeinschaft (community)	Before Chinese traditional wedding, parents will bless the couple with the blessings such as "live together until old age" . (Collectivism)
Individualism	Gesellschaft (society)	

Source: Hofstede, Geert. Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations, 2008.

Table 4. Film Scenes Analysis Based on Cultural Dimension (Long-term Orientation/Short-term Orientation) and Sub Cultural Dimensions

Cultural Dimension	Sub Cultural-dimensions	Film Scenes
Long-term Orientation	Leisure time not so important.	Wei Tong has cancelled his long-planned holiday with Simon because of his work schedule, and Simon is extremely opposed to it. (Long-term Orientation vs Short-term Orientation)
Short-term Orientation	Leisure time important.	
Long-term Orientation	“Humility” is a general human virtue.	Weiwei modestly says that his cooking skills are not as good as that of Lao Zhang. (Long-term Orientation)
Short-term Orientation	“Humility” is a feminine virtue.	

Source: Hofstede, Geert. *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions, and Organizations across Nations*, 2008.

3. Conclusion

Of all the cultural dimensions concluded by Hofstede, the above analysis of film scenes majorly reveal the following four cultural dimensions: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism vs Collectivism and Long-term Orientation vs Short-term Orientation. Chinese-related scenes reflect High Power Distance, High Uncertainty Avoidance, Collectivism and Long-term Orientation dimension compared with the cultural dimensions Low Power Distance, Low Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism and Short-term Orientation which are obviously shown in the US.

3.1. High Power Distance vs Low Power Distance

In the film, the cultural dimension—High Power Distance—is embedded in some Chinese-related scenes which are distinct from the characteristics of Low Power Distance dimension. For instance, in the film, Wei Tong reprimands and threats against subordinates with salary deduction, which reflects the sub cultural-dimension “Subordinates influenced by formal authority and sanctions”; Wei Tong let his father eat first when having dinner; when Wei walks with his father, he just follows his father and dares not speak, which reflects the sub cultural-dimension “Respect for parents and older relatives is a basic virtue and lasts throughout life”; Wei Tong’s parents send a lot of commodities to Wei Tong who is alone abroad but already 30 years old, which reflects the sub cultural-dimension “Children not seen as competent until at a later age”.

3.2. High Uncertainty Avoidance vs Low Uncertainty Avoidance

In the film, the cultural dimension—High Uncertainty Avoidance—also can be found embedded in some Chinese-related behaviors which are distinct from the characteristics of Low Uncertainty Avoidance dimension. For instance, Wei Tong shows a look of respect and awe as Wei Tong listens to her mother’s recording. That scene reflects the sub cultural-dimension “Older people are respected and feared”; In addition, since Americans are more open-minded, their home furnishings are more open photos. In order to meet the aesthetic standards of Wei Tong’s family, Wei Wei changed the furnishings into calligraphy as a decoration which reflects the sub cultural-dimension “Conservatism, law and order”.

3.3. Individualism Vs Collectivism

Of all the dimensions, the cultural dimension—Collectivism—is the most obviously reflected in the film which are distinct from the characteristics of Individualism dimension. For example, Wei Tong and Simon express their affection directly between each other. Wei Tong parents do not telling him about his father being ill in hospital because they don't want Wei Tong to worry about that which manifests the sub cultural-dimension "Speaking one's mind is a characteristic of an honest person"; Wei Tong's parents want their son to get married and have a son as soon as possible. They want him to carry on the family line which reflects the sub cultural-dimension "A marriage without children is not complete"; Wei Tong's parents insisted on holding a wedding banquet for the new couple because Chinese people place a high value on establishing, evaluating, or saving face (Bond 1991). That scene reflects the sub cultural-dimension "Collectivity orientation" and "'We' consciousness"; moreover, before Chinese traditional wedding, parents will bless the couple with the blessings such as "live together until old age" which embodies the sub cultural-dimension "Gemeinschaft (community)".

3.4. Long-term Orientation Vs Short-term Orientation

In the film, the cultural dimension—Long-term Orientation—also can be found embedded in some Chinese-related behaviors which are distinct from the characteristics of Short-term Orientation dimension. For instance, Wei Tong has cancelled his long-planned holiday with Simon because of his work schedule, and Simon is extremely opposed to it. That scene demonstrates sub cultural-dimension "Leisure time important" and "Leisure time not so important" respectively; in addition, Weiwei modestly says that his cooking skills are not as good as that of Lao Zhang which reflects sub cultural-dimension "'Humility' is a general human virtue."

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