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A Brief Analysis on the Conflict Between Chinese and Western Cultures in the Film *The Treatment*-- Based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

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ABSTRACT

The Treatment is an excellent film that reflects the cultural differences between China and the United States. The film tells the story that Dennis' grandfather, who was brought to the United States from China, uses traditional Chinese Gua Sha to help his grandson, Dennis, when he is sick. But then the couple Datong is subsequently charged with child abuse, and conflicts arising from the fact that the cultural differences between the United States and China, and Western doctors are unable to understand this traditional Chinese treatment. Using Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, this paper analyses the contradictions and conflicts between Xu Datong's family and the American children's welfare agency after Gua Sha, reveals the deep-rooted reasons for the differences between the Chinese and American cultures in the six dimensions of individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, long-term orientation/short-term orientation, and indulgence/restraint, and explores cross-cultural communication strategies to achieve better communication.

1. Introduction

1.1 Brief introduction the film *The Treatment*

The Treatment is a Chinese-American film directed by Xiaolong Zheng, starring Jiahui Liang and Wenli Jiang. It depicts a Chinese-American family thrown into crisis when the father's use of the traditional Chinese therapy Gua Sha on his son is mistaken for child abuse by American authorities. The film explores the profound conflicts and misunderstandings arising from the clash of Eastern and Western cultures.

Culture is one of the most popular and widely used words. Google lists half a billion searches for culture,

more than for politics, money, or sex (Taras, Steel, & Kirkman, 2012). It is important to keep in mind that Hofstede's work measured cultural dimensions at a national rather than individual level, which means that his value dimensions characterize that dominant cultural in that society (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2017, P. 111). Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory provides a framework for this, identifying six value dimensions (individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity/femininity, long-term/short-term orientation, and indulgence/restraint) that characterize national cultures. In particular, various circumstances such as technological improvement, travel and tourism, growing immigration and cross-cultural marriages have led to increased com-

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monality in the world's culture (Minkov & Hofstede, 2012).

This theory has been widely applied to analyze cultural comparisons in various fields. For example, the corporate culture values and development trends of Chinese Huawei and American Apple are analysed in detail from the dimension of Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory (Ji, 2021), the differences in the forms of humorous discourse used in Chinese and American talk shows are analysed (Lin, 2018), exploring the salient features embodied in Chinese and American college admissions promos and website profile sections (Zhang, 2023), comparing differences in the concepts of family education and their causes reflected in Chinese and American, Chinese and Russian famous family dramas etc (Wang, 2021).

This paper will use Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory to analyze the Sino-Western cultural conflict in *The Treatment* and propose suggestions for managing such conflicts.

2. Introduction of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory is a good tool for understanding and analyzing cultural differences, which can be divided into following six parts.

Individualism vs. Collectivism:

Individualistic cultures, such as those in the United States and the United Kingdom, emphasize personal rights, freedom, and self-expression. In contrast, collectivist cultures like China and Japan prioritize group harmony, loyalty, and shared interests.

Uncertainty Avoidance:

This dimension reflects the extent to which members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous situations. Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, such as Japan, tend to rely on rules and structure to minimize ambiguity, whereas those with low uncertainty avoidance, like the United States, are generally more open to change and comfortable with uncertainty.

Power Distance:

Power distance measures how a society handles inequality. In high power distance cultures, there is a strong respect for hierarchy and authority. Conversely, in low power distance cultures, such as many Nordic countries, people strive for equality and are more likely to question authority.

Masculinity vs. Femininity:

Masculine cultures, including Japan and Mexico, value achievement, competition, and material success. On the other hand, feminine cultures, such as Sweden and Norway, emphasize care, quality of life, and cooperation.

Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation:

Cultures with a long-term orientation, like China and South Korea, focus on future rewards and value perseverance and thrift. In contrast, short-term oriented cultures, such as the United States and Egypt, place greater importance on tradition and fulfilling present social obligations.

Indulgence vs. Restraint:

Indulgent societies, including the United States and Mexico, allow relatively free gratification of desires and prioritize personal enjoyment. However, restrained societies, such as China and India, regulate such gratification through stricter social norms.

In summary, these six dimensions offer a systematic approach to analyzing cultural differences and potential conflicts in various contexts.

3. Cultural Conflicts Analysis in the film *The Treatment* based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory

3.1 Individualism vs. Collectivism:

The film highlights this dimension through key conflicts. Firstly, the grandfather's use of Gua Shato treat his grandson exemplifies Chinese collectivism, emphasizing family duty and collective well-being. The American medical and legal system's interpretation of the marks as child abuse reflects an individualistic culture prioritizing individual rights and legal evidence.

Secondly, Datong Xu's actions demonstrate collectivist values. He conceals from his father that Dennis was taken by child services to prevent family worry, showcasing the primacy of family harmony and collective interests over individual disclosure.

In contrast, the American child welfare agency's immediate legal intervention reflects individualism, focusing solely on protecting the child's individual rights without considering familial context or cultural differences.

Furthermore, the conflict between Datong Xu and his wife, Jane Ning, underscores this clash. Jane prefers resolving the issue through legal avenues, aligning with American individualism's emphasis on individual rights. Datong, however, seeks to preserve family harmony through sacrifice, reflecting Chinese collectivism.

3.2 Uncertainty Avoidance:

The conflict over Gua Shotherapy illustrates this dimension. American doctors and child services, unfamiliar with the practice, immediately interpreted the marks as child abuse and intervened legally. This reflects a high uncertainty avoidance culture, which relies on established rules, laws, and scientific evidence to eliminate ambiguity.

and ensure safety.

In contrast, Datong Xu's insistence on using the traditional treatment, despite knowing it might be misunderstood, demonstrates low uncertainty avoidance. It shows trust in traditional experience and methods, even without modern scientific validation.

This clash is further evident in the courtroom. American judges and lawyers, embodying high uncertainty avoidance, demanded scientific proof of Gua Sha's efficacy. Datong's defense based on cultural tradition failed to convince them, highlighting a cultural preference for accepting tradition over strict evidence.

3.3 Power Distance

The film contrasts high power distance in Chinese culture with low power distance in American culture. Datong Xu's father exercising authority to use Gua Sha reflects the high power distance in Chinese culture, emphasizing elder authority, which clashes with America's low power distance value of individual equality.

Datong's courtroom decision to take blame for his boss, John, to "save face" further demonstrates high power distance—showing respect and obedience to authority. In contrast, the American legal system, where judges and lawyers equally scrutinize Datong, embodies low power distance, asserting that all are equal before the law and authority can be challenged.

Thus, Datong's initial attempt to resolve the issue through explanation rather than confrontation highlights a cultural inclination to respect authority, unlike the American emphasis on legal equality and open questioning.

3.4 Masculinity vs. Femininity

The film illustrates the contrast between masculine Chinese culture and more feminine American norms. Datong Xu's career drive and role as family provider reflect the masculine emphasis on achievement, material success, and responsibility. Similarly, his father's authority in using traditional treatment embodies masculine respect for elders. In court, Datong takes blame for his son to protect his boss's "face," showing masculine loyalty and hierarchy, while his American boss values personal responsibility and equality—a feminine trait. Additionally, Datong makes parental decisions unilaterally, reflecting masculine hierarchy, whereas his wife Jane Ning prefers equal discussion, illustrating feminine cooperation. Thus, Chinese culture is portrayed as masculine, valuing authority, loyalty, and success; American culture leans feminine, prioritizing care, equality, and quality of life.

3.5 Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation

The film illustrates the contrast between a long-term oriented Chinese culture and a short-term oriented American perspective.

Chinese Long-term Orientation is demonstrated through: (1) Valuing long-term benefits, as seen in the grandfather's use of Gua Sha—a traditional method trusted for long-term health over immediate appearance; (2) Emphasis on familial responsibility as a sustained commitment; and (3) Acceptance of delayed gratification, where short-term discomfort is tolerated for the child's future well-being.

American Short-term Orientation is reflected in: (1) A focus on immediate results, preferring quick medical fixes over traditional methods; (2) Prioritizing individual rights and freedoms in the near term, leading child services to intervene based on visible marks without full cultural context; and (3) Strict adherence to rules and procedures, applying them uniformly without accounting for cultural differences.

The Gua Sha incident thus becomes a clash between a culture that values tradition, future outcomes, and collective duty, and one that emphasizes immediate evidence, individual protection, and procedural compliance.

3.6 Indulgence vs. restraint

For Chinese culture, it is full of restraint, which can be reflected from the following aspects. In order to maintain the overall harmony of the family, Cosmos Xu's family is willing to sacrifice personal comfort and convenience by moving out to live and enduring misunderstanding and pressure from social service agencies. This reflects the importance placed on collective interests in Restraint culture, where individual needs and feelings often need to be conceded for the sake of a greater goal.

However, in American culture, it emphasizes indulgence, which pays attention to personal freedom and happiness. In *The Treatment*, American social service agencies and social workers are more concerned with the Dennis's immediate feelings and comfort, and consider any behaviour that may cause the child discomfort or pain (e.g., Gua Sha) to be unacceptable. This attitude reflects the high value placed on personal freedom and pleasure in American culture, i.e., a child should be protected from any form of physical or psychological pain.

4. Resolution Strategies for Cultural Conflict

Although the film displays certain conflicts between Chinese and American cultures, it reflects only a part of

real-world cultural discrepancies, as greater differences exist in daily life. Therefore, the following cross-cultural communication strategies are essential to alleviate conflicts and promote mutual understanding.

First and foremost, it is important to cultivate cultural awareness by understanding and respecting others' backgrounds, values, and behaviors. Additionally, stereotypes and ethnocentrism should be avoided, and one should remain open to individual and cultural differences. Furthermore, developing adaptability through learning and practice is necessary to function effectively in different cultural environments. Moreover, patience and an open-minded attitude are key, as misunderstandings and frustrations are often encountered in cross-cultural communication. Ultimately, the foundation of successful intercultural interaction lies in respecting and understanding diverse cultures.

5. Conclusion

Employing Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, this paper has analyzed the Sino-American cultural differences depicted in *The Treatment*. This analysis aids in understanding divergent communicative behaviors within distinct cultural contexts, thereby facilitating cross-cultural exchange and integration. In an era of globalization, it is crucial to adopt a broader outlook, resist ethnocentrism, and foster the mutual dissemination and enrichment of diverse cultures to achieve genuine coexistence and shared prosperity.

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