

A Cross-cultural Comparative Analysis of Sino-American Family Conflicts Management

Ziyi Xue

Zhejiang Ocean University, Zhoushan, China

Jingjing Lu

Zhejiang Ocean University, Zhoushan, China

Abstract—Based on Culture Dimension Theory, the author explores the dynamic factors causing family conflicts by observing and analyzing the behaviors in the episodes of the sitcoms *Modern Family* and *Home with Kids*. This paper attempts to answer two basic research questions: How do Chinese and American people deal with family conflicts? Is there any similarity or difference in the family conflicts of the two cultures? The paper compares the Sino-American family conflicts in three aspects: the cultural value context and the cultural reason leading to the conflicts; the conflict management styles being resorted to by the two families; and the changes and new findings in the conflict management strategies of two families. Through the comparative analysis on family conflict from two cultural contexts, the author is not only going to address the similarities and differences in family conflicts and conflict management strategies in those two cultures, but to explore whether different behaviors are driven by different cultures and values or not. Furthermore, through this cross-cultural comparative analysis, it would be helpful to understand globalization and integration and to avoid misunderstandings or conflicts in intercultural communication.

Index Terms—cross cultural comparison, culture dimension theory, family conflict, conflict management strategies

I. INTRODUCTION

Over the long history of human development, each civilization derives from certain family education concepts with national features. Based on sharp different ideology and cultural tradition, Chinese and American family culture bear different values with distinct features. Conflict has been a popular theme in the study of cross-cultural communication and it is frequently explored by domestic and foreign scholars. Family conflicts exist in everyone's life no matter which culture he/she comes from. Therefore, the research of family conflict is worthy receiving more and more attention from cross-cultural communication scholars. In this thesis, two TV series *Home with Kids* and *Modern Family* are cited to explore the differences of family conflicts management between China and America, expecting it can work as a reference for Chinese family education as well as promote the social and cultural exchanges between China and America.

II. CULTURE DIMENSION THEORY

Geert Hofstede (2001) put forward Cultural Dimensions by doing a ten-year quantitative research. This model was developed based on data collected from an extensive IBM database for which 116000 questionnaires were used in 50 countries and in 20 languages. By conducting various and numerous cultural and academic activities in many different countries, Hofstede is regarded as one of the leading representatives of intercultural studies. The findings of his research and his theoretical ideas provide an excellent summary of the relationship between cultural values and social behaviors, and are used worldwide in both academic and professional management studies. The six culture dimensions are introduced as follows:

Individualism-Collectivism: Individualism is the most important pattern in the United States. Individualism manifests itself in individual initiative, independence, individual expression and privacy. Collectivism is characterized by a rigid social framework that distinguishes between in-groups and out-groups. (Hofstede,2001)

Power Distance: It describes the distribution of influence within the culture, the extent to which the members of a society accept that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally. People in a large degree of Power Distance societies accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place which needs no further justification. People in small Power Distance societies strive for power equalization and demand justification for power inequalities. (Hofstede,2001)

Uncertainty Avoidance: It deals with a society's tolerance for ambiguity people will endure and how much risk they like to take, and it involves the extent to which a culture would avoid or tolerate uncertainty. Strong Uncertainty Avoidance societies maintain rigid codes of belief and behavior and are intolerant towards deviant persons and ideas. Weak Uncertainty Avoidance societies maintain a more relaxed atmosphere in which practice counts more than

principles and deviance is more easily tolerated. (Hofstede,2001)

Masculinity-Femininity: This dimension measures a culture's dominant values ranging from aggressive masculine traits to nurturing feminine traits. Masculinity stands for a preference in society for achievement, power, possessions, heroism, assertiveness, and material success. on the contrary, Femininity stands for a preference for relationships, nurturance, modesty, caring for the weak, and the quality of life. (Hofstede,2001)

Long-term orientation versus short-term orientation: The time-orientation dimension refers to a person's point of reference about life and work. Cultures that promote a long-term orientation value social norms, traditions and long-range goals, and admire persistence, thriftiness, humility, a sense of shame, and status differences within interpersonal relationships. Cultures that promote a short-term orientation toward changing events, on the other hand, have a deep appreciation for tradition, personal steadiness and stability, maintaining the "face" of self and others, giving and receiving gifts and favors and immediate gratification of one's needs. (Hofstede,2001)

Indulgence-Restraint: Indulgence stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human needs related to enjoying life and having fun. Restraint stands for a society that suppresses gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms. (Hofstede,2001)

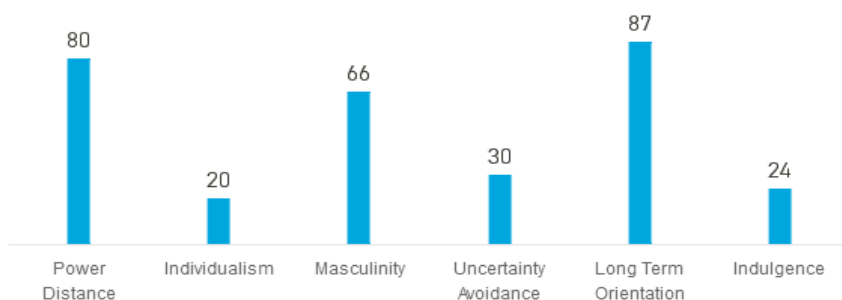


Figure 1. Values of Six Culture Dimensions of China

By exploring the Chinese culture through the values of Six Culture Dimensions, we can get a good summary of the deep drivers of Chinese culture compared to other world cultures. From figure 1, it's easy to conclude that Chinese culture can be classified into a collectivist, high-power distance, masculine, low uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation and restraint one. China sits in the higher ranking of power distance index at 80, and China is a society that believes that inequalities amongst people are acceptable. The subordinate-superior relationship tends to be polarized and there is no defense against power abuse by superiors. China is a highly collectivist culture with a score of 20, where people's behaviors are mostly driven by the interests of the group rather than themselves. China is a Masculine society with a score of 66 –success oriented and driven, which exemplifies the fact that many Chinese will sacrifice family and leisure time to work in order to pursue success. China has a low score on Uncertainty Avoidance. Chinese people have a high tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; Chinese language is full of ambiguous meanings that can be difficult for Western people to follow; Chinese are adaptable and entrepreneurial. With a score of 87, China is classified into long-term orientation, which means that it is a very pragmatic culture. In a pragmatic culture, Chinese people value social norms and traditions, and admire persistence, thriftiness, humility, and a sense of shame. Social distinctions between elder and younger siblings are common, deferred gratification of needs is widely accepted, and family life is guided by shared tasks. With a low score of 24, China is a restrained society in this dimension, where people usually try to suppress their own needs and regulate them by keeping strict social traditions and norms.

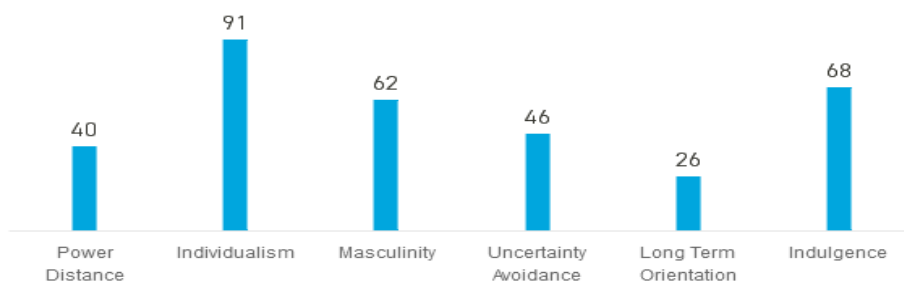


Figure 2. Values of Six Culture Dimensions of United States

Figure 2 clearly illustrates that American culture can be classified into an individualistic, low-power distance, masculine, low uncertainty avoidance, short-term orientation and indulgent one. With a fairly low score of 40 on Power Distance and a fairly high score of 91 on Individualism, America boasts a culture value that believe in the importance of

minimizing social or class inequalities, questioning or challenging authority figures, reducing hierarchical organizational structures, and using power only for legitimate purposes. American people put more emphasis on independence, privacy, self, and decisions are usually made on the basis of what is good for the individual, not for the group. Similar to China, the US scores 62 on Masculinity, which can be seen in the typical American behavioral patterns. With a low score of 46 on Uncertainty Avoidance, Americans tend to be more tolerant of different ideas or opinions and allow the freedom of expression, so their communication styles tend to be direct and straightforward. The United States scores normative on the fifth dimension with a low score of 26, which strengthens the fact that Americans are very practical, being reflected by the “can-do” mentality. At 68, the United States scores as an indulgent society on the sixth dimension, which is reflected by the contradictory attitudes and behavior---Work hard and play hard.

The two figures demonstrate the respective values of six culture dimensions of China and United States, which provide a solid reference for the author to analyze and compare the family education and conflicts management strategies adopted by Sino-American families.

III. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ON FAMILY EDUCATION CONCEPTS OF SINO-AMERICAN FAMILIES

A. *Research Objects*

1. Modern Family

Modern family is an American situation comedy with three families as background, including father Jay and stepmother Gloria, daughter Clair and her husband Phil and son Mitchell and his homosexual boyfriend Cameron, covering emotions, family education, interpersonal relationship, and cultural conflicts. The comedy presents us the genuine American lifestyles.

2. Home with kids

Home with kids is a situation comedy on nurturing Children in Chinese mainland on the basis of reconstructed family. The grass widower Xia Donghai who has two children named Xia Yu, Xia Xue, remarries another grass widow Liu Mei, who has one child named Liu Xing.

B. *Family Education Concepts of Sino-American Families*

Family education concepts derived from the larger philosophical issues that are part of cultural context. Cultural values guide both perception and communication. For above reasons, no matter why a conflict is raised or how people cope with it, family education concepts should be related.

1. Different Education Methods

a. Family Education Concepts of the Traditional Chinese Family

Influenced by Confucianism, Chinese parents hold authoritative position in family. Chinese family education concepts are reflected in Home with Kids in the following aspects: children are supposed to obey almost everything their parents order. From the moment the parents get home after work, they routinely talk endlessly, even though their children study in their own rooms, they don't stop chattering. Liu Mei is a representative of such mother. Once her children make mistakes or do something wrong, she will scold them seriously and sometimes may impose corporal punishment. As what Liu Xing puts it 'it is common in china that parents scold or beat their children, but in America, it is unlawful.'

b. Family Education Concepts of the Traditional American Family

American family education focuses on children's initiative. Parents respect individuality and human rights, and treat them as equal family members and establish democratic relationship with their children. These values are obviously embodied in Modern Family in the following plots: Alex feels frustrated and is ready to talk to her grandmother Gloria, who related her own whole love-relationship experiences in order to comfort her just like bosom friends. As Luke says to his father Phil, 'we are friends'. When the child commits mistakes, parents will try to communicate with them and listen to them. They will give approval to their right words and deeds but also guide them correct their mistakes by pointing out their wrong behaviors. When Manny wants to drop out from the sword competition, his mother doesn't criticize him on the spot with pushy words, instead, she persuades him in soft ways and finally Manny participates in the competition.

2. Different Education Contents

a. Education Contents of the Traditional Chinese Family

Chinese family education attaches the training of language and logical ability, namely knowledge input first. Generally speaking, what Chinese parents educate their children are limited to study performance, defined as Utilitarian Knowledge. And art education is just compensation for the lack of knowledge, not the education in the real sense. These are also reflected in Home with Kids: After a parents' meeting held by school, Liu Mei is eager to know Liu Xing's teachers' evaluation to Liu Xing, and she wants to get answers from Xia Donghai, who attends the parents' meeting. Xia knows that if Liu gets the truth, Liu Xing will fall into trouble. So he wisely avoids responding to her. From this plot, we see clearly children's performance really matters to parents.

b. Education Contents of the Traditional American Family

American family education is diversified in contents, balancing their development in physical power, recognition, language, social ability and emotions. It is billed as education for all-around development. American parents focus on

outdoor activities and physical exercise, including swing and hikes in nature. In *Modern Family*, parents often take their children for outdoor exercises, such as bicycling and playing basketball and football in order to train their body movements. When disagreements arise, parents will not interfere in their rights to free choice, instead, they will provide advice to their children with their own experiences. When Alex studies hard and scored number one in his class, his parents Phil and Claire feel uneasy, for they worry about Alex's health and decide to take him outside for relaxation.

3. Different Education Purposes

a. Education Purposes of the Traditional Chinese Family

Since ancient times, China has placed much importance on family education. Parents hope that their children can be pillars in society. As such, Chinese family education is a sort of family activity. In traditional Chinese culture, man is understood as the existence of group and sociality is valued. Therefore, children education will be linked with family development. And the so-called modern education advocates that children are never allowed to lose at the beginning. Parents are ready to take all the housework for their children who are sent to the first-class schools. Because they hope their children can rank first in study performance. In *Home with Kids*, these are reflected in the following plots: on the day that Xia Xue takes the national college entrance examination, both Liu Mei and Xia Donghai get up earlier, Liu is accustomed to getting up ahead of time, while Xia is insomniac because he is worried about the examination. Xia Xue feels confident after the exams; the whole family is covered by happiness. Unfortunately, Xia Xue fails to enter Tsinghua University. Liu is sick for months of constant work. From this plot it is obvious that the whole family attach much importance to the college entrance examination. Parents hope their children can enter famous university.

b. Education Purposes of the Traditional American Family

American values individuality and personal interests, which is the core of American culture. To cultivate their children into a social person who is able to adapt to various environment with independent living abilities serves the purpose of American family education. Parents will respect children's willingness in setting family education goals. This is embodied in the *Modern Family* in the following plots: Alex is allowed to choose her favorite violoncello course although she has to carry it herself to the classroom; Phil appreciates Luke's purity and innocence and doesn't push him to learn other skills. For the 15-year-old Haley's love, he doesn't interfere it and allow her to experience herself. Although at first he disagrees Mitchell's homosexual love, at last he accepts Cameron and their family. It is Manny's words that best translate American family education--- I don't want to give up doing myself for even a second.

IV. THE CULTURAL REASONS LEADING TO FAMILY CONFLICTS

A. *Chinese Parent-child Relationship*

Traditional Chinese culture is widely considered to be built upon Confucianism which requires a hierarchical family structure. Filial piety represents one form of hierarchy in a Chinese family. Because of the influence of Confucianism, filial piety is considered as a traditional virtue in Chinese kinship. The filial piety represents an obligation of every Chinese people that the young generation has to show their filial obedience to their parents and support them; Filial piety has always been a core value orientation in Chinese family. So the power of the elder in the family greatly surpasses that in American families. In the sitcom, filial piety is always an important theme interwoven in the stories. The unshakable authority of the elder can be found in the relationships among Liu Mei, Xia Donghai, and Liu Mei's mother in the sitcom.

B. *American Parent-child Relationship*

Since individualism has been deeply rooted, the Americans frequently place great value on independence. Parent-child relationship is no exception, but it does not mean that the family tie is weak. The American people cherish the family love and kinship as much as the Chinese do. But the difference is that they have their own way to interpret and express their love toward family members, which is not the same as the Chinese style. For example, the American people believe that love need to be expressed not only by action, but also by words. That is why "I love you" can be frequently heard among American family members. Besides, a short distance between American parents and their children is noticeable. The parents, apart from playing a role of teacher, play some other roles like friends for their children, which is helpful for the communication and sharing between parents and children.

V. COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS ON THE CONFLICT MANAGEMENT OF SINO-AMERICAN FAMILIES

As the education concepts of these two countries and families are discussed, this part is to compare and contrast the family conflict management in those two cultures under the guidance of Hofstede's six dimensions of cultural values.

A. *Conflict Management in Chinese Culture*

From the perspective of cultural values, according to Hofstede's value dimensions, China tends to be a collectivist, high-power distance, masculine, low uncertainty avoidance and long-term orientation country (1980). And from the cultural value context, it is not difficult to understand why Chinese people prefer to make a compromise to resolve conflict. First, Chinese people's pursuit of harmony reminds them to avoid conflict as far as possible. An indirect and non-confrontational strategy is used to manage the conflict, and maintaining harmony is still their first consideration

and purpose. Second, collectivism is the culture which highly concerns about the collective interest and lowly concerns about the individual's. In certain conditions, the individual would sacrifice himself/ herself to ensure the interest of the team, like family, ethnic group, or nation. Third, in front of the elder in a family context, or in front of the authority in an organization, it is easy for Chinese people to compromise because they highly value the filial piety and the traditional virtue of respecting the elder. Since the last two decades, many intercultural communication researchers began to study conflicts styles in Chinese society. Differences and similarities have been found between China and America. In the study by Ting-Toomey (1985) about the differences in conflict management between low-context and high-context cultures, the author points out that the Chinese people, as the people in high-context cultures, tend to enter into a conflict when their culturally normative expectations are violated. And they are likely to make use of a tactful, non-confrontational, and affective style in managing conflicts.

From the sitcom *Home with kids*, Chinese audience may be quite familiar with the pictures that the kids dare not to talk at all when the parents show their absolute authority by taking a serious facial expression, an angry voice or look in the eyes. When dealing with parent-child conflicts, most children follow the traditional Confucianism values, such as being obedient to their parents or the elder, sacrificing their own interest for collective harmony, or avoiding the direct confrontation with their family. For example, when Liu Xing assumes the responsibility of breaking the window of his classroom for his best friend, his mother threatens to beat Liu Xing without listening to his explanation patiently. His mother is always too much confident about her own judgment before the truth is found. Instead of telling the truth to his parents, Liu Xing dare not to explain anything. But after knowing the truth, Xia Donghai, Liu Xing's step father shows his understanding, and out of the son's expectation Liu Xing does not get scolded, but is praised for helping his friend.

B. Conflict Management in American Culture

According to Hofstede's value dimensions, America tends to be an individualistic, low-power distance, masculine, low uncertainty avoidance and short-term orientation country (1980). According to the studies on the conflict management of the American people in low-context culture, American people tend to be confrontational and direct in handling with conflict, hence, the obliging and avoiding styles are less used. They actually resort more to direct, confrontational and assertive dominating styles. And the reason for the frequent use of dominating style can be traced back to the American cultural factors and values which are characterized by individualism. They value the individual achievement, personal identity, individual privacy and independence, which are full of the competitive spirit and challenge. And these personalities urge them to strive for equality and self-discipline over relationships. In low-context cultures, American people value independence, freedom and personal rights. Therefore, they usually hold an objective and logical view during their conflict managing process.

From the American sitcom *Modern Family*, there are many details of the American family conflict management presented on the TV screen. The dominating style can be clearly noticed—the face-to-face talk between the parents and their kids, the out-loud pronouncement for personal assertion, and low hierarchy. In the conflicts between parents and children, parents regard themselves as equal as their kids, which helps them listen to the kids and talk with them calmly and sincerely. Sometimes the parents apologize to their children actively, which shows the respect of parents to the young generation and help to harmonize the parent-child relationship. It would be obvious to notice, especially for the Chinese audiences, that the American values can improve the family conflicts managing positively, and help maintain their familial harmony. The most impressive thing is their close and equal parent-children relationship. This is embodied in the following plot: When Mitchell was a young man, Jay had been giving him a masculine style education. But when Mitchell showed his own sexual orientation, as a father, Jay was somewhat unacceptable in his mind. But he doesn't interfere it and try to understand his son. They try to communicate sincerely and exchange opinions with each others. Although at first Jay disagree Mitchell's homosexual love, at last he accepts Cameron and their family.

C. Comparative Analysis and Discussion

On the basis of the theories by the western scholars, conflict raised in low-context culture is different from the one in high-context culture. In low-context culture, the individual is highly concerned, while the society or group is considered more important in high-context culture. In the same mode, conflict in the individualistic cultures, typically low-context cultures like America, would be preferred to be managed directly and straightforward. Oppositely, conflict in the collectivistic cultures, typically high-context cultures such as China, would be dealt with indirectly, cautiously, and ambiguously.

According to the observation on the conflict management behaviors in two families of the sitcoms, Chinese family adopts the dominating style in coping with their family conflict as frequently as the American family; and American family actually spends so much time and resorts to the obliging style in dealing with their parent-child and husband-wife conflict, since family harmony is the same wish in different families. And the trigger of the parent-child conflicts depends on its exact context, on which the cultural values are influential but not decisive. As for the compromising style, according to its definition that this style indicates intermediate concern for self and others, it is hard to evaluate what behavior belongs to this style. But when dealing with the family conflicts, people (including parents and children) often compromise to each other, and it actually helps to suppress conflicts.

According to the observation, another idea is presented that cultural values have both positive and negative effect on the conflict management in a family. The positive effect means since the cultural values are translated into people's

action, it would be unconscious or convenient for people of each culture to cope with the relationship among the family members, and it can be easy, natural and comfortable to accept for one another. And the negative effect means that in one culture, the Chinese traditional values such as hierarchy, if emphasized too much in a family, would limit the developing pace for a family member. In the American culture, those dominant values such as individualism could be triggers of family conflict, since people may insist on their own opinions or interest, which would lead to their selfishness.

VI. CONCLUSION

This thesis mainly discusses the differences in Sino-American family conflicts management in *Modern Family* and *Home with Kids*. Because of the globalization and China's opening policy, Chinese families begin to absorb various information from the outside, and people's minds are changed and improved by those new alien information. Especially the outside values produce impact on Chinese families and have a great effect on them, like the changes of the Xia's. The changes can bring some new conflicts among the family members of different generations. However, the traditional Confucianism is still the core culture which is reflected in every aspect in the life of the Xia's. Meanwhile, the similarities between the Xia's and the Phil's are clear. Both families have three kids, and the family members are confronted with family conflicts, and sometimes conflicts occur between the family and the out-group. Besides, similarities in their conflict management strategies can be obtained from the two sitcoms. For example, a sincere apology from parents to children and a close and friendly talk between the elder and the young. These findings will be beneficial not only to Chinese families but also to American ones. In addition, they will provide useful insights for scholars abroad and domestic to make further research in this domain. Although there is still a large gap between the two cultures, people can find the similarities and learn to improve their communication and family relationship.

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Ziyi Xue was born in Fujian, China in 1997. She is currently a college student in Zhejiang Ocean University, Zhoushan, China. Her research interests include cross-culture communication and English teaching.

Jingjing Lu is an associate professor in Foreign Language College, Zhejiang Ocean University, Zhoushan, China. She received her M.A. degree in linguistics and applied linguistics from Huazhong University of Science and Technology, China in 2006. Her research interests include cross-culture communication, English teaching and discourse analysis.