

An Analysis on the Movie A Grandson from America in the Perspective of Barriers to Intercultural Communication

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Abstract: This paper examines the film *A Grandson from America* through the lens of intercultural communication barriers, including power distance, stereotype, long-term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence. By analyzing specific interactions and scenarios in the movie, this study aims to illustrate how these barriers manifest and affect relationships between characters from different cultural backgrounds. The research combines qualitative content analysis with Hofstede's dimensions of cultural variability as theoretical foundations so as to reveal how such barriers hinder mutual understanding and propose strategies for overcoming them. This study contributes to the broader discourse on intercultural competence by providing insights into cultural conflicts and reconciliation.

Keywords: intercultural communication; Sino-US cultural barriers ; Hofstede's dimensions of cultural variability

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Introduction

Intercultural communication could be defined as the communication between people of different cultures, the term first used by Edward T. Hall. It is the great differences between various cultures that engender misinterpretation in the process of globalization (Wang and Wen, 2020)^[1]. It has become increasingly significant in a globalized world where individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds interact more frequently. However, such interactions are often fraught with challenges arising from cultural differences and inherent biases. Therefore, this paper aims to analyze some cultural barriers between China and America, and explores possible approaches to cope with these barriers in intercultural communication, exemplified by the movie *A Grandson from America*. The film portrays a story that a lone village shadow puppeteer Old Yang's son brings home his wife—a widow from America and her six-year-old son, Brooks—which leaves the conservative Old Yang feeling utterly embarrassed and caught off guard. Differences in language, age, and lifestyle lead to a bumpy start, but gradually the two come to understand and tolerate each other, building a deep bond (Qu Jiangtao, 2013)^[2]. This encounter not only serves as a meeting of family members but also as a cultural convergence where Chinese and American ideologies, values, and lifestyles collide. The cultural clash between the protagonist Brooks and his grandfather serves as a typical example of broader intercultural communication issues.

This paper analyzes the film to identify and discuss key barriers to intercultural communication, such as power distance, stereotype, long-term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence. By in-depth analyzing pivotal scenes and character interactions, the study sheds light on how these barriers are portrayed and their impact on intercultural relationships. This analysis not only enhances our understanding of intercultural dynamics but also underscores the importance of cultural sensitivity and adaptability.

1 Literature review

Hofstede's dimensions of cultural variability including individualism versus collectivism and uncertainty avoidance influence intercultural communication (Hofstede, 1980). Until now, it is still highly acknowledged in the field of intercultural communication and perceived as the most significant theory in the field of cross-cultural exchange (Yao Yibing, 2016)^[4]. According to the data on the website of Hofstede Insight, there are differences in the 4 dimensions of individualism, power distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, long term orientation, and indulgence between China and America (Table 1). Among them, individualism, power distance, masculinity, long term orientation, and indulgence index have significant

disparity. Therefore, his theory can be used to unveil cultural barriers hidden in communication across various cultures. Xiao Shiqiong studies the differences of of Sino-US values from the movie, *The treatment*, with Hofstede’s theory of cultural variability as the theoretical foundation. It validates feasibility that Hofstede’s theory is adoptable in analyzing intercultural elements of a movie. Xiao also advocates that the most effective method to overcome cultural barriers is in the process of eliminating ethnocentrism (Xiao Shiqiong, 2009)^[5]. In addition, analysis of Sino-American Cultural Conflicts and Integration through Hofstede’s Dimensions Theory: A Case Study of the Film *Grandson from America* has been a hot topic in researching fusion and distinction of Sino-US culture. Although both domestic scholars Ju Haining and Yang Jinying have analyzed cultural fusion and conflict in this movie, few of them have delved into problem-solving perspective to analyze corresponding barriers in Sino-US communication and feasible approaches to fostering bilateral communication and reducing misunderstandings. Based on Hofstede’s theory and previous analysis of this movies, therefore, the essay sheds light on how power distance, individualism, indulgence, and long term orientation engender intercultural barriers and explores possible approaches to address them.

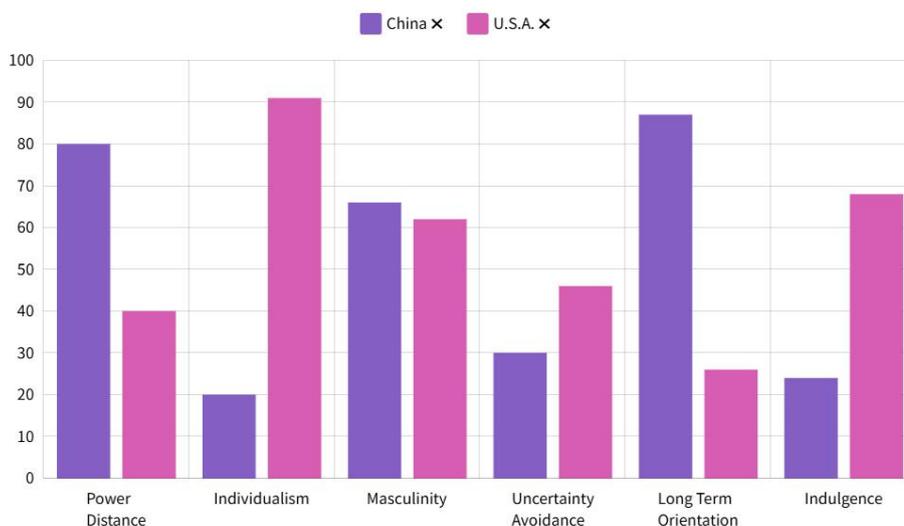


Table 1 Sino-US cultural dimensions comparison

2 Barriers to Intercultural Communication in A Grandson from America

2.1 Power distance

According to Table 1, China scores 40 points higher than America in the Power Distance Index (PDI). That means, in high power distance cultures, children are expected to obey authority, show deference to elders, and practice self-restraint. By contrast, in low power distance cultures, parents and children interact on a more equal footing^[3]. The film *A Grandson from America* vividly illustrates the high power distance characteristics of Chinese culture when Old Yang educates Brooks. For instance, when Old Yang finds out that his son and daughter-in-law have left without notice, leaving Brooks behind, he instructs the boy to stay home while he goes after them. To enforce obedience, he sternly repeats his requests until Brooks nods in fear, after which he locks the child inside. Later, when Brooks wets the bed and hangs the quilt outside to dry, Old Yang mocks him, saying, “You’re too old to wet the bed. Aren’t you ashamed?” Embarrassed and angry, Brooks tries to leave with his schoolbag, only to be scooped up and dragged back into the house by Old Yang despite his struggles.

The clash could be attributed to Confucianism that emphasizes social roles such as ruler-subject, father-son, and husband-wife, with filial piety considered the foundation of benevolence. Over time, people in lower social positions have accustomed to deference and obedience to their superiors who, in turn, take on the role of guardian and decision-maker. Old Yang’s way of educating reflects the typical authority and dominance expected of an elder in traditional Chinese culture. As a result, different PDI may impede mutual understandings and even give rise to conflict.

2.2 Stereotype

According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, China scores 20 on the individualism index, which is significantly lower than that of the United States. Additionally, the two countries have similar scores on the uncertainty avoidance index. As a result, individuals may experience anxiety when confronted with unfamiliar cultural traits, leading them to rely on stereotypes for intercultural interpretation.

Stereotype, entails a preconceived viewpoint of the other, which people normally categorize people according to nationality, race, region (Ji Yuhua, 2012)^[7]. They only place more emphasis on those phenomena that match their own stereotypes and neglect others when observing foreign cultures (Wang and Wen, 2020)^[1].

In the film, the grandparent preconceived notions about Americans, often viewing them from stereotyping. He is hard-wired to believe that American children is always smart and he imposes this belief on Brooks. Besides, Station Master Wang tells grandpa that western people are tall and robust or elders are always energetic. This bias affects their interactions with Brooks, leading to tension and misunderstandings. These portrayals highlight how stereotype, even when unintentional, can impede genuine communication and reinforce negative stereotypes.

From Hofstede's perspective, this phenomenon can be partly explained through high uncertainty avoidance in traditional Chinese culture. To reduce anxiety toward unfamiliar foreign behaviors, individuals may rely on simplified and familiar stereotypes—to interpret new experiences. Moreover, the stark contrast between collectivism of Chinese society and individualism of American may also reinforce bias and out-group generalization, making it easily to judge foreigners based on perceived national characteristics.

2.3 Long-term and short-term orientation

In light of table 1, in the dimension of value orientation, China and the United States exhibit notable disparity. China scores over 80, indicating a long-term oriented society, while the United States scores around 35, reflecting a short-term orientation. Such cultural value orientations could shape people's lifestyles. Long-term orientation society emphasizing more on the future, saving, accumulation and sustainable efforts tend to delay immediate gratification for long-term goals, while short-term orientation pay more attention to immediate experiences and current feelings, giving low priority to long-term goals. The different living ways are well exemplified in the film.

Station Master Wang of the village cultural center tirelessly travels from village to village in an effort to revive the traditional art of shadow puppetry, persuading Old Yang to return to the stage. However, the youngest trainee in the shadow puppetry class is already in his fifties. The preservation and inheritance of cultural heritage are fulfilled by long-term planning, but the Station Master Wang does not focus solely on short-term returns. Instead, he considers the long-term impact of promoting shadow puppetry on villagers' livelihoods and the education of future generations, hoping to revive people's love for traditional culture through the revitalization of this traditional art form. On the contrary, in short-term oriented cultures, couples in this film tend to pursue shared interests and hobbies. When Yang Dongliang first brings wife home, he describes their relationship as "love at first sight" and "having much in common". However, when they return to Shaanbei to pick up Brooks and take him back to America, Yang Dongliang confess to his father that he and his wife have broken up because "their interests didn't align." Old Yang found it difficult to comprehend his son's reasoning, feeling that Yang Dongliang was taking marriage too frivolously. From the perspective of a long-term oriented culture, marriage is not necessarily based on shared interests or personal enjoyment, but rather on practicality, responsibility, and long-term commitment.

Different value orientations: long-term vs. short-term affect priorities in life, relationships, and decision-making. Misunderstandings arise when individuals interpret behaviors through their own cultural lens in one side, leading to value conflicts and communication breakdowns.

2.4 Restraint versus indulgence

Restraint and indulgence refer to the extent to which a society tries to control desires and impulses. In indulgence, China scores 24 points, which is 46 points less than the United States. The significant difference indicates that Chinese society tends to exercise more self-discipline and restraint, placing greater emphasis on regulating personal desires and impulses. In contrast, the United States leans more towards indulgence, allowing for a higher degree of freedom in

satisfying individual wants and enjoying life. Such cultural distinctions influence decision-making process and further cause quarrel. Understanding these differences is essential for effective cross-cultural communication and collaboration.

Old Yang, representing a high uncertainty avoidance culture, exhibits a strong preference for tradition and stability. He is uncomfortable with the Brooks' spontaneous and naughty behavior, which are perceived as disruptive. For instance, the Brooks' decision to climb the tree is criticized by Old Yang, as it violates the rule of avoiding adventurous behavior.

In contrast, Brooks comes from an indulgent culture, where individuals are encouraged to express themselves freely, pursue enjoyment, and embrace spontaneity. His behavior, such as climbing the tree and ignoring Old Yang's warning, is not meant to offend but rather reflects his cultural comfort with fun, freedom, and uncertainty.

This clash of values leads to misunderstandings. What Brooks sees as innocent playfulness, Old Yang interprets as inappropriate or even disrespectful. Thus, the intercultural communication barrier arises from fundamentally different cultural attitudes toward pleasure, rule-following, and extent of restraint and indulgence. Without mutual understanding, such differences may easily lead to tension and misinterpretation.

3 Strategies for Overcoming Intercultural Barriers in A Grandson from America

To overcome above intercultural communication barriers in the film, several strategies can be adopted. First, transform mindsets and embrace peaceful coexistence across cultures. The film also offers this insights into strategies for overcoming intercultural communication barriers. In the film, Old Wang invites his grandson to watch shadow puppetry, saying, "Let's go". Old Wang learns some English phrases to communicate with Brooks. Meanwhile, Brooks enjoys eating with chopsticks and savors the Chinese food mutton paomo, showing the transition from cultural collision to integration. Both of them transform cultural distinctions and respect mutual culture as well as language.

Second, promote mutual understanding and seek common ground through cultural integration. When the grandson asks who is stronger between the Monkey King and Spider-Man, the Old Wang replies, "Why make them fight? Let the Monkey King and Spider-Man be friends and protect our Earth together." Although there are conflict between Brooks and Old Wang from time to time embodying Sino-US cultural differences, the overall tendency of two cultures is to move toward integration as long as we adopt a proactive and effective approach to intercultural communication. Cultural conflicts are best resolved through reconciliation (Li Wenhui, 2022)^[9]. By emphasizing shared human values, fostering curiosity rather than judgment, and encouraging mutual respect, people from different cultural backgrounds can coexist peacefully and even thrive together.

Third, consciously develop sensitivity to cultural differences and reduce preconceived notions. As Xiao Shiqiong said, treating members of different groups or cultures with an equal attitude (Xiao Shiqiong, 2009)^[5]. In short, it is crucial to be very vigilant against the unconscious errors of biases and to overcome the tendency to interpret and evaluate others' communicative behaviors using one-sided cultural standards and social norms. Without conscious efforts toward mutual understanding and empathy, such differences may easily lead to emotional distance, tension, or even conflict. However, as shown later in the film, moments of shared experience—like working together or storytelling—can gradually bridge these divides.

4 Conclusion

A Grandson from America serves as a compelling narrative for exploring the barriers to intercultural communication. By examining power distance, stereotype, long-term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence, this study underscores the multifaceted nature of cultural conflicts. The film's resolution, which emphasizes empathy and adaptability, offers valuable lessons for navigating intercultural interactions in real life. There are still some cultural elements that haven't been researched at length in this film such as Chinese value of face, urbanization, preservation of intangible culture, and so on.

Understanding and addressing these barriers are crucial for fostering effective communication and harmonious relationships in a multicultural world. As the film illustrates, intercultural competence is not merely about acknowledging differences but actively working towards mutual respect and understanding.

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