

A Preliminary Analysis of the China-US Cultural Differences Based on the TV Series Young Sheldon

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Abstract: Guided by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's Values Orientation Theory, this paper examines the cultural differences between China and the United States in terms of how the Chinese and the Americans view humanity, education, kinship, love, and friendship based on the TV series Young Sheldon. Due to the differences in historical origins and ideologies between China and the US, people's perspectives contrast sharply in many ways. Recognition of these differences helps both nations seek common ground while reserving distinctions, pursue mutual understanding and respect, and establish win-win partnerships in more sectors.

Keywords: China-US cultures, cultural differences, ideas, TV series and films, Kluckhohn

1. Introduction

Young Sheldon is a sitcom first presented in 2017 by CBS, and the fifth season is being on air. The series tells the stories between the genius boy Sheldon and his family members and friends at school and in life in Texas. Many hilarious, touching, and happy stories happened to Sheldon, his mother Mary, father George, brother George Jr., sister Missy, grandma Connie, friends, and Connie's boyfriends. The interactions between children and the interactions between children and adults offer a glimpse of American culture that differs greatly from the Chinese culture. Although the stories in the sitcom took place at the end of the 20th century, they were created and published in recent years. The perspectives conveyed in this sitcom are of significant referential value. Therefore, this research bases itself on the TV series Young Sheldon and the environment the author lives in and compares the cultural differences between China and the United States in terms of how the Chinese and the Americans view humanity, education, kinship, love, and friendship^[1] with the guidance of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's Value Orientations Theory.

2. Perspectives on humanity

According to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's Value Orientations Theory, different peoples, nations, and cultures view humanity differently due to the differences in the living environments, historical backgrounds, and thinking patterns. The American culture adopts a more inclusive approach to kindness or evil and holds that people are not born to be kind or evil and people can be kind and evil at the same time or can be kind sometimes and evil other times, which reflects Americans' dialectical perspectives.^[2]

Characters are subtly portrayed in Young Sheldon and their double-faceted or even multi-faceted humanity is presented by characterization. The strengths and weaknesses of each character are so distinctively and exaggeratively depicted that it is impossible to pass judgment on their kindness and evil from one single perspective. Sheldon's father, for example, defended Sheldon when Sheldon wished to go to college amidst the opposition of his mother. He showed understanding and support when George Jr. decided to work and make money at the card room run by his grandmother but was criticized by his mother. Sheldon's father always showed support for his children, worked hard for the family, and apologized first whenever he had a fight with Mary. He had an absolute dedication to and love for his family. But in the fifth season, he tended to cheat on Mary repeatedly, which substantially overturned his perfect image. His contribution to the family should not be denied, while his infidelity should not be overlooked either. In the American culture, it is unacceptable to judge a person from one single perspective. Both kindness and evil are diametrically opposed but also relative. Therefore, Sheldon's father should be judged dialectically in two ways: his positive image as a good father should be recognized and the suffering brought by the errant husband should also be criticized.

In China, the idea that “people are born to be good” proposed by Confucius has been continued for thousands of years. The very concept of intrinsic human good conveys the Chinese positive attitude and good wishes for life and is spread since the formative education of children, such as in *The Three Character Classic*. In many Chinese TV series and films, the villains are often kind in the first place, and then become evil under the influence of external factors as the story goes on. Typical examples include Jiang Yuyan, obsessed with love, in *The Proud Twins*, Zhou Zhiruo, seeking love but ending up in failure, in *Relying on Heaven to Slaughter Dragons*, and Yuan Chun, battered out by comedowns, in *Princess Agents*... All these characters are innocent at the beginning but then became evil as coerced by circumstances and exhausted by self-frictions. These stereotyped characters are common in TV series adapted from Jin Yong’s martial arts novels. The distinctive characters of the roles become more logical after appropriate emotional motives are introduced. But in reality, every individual has something in common within, namely, humanity. Selfish desires can also be found in kind people. If the roles are only given monotonous characters and the plot stretches based on these tedious characters with no other facets mentioned, the roles will be stereotyped, unreal, and phony. The characters of the roles are supposed to change as they grow up and so does humanity. Although it is widely accepted in China that human beings are born to be kind, it is equally acknowledged that humanity becomes complicated and multi-faceted as time goes by.

3. Perspectives on education

Education and culture are closely related, interdependent, and mutually constrained. As a special cultural phenomenon, education has dual cultural properties—it serves as a means to pass down and deepen culture on the one hand and mirrors cultural traits, such as ideological thinking and value orientations, on the other.

In American education, respect for children’s will is put first by parents. The idea that everyone is equal is cherished above any other relationship. Children are first of all viewed as independent individuals and then the kids of their parents. When it comes to matters related to children, parents put the children’s will in the first place. In *Young Sheldon*, Sheldon boasted sharp wits that outperformed his peers, talents, and assiduities. His twin sister Missy was not as smart as him, but had outstanding emotional intelligence and was empathetic. These differences between them led to totally different education experiences. Sheldon was going to college at 11 when Missy just graduated from primary school. Sheldon’s mother was concerned about his interpersonal skills and opposed Sheldon’s decision. But then she decided to show support for Sheldon after being convinced by Sheldon and her husband. As for Missy, she shared the same growth path as most children. It is typical of American parents to show respect for their children’s will and give full play to their aptitude.

In the Chinese education system, obedience dominates parent-child relationships.^[3] Most children obey their parents’ will before they figure out their own interests. They may choose between arts and sciences based on their parents’ will during high school and choose their majors in college with a full account of their parents’ thoughts. The same thing happens when they make decisions about jobs, marriages, dwellings... In the first half of the Chinese children’s life, their parents play an essential role. Parents’ opinions are taken seriously during almost all critical milestones in the children’s lives and some decisions are even made by parents on behalf of their children. This education tradition is affected by the filial piety culture in China. As the Mencius mentioned, “Of services, which is the greatest? The service of parents is the greatest.” Among the five pairs of cardinal relationships, namely, parents-children, monarch-subjects, husband-wife, elder-youth, and friends, Mencius takes parents-children and monarch-subjects relationships as the most important.^[4] Mencius carried forward the ideas of unity of filial piety and fraternal duty of Confucius and viewed filial piety as the core of moralities, which laid the foundation for the further promotion and development of filial ideas. Particular emphasis on filial piety placed by emperors throughout the history of China also contributed to the continuation of filial ideas over the past thousands of years in China. In *A Conceptual Analysis on Chinese “Xiao” (filial piety)*, Mr. Yang Guoshu mentioned that the development of traditional China depends not only on agriculture but also on filial piety. Filial piety was highly esteemed by empires of all dynasties and was used as a tool to consolidate power and prevent royal relatives from interfering with politics. The filial culture plays a significant role in the traditional Chinese culture and is still valued and practiced by the Chinese today.

In addition, American parents value individual initiatives, contribute children’s accomplishments to their competence, and give sufficient support and liberty for children’s growth. In *Young Sheldon*, when computers first became popular and passwords needed to be manually input on start-up, Sheldon’s parents bought him a computer so that he can obtain more academic information and give full play to his

initiatives in utilizing and developing knowledge. However, in China, parents value the impact of the environment on education and often attribute failures and successes to the environment. The ancient saying that “one takes the color of one’s company” exemplifies the importance of the environment to education. Just like Mencius’s mother moved houses three times before she found a suitable location for Mencius’s upbringing, many parents today scramble for school district houses. In the eyes of Chinese parents, the environment is a crucial factor that decides whether their children will be successful or not.

4. Perspectives on kinship

American culture emphasizes individualism and the role of individuals. According to Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s Value Orientations Theory, American culture distinguishes itself from other cultures in viewing the relationship between themselves and others from an individualistic approach. Americans believe that everyone is an independent and unique individual. Children in the US are taught to think from the perspective of “I” and are encouraged to fulfill their goals in their own way. To earn money, George Jr. peddled Texas snow globes and candies and worked at an auto repair shop and an outdoor supplies shop. He bought the unmarketable Texas snow globes from supermarkets at a price of less than 1 dollar and sold them at 4 to 5 dollars. At first, George Jr. was frustrated because he cannot sell out any of the snow globes. Later, he learned from a neighbor that there was once heavy snow in Texas, which was an unforgettable experience for seniors who were just kids then. George Jr. decided to take the snow as a sales pitch and invoked people’s nostalgia in his marketing. He managed to sell out all the snow globes by establishing emotional bonds with buyers, rather than by simply boasting about the products. Without relying on his family, George Jr. made a lot of money on his own.

In contrast, the Chinese culture highlights collectivism under the profound influence of the Confucian culture. In the eyes of the Chinese, individuals cannot survive without the group and the group cannot succeed without individuals. Children are well protected by the best possible care of their families and are often taught to think from the perspective of “we”. Sayings like “everyone is responsible for the rise or fall of his country” and “learn for the rise of China” echo the long-tested and time-honored collectivism that remains vital amidst the ups and downs of China’s history.

It is worth noting that the “harmony” advocated by the Confucian culture highlights “unification” with individual traits instead of simplified “sameness”. As the book “Discourses of Zheng” in Discourses of the States says, “Harmony begets new things while sameness does not lead to continuation. Things accommodating each other on equal terms are called blending together in harmony, and in so doing they are able to flourish and grow, and other things are drawn to them. But when sameness is added to sameness, once it is used up, there is no more.” In other words, the existence and development of the world do not lie in the simple addition of the same things but in the equilibrium and interaction between different things.

5. Perspectives on love

The American culture highlights equality and freedom in relationships and love is no exception. They pursue unrestrained and passionate love. In Young Sheldon, despite being in her 70s, Sheldon’s grandmother Connie did not wish to surrender her right to pursue love, and the plot that she dated Sheldon’s teacher Dr. John was touching. Dr. John was seemingly blunt and tactless without much experience with love. But he learned to drive for Connie and had the courage to leave the camp base alone when he quarreled with his rival in love. Connie was patient with Dr. John as well and didn’t leave him when he was sick. However, the fact that they fell in love with each other did not veer Connie away from her bottom line that she can be in love but would not get married as she wanted to be herself instead of somebody else’s wife. In the end, Connie, who wished not to be hogtied by marriage, broke up with Dr. John. Then, Connie fell in love with Missy’s baseball coach at first sight. In the fourth season, Connie had many pursuers. In this sense, love is equal in the American culture where equality, mutual contribution, mutual support, and independence of each other are advocated. Love is also free and it calls for people to dare to pursue when in love and give it up when things cannot be worked out. In addition, love is also open. Americans talk more about “sex” in the same way the Chinese greet each other by asking “Have you eaten?”. Sex is a common topic in their daily life to jest with each other and generally would not incur unpleasant feelings.

The Chinese have had good aspirations for love since ancient times and fidelity and undivided affection are particularly important in the Chinese value system. Liang Shanbo and Zhu Yingtai, who

vowed to be together until death, turned into butterflies after death in pursuit of inextinguishable love. In the Romance of the Western Chamber, Wang Shifu, the author, gave the story a happy ending that made up for the tragedy in Yingying's Biography, the original version of the story, that Zhang Gong ultimately broke from Yingying after he managed to secure an official position. The happy ending fulfills the Chinese aspirations that "every Jack has his Jill". Love is supposed to be delicate in the traditional perspectives of the Chinese, from the cautious interactions between Lin Daiyu and Jia Baoyu where the former mocked the latter as "worthless despite an attractive exterior" to the obscure affection in the lines by Cui Hu "Now the rosy cheeks are nowhere to be seen, the peach flowers smile in vain in the spring air." The Chinese are cautious about love and marriage and conservative about sex. When the Cheng-Zhu school of Neo-Confucianism began to prevail in the Song Dynasty, exercising spiritual control and forbidding personal desires were used as means to stabilize social order. As a result, it became a basic social etiquette that "it is improper for men and women to touch each other's hand in passing objects".

6. Perspectives on friendship

Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's Value Orientations Theory also points out that people from different backgrounds have varied ideas about space. In some cultures, space is viewed as public, and little is reserved for privacy; in other cultures, space is taken as private for intimacies to be swapped without being known to others. Americans attach great importance to privacy when associating with friends. In contrast, the Chinese tend to share space with friends as part of the public domain. Although Sheldon and Missy were pressed to share a bedroom as the rooms in the house cannot go around, they had strong territory awareness. Whereas the Chinese long for the friends from whom they keep no secrets. They believe that the more they know a friend, the closer the ties between them will be and, therefore, care less about privacy.

A fundamental cause of this difference is the fact that friends are defined differently in the Chinese and American cultures. The Americans define friends so broadly that anyone with whom they have an agreeable chat can be called a friend, no matter at a party, in an occasional meeting, or during an unexpected encounter. However, in China, friends that are made with a few pleasantries and congenial conversations like this are viewed as "acquaintances" as they do not involve many mental resonances and exchanges. Sheldon had no shared interest with his neighbor Billy, but they were friends. Although Tam came from Vietnam with a big age gap and different cultural backgrounds and living experiences, he is the best friend of Sheldon in high school. In contrast, the Chinese define friends in a more emotionally profound manner and only make friends with those who truly show understanding and support that can withstand the test of time and numerous trials. As recorded in the chapter "Biographies of Lian Po and Lin Xiangru" of Records of the Grand Historian, "When Lian Po heard these words, he took off his shirt to expose his upper body and carried a thorn whip on his back. Led by the guests, he came to Lin Xiangru's door and apologized: 'I am such a brutish and lowly person that I failed to know your generous mind.' The two finally reconciled and became friends who shared weal and woe." The friendship between Lian Po and Lin Xiangru highlighted by their close ties of affection has been highly regarded by the Chinese since ancient times.

7. Conclusions

Guided by Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck's Value Orientations Theory, this paper examines and summarizes the cultural differences between China and the United States based on the relationships between Sheldon and his parents, the love stories of Sheldon's grandmother, and the interactions between Sheldon and his friends in Young Sheldon. China and the US view humanity, education, kinship, love, and friendship differently due to the differences in historical origins and ideologies of the two countries. Recognition of these differences and cultural diversity helps both nations develop healthy competitive relations, seek common ground while reserving distinctions, pursue mutual understanding and respect, and establish win-win partnerships in more sectors. At the same time, it is suggested to examine Chinese culture via learning from the strengths of foreign cultures with a view to boosting cultural confidence, guarding cultural position, and reinvigorating Chinese culture in the new era.

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