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Cross-cultural Communication Strategies of American Family Ethics Dramas: A Case Study of *Modern Family*

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Abstract*: Modern Family is the longest-lived comedy program broadcast by ABC, winning numerous awards and good reviews. As one of the most successful American TV dramas, its cross-cultural communication strategies deserve in-depth discussion and research. Taking Modern Family as a case, this paper studies the cross-cultural communication strategies of American family ethics dramas from three dimensions: public sphere theory, field theory and dramaturgical approach, so as to provide useful references and inspirations for family ethics dramas in Asian countries.*

Keywords*: American family ethics dramas; Modern Family; Cross-cultural communication; Strategies*

Introduction

Family ethics dramas take social lives as the background, treat different family members as the research objects, and convey social mainstream ethics and morals by depicting different family stories. Compared with science fictions, fantasy dramas and historical dramas, family ethics dramas can better overcome the influence of intersubjectivity and achieve better communication effect in terms of cross-cultural communication.

The Academy of Television Arts and Sciences of America (ATAS) does not include the classification of family ethics dramas in its TV show awards, with only sitcom, comedy and other categories mentioned. However, family ethics dramas play important roles in lots of successful comedies, most of which are about family lives. Early representative works include *Growing Pains*, *Friends*, *Desperate Housewives*, etc. In recent years, *Modern Family* has received lots of attention and influence.

Modern Family has been nominated for 75 Emmy Awards and won 22 Emmy Awards, including the Emmy Award for Best Dramas for five consecutive years. It also won the Magnolia Award at the 21st Shanghai TV Festival and the International Audience Award for Comedy and Drama at 2014 Monte Carlo TV Festival. As one of the most successful American TV shows in history, its cross-cultural communication strategies are worth exploring and studying. Therefore, this paper takes *Modern Family* as a case to study the cross-cultural communication strategies of American family ethics dramas, so as to provide references and inspirations for family ethics dramas developing in Asian countries.

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Creating Public Sphere for Free Expression

In his description of the public realm of literature, Jürgen Habermas says: “The relationship among the author, the works and the readers becomes the intimate relationship among human nature, self-knowledge and compassion.” (Habermas, 1999) The construction of public sphere for free expression can play a more promoting role in the construction of cultural identity.

American family ethics dramas are very good at storytelling in group-portrait structures, covering various social strata, showing almost all aspects of contemporary American family lives, such as the young generation in *Friends*, groups of scientists in *the Big Bang Theory*, married women images in *Desperate Housewives* and *Why Women Kill*, popular family modes in *Modern Family*, etc. By creating the free expression of different characters in the same public sphere, universal values can be transmitted, and the high and low cultural contexts can be connected to carry out cross-cultural communication.

In *Modern Family*, three groups of American families — traditional middle-class family, step family, and gay family — express their views in the same public sphere, resulting in conflicts due to different outlooks on life and values. Jay represents a slightly conservative, stubborn group of elder white people; Gloria, with her fiery emotions, loud voice, strong English accent, and hot figure, is an inherent image of Latin women in the minds of Americans; Phil, who loves his family very much, is positive, optimistic, straightforward and humorous; Claire represents a typical middle-class American housewife; As representatives of gay people who long for the understanding and recognition from others, Mitch and Cameron are sensitive and dramatic, meanwhile they are kind, frank and naive. There are also children with different personalities in the big “modern” family: Haley, a charming but simple-minded girl; Alex, a straight-A student but unsociable; Manny, a little boy with an old soul; Luke, very adorable but bad at study; Lily, an adopted Asian girl. Their way of life represents that of most American teenagers.

Modern Family depicts the daily lives of imperfect characters from all walks of life. While showing the beauty of ordinary life, the drama also exposes the human frailties such as selfishness, jealousy and xenophobia directly to the audiences. The characters in the show own the same discourse power and stand up for their rights in their own way by confronting the challenges of many issues, such as homosexuality, minorities, children's education, and how to balance family and career, etc. By confronting the deep-seated social contradictions, scriptwriters create more sense of reality and successfully create a public narrative sphere. It is based on the setting of the public sphere that the audience in front of TV from all social classes can face their hidden real emotions with a relaxed attitude and express their hidden emotions through the performance of the actors in the drama. The audience will involuntarily reflect the characters' experiences onto their own lives, thus producing sense of substitution. This way of image setting enables the audience to establish an "intimate" relationship with the characters in the play, and the audience is more likely to resonate with the characters' experiences in the show, thus triggering "empathy" and reflection.

Meanwhile, In the book *Culture and Public Sphere*, Jim McGuigan, a British cultural studies scholar, also emphasizes the multi-dimensional and diversified perspectives of cultural studies, “to explain the absolute complexity of pluralistic society and cultural reality” (McGuigan, 1996). American family ethics dramas

focus on the contradictions, conflicts, reflections and understandings among family members through typical characters and plots, showing universal values and American family ethics that could transcend time, space, regions, races, cultures and classes in a pluralistic society.

Grafting Narrative Framework of Dramatic Performances

In the drama theory of human interaction, Erving Goffman, an American sociologist, points out that social life is divided into "front stage" and "back stage" (Goffman, 2008). Sometimes people's self-expression on different occasions will be quite different from their real inner world, related but different, just like foreground and background in a theatre.

In each episode of *Modern Family*, family members take turns appearing in front of a camera to confide in each other. This kind of film shooting technique is called "Mockumentary", by which monologues of different characters are described to construct a binary narrative framework of "front and back". Monologue is a form of artistic expression originated from theatre, which is used to show the complete psychology of characters. In the short monologue segment, the character's real psychological activities are in contrast with that in reality, which can bring the characters in the show a strong dramatic conflict and performance tension. In the second episode of *Modern Family* Season one, "The Bike Thief", both Phil and Claire had a wonderful monologue when facing the camera. Claire explained why she didn't want to buy his son a new car, while Phil, her husband, sitting next to her showed an unnatural expression. In order to maintain the authority of his wife, he tried to express different opinions in a euphemistic way. However, in the monologue that followed, Phil, alone with the photographer and the audience, made it quite clear his decision to buy his son a new bicycle, when he was 100% sure that Claire was not present. "Sometimes a man's got to put his foot down and do what a man's got to do. And if the old lady doesn't like it, that's too damn bad." Phil said. The switching from two-person monologue to single-person monologue has a strong dramatic conflict effect, which also gives the audience a chance to understand the real thoughts and their hidden inner world of each character in the drama. The initiative and interest in watching the drama have been greatly enhanced.

Scriptwriters of American family ethics dramas are good at adopting the mode of theatre plot promotion to tell their stories — beginning, foreshadowing and climax. The dramatic narrative methods of creating climax through conflicts are also widely applied in *Modern Family*. In each episode of the drama, the three families tell their stories with a unified theme (family love, friendship, love, life, philosophy, etc.). The scriptwriters' wisdom is that each story is unfolded through three parallel narrative routes, interspersed with descriptions of three families with the same thematic perspective as the foreshadowing of the plot. The three narrative clues are combined together in the end to form the climax of the drama, sublimating the theme and give an ending. Therefore, audiences can get a rich experience of watching the drama.

Constructing "Cultural Field" that Coincides with Time and Space

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, proposed the concept of "field", which can be defined as an independent space with special rules of operation. And there are various fields of different types in the entire social system (Bourdieu, 2004).

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American TV dramas usually adopt a regular broadcasting mechanism, with one episode every week. Audiences can extensively participate in plot discussions, evaluate the character settings in the show, and create an exclusive "field" belonging to the play together with the scriptwriters. Therefore, in American family ethics dramas, festivals and hot events are often seen to create a "story intersection" between the characters in the play and audiences in the real life. Time and space fields in the show are integrated with reality and it seems that the characters and audiences share the same interests, hobbies and concerns, track the same social hot issues, and celebrate the same traditional western festivals.

In *Modern Family*, for example, Apple's latest electronic products were sold and used in the drama just as the audience did simultaneously in reality; Hollywood blockbusters were released "simultaneously"; there are a lot of episodes concerning about some traditional festivals, like Valentine's Day, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas and so on, broadcasted exactly on the day of each festival.

Cultural field has also been constructed in American family ethics dramas. Cultural elements, such as religion, food, entertainment, festivals, weddings and funerals, education, employment, and time and space fields shown in dramas promote the spread of mainstream culture of American society, make audiences around the world better understand American culture, and successfully carry out cross-cultural communication through TV dramas.

Conclusion and Perspectives

In order to spread Asian cultures all over the world, some cross-cultural communication strategies can be learnt from American ethics dramas:

1) Construct group portraits' public expression space through diverse narrative structures based on the complex relationship between family members.
2) Utilize characters' monologues, intense plot development, clear narrative purpose, dramatic narrative forms, continuous humorous baggage, positive ending, etc. to gradually get rid of some repetitive and monotonous plots, which can be usually seen in Asian dramas nowadays, and construct the narrative framework of multiple dramatic forms.
3) Learn the broadcasting mechanism of American TV shows to match the broadcasting time of Asian family dramas with traditional Asian festivals, create Asian "cultural field" that coincides with time and space, and enhance the influence of Asian culture.

Family ethics dramas in Asia should also take into account the differences in film aesthetics and drama viewing habits of different audiences around the world and add more entertainment elements, so that audiences around the world can forget the chaos in their lives and gain more understanding and recognition of Asian cultures in a relaxing and pleasant atmosphere by watch Asian family ethics dramas.

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