

The Conflict of Value Concepts Among Chinese Immigrant Families in America: Take the Movie *Everything Everywhere All at Once* as an Example

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As a small-budget science fiction film, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* has earned a good reputation at home and abroad for its unpredictable plot and excellent visual effects and has been nominated for 11 Oscars, making Ms. Michelle Yeoh the first Chinese movie star to be nominated for an Oscar. The film presents a typical Chinese American family in a very eye-catching way. In this paper, we will discuss the conflict between Chinese and American values from three perspectives: love, marriage, and education, with the portraits of the characters in the movie and the specific movie plot.

Keywords: *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, Chinese immigrants, value clashes

Introduction

The conceptual confrontation in immigrant families is a common problem in cultural studies. Under the influence of Confucianism, Asian American immigrant families, especially Chinese immigrant families, are more prone to family conflicts and tragedies caused by conflicting perceptions compared to immigrants from Western countries. Many literary and film works have explored the conflict of perceptions between parents and children in Chinese American families. In the early days, there was the book named *The Joy Luck Club* by Amy Tan, which tells the story of mothers and daughters going through the process of frequent conflicts, reconciliation, and mutual recognition due to the cultural differences between China and the West and their different understanding and pursuit of cultural identity. In recent years, Pixar's animation *Turning Red* also focuses on inter-generational conflicts—rebellious daughters and conservative mothers. After further exploring the protagonists' survival in similar works, the author finds that the clash of Chinese and Western concepts creates a similarity in the core of these works.

Where Did Evelyn and Her Family Come From

The abundance of Cantonese, as well as Mandarin dialogue in the film, indicates the ethnic background of Evelyn and her family. Except for this film, most Asian characters in American films identify as Chinese in speaking Cantonese. Such a role arrangement is not come from anywhere, though it is full of stereotypes.

The United States has seen two more giant waves of Chinese immigration. The first more significant wave of Chinese immigration to the United States came in the mid-19th century with the rise of the California Gold

Rush (Zhang, 2003). The gold rush attracted many Chinese immigrants to the United States. Moreover, most of these immigrants spoke Cantonese, which was in political and economic turmoil then. They came to America for better lives at first, but most ended up building railroads with meager salaries. The second wave of Chinese immigrants emerged from 1952 to 1965. Furthermore, due to the lifting of the ban on U.S. immigration laws in 1965, many students from Hong Kong and Taiwan went to the U.S. to study; some stayed and became U.S. citizens.

Combined with the above history of Chinese immigration in the United States, it is not hard to understand why most Chinese characters in today's American films always speak English with a Cantonese accent. From the age of Evelyn's characters in the film, it is inferred that this Chinese family, who traveled through multiple universes to save the world, was also part of the great wave of Chinese immigrants at that time.

Evelyn and Her Family in and Around Chinatown

In the early days, most of the uneducated Chinese immigrants gathered in inner-city Chinatowns and lived with their fellow villagers (Xie, 2017). Due to some Chinese immigrants' insufficient educational background, some needed help communicating well with mainstream society. In this case, they only communicated in Cantonese or other dialects within the established areas. According to Wikipedia, about one-third of the three million Chinese in the United States have a college degree or higher. In some areas, the percentage of Chinese with advanced degrees has even surpassed that of other ethnic groups simultaneously. The remaining two-thirds of the Chinese are still engaged in the same business as they were a century ago, opening restaurants and laundries.

In the movie, Evelyn and her family are running a laundry. They are busy and worried about their livelihood every day and are consistently unable to communicate effectively with government employees who review business qualifications because of poor English. Finally, after three or two unsuccessful communications, they have to disagree with the censor. This plot reflects the living conditions of most Chinese immigrants who came to the United States in the last century for better livelihood. Although the Chinese living in Chinatown were poor, they still worked hard to create a better life with their hands in whatever way they could.

Second-generation Chinese immigrants' language skills have greatly improved with systematic American-style education. So young people mostly choose to leave the Chinese community where they grew up to integrate into mainstream American society deeper nowadays. Furthermore, thus, the channels of communication between the Chinese community and the outside have increased a lot. This is also reflected in the film. For example, Joey, the daughter who grew up in the American education system, left Chinatown early and chose to live with her white girlfriend; after learning that Evelyn had trouble communicating with the staff due to the language barrier when dealing with tax issues, Joey repeatedly mentioned that she would help Evelyn communicate with the auditor together with her white girlfriend, etc.

Talking About the Confrontation on Values in Chinese American Families, Take the Parent-Child Conflicts in the Movie as an Example

Most of the conflicts in Evelyn's life originate from her daughter Joey from her point of view. Joey is even the initiator of the extermination action in an alternate universe. Behind the many appearances, the conflict of values is the core cause.

Differences in the Value of the Romantic Relationship

Chinese families have a more conservative view of relationships. The traditional Chinese concept of love is

about “matchmaking” and “harmony between yin and yang”. When falling in love, personal feelings are often put ahead of the partner’s family’s financial status, social status, and the values, education, and background of both men and women. In other words, a lover is good if he or she can bring more incredible benefits to the family.

Individualistic values are reflected in all aspects of American society, and independence in choosing a relationship partner reflects individualism in love (Sun, 2010). People believe that love and marriage freely are the inherent rights of everyone and that others have no right to interfere with them. As far as both parties in a relationship are concerned, both men and women should respect their own hearts and respect each other’s wishes and feelings. After experiencing abstinence and sexual freedom, Western society has become more accepting of same-sex couples (Zhang, 2012), and since 2003, same-sex marriage has gradually been legalized in some states and has become a hot topic in American society.

To this day, there is still a lack of literature and film discussing homosexuality in mainland China. Most Chinese parents find it difficult to accept their children’s sexual orientation other than heterosexual under the influence of traditional Chinese culture influenced by traditional culture. Same Evelyn sincerely believes that her daughter Joy’s sexual orientation is wrong. For example, Evelyn stops her daughter Joy from “coming out” by saying that she is “afraid that her grandfather will not be able to bear it” in front of Joy’s grandfather. Moreover, she deliberately calls Joy’s girlfriend “just a white girl-friend”; Evelyn blames Joey’s sexuality on being “seduced” by the villain. When Jobu Tupaki, who has the same appearance as Joey, shows up, Evelyn says, “Because of you, my daughter became a homosexual”. Daughter Joey suffers for not being herself under Chinese parental authority, as two very different Chinese and American views of relationships pull at Joey. Joey, who is influenced by the open and liberal culture of America, is more concerned about her feelings of self when falling in love than Evelyn. For example, she chooses to bring her lover to the family gathering even though she knows that Evelyn would blame her; she tries to “come out” in front of her family several times; and at the end of the movie, Joy confesses her sexuality to her grandfather, the center of authority in the Chinese family. The vast differences in views of romantic relationships cause an inevitable conflict between Evelyn and her daughter.

Differences in Views on Marriage

The marital crisis between Evelyn and her husband in the film is also a basic plot in advancing the film’s pace, and the divorce drama reflects the big difference in the Chinese and American views of marriage.

Taking the attitude toward divorce as an example, the Chinese view of marriage believes that marriage is a matter of two families, and when there is a relationship crisis, most Chinese couples will choose to avoid discussing it. Sometimes, both spouses know clearly that the marriage has broken down, but they still choose to live together, because they consider divorce dishonorable and failed performance in life. A saying well illustrates the situation in Chinese society “It is better to tear down ten temples than one marriage”.

Chinese couples in traditional Chinese marriages are often, so busy making ends meet that they find it challenging to address the pain in their marital relationship and address them. At the beginning of the movie, the fast-paced plot shows Evelyn’s dilemma in her marriage and family. Her husband believes that their marriage can be saved through a fake divorce. As the plot advances, fighting with the villain at a disadvantage when Evelyn overlooked her husband’s divorce papers, Evelyn becomes incredulous and emotional, directly triggering a new cosmic connection point to turn the situation around. The couple’s attitude towards divorce, whether Evelyn’s husband faked the divorce, or Evelyn’s strong denial of the divorce agreement, reflects the typical Chinese view of marriage.

The American view of marriage is very different. When a problematic marriage crisis arises, Americans often seek professional help, for example, marriage counseling, also known as couples counseling. Those who provide this service are usually psychologists, social workers, and volunteers who have the expertise and credentials. During the counseling process, the marriage counselor will allow the couple to discuss problems, exchange ideas, and solve problems. Finally, the marriage counselor will analyze the problem professionally and give a professional opinion. However, the kernel of the Evelyn couple's marriage, who has lived in the United States for many years, is still Chinese and traditional.

Differences in Educational Perspectives

Education is already a crucial part of Chinese culture, and in China, there is an adage that "two ears do not hear what is going on outside the window, and one mind only reads sage books". One of the reasons the education is vital to the Chinese is that a good education can better help children obtain career advancement. As mentioned earlier, the development history of Chinese in the United States is full of hardships, and early Chinese immigrants were more or less ostracized and discriminated against by mainstream society. Therefore, Chinese parents are eager for their children to stop being at the bottom of American society and suffering from injustice. In addition, the success of some Chinese immigrants has brought Chinese parents as role models, and studying for school has become the most accessible channel for Chinese parents to upgrade their families.

American schools focus more on cultivating the creative spirit in children. If Chinese education cultivates the quality students to be strict and orderly, American education cultivates the spirit of students who dare to question experts and scholars and challenge authority. American schooling emphasizes students' expanded and creative learning of knowledge rather than passive and inherited acceptance (Zhang & Huang, 2010). In terms of American family education, American parents pay more attention to the process of their children's growth and value their children's sense of innovation and personal character characteristics, and their children's success is not linked to whether or not they go to a prestigious school. There are numerous differences between Chinese and American family education views, and the conflict between the two educational concepts has highlighted the problems of Chinese immigrant parents in the education of the next generation.

The conflicting views of education in Chinese-American families are reflected in some literary works. In Tam En-mi's *The Wife of Vesta*, Wei Wei's aunt blames rebellious Western education for her mother's departure from home. She argues that "foreign teachers just want to overthrow all the order in the world" and that "it is so wrong that a girl can be a teacher and does not have to get married". The second generation of Chinese immigrants grew up in a very different environment from their parents, and it was difficult for them to understand the educational philosophy of their parents under the influence of American educational ideology. Some children deliberately adopt new and different practices to disappoint their parents, frustrate their parents' desire to get ahead through education, and emphasize their freedom and independence. The conflict between the Chinese and American views of education is also reflected in many places in the film. When her daughter Joy storms out of the door after her first argument with her mother, Evelyn catches up with her daughter and wants to talk to her but hesitates to pick on Joy's body type, telling her to "eat less junk food" because in her opinion Joy is "too fat". After hearing his mother's words, Joey felt incredulous but could only leave with his girlfriend in disappointment and helplessness. In addition, any episode involving Evelyn and Joey arguing will mention that Joey dropped out of college. Evelyn believes that Joey, who does not even have a college degree, cannot lead a decent life. For their minor children, traditional Chinese parents often plan every aspect of their children's lives

early on (Li, 2004). Everything the minor children do and every step they take in the process of growing up cannot be free from their parent's plans, and Chinese parents also communicate with their children in a way that is mainly demanding and commanding. For their adult children, Chinese parents are often concerned about the decency of their lives and careers. As a typical Chinese parent, both her daughter's school dropout behavior and her bad habits were considered by Evelyn to be off the "right track". Evelyn is constantly lecturing her daughter because she wants Joey to grow up in a way that is more in line with the Chinese view of education. Growing up in a traditional Chinese family, Joey knows what a good daughter would look like in a Chinese upbringing. For example, at the movie's end, Joey tearfully asks Evelyn why she did not just find an excellent daughter to replace her. Nevertheless, Joey, influenced by American education, prefers to follow her heart rather than become an obedient assembly line product. In this way, Joey becomes the exact opposite of her mother's expectations, and the difference between the Chinese and American views on education is a significant cause of the confrontation.

Conclusions

Everything Everywhere All at Once reflects the plight of Asian American families. And to some extent, it also presents the dilemma of our native families as they integrate into the globalized world. The film visualizes the conflict of values in immigrant families through humor and wit, including the conflict of views on love, marriage, and education. In the conflict between the open and liberal Western culture of America and the traditional and conservative native culture, the main character Evelyn is inevitably torn apart, but Evelyn clears the fog. She overcomes herself and learns to fight with love and peace. She turns bullets into plastic ornaments, bombs into perfume, touches her daughter with loving hugs, and learns to respect and let go genuinely.

The film's reflection of saving the world is Evelyn's reconciliation with the real world. This includes the reconciliation between the lower-class Asians and mainstream American society, the reconciliation between American and traditional Chinese values, the reconciliation between the hedonistic and information-explosive society, and Evelyn's half of her life, which is full of hard work and information blockage. The conflict of ideas hidden under the great perspective of "saving the world" is worthy of deeper consideration, leaving aside the novelty and excitement of the fight scenes. What is worth mentioning is that *Instant Universe* takes Chinese families as the main characters and focuses on the survival of Asians in American society. Affected by the global epidemic, crimes against Asians in the United States have increased since 2019. Although people still have a long way to go in breaking stereotypes of Asians and elevating the status of Asians in American society, the success of *Transient Universe* in the U.S. has at least refocused people's attention on the actual state of existence of Asians.

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