

Analysis on Bicultural Identities of Chinese Americans Based on Acculturation Theory

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In the context of globalization, the communication between countries is gradually enhanced and the immigration is increasing. Chinese Americans, as a unique ethnic group, are easy to fall into the difficult problem of self-identity construction when facing the bicultural identity conflict between Chinese and American. This paper selects the film *The Farewell* created by a Chinese American director as the research object, analyzes the cultural identity crisis of Chinese Americans, introduces the cultural adaption strategy adopted by Chinese Americans from the perspective of Acculturation Theory, and provides reference for Chinese Americans about how to realize the bicultural identities in the cultural diaspora.

Keywords: acculturation, Chinese Americans, bicultural identities

Introduction

Under the circumstances that every country currently interconnects with each other increasingly, the number of Chinese in each country only increases and does not decrease. The cultural identities problem of Chinese Americans has always been a research key point. Adapting what kind of method of cultural identity is also a difficult problem about identity construction of overseas Chinese of every generation. Thus, the author tries to analyse the identity construction problem of Chinese Americans by using Acculturation Theory, hoping to provide reference for overseas Chinese who are buried in the predicament of cultural identity.

Acculturation Theory and Bicultural Identities

Canadian cross-cultural psychologist, John W. Berry (1997), put forward Acculturation Theory. He believed that acculturation needs to be considered and discussed from two basic dimensions. One dimension is the tendency to maintain traditional culture and identity, and another dimension is the tendency to communicate with other ethnic cultural groups. Based on these two dimensions, Berry put forward four strategies of cultural adaption. They are respectively integration, assimilation, separation, and marginalization. When Chinese immigrants come to American society, they may adopt different kinds of cultural adaption strategies based on their own cultural psychology. If they not only want to maintain Chinese cultural traditions, but also want to integrate into mainstream American society, they will adopt integration strategy. If they ignore Chinese cultural traditions and mainly focus on integrating into mainstream American society, they will adopt assimilation strategy. If they attach great importance to Chinese cultural traditions and avoid being influenced by American social culture,

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they will adopt separation strategy. If they are unable to maintain Chinese cultural tradition and to integrate into mainstream American society, they will adopt marginalization strategy.

Bicultural identities refer to the tendency of immigrants to recognize and maintain the culture of their home countries as well as communicate with the cultural groups of immigration country. The realization of bicultural identities of immigrants is not only beneficial to maintain connection with their home countries, but also conducive to integrating into the society of immigration country, which can construct unique cultural identities of immigrants.

Cultural Identity Crisis of Chinese Americans

The Farewell is a film created by Chinese American director Wang Ziyi based on her own experience. It tells a story of a transnational family. The grandmother of the family is diagnosed with cancer. The whole family decide to hide the truth and return to China to see grandmother for the last time. They use the wedding of Haohao who has lived in Japan and will marry in China as a pretext. But, in this family, the granddaughter, Bili, who is also the protagonist and grow up in the United States, disapproves of this kind of behavior. She is influenced by American values and believes that her grandmother has the right to know the truth. Thus, what her families do is completely a cheat in her mind. The conception of herself and what her family does make Bili buried in contradiction. In fact, Bili's contradiction is the cultural identity conflict of Chinese Americans. With the story propelling, Bili learns more about Chinese culture. At the end of this film, Bili reaches an agreement with her families and they conceal the illness of her grandmother together. That reveals that Bili constructs bicultural identity belonging to her.

Chinese Americans are ethnic Chinese who own American nationality or Americans of Chinese descent. They are usually influenced by both Chinese culture and American culture. In real world, because of bicultural influence, they neither maintain Chinese cultural traditions nor truly integrate into the cultural society of the United States, so that they are easily in a dilemma of severe crisis of cultural identity.

Separation From Chinese Culture for a Long Term

Chinese Americans of the first generation immigrants generally leave China early, live in the United States for most of time, and rarely return to China. Chinese Americans of second-generation immigrants are basically born and grow up in the United States. They are edified by the American cultural environment and receive Western cultural education. The educational mode of the first generation immigrants to the second-generation immigrants tends to be American mode. The educational content tends to be American culture. And, the Chinese cultural education is rarely carried out. Under this circumstance, both first generation immigrants and second-generation immigrants have been separated from Chinese society for a long time, greatly affected by American culture. It is difficult for them to produce the sense of identity with Chinese culture. In the film *The Farewell*, Bili has been in the United States since the age of six and has never returned to China during this period. She communicates with her parents in English. Only when she is on the phone with her grandmother, can she speak Chinese. But her Chinese is really spoken. When Bili's parents decide to go back to China to visit her grandmother, their prime decision is to hide the truth from Bili and not to let her go back. When Bili returns to China furtively, the whole family, in addition to the grandmother who does not know the truth, show expression of fear and tension at first, instead of surprise. They are for fear that Bili will tell the truth of her grandmother's illness. This actually shows that Bili has already been excluded from Chinese culture in this big transnational

family and has been regarded as a part that represents American culture. Bili, who has been separated from Chinese culture for a long term, also lacks identification with Chinese culture. Therefore, she cannot understand why her family does not tell the truth to her grandmother.

Inability to Truly Integrate Into American Culture

Diaspora, as a social phenomenon, was used to describe Jews at first (Zhou, 2022). It refers that an ethnic group are unable to return to hometown due to religious, political, and war reasons, but still maintain their identical characteristics of their own nation. Nowadays, the diaspora emphasizes immigrants' inability to be assimilated in immigration country and the complex emotion towards their home country in their souls. Chinese Americans, as a diaspora group, have deep emotion with Chinese culture, which makes them not fully assimilated by American culture and then integrate into it. No matter how long they have been away China, some concepts and actions always reveal characteristics of Chinese culture more or less. Bili's mother is the first generation immigrants. She persuades Bili to save money, reflecting traditional Chinese concepts of pursuing stability. She asks for Bili's opinion on the surface, but in fact directly decides how many wonton Bili should eat by ignoring Bili's answer, reflecting that Chinese parents are accustomed to holding dominant position and showing their authority in their family. Bili is second-generation immigrants. Her behavior basically inclines to look like American youngsters. But, some details still reflect Chinese characteristics. She hides the truth that she has failed to apply scholarship from her parents for a long time. This is a typical Chinese concept of "reporting only what is good while concealing what is unpleasant".

In addition to internal factors of immigrants itself, the inability to integrate into American culture also includes external factors. Racial discrimination in the United States has also influenced the integration of Chinese Americans into American culture and society to some extent. In the mid-19th century, influenced by gold rush in America and the First Opium War in China, a large number of Chinese labors went to the United States. Since then, they have already been subject to racial discrimination, known as the yellow peril and Chinese threat. Later, the promulgation of Chinese Exclusion Act marked particularly salient conflicts of rations (Sun & Wei, 2023). Until now, although Chinese international status continues to improve and the United States propagates the slogan of "All men are created equal", it is difficult for Americans, which has been deeply rooted in their concepts of racial discrimination, to change their old concepts. In 2023, a research released by the nonprofit Asian American Foundation showed that half of Asian Americans feel unsafe in the United States and they have experienced discrimination or hate crime in their workplace, at school, or on public transport (Guo, 2023). In this film, when Bili first came to the United States, she could not fit in it. She snivels her feelings to her mother and tells that one of the few good memories of her childhood was the summer at her grandmother's. Her mother responds that that time was difficult for everyone. It can be seen that they also encountered some pressure from American society when trying to integrate into it. The unfair treatment of American society has reduced the sense of belonging of Chinese Americans in the United States and has affected their identities with American culture.

Large Difference Between Chinese Culture and American Culture

Based on the cultural dimensions theory proposed by Geert Hofstede (Cai, 2022), we can find that Chinese culture is different from American culture in individualism versus collectivism, power distance and long-term versus short-term. In America, individualism index is 92, power distance index is 40, and long-term orientation is 26. Americans advocate individualism, are largely free from power, and focus on the enjoyment of present life.

In China, individualism index is 20, power distance index is 80, and long-term orientation is 87. Chinese advocate collectivism and a strict hierarchy in Chinese society. They focus on investing and saving money for long term. The giant difference in index manifests giant difference of Chinese culture and American culture in dimensions. This is also one of the reasons why Chinese Americans are prone to get in trouble with crisis of cultural identity. When Chinese Americans first arrive in the United States from China, their perception is dramatically subversive. Something may be taken for granted in China, but is not feasible in the United States. Cultural identity is difficult to be changed in a short period, even in a long period. Concealing illness of a dying person is illegal in the United States, but it is a common practice that people will choose in China. Chinese call it “a white lie”. Contrast to the giant difference between China and America, in Japan, individualism index is 46, power distance index is 54, and long-term orientation is 88. Both Japan and China are countries in Asia, so they have a high cultural similarity. Chinese who live in Japan are much easier to acquire cultural identification than who live in the United States. In the film, Bili’s uncle and his family who live in Japan do not raise a question about concealing grandmother. The narrow difference between Chinese culture and Japanese culture is the reason. Thus, the great differences between Chinese culture and American culture make it easier for Chinese Americans to be buried in the crisis of cultural identification.

Acculturation Strategies of Chinese Americans

In the film *The Farewell*, Bili’s family, as the Chinese Americans, embody two kinds of acculturation strategies, assimilation and integration.

Assimilation refers when an individual is unwilling to maintain their original cultural identification, but has fluent interaction with other cultural groups. In the first half part of this film, it is clearly that Bili’s family adopt assimilation strategy to cultural adaption. The main conflict running through the film is the conflict with her grandmother over right to know her real illness when she approaches the end of her life. Bili is the one thinking that grandmother has the right to know. She began to accept Western culture when she was a child. She insists on telling her grandmother the truth from the beginning of the film and claims that concealing her grandmother is illegal in the United States. Bili’s father is mainly influenced by Chinese culture, but also accepts American culture for a long time. So, at first, he steadfastly made his mind to conceal his mother, but gradually he blew hot and cold over his ideas, and thought it reasonable about his daughter’s minds. When they tried to integrate into American society, both of them did not maintain their own cultural identification. They tended to forsake their original culture and hug American culture. In addition to the main contradiction in the film, other parts can also reveal that they choose assimilation strategy. When Bili talks with Chinese, she cannot speak Chinese fluently and cannot understand some Chinese words. When she makes an attempt to try bath in the northeast of China, she treats the cupping with suspicion. When the big family have a dinner together, Bili’s mother is denied that people can earn money easier in the United States than that in China. Then, she tries to describe the benefits of the United States by saying that the United States is more humane and caring. Bili’s father even recognizes himself as an American instead of a Chinese. In addition, Bili’s mother tells Bili’s that her grandmother does not want to go to America in order to maintain her authority. She implies her dissatisfaction with Chinese culture everywhere.

However, as the plot constantly carries forward, Bili stays longer in China. Her strategy of acculturation changes from assimilation to integration. Integration refers that an individual in acculturation not only pays

attention to maintaining traditional culture, but also pays attention to communicating with other groups in daily life. The main reason why Bili does not agree with concealing her grandmother is the influence of individualism in America. Individualism emphasizes the independence, value, and meaning of an individual. What her families do is an obvious violation of individualism. Nevertheless, in hospital, Bili meets a Chinese doctor who has studied in the UK. He tells Bili that the concealment of illness is a good lie. And, Bili's uncle also persuades Bili. He says, Americans think one's life belongs to oneself and that is the difference between the East and the West. They do not tell her grandmother, because it is their duty to carry this emotional burden for her. Gradually, Bili accepts the differences between Chinese and American culture, understands the meaning of "The Farewell" and agrees with the white lie in China. After taking family photos in wedding, she runs to hospital in a hurry and takes the initiative to change the test results of her grandmother. She becomes a person who conceals the truth and accepts Chinese culture. Besides, Bili, as a Chinese American, should have attached great importance to her personal space and feelings. But, at the wedding of her cousin, her grandmother tells her to be gregarious and talk with strangers positively. She tries to express herself in Chinese in response, although it is not very fluent. She says, "In American, we do not have a lot of families. I miss you and I'm glad I come". Bili has already changed from a unilateral identification with American culture to integration of Chinese and American culture.

How Can Chinese Americans Reconstruct Their Identities

According to the relevant researches about acculturation theory, the integration is usually the most effective acculturation strategy. The assimilation and the separation are in the middle of these strategies and the marginalization is the worst (Tan & Chang, 2013). When Chinese Americans face the dilemma of their identities, they do not need to choose a single Chinese cultural identity or a single American cultural identity. The better solution is that they can not only maintain the Chinese cultural tradition, but also accept the influence of American culture. Thus, both Chinese culture and American culture can be displayed in a person with bicultural background and Chinese Americans can achieve bicultural identities. A famous post-colonial theorist, Homi K. Bhabha (1994), also criticized the identity division, put forward the theory of Hybridity, and chose negotiable dual identities. Chinese Americans can work hard to accept the differences between Chinese culture and American culture, and construct their own unique bicultural identities.

The solution of the contradiction in this film is that Bili accepts Chinese culture. And, it is under the premise that she is mainly influenced by American culture. Based on this, both Chinese culture and American culture can exist in her. She accepts the behavior of concealing the illness, which is illegal in American and is reasonable in China. In the film, Bili's grandmother taught Bili shout aloud and shout out Zhuoqi in her body. It is evident to bring Chinese medical concept. At that time, Bili did not do it seriously. But, at the end of the film, Bili returns to the United States and shouts out "Ha" in the American street aloud, alarming birds in the trees of her grandmother's house in China. A bind is created in China and America. In this film, it does not explicitly delineate which culture is better or superior between Chinese culture and American culture. This makes the end of the film better. Also, this film conveys the idea that culture can permeate and understand mutually. It is the concept of bicultural identity.

Conclusion

The film *The Farewell* shows the collision between Chinese culture and American culture from the perspective of a Chinese American. In the film, the actress Bili seems to ostensibly face the predicament of

whether tell her grandmother's illness or not. In fact, she is buried in the dilemma of cultural identification. She clearly and veritably presents identity construction challenges that many Chinese Americans may face, sets a good example for them, and finds the best way to solve challenges.

By 2017, the population of Chinese Americans in the United States has reached 5.0817 million. For such a huge group, how to construct identity is a very vital problem. When Chinese Americans first come to the United States or return to China, it is inevitable for them to face the difficult problem about cultural identity. Bili in *The Farewell* is an example, who shows the process of how a Chinese American constructs bicultural identity. When constructing cultural identity, they do not have to deliberately degrade or appraise a culture and they do not have to make a single choice. They can choose to accept both cultures at the same time and achieve a bicultural identity.

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