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ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL CONFLICT IN *THE GUA SHA TREATMENT* BASED ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION THEORY

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ABSTRACT

The GuaSha Treatment tells the tragic story of a Chinese immigrant family who is not understood and recognized by Americans because of traditional Chinese medicine therapy, Gua Sha. The film reflects the conflicts between the Chinese culture and the American law that only believes in objective facts, and attempts to express people's desire to expect mutual communication, understanding and integration between Eastern and Western cultures even all the human beings. This article takes the traditional Chinese medicine therapy, Gua Sha as the starting point, analyzes the conflicts between Chinese and Western cultures from the perspective of intercultural communication theory, and attempts to propose strategies to avoid or reduce cultural conflicts, thus improving the quality of intercultural communication.

Key words: Gua Sha; intercultural communication; cultural conflict; strategy

Introduction

The story described in *The Gua Sha Treatment* took place in St. Louis, Missouri, USA. Chinese Xu Datong and Jian Ning moved to the United States for eight years, and they realized their American dream, family happiness and enviable social status with a lovely child. However, the unexpected disaster suddenly came to this family. The five-year-old son, Dennis, had a stomachache. The grandfather was unable to understand what the English instructions on the medicine bottle said, and he used the Chinese medicine therapy to cure his grandson, which became Xu Datong's evidence of child abuse. Because of this, Xu Datong and his wife were brought to court. The series of dialogues in the court superficially reflected the misunderstanding

caused by the traditional Chinese medicine therapy and the cultural differences between China and the United States. In fact, it shows the process of Chinese and American cultural conflicts and integration in intercultural communication. This article mainly applies the intercultural communication theory to analyzing the cultural conflict and integration process in *The Gua Sha Treatment*.

The study of intercultural communication aroused in America as a new field and then attracted the attention of many educators and linguists. Edward T. Hall (1959) introduced cultural differences concerned with use of language and context in communication in his book *The Silent Language*, which marked the foundation of intercultural

communication. In 1960s, some colleges of America began to set courses about intercultural communication. Since the 1960s, some scholars had turned their attention to this issue of how people in the world differ culturally and how they can understand and get effective communication in intercultural situations. In 1970, the International Communication Association admitted that intercultural communication is a branch of communication study. Famous American intercultural communication scholar William B. Gudykunst (2004) published a book, which pointed out that there are at least 15 theories involving all levels of intercultural communication. And these theories can be divided into seven categories: meaning construction, communication norms, cultural models, adjustment and adaptation, formation and adjustment of identities, psychological processes of interpersonal communication, and groups and networks of communication.

In the early 1980s, intercultural communication was introduced into China. It is acknowledged by the academic field that the publication of "Culturally-loaded Words and English Language Teaching" by Xu Guozhang (1980) in *Modern Foreign Language* marked the beginning of research on intercultural communication in China. Nowadays, scholars studies intercultural communication from various perspectives. Some researchers pay attention to applying intercultural communication to language teaching and course designing, and others link the intercultural communication with other academic branches, such as anthropology and sociology. Hu (2004) applied intercultural communication theory to international exchange activities and he proposed the theoretical framework of intercultural communication from the perspective of pragmatics. Hu (2005) discussed the principles of communication in the E-era, outlined the study of cultural comparative theory, and reviewed the specific theoretical research of intercultural communication. Combined with the current era, the general communication model of E-era is proposed with Chinese traditional culture as its core. Hu (2013) suggested that the cultivation of intercultural communication competence of

students requires work both on and off campus and direct contact with foreign cultures, and teaching design should be more scientifically for different stages of teaching.

The GuaSha Treatment reflects the cultural difference between China and America from various aspects, including the medicine treatment therapy, conflict on legal concept and education view, etc. By the analysis of cultural difference in the film, the author attempts to propose strategies to avoid or reduce cultural conflicts in the process of intercultural communication, guiding people to abandon national and cultural prejudices, effectively raises their cross-cultural communication awareness and improves their cross-cultural communication competence, which are of practical significance for intercultural communication.

Theoretical Foundation

In terms of the notion of intercultural conflict, there are some different views from different perspectives.

Chen(1998) held that people are in a conflict situation when the need of the communicators become compatible and unfulfilled, and it is inevitable for people to confront conflicts. Chen's emphasis is mainly on the process of the interaction that the need of different communicators cannot be equally satisfied and is hard to be coordinated.

Wilmot and Hocker(1998) considered that there is a struggle between at least two interdependent parties who perceive incompatible goals, scarce resources and interference from others in achieving their goals. In this definition, the conflict involves two or several parties. Their different perception of goals, scarce resources and interference fail in reaching agreement, and thus leading to incompatible conflicts.

Ting-Toomey (1998) put forward the definition that conflicts happens when there is perceived incompatibility of values, norms, processes or goals between a minimum of two cultural parties over identity, relational, or substantive issues. Ting-Toomey emphasized the participants' backgrounds in the process of conflicts. In her opinion, the entity of the conflict is "a minimum of two cultural parties". She insisted that

the study of conflicts cannot escape the cultural context and should better be studied in a global sense.

Intercultural Conflicts in *The GuaSha Treatment*

The founder of intercultural communication, Hall (1959) pointed out that culture exists at two levels, covert culture and overt culture. The former is visible that can be described and the latter is invisible. Even highly trained observers are hard to detect. In the film, the conflicts between China and America on medicine treatment therapy, legal concept and different ways of parenting form a sharp contrast.

Conflict on Medicine Treatment Therapy

Gua Sha, the traditional Chinese medicine treatment therapy, is very common in China but it caused such a big conflict in the United States. The scratches left on Dennis after Gua Sha are used as evidence of child abuse. In court, no matter how Datong explained Gua Sha, he cannot make Americans understand what it is. The judge asked Datong to find an official doctor to explain Gua Sha in concise English, but as Datong's defense lawyer said, "There is no American medical textbooks with a record of Gua Sha. That is unscientific, no one will testify for this." When Xu Datong tried to explain Gua Sha, he had to use Chinese medical terms such as "Dan Tian" and "Seven Jing and Eight Mai" because there is no corresponding vocabulary to express it in English, which made Americans in the court unintelligible and the judge prevented him from continuing. They tried to look for experts to explain what Gua Sha is, but Datong and his wife, Jian Ning, could not find such a person, and they had to give up explaining the term. In the film, Grandpa deplored himself: "Gua Sha has been in China for thousands of years, why I couldn't say it clearly in the United States?" In the eye of Grandpa and most Chinese audiences, this treatment therapy is so common in China, however, Americans do not know what it is at all. This is the cultural conflict during the process of intercultural communication, that is, imposing one's own culture on another culture and using their own behavior as the standard to judge the others' behavior. In fact, this is not just the conflict between different medicine treatment

therapies. It reflects the inevitable collisions and frictions that occur when traditional Chinese culture makes connections with foreign cultures.

Conflict on Legal Concept

The American law emphasizes human rights. All men are equal before the law, and the rights between parents and children are equal. Although such a rigorous law of the United States has guaranteed human rights to a certain extent, it has established the law on a cold legal system without emotional reference. The Chinese pay attention to "golden mean", the essence of Confucianism, and emphasize emotional connection between people. In *The Gua Sha Treatment*, the American doctors denied the therapeutic effect of Gua Sha and regarded it as a kind of abuse. The mark of Dennis after Gua Sha became powerful evidence for Xu Datong's abusing child; Quinlan verified it because Xu Datong hit Dennis in front of himself; Xu Datong's decision of protecting Jian Ning during her dystocia when giving birth to a child was also seen as evidence that Datong did not like his child and violently maltreated the child. The law of the United States only focuses on effective evidence but ignored the cause of the incident, which forms a great contrast with the legal system in China. Because Chinese legal system emphasizes the moral principle and pays attention to human care. Xu Datong's custody of his son, Dennis was finally deprived and Dennis was separated from Datong's family. Although this judgment lacks emotion, the judgment of the court is correct according to American law. However, it is unacceptable for Chinese people who pay more attention to emotion. The conflict between the Chinese and American in dealing with emotion and reason is an important cause of the film tragedy.

Conflict on Different Ways of Parenting

Traditional Chinese Confucian culture advocates "the three cardinal guides and the five constant virtues", and believes that children should always follow their fathers' thoughts and behaviors and only the parents strictly educate their children, can the children get a bright future. However, Western society emphasizes that the relationship between father and son is equal and independent.

The punishment of children is an illegal act of children abuse, which may even lead to the loss of child custody. After the eight-year's hard work, Xu Datong finally harvested the success of his life and realized his "American dream." At the awards ceremony, he saw his son Dennis hit Paul, the son of Quinlan, his boss, and he strongly urged him to apologize to Paul, and finally hit Dennis seriously. This made Quinlan, the boss and friend, very confused. He felt that Datong did not love his son and ignored the child's human rights and even regarded him as one of the evidences of Xu Datong's child abuse at a later hearing meeting in the court. On the contrary, Dennis's grandfather really understood Xu Datong's behavior. Because they think that parents who hit children love their children and it proves their intimate relationship, and only by hitting and educating their children, can children become better. This reflects the conflict between China and the United States in the concept of parenting.

Strategies to Reduce Cultural Conflicts

After analyzing the cultural conflicts in *The Gua Sha Treatment*, we have had a deep insight into this film. Some strategies are put forward, including enhancing intercultural awareness, eliminating the sense of ethnocentrism and strengthening intercultural communication training.

To Enhance Intercultural Awareness

Although Datong has been in the United States for eight years, he has achieved his own success in his career and realized his "American Dream", but because of his Chinese-marked culture and his insufficient understanding of American individualism culture, he did not really integrate himself into American culture, which led to a series of cultural conflicts. With the development of globalization and the continuous advancement of the "The Belt and Road" strategy, people will inevitably deal with people from different cultures. Therefore, in order to promote effective communication, it is very necessary to actively understand the way of thinking, values, customs and habits in the target language culture before contacting with foreign cultures. This process enables people to have a good insight into cultural

differences, enhance their cross-cultural awareness, and lay a good cognitive and psychological foundation for cross-cultural communication practice, effectively avoiding or reducing cultural conflicts and cultural shocks. As culture is largely learned without our consciousness, cultural rules and influences only come to be recognized when new patterns or ways of doing things are observed and identified. In endeavor to understand others' culture, we will discover our own cultural bearings and learn more about not only what we are but also why we are and how we are. Our cultural identity is thus strengthened rather than threatened.

To Eliminate the Sense of Ethnocentrism

John T. Omohundro (2008) defined ethnocentrism as the act of judging another culture based on preconceptions that are found in values and standards of one's own culture. Therefore, ethnocentrism can lead to mistrust between different groups or cultures, mutual hatred, causing cultural conflicts, or giving people a sense of superiority and trying to change the language, behavior, customs, religion or even the way of thinking and habits of others. Sun Wukong in Chinese culture is the image of being brave, clever, lively, aggressive and responsible, and most of Chinese people love Sun Wukong and regard him as personal example. However, in the film, the lawyer maliciously distorted and slandered the Chinese heroic image of Sun Wukong in the court; and the complaints of the doctors and obstetricians of Guangci Hospital about Xu Datong's "Protecting the mother regardless of child" to some extent are all manifestations of ethnocentrism. On the contrary, Xu Datong angrily resigned from Quinlan's company because of his dissatisfaction with his boss's testimony, which is also an unconscious ethnocentrism. Both sides take a stand from the perspectives of their own cultures, inevitably leading to a series of conflicts and misunderstandings. Obviously, when interfacing with people of different cultural backgrounds, it is advisable to try to interpret and evaluate relevant behaviors with the values and social norms of the other culture, rather than relying on their own subjective consciousness. At the end of the film, Xu Datong's friend Quinlan gave up the cultural prejudice and went to

Chinatown to experience Gua Sha. He truly understood this traditional Chinese therapy and then asked the judge to withdraw the lawsuit against Xu Datong, and finally led to the film to a happy ending. Quinlan's efforts provide an excellent way for people engaged in intercultural communication to cope with cultural conflicts, that is, only by putting aside prejudice, can people from different cultures enhance mutual understanding and resolve cultural conflicts.

To Strengthen Intercultural Communication Training

When people enter a different cultural environment, they will inevitably encounter setbacks and difficult conditions, and even suffer from cultural shock. In the film, It is the first time for Xu Datong's father to live in the United States. His familiar behavior patterns and value were challenged by a new set of norms in addition to huge language barriers. Because he couldn't read the English instructions on the medicine bottle, the grandfather had to do Gua Sha for Dennis, which brought "catastrophic" trouble to the family. The accidental death of his old friend Lao Huo made him more lonely and helpless in a foreign land. "I am still an intellectual in China, but I have become a blind and a dumb." From what he said, the old man told his bitterness for the unfamiliar language and society after he came to the United States. So in order to ensure a smooth working and living in the target culture, it is of great importance for people who are involved in intercultural communication to attend language and cross-cultural training before contacting with different cultures. This kind of training not only allows the trainees to master certain linguistic knowledge and communicative ability, but also profoundly understand all aspects of a country's history and culture through case studies, role-play, and interaction with different cultures, thus vividly experiencing intercultural communication. Their cultural sensitivity and intercultural communication skills can be gradually improved by solving the problems in the activities.

Conclusion

Xu Datong, a Chinese in America, suffers from cultural identity a lot. The process of his fight

for his son's custody lawsuit is the epitome of difference between Chinese and American culture. Finally, after Quinlan did Gua Sha, he experienced the comfortable Chinese medicine treatment therapy and with the help of Quinlan, Dennis came back to Xu Datong's family happily. *The Gua Sha Treatment* shows the cultural conflicts and can serve as an excellent example for the analysis of intercultural conflicts between China and America.

The article analyzes the conflicts between Chinese and Western culture reflected in the film. There exist great differences in medicine treatment therapy, legal concept and ways of parenting, which caused lots of troubles for Xu Datong's family. By the analysis of the conflicts, some strategies of avoiding intercultural conflicts are proposed. To better communicate with people from foreign cultures, enhancing intercultural awareness, eliminating the sense of ethnocentrism and strengthening intercultural communication training are very necessary.

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