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The Comparison of American and Chinese Family Education: Taking *Modern Family* as an Example

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Abstract

This paper compares some important family education phenomena in the TV serial—*Modern Family* which are obviously different in China. Then, this paper gives explanation from three main perspectives of beliefs, historical as well as welfare origin. And some implications are provided so as to help Chinese parents cast off obsolete thoughts and support all-round development of Chinese children.

Key words: *Modern Family*; Family education; implications

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INTRODUCTION

Since stepping into the 21st century, competition among nations is embodied in the competition of the talents in the final analysis. Family is the basic cell of society, the foundation of social development and stability and the first place where children get in touch with education. Thus, family plays a vital role in cultivating the world outlook and thinking model of children. Family education is getting a high degree of attention from researchers and parents. However, at present, there exist some nonnegligible misunderstandings about education in a

Chinese family. Those problems pose a serious threat to the formation of good quality of the young generation. Drawing lessons from valuable practice of other countries will help Chinese family education get rid of wrong zones.

Along with a long period of historical precipitation, every culture shapes its own characteristic family education value. Hegel once said “the art works are left in the richest insights and ideas of all ethnic groups. Television show as an art form is the intuitive carrier of culture, representing a wealth of cultural connotations. The culture of one country or one nation is embodied vividly in films and television shows” (Zhang, 2012). In this sense, this paper compares four educational aspects about the purpose and way of family education, behavioral development as well as social contact embodied in *Modern Family*. Then some implications are provided in the hope to improve the quality of Chinese family education.

Modern Family is an American TV serial which tells stories happening in the three families—the May-December blended family, the daughter’s family and the gay son’s family. It shows what the family life is like in America.

1. AMERICAN FAMILY EDUCATION

1.1 The Purpose of Family Education

As we all know, America is a country which is full of opportunities and challenges, advocating independence and upholding the spirit of exploration. Cultivating child as an independent man or social person with the ability of tackling various situations is the objective of American family education. To strive for this goal, American parents will arrange some tasks for their children and ask them to accomplish by themselves, for example, sleeping alone when they are still babies; cleaning their rooms or making allowance when they grow up. Therefore, when an adult man still lives with his parents, he will be called “mommy

boy". All of these examples are typical manifestations of independent culture. They are taught if you want something, you have to make your own efforts.

The Episode 12 of Season 4 shows us how nurturing independent ability of children is going on. After Haley gets kicked out school, she lives with her parents. When her father asks her to pay to live in their house, Haley says "This is everything I made at the boutique last week. I'm not gonna have any money left for me." Her father answers her "you should have thought of that before you got thrown out of school. You live here, you pay rent." According to a survey (Sun, 2002), 54% teenagers have no allowances and 68% interviewed teenagers earn money by taking part-time job in America.

Nevertheless, the goal of Chinese family education is bringing up children as talented people with a bright future. Based on such expectation, most Chinese parents want their children to be well-educated and have a stable job after graduation. Before that, parents can do everything for children. Chinese children still get living expenses from their parents even when they are at colleges. Chinese parents are stick to a box that only if children can study hard, parents will do their utmost to support them. They think taking part-time jobs may be at cost of the studying time, or is not safe for girls. Especially in high schools, parents make every effort to create a good atmosphere for children to study. The only thing they need to do is studying and so as to get admission into famous universities. This family education goal deprives the capability to adapt to society of many Chinese children.

1.2 The Development of Children's Habit

Education purpose is the decisive factor of education content. American family education with a wide range of content attaches importance to the harmonious development of children in physical strength, cognition, language, sociality and emotion. Hence, plenty of people regard American family education as quality education.

In the Episode 3 of Season 6, when three families get together to have dinner because of Cam and Mitchell's wedding, Manny wants to leave in that he is in a bad mood. His mom Gloria said "sit down! This is a family dinner. We all eat together." His mother's attitude is very strong.

On the top of that, Luke, the daughter's son shoots Alex by plastic BBs. Claire lest Luck's father deal with this. His father just says "uncool buddy." However, Claire says "NO. We get the agreement that if he shoots someone, we will shoot him." Luck says he was sorry with crocodile tears. His mom recognized he was lying. Even they have many things to do that day, they still find a time to punish Luck.

Differently, Chinese family education content is less scientific. Although Ministry of Education in China calls for sound development in morality, intelligence, physique,

aesthetics and labor, intelligence education will become the top priority after children go to school.

A great number of Chinese parents are just strict to their children in the study, but they are causal in other aspects. As a popular saying goes "nothing is as touching as parents' love" in China, Children mean everything for Chinese parents. Especially some parents in rich families spoil children very much. When children use puppy-dog eyes trick, they always win. When children make mistakes and say they are wrong, Chinese parents usually let it go or just say "Don't do that again". As a result, many children won't follow the rule. They will do that again because they know they won't get punished. Thus, there are a lot of Chinese children with good grades who are short of life skills.

1.3 The Way of Cultivating Children

The way of family education is closely related to the cultural tradition, costumes, as well as historical background. It is the concrete measures and means of achieving education content.

Individualism culture spurs American people to treat children equally and pay close attention to their inner world. Even they are little kids, parents always let them speak out their opinions and take care of their feeling.

In Episode 2 of Season 6, one day Lily (a girl adopted by the gay son, Mitchell and his partner in the TV serial) angrily sticks her portrait she drew on the photo of her dads. Then her dads realize that they don't have a photo of Lily may make her a little bit unhappy. When they decide to take a family photo, Lily's smile is not natural. Her dads still tell her it is not bad. In the second time, they still say she is beautiful. They want to do gently to let Lily notice her forced smile. Therefore Mitchell asks Lily "see if there's anything that we would do differently. I think I could stand up straighter. Lily, is there anything that you see in yourself that you would want to change here?" Even finally Lily doesn't change her smile at all, her dads consider that's the nature of a kid.

On the contrary, the Chinese family values obedience. In the hearts of Chinese parents, they think obedient children are good children. The right to choose and speak of children is small at home. A lot of things are done according to the wishes of their parents or parents finish on their behalf. Consequently, in this same circumstance, Chinese parents are accustomed to directly telling children their smile is weird and how you should do. This may unconsciously hurt children's feelings. Grimace and exaggerated smile are just embodiments of naivety. Parents should not judge children by adult values.

There is another impressing example in this episode. When Alex comes to visit the college before she applies for it, her elder sister Haley feels she is a loser because she gets kicked out college for drinking under age. Her father said to her

You are not a loser. You have value, talent, and potential that their tests can't measure. Who cares if you don't fit into their little box. You're finding your way. That's what your 20s are for to take chances, to make mistakes and to learn from them, and you are learning from them.

However, in China, parents try their best to let their children go into college. It is one of the important criteria to see whether children are promising or not. Even their children voluntarily drop off school, they feel embarrassed, because most parents hold the thought that only those people who get good education will succeed.

1.4 The Degree of Freedom in Social Contact

Apart from the different education purpose, content and way, there is a conspicuous phenomenon necessarily being mentioned in this paper.

Almost all Chinese people believe it is true that American children start dating very early and their parents won't intervene too much.

In Episode 1 of Season 1, When Manny is just 11, he wants to go to the mall where Brenda Feldman works to tell her that he loves her. His mom and Jay really accompany him to the mall to declare his love. When Manny gets refused, he thinks he is pretty stupid but his mom tells him "you are brave."

Also in Episode 22 of Season 6, Alex and Sanjay, after four years of spirited competition, they are the Pali High class of 2015 co-valedictorians! However, both of them want to do that alone. Thus, the Principle decides to let them do a makeup race of this semester's mile run. Sanjay tells Alex he likes her before the race. Then they kiss each other in front of parents and the Principle. Claire, Alex's mother, says "oh it's so cute". Sanjay's father said: "He seems quite skilled at it."

However, the question of puppy love is quite serious in the eyes of Chinese teachers and parents. Even though there is a signal in school, parents will get extremely nervous and uptight. The reason why they worry is that it will exert bad effect on children's grade. Even some conservative parents forbid their children from starting a relationship with someone when they are freshman in university. From these, we can see that American children have more freedom to make friends while Chinese children are influenced too much degree by their parents.

2. MAIN REASONS OF THESE DIFFERENCES

2.1 Religious Origin

American people believe god. They think it is god to combine individual together. Everyone is equal. Even a child's opinion should be respected. Hence, children are in the same level with parents.

However, Chinese people have been influenced by Confucius for long time. The culture of priority in

rank continues to the present time and the authoritative position of parents is extensively accepted by people. Children grow up under the spirit that it is not filial if they go against parents' willing. Therefore, children are accustomed to trying their best to meet the demands of their parents. As rules in *Di Zi Gui*, when parents call, answer them right away; When parents ask you to do something, do it without any hesitation; when parents instruct you, listen respectfully; when parents reproach you, obey and accept their scolding.

2.2 Historical Origin

Due to different historical development, America and China form two distinct thinking models: Individualism and Collectivism.

Individual culture puts personal behavior in the spotlight. What people do just represent themselves. The reputation of parents has nothing with the achievements of their children. Parents are separate with children. They won't take the blame for children's mistakes.

In China, parents strongly expect their children to stand out among people. When children outperform their peers, parents will feel proud, otherwise parents think that is an embarrassing thing. Chinese people always say "Son is not taught, which is father's fault". The image of one person can stand for the whole family. So if children are rebellious or do something wrong, the public will judge that their parents are not good enough either.

2.3 Welfare Origin

China is being and will be in the primary stage of socialism for long time. Even though these years have witnessed the quick improvement of economy, welfare mechanism is still not well organized. Education to children is frequently out of family reputation and support in old age. Children are taught they should reciprocate their parents for raising them.

Compared with China, America is a developed country with well-built welfare mechanism. Parents are not bound up with the thought that bringing up children is for their old age. When they get old, they can go nurse house without any worries back at home. Therefore, they won't put high demand on their children and fully depend on them. Children can choose the path that they want to take. Parents and children won't be responsible for the life of each other.

3. IMPLICATIONS TO CHINESE PARENTS

3.1 Updating the Concept of Family Education

Chinese parents are in authoritative position in family and prefer arranging everything for their children. They strive to educate children to become successful people who can get a good job and earn much money. They impose their unfulfilled dreams on shoulders of their children. And

they are used to be strict with their children rather than praise them. Even when children get 98 scores in a math test, parents usually ask them why they still lose 2 points. They are accustomed to ignoring progress of children but see what they don't achieve. However, the older children grow, the more insightful they are. Chinese parents are supposed to treat children equally and listen to what they think instead of ordering them to do something.

3.2 Paying More Attention to the All-Round Development of Children

It is natural that children are the apple of parents' eyes. However, the ancient proverb of China says that spoiling children are the same as ruining children's future. Nevertheless, many Chinese families, especially grandfathers and grandmothers think that everything done by children is right. What this situation causes is that Chinese children become more selfish and vulnerable than ever before. There occurs a comparison ethos in society among children, for example, branded clothes, parents' social positions and so on.

It is imperative to scale up education content. Parents should balance the development of children in all aspects. Intelligence education is undoubtedly important. Meanwhile, parents should also enable the harmonious improvement of children in morality, physique, aesthetics as well as labor.

3.3 Teaching Children to Be Responsible

When children step into the period of adolescence, it is normal for children to more like someone than others. Chinese parents usually make a mountain out of molehill. They switch their children's desk-partners or even classes. Anyway, parents do what they can do to get their children away from the person who they like rather than asking them what kind of personality attracts them. When comes to this situation, Chinese parents ought to tell their children that are normal at that age. Parents should direct them to a correct way, tell them what they can learn from each other and help them get the motivation to go forward. Let them know they need to be responsible for any decision they make and any actions they do.

3.4 Improving the Independent Ability of Children

Almost all of Chinese parents hold the belief that they would rather suffer than let children endure grievance. They always spare no effort to create excellent living conditions for their children. In case of children getting hurt, parents warn them in advance. As a result, it produces a large group of social misfits. Here is a paradox. Chinese parents long for success of children, but more and more Chinese children can't bear failure. Once they failed, they would be angry, or even worse, be desperate.

For example, when children play a game with often their parents, they usually cry or even beat their parents after losing a game. Parents are eager that children can succeed but they don't let children have the quality of being a successor.

Accordingly, Chinese parents should learn to let children out of their protecting circle. There is another Chinese proverb that a fall into the pit, a gain from your wit. In this sense, Chinese parents are supposed to cultivate the independent ability of children. Encouraging children to make a try is conducive to adaptation to society.

CONCLUSION

It is often said that parents are the first and best teacher of children. Family education is never replaceable by school education and social education. Research statistics (X. Y. Huang & C. F. Huang, 2009) show during the growing process of children in China, the influence of family education accounts for 70%, followed by school education (20%) and social education (10%). From that, we can see how important family education is.

This paper gives analysis of different phenomena between Chinese and American family education through the TV serial—*Modern Family* and explains the main reasons for these diversities. Then, four implications are advised so as to promote Chinese family education. However, what is worth our attention is that each nation has its own unique education value. Chinese parents should not deny everything of domestic family education, less should they blindly assimilate American-style family education, but consciously and purposefully draw on good things on the basis of children's needs. It is a long-term and uphill journey to offer good family education for cultivating talents suitable to Chinese development.

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