

Differences Between Chinese and American Family Values in *Pushing Hands*

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Abstract

Pushing Hands is a movie telling the differences between Chinese and American family values. In the movie, the father-in-law from China and the daughter-in-law from America can't adapt to each other in the family life because of the culture differences. This paper mainly demonstrates the difference between China and the west in family values, describes its difference in various aspects as well as the causes of it and trends of integration.

Key words: *Pushing Hands*; Chinese and American cultures; Family values

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INTRODUCTION

Pushing Hands is a movie directed by Li'an from Taiwan, China, showing the cultural difference between China and the west. Like many Chinese, Xiaosheng was born in a traditional family. Having finished his PHD in computing in America, he got married. Soon he invited his retired father to America to live with him and enjoy the family time. However, Martha, Xiaosheng's wife who was born in an American family, couldn't accept the fact that they had to live with her father-in-law, because it was very inconvenient. Thus, the conflict just stood out.

1. THE DEFINITION OF "FAMILY"

Family is the basic unit of society connected with blood ties and clan relations, including parents, children and other relatives living together. But, to better understand families and the specific relations they represent, we must recognize that the term "family" is socially constructed; that is, the meaning of family changes in the response to a wide variety of the social and cultural conditions. To reflect this understanding, we often refer to families in the plural. Multiple meanings of the family are reflected in the historical and cross-cultural record. Modern sociologists divided the traditional family into three categories: Nuclear family includes a couple and their under aged children; Stem family includes a couple and the couple's parents, or immediate superiors and under the aged children; Extended family includes the nuclear family or the stem family and other collateral relatives.

In China, traditionally, people prefer extended families, esp. three generations at one roof which represents happiness. So "may your whole family enjoys happiness" is the greeting during the festivals. As we can see, the Chinese people like extended family and many people prefer to stem family, esp. males and their parents. They consider this as the highest state of filial piety which fully embodies the idea of "family-centered" of the Chinese. In America, most of families are nuclear families which consist of a couple and their underthe aged children. Americans value privacy the most which fully embodies the idea of "individual-based". In *Pushing Hands*, the culture conflicts are inevitable between the Chinese father-in-law and the American daughter-in-law when they live under the same roof.

2. DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND AMERICAN FAMILY VALUES IN *PUSHING HANDS*

2.1 The Aging Problem

In China, it is difficult for the people to accept the idea of being sent to the nursing home when they are old, let alone the actual practice, as long as they have sons and daughters. Likewise, even though some old people are very open-minded, their children are still not very supportive, no matter how good conditions the nursing home is, because they are afraid of receiving the condemnation of the public opinion. People wouldn't bear such charges. In a Chinese TV series called *Daughter-in-law's happy life*, the sister-in-law just sent her mother-in-law to the first-class local nursing home because she didn't want to live with her any more. The first thing came into the mother-in-law's mind was that her children wanted to drive her out of the house because she was useless. Then she cried out loud and cursed his son for his unfiliality. "Bring up their children in old age" is the widespread idea in China, esp. in rural areas. People think it is very natural for parents to live with their grown-up children; even they have already got married. As we can see at the beginning of the movie, Xiaosheng's father has been treating himself and the relationship between him and his son's family as a Chinese. He treats his son's home as his own; he does whatever he wants in the house, like watching TV, singing Peking Opera, performing tai chi etc. regardless of the daughter-in-law Martha's feelings.

In the western individual-oriented culture, people value personal values and dignity. It is impossible for three generations to live under one roof. In America, nuclear family prevails. The state pension in America is excellent and the general practice is social pension. So it is difficult for Martha to understand her husband's practice, that is, they have to live with her father-in-law, because it is very inconvenient. As a writer, she really feels frustrated and even tells her husband she will never have new works.

The prominent contradiction in this movie is on the dinner table. While listening to his wife's complaints about her inconvenience with the old man and her plan of buying a big house, Xiaosheng had to listen to his father's endless nagging about the trivial things in life. Finally, Xiaosheng had to tell them both to "just eat". All this has served to influence their husband-wife relationship. Xiaosheng didn't blow up until his father got lost when he walked around in the neighborhood one day. He got mad with his wife, almost ruined the kitchen, looking for his father desperately on the streets all night long. Not having found his father, he came back home, totally drunk. In Martha's opinion, the old man was just like a child and got himself lost on purpose on the attempt to draw some attention; while Xiaosheng asked Martha "why can't you be nice to him?" When Xiaosheng was finally determined

to send his father to the nursing home, the old man fell sick. The whole thing came to a deadlock. Until Ms Chen told Xiaosheng's father the reason for it, the old man started to understand what was going on. Whose fault to make such situation? It seems that nobody has done anything wrong.

2.2 The Family Hierarchy

In China, father-son relationship is considered as one of the most important one in the family ties. Father-son relationship means that the father should be kind and the son should be filial. Kind means to love, while filial piety is the core of Chinese traditional ethic which is the root of morality. The Chinese people believe that their body was given by the parents. When the body is dead, life doesn't exist. In *Pushing Hands*, when Martha forces Xiaosheng to ask his father to move out, he said: "I am his only son. What should I do?" As a Chinese, we know that it is the responsibility of the only son of the family to take care of their aging parents. In China, sometimes the parents will beat their children severely for the sake of their own good. It is considered that a father is at the center of the family.

In the west, this kind of relationship is much equal. Father can be friends with his kids. Children show their love to their parents. We can often hear them say "I love you". Parents and children are more equal in American families. In America, people believe that they were born equal, whether fathers or sons, they are God's people. They do not value the inherent relationship between father and son, instead, they value equality. Parents also think their children are independent individuals. They love to help them, but never force them to do anything.

2.3 Education on Children

In the movie, the kid told his mom a story of his own: a turtle, a fish, a mouse and a bottle of liquid medicine and finally they are on the road to ruin which seemed weird to us, but it meant different to the child. Martha was also not sure of the connections of the many things, but she still praised her son "Jeremy gets some ideas". American parents tend to listen to their kids and respect their ideas toward the world and understand them. From their points of view, nobody has the right to limit the development of the children, either the parents or the teachers. Nobody should impose their own ideas on the children. In America, parents pay more attention to develop the children's personal autonomy and deal with the daily events with their own efforts.

Instead, for the Chinese children, they were brought up to obey the parents. You can often hear parents saying such things as "Go finish your lunch." "Get your homework done.", etc.. The Chinese parents would love to do all the things for their kids, esp. the grandparents on both sides. They won't give the children any opportunity to show themselves, let alone cultivating their independence. Actually, the children's rights have

been deprived. In China, at present, about seventy percent unemployed people turn to their parents for support, and become “boomerang children”.

In America, people value other’s privacy, including their children. So, when Xiaosheng’s father looked at his grandson’s genital after he was taking a bath, saying “The future of our Chu family depends on your little treasure.” Martha got mad at it. In America, that is not allowed. In spite of the high degree of the American sexual openness among the adults, children are definitely not included. For example, Nirvana new album was deleted on the Internet because of the naked boy on its cover which violated website rules. However, the models of the adult magazines would like their body more exposed than covered. In China, it seems that there is no secret to the children’s body. In the Chinese TV series *Golden Wedding*, when the grandma saw the newly-born grandson, she couldn’t conceal her delight and kissed the lower part of the baby’s body. Everybody thought it was normal and natural. Although it is not the common practice in China today, it still exists in some parts of China, especially, the countryside.

Xiaosheng’s father said “American people teach children like they are doing business. Everything is a deal.” This is also a typical difference between the Chinese and American education. Look at the following case: In America, if a child didn’t want to eat his food, the mother said “Eat your food now or you can’t eat anything until tomorrow morning.” The child agreed with it. When it was time for dinner, the child said he was hungry and wanted to join the parents for dinner, but the mother mentioned their previous agreement. So the child could only watch the parents eat and waited until the next day for breakfast. From that day forth, similar things never happened. In China, a lot of children are very naughty, they eat less. And for the parents and grandparents, they will chase the children and feed them food, thus the children form a bad habit. Most of them got two stomachs to eat and one to work. I once read a report which praised a mother who gave up her career and accompanied her son studying at school. By contrast, the American parents are much smarter.

3. THE REASONS FOR THE DIFFERENCES

3.1 Historical Reasons

America is an immigrant country which means the people uprooted themselves in order to come to this new land. The original family base doesn’t exist and the family structure is not very stable. They have to depend on nobody but themselves in the process of growing up. Gradually, they form the independent personality which also reflected in their education to the next generation. Meanwhile, they make no demand for their children that they should be taken care of when they are getting old.

The centrifugal force is the main reason for the present American family values.

A child providing for their parents embodies a fundamental value in Chinese tradition. It reciprocates the nurturing functions between parents and children. For thousands of years, it has been natural for the Chinese to equate, “having a son to alleviate old age and accumulating grains to alleviate hunger.” In contrast to western belief, every Chinese person depends on the family from birth to death. Thus the aging parents in China are supported by their children rather than the social security system in the west.

3.2 Religious Reasons

Religion plays an important role in the formation of human consciousness. A lot of stories in *Bible* show that many families consist of mother and children. In the story “Noah’s Ark”, there was a big quarrel between the father and the son, and then all the children just got away from the family, re-establishing their own family, never returned the place where they were born, all of which illustrated that some people are very indifferent with their ancestors in the western society.

In traditional Chinese society, individual interests should submit to the family interests so that the interests and harmony of the family can be protected. In a family, the parents are absolute authorities and all relations are based on the blood bonds. This embodies the Chinese family’s system and the externalization of this system is the ethical concept at the core of “filial piety”. When the parents pass away, the children should offer ritual sacrifices and mourn them for three years. However, the mourning practice has long been abolished. Rituals and sacrifices still exist. On the day of the Qing ming Festival every year, the Chinese people will sweep the tombs of the dead and mourn for them. To promote this tradition, the Chinese government made it a legal holiday in 2008.

3.3 The Difference Between Ideological and Political Consciousness

Feudalism has a huge influence on the Chinese family values. The traditions observed by Chinese families were born from China’s unique cultural background, and China’s family ethics are different from other countries. First, family was traditionally the major activity sphere of the people, and the ideology of family clan priority was the core of Chinese family ethic. Family harmony required that individual interests bow to family interests unconditionally. Second, in the Chinese patriarchal system, the standing between relatives, as well as their precedence in the family was all decided by their relation with the father, the male dominator of the family. So in China, a lot of children are very obedient. The parents can impose their ideas on the children; meanwhile, the children got no interests of their own, only because they are the continuation of their parents’ lives.

While we find the following words in *The Declaration of Independence*, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness." In this way, Americans made their voices heard and confirmed the existence of personal values and thus formed the ideology of personal standard. The ultimate embodiment of this ideology is the freedom, equality and independence for every family member in the house.

There is no doubt that the world is developing toward the direction of integration and the degree of cultural blending is strengthening. In this era of cultural globalization, the cultural conflicts between Chinese and western countries is inevitable. However, this conflict is not terrible, on the contrary, it promotes the communication between Chinese and western culture. We will figure something out to solve the problems. What we need to be communication and dialogues instead of exclusion and confrontation. With the development of world economic integration, the exchanges between the peoples from all over the world become more and more close, not only in economy, but also in culture. Economic cooperation will inevitably lead to cultural communication. Cultural exchanges and, in turn, have the effect of promoting economic cooperation. But various cultural differences between different ethnic groups brought a lot of difficulties in all aspects of communication. Therefore, it is necessary to strengthen cultural communication and integration between nations.

CONCLUSION

The movie *Pushing Hands* is a true reflection of the conflicts between east and west. It has the reference significance for those who come from different cultures. Taking this movie as an example, the author gives some advice for the sake of easing the cultural conflicts between east and west.

Firstly, in the movie, the father-in-law and the daughter-in-law come from different countries and have different cultural backgrounds, but they become relatives because of the Xiaosheng's marriage. They should respect each other's culture. For the elders, he should be kind and tolerant while the juniors should treat their parents

with filial respect. Only in this way can we close the gap between the two cultures. At first, it must be a little awkward; however, as long as both sides would take the time to adapt to each other and understand each other, there is always a way out. Attitude is everything. We should be open to new things in our life.

Secondly, respect itself is not enough because they are learning different cultures. In order to be more integrated into the second culture, one has to deepen his understanding of the culture. In this movie, Xiaosheng should play a good intermediary role and help to solve the problems between his father and his wife. In the first place, Xiaosheng is Chinese and was born and raised in China. He has moved to America for quite a long time and more or less knows some American culture. And it is much easier for him to communicate with his American wife. In this case, Xiaosheng's father and his wife have to know the difference between the two cultures, personal values, even each other's characteristics through him.

Thirdly, after knowing each other's cultures, the father-in-law and daughter-in-law should adapt to each other and seek common points while reserving difference. They can solve the problems themselves. The people involved should break the cultural stereotype and try to renew their understandings toward other cultures and open their minds to the new things that come along the way. Only in this way could the three generations live under one roof happily.

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