On the Narrative Features of British Sitcoms: Take *The IT Crowd* and *Yes, Prime Minister* as Examples

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Abstract

In recent years, British TV dramas have been a glaring phenomenon and the "new favorite" of fans who love watching overseas TV plays. This paper takes two TV dramas of *The IT Crowd* and *Yes, Prime Minister* for case studies, explores the narrative features of British sitcom from dramatic narrative tendency, core narration of "people", self-deprecating humor, unity of conflict and social significance, concludes three points of inspiration for China's film and television creation: "learn" instead of "imitate", "serious" instead of "funny", "modern" as well as "traditional."

Key words: British sitcom; Narrative feature; *The IT Crowd*; *Yes, Prime Minister*

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, British TV dramas have been a glaring phenomenon and the "new favorite" of fans who love watching overseas TV plays. "In the recent surveys on audience's evaluation of programs, sitcom ranks the second only following national news." (liu, 2014) *Downton Abbey, Doctor Who, The IT Crowd, Coupling, Merlin* and other popular British dramas have not only been recognized by Emmy Awards, but also have swept the globe with unprecedented momentum. In this "British style", sitcom which advocates black humor, "cold joke" from ordinary life and memory, absurd and exaggerated nonsense craziness are also very popular. *The IT Crowd,* as *The Big Bang Theory* which takes the life of high IQ and low EQ life Frankenstein as the theme, attracts a group of loyal fans by virtue of the British "cold jokes"; *Yes, Prime Minister*'s ridicule on British politicians and its political satire often arouses people's admiration; *London Girl, Miranda* and other TV plays make people laugh and recollect the old days with their joking thinking of youth. Many audiences have been captured by British sitcoms' infinite charm, unique style and right sense of humor.

1. REASONS TO CHOOSE *THE IT CROWD* AND *YES, PRIME MINISTER*

There are many popular British sitcoms in China in recent years, this paper selects *The IT Crowd* and *Yes, Prime Minister* for case studies based on the following considerations:

The first is visibility and popularity. These two well-made TV shows have been praised by the critics and academic circles, and have had high visibility in the UK and China. *The IT Crowd* has received a number of nominations in the 2014 British TV Art Academy Awards which is known as "the highest award of the British TV plays". The 2013 edition of *Yes, Prime Minister* is a classic return of British political satire comedy. Its original edition was popular all over Britain, especially in political circles in the 1980s, and its witty humor and satire comedy are better than current debates in the lower house of British parliament.

The second is breadth and clarity of the theme of the times. These two dramas have distinctive contemporariness and strong vitality. *The IT Crowd* takes a multicultural office as the background, and is a typical workplace sitcom. The story involves many aspects, and is the epitome of the British daily lives. *Yes, Prime Minister* creates a spicy witty screenplay based on the current events, representing the high level of British political comedy. It also collects the debt crisis, economic downturn, Scottish independence and other hot topics, making audiences along with the Prime Minister witness the ups and downs behind these numerous events.

American drama theorist Northrop Frye makes the following discussions in *Spring Myth: Comedy,* "In the plot structure, comedy is rather a program than a form." (Northrop, 1992, p.220). We borrow this sentence into the study of British sitcoms. Sitcom has formed a set of mature ideographic system after half a century of development, having its unique production system and narrative strategy. We take *The IT Crowd* and *Yes, Prime Minister* as examples to conduct a study on the narrative features of British sitcoms, making the audiences know more about the background and characters, understand development of plot and fun brought about by the development.

2. DRAMATIC NARRATIVE TENDENCY

"Since its birth TV show has a deep history and relationship with traditional drama in the play structure. Dramatic TV show is still one of the narrative tendency of TV shows." (Zhang, 2013, p.133) In the country of Shakespeare, though still with the main narrative content of daily lives, British sitcom is different from other countries' sitcoms in a clear tendency of dramatic narration, and TV seems to be another theatrical stage.

2.1 Make Trivial Daily Life Into "Drama"

British sitcoms usually represent daily chores in the background of everyday life, cleverly use drama to continue to attract audiences, and make ordinary life no longer common. For example, in an episode of *The IT Crowd*, Jen is refused to participate in a manager's meeting, for which she is very unhappy. At first we would think that it's a female staff's ordinary office life, but the story begins to change to be that Jane finally enter the room by changing dress, only finding that the boss leads the managers to dance aerobics rather than have a slumber party, that her participation is not allowed is because she can not keep up with the progress due to the previous leaves. Jen's wearing professional suit and high-heeled shoes causes a mess. Such a dramatic conflict accelerates the pace and is quite expressive.

2.2 Lingering Relationship Between Plot and Story

When speaks of "scene" Diderot holds that: "A scene in a script is composed of family relationship, professional relationship and friend and enemy relationship, etc." (Zhu, 1963, p.263). In British sitcoms, in terms of the relationships between main characters, unless there are other plot lines as an auxiliary, warm friendship between the main characters, ambiguous feelings as well as the dramatic ups and downs of individual inner feelings will determine the rhythm of the sitcom. Human emotion is an emotional topic, which is destined not to have a decisive ending. Therefore, apart from the cycle of "have problem - solve problem" in the story structure, it is difficult to cut off the relationships between people, so it is naturally difficult to separate narration in a sitcom.

In *The IT Crowd*, Moss and Joey work in IT department in a building basement like two otakus, and the "computer idiot" Jen is accidentally appointed as the department head. If suspect excessively, this is an old-fashioned drama between two men and a woman - but it's estimated that it would be longer than ten seasons for them to produce mutual admiration. In fact, all the jokes are derived from the three lovely characters, from their contacts with other people. When Jen firstly begins to work she finds the interpersonal "barriers" in Moss and Joey, she resolutely starts a public relation work. Even if there are some misunderstandings and conflicts, the three characters have identified friendship which will not change.

3. CORE OF THE NARRATION IS THE "PEOPLE"

Film and television art's object is people, and what audiences care about is also people. In a drama, conflicts are sharp, but they must also be meaningful. For audiences what they really care about is people, and only by making the audiences understand the characters in conflicts, concern their encounters, fates and living roads, the audiences can appreciate the significance of the conflicts.

3.1 Typical Character of Minority Culture

The greatest feature of characters in British sitcoms is that a character often represents a group, a culture, and this not only has a great practical significance but also avoids being identical. As shown in Table 1, Table 2, *The IT Crowd* is an epitome of British multicultural society, and *Yes, Prime Minister* is a "Facebook" of British politics.

Table 1
Main Characters of *The IT Crowd*

Moss	Joey	Goth	Denholm	Douglas	Cannibal	Transgender
Otaku geek	Otaku geek	Non-mainstream goth	Exquisite and selfish	Playboy	Mutant middle class	Vietnamese transgender

Table 2
Main Characters of *Yes, Prime Minister*

Hacker	Sir Humphery	Bernard	Claire
Grassroot civilian peak of the public officer system	Elite class left wing movement the royal family	British gentleman with ideal and belief	Political woman realist

3.2 Specialize in Making a Fuss About Social Distress

Character relationship is the cornerstone of narrative conflicts, whose core in Britain is social distress. Because of social distress, Joey is beaten due to poor communication, Moss is bewildered in the face of beautiful women, and the "Goth" even hides inside the computer room. The most important thing is that there are clever complementations and influences among the three characters, which balance a lot of "social issues". Jen learns "do you restart it?" in the first day of her work, which makes her from a computer idiot become an IT technician, but Moss and Joey are very unhappy about this. Finally, the biggest reason for them to accept Jen is because Jen is responsible for their communication, helping them solve the communication problems.

4. HUMOR IS INSEPARABLE FROM BRAVE SELF-DEPRECATION

4.1 Exaggerated External Action and Conflict

"External action or inner activity is not narrative by themselves. Whether they can be narrative depends on whether they can naturally arouse the audience's emotion, or achieve this effect by the author's processing." (Lu, 2004, p.3) In a TV play, in order to create vivid and full characters, their actions need to be centralized and rapidly developed so as to help the audience sort out the clue and determine the theme.

In *The IT Crowd*, exaggerated actions of the three protagonists are often a source of humor. Once Jane had her eye on a pair of shoes, but could not wear them because of the smaller size. Jen had only "shoes" as the answer to all questions the whole day, and finally wore them by twisting her feet into deformity. In *Yes, Prime Minister*, Humphrey would say a paragraph of words about politics's nature with a tone of debate when he has nothing to say, but his expression is not self-confident and like a child doing something wrong. Whenever Humphrey says such non-confident words, the audience will laugh. This satirizes some politicians' glib tongue without any practical significance, and naturally produces a comedy effect.

4.2 Visual Words: A Catalyst to Extend Conflicts

"Visual words refer to an embedded text which can be seen by audiences in the screen and are shown in the form of props." (Dong, 2011, p.22) Such visual expression is not random or occasional, but to convey some comedy information by connecting the audience's recognition and imagination with a specific emotion at the moment. In a episode of the second season of *The IT Crowd,* Moss picked up a fire extinguisher to put out a fire, but found that the fire extinguisher was on fire, then he had a clear understanding when he saw the words of made in Britain. The audience cannot help but laugh when see this, wondering whether the script writer despises his own domestic products. The key of the words is actually not to despise the manufacturing, but to self deprecate that only exported produces are in good quality.

Another example is in the episode of *Yes, Prime Minister* that Bernard ridiculed the bald head of the Prime Minister. Humphrey whispered while reading newspaper by the side of Hacker, then Hacker asked "What?" Humphrey narrowed his eyes and lifted the small chin smiling at Hacker cunningly. This satirizes that the British Prime Minister Cameron's hair turned gray and became bald after he took office for only over three months.. The Guardian even published an article entitled "Can bald men ever hope to lead their countries?" to ridicule Cameron's bald head. Humphrey just held a newspaper with a shampoo advertisement.

5. UNITY OF CONFLICT AND SOCIAL SIGNIFICANCE

Plekhanov once said, "Any nation's art is determined by its psychology. Art works and literature in a certain period represent the social psychology." (Lu, 2004, p.43) Films and TV programs are in a social environment, and are also spiritual and cultural products depending on and rendering the human spirits - ideology, economics, culture and society. As culture medium they shoulder the responsibilities to disseminate spiritual quality and enhance cultural taste. In British sitcoms a lot of conflicts and social significance are always united, which provoke laughter while not forgetting to ridicule and reflect the reality. A prominent feature is that many British sitcoms are political comedies, which exaggerate the political reality on one side, and represent Moliere's irony of "Who do you laugh, laugh at yourselves" on the other side.

Yes, Prime Minister sets the tone in the first episode, when Humphrey started chatting with Bernard talking about the coalition government, alluding to the British Prime Minister David Cameron (the first coalition government in 70 years). The virtual country Kumranistan

should be Turkmenistan, alluding to the trans-Caspian pipeline agreement signed by Turkmenistan and the European Union, which determine to deliver natural gas directly to Europe from Turkmenistan through the Caspian Sea and Azerbaijan in stead of through Russia as before. By Bernard's opposition to Humphrey, it ridicules that the British government only cares about the temporary achievement, regardless of the long-term development of the country. A meaningful sentence "yes, Prime Minister" completes the ridicule on the British political life by the dialogue conflict.

British sitcom is also full of human concern for subcultures, which is worth learning by the domestic sitcoms, such as the complex role of the big boss's son Douglas in *The IT Crowd* which triggers the cares for women security in the workplace and British minority immigrant descendants. Another example is the daily lives of two lovely grandfathers in *Vicious*, in which the screenwriter no longer makes fun of homosexuality or gets entangled in ethics, but begins to explore the in-depth friendship, emotion and aging issue under the superficial ridicules.

CONCLUSION

(a) "Learn" instead of "imitate"

In recent years, with the development of the Internet, we can watch more and more outstanding overseas dramas, which provides more reference cases for our domestic sitcom creation. However, in recent years there has been a significant "imitation" atmosphere in China's sitcom creation. Chinese sitcoms have a lot plots which imitate or adapt the classic Anglo-American dramas. Although they are not good for nothing as some netizens blasted, their independent innovation are still far from enough.

British sitcoms, in contrast, focus on the quality, excellent performance and literariness and profundity of scripts, thus get a good reputation. In addition to learning the mature and efficient production mode of foreign TV plays, the domestic film and TV creation should pay more attention to observe the social life and psychology of the audience, put innovation in the first place, improve narrative art, and show the core values.

(b) "Serious" instead of "funny"

From its birth TV play becomes a cultural media carrying multiple functions. In addition to focusing on business values, domestic sitcoms should also play multiple functions by learning from British TV series. British sitcoms, no matter *The IT Crowd* which shows beautiful friendship, *Miranda* which advocates the faith of "we never give up", or *Skins* which tells bizarre horror stories, they explore serious topics under the surface of madness and giggles.

In recent years, some domestic sitcom creation, especially that of some network made dramas, has a phenomenon of taking vulgar humor or pornography as the selling points, which is not conducive to the long-term development of China's sitcoms. In contrast, the outstanding works in early years such as *The Story of Editorial Department* and *I love My Family* are the works which entertain audiences and have a social significance. Successful comedies are not only one model, but are undoubtedly a combination of funny package and serious kernel, because only in this way they are able to be amusing as well as thought-provoking.

(c) Coexistence of "modernness" and "tradition"

The British sitcoms inherit the theatrical tradition, and show the charm of British traditional cultures. In *Yes, Prime Minister,* Humphrey's debates are like the lines of Shakespeare's dramas, conveying a deep literary taste. Humphrey's each debate has been crafted by the playwrights to grind out meaningful and varied vocabulary. Today, with the rapid development of new media in China, there are more convenient channels and platforms to broadcast works. We hope the creation of domestic TV plays can explore a road of coexistence of modernness and tradition on the basis of learning, and bring more excellent works to the audiences.

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