

Cross-cultural Narrative in Romantic Comedy by Chinese-American Director

– Take the Case of 'The Half of It'

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Abstract: Chinese-American groups have always existed as "marginalized" in the Western cultural context, and this article uses the romantic comedy "*The half of it*" as the research object to explore its cross-cultural narrative strategy. With the dual cultural identity of director Alice Wu as the entry point, the film narrative space is divided into three parts of family life, campus life and table tennis platform as a cross-cultural intersection of Chinese and Western culture, focusing on the film's character image design and the cultural phenomena behind the film, from Audio-visual design, plot structure and value connotation of three aspects to assist intercultural narrative of the film, explore the background of the cultural differences between China and West. The focus on the marginal groups highlights humanistic care, directs implicit, humorous narrative technique, so that the film shows more inclusive and provides ideas for the cross-cultural narrative of Chinese-American films.

Keywords: Chinese-American films, romantic comedy, cross-cultural narrative, cultural identity

1. Introduction

Intercultural communication explores the relationship between culture and communication, and the possibility and mechanism of understanding, cooperation and coexistence among different cultures, which permeates all activities of human society, maintains the dynamic balance of social structures and social systems, and promotes the integration, coordination and development of global society[1]. In the context of globalization, cross-cultural communication has become more and more of an emphasis, and film as an important medium for cross-cultural communication, with its outstanding audio-visual effect to influence the audience.

Alice Wu's "*The Half Of It*" better reflects the differences in Chinese and Western cultural differences, and the work focuses on marginal groups while paying attention to multiple social issues such as race, immigration, homogeneity, class, teen growth and other development[2]. The director uses the narrative construction of romantic comedy, weaken contradictions and conflicts with mediocre and humorous narrative style, reconciles the relationship between different ideologies, brings more possibilities for cross-cultural narratives of Chinese-American films. At the same time, the director's role shaping precision and delicate, focusing on the character's emotional and

psychological changes, let the character live stereotype and resonate with the audience, while breaking the stereotype, effectively enhance the identity of the marginal group.

This article will analyze the film's cross-cultural topic selection, director's cultural identity, narrative space and character construction and explore the Cross-cultural narrative strategy of "*The Half Of It*".

2. Overview of cross-cultural communication

2.1. What is cross-cultural communication

Cross cultural communication refers to the process of various cultural information flowing, sharing, and interacting in time and space. It not only relates to the information dissemination and interpersonal communication between members of different cultures, but also involves the diffusion, infiltration, and migration of many cultural elements in human society. Its essence is a cultural exchange activity that communicates and establishes coexistence relationships between people in different cultures. [1]

2.2. Cross cultural Communication Background and Case Selection

As human society enters the era of globalization, the position and role of culture in international competition are becoming increasingly prominent. The cultural field has become a battlefield for various political and ideological forces to confront each other. Western developed countries, led by the United States, rely on their strong economic strength and advanced media information technology to penetrate through various cultural, promoting cultural hegemony and cultural expansion[3]. For example, since the 1980s, Hollywood movies have been spreading culture to the outside world, building themselves while also constructing the imagined East, promoting mainstream Western values, and shaping various sense of community belonging for the audience of the film[4]. The theme of "*The Half Of It*" is niche, but it is a successful example of cross-cultural back propagation. Its cross-cultural narrative strategy is worth analyzing.

3. Alice Wu and the Chinese American Film "*The Half Of It*"

3.1. Cross cultural Topic Selection of the Film

The film "*The Half Of It*", released on May 1, 2020, takes "romantic comedy" as its type framework and actually focuses on the emotional and survival status of the marginalized group of Chinese Americans and homosexuals, connecting with reality and possessing humanistic care.

At the beginning of the 21st century, whether it was comedy, youth films, or Chinese American films, there was a trend to turn their attention to marginalized groups[5]. Although there were ideological struggles among different political and power groups behind films, this was still a rare opportunity for marginalized groups to break the stereotype and enhance their discourse power. The director uses the classical narrative framework of mainstream genre films, humorous narrative techniques, Western film language, and lengthy English dialogues of mainstream genre films to make it easier for the audience to understand and accept the film's setting, thus paying attention to the cultural connotations behind the film.

"*The Half Of It*" is a successful example of cross-cultural backpropagation, which tells the emotional entanglements of three high school students, Ellie Chu, Paul, and Aster, who live in small towns in North America, due to ghostwriting love letters[6]. The film takes "growth" and "love" as its themes, focusing on the character's self exploration and growth in universal emotions.

3.2. Director's cultural identity

In cross-cultural communication, the identity and attitude of the disseminator will have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the communication. However, there are differences in social and cultural backgrounds between the construction of the meaning of the transmitter and the interpretation of the meaning of the receiver, so it is crucial for directors to accurately position themselves.

Alice Wu is a Chinese lesbian director with a complex cultural identity, which has helped her determine the main focus of her works. Her profound experience of Chinese and Western cultures allows her to clearly define her identity and gain a deeper understanding of both Chinese and Western audiences. When she is the creator of the story, she can to some extent reduce her own cognitive bias and the cognitive bias that arise after her work is conveyed to the audience. Viewers can also understand the topic selection, character image design, plot structure and other aspects of the film from multiple perspectives, thereby generating cultural identity.

4. The Narrative Space and Character Construction of "*The Half Of It*"

4.1. The narrative space of the film and the cultural identity of the protagonist

The director's construction of character images has to some extent broken the stereotypes of marginalized groups such as women, Chinese Americans, and homosexuals from the outside world. At the same time, the director has also subverted the portrayal of inherent characters and family relationships in youth films, presenting an overall process of character growth and awakening.

The innovation of "*The Half Of It*" lies in the change of character identity setting. The protagonist of the film is no longer a white group, and the director focuses on immigrants and same-sex groups, paying attention to their daily lives and psychological changes. The identity of the protagonist Ellie Chu's 'cultural heterogeneity' makes her a carrier of cross-cultural narrative in the film, and her reflection and choice of self-identity in different situations establish the foundation of cross-cultural communication in the film. Therefore, she is the focus of the author's discourse.

Ellie Chu is an atypical protagonist who, like the director, has a complex cultural identity. As a Chinese American living in a small town in North America, she gradually completed the "self-identity" of homosexuality during her growth process. From the initial character design, Ellie has a nerd like appearance and works alone, making her a typical image of a Chinese American student. The Chinese community is marginalized in Western society, and in order to enter the middle class, they must excel and be versatile during their student years. Nevertheless, they have always been transparent in the Western world, which is also the protagonist's situation at the beginning of the film. As the plot progresses, the relationships between the characters begin to change. The protagonist's clothing color scheme transitions from cool to warm colors, and their behavior changes from passive to active. This is accompanied by the protagonist's exploration and acceptance of themselves, as well as the cultural exchange behind the characters.

With the advancement of globalization and digitalization, cultural research on narrative in the post industrial era is gradually shifting from a temporal dimension to a spatial dimension[7]. The director divided Ellie's living space into three parts, namely the surreal and dynamic campus life, the real and static family life, and the table tennis table, which serves as the intersection of Chinese and Western cultures[8].

4.2. Static Family and Parental Role Identity

The static and realistic family life is the root of Ellie's initial image, and it is also a stable and safe spiritual world. Among many works that focus on Chinese Americans, Chinatown and modern European cities constitute the main narrative space of the story, while the protagonist's situation in

"*The Half Of It*" is clearly more marginalized. The protagonist's family, as one of the few Chinese Americans, lives in a small North American town with an average population of only 20000, which is a narrow world surrounded by white people and religion. When the narrative revolves around the family, images such as trains, tracks, pavilions, and living rooms symbolize cycle, loneliness, stillness, and eternity, forming Ellie's limited and enclosed living space, which is also the initial state of life for Ellie and her father.

Ellie's father was quiet and reserved. He did not appear as a hindrance in previous youth films, nor was he portrayed as a "strict father" in East Asian families. Instead, he existed as an observer, playing a role in accompanying and inspiring Ellie. At the same time, he is also a microcosm of the first generation of Chinese immigrants. He has a doctoral degree in China, but is trapped at home due to language restrictions. He appears at the window and in the living room, wearing the same checkered home uniform every day to watch different classic movies. This is a stagnant state, and the audience can clearly perceive that if Ellie does not make changes, she will eventually become a replica of her father.

The living room is one of the recurring scenes in movies that reflect the internal life of Chinese American families. As a public living space of a family, it appears in a warm but slightly rigid image in the film. The lighting sets the main color tone of the scene as warm orange, and the only cool light source comes from the TV playing foreign language movies. This is the only entertainment device in Ellie's home, which to some extent symbolizes the connection between the family and the outside world. The decoration of the living room presents a blend of Chinese and Western elements, which is in line with the symbolic significance and character identity of the entire family in the film.

The director made a certain breakthrough in shaping the father daughter relationship in Eastern families. Unlike the traditional Chinese family's hierarchy, the protagonist's family's way of getting along is more westernized, reflecting the influence of American thought on the lives of Chinese Americans. The director often uses horizontal composition when depicting the relationships between characters. The scene of the father and daughter talking in the living room can be evenly divided from the center line, which brings a sense of balance to the audience psychologically and reflects the equality of character relationships.

Mothers are often the most influential women in a person's life, and this image is absent in "*The Half Of It*". From the perspective of identity, the absence of mothers to some extent represents the uncertainty of gender identity[9]. This can echo Ellie's same-sex orientation.

The image of Ellie's mother is interspersed in the form of dialogue and photos in the five paragraphs before and after the changes in the relationship between the characters in the film, gradually progressing layer by layer, encouraging Ellie to gradually complete ego identity. The photo of her mother in the film has a positive suggestive effect, while in the conversation section, Ellie's description of her mother as "young and interesting" implies that this is an eternal and ideal state, thus playing an implicit guiding role in Ellie's choices and growth in the subsequent plot.

4.3. Dynamic Campus and Non typical Triangle Relationship of Characters

Campus life is another space that the director focuses on narrating, which is colorful in external presentation and disconnected from Ellie's boring and lonely daily life, truly reflecting the marginalized state of the Chinese American community in American campuses. In the world of diverse information, Ellie's identity begins to integrate more possibilities[10].

The director's construction of the relationship between Chu Ellie, Paul, and Aster is mainly based on atypical triangle relation, which from an emotion attributes, endows female characters with more sexual flow. The director often uses horizontal composition when the protagonist and the two are alone, in order to continue the sense of equality and balance presented from family life. The destructive nature of triangular relationship in the film is weakened, transforming into individuals

clarifying their own growth process in group communication. This embarrassed character relationship is dramatic and inherently comedic, echoing the director's humorous narrative techniques.

Aster is similar to Ellie in terms of identity setting. She is a Latin American immigrant and has a bisexual tendency, so she can show an attitude of identification and acceptance towards Ellie from the root. In the character relationship, the director has set up a mirror image relationship for the two, which is respectively set in the corridor, school bathroom, and hot spring to imply the character relationship.

Ellie Chu and Aster have a high degree of spiritual and ideological compatibility. Under the core event of "writing love letters", they communicate indirectly through letters, paintings, and other means. This process also includes elements such as forged information, identity dislocation and other elements. The protagonist completes identity recognition at the moment of truth disclosure, which is located in the climax of the third act of the film.

Ellie's confession to Aster in the small town church was a personal breakthrough, and a significant impact on the closed and traditional religious town, but the conflict did not manifest in a fierce state. Love, as a universal emotion and an important topic in movies, demonstrates more inclusiveness, giving characters the opportunity to talk and listen to each other. The director gradually weakens and resolves conflicts in a moderate and humorous way, keeping power within the characters.

Paul is a white American youth in terms of cultural identity, and his behavior reflects the acceptance of marginalized groups in mainstream discourse and the possibility of cultural opposition. Paul never showed any estrangement from Ellie's Chinese identity, and he was the opportunity that prompted Ellie to integrate into campus life. Paul's questioning of religious beliefs and his understanding and tolerance of homosexuality are accompanied by a process of self reflection, revealing the possibility of cultural opposition in the context of cultural hegemony.

The relationship between characters continues to progress in repeated scenes such as table tennis tables, highways, living rooms, and stations, and the changes in their relationship reflect the process of two-way communication in cross-cultural communication. Specifically, the table tennis table is one of the intersection points between Chinese and Western cultures in the film.

The ping-pong diplomacy of 1971 in history has significant importance in international relations and cross-cultural exchanges. It broke the hostile state between China and the United States, promoted mutual understanding and friendship between the people in the two nations. The table tennis table is also the starting point for Ellie and Paul to try to understand each other in "Sincere Half Explanation". This scene appears four times in the film, focusing on the training and conversation stage when Ellie helps Paul pursue Este, corresponding to their relationship from interest cooperation to building friendship. The topics discussed by Paul and Ellie involve small towns, individuals, families, and love, covering several important issues in life. Both parties come into contact and understand each other's cultures, lifestyles, and values, gradually moving from collision of ideas to eliminating misunderstandings and biases.

5. Conclusion

The topic of the film focuses on the marginalized group of same-sex and Chinese Americans, with humanistic care and in line with the purpose of cross-cultural communication in the context of globalization. The director's narrative is cautious and restrained, and the story takes place in a small North American town far from politics. The Western Other is the most common and ordinary white group. The director did not set absolute confrontational forces in the exploration of the growth of the Chinese American and LGBTQ+ community, and conflicts no longer originate from within the family or traditional beliefs, but from external religions and the inner thoughts of the characters. The director uses a moderate and humorous approach to reconcile conflicts and contradictions, making the narrative softer and more comedic.

The way marginalized groups fight for rights in the film is not radical, and the only demand is that individuals no longer hide or speak their minds. Against the backdrop of cultural hegemony, there is a mild cultural backlash among Asians. In the universal emotion of love, there is more inclusiveness among characters, and they no longer follow the inherent order but choose to think independently. This is a breakthrough for Chinese American directors when shooting queer groups, and the director's unique cross-cultural narrative approach can provide reference for cross-cultural narrative in Chinese American films and find a balance point for presenting the real queer group in the film.

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