

The Civilization behind Homes, Heroes and Powers: The Review with An ICC Perspective on Houyi 2023

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Abstract. In 2021, the scene play *Houyi 2023* appeared on the stage of the 4th SFLEP Cup National College Students Intercultural Competence Contest in China. It demonstrated the conflicts between the US and China in artworks triggered by the different concepts of homes, heroism and powers in the two civilizations. The conflicts in the scene play were the epitome of the more profound ones in the current international arena. To mitigate them, the intercultural communication (ICC) theories were put into the broader landscape of myths, history and civilizations. The paper tries to analyze what the concepts of homes and heroism in the artworks of both civilizations signify and what conflicts can be caused even with the communication attempt and cross-cultural awareness. It is ultimately found out that the difference does not necessitate conflicts, and the world is wide enough for both individualism and collectivism.

Keywords: individualism; collectivism; heroes; heroines; ICC; civilization.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, intercultural communication (ICC) seems to be ubiquitous as the countries have never been more interdependent than before. Intercultural activities, such as, cross-border business, overseas studying, political exchanges, diplomacy activities and so on are becoming common among the general public. Economic globalization is ever-deepening while political utilization is gaining momentum (Gohain, 2010). Today, the conflicts among those with various cultural backgrounds are developing into friction or even divergence in identity, ideology and civilization. In addition, with the contribution of the media and internet, more severe misinterpretation, stereotypes or even stigma is being incubated. The inadequate ability of understanding other cultures and the unwillingness to understand inherently reinforce each other. This phenomenon calls for the publicity of ICC theories and a deeper insight into them with a renewed and broader landscape.

For instance, the theories of ICC unraveled the difference between individualism and collectivism, the context of cultures, the power distance, the fixed stereotype (Hofstede, 2003) and the dynamism of cultures (Hofstede & Hoope, 2004). Further discussions were made on the blurring borders of nations with similar identities (Minkov & Hofstede, 2014). Besides the micro ICC theories, there are macro studies concerning the communications among civilizations from a political perspective. For example, some deduced that there was a clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1996) and announced the end of history (Fukuyama, 1992), while others insisted that the coexistence of civilizations was accessible (Tang, 1994).

It is found that there is a gap between the macro-political social theories on the clash of civilizations (Huntington, 1996) and the micro practical ICC theories formed with real-case investigations and surveys in the business setting (Hofstede, 2003). The former points to a large picture, while the latter consists of a relatively shallow interpretation of history and civilization. Traditionally, ICC theories are predominantly used in corporate governance and internal control in the business setting. However, intercultural frictions also occur in the newspaper and entertainment industry. Thus, it will be effective to analyze such cross-cultural tensions from the ICC theories, so that the ICC theory can be applied to a more macro landscape.

Therefore, the present study aims to investigate the under-researched phenomenon of the application of ICC theories in cross-cultural interactions, with the consideration of the deep culture. Analyzing the plot in the scene play *Houyi 2023* with sufficient complementary real-case examples,

the reasons and formation of the phenomena will be put into a broad picture of history and literature civilization. To some extent, this paper can provide an insight into the current international artworks based on western and Chinese cultures from an ICC perspective.

2. Intercultural Communication

2.1 Collectivism/individualism

This concept refers to the phenomenon that some cultures focus more on their membership in a community while others put more concentration on themselves (Hofstede, 2003). In a collective culture, decisions should gain the agreement of the upper class or a larger group rather than oneself; while in the individualist culture, one with the delegated power can make a decision directly rather than consult the opinions of others. Those in a collective culture tend to attribute the success to the whole group, while those in an individualist culture tend to emphasize the self-contribution to the success and show confidence in one's own capability (Hofstede, 1993). To the individualist culture, "I" weighs more than "we". Collectivism and individualism is the most drastically contrasting pair of value in the Culture Dimensions.

The theory of collectivism and individualism was originally used in analyzing the design of the Olympic poster of various countries. In this case, it was found that the US poster in the 1996 Atlanta Olympic Games and the South Korean poster in the 1988 Seoul Olympic Games demonstrated the obvious difference between individualism and collectivism. And it was manifested as the difference in the size and location of the human image on the poster (Liu, 2021). Besides, this theory was also used in the designing of the strategy of helping Chinese enterprises "go out" under the national policy of the "Belt and Road Initiative". It concluded that the European enterprises preferred individualism as well as a relatively loose structure in an organization, thus conflicts may arise from the salary if Chinese business is spread to Europe. (Gao & Ma, 2015).

2.2 High Context/ Low Context

The cultural context usually refers to its connotation (Hofstede, 2003). In a high context culture, few words can express quite rich connotations and the information density is relatively high, which makes simple expressions hard for newcomers to understand because of their relative lack of imagination and background knowledge (Hofstede & Hoppe, 2004). In this cultural context, vacancy is needed in expressions and communications and the usage of languages is relatively formal with complex words and phrases. Typical high context cultures include China and Japan. In a low context culture, words tend to directly refer to their meaning and clear and direct expressions are used to convey equivalent information, which makes newcomers feel relatively easy to integrate into a new group (Peacock, 1971). In this cultural context, simple and oral words with easy-to-understand meanings are more frequently used, and due to the relatively less information carried by each phrase, more words and phrases are needed to express the same meaning to a phrase in a high context culture, thus usually little vacancy is left in the communication. Typical low context cultures include America and Australia.

A phenomenal internet influencer Li Ziqi created an unprecedented cultural exchange between China and the world with the wise leverage of this high/low context culture theory (Li, 2020). The video was silent, which is a typical feature of high-context culture. But direct and detailed procedures of traditional Chinese art craft and agriculture were demonstrated explicitly, which suited the demand of the low context culture. Thus, in the widely loved videos, two contrasting context cultures unbelievably coexisted harmoniously. Besides, the English translation of traditional Chinese classics witnesses the necessity of taking the high/low context culture theory into consideration. For instance, in the study against the English translation of the Confucian classic *the Roots of Wisdom*, literary complementation, meaning complementation and meaning explanation are called for (Han, 2016).

2.3 Power Distance

Power distance mainly refers to the abstract distance between the controlling party and the following party in a community and the extent to which one accepts that power (Hofstede, 1981). In a typical low power distance culture, the president may take the same underground as a normal citizen to go to work; while in a high-power distance culture, a normal citizen may never see the president with his own eyes in his lifetime. In a high-power distance culture, individuals are more disciplined under the order of the controlling party and tend not to ask but to execute compared to those from a low power distance culture.

In the corporate management, it was found that the strength of transformational leadership effects on procedural justice was moderated by individual-level power distance orientation (Kirkman et al, 2009). Besides, in terms of marketing, Zhang et al (2010) indicated that those in a high-power distance culture where self-control is more common are less likely to participate in impulsive buying.

2.4 Stereotype

Stereotype is a fixed view of a certain group of individuals based on personal experience or external influence (Hofsted, 2003). Although stereotypes are formed based on experiences, they bring a lot more hazards than good (Robertson et al, 2018). Typical stereotypes are similar to discrimination and can seriously hurt individuals due to the unfavorable social environment formed by the stereotypes.

There are stereotypes against Muslims (Sides & Gross, 2013), females (Robertson, 2018) and so on. The stereotypes against Muslims mainly related Islam to terrorism, which harmed social fairness and credibility. The stereotype against females in a higher education system strongly inflicted the performance of those highly-motivated and skilled individuals. The stereotype is a poison to the harmony and the future development of a society.

2.5 Dynamism

The culture is dynamic rather than static (Hofstede, 2006), which means that whenever culture is discussed, it should be put into the ever-changing social condition. The culture is constantly evolving especially in an interdependent world, thus various cultures integrate with and enrich each other (Minkov & Hofstede, 2014), which makes former common senses easier to become a stereotype.

In the 1960s in the US, a counter-cultural protest movement broke out in the US with youngsters at its core, calling for sex emancipation and civil rights, exerting a profound influence on the US society (Zhao, 2000). In contemporary India, the millennium old of caste system was being shaken by the political rise of backward classes and Dalits (Upadhyay, 2013).

In summary, previous works on cross-cultural communications found the wide potential usage of the ICC theories in artworks (Liu, 2021), corporate governance (Kirkman et al, 2009), politics (Zhao, 2000) and so on. However, traditionally, ICC theories were often used to analyze already formed phenomena, and there seemed to be few decisions made with these theories concerned beforehand. Besides, these studies mainly used the current ICC theories directly to analyze events that happened, without exploring the deeper reasons for the theories themselves. The present study will demonstrate the scene play *Houyi 2023* which integrated with and explained the ICC theories and further explore the relevant history, literature and civilization background.

3. Text analysis

3.1 Scene play Houyi2023

This paper considers the scene play *Houyi 2023* as the research object. The story of the scene play happened in 2023, showing the cross-cultural communication between two parties, the Chinese top movie company Yihua and its US counterpart Flixnet. As the English movies based on traditional Chinese stories grow increasingly popular these years, Flixnet was determined to seize the

opportunity to make a movie of this type based on Chinese myths. In order to ensure that it was authentic, Mr. Cooper, the CEO of Flixnet decided to co-produce this movie with Mr. Lee in Yihua company in China. Having discussed this cooperation online, both the Chinese and US sides prepared their own version of the play script and both of them wanted to persuade the other side to use their own. Miss. Xu, the senior cultural consultant of Yihua company, mitigated the conflicts and explained the causality and reasons behind the two play scripts through employing the ICC theories, finally making it understandable and reasonable to use the Chinese version as the ultimate choice. Thus, in this case, the ICC theories provide a deeper insight into a broader landscape of civilization and history through analyzing the verbal and non-verbal communication of the three characters.

3.2 Difference in Chinese and US concepts of home: “staying with the home” or “farewell to the home”

In the scene play, the different concepts of home influenced the intercultural communication. When the US CEO proposed his script, the Chinese CEO opposed the plot, of “escaping to the moon”:

Cooper: ...at the end of the world, a young man, with the divine power of “Qi” from dragon, will break the restriction of his power and lead his people to travel to the moon, thus save the nation.

Lee: I’m afraid there’s still a long way to go.

Cooper: Why? This play script was agreed by our Chinese culture consultant.

The problem lies in the neglect of the unique feeling of the Chinese toward their lands. For one thing, the long agricultural history gradually equalizes the term “home” and “land” to the Chinese, forming the deepest attachment toward land. As the only ancient civilization extant, China reserves 5 millenniums of uninterrupted civilization. Although historically, the southern Americans and farmers in France and Britain also developed a strong relationship with their lands, the self-sufficient agricultural tradition of China is long-lasting. It is not an exaggeration to say that the Chinese culture is based upon agriculture. To maintain the stability of an agricultural society, Confucianism tries to bond the whole society with families and unite families with the tie of blood, thus the order of the society can be established by how strong the kinship is and how close the family branches are. Thus, the Chinese phrase “国家”, which can be translated as “country”, is actually combined by two characters with distinctive meanings, “country” and “family”. The common point is that the Chinese nearly equalize the concept of “country” to “land”.

For another, the Chinese developed the ability to coexist with, leverage, or even govern nature in the evolution of millenniums of agriculture history. It is actually related to their belief in the capability of human beings to be a prophet. It can be traced back to 《礼记》 (*the Book of Rites*) a classical Confucian work and 《易经》 (*the Book of Changes*), one of the three books of wonder in ancient China. Since Chinese characters are polysemic, the idiom “天圆地方” can be separately interpreted as “sky, round, land, square” (the sky is round and the land is square). However, the Book of Changes interprets “天圆” as “天时”, “the time of the sky”, referring to the rule of time, which is consistent with the invention of the Chinese 24 solar terms (Song, 2017); it interprets “地方” as “geographic orientation”, referring to a belief that human beings can prophet the future according to the worldly actions and learn to leverage the nature by accumulating experience on the earth. This relatively unique ability not only constantly strengthens their love toward their land, which is the stable provider of food and lives, but also boosts their confidence and determination to face up to the great nature.

In the abstract mentioned above, the script written by the US movie company includes this plot: the hero led the human beings to escape to the moon from the planet and saved all mankind. This plot is quite typical in western science fiction films. To the US, it can not only demonstrate the destructive havoc but also underline the vitality of human beings. However, this plot is not favored by the Chinese.

This is a typical “farewell to the home”. The Anglo-Saxon culture, or the basis of British and US cultures, strongly emphasized the farewell to the home. This farewell tradition can be traced to a story in Genesis, *Noah’s Ark*. Attacked by the prehistoric great flood, creatures on the planet embarked on

a gigantic arc to escape from the flood and left their home. These left livings will be the remaining kindling of the new civilization, shouldering the responsibility and honor of building a whole new world. In western culture, homes tend not to be fixed because human beings harbor the vitality and vigor to build new homes wherever they go. The farewell was explained as “mental patricide” (Ohayon, 1983), demonstrating a desire to create a whole new world with one’s own ability and talent.

4. Findings

The discussions above on agricultural and maritime civilizations are quite helpful to understand the core conflicts in the scene play *Houyi 2023*. Next, the scene play will be analyzed with various ICC theories in a broader background.

4.1 Misinterpreted core values in Disney Mulan

In the scene play *Houyi 2023*, the failure of the real-man Disney movie *Mulan* was deeply discussed. Since China is rising at an unprecedented speed, it is natural for the world to get curious and alert to it at the same time. On one hand, China is a hugely attractive market; on the other hand, China is an outsider to traditional western ideology. The first version of Disney *Mulan* released in 1998 created an animation figure, which was welcomed across the world. To simulate and expand the success, the real-man movie *Mulan* in 2021 was made.

Mulan is a fictional figure in ancient traditional Chinese stories (Guo, 2016), but she has many archetypes in history. She was a girl in Wei and Jin dynasty 1500 years ago who disguised as a boy to replace her sick father to go to the battlefield and successfully defended her country. Her courage, self-respect, resilience and deep love toward her family and country are deeply rooted in the memory of Chinese readers. *Mulan* is a time-honored Chinese symbol representing brave and excellent women who perform better than men in difficulties, and this figure is loved by people of all ages in China.

In the scene play, the different attitudes toward the real-man movie *Mulan* were shown:

Conflict 1:

Lee: So, you said your movie company wants to cooperate with us to make a new movie based on a traditional Chinese story? Just like *Mulan* produced by Disney last year?

Cooper: Yes...audience in world gets more and more interested in traditional Chinese culture...

Lee: Actually, *Mulan* produced by Disney last year infuriated many audiences in China.

As explained by the cultural consultant, there are two major mistakes in the real-man movie *Mulan*. First, *Mulan* was presented as a demigod rather than a mortal, which is contrary to the long-lasting collectivism culture in China. Collectivism believes that virtues weigh much more than power in heroism. It is widely known that it is exactly the struggles met by an ordinary human being that makes the girl *Mulan*. Besides, when *Mulan* harbors the superpower, “*Qi*”, the formidable situation met by the females in a patriarchal society is erased. Second, there are stereotypes against Chinese females. *Mulan*, a female from the minority ethnic group, Xianbei, was mistakenly replaced by a “typical Asian woman” of the Han ethnic group a stereotype. A handsome powerful female soldier with olive skin and a Roman nose (Guo, 2016) was replaced by a fragile, delicate and snow-white beauty.

4.2 Core Values Behind the Heroism in Two Civilizations

There are conflicts about the distinctive concepts of heroism in the scene play:

Conflict 2:

Cooper: ...here’s the outline for our playscript...“the Dragon Warrior”...at the end of the world, a young man, with the divine power of “*Qi*” from dragon, will break the restriction of his power and lead his people to the moon and save the nation.

Lee: I’m afraid there’s still a long way to go...we have another version of the play script...*Hou Yi Shooting the Sun*... ten suns were scorching the earth, Hou Yi shot down 9 of them to protect his home, and he was a mortal...

Cooper: ... Why don't we just empower him with divine power? a mortal shot a sun? Is that really a myth? How can a mortal kill Apollo? That's not logical you know—

The core divergence lies in the collectivism and individualism behind heroism. Collectivism prefers “virtue” while individualism prefers “power”, which can be seen in the source of heroism: the gods in myths. In Greco-Roman mythology, Gods are born divine and paramount (Williams, 2009), mortals are inferior animals to them and gods are admired for their cruelty. While in traditional Chinese myths, gods are mortals who once contributed to mankind (Wu & Du, 2011). Mortals have the rights to punish and deny their gods once gods made moral mistakes.

4.3 Combating spirit represented by the image of Houyi

In the scene play, the attitude of the hero toward natural disasters and gods was hard to understand for the US CEO:

Conflict 3:

Lee: ...second, we should not escape but to fight...third, a Chinese hero should not lead the people to escape from the disaster and desert their homeland. Instead, he will lead people to fight against it and protect their home.

Cooper: But, I mean that's a havoc! A natural disaster... Although it is a story based on myths, but... a mortal to revolt natural disasters?... forgive me, I just don't see that make sense...

The conflict arose from the “combating spirit” toward the great nature, a unique feature of traditional Chinese heroes. To explain this, the cultural consultant took a comparative example, the “Noah's Arc” in Genesis and the “King Yu Taming the Flood” in the traditional Chinese myths. Facing up to the same prehistoric great flood, the former choice is to escape from the disaster to preserve the kindling of human civilization, while the latter choice is to tame and govern the disaster together with tribesmen. To the Chinese, collectivism and agricultural culture inherently reinforce each other. The reciprocal relationship between men and nature constantly boosts the confidence and the combating spirit of the Chinese people in coping with natural disasters.

4.4 The Concepts of Power behind Tea Pouring

There are conflicts driven by the neglect of the power distance and the cultural context:

Conflict 4

Cooper: Shall we meet tomorrow at Tang Shiyeyan? (a high end restaurant in China.)

Lee (hesitates, looks at Xu): I'm afraid that such a restaurant is too noisy for us. Hold on a second please.....

Lee: Mr. Cooper, do you like drinking Chinese tea? What if we meet at a tea house? Our senior consultant wants to bring her family tea sets for us.

Cooper: (seems confused) All right!

The response of Lee is typical in a high context culture like China where refusals are expressed quite implicitly. But a low context culture like the US prefers to show attitudes directly and immediately. Thus, it can make an American confused or even feel offended if a Chinese keeps beating around the bush. In addition, it can be deduced that the US CEO insisted on the stereotype that the Chinese culture is a relationship-driven one, which is related to the history of China. There were many extravagant banquets in the Chinese business environment in the previous times, which not only caused the waste of resources but also the corruption. However, this phenomenon has been greatly changed in the past decades. Furthermore, personal identities should not be covered by the general culture, which means that the general cultural concept should not be posed on a certain individual since from a dynamism perspective, different regions cultivate their own cultures and these various cultures evolve and integrate simultaneously.

When Mr. Cooper keeps doubting the logic of Chinese myths, Mr. Lee suddenly puts his teacup heavily on the table. Then, Miss Xu stood up to pour a cup of tea for Mr. Lee, which made Mr. Cooper rather surprised.

Besides, the behavior of Miss Xu seems common in a culture with high power distance like China, but pouring tea for your superior to show respect is not familiar to Mr. Cooper. However, under the silent guidance of Miss Xu, Mr. Cooper also stood up to pour a cup of tea for Mr. Lee to apologize, which greatly mitigated the conflict.

5. Conclusion

This study put the traditional ICC theories into a broader landscape of civilization, history and literature to further analyze and complement it through analyzing the scene play *Houyi 2023*. Three major factors, that is, concepts of homes, heroes and powers constitute the comprehensive discussion of the scene play. The study found out that, the stereotype against traditional Chinese female image and the Chinese relationship-driven culture, the misinterpreted traditional Chinese stories and the distinctive concepts of heroes and heroines led to conflicts in cross-cultural communication. In addition, ICC theories including the collectivism & individualism theory, the power distance theory, cultural dynamism and the stereotypes fostered the conflict collapse. Rich literature and historical background were discussed, including the Greco-Roman mythology and the traditional Chinese myths, Genesis and so on. This study is an epitome to enlighten the future creation of international artworks.

There are limitations in the present study. The text sample is limited in number, only the scene play *Houyi 2023* was considered. In the future, more scene plays and other artworks concerning ICC need to be chosen to enrich the corpus in order to conduct quantitative analysis.

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