

Cinematic Features under Context Cultural Pattern: Chinese and American Movies

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Abstract

Movies are a popular form of media communication widely enjoyed by people of different cultures. The cultural identity of directors may leave clear prints in their movies. The present research aims to explore the different cinematic features by using context culture theory. The Chinese movie Eat Drink Man Woman and the American movie A Thousand Acres are chosen as they deal with similar topics. The findings are: the high- and low-context phenomena exist in the techniques of expression, conflict style, communication style, family concept and time concept of the two movies. It supports the major conclusion that the two movies exhibit distinctive features of high- and low-context cultural patterns. They show divergence in the use of covert and overt messages, ingroup and outgroup distinctions and polychronic and monochronic time system. The ultimate goal is to promote Chinese culture and enhance the mutual understanding of people with different cultural background.

Key words: high-context culture; low-context culture; cinematic features

1. Introduction

According to Edward T. Hall and Mildred Hall (1990), context refers to “the information that surrounds an event; it is inextricably bound up with the meaning of the event”. Based on the amount of information that different cultures require, cultures differ on a continuum, with high-context cultures at one end, low-context ones at the other end. Edward T. Hall identifies that high-context communication or message is one in which most of the information is either in the physical context or internalized in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message (Hall, 1976); while in low-context cultures, “the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code” (Hall, 1976). Whether to rely on the surrounding environment or the verbalized messages constitute the major difference of high- and low-context cultures.

Linda Beamer and Iris Varner (2001) highlight the messages in high-context cultures “can be elliptical, indirect, and allusive”, but in low-context cultures, “messages are explicit, direct, and completely encoded in words”. High-context cultures believe the unspoken message can send richer meaning than articulated words. Ambiguous information poses no problem for the communicators even if the decoded information may be different or erroneous, as people still have chances to correct it in the long run. Low-context cultures cannot tolerate ambiguous information. They choose to ignore the information sent by surrounding environment, as they think the information is not explicit enough, therefore, not accurate. Precise information is needed for every single communication event.

Myron W. Lustig & Jolene Koester (2007) categorize three characteristics of high- and low-context cultures, namely, use of covert and overt messages; importance of ingroups and outgroups; and orientation to time. Polychronic time system and monochronic time system are favored by high-context cultures and low-context cultures respectively.

High-context cultures usually explore covert messages. Gestures, use of space, silence can send better information than articulated words. Status differences such as age, sex, education, family background, title and affiliations all supplement the information (Dean Allen Foster, 1992). As there are more shared implied information among ingroup members, differentiated ingroups and outgroups is also a feature of high-context cultures. Time is relatively flexible. People in high-context cultures tend to do several things together at the same time. Generally in low-context cultures, people need detailed background information for every single communication. The messages should be direct and explicit. Distinction of ingroups and outgroups is not preferred. People tend to have flexible relationships among the interactants. Time is organized highly and tightly, which is usually segmented into precise, small units. People observe time and arrangements strictly.

Media plays an important role in people’s lives as it constantly influence and reinforce people’s values. It is a powerful social system, helping to create a person’s sense of reality (Gergen, 1999). It can deliver message to unknown, diversified and large population of audience (Kevin Pearce, 2009). Carrying enormous information and influence, media communication has a profound effect on people at large, be it positive and negative. Karl Deutsch maintains that positive effect of media proves beneficial to the construction of the national image of the culture (Zhu, Weijing, 2015). The negative effect can bring damage to the culture as well.

Movies, as a popular form of media communication, bring subtle, unconscious but immeasurable influence on people. The influence can be political, economic or cultural. Chinese movie *Finding Mr. Right* “has brought a big boost to the tourism in Seattle” (Wang, 2016). Movies can transmit cultural values in informal and relaxing methods. Successful movies can bring positive effect on cultural transmission, which in turn promotes mutual

understanding between different cultures, achieving economic boom thereafter. It is especially significant to establish a positive Chinese cultural image which is often biased and misinterpreted by some western media. However, Chinese movies do not enjoy a high prestige on the world arena. According to the data, 29 Chinese mainland movies submitted to Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film from 1979, only 2 are nominated and none wins the Award (Awards Databases, 2016). Director Ang Lee was nominated most Academy Awards with Chinese cultural background. Lee's movies are not warmly received among the western populace despite his fame, as they are generally believed difficult to understand. Cultural identity of the directors can put unconscious effect on their movies. High-context cultural influence shoulders the responsibility.

A Chinese movie and an American movie with similar settings are chosen here to conduct the comparison, with the intention to explore their distinct cinematic features. High- and low-context cultural characteristics are in full display. *Eat Drink Man Woman* manifests typical features of high-context culture while *A Thousand Acres* reflects the features of low-context culture. The paper discusses the different cinematic features demonstrated by context cultural model, sorting out the ambiguous aspects of high-context featured Chinese movies, which hinder the understanding of western audiences. Hopefully it can provide some insights to the correct interpretation of Chinese culture. The ultimate goal is to promote Chinese culture and enhance mutual understanding of people with different cultural background.

2. The Story Line

Eat Drink Man Woman is directed by Ang Lee in 1994. The story stars in Taiwan. Old Zhu, a widower, is an outstanding chef in a famous hotel in Taipei. He raises his three unmarried daughters alone after the death of his wife. Old Zhu tries to maintain the family harmony through evening dinners, which serve as a family reunion and communication occasion. All three daughters have different characters, who fill every dinner with unexpected announcements, causing various conflicts and problems to the family. The final resolution ends with the marriages of two daughters, remarriage of Old Zhu and the mutual understanding of Old Zhu with his second daughter Jiaqian.

A Thousand Acres is based on Jane Smiley's Pulitzer Prize Winning novel and is directed by Jocelyn Moorhouse in 1997. Ginny, Rose and Caroline are daughters of Larry Cook. Larry owns a prosperous Iowa farm. He decides to retire and split his acres of land among his three daughters. Ginny and Rose happily accept it, but Caroline expresses her disagreement. Larry deprives her inheritance. However, as Larry loses touch with farm work, he begins to lose vigor and vitality with life. In order to regain his patriarchal control, Larry decides to sue Rose and Ginny with Caroline's help. The lawsuit splits the family forever. Rose and Ginny draw their own individual strengths to surmount the adversity. They learn how to survive and strive on their own, trying to shed the suffocating influence of their father.

Table 1 presents some surface similarities for the comparison.

- ♦ Similar period casts similar flavor of era. There is no great gap between people's life style and living standard of the two cultures as revealed in the two movies.
- ♦ Similar fame manifests their popularity and significance to their cultural society.
- ♦ They have similar theme, namely, both about family conflict and reconciliation.
- ♦ The setting is both father bringing up three daughters while mother dies long ago.

Yet the Chinese and American cultures demonstrate great differences despite the surface similarities in the two movies. Here Hall's context cultural model will be employed to analyze the differences.

Table 1 Surface Similarities of the two Movies

Items for comparison	<i>Eat Drink Man Woman</i>	<i>A Thousand Acres</i>
Time for release	1994	1997
Fame	1994 Academy Award Nominee	1992 Pulitzer Prize for Fiction
Theme	family conflict and resolution	
Setting	father raising three daughters	

3. Comparison of Cinematic Features

Content analysis is conducted from the techniques of expression; conflict style; communication style; family concept and time concept.

3.1. Techniques of Expression

Long shot and voice-over are both techniques of expression. Long shots are used for presenting the panorama of the scenes; while voice-overs serve the purpose of providing information that are out of the characters' lines. The statistics of the technique choices are as follows (Table 2):

Table 2 Divergence of the Technique Choices of the two Movies

Items for comparison	<i>Eat Drink Man Woman</i>	<i>A Thousand Acres</i>
Long shot	20 times more	3 times
Voice-over	0	6 times
Silence length*	74/123 min.	22/105 min.
Silent conflict	4 major ones	0
Direct conflict	1 (topic shift)	4 major; 3 minor

*Timed silence includes long shot, turns-taking of conversation, and nonverbal languages.

In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Long shot technique is frequently used. Long shot is a kind of movie's expressional technique to show the entire object or human figure. It intends to bring the associations with its surroundings. Long shot is used for more than 20 times in the movie. It lasts for the first 5 minutes of the movie, without any single explanation. The introduction of every character follows the same pattern. But in *A Thousand Acres*, long shot without voice-over is used only for 3 times. One is that Father closes the door before Caroline to draw her out from the division of the farm. Caroline goes away. Second is that Peter's car crashes in the ditch. Another is Ginny's memory of father entering her house. But all three scenes are explained later in voice-over or Ginny's conversation with Rose.

In long shot technique, information is implied. The audiences need to use their own senses and understanding to infer the director's intention. Comparing with long shot, Voice-over is a frequently used technique in *A thousand Acres*. Ginny's voice-over appears 6 times to clarify nearly all the background information.

Voice-over dominates the first 10 minutes of the movie. It explains detailed background knowledge, leaving no vague information for the audiences. Noticeably, voice-over is not used entirely in *Eat Drink Man Woman*. From the choice of different techniques of expression, *Eat Drink Man Woman* retains information to the scenes. It leaves the audiences the task to discover the messages. But in *A thousand Acres*, the director tries to fill every blank of scene with precise information.

3.2. Conflict Style

The major form of conflict style in *Eat Drink Man Woman* is silent embarrassment. All through 123 minutes' of the movie, 74 minutes is given to silence. Silence expresses disagreement and disapproval. Four major conflicts are all demonstrated in silence: Jiaqian's moving out; the failure of house investment; Jiaqian's knowing of her sister's sacrifice for the family; and the daughters' disapproval toward Old Zhu's connection with Mrs. Liang. The family never discuss embarrassing matters openly. Silence is the way to settle the conflict. Silence in *A Thousand Acres* produces no rich meaning. Only 22 minutes are given to silence in the 105 minutes' long movie. It includes the blank stare of Larry at the window; and Ginny's watching through the storm. People do not explore internal meaning from silence.

Direct confrontation is the common form of conflict in *A Thousand Acres*. Fierce quarrels burst out three times in the movie. And there are four more minor conflicts. The fierce conflicts include the quarrel between father and two daughters; Harold's direct confrontation toward Ginny and Rose on Sunday dinner; and Rose's confrontation with father after the hearing. Four minor conflicts include father's rage when Caroline expresses her doubt about the division of the farm; the discussion about Rose's moving off one breast because of the breast cancer; Larry's drunk driving; and the lawyer's remark "I don't approve your way to treat your Dad." From the direct confrontation, people can understand fully of their conflicts. Direct confrontation appears only once in *Eat Drink Man Woman*. Mrs. Liang loses control when Old Zhu wants to marry her daughter instead of her. The fact is that even though the daughter knows the truth, she keeps silent. Interestingly, Mrs. Liang shifts the topic to express her disappointment and anger. The only direct confrontation is still not aimed at target issue in this movie, which is still indirect in nature.

Different interpretation about silence caters to the different features of the two movies. In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, silence expresses rich meaning. The Chinese audiences can understand it fully. The messages are better transmitted than blunt words. But in *A thousand Acres*, direct confrontation presents openly. This conflict style provides no ambiguous information. Somehow, it is just too aggressive for high-context audience.

3.3. Communication Style

In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, there is a great tolerance for ambiguous information. Love is felt, not spoken out. Holding hands, or kiss are manifestation of love for Chinese. All through the movie, not even one "thank you" is uttered. Sense of love for Jianing's boyfriend; love letters without signatures that Jiazhen receives reveal that Chinese people are more inclined to find out answers of the ambiguity. Ambiguous information do not bother them.

Precise information is preferred in *A Thousand Acres*. Rose always urges Ginny to speak out true feelings toward their father. Even for embarrassing questions, Rose wants a definite answer. Sentence like “I love you”; “I hate you” and “thank you” appears quite often in *A Thousand Acres*.

Nonverbal language has a much richer meaning in *Eat Drink Man Woman* than in *A Thousand Acres*. In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, nonverbal language usually substitutes the verbal language. They are equivalent. For example, at the beginning, Jiaqian frowns twice. Old Zhu asks twice: “What is wrong? Speak out!” When meeting Mrs. Liang, three daughters’ facial expressions express disapproval without words. The scene of Old Zhu’s taking bath and massage appears 3 times to convey his anxiety. Never does the movie provide any voice-over to explain it. Within Chinese context, the silent action has expressed the meaning vividly, more abundant than words.

But in *A Thousand Acres*, nonverbal language only supplements the meaning. When father sees doubt in Caroline’s face, he says nothing. He loses temper only after Caroline speaks out her doubt. When Rose stares at her, Ginny says “You made me nervous” directly to supplement the meaning of the stare.

Chinese communication style resides in “harmony”. Harmony weighs more than accurate information. Ambiguous information and nonverbal languages can maintain each other’s face. The American communication style puts more emphasis on the precise information. They holds that communication can reduce misunderstanding. Face is out of their consideration.

3.4. Family concept

The most remarkable family concept in *Eat Drink Man Woman* is harmony. In attaining harmony, family members should support each other and avoid open conflict. It is natural for parents to live together with children and the children shoulder the responsibility of taking care of aged parents. After the marriage of her two sisters, Jiaqian makes her decision not to accept the promotion in Amsterdam, fulfilling the sisters’ task of taking care of Old Zhu.

Family hierarchy plays an irreversible role. Old Zhu aspires to choose decent jobs for the daughters as he is wiser than his immature daughters. Old Zhu doesn’t allow Jiaqian to be a chef. In his mind, Jiaqian deserves a promising future. It is his responsibility to choose a good career for his daughter regardless of her interest.

Sustaining family harmony is the golden rule. There is no clear distinction between right or wrong. When the two sisters quarrel, Jianing says: “It’s OK. Don’t quarrel” to settle the dispute. People usually use silence to avoid open conflict. It is not important to know who stands for truth. Harmonious atmosphere within the family is preferred.

At the end of the movie, tranquility fills each and every small family. Ultimate goal of harmony is acquired, which is the most desirable family state in Chinese culture.

In *A Thousand Acres*, there is a clear distinction between right or wrong. All people abide by their principles. When Caroline feels that her sisters ignore their father, she discusses with Ginny, though she has conflict with her father. When Tai thinks Ginny and Rose are not merciful to their father, he talks the matter with Caroline. He does not stand by his wife. Rose openly criticizes Larry because he owes the blame. She challenges her father publicly. Justice weighs over family tie, given it for Tai or Rose.

Different from sustaining family harmony in the Chinese movie, building independent personality is the most important theme in *A Thousand Acres*. With all those experiences, Ginny throws off the shackles of her father and she develops her individual strength and personality.

3.5. Time concept

In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, time is quite flexible. Jianing wants to switch work hours. The manager consented in a casual manner. During family dinners, Old Zhu goes to the restaurant immediately after receiving the phone call. Before visiting, appointments are not essential, such as Jinrong, Jiaqian, and Mrs. Liang's visit, acceptable though inappropriate sometimes.

But in *A Thousand Acres*, time is strictly observed. Caroline wants to talk with Ginny. Ginny refuses. But Caroline insists on only fifteen minutes' talk. Ginny finally agrees. The daughters are invited to attend the Sunday dinner beforehand. And they receives lawsuit long enough to do preparations. Flexible time and rigid time see difference in the two movies. Chinese culture allows change to break the schedule. The American culture follows the prior arrangement.

4. Interpretation of Cinematic Features by Context Cultural Pattern

Hall's high- & low-context cultural pattern appropriately interprets the cinematic features demonstrated in the two movies.

Eat Drink Man Woman manifests high-context communication in which most of information is internalized and covert messages are preferred. There are strong interpersonal bonds. Responsibility to others is more important than to oneself. While, *A Thousand Acres* demonstrates low-context communication in which most of information is coded and explicitly transmitted. The commitment between ingroup members is low and they have rather fragile interpersonal bonds. Time in *Eat Drink Man Woman* is flexible while it is fixed and rigid in *A Thousand Acres*.

The detailed interpretation of cinematic features of *Eat Drink Man Woman* and *A Thousand Acres* will be conducted, tightly following Lustig and Koester's summary of context cultural model (see Table 3).

Table 3 Characteristics of High- and Low-context Cultures¹

High-Context Cultures	Low-Context Cultures
Covert and implicit	Overt and explicit
Messages internalized	Messages plainly coded
Much nonverbal coding	Details verbalized
Reactions reserved	Reactions on the surface
Distinct ingroups and outgroups	Flexible ingroups and outgroups
Strong interpersonal bonds	Fragile interpersonal bonds
Commitment high	Commitment low
Time open and flexible	Time highly organized

¹Myron W. Lustig and Jolene Koester, *characteristics of Low- and High-context Cultures* (2007).

4.1. The use of covert and overt messages

In high-context cultures, covert messages are often used and meanings are internalized. In contrast, in low-context cultures, overt messages predominate. Members are expected to express all information clearly and sensibly by using their language (Liu & Zhou, 2011). Comparing with *A Thousand Acres*, cinematic features in *Eat Drink Man Woman* is indirect. Use of covert message is the universal law. Hidden information is provided through nonverbal language, gestures, the use of space and even silence (Samovar, Porter, & Stefani, 2000).

4.1.1 Messages internalized vs. messages plainly coded

In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, background information is inconspicuous, which is a high-context approach. Long shot technique dominates without any verbal language to present characters' behaviors or daily routines to clarify their jobs, social relations or even personality. Images rather than words are often employed to develop the story.

Based on the characteristic of plainly coded messages, members in low-context culture express their intentions in direct messages. The frequent use of voice-over in *A Thousand Acres* maintains that speakers prefer to use direct language. It shows the "use of plainly coded messages" demonstrated in Hall's low-context cultures.

In conversations of *A Thousand Acres*, Rose just directly says what she thinks and all her information is transmitted in explicit message. In low-context cultures, listeners look for the meaning of other's behaviors in clear messages. The speaker is responsible for constructing a clear, persuasive message that listeners can decode easily (Wu, 2006). This well explains the use of voice-over in *A Thousand Acres*. Ginny as a narrator tells audience necessary background information.

In summary, internalized messages are used in high-context communication. While plainly coded messages are transmitted in low-context communication. The divergent techniques of expression are exactly the illustration of high- and low-context cultural features. As a result, the American movie tells everything to audience in the beginning but the Chinese one does not feel obliged to do so.

4.1.2 Much nonverbal coding vs. details verbalized

Using nonverbal language to substitute or supplement information is the distinction of the two movies. By substituting the information, people rely on nonverbal codes. By supplementing the information, people believe in verbalized details. In high-context communication, the information can be contained in facial expressions, gestures or hidden meanings of sentences, even silence. Nonetheless, members in low-context communication are inclined to verbalize information in details. Iris Varner and Linda Beamer claim that "silence does not fit with a low-context culture's emphasis on precision and clarity" (2006). The cinematic features of high- and low-context cultures are presented in the two movies. In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, facial expressions or unusual gestures often provide information. Silence weighs much in the movie. This caters to "much nonverbal coding" demonstrated in Edward T. Hall's high-context cultures. A facial expression or gesture sends the intention. Jiaqian interrupts her father without verbal language, which avoids direct conflicts. Another typical phenomenon is that real intention is hidden behind sentences. When Jiaqian announces that she has bought a new apartment, all families knew she is moving out. It is never uttered, though. Leaving

home is the implied information. Silence is interpreted as disagreement. Jiaqian asks her father whether she could move out when her apartment is ready. Mr. Zhu keeps silent to show his rejection.

Opposite features present conspicuously in *A Thousand Acres*. In the first voice-over of the movie, Ginny introduces her family to audiences. All information is verbalized in detail. She praises the flat and fertile land and she describes her happy childhood on the farm. In the last voice-over, Ginny thoroughly verbalizes the end of story including the death of her father, her solution about the land and her plan of future life. These clues clearly signify the features of verbalized details in low-context cultures.

4.1.3 Reactions reserved vs. reactions on the surface

Different cinematic features in the two movies are positively relevant to the amount of information needed. High-context communication normally prefers reserved reaction as the background information has indicated the opinion and attitude of the interactants; while low-context communication prefers reactions on the surface as background information doesn't count. Therefore, the conflict styles of movies manifest this difference. Conversations in *Eat Drink Man Woman* develop at a slow rate. Longer pauses are expected between turns-taking. Speakers in the movie usually reserve their reactions to avoid embarrassment or maintain superficial harmony. Jiaqian intends to announce her job promotion, but her father misinterprets her feeling and tries to comfort her. Jiaqian doesn't point out her father's misunderstanding instantly so as to preserve her father's face. All other conflicts in *Eat Drink Man Woman* emerging quietly illustrate the characteristic of reserved reaction in high-context culture. While, conflicts in *A Thousand Acres* demonstrate the direct confrontation of the family. They prefer reactions on the surface. People express their thoughts directly. They do not reserve action. This difference echoes William B. Gudykunst's Standpoint: low-context style "emphasizes assertive, complementary nonverbal gestures to punctuate the important conflict points", but high-context style "emphasizes nonverbal nuances and subtitles to signal conflict meanings" (2014).

To sum up, two movies differ in the amount of messages required in communication by the context culture theory. Use of covert and overt messages between high- and low-context cultures can be clearly identified and differentiated in these two movies.

4.2. Ingroup and Outgroup Distinctions

High-context culture usually aims to promote and sustain harmony among the members. In contrast, members in low-context culture aim to convey exact meanings. The divergence of family concept between the two movies fully depicts the characteristic of ingroup and outgroup distinctions. In high-context cultures, people have distinct ingroups and outgroups. They have strong interpersonal bonds and high commitment with ingroup members. On the contrary, people have flexible ingroups and outgroups in low-context cultures. They have fragile interpersonal bonds and low commitment with ingroup members.

4.2.1 Distinct ingroups and outgroups vs. flexible ingroups and outgroups

In high-context cultures, the division of ingroups and outgroups is very distinctive. It is easy to detect who is member of the group and who is not. However, in low-context cultures, they stress individual independence rather than group harmony. To some degree, they do not settle in one group but switch from one circle to another which forms the flexible ingroups and outgroups. In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Mr. Zhu always stresses

the importance of family. Family members have the responsibility to care about each other. Mr. Zhu sacrifices his time and his freedom for his daughters after the death of his wife. Jiazhen does not have intention to marry for 9 years. She deems she should take care of the father and two sisters. Jiaqian gives up the position in Amsterdam after the marriage of her two sisters. All these prove the closeness among ingroup members. As in high-context cultures, family are often regarded as ingroup where insiders can be given privilege and members do more favor to each other.

A Thousand Acres demonstrates the topic of being independent both physically and mentally. It is impossible for people to be shackled by a particular group. In low-context cultures, independence overweighs harmony of family. People value flexible ingroups and outgroups. Larry draws out Caroline in the land division, but it does not affect their father-daughter relationship. Tai goes to discuss the matter with Caroline when he feels that his wife ill-treating her father. They do not include family members as privileged ingroups. They deem that they cling to truth and justice.

In high-context cultures, Family members always belong to ingroups that enjoy privileges. In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, every member needs to do favor to insiders. They are supposed to obey the rules of group. However, in *A Thousand Acres*, people strive for individual independence. They will break down all the barriers, even the family. Therefore, flexible ingroups and outgroups are preferred.

4.2.2 Strong interpersonal bonds vs. fragile interpersonal bonds

There are strong interpersonal bonds between ingroup members. Corresponding to flexible ingroups and outgroups, members in low-context cultures have fragile interpersonal bonds. In high-context cultures, strong interpersonal bonds exist in ingroup members and they incline to maintain the tight relationship. Protection of the strong interpersonal bonds is on the top agenda when people are facing a choice. In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, Mr. Zhu tries to strengthen the interpersonal bonds of family by holding Sunday dinners and veiling his secrets of falling in love with Jinrong. For him, family harmony weighs more than personal happiness.

In low-context cultures, interpersonal bonds are more fragile. If a person's core interests are infringed, they will prefer to break the interpersonal bonds. The phenomena in *A Thousand Acres* demonstrate this point. Ginny yells at Harold. She argues with him bitterly. Even though the two families have gotten along well, Ginny never tolerates Harold's wrong blame. As soon as conflict emerges, their interpersonal bonds break. People choose to stand for truth and justice rather than friendship or kinship. Different perceptions of interpersonal bonds in high- and low-context cultures indeed influence the attitude towards interpersonal relationship of the given culture. In high-context cultures, ingroup members value and protect their strong interpersonal bonds; while in low-context cultures, interpersonal bonds are venerable.

4.2.3 High commitment vs. low commitment

In high-context cultures, people have high commitment with ingroup members; while in low-context cultures, the commitment between ingroup members is relatively low. Family concepts in *Eat Drink Man Woman* and *A Thousand Acres* depict the characteristic of high commitment and low commitment respectively. In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, family members are responsible for taking care of each other and everyone shares their duty to family. Mr. Zhunever allows Jiaqian to be a chef. In his opinion, he has the responsibility to choose a better future for his daughter. It maintains the feature of high commitment in Edward T. Hall's high-context cultures.

Quite differently, individual development was highly stressed in low-context cultures. There is no such strict responsibility to sacrifice for family members. When Larry insists walking alone in the storm, daughters have no obligation to stop him or drag him into the house. The most important element of the family is to guard their independence. Their individual development surmounts family ties. The daughters do not forgive the wrongdoings of their father. And they try to shackle off his negative influence. This fully explains low commitment featured in low-context cultures.

In brief, the difference family concepts of the movies manifests the theory of ingroup and outgroup distinctions demonstrated in Hall's high- and low-context cultures.

4.3. Polychronic and Monochronic Time System

In high-context cultures, people usually follow polychronic time system which indicates that several things are being done at the same time. Yet, in low-context cultures, monochronic time system prevails, which means things should be done one at a time and time is segmented into precise, small units. Their respective time systems are well reflected in two movies. In *Eat Drink Man Woman*, family dinners never start at a settled time, which suggests that their sense of punctuality is faint. There are usually no appointments before visiting. Jiaqian works late at night and enjoys putting work and relaxation together. Jianing switches work hours without notice beforehand. These facts echo polychronic time system. However, in *A Thousand Acres*, people have strong sense of time. Caroline asks for 15 minutes' talk with Ginny. The daughters are invited to attend the Sunday dinner beforehand. And they receive lawsuit long enough for them to do preparations. These demonstrate the strong sense of time in monochronic time system. In general, faint sense of punctuality in *Eat Drink Man Woman* and strong sense of time in *A Thousand Acres* typify the features of polychronic and monochronic time system respectively.

In this part, cinematic features in *Eat Drink Man Woman* and *A Thousand Acres* are compared by employing Hall's high- and low-context cultures theory. The features fit into patterns of "covert and overt messages", "ingroups and outgroups distinctions" and "polychronic and monochronic time". The conclusion is that different cinematic features corresponds to Chinese high-context and American low-context culture.

5. Theoretical Significance of the Comparison

Edward T. Hall first proposes high- and low-context culture theory in 1976, which is a classical theory in analyzing different cultural patterns. Hall's contributions to the different amount of information required in nonverbal communication of various cultures and different orientations to time function well in differentiating one type of culture from another. It can provide insights to the communication studies.

In the above comparison, cinematic features of high- and low-context movies can be viewed clearly. Attention should be given that high-context people and low-context people do not stand on an equal footing. To be more specific, it is easier for a high-context person to understand a low-context communication style; yet it is hard for a low-context person to understand a high-context featured communication style. This is the challenge for Chinese movies to attract western audience.

Explored by this research, directors with high-context background should strive to seek the balance between the picturesque beauty and comprehensibility. If the movie is aimed to attract western audience and Oscar examiners, high-context features should be reduced to avoid the ambiguity. Ambiguity could lie in the

long-shot, facial expressions, nonverbal language, and silence. Some cultural aspects like family concept or important cultural values may cause ambiguity, too. Explicit explanation should be adopted in background introduction, conflicts, showing ingroup relationship and demonstrating core cultural values. Explicit messages should be added through appropriate voice-over or film subtitles, if not spoken out by the characters. Interpretation of silence should also be verbalized.

6. Conclusion

Cultural values influence people's cultural identity, which exerts an impact on people's behavior and perception. High- and low-context cultural model reveals people's different behaviors and perceptions across cultures. Chinese culture is a high-context culture while American is a low-context one. Their movies display different features of high- and low-context cultures.

Movies, as a form of media, are influential to intercultural communication in the era of globalization. Directors with different context cultural background usually produce movies with distinctive features. Use of covert and overt messages; importance of ingroup and outgroup; polychronic and monochronic time system may be well presented in movies with different context cultural features.

Chinese and American movies *Eat Drink Man Woman* and *A Thousand Acres* are chosen to present their different cinematic features from the context cultural perspective. It is more convenient for movies with low-context cultural features to display or promote their cultural values, as the messages are explicit and direct. But high-context featured movies are difficult to comprehend. The messages are normally ambiguous and implicit. There are too many nonverbal codes. The relationship between high-context people is too complicated. There are too much shared information among ingroup members that outsiders cannot understand. Low-context audiences feel it hard to fully appreciate the high-context movies.

Reducing the gap between those cinematic features can draw people of different cultures closer together. To avoid the ambiguity can alleviate the difficulty of understanding and guarantee a better comprehension of the story. This is an indispensable requirement to arouse the interest, and thereafter, influence the western populace. More importantly, it contributes to the correct interpretation of Chinese culture, which helps to eliminate the biased or prejudiced understanding toward the Chinese cultural values and social practices. The ultimate goal is to promote Chinese culture and enhance the mutual understanding of people with different cultural background.

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