

Differences in Family Concepts in Contemporary Children's Films

--Visual presentation of Chinese and Western cultures

Yimeng Huang

School of Cultures, Languages and Area Studies, University of Nottingham, Nottingham, UK

Abstract

As an important carrier of popular culture, children's films are not only entertainment products, but also transmitters of social concepts and values. This article takes contemporary Chinese and foreign children's films such as "Ne Zha: The Birth of the Demon Child", "Life Events", "Coco", and "Spider Man: Parallel Universe" as analysis samples, and deeply explores the differences in the presentation of Chinese and Western family concepts in images from three dimensions: family structure, parent-child relationships, and the tension between individuals and families. Research has found that Chinese children's films tend to depict a family lineage characterized by a "vertical axis", emphasizing intergenerational responsibility, sacrifice, and integration, and the self realization of children needs to be achieved through family identity; Western children's films, on the other hand, focus on the family unit centered around the "horizontal axis", advocating for equal dialogue and individual separation between parents and children. Self realization is often achieved through an independent journey away from home. This difference is rooted in the deep cultural logic of collectivism and individualism. However, in the context of globalization, Chinese and Western children's films have also shown a new trend of mutual reference and integration, jointly depicting the pursuit of eternal human emotions - love and understanding.

Keywords

Children's movies; Family values; Cultural differences between China and the West; collectivism.

1. Introduction

The family is the most fundamental unit of human society and a conceptual product of its specific cultural soil. As the most widely watched and functionally defined type of film that combines education with entertainment, children's films are vivid mirrors of social and family values that are gazed upon, portrayed, and constructed. They are also reflective mirrors of abstract and conceptualized cultural values. Cultural values are the prism through which people in Chinese and Western children's films use images to tell the stories of their families, shape the image of their families, and express emotions in the context of globalization. Therefore, the main purpose of this article is to select representative and influential Chinese and foreign children's films from the past decade as text objects through a method of close reading and comparison. Represented by the Chinese series "Ne Zha: The Birth of the Demon Child" (2019), "Life Events" (2022), and "Boonie Bears", and referenced by the Western series "Coco" (2017), "Spider Man: Parallel Universe" (2018), and "The Brain Agents" (2015), this article first analyzes the "family structure" level, then searches for the tension between "individual" and "family" from the structure and power of "parent-child relationships", and finally explores the tension between "individual" and "family". Exploring why the narrative of contemporary Chinese and Western children's films, with its unique imagery, points to two forms of collectivism in the pursuit of self actualization The cultural mirror of "Chinese family" and

"Western family" - the fundamental point of divergence between "China" and "West", "children" and "parents" (parents) in terms of "integration and responsibility" and "separation and growth" in terms of family structure; At the same time, in the contemporary era of cultural interaction, a narrative variation of "you in me" and "I in you" has begun.

2. Image presentation of family structure: vertical axis and horizontal axis

The image structure of family structure is the biggest manifestation of the cultural differences between China and the West. Most Chinese films depict a long horizontal axis family lineage with a vertical axis to show the inheritance of descendants and bloodlines, while Western films highlight a single core family with a horizontal axis, highlighting the relationship between husband and wife and the relationship between parents and children. In Chinese children's films, 'home' is almost exclusively associated with the generation of parents and children. The relationship between the people of Chentangguan and the Li Jing family in "Ne Zha: The Birth of the Demon Child" already contains the binding of "family" and "regional community". As a father, his behavior subjectively includes fatherly love, while objectively it includes the role and obligation of the "commander" and the family reputation of the "Li family". One of the most brilliant parts of the film is that Li Jing is willing to exchange his life talisman for his son's life. This sacrifice goes beyond the simple act of licking a calf's deep affection, and is more of an expression of the almost absolute responsibility of parents towards their offspring under the background of Chinese patriarchal culture, which is the ultimate manifestation of "fatherly kindness". The past of the family (the history of Lingzhu and Mowan) and the future of the family (the fate of Nezha) constitute the main tension of the narrative, forming a vertical timeline.

Through the perspective of funeral director Mo Sanmei, "Life Events" delves deeper into Chinese family culture: the film begins with "death" and then delves into "survival", giving back to "family". After the little girl Xiaowen lost her "only" grandmother, on the genealogy of her "family", she was "alone in the boat". The relationship with the third brother, from initial mutual struggle to later dependence, was finally agreed upon and confirmed through legal "adoption". The setting of narrative motivation is an inseparable desire and respect for a "stable and dignified home" expected by Chinese culture. The funeral home inherited by the third brother, named "Up to Heaven", carries a metaphor for the cycle of life and the continuity of the family from generation to generation. The presence of funeral ceremonies, urns, tombstones, and other objects in movies are visual symbols that connect the living and the dead, and maintain vertical family relationships.

In contrast, Western children's films mainly present a "horizontal axis" structure of family relationships: the "Incredibles" series is a typical nuclear family, while "Incredibles" and "Incredibles 2" are entirely composed of Mr. Superman, Supergirl, and their three children. The execution of crises (villains) and solutions (family cooperation) takes place within this family of five, with little involvement of grandparents or other elders in the story. The main conflicts within families focus on how members balance their superpowers with their daily lives, communication and collaboration between spouses and parents. For example, in "Incredibles," Mr. Superman helps the family rediscover their identity, and the resilient Superwoman participates in the family's planning and strategies to ultimately resolve crises. The same goes for Spider Man: Parallel Universe. Miles Morales' family is also a typical middle-class nuclear family in New York. His upbringing story takes place between him and his parents, and his uncle Allen plays an important but mainly "external" role in Miles, which is later incorporated into the story of Miles' relationship with his parents.

Even for movies like "Coco" that depict a vast family of undead, the core narrative force is still the conflict between Miguel's personal dreams and the family's "ban" (prohibiting access to

music). Although the family of the undead world is vertical and vast, for Miguel in reality, it is an "external world" that needs to be explored, discussed, and ultimately sought for his recognition. The solution of the film is not that Miguel completely gives up himself to obey the family, but that the family corrects past mistakes and accepts individual choices after learning the truth. The 'vertical axis' of the family serves the core appeal of the 'horizontal axis' of personal dreams here. In terms of visual composition, Chinese films often use panoramic shots to depict scenes of a family sitting around for a meal and taking collective actions, emphasizing the integrity of the "group"; Western movies, on the other hand, tend to use close-up and over the shoulder shots to capture the interactions and reactions between individual family members, highlighting the independence of the individual.

3. The power structure of parent-child relationships: authority and obedience vs. equality and dialogue

Different family types lead to different parent-child relationships. In Chinese movies, parent-child relationships exhibit a power structure of "dominance and obedience", while in Western movies, parent-child relationships generally show an interactive relationship of "equality and communication".

In the traditional mother tongue context of filial piety in China, the elders are undoubtedly the authority and role models of the family. In children's films, the most common pairing is the classical configuration of "strict father and loving mother" and the arc of children's growth from "rebellion" to "maturity". Li Jing in "Ne Zha: The Birth of the Demon Child" is a silent, serious, and educative character in many occasions. For Nezha's teachings, he always stood on the high ground of patriarchy, full of love but with dignity that could not be compromised. Nezha's rebellion 'is not only a counterattack against the injustice of his own fate, but also a dissatisfaction and rebellion against his father's lack of understanding' of him. The most crucial ignition mechanism in the film is that Nezha knows the truth that his father can sacrifice his life to save him. As a result, Nezha's rebellion instantly dissolves, and as a "discovery" of patriarchy, it is built on an unconditional sacrifice. Nezha's final act of "understanding" was to accept his own destiny and protect the world for the sake of his family and the people, which was to "discover" the true meaning and submission of patriarchy (and the family responsibility as a symbol of patriarchy). Here, love is achieved through 'silent sacrifice' and 'harsh discipline', as the successor and token of language.

The novel 'Boonie Bears: Companion to My' Bear Core 'provides a modern interpretation of maternal love, but the core still points to children's understanding and forgiveness of their mothers. Xiong Da and Xiong Er are deeply concerned about their mother's "abandonment", but as the truth is revealed, they discover that their mother has unavoidable difficulties and enormous sacrifices. The ending of the story is also when the younger generation, after knowing the whole truth, eliminates their resentment towards their mother and the family relationship returns to harmony through "understanding". This "understanding reconciliation" model assumes the legitimacy of parental behavior (even if the method is debatable), and children's growth lies in learning to "understand" the love hidden deep in their parents' hearts.

The parent-child relationship in Western children's films is closer to an equal friendship or mentorship. Parents are not always authoritative figures, they can confuse, make mistakes, and grow up together with their children. The conversations between Miles' parents - especially his police dad - and son in Spider Man: Parallel Universe are a model. They never give orders, they only share their doubts and confusion. My father's monologue in front of Miles' door: 'I saw you lock yourself behind the door, and I know you're going through a difficult time... I hope you know, I will always love you.' It was an attempt to communicate and express love rather than control, expressing 'respect, trust, and support.' When Miles finally chose to take on the

responsibility of Spider Man, he didn't need to wait like Nezha to be told a 'sacrifice' truth to gain motivation. His motivation came from his inner realization, and his parents' love was just his strong backing, not a mystery that needed to be 'understood'.

The combination of internal growth and external communication is portrayed to the extreme in 'Brain Agents'. Lily's emotional crisis stems from her inner turmoil, and her parents did not resort to coercion, but tried to understand and accept her sadness. The film tells us that negative emotions are equally valuable, and an individual's emotions need to be seen and respected. This narrative itself is based on the premise of treating children's psychological world equally. Parents are not here to 'correct' their children, but to 'accompany' and 'help' them through crises. Communication is two-way and immediate, and emotional expression is outward and direct, which is in sharp contrast to the introverted and indirect emotional expression in Chinese movies.

4. The tension between individuals and families: Differences in the paths of self actualization

When children's "self pursuit" and "family expectations" contradict each other, Chinese and Western children's films preset two opposite endings for characters, which precisely reflects the cognitive differences between Chinese and Western films on "self pursuit".

The core narrative logic of Chinese films is to achieve self realization through family identity. The ultimate destination of an individual's dreams, values, and sharpness is often to gain recognition from their family, which in turn consolidates the integrity and glory of the family. The ultimate goal of the earth shattering individualistic declaration in "Ne Zha: The Birth of the Demon Child" is not simply individual heroism. Nezha's rebellion against the "mandate of heaven" is the fate of Mo Wan to bring disaster to the people, and the "self" he wants to prove is a "hero" who can protect his parents and the people of Chentangguan. His self actualization is closely tied to his responsibility towards his family and community. His ultimate victory was not only the individual's successful struggle against fate, but also the "son of Li Jing"'s salvation and sublimation of the family's reputation. The pinnacle of personal value lies in becoming the pride of the family.

In "Life Events", Mo Sanmei's self realization is the same. At the beginning, he deeply despised the job and identity of a funeral director, believing that the lowly and unlucky profession was contrary to his personal wishes and family inheritance. It was during the process of raising Xiaowen that he understood his father's adherence to his profession and the meaning of "life is nothing but death". He finally chose to accept the funeral parlor, which not only allowed him to settle down in his career, but also became a qualified executor who inherited the family business mantle spiritually. Through the process of father daughter reconciliation and becoming a "father", he established his self-identity.

The classic mode of Western cinema is to achieve self realization by leaving home. In the cultural script of individualism, 'leaving home' is the starting point of the hero's journey, a necessary ritual for individuals to break free from protection, face the world, and discover their true selves. Miguel in "Coco" has a music dream that directly conflicts with the rules of his real family. His first step was to physically 'leave home' - to escape from his family on the night of the Day of the Dead and enter the world of the undead. The entire adventure process was his independent pursuit of dreams and proof of himself. Although he eventually returned to his family, what he brought back was not only family reconciliation, but also a brand new and recognized "musician" identity by the family. The family changed because of him, not because he completely surrendered to the old rules of the family.

And Miles' growth process was also accompanied by the breakthrough of the "protective shield" for his parents. He had to learn to face risks and make his own choices alone. In the climax of

the film, he is trapped in a collapsed laboratory and isolated by his father. This place holds great symbolic significance. At a critical moment, the father is unable to enter his son's world, and the son must rely on his own strength to overcome difficulties and complete the "rite of passage". His "completion of self" is first and foremost a "return to oneself" as a "own person", and then a glorious annotation of his identity as a "son".

5. Integration and Variation: New Trends in the Context of Globalization

Despite the existence of clear boundaries of differences, in today's cultural globalization, the narrative of Chinese and Western children's films is not rigid, but has shown a trend of mutual reference and integration that deserves attention.

Chinese children's films are beginning to incorporate more modern and individual focused expressions while adhering to the cultural core. For example, although "Ne Zha: The Birth of the Demon Child" ultimately returns to family values, its theme rendering of personal fate struggle and character image design (such as Ne Zha's smoky makeup and rebellious personality) have clearly absorbed elements of global youth culture, making it more individualistic than traditional "well behaved child" narratives. The introduction of science fiction elements in "Boonie Bears: Companion to My 'Bear Core'" explores the memory of motherly love, and also applies global narrative grammar to make its story easier for audiences from different cultural backgrounds to understand.

On the contrary, Western films are increasingly incorporating their individualistic narratives with varying degrees of praise for family relationships and a return to community values. *Coco* is the best annotation. In fact, in this movie, it is a complete Hollywood production, but it is a movie with Mexican family culture as its complete narrative core. It places "family memory" above "personal dreams" and believes that "forgetting family members is the most 'dead'." This value system is full of familialism and has been successful on a global scale, proving that subjective emotions about family have the power to penetrate different cultures. Judy Rabbit's parents in *Zootopia* combine their "conservatism" with "enlightenment". *Zootopia* tells us that the West is also rethinking the narrative of family meaning, that is, the parents of the rabbit Judy in the film, although they want her to stay in the countryside peacefully, ultimately choose to encourage her to pursue her dreams in the big city.

This fusion means that in the deepest layers of human nature, there is no distinction between love, understanding, companionship, and support. No matter how the script is written, what moves us in children's movies is the individual's true feelings, the storms and rainbows in the harbor of the family, the confusion and growth.

6. Conclusion

In summary, by comparing typical children's films from contemporary China and abroad, we can clearly perceive that the visual narrative is deeply engraved with cultural genes. The preference and narrative construction of the "vertical axis" family genealogy in Chinese children's films, as well as the reflection and manifestation of the "parental child relationship" of "authority and obedience," and the "path to self realization in family identity," are linked to the family cultural values of "responsibility, sacrifice, and integration" in collectivist culture; The focus of Western children's films on the "horizontal axis" and "nuclear family", the shaping of the "parent child relationship" with the theme of "equality and dialogue", and the promotion of the "life path" of "realizing oneself through leaving home" reflect the value pursuit of "independence, freedom, and self" in individualistic culture. This "difference" is not classified based on the level of "value", but rather a perspective to understand the diversity of human social organizations. It is like two mirrors, reflecting one's own culture and the colorful world of others. For authors, only by understanding their differences can they create excellent works

with cultural heritage and a global perspective; For readers and audiences, this is also a question of 'how to be a home'. I believe that in the future, Chinese children's films will not only maintain cultural confidence and cultivate localized family narratives, but also pay more attention to the individual inner world of children and the complex ecology of current Chinese style families, creatively transforming and innovatively developing traditional family culture; Similarly, Western films will continue to explore writing that resonates more with the world in terms of the relationship between the individual and the whole, as well as in terms of emotions. All the movies, together they participate in, constitute a richer world view about love and growth, tolerance and understanding.

References

- [1]Alin F ,Avihu S . The home-self and out-of-home placement: The home concept among adults educated in their childhood at a residential care setting. [J]. Journal of community psychology, 2020, 48 (5): 1583-1602.
- [2]Smiljka T . What we talk about when we talk about family?: Concept in context [J]. Sociologija, 2019, 61 (3): 301-322.
- [3]Mi N ,Kyughwan S ,Dongtaik K . The Study on the Kinship Cognition and Family Concepts of Elementary School Children [J]. Korean Association For Learner-Centered Curriculum And Instruction, 2018, 18 (18): 849-871.
- [4]Comlan C S . Re-Visitation of Family Concept with an Educative View in Shakespeare's Titus Andronicus [J]. European Scientific Journal, ESJ, 2018, 14 (23): 196-196.
- [5]Júnior O D B I ,Moraes D F A D ,Coimbra M R . THE CULTURAL INDUSTRIES DES/RE/CONSTRUCTION OF STEREOTYPES FAMILIES IN TRAINING CONCEPTS TEACHERS [J]. Revista Ibero-Americana de Estudos em Educação, 2016, 11 (4): 2012-2029.
- [6]Deneckère R ,Kornyshova E . Evaluation of the method family concept and its application to agile methods [J]. ISI, 2016, 21 (2): 95-121.
- [7]Gavriel-Fried ,Shilo . Defining the family: the role of personal values and personal acquaintance [J]. Journal of Family Studies, 2016, 22 (1): 43-62.
- [8]Hallac S ,Oz F . A Theoretical Perspective of Family Concept [J]. Psikiyatride Guncel Yaklasimlar, 2014, 6 (2): 142-153.
- [9]Scarpa ,James . Everything's on the table for family concepts [J]. Nation's Restaurant News, 2010, 44 (13): 67-68.
- [10]Tinelli O S . The Relationship of Family concept to Individual Self-Esteem [J]. Issues in Mental Health Nursing, 2009, 3 (3): 251-270.