

# Analysis of Cultural Differences in Chinese and American Film and Television Contents: Taking "Shameless" and "Little Reunion" as Examples

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**Abstract.** This essay aims to study the cultural differences in the content of the Chinese and American film markets in the last five years. Taking the American drama *Shameless* and the Chinese TV drama *Little Reunion* as examples, the essay compares and analyses these two works in terms of their plots, characterization, values, social backgrounds, etc., and explores the differences and reasons for their audience reactions in the Chinese and American film markets. Through intensive comparison and analysis of these two works, it explores their similarities and differences in terms of family themes, cultural elements, and audience response. Using the research methods of case study and data statistics, this study compares the two works in several dimensions. It has been found that *Shameless* focuses on revealing the sorrows and struggles of underclass families in the United States, and emphasizes individual freedom and rights, while *A Little Reunion* highlights family harmony and traditional values. In terms of audience response, *Shameless* is highly praised in the American market but may be controversial in the Chinese market due to cultural differences. This study is important for understanding the cultural differences between the Chinese and American film markets and the audience response to family-themed dramas.

**Keywords:** Film market, cultural differences, values.

## 1. Introduction

Hollywood is commonly synonymous with the American film industry, which has gone through a series of transformative eras, each of which has shaped the cinematic landscape in unique ways. Pioneers such as Thomas Edison played a crucial role in the budding of the film industry in the late 1890s. Edison's invention of the microscope marked the beginning of the cinematic experience, even though these early films were rudimentary, short, and silent. In the rapidly industrializing American context of the 1910s, the speedy development of simple voyeuristic viewing devices to the first narrative films left no doubt about Hollywood's development as the heart of American cinema [1]. Hollywood's Golden Age, spanning the 1930s to the 1950s, brought far-reaching innovations. The creation of "Talkies" or synchronized sound films revolutionized film narratives and the audience experience. During this era, film majors such as MGM and Warner Brothers controlled every aspect of film production, from script to projection. A handful of studios controlled nearly every aspect of film production [2]. Despite Hollywood's economic strength during World War II, the studio system gradually collapsed after the war.

With the rise of television in the 1950s, cinema faced formidable competitors in terms of audience. Hollywood's once unassailable studio system began to decline, ushering in an era of major change. The 1960s storylines and 1970s are often referred to as the era of the "New Hollywood," with the decline of traditional studio power and the rise of independent filmmakers. Films such as the science fiction film *Star Wars* and the horror film *Jaws* broke with established norms and signalled the dawn of the blockbuster era. Unlike previous storylines that followed a timeline, scripts and new ways of portraying characters: upsetting years, storylines with unexpected endings, and vague lines between protagonists and villains opened up the evolution of New Hollywood. The emergence of independent production in New Hollywood also created a trend towards the fusion of director and producer, creating a director's capital system [3]. The turn of the 21st century heralded another paradigm shift. The advent of digital technology redefined the production, distribution and consumption of film.

More recently, streaming platforms such as Netflix, HBO and others have profoundly changed the structure of the film industry.

The growth of the film industry in China is more closely tied to the history of the country than it is to that of the United States. China's film industry originated later than the United States, beginning in the early 20th century. The first Chinese film studio rose to prominence in the 1920s and ushered in the "Golden Age" of Chinese cinema in the 1930s. The content of films from this period focused on depicting urban realities and social issues to resonate with contemporary audiences, such as 1937's *The Roadrunner*. During the War Against Japan and the ensuing Chinese Civil War, the film industry faced tremendous upheaval. However, these events led to the creation of highly influential wartime promotional films that served to unite people's hearts and promote nationalist sentiments. After the founding of the People's Republic of China in 1949, the film industry came under state control. During this period, films were mainly used as a tool to promote socialist values. The late 1970s saw the emergence of the 'Fifth Generation' of filmmakers, such as Zhang Yimou and Chen Kaige, who introduced a whole new language of cinema. Their films often combined personal stories with commentary on broader social issues and works such as *Red Sorghum* and *Farewell Concubine* began to win international acclaim [4]. The 2000s to the present have seen the rise of a "sixth generation" of filmmakers, often focusing on urban stories and China's rapid modernization. At the same time, the Chinese film industry began to boom in terms of box office receipts, with films such as *Wolf 2* setting several records. In addition, international co-productions and the expansion of Chinese films in the global market have highlighted China's burgeoning influence in the global film scene [4].

The film and television markets and content of China and the United States display their respective cultural and historical characteristics. American cinema is characterized by its sophisticated production system, international influence and individualism, emphasizing personal freedom, the pursuit of dreams and multicultural integration. Chinese films, on the other hand, reflect the country's historical changes and cultural traditions, emphasizing collectivity, family and harmony, as well as showing the rapid changes of modern society. These characteristics and differences stem from the different historical, cultural and political backgrounds of the two countries.

## **2. Cultural Differences in Chinese and American Films and the Causes**

As an important part of the culture, the film undoubtedly reflects the values and historical background of a country or region. As the world's two largest film-producing countries, China and the United States not only have significant differences in their output but also reflect deep cultural characteristics in their content and narrative style.

First of all, the cultural difference in narrative style has become the focus of attention of many researchers. By comparatively analyzing a classic film, *MULAN*, it found that the two essays aimed to stimulate the public's cultural sensitivity in watching the film and to increase the public's awareness of the film. *MULAN* is a live-action film, produced by Walt Disney Studios. Compared with the Chinese film *Mulan*, the film is permeated with a large number of Western cultural values while retaining Chinese elements. Chinese films tend to emphasize the heroic image of *Mulan*. The film emphasizes "collectivism", with words such as "we" and "brotherhood" repeatedly appearing as words of belonging. For instance, *Mulan* highlights the brotherhood with soldiers at a critical moment, and she says she will not betray the country, which demonstrates the collectivism and strong sense of national honor in Chinese culture. American films, on the other hand, pay more attention to showing individual heroism and dream-chasing spirit. The character *Mulan* is like a Western superhero, she has a special "temperament" and saves the emperor alone, which reflects typical American heroism.

Secondly, there is also a significant difference between the two countries' films in terms of values and morality, as Geert Hofstede puts forward the idea of power distance in *Cultures and Organizations: Software of Mind* [5]. The Western film industry is also very different from the Western film industry in that it is based on the idea of power distance [5]. Western countries are mostly low power distance countries, while Eastern countries are mostly high-power distance countries. In *Mulan*, the American

interpretation of the concept of filial piety favors "dedication to the family", where there are equal rights between parents and children, and where children can make their own decisions and be responsible for the family. In Chinese culture, respect for elders and people of status is at the center of traditional morality. In its study, it was found that respect for and promotion of traditional morals and family values are often found in Chinese films. Meanwhile, American films place more emphasis on the pursuit of individual freedom and rights, demonstrating Western values of individualism.

Moreover, the image of Mulan breaks down traditional gender roles, epitomizes feminist ideals and challenges the notion of "male superiority over female". Historically, China's male-centered society has placed women in suppressed roles, emphasizing their domestic responsibilities. Even with modern reforms, women's roles remain constrained by old cultural norms. In contrast, the Western feminist movement in the United States in the 20th century celebrated women's independence. Several films that celebrated women's independence and being on their own were also released on screen.

The construction of post-feminist hegemony suggests that since its debut in the US in the mid-1970s the film *Charlie's Angels* has been a central topic in American popular culture concerning feminism, femininity, and their relationships. The article analyses the 'reinvention' of *Charlie's Angels* over time and its 'reframing' concerning discourses of feminism and femininity in changing historical contexts. The study holds that analyzing the various re-imaginings and remakes of *Breaking Bad* can reveal how post-feminism has evolved in American popular culture over the past three decades and that it has become increasingly natural, and therefore more hegemonic, to establish its place over time [6].

To sum up, the cultural differences between the Chinese and American film industries are not only superficial but also a reflection of deep-seated values and narrative styles. These differences provide us with a unique perspective to better understand the cultural, historical and social backgrounds of the two countries. Through these studies, it is probably cannot only gain a deeper understanding of the film industry but also a better appreciation of the cultural exchanges and collisions between the two countries.

### **3. Methodology and Discussion**

To deeply explore the cultural differences between China and the United States in film and TV productions, this study will combine two research methods: case study and data statistics.

#### **3.1. Case Study**

##### **3.1.1. Research objective**

The trend of globalization today has made cultural exchange and conflict an increasingly important topic. As an important carrier of culture, the cultural messages and values behind TV dramas are constantly being studied and interpreted. The paper chooses two Chinese and American TV dramas with the same family theme for the study: the American drama "Shameless" released by Showtime shows the struggles of a family at the bottom of American society and its emphasis on freedom and rights of the individual. In contrast, the Chinese TV series *Little Reunion* shows the challenges of education and family relationships for middle-class families in China. Both productions have achieved high ratings and can be considered representative of their respective cultural contexts.

##### **3.1.2. Plot and character analysis**

We will analyse in detail the key characters in each play, their personality traits, values, decision-making styles and the way they interact with other characters. This helps us to understand the cultural values and social concepts behind each production.

*Shameless* is an American comedy television film series that premiered on 9 January 2011 on the Showtime Television Network. The series ran for eleven seasons and ten years, making it the longest-running television series in the Showtime Network's broadcast history [7]. The series depicts the

cultural values and social concepts behind each of its works [7]. The show depicts a poor family named Gallagher, who lives on the South Side of Chicago, and how the family's six children struggle to survive under the "care" of an alcoholic father and an absentee mother. The producers of the television series attempted to differentiate the series from other television shows about working-class Americans by highlighting the effects of Frank Gehrig's alcoholism on the family.

The show's characterization brings out the distinctive traits of each character. Frank Gallagher (the father of the show) As the head of the family, Frank often takes advantage of or neglects the children to satisfy the selfish needs. The character provides a perspective on how the underclass of Americans struggles to meet their own needs. Fiona Gallagher, as the oldest daughter in the family, often acts as a mother to make sure that the other children in the family receive the love and support, they need. The character reflects many young women who sacrifice their own needs and dreams for their families. Other characters such as Lip, Ian, and Debbie each reflect different coping strategies when faced with family and social pressures. One of the key characters in the show is Ian, who as the fourth oldest child in the family has inherited mother's bipolar disorder, which the actor portrays in great detail as well as realistically.

The series thoughtfully captures the myriad of marginalizing experiences associated with systems of oppression, including classism, racism, heterosexism, corporatism and their intersections, in a complex way. In addition to these standout elements, *Shameless* maintains a distinguished place in commercial television for its accurate and humane portrayal of mental illness. Although the show depicted multiple characters struggling with addiction and mental health issues, the character of Ian Gallagher, played by Cameron Monaghan, gave a realistic and dignified representation of bipolar disorder as a condition [8].

*A Little Reunion* tells the story of three middle-class families surrounding their children's entrance exams in a small school district in Beijing, China. The setting of these three families, one a dual-income wage-earner family, one a civil servant family, and one a divorced family, is representative of the filming context for Beijing, the political, cultural, and economic center of China, where the capital's arts and cultural industry chain is highly developed. The plot of one of the families' children enrolling in an art school is realistic and natural. *A Little Reunion* dives into the proposition of Chinese family parenthood in the social metropolis through the prism of education. The three fathers of the three families are portrayed as tolerant and loving fathers, while the three mothers are portrayed as typical Chinese mothers who focus on their children's academic performance but do not concern themselves with their children's physical and mental health.

## **3.2. Data Statistics**

### **3.2.1. Data source**

This study collects data about the two productions from major ratings statistics websites, drama review websites and social media platforms.

As can be seen in Table 1, *Shameless* has had over a million viewers each season from the first to the final season, with the final episode of the finale season setting a record of 1.45 million viewers, making it the best-performing up-and-coming TV series ever on the Showtime network. This demonstrates the high popularity of this TV series. With only a single season, "*A Little Reunion*" aired on both networks as well as two streaming platforms, and was steadily ranked third in viewership among its contemporaries.

**Table 1.** The market performance of these two TV dramas

| season | timeslot(ET)  | Episodes | First aired Date | First aired Viewers (Millions) | Last aired date | last aired viewers (millions) | Avg. viewers (millions) | avg. 18-49 rating |
|--------|---------------|----------|------------------|--------------------------------|-----------------|-------------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------|
| 1      | Sunday10.00pm | 12       | Jan. 9, 2011     | 0.98                           | Mar. 27, 2011   | 1.16                          | 1.03                    | TBD               |
| 2      | Sunday9.00pm  | 12       | Jan8, 2012       | 1.58                           | Apr. 1, 2012    | 1.45                          | 1.36                    | 0.72              |
| 3      | Sunday9.00pm  | 12       | Jan13, 2013      | 2.00                           | Apr. 7, 2013    | 1.82                          | 1.65                    | 0.81              |
| 4      | Sunday9.00pm  | 12       | Jan12, 2014      | 1.69                           | Apr. 6, 2014    | 1.93                          | 1.71                    | 0.82              |
| 5      | Sunday9.00pm  | 12       | Jan11, 2015      | 1.77                           | Apr. 5, 2015    | 1.55                          | 1.58                    | 0.71              |
| 6      | Sunday9.00pm  | 12       | Jan10, 2016      | 1.44                           | Apr. 3, 2016    | 1.63                          | 1.56                    | 0.64              |
| 7      | Sunday9.00pm  | 12       | Oct2, 2016       | 1.24                           | Dec.18, 2016    | 1.72                          | 1.42                    | 0.54              |
| 8      | Sunday9.00pm  | 12       | Nov5, 2017       | 1.86                           | Jan.28, 2018    | 1.73                          | 1.50                    | 0.54              |
| 9      | Sunday9.00pm  | 12       | Sep9, 2018       | 1.31                           | Mar.10, 2019    | 1.35                          | 1.04                    | 0.36              |
| 10     | Sunday9.00pm  | 12       | Nov10, 2019      | 0.76                           | Jan.26, 2020    | 0.92                          | 0.85                    | 0.24              |
| 11     | Sunday9.00pm  | 12       | Dec6, 2020       | 0.70                           | Apr.11, 2021    | 0.70                          | 0.58                    | 0.13              |

Until today, many new media platforms such as TikTok, YouTube, etc. still have many self-media bloggers making memes with classic quotes from the main characters of the shameless episodes, and many marketing numbers explaining the morals of some of the moments in the shameless episodes. However, Shameless is only popular during the broadcasting period, and netizens will not interpret the show repeatedly after watching it.

### 3.2.2. Data interpretation

Combined with the comparison of the above data, the ratings of both films are high amongst the same period dramas, and through the netizens' comments, it can be seen that this is most likely because both family dramas bring a sense of empathy to the viewers. Although both productions, Shameless and Little Reunion, dealt with the themes of family and youth development, they showed significant differences in the stories they portrayed and the cultural connotations behind them. These differences not only reflect the different concepts of family, morality and education between the Chinese and Western cultures but also affect the acceptance of the two works by the audiences in the two places.

A Little Reunion centers around the college entrance exam, a social phenomenon unique to China. The problems that Chinese children face in their studies, such as teaching to the test, and the pressure and expectations of their parents are a reflection of the reality that many Chinese families face. People have been taught that the imperial examination is the only way for people to improve their status and change their social class [9]. As a result, people aspire for the examination [9]. As a result, people aspire to be at the top of the college entrance exams and change their fate through the limited acceptance rate. As colleges and universities continue to expand and the current acceptance rate of students increases, higher education in China has become more widely available and the competitive pressure on students has increased, with parents' expectations exceeding their children's abilities. Parents' expectations exceed their children's abilities, and they no longer value their children's physical and mental health or hobbies but rather focus on their children's grades. In a study by Lam, S. F. (2007), a Chinese fifth-grade student reported that their parents did not emphasize their academic success but rather their academic failure, while American students reported that their parents did the opposite. This explains to some extent the cultural differences between Chinese and American parents [10]. In contrast, although Shameless also depicts the daily life of a family, it highlights more how family members survive in a challenging environment, especially when the home is filled with alcohol, drugs, and socially undesirable behaviors.

Nevertheless, there is a huge difference between these two works in terms of audience acceptance. For example, alcohol and drug abuse and underage drinking in Shameless may be seen as "negative energy" in Chinese culture and are unlikely to be shown in mainstream media. This is because Chinese radio and television censorship tends to promote positive, healthy family values while being conservative about content that might harm young people. However, when placed in the European

and American markets, viewers will be struck by the level of realism because life is indeed much more than the rosy scenarios given in front of the screen, and the harshness of reality is very real.

On the contrary, if *A Little Reunion* were to be shown in a Western market, its focus may not be fully understood or seen as important. The specific social context of the high school entrance exam may lack immediate resonance for Western audiences and instead be incomprehensible, as Western culture places more emphasis on individualism and self-seeking.

Overall, both works provide a glimpse into the experiences of families and teenagers growing up in different cultures. They reveal how cultural contexts influence the way stories are narrated and how audiences in different cultures interpret and receive these stories.

#### 4. Conclusion

Family TV dramas offer a remarkable window into the diversity of civilizations, social ideals, and values between the two countries when analyzing the distinctions between Chinese and American cultures. To understand the cultural variations underlying two TV dramas—*Shameless* and *Little Reunion*—and their effects on audience reactions, this study conducts thorough analyses of each of them.

The college entrance exam, a societal phenomenon specific to China, is the focal point of *A Little Reunion*. In Chinese culture, qualifying for the college admission exam is seen as a crucial life stage that not only affects one's job and social standing but also as an important milestone that Chinese parents eagerly anticipate for their children. Family, education, and the demands and responsibilities that parents place on their kids all take lead roles in this play. While *Shameless* also shows a family's routine, it focuses more on how people struggle to get by in a difficult situation, particularly when there are drugs, alcohol, and other socially unacceptable habits present in the home.

However, this contrast is not just cultural, but also relates to television censorship policies, social values and viewer expectations in both countries. For example, whilst the negative scenes in *Shameless* may be seen as a true reflection of Western culture, in China these scenes may not be accepted by a wide audience due to the messages and emotions they carry.

Although this study provides insights into the cultural differences between China and the United States, there are still some limitations. For instance, only two works were selected as representatives, which may not fully represent the cultural and social contexts of the two countries. In addition, the creation and reception of film and television works are complex processes that are influenced by a variety of factors, and extracting conclusions from only these two works may be biased.

Overall, this study not only provides an in-depth understanding of the cultural differences between Chinese and American TV dramas but also offers valuable references for the production and promotion of cross-cultural film and television works. It highlights the importance of in-depth research on audiences from different cultures and how to deliver and resonate effectively in the era of globalization.

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