

# A study of cross-cultural communication strategies of American TV series in China from the perspective of encoding and decoding —illustrated by the example of Modern Family

Weiqli Lin\*

College of Foreign Studies, Minnan Normal University, Zhangzhou, China

**Abstract.** This paper analyzes the American drama "Modern Family" by using Stuart Hall's "encoding/decoding" theory. Modern Family uses universal themes and a "modern" plot to attract Chinese viewers, and uses diverse characters to bring a sense of psychology and identity to decoders. The American values embodied in the show mainly focus on values related to diversity and confident low-context culture. The decoders mainly show a hegemonic position on episodes such as the way of education between parents and children, a negotiated position on episodes that go against traditional concepts, and an antagonistic position on the ideological, political, and economic levels of the episodes.

## 1 Introduction

Stuart Hall's "Coding and Decoding in Television Discourse" broke the traditional linear communication thinking and proposed three audience decoding positions, which left a profound impact on subsequent communication studies. As a model of successful cross-cultural communication overseas, American dramas have been favored by the Chinese market. This paper aims to further reflect on the dissemination of Chinese dramas overseas by combining the excellent American drama "Modern Family" with "coding/decoding". Modern Family is an American sitcom TV series, which reflects various aspects of American cultural characteristics and values. By analyzing the coding of Modern Family and the decoding behavior of its audience, we can further analyze the coding factors of the successful cross-cultural dissemination of the American drama Modern Family in China, and at the same time, by exploring the decoding situation of the audience and the reasons behind it, we can reflect on the reasons for the failure of the decoding of domestic dramas overseas and explore valuable strategies for the cross-cultural dissemination of Chinese movies and TV overseas.

## 2 Hall's Encoding/Decoding

In "Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse," Hall argues that in the communication process, the codes of encoding and decoding are not symmetrical. And the degree of this asymmetry, i.e. the degree of misunderstanding, depends on the degree of asymmetry in the position and structure of the encoder and decoder. In order to do further semiotic analysis, the particular codes

\*905091492@qq.com

that we use to symbolize a certain meaning in the structural surface of television should be analyzed.[1]

In the "encoding/decoding", we can see that TV discourse cannot be separated from the combination of ideology and its influence on ideology. The overseas export of TV programs is not only at the level of cultural export, but also at the level of influencing ideology. According to a survey conducted by scholars, among 100 respondents, the popularity of Thai dramas accounted for 18%, Korean dramas accounted for 27%, Japanese dramas accounted for 20%, and American dramas accounted for 35%, and among overseas dramas, American dramas were the most popular in the Chinese market[2]. American values have been gradually accepted by Chinese viewers with the spread of TV programs, among which the concepts, delivery methods and effects of American dramas to Chinese viewers have to be examined. Using the "coding/decoding" theory to analyze the coding factors in American dramas and their decoding in China is helpful to further analyze the values conveyed in the dramas and the acceptance of Chinese viewers.

## 3 Coding in Modern Family's TV Discourse

### 3.1 Coding of thematic content

The theme of a TV program sets the overall tone of its main story, and "content is king" has always been a concept respected by film and television producers. It seems that the popularity of the TV show "Modern Family" is not a coincidence, which is also inseparable from the attraction and resonance of its theme to the audience. The

theme of "Modern Family" can be summarized into two points: one is a universal theme, and the other is "modern".

One of them is the universal theme, "Modern Family" is set in a large family with three families, and the story cannot be separated from the dabbling of affection and love.

Coding for family content, the end of the first season of Modern Family sets the tone for the entire show with the timeless theme of love. The episodes often begin with family drama, and after a series of plot twists, the family finally understands and tolerates each other, and ends with a beautiful Chicken Soup for the Soul review of the episode. The episodes reflect the omnipresent support and tolerance between relatives, but also portray the troubles, contradictions and chaos that every family goes through.

Coding about love content, the love in "Modern Family" includes the love of fathers and mothers, but also the plot of the love of the younger generation of children. How to resolve conflicts and maintain love between couples in each small family are also issues that every viewer needs to face. What really attracts the audience is not only the truthfulness of these episodes, their comedic effect, the touching and warmth they bring, but also the way the characters solve the small farces in their lives and continue to look ahead and the inspiration and reflection they bring to the audience.

The second is "modern", as the name "Modern Family", the story is set in the 21st century, technologically advanced, avant-garde modern society, the episode is not short of the characteristics of the modern social context. Phil's obsession with electronic products and his fervor for buying iPads combine the characteristics of the 21st century, when technology is developing rapidly and electronic products are being replaced rapidly. Besides, the marginal voices are gradually being heard by society, including colored people and the LGBT community. The series even boldly includes a gay couple in the main story line, and the main characters participate in the march to defend the rights of gay lovers and women. The series is a positive response to the current situation of the times and the policies of the country.

Psychological identification is an important psychological process for viewers. The narrative of a TV program needs to resonate with viewers and further make them accept the ideological constructs in the episode in order to obtain their psychological identity or identity. [3]Modern Family" gives viewers a sense of psychological identity by choosing universal themes. The "modern" story setting and the "modern" ideology bring the TV show closer to the audience, which are the reasons why "Modern Family" can attract Chinese viewers.

### 3.2 Coding of character settings

There are eleven main characters in Modern Family, each with very distinctive character traits and each belonging to a different group in society. The following is a table analyzing the characters in terms of characteristics, costumes, and identity symbols.

**Table 1.** Characters' code

Family	Roles	Characteristic Code	Costume Code	Identity code
Jay & Gloria	Jay	Traditional, rich, tolerant, stubborn	Loose casual sweat-shirt, suit	The Aging American Rich Class
	Gloria	outspoken, supportive, open, Hispanic	Tight dress, high heels, bright lipstick	Hispanic beauty
	Manny	Literary, brave, mature, Hispanic	Loose fitting shirt	Hispanic
Claire & Phil	Clare	Controlling, perfectionist	Casual wear, suits	Housewife
	Phil	Open, affable	Suits	Middle Class
	Hailey	Pretty, rebellious	Short skirts	Beauty
	Alex	Nerd	T-shirt shirt	Nerd
	Luke	Silly	Casual wear	Weak student
Mitchell & Cameron	Mitchell	expressive	Casual wear, suits	Gay, intellectuals
	Cameron	Enthusiastic, dramatic	Casual wear, sports-wear	Gay
	Lilly	mean	Casual wear	Asian

As you can see from the character personality trait symbols, each character in "Modern Family" possesses different characteristics. Although Jay is relatively traditional in his outlook, he also tends to be the one who accommodates others in the episodes. Manny's hobbies are not the mainstream interests of the children, but he is still brave and determined to stay true to himself. According to Lacan's "mirror stage" theory, "At 6-18 months, infants are able to recognize who they are through mirror images, a sign of self-identification and self-establishment." [4] The characters in the play have similar personalities, hobbies, strengths and weaknesses to the audience, and these characteristics allow the audience to find their own shadows in the mirror image of the characters in the play, triggering psychological identity.

In terms of the groups represented by each character, the play includes characters representing the rich American class, the middle class, and intellectuals, as well as marginalized groups. In addition, there are characters representing various groups such as housewives, lawyers, and real estate agents. It fully shows the living conditions and personalities of people with various identities in the United States, bringing freshness to Chinese viewers while Chinese viewers can also gain identity from the groups represented by some of the characters.

Meaning can only be created when "reality," expression and ideology are combined into what appears to be a coherent, natural unity[5]. Modern Family further contributes to the creation of meaning in the content of the show by portraying the characters' characteristics, costumes, and identities in a more three-dimensional way.

### 3.3 Coding of American values

John Fiske sees television as a "cultural factor"[5], where the content of television programs can convey meaning by focusing on symbols of the same nature over time, serving as an important bridge for the transmission of national ideology. The typical American values of the television program Modern Family are also present everywhere, most notably in the diversity that the United States has always promoted, as well as in the expression of ideas such as straightforwardness and self-confidence in self-identity.

The United States is widely known as the "melting pot", and diversity is the most prominent characteristic that Modern Family wants to show. From the setting of the character groups in the show, the main characters are ethnically American, Latino and Asian, and the supporting characters are African-American and more; the personalities of Paul are even more diverse: introverted, outgoing and enlightened ..... In the episode, each person has a variety of possibilities, housewife Claire can return to work again to take over Jay's closet company, but also to run for mayor. When a character chooses one more possibility, the other characters in the show often react with full support. The new choices of characters and the support of other characters behind them reveal the esteem of American society for the development of personal diversity.

Diversity has even become a form of "political correctness" in the U.S. nowadays, and this is reflected in the episode. When Mitchell and Cameron are looking for a kindergarten for Lily, many schools use diversity as a criterion for admission. Diversity has become a kind of correctness, only diversity is the best, and the episode also satirizes to some extent the excessive pursuit of diversity in American society.

Modern Family also highlights America's affirmation of self, with characters emphasizing self-confidence and self-identity. When the characters in the show are not confident in their appearance and learning, the characters are choosing to encourage. Unlike the frustration education that was popular in China earlier, the encouragement education in American families places more emphasis on individual self-confidence. In addition, the play also reflects the straightforwardness of American society in a low-context culture. There are many conflicts within the family, and most of them are solved through communication and understanding. In a low-context culture, people are used to expressing their opinions directly without being subtle and roundabout.

## 4 Chinese audience decoding situation

In "Encoding and Decoding in Television Discourse," Hall acknowledges audience activism and proposes three audience decoding positions: the hegemonic-dominant position, the negotiated position, and the confrontational position.

### 4.1 Hegemony - dominant position

Chinese viewers mostly show a dominant stance on the content of the drama with the handling of parent-child relationship and love between husband and wife. The majority of decoders approved of the tolerance of family members and the way of educating children shown in the drama. The problems in life encountered by the characters in the drama are problems encountered by the general public, and as the drama develops, the characters often end up with the idealized ending of solving the problems and mutual understanding and tolerance among family members according to the plot arrangement. Regardless of whether the characters' solutions are correct or not, decoders can only see the side of perfect ending and idealize that the methods adopted by the characters can be applied to their own lives. In this case, viewers do not just see TV shows as a tool for their usual entertainment and recreation, but even interpret them as a guide for their own lives.

### 4.2 Negotiated position

Influenced by traditional Chinese beliefs, Chinese viewers negotiate their position when watching content related to "early love" and low-context culture. In Chinese tradition, women are expected to be chaste and falling in love is considered a taboo during adolescence, leading many people to be overly sensitive to intimate relationships between men and women. With the progress of thinking, the public gradually began to look at intimate relationships between men and women in a positive way, but traditional thinking still influences the public to a certain extent. In the drama when Hailey and her boyfriend sit side by side on the bed to watch the video, many Chinese viewers said they could understand such intimacy, but they would not accept doing so. In addition, influenced by the high-context culture, when the audience sees the characters in the drama solving problems through communication, they praise communication as a way, but in their own lives they do not choose to speak directly to the problems of the conflicting parties. These behaviors demonstrate a negotiated position that decoders do not fully endorse, although they agree with what is shown in the play.

### 4.3 Opposite position

Chinese decoders' confrontational stance is mainly manifested in economic, political and ideological aspects. Some viewers analyzed the economic strength of the

three families in Modern Family and believed that Modern Family promoted the concept of "having money makes you happy". Some viewers think that the family mode of the three families in "Modern Family" are all male-dominated, and that the characters are all set based on traditional stereotypes, such as the prejudice that a smart kid must be a nerd and a good-looking person must be poor in study. They contend that Modern Family looks modern but is actually very conservative, which obviously contradicts the intention of the coder.

## 5 Conclusion

Modern Family" uses universal themes and a "modern" plot to attract Chinese viewers. It uses the portrayal of characters' characteristics, costumes and identities, combined with the characters' scenes, decorations and props to create a coherent and natural unified character image, which further serves as a reflection of various American values in the drama. Most viewers show a dominant position on the drama's education styles, a negotiated position on plots that run counter to traditional concepts, and a opposite position on the ideological and economic aspects. The reason for the successful cross-cultural export of Modern Family in China cannot be separated from

Modern Family's function in the minds of decoders. For viewers, Modern Family is not only an entertainment pastime in daily life, but also a life guide to help the public create good families atmosphere.

## References

1. Hall, S. (2007). Encoding and decoding in the television discourse. In CCCS selected working papers (pp. 402-414). Routledge.
2. Li Xiaoping. Analysis of the spread of American drama culture in China and its influence in the Internet era[J]. TV Guide,2017(20):14-15.
3. Ji Dongdong, GAO Na. Emotional narrative, reality mapping and psychological identity--interpretation of the audience network evaluation of domestic hit dramas[J]. DOI: 10.16531/j.cnki.1000-8977.2021.05.014.
4. H. W. Fang, Postmodernist Cultural Psychology: A Study of Lacan, Shanghai Sanlian Bookstore, 2000, p. 211.
5. John Fiske; translated by Qi A-hong and Zhang Kun. Television Culture [M]. Beijing: Commercial Press, 2005.08.