

Construction of Chinese-American Women's Identity from the Perspective of Cultural Dimensions: A Case Study of Fresh off the Boat Season 1

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Abstract. Fresh Off the Boat is the first American family sitcom in the 21st century centered on a Chinese family. It depicts the story of the Huang family from Taiwan, China, who moved from Chinatown in Washington, D.C., to settle in Orlando, Florida, in 1995. Taking the first season of Fresh Off the Boat as the research object, this study focuses on its core female characters, Jessica Huang and Grandma, aiming to explore the image construction mechanism of Chinese immigrant women in Western mainstream media under the context of globalization. Adopting case analysis and semiotic analysis, this paper analyzes the image construction, characteristics and underlying reasons of the major Chinese female characters based on Roland Barthes' semiotics and Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory. The study finds that the female characters vividly demonstrate the complex game and dynamic negotiation across different cultural dimensions through a series of specific material symbols. They are reshaped from stereotyped objects "being spoken for" into proactive "cultural negotiators" and "spatial sovereigns". Such image reconstruction provides an enlightening sample of discourse strategies for cross-cultural communication and the international communication of Chinese culture.

Keywords: Cultural Dimension Theory, construction of Chinese-American women's identity, cross-cultural communication.

1. Introduction

Set in Homi Bhabha's era of "cultural hybridity", ethnic minority representation in Western mainstream media is a core academic focus, yet Chinese women have long been confined to Orientalist stereotypes (the "Dragon Lady", "Lotus Blossom", "Tiger Mom"), with their subjectivity and complexity obscured by eroticization, mystification and instrumentalization. Premiered in 2015 and adapted from Eddie Huang's memoir, the sitcom Fresh Off the Boat subverts such tropes through its complex, dynamic female leads Jessica Huang and the Grandma, providing an ideal research case [1].

This study fills the gap of insufficient systematic theoretical analysis of the show's core female characters in existing research, and is of great significance for subverting Chinese-American

women's Western media stereotypes, enriching cross-cultural research on their images, and exploring their cultural identity construction and adaptation strategies, while offering a reference for future studies on ethnic minority women in similar dramas.

Focusing on Jessica Huang and the Grandma, the study analyzes the Hofstede's Cultural Dimension characteristics in their behaviors, the visual and narrative symbols shaping their cultural identities, and their cultural adaptation strategies in the face of Western mainstream culture. Its ultimate goal is to reveal how the sitcom transcends traditional stereotypes and breaks the gender-ethnic double shackles for Chinese-American women through the above explorations.

It addresses three core questions:

1. What key dimensions of Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory are reflected in Jessica's and the Grandma's family and social behaviors, and in what ways?
2. What types of visual and narrative symbols does the sitcom employ to construct and reconstruct Chinese-American women's cultural identity, and what are their functions?
3. What specific cultural adaptation strategies do Jessica and the Grandma adopt to break the gender-ethnic double shackles under Western mainstream cultural impact, and how are these strategies implemented?

2. Literature review

Cultural dimension analysis is a core research field, with scholars mainly applying Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory to explore the Huang family's cultural adaptation predicaments and integration paths. Jiang Runyuan's representative study examines Sino-US cross-cultural conflicts from the dimensions of Power Distance, Femininity vs Masculinity, and Long-Term vs Short-Term Orientation through specific plot cases [2]. He identifies the embodiment of high power distance in the Chinese family—Jessica's absolute domestic authority—and the family's adoption of Western low power distance logic in social rights protection, filling the gap in scenario-based analysis of cultural differences [2].

Kuang Fang and Tian Dexin further expand this research by focusing on Sino-Western face concept differences under Hofstede's framework [3]. They reveal the deep connection between face concepts and Power Distance, Collectivism vs Individualism, and Masculinity vs Femininity: Chinese culture prioritizes collective face and positive face maintenance via euphemism, while Western culture emphasizes individual negative face and free action, refining the micro manifestations of cultural conflicts [3].

Academics generally affirm the Huang family's "cultural root adherence + American culture adaptation" practice, a view consistent with Xu Xiaobao's research on the second-generation Chinese-Americans' cultural integration as the core of their American Dream [4].

In journalism and communication, studies focus on the show's image subversion, Chinese element presentation and audience acceptance. Sun Lianmi notes its subversion of stereotyped Chinese images in Western media, while Wu Kaixuan points out the duality in its portrayal of Chinese culture—acknowledging Chinese intelligence yet containing one-sided depictions—offering suggestions for Chinese TV drama creation [5,6]. Yang Jiabo et al. conduct an innovative discourse analysis of 103 IMDb audience comments based on Homi Bhabha's "Third Space" theory, identifying four acceptance discourse patterns and deepening the understanding of Chinese culture's cross-cultural communicability [7].

Overall, existing research forms two camps of linguistic application and journalism and communication, featuring interdisciplinary analysis. However, it has two gaps: the lack of comparative empirical research on the show's female characters (especially intergenerational ones)

under a systematic cross-cultural theoretical model, and the insufficient integration of non-verbal elements such as visual symbols and spatial layout into the analysis framework, failing to fully interpret the sitcom's audio-visual signification system. This study addresses these gaps by analyzing Chinese-American female images in the show's first season through Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory and semiotic close reading.

3. Case analysis

3.1. Semiotic spectrum

The sitcom materializes abstract cultural values through a sophisticated symbol system, enabling the audience to intuitively perceive the identity coordinates of Chinese-American women. According to the symbols appearing in the first season, the author has formulated a Visual and Material Symbol Decoding Table, which analyzes the identity representation of the main female characters Jessica Huang and the Grandma from the perspectives of material, spatial, dietary and physical symbols, and combines Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory to analyze the corresponding cultural traits [8].

Table 1. Visual and material symbol decoding table

Symbol Category	Observed Signifier	Hidden Signified	Cultural Dimension (Hofstede)
Material Symbols	The free sample Jessica holds in the supermarket 2. The job advertisement Jessica holds	Profound survival anxiety in the early stage of immigration	High long-term orientation (accumulating for the future) and high uncertainty avoidance (reducing risks through material preparation)
	Eddie's straight-A report card held by Jessica	Anxiety about the future	Collectivist perspective: concerning the dignity of the "Wong family" in the community; Long-term orientation perspective: reflecting the strong future-planning consciousness in Chinese culture; High uncertainty avoidance
	The palm-leaf fan held by Grandma 2. The ball of yarn held by Grandma	Adherence to traditional culture	Collectivism
Food Symbols	Noodle lunch made by Jessica	Adherence to her own food culture; A cultural identity barrier; adherence to native culture	Collectivism (ethnic identity)
	Stinky tofu made by Jessica at the gathering	Adherence to her own food culture; A cultural identity barrier; adherence to native culture	Collectivism
Spatial Symbols	Chinese-style round table at home Blue-and-white porcelain display A smoky kitchen full of Chinese ingredients Red couplets at home The God of Wealth shrine at home Landscape paintings on the wall	Tenacious adherence to the family structure and cultural traditions on the verge of disorder in a foreign country	A place for the cohesion of collectivist emotions (the whole family eating together) and a venue for Jessica to exercise maternal authority (an internal manifestation of high power distance in the family)

Table 1. (continued)

Body / Clothing Symbols	Jessica's professional suit, neat short hair, and serious expression	Professionalism, defensiveness	Masculinity (success and assertiveness); Low power distance (daring to challenge external authorities) and high uncertainty avoidance (establishing a sense of order and control through a rigorous appearance)
	Jessica's cheongsam	Identity anxiety	Collectivism
	Grandma's wheelchair	Physical limitation; a mobile "fortress" where she sticks to her own cultural circle	Collectivism

As shown in Table 1, the author identifies several representative visual symbols. Jessica's obsession with coupons and free food samples signifies survival anxiety and resource control during early immigration, reflecting High Long-Term Orientation and High Uncertainty Avoidance.

Dietary symbols like stinky tofu and chicken feet mark cultural boundaries and reveal incommensurable cultural systems. Traditional Chinese medicine embodies an Oriental holistic, long-term philosophy, contrasting with Western short-term, confrontational medical thinking [8].

The kitchen acts as a cultural fortress and power field. Jessica's busy, ingredient-filled Chinese kitchen contrasts sharply with her neighbor's open, social kitchen, representing collectivist values and her maternal authority, while maintaining kitchen order symbolizes her adherence to family and cultural traditions abroad.

Physical and clothing symbols convey defense, authority and identity. Jessica's formal, structured attire contrasts with her neighbor's casual style, projecting Low Power Distance and High Uncertainty Avoidance. Grandma Huang's wheelchair signifies physical limits but also serves as a mobile cultural fortress.

3.2. Behavioral logic and conflict negotiation under cultural dimensions

3.2.1. Jessica's "straight-A" challenge

After Eddie got straight A's, Jessica saw this as proof that American public school standards were too low and wasting his talent—the core scenario of the case. She took the A report card, went directly to the principal, and firmly demanded more challenging courses.

From cultural dimensions, this behavior has three meanings. First, Collectivism: Eddie's grades are not personal but tied to the Huang family's reputation and honor in the new community. Second, Long-Term Orientation: her anger comes from anxiety over his long-term development, fearing insufficient challenge will harm his future. Third, Power Distance: as a Low Power Distance culture holder, she challenges American educational authority rather than passively obeying, negotiating equally and firmly.

From cultural adaptation, Jessica uses an integration strategy: she does not reject the American system but seeks better resources within it, driven by Chinese educational values. Her assertiveness is redefined as positive initiative to fight for her child's rights.

3.2.2. The grandma's ritual to drive away bad luck from the Huang family

In Episode 11, Jessica thought the check numbered 4444 brought bad luck and asked Grandma Huang to perform a ritual. Using the Chinese almanac and other oriental symbols, the ritual was completed before the whole family. Grandma spoke almost no English, communicating only with gestures and simple Chinese, following traditional Chinese cultural norms.

From cultural dimensions, her superstition reflects High Uncertainty Avoidance. As an elder with traditional knowledge, she held a kind of authoritative superiority, though such authority was unrecognized in the cross-cultural context.

Regarding cultural adaptation, Grandma adopted a separation strategy. Her cognition and life were deeply rooted in Chinese culture. The well-meaning ritual strengthened cultural boundaries; her language barrier hindered communication but also protected her cultural space and resisted assimilation.

3.2.3. Jessica's "impression management" in community socialization

Table 2. Cross-cultural image comparison and analysis framework (intergenerational comparison)

Character	Core Events	Summary	Conclusion	Cultural Adaptation Strategy
Jessica Huang	1. Jessica tries to integrate into the white female community.2. Jessica and her husband want to join the country club.3. Jessica watches Melrose Place with neighbors.4. Jessica is influenced by American food culture.	Attempts to integrate through "rules" (integration strategy).	Reflects different approaches to uncertainty avoidance among Chinese-American women of different generations.	Integration
Jessica Huang	1. Jessica thinks changing shoes at home is the only sign that distinguishes her from Americans.	Constantly reminds herself not to forget her origins.	Reflects different approaches to uncertainty avoidance among Chinese-American women of different generations.	Separation
Grandma Huang	Remains silent, speaks Chinese, and often wears Chinese-style clothing.	Refuses to assimilate.	Reflects different approaches to uncertainty avoidance	Separation
Grandma Huang	Grandma eats potato chips and listens to the radio.	Impact of American culture.		Integration

As shown in Table 2 and Table 3, from a situational comparison perspective, enthusiastic white neighbors frequently invite the Huang family to participate in leisure parties, but Jessica often refuses on the grounds of financial planning and supervising children's study. Even if she attends, she feels out of place and is always eager to leave. As a cultural symbol of the American middle class, the party represents a life concept of Short-Term Orientation, that is, the pursuit of instant pleasure and relaxed social interaction, and also reflects the cultural characteristics of Low Uncertainty Avoidance—acting casually and lacking planning. Jessica's refusal and discomfort are also embodied through body language such as stiff smiles and frequent clock-watching.

An in-depth analysis from the perspective of cultural dimensions shows that this contradiction is first reflected in the conflict between Long-Term Orientation and Short-Term Orientation. Jessica regards aimless social interaction as a "waste of time", believing that such time should be invested in activities that can generate future benefits such as study, work and planning. This is a profound collision between two different time concepts and life philosophies. Second, it reflects the difference between Collectivism and Individualism. Party culture focuses on the instant release of personal emotions and interpersonal connection, while behind Jessica's behavior is the collectivist thinking that prioritizes family responsibilities and future planning.

From the perspective of immigrants' cultural adaptation strategies, Jessica's performance wavers between integration and separation: she has the willingness to enter the American social field, reflecting a tendency of cultural integration, but she cannot really internalize its social rules. In the end, she often chooses to retreat and return to the life "backstage" dominated by her own cultural logic, which reveals the essence of cultural separation. This contradictory state truly reflects the realistic predicament of the first-generation immigrants in the process of cultural adaptation, as well as their identity hybridity when living between two cultures.

Table 3. Cross-cultural image comparison and analysis framework (cultural comparison)

Character	Summary	Cultural Dimensions	Conclusion
Jessica Huang	Pursues achievement and guards against risks	Collectivism, high uncertainty avoidance	Such conflicts, presented in the form of comedic clashes, dissolve the originally heavy racial prejudice.
Neighbor Honey	Pursues personal enjoyment and relaxed social interactions	Individualism, low uncertainty avoidance	

It deconstructs one-dimensional stereotypes: Jessica is more than a "Tiger Mom," showing contextualized strength in education, consumption, and social life; Grandma transcends the "silent Oriental elder" trope, using silence as a form of cultural persistence [9,10].

The series also portrays these women as active cultural negotiators and spatial sovereigns. Rather than being passively assimilated, they strategically define their stance toward mainstream culture.

Using comedic rhetoric, the show turns deep cultural conflicts into accessible humor. Laughter softens confrontation, helping mainstream audiences understand cultural differences while offering Chinese-American viewers resonance and catharsis, forming a sophisticated cross-cultural communication practice.

4. Conclusion

Taking the first season of *Fresh Off the Boat* as the research object, this study conducts a systematic textual interpretation of the images of Chinese-American women represented by Jessica and the Grandma under the framework of Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory, combining semiotic analysis and case thick description methods.

The research results show that with the help of diverse visual symbols and narrative conflicts, the sitcom accurately depicts the complex wandering state and dynamic choice behaviors of the first-generation Chinese immigrant women on the core cultural dimensions such as Collectivism vs Individualism, High vs Low Power Distance, and Long-Term vs Short-Term Orientation. Among them, Jessica's image reflects the "strategic integration" cultural adaptation path of Chinese immigrant women: her "strength", which is labeled by the outside world, is essentially the embodiment of survival wisdom and subjective initiative in a heterogeneous cultural environment. The Grandma's image, on the other hand, represents a "gentle yet firm" cultural separation strategy: her silent adherence to her own culture has become an important check and balance against the pressure of cultural homogenization, also highlighting the core value of cultural diversity.

At the same time, the sitcom has realized the narrative reconstruction of the image of Chinese-American women, pushing them from the "Other" gazed at from a Western perspective to the "subject" with the right to self-cultural interpretation to a certain extent, and making them "negotiators" who actively use cultural resources for cross-cultural dialogue and identity construction.

Thus, it is further concluded that the shaping of the images of Chinese-American immigrant women in the first season of *Fresh Off the Boat* breaks the stereotyped expression of Asian images on the traditional American screen and enriches the spectrum of Asian film and television images. Moreover, the cultural expression logic presented by this image shaping provides a key enlightenment for cross-cultural communication in the era of globalization: effective cross-cultural dialogue and identity construction are not based on the complete assimilation of one party's culture, but on the face-up recognition of cultural differences and the true display of the complexity of immigrants' cultural experience. Only through dynamic negotiation between different cultures can the coexistence and in-depth understanding of various cultures be realized.

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