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Keeping Up Appearances before the “Other”? Interculturality and Occidentalism in the Educational TV-Program “Happy Chinese”

Abstract “Happy Chinese” or *kuai le hanyu* is an educational melodrama produced by the Chinese TV channel CCTV in 2009. Aiming to improve foreign learners’ Chinese language skills, the plot revolves around Susan, an American, staying with her former Chinese classmate’s family. “Happy Chinese” proposes both language and cultural learning. In this paper, the authors are examining the first seven episodes marking Susan’s arrival in China for the Spring Festival. Basing the study on a postmodern and critical approach to the “intercultural,” as well as on a critical view towards Orientalism and Occidentalism, the authors are interested in how the programme constructs the arrival of the American and the way she is perceived and represented by the “locals.” The authors are also looking into what the Chinese family teaches Susan about being Chinese and, at the same time, the tensions that a certain tendency to “keep up appearances” and appear “real Chinese” before her trigger in the family, across generation and gender. The research tools used to analyze the data are derived from discursive pragmatics.

Keywords intercultural communication, identity, Occidentalism, Chinese as a foreign language, education through media

Introduction

Since the beginning of China’s modernization process in the early 1980s, attitudes toward Mandarin Chinese or *Putonghua* have changed worldwide. As

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such, a greater global demand for Chinese language education has emerged in recent decades (Zhao & Huang, 2010, p. 127; Ding & Saunders, 2006, p. 19). For example, in 2009, the population of Chinese language learners was over 50 million worldwide (CCTV News, 2009).

In order to promote Chinese language and culture, China has established overseas non-profit public institutions such as Confucius Institutes since 2004, and the Chinese Language Council International and a subsidiary office known as Hanban in 2006 (Hanban/Confucius Institute Headquarters, n.d.; Office of Chinese Language Council International, 2006, p. 4). The current promotion of Chinese language learning throughout the world by the Chinese government is seen as a way to shape the country's image and an "effort to accomplish its foreign policy goals through the use of soft power" (Hartig, 2012, p. 53; Gil, 2008, p. 116). Being closely related to Hanban's principles of "going global, public, and multimedia," China's important state media institutions, especially China Central Television (CCTV), are allocated large human and economic resources in response to the mission statement of the Communist Party of China (CPC) about the shape and direction of Chinese media's efforts to "go global" and promote "the images and voice" of China (Li, as cited in Sun, 2010, pp. 54–55; Hartig, 2012, p. 54). Therefore, through its global coverage, the goals of promoting Chinese language and culture as well as the country's image are combined in CCTV's international programs targeting Chinese language learners overseas.

Very little has been written about such programs in the fields of education and in relation to interculturality. In this paper, the authors examine a programme created by CCTV called "Happy Chinese" or *kuaile hanyu*. Produced by CCTV International Channel since 2009, "Happy Chinese" is an educational melodrama. The program proposes both language and cultural learning that aims to improve foreign learners' Chinese language skills. Currently there are two seasons of the program (CCTV News, 2010). The first season, comprising of 116 episodes on "Daily Life" gives lessons on the use of daily language in family and school situations. The plot of the first season revolves around Susan, an American staying with her former Chinese classmate's family. In this paper, the authors examine the first seven episodes marking Susan's arrival in China for the Spring Festival. The authors' interest is in how the arrival of this stranger is depicted in the episodes, especially in relation to the "intercultural." At the outset it is important to say that these seven episodes are not representative of the entire series as they introduce a much longer and complex narrative developed throughout the 116 episodes of the series.

A lot has been written on how the "West" perceives and constructs the "East" (often called *Orientalism* after Edward Said's Foucauldian take on imperial discourse, see Said, 1979) but not as much on the contrary, especially in the

fields of intercultural communication and education. This paper represents an attempt to examine potential counter-discourses, which the authors name *Occidentalism* after Carrier (1995).

The “Intercultural,” Occidentalism, and Othering

In the field of education, the “intercultural” is being increasingly described as a polysemic and problematic notion (Dervin et al., 2011; Piller, 2011; Aikman, 2012). The authors’ approach to the intercultural critically reviews “ahistorical” and “depoliticized, and uncritical ethnocentric benevolence” (Andreotti, 2011, p. 144), which is often found in the treatment of the notion. The authors also attempt to move away from an overemphasis on the problematic concept of culture, which is often a “substitute for a demonstration” (Bayart, 2005, p. 10) when analyzing interactions between persons (from the Latin *persona*, mask) whose multifaceted identities [gender, social class, generation, etc., but also (inter-)subjectivity] should be taken into account. For Andreotti, an overemphasis on culture “tends to confirm racist assumptions of the superiority of the self as seen through the eyes of others, disguised in a politically correct discourse of mutual learning” (2011, p. 144). She also argues that the use of the concept of culture casts aside questions of inequality and privilege (p. 156). In a similar vein, Amartya Sen (2006) claims: “invoking the magical power of some allegedly predominant identity... drowns other affiliations” (p. xv). Culture and identity (especially in their national forms) often work hand in hand in leading to these problems.

The context of this study, China, has often been presented in popular discourses, politics, and research, as a “monocultural” country, regardless of its very large and diverse population (Cheng, 2009; Dervin, 2011). But, as Pieterse has argued about Nation-States, “‘national’ identities are *mélange* identities, combinations of people that have been conventionally amalgamated under a political heading” (Pieterse, 2004, p. 35). This obviously also applies to China.

In the politics of differences that governs the intercultural, a lot of attention has been paid to how China has been orientalized by “Westerners.” This article contributes to the discussion by exploring the fact that essentialism and culturalism, or the reduction of the “Self” and the “Other” to solid cultural entities (Abdallah-Preteille, 1986), are also phenomena that can be identified in the Chinese context when the Other, the Westerner, is talked about. In other words, the authors argue that essentialism is a “two-way street” and that, if there is Orientalism, Occidentalism is also very much present in how China, for example, constructs the rest of the world. The authors shall also argue that Orientalism feeds Occidentalism and vice versa.

This is why the authors move away from an approach to the intercultural that relies entirely on knowledge about the actors’ culture (China vs. the West). In

terms of method, the authors thus follow Shi-Xu (2001) when he asserts that “language and communication are a joint social activity that is embedded in broader cultural and historical and by implication unequal-power context and that, more particularly, current intercultural communication is itself part of the globalized competition, mass human migration, unending local conflict and hostility, where social injustice and alienation are the order of the day” (p. 280). Representations of the Self and the Other as well as the comparison of cultural difference (“knowledge”) cannot but lead to an exercise of power, be they in the “West” or the “East”. Besides, for Shi-Xu, far too many explanations for intercultural communication are flawed and fail to take into account certain aspects of world- and meaning-making:

- the idea of misunderstanding is often explained by “imprecise or wrong translation” of an intended meaning, rather than the co-construction of identities in specific micro- and macro-contexts;
- problems are always attributed to an individual (often the Other) “not to the broader social and cultural traditions and to the interaction and relation between these traditions in which the communication takes place”;
- Shi-Xu even goes as far as arguing that it is often the Other who is to be blamed as well as her language and culture;
- Aspects beyond “culture” should not be overlooked (gender, age, social status, etc.; pp. 280–281).

In the context of a TV programme dedicated to the teaching of Chinese, produced in China, it is easy to see how the aspect of power can play a role; it is up to the show producers to decide what image(s) of both China and the outside world they want to create. As such it is a construction rather than some sort of revelation of a truth about China, Chinese culture and Chinese people that we are most probably witnessing in the program.

In his postmodern critical approach to intercultural communication and ideology, Holliday (2010) also puts power at the center of his analysis of the intercultural. Amongst other things, he demonstrates clearly how culture and prejudice can work hand in hand in everyday life and how the former can lead “easily and sometimes innocently to the reduction of the foreign Other as culturally deficient” (p. ix) when one tries to describe and define a culture in opposition to another (p. 8), even in research where such ideas can be presented as neutral and objective. His central analytical element is ideology, or rather “ideological imaginations of culture” which can lead to the “demonization of a particular foreign other” (p. 1). One interesting instance that Holliday takes up in his book is the dichotomy of individualism and collectivism. His conclusions, based on a criticism of “Western” thinking, are that “individualism represents imagined positive characteristics, and collectivism represents imagined negative

characteristics” in research on the intercultural (p. 9). He also criticizes the “lack of belief that the non-Western Other can be complex and sophisticated just like us” (p. 74).

Through social psychology (see Gillespie, 2006), amongst others, we know that “people tend to positively differentiate themselves and their in-group from other people and out-groups” (Gillespie, 2007, p. 580). Gillespie mentions for example studies on the representation of women and of the Orient which have informed us amply on these issues. This phenomenon has also been referred to as “othering” or turning another person into an Other. This process often leads to hierarchizing the self and one’s group on a higher level but also to “shelter” them from external influences (Holliday, 2010; Gillespie, 2006). But othering can also lead to other strategies such as manipulation, refusal to do something, explaining a mistake, being polite, standing out from the majority. The authors argue that Orientalism and Occidentalism represent similar ways of othering.

Othering also means reducing the Self to certain limited yet positive characteristics while creating the Other. Interestingly many scholars from the field of cultural studies have examined Occidentalism from this perspective, i.e., how “non-Western” individuals or political powers have used othering characteristics imposed on them for their own benefit. Many labels describing this phenomenon can be identified in the literature: “180-degree flip-flop” (Whyte, 1994, p. 40), “Re-orientalism” (Lau & Mendes, 2011) and “Reverse Orientalism” (Hill, 2000, p. 178). Re-Orientalism is defined as “based on how cultural producers with Eastern affiliations come to terms with an orientalised East, whether by complying with perceived expectations of Western readers, by playing (along) with them or by discarding them altogether” (Lau & Mendes, 2011, p. 1). Hill (2000) defines reverse orientalism as “entail(ing) the attribution of a set of cultural values to East and Southeast Asian societies by Western social scientists in order to contrast the recent dynamic progress of Asian development with the stagnation and social disorganisation of contemporary Western economies and societies. The contrast provided legitimation for some of the nation-building policies of political leaders in such countries as Singapore and was incorporated in attempts to identify and institutionalise core values” (p. 178). He shows for example how Confucianism, a term often used to describe Asian societies, became an important aspect of Singaporean politics after 1982. In her analysis of Confucianism in China, Cheng (2009) provides a similar analysis.

How to Approach the Intercultural, Occidentalism, and Othering?

Having now conceptualized the intercultural and Occidentalism beyond solidity (Bauman, 2004), we need to ask ourselves how one can examine the TV program

under scrutiny, given the co-constructionist, contextualized and intersubjectivist approach suggested in the previous section. The following scholars from the fields of applied linguistics and education will guide us here: Shi-Xu (2001), Adrian Holliday (2010), Hoskins and Sallah (2011) and Vanessa Andreotti (2011). In her postcolonial approach to global education, Vanessa Andreotti (2011) proposes to take into account the following important principles when analyzing interculturality:

- from ethnocentrism to a conceptualization of knowledge as located in culture and social/historical contexts;
- from depolitization to analyses of power relations and self-reflexive positioning;
- from ahistoricism to an awareness of the situatedness of selves, relationships and events. (p. 181)

These are important for examining a programme such as “Happy Chinese.” The authors shall try to make an effort to move from ethnocentrism (one of us being Chinese, the other European); to take into account power relations, for instance as the American girl is in a minority in China and a guest who has to abide by the laws of hospitality (Derrida, 2000); to introduce elements of situated selves, relationships, and events in the analysis reflecting “imagined”/real American-Chinese relations in the program. Adrian Holliday (2010) moves in the same direction when he proposes that researchers should “put aside established descriptions,” “seek a broader picture” and “look for the hidden and the unexpressed” (p. 27).

As to Shi-Xu (2001), he also suggests that “we draw active attention to one’s own historical discursive practice in and through which the Other has been represented” (p. 289). For the researcher, analyzing power-oriented representations of the other and the self but also “the discursive complexities, dynamics and ideologies leading to unequal power relations or consequences” is thus essential. In “Happy Chinese” the authors are interested in such aspects which will provide us with information about Occidentalism (see Breidenbach & Nyíri, 2009, p. 340).

Going back to the concept of culture, the authors also feel that it is important to take into account Hoskins and Sallah’s (2011) recent advice on how to work with culture when examining intercultural encounters. They propose (p. 123) that culture be considered complex and that researchers question the voices that attempt to represent a group as well as power relationships. They also suggest moving from an exclusive emphasis on national culture to explore other horizons and intersections between gender, class, ethnicity, generation, etc. (p. 123).

Finally the authors also bear in mind one warning made by Holliday (2010)

but which the authors transfer to Occidentalism: “we need to be careful not too easily to interpret all Western depictions of a non-Western Other as being chauvinistic and not to indulge in the overextending of accusations which give political correctness a bad name” (p. 85). This means that we need to pay attention to the analytical process which should not just consist of seeing Occidentalism everywhere.

The analysis of the data is based on a discourse analysis of verbal interactions, which allowed the authors to identify key excerpts for our problematic. Discursive pragmatics (Dervin, 2011; Johansson & Suomela-Salmi, 2011) was used to examine the construction of the Self and the Other. In short, this approach is interested in (1) how a person constructs her/his discourse, and (2) how she/he negotiates the discourse with others (intersubjectivity). One central aspect of it is to consider a speaker as a heterogeneous subject, meaning an individual who positions her/himself in interaction with others and who uses and manages various discursive and pragmatic strategies to construct the self, the other, surroundings, experiences, etc. Many and varied linguistic elements were used to identify the analyzed excerpts: deictics (markers of person, time and space such as personal pronouns, adverbs, and verbs) which allow speakers to “stage themselves or make themselves manifest in utterances, or on the other hand may decide to distance themselves from it, leaving no explicit signs of their presence or manifesting their attitude in utterances” (Johansson & Suomela-Salmi, 2011, p. 94), nouns which may also express the attitude of a speaker towards a person, a phenomenon, an object, etc. (Paul is a “lazybone”). Finally the authors also examined irony in the episodes.

By concentrating only on verbal aspects of the TV series, the authors are aware of the fact that many other aspects of communication which could provide “evidence” of the construction of Occidentalism could be missing. A semiotic analysis of the actors’ non-verbality (facial expressions, body movement, silence, etc.) for example, and/or camera work (close-up, full shot), might also provide an interesting framework (Berger, 2012). Yet combining a discourse analysis of the seven episodes and a semiotic analysis would exceed the scope of this paper.

Occidentalism in Chinese Media Productions

“Happy Chinese” is very much reminiscent of mainstream Chinese television drama serials. Each of the seven episodes lasts for 14 minutes and follows the same pattern: The first five minutes are devoted to a plot, followed by the explanation of a grammar point and vocabulary, and by the development and conclusion of the storyline. The central character, Susan from America, arrives in China and stays with her Chinese friend’s family, both having to adapt to each

other. Here is how the programme is described by the Confucius Institute Online (2009):

Taking the form of melodrama, “Happy Chinese” aims to improve learners’ listening comprehension and speaking, multi-dimensionally demonstrate the real life of contemporary China, and reflect the unique charm of China today. Stories of the first series of “Happy Chinese” center around Susan, an American student who studies in China. Each part of “Happy Chinese” relates an independent story that constitutes part of the whole plot. The program starts from the elementary patterns such as *nihao* and *xiexie*, mainly teaching everyday expressions for family and school life. Each series of “Happy Chinese” will last one year.

The program was broadcasted by CCTV, China’s national TV broadcaster and main news source in China. According to Han (2011), “it is also an important window through which the Chinese can learn about the outside world, and through which the world can learn about China” (p. 300). As such the channel appears to have intercultural goals. TV signals from the channel are able to reach 140 countries. Chinese language teaching and Chinese studies are part of Chinese public diplomacy (p. 301).

“Happy Chinese” is based on contemporary China and presents a modern vision of the country and its people, or as Liu (2004) puts it, a China representing “a hybrid post-revolutionary culture that embodies the fundamental tensions and contradictions of globalization” (p. 4; see also the study on Chinese migrants within China, which depicts well this diversity, Dong, 2011). Many different generations are represented by the characters: parents, children and grandchildren.

In order to analyze the programme, it was deemed important to acquaint oneself with the literature on how “China” has represented the Other, the Western and the American in its cinema and television. To the authors surprise very little has been written on the topic, whereas hundreds of publications on how the Chinese is represented in Western media are available in the literature. The following presentation is thus based on two recent articles which review questions about Chinese cinema and television.

In her 2012 article, Cao examines how the West has been imagined on Chinese television. She notes that “The West is seen both as an immoral and destructive force and the ultimate source of tools for wealth and power as well as having advanced forms of economic, political, and social institutions” (p. 127). She adds that these views, and especially the portrayal of America has been highly influenced by the first opium war of 1840–1842 (p. 128). The idea of Western powers as invaders of people’s spaces is said to be still prevalent in representation (p. 129). Yet Cao argues that especially representation of China

itself is changing from “victimized weak-link to confident participant, from an angry rebel to constructive partner in shaping a shared world order” (p. 129).

As for the cinema, Xiao published a review article in 2011 about a century of America on Chinese screens in which he first notes that while the West and especially the USA have put China in their cinema (p. 305), the contrary is hardly the truth. In his history of the appearance of Westerners in the Chinese cinema, Xiao explains that the first Westerner to be featured in a Chinese film was a British actor playing an imagined visit of Charlie Chaplin in China (Zhang, S. C., dir., 1922, *Huaji dawang you hua ji* [*The king of comedy visits China*]). Xiao asserts that throughout the history of Chinese cinema, the few foreigners that have appeared in films “function to foreground the shining virtues of the Chinese people” (p. 319). This is the case for example for the film *Love and Death* (1999) which centers around an American character in China.

This short review of Western and American in Chinese cinema and television gives a limited yet interesting background for studying Othering and Occidentalism in the TV programme “Happy Chinese.” Like any media production, the series cannot but be impregnated by representation of the Self (China) and the Other (the West/the USA). This study will try to identify potential intertextuality between the discourses produced for the series and discourses on these items.

Analysis of “Happy Chinese”

Keeping Up Appearances through Traditions?

In the first section of this article, the authors argued by way of social psychology, that the construction of the self as a representative of a nation is always related to how we construct the other and vice versa. It was also explained that Occidentalism works hand in hand with Orientalism. These construction “games” are omnipresent in the first seven episodes of “Happy Chinese” even if the atmosphere is positive and cordial between the characters, the American student Susan and the Chinese family.

Having a foreign guest at home seems to put some pressure on one of the family members at the beginning of the series in particular, the father. A clear generational but also gender difference appears in relation to how the family should treat Susan and behave in front of her. In the second episode of the series called tellingly “Maintaining the image,” a family meeting (“an emergency meeting” according to the mother) is arranged to discuss her stay with the family. For the meeting, the father appears wearing a formal Chinese business suit. He is asked why he is wearing such clothes in the following excerpt:

DW¹: Dad, why?

MU: Our family has got involved in foreign affairs. Susan is in our home.

DW: We've involved in foreign affairs just because of Susan's presence? Does Susan represent the US government?

MU: But we represent a Chinese family. We should pay attention to our image.

DW: (Laughs) Do we have to dress like this even when we eat sunflower seeds at home?

(...)

MU: (Serious face) When we dress like this, we shouldn't eat sunflower seeds at all!

The scene seems to show a certain playful misunderstanding between the children of the family who do not seem to take the father seriously when he asserts that the family is involved in "foreign affairs." Susan's presence leads the father to "retreat" into traditions, presenting the family with an argument of weight: "we represent a Chinese family." This first excerpt shows a gap between a father who seems to believe in typical "Chineseness" (or at least representing it to the Other) and other family members who are playful about his representations.

The father continues explaining what Susan's presence means concretely for the family:

MU: In front of the guest, we should always or really... sit and stand with good manners. (All change their gestures). When we smile, we should show eight teeth, not more and not less. (Showing his teeth).

(...)

MU: Be serious! From now on, no one should make jokes. We should always maintain our polite, graceful, and elegant manners.

This excerpt contains many deontic modalities (should... should...) which contribute to forming a certain image of the "Chinese family" that the father wants to present to Susan. This phenomenon was named here "keeping up appearances before the Other," i.e., showing typical and traditional ("imagined"?) sides of "Chineseness" to please the Other. In other words, the father wants to give a positive, polite but also traditional image of the Chinese. This could be a first sign of Occidentalism and Reverse Orientalism as the father wishes to put forth an image that he expects his guest to wish for. The other members of the family do not seem to approve of the father's wishes. For example the son of the family exclaims after hearing the list of "to dos": "This is overregulation!" Interestingly, this exclamation might surprise Western viewers who are often told

¹ DW = a son; MU = the father; MA = The mother; S = Susan; XW = Xiaowei, son of the family; MM = the Chinese friend, niece of the family. The translations from Chinese are provided by CCTV. The authors made a few corrections.

that Chinese youth submit to their elders (Dervin, 2011).

As we shall see in the next section, farce or comedy appears to be a central element in the depiction of the intercultural encounters between Susan and the Chinese family, especially when Occidentalism is created. In the aforementioned episode, the fact that the father insists on keeping up appearances for the American student leads to an interesting situation where his insistence places him in an awkward situation. The family is sitting at the dinner table for Chinese New Year and they are drinking to each other’s health. Susan takes this quite seriously (she is often portrayed as an over-eager “orientalist” character in the series), and keeps drinking to the father’s health, to which he cannot refuse and drinks every time she raises her glass:

S: I wish uncle good health!

MU: Thank you. (Drinks up the wine in his glass).

MA: You really emptied your glass?

MU: Of course, I did. Our guest is toasting to me, I shouldn’t be impolite.

S: I wish uncle satisfaction in everything! (Refills uncle’s glass).

MU: Thank you! (Drinks up).

DW: You’d better drink no more.

MU: I must drink it. Respecting females is the basic of a gentleman’s good manners.

S: (Refills uncles’ glass). May uncle stay young forever!

MU: Thank you. (Drinks up).

As Susan is learning Chinese this is a good occasion for her to rehearse some of the expressions that she has learnt. Eventually, the father gets very drunk and starts behaving in a strange manner. When he wakes up the next morning, his family criticizes him for having tried to stick to tradition (Reverse Orientalism, see Hill, 2000). This represents in a sense a criticism of the creation and maintenance of a “traditional” Chinese image by the Chinese themselves. It also illustrates a critique of the “solid” intercultural which is based on a representation of static cultural elements that was discussed earlier:

MU: This is not a question of drinking capacity. It’s a question of maintaining the image of Chinese old men.

DW: Just because you insisted on maintaining the image of Chinese old men, you got yourself drunk.

MU: (Checking his outfit). Oh, maintaining the image!

But traditions are not always so clearly discarded in the series as is evidenced in Episode 7 called “I love Peking Opera.” In this episode, Susan expresses her interest in learning Chinese opera with the father of the family, who is a

playwright. The dad accepts the challenge of teaching her and tells his family about this decision in the following dialogue:

MU: Apart from Xiaowei who is away on business, all of you are here. I have something to say. At the persistent request of Susan, I decide to teach her how to sing Peking Opera. (MA shakes her head). She is from a foreign country, travelling thousands of miles to China, and she loves our arts so much. Do you know what Susan said?

(All are shaking heads with the confusing look on their faces).

DW: I love Peking Opera!

MU: (Slaps knees). Yes, that's what Susan said from her heart: "I love Peking Opera!"

DW: I never said that. But...

MU: (Interrupts DW unpleasantly). But what? Both you and Xiaowei are grown-ups. Have you ever asked me to teach you Peking Opera? (DW wants to explain but he doesn't even get a chance). Do you know what old Peking Opera is?

(All shake their heads).

DW: No.

MU: Let me tell you. Peking Opera has existed for over 200 years. But seeing such a wonderful art, none of you wants to make use of me as a resource. None of you wants to be my successor. I'm so disappointed! So disappointed, so disappointed! So I'm holding this family meeting only to seriously ask you to firmly support Susan in her effort to learn Peking Opera.

This scene is interesting as it shows again a potential gap between generations in the Chinese family. The father blames his children for not being interested in a tradition that means a lot to him. The argument of Susan being from abroad is used again to justify his actions and indirectly blame his children for not being interested: "She is from a foreign country, travelling thousands of miles to China, and she loves our arts so much." At the end of the scene, the children share the same argument and one of them says: "You're absolutely right. It's a good thing for a foreign friend to be so keen on traditional Chinese culture." The argument about Susan being foreign ("a foreign friend," "she loves our arts") gives a very positive, "interculturally correct" image of interculturality. This is also shared by Susan herself when she introduces herself "formally" to the family: "My name is Susan. I adore Chinese culture. I once attended a Confucius Institute in America. But I thought that wasn't enough. So I flew to China to further my studies." While in the first episode the critical voice won against a representation of Chinese traditions at home, in this episode, tradition represented by Chinese opera takes over.

This section has demonstrated that the first episodes of the series seem to oscillate between presenting traditions as something to discard of, especially in relation to everyday life, and the importance of art tradition such as the Peking

Opera in the intercultural encounters taking place in the series (Xiao, 2011, p. 319). When “confronting” the foreigner at home, it seems necessary for some members of the family to maintain their image (keeping up appearances), and to show the “shining virtue” of their cultural identity to the Other, even if this virtue seems to be imagined. Occidentalism and its companion, Reverse Orientalism, are thus phenomena that appear to be unstably depicted in the series.

An Intercultural Farce?

As asserted in the previous section, in “Happy Chinese,” comedy and especially farce appear to be central to the depiction of the intercultural encounters that are taking place. According to the *Oxford Dictionary of English* (2005), farce is “a comic dramatic work using buffoonery and horseplay and typically including crude characterization and ludicrously improbable situations.” A theatrical farce, such as Shakespeare’s “Much Ado About Nothing,” usually contains disguise, mistaken identity, absurdity, and improbable situations (Rey-Flaud, 1984; Goffman, 1959). Noteworthy in the series is also the fact that farce is often used to depict other aspects of interaction, not just between representatives of “other cultures” (American vs. Chinese) but also between different generations, genders on several occasions. In each episode under scrutiny, a scene of mistaken identity and confusion, involving Susan takes place. Sometimes the farcical characteristic of the scenes is on purpose (people pretending to be someone else), other times it is just a question of uninformed mistaken identity.

The authors start with the latter. The first encounter between Susan and her friend’s parents in Episode 1, “Friend from afar” is based on such a quid-pro-quo, the family’s son has decided to send a cake to his parents to celebrate Chinese New Year. Susan, of whom the parents know nothing, arrives at the parents’ house with a cake that they mistake for the son’s cake and want to settle financially for it. In the ensuing soliloquy, Susan asks herself: “I bought the cake, how come their son had paid for it?” Surprised at first by the fact that the delivery person is a foreigner (MA: “Oh, look, even a foreign girl!”), they become quite uncomfortable with her when she starts “making herself at home.” The father asks the mother “Why doesn’t she leave after delivering cake?” Noticing that Susan looks tired, the parents hold the following discussion:

MA: They even employ foreigners to deliver cakes.

MU: Today is the Lunar New Year’s Eve, I guess all Chinese workers are on holiday, so they hired foreigners as temporary workers.

MA: Oh, it’s really hard for these students, working as temporary workers! They must be unfamiliar with the roads here.

In a sense this dialogue represents a counter-discourse about the West (“foreigners” in the excerpt) and the East, where the West serves the East.

Susan then brings in her suitcase and asks where her bedroom is, thus making their space her own (see chapter “How to Approach the Intercultural, Occidentalism and Othering?” about representations of Americans in Chinese cinema). Confused, both parents become even more shocked. The only plausible explanation the parents find is that the stranger is their son’s girlfriend: “No wonder she wants to live in our home. Why didn’t Xiaowei tell us earlier?” (MA, MU). The situation is defused by both the son’s and Susan’s Chinese friend arrivals. In this first farcical episode, the representation of the foreign girl is that she takes liberties and that she invades the parents’ personal space. But also that she must be someone’s girlfriend (local). Occidentalism can be easily identified here.

In a similar vein, Episode 4, “Breakfast” is based on a misunderstanding around a word that Susan misuses, because of a difference in tone, “breakfast” or *zaodian*, and “to be early” or *zao dianr*. It starts with a sign that she sees at a breakfast stand and wishes to buy as she thinks it reproduces a word that she had heard in the family in the morning (“early”):

Seller 1: Miss, have you eaten breakfast yet?
 Seller 2: What would you like?
 S: I don’t need anything; this... (She points to the sign).
 Seller 2: They don’t sell it.
 S: Oh, they don’t.
 Seller 2: No.
 S: May I take a picture of it?
 Sellers: Sure, do as you please.

The sellers end up selling the sign that says *zaodian*, which means “breakfast.” She takes the sign with her on her bike and cycles home. Her Chinese friend’s uncle and his son Xiaowei see her and say:

XW: It’s Susan!
 MU: What’s written on the board she is holding in her arms?
 XW: “Zaodian”!
 MU: “Zaodian”? What does she mean?
 XW: Perhaps she wants to set up a breakfast stall. A breakfast stand.
 MU: What? Susan is setting up a stall to sell breakfast?
 XW: Yes.
 MU: That’s not a good idea.
 XW: Who said deep-fried dough is the only food for breakfast? She can sell

Western-style food, such as hamburgers, sandwiches, and pizzas.

The sole and primary interpretation of what they witness is based on the idea that Susan wants to set up a business to make money, probably because in the previous episode Susan told them that she needed to get a job to finance her stay in China. Again their interpretation is one-sided and relies on a financial representation that is often associated with Americans.

In the end, the farce ends when the father of the family asks Susan what she is doing with the sign. The following conversation ensues:

S: Really? *Zaodian* means breakfast?

MU: (Holding the board with MA and pointing to the word) Yeah, *zaodian*, food for breakfast.

S: Why did you ask Xiaowei to *zaodian* get up?

MU: What I said was *zao dianr*, with the suffix “r” added to *zao dian*. Means “early”...

The quid-pro-quo ends here without the family members questioning their representations of Occidentalism.

In Episode 5, “Someone warmhearted” mistaken identities (and their farcical tone) occur in a different form, they are intended. This is the case when a blind date takes place between Xiaowei and a neighbour’s niece. At first the young man does not want to go on the blind date because he thinks it is an old-fashioned tradition (counter-discourse). He thus plans with Susan and her Chinese friend that they will “save” him from the situation by disrupting the date. When Xiaowei meets the neighbour’s niece, he is enchanted. She appears to be clever and extremely beautiful. Yet the girls go ahead with their plan and Susan comes to “rescue” Xiaowei. She calls him “my dear” and thus gives the impression that they are a couple. The neighbor’s niece then leaves, feeling upset and humiliated. This is how Xiaowei reacts:

XW: Don’t be silly.

Wu and Mei: My dear?

XW: She was joking.

Mei: But it was too big a joke! (Leaves in anger).

XW: Don’t misunderstand...

Wu: Don’t say any more. Everyone knows what “my dear” means!

XW: Don’t misunderstand.

Here the foreign other plays, in a sense, the role of troublemaker but also of intruder and victim of circumstances (the brother had no possibility of telling her not to intervene). Again the misuse of a word, “my dear”), is presented as a way

of blaming Susan for the unsuccessful date and the loss of face. Interestingly nothing is said about the fact that she is foreign and does not understand connotations or that she did this because of her culture. It is up to the viewer to make her/his own interpretations. It thus appears that “Happy Chinese” does not correspond fully to an approach to the intercultural which blames directly the other for being a “certain cultural other.” The othering game takes place indirectly, without being enunciated.

The second episode, “maintaining the image” is also putting into the scene intentional mistaken identities to tease a friend, confusing the boundaries between the East and the West. In the following scene, Susan’s Chinese friend is sitting behind her and uttering words while Susan pretends to be her by ventriloquizing:

S: (Voice from MM) Xiaoyong!

XY: Yes. (Doesn’t believe what he sees). You know me?

S: (Voice from MM) Are you the owner of that restaurant?

XY: Yeah, but who are you?

S: (Voice from MM) Why, you even can’t recognize my voice?

XY: Mai Miao?

S: (Voice from MM) Yes.

XY: (A bit scared). Mai Miao! Did you have plastic surgery? Now you look like a foreigner.

S: (Voice from MM) Do I look like a foreigner?

XY: Oh, very much so! Much more even than a real foreigner!

To summarize, farce and comedy, accompanied by the usual mistaken identities and quid-pro-quos, represent central components of how “Happy Chinese” constructs the relations and dialogues between the American student Susan and the Chinese family. At the very beginning, Susan enters the family as a foreigner, a stranger, and an outsider. As was indicated in Episode 1, “Friend from afar,” she is presented as someone who does not understand and apply the right social rules, and she is thus naturally “culturally deficient” because of her foreignness (Holliday, 2010, p. ix). However, due to the “laws of hospitality,” Susan’s impoliteness is forgiven (willingly or not; Derrida, 2000).

Later, the distance between Susan and the family seems to be reduced. In Episode 4, “Breakfast,” through the farcical scenes of *zaodian*, Susan is considered more like a family member, as the family (especially the parents) shows a level of concern far beyond her guest status. However, at the same time, Susan is still seen as a representative of the “West” or the “Western” lifestyle. As Susan spends more time with the family, she has a certain and increasing influence on family affairs, such as in Xiaowei’s blind date in Episode 5,

“Someone warmhearted,” for instance.

The farcical scenes show Susan’s developing position in the family, which also reveal her multifaceted identity in the eyes of the family. As we move on from Episodes 1 to 7, fewer marks of Occidentalism and Reverse Orientalism are noticeable in the series. One could hypothesize that the more the characters get acquainted with each other, the less they need to “keep up appearances” (especially the father), the less they feel the need to play the “cultural other.”

In the following section, the authors analyze how the family labels Susan in the episodes as well as the ambivalence the family encounters when they live with her.

Constructing Occidentalism/Foreignism?

Labelling Susan

As a product of identity, the Self and the Other mutually construct each other and are often reduced and solidified (Abdallah-Preteille, 1986; Gillespie, 2006, 2007). The process of othering often results in a hierarchy where the Self and one’s group are put on a higher level and standing out from the rest. Therefore, when there is an encounter between the Self and the Other, it becomes “natural” to label the Other by the Self. In the episodes, many different labels are used under scrutiny to refer to the American guest:

- The most often used label is that of the foreigner, used by many different characters: “Is she a foreign fast runner?” (XW), “Oh, look, even a foreign girl!” (MA), “They even employ foreigner to deliver cakes” (MA), “Our family has got involved in foreign affairs. Susan is in our home” (MU), “Who is this foreign beauty?” (XY), “All Chinese here know I’m Li Wenmao. But the foreigner doesn’t know I’m Li Wenmao” (MU), “She is a foreigner, and certainly should sell Western-style food” (MU), “She is from a foreign country, traveling thousands of miles to China...” (MU), “It’s a good thing for a foreign friend to be so keen on traditional Chinese culture” (DW);

- The second most used one refers to her nationality (American): “Aunt, are you American?” (LL), “She is Susan from America” (MM), “This is Susan, my schoolmate from America” (MM), “This is Susan, an American student studying here” (MA), “Do you Americans only eat burgers?” (MU), “Susan, don’t you Americans pay attention to the nutritional balance of food?” (MM);

- The label “guest” is also used a little, especially by the father: “In front of the guest, we should always sit and stand with good manners” (MU), “Our guest is toasting me, I shouldn’t be impolite” (MU), “But I always feel a bit restrained in the presence of the guest” (MA), “Hold on for another day. We’ll be free after the guest is gone” (MU), “Susan is our guest, so let her eat the first *jiaozi*²”

² Meat or vegetable filling wrapped in dough.

(MU);

- Finally, Susan is as described or referred to a little as “one of them” (see use of pronouns): “No problem. From now on, just take this as your own home” (MA), “We’ll not consider you as an outsider” (MU), “If your uncle and aunt saw you going out without wearing a down-filled coat, they would be unhappy” (DW).

Interestingly enough, the dichotomy West/East is not used a single time (only the word “Western food”), foreignness being the principal identity attached to Susan. Only three of the uses of the above labels appear to lead to categorizing, “boxing” comments: “She is a foreigner, and certainly should sell Western-style food” (MU).

This first excerpt represents an attempt to solidify the foreigner by imposing a restriction on what she can/not do (while a similar reaction is not to be found in the case of Peking opera).

But there are also comments about Susan’s origins which represent pure stereotyping, with an ethnocentric and reverse orientalist vision of the Chinese in terms of health in these precise examples: “Susan, don’t you Americans pay attention to the nutritional balance of food?” (MM), “Do you Americans only eat burgers?” (MU)

Ambivalence

Though the general tone of the first episodes is “interculturally correct” and positive towards the American guest and foreigners in general, a few excerpts show that there is at times ambivalence towards the other.

This is the case in this first example, which is taken from Episode 3 “Making *jiaozi*.” At the very beginning of the episode, the following exchange between the family members takes place:

MU: Dawei, take it easy. The last few days, everybody has done pretty well. The person who has done best, who has treating her both warmly and naturally, who has shown a perfect sense of propriety, and who is a good example of refined Chinese ladies, is your mom.

MA: But I always feel a bit restrained in the presence of the guest.

MU: Hold on for another day. We’ll be free after the guest is gone. Today is the fifth and tomorrow the sixth. I presume it’s already time for Susan to be back to school. (...)

This excerpt could demonstrate that the family is experiencing some kind of stress because of the foreigner’s presence, especially the mother. The use of the word “guest” not “foreigner” in “I always feel a bit restrained in the presence of the guest” is interesting as it gives a general meaning to the sentence, which

excludes potential xenophobia. The father’s answer is also telling as he speculates on Susan’s imminent departure (“guest” again).

The rest of Episode 3 is devoted to the preparation of *jiaozi*, during which the family makes fun in a nice way at Susan’s skills in preparing the patties, as a foreigner, she lacks the skills (the series director could have depicted Susan as a good *jiaozi* maker). At the end of the episode, the youngest child of the family asks a question to Susan that seems to embarrass the family and confuse Susan:

LL: Auntie Susan, after eating *jiaozi*, will you be leaving tomorrow?

S: Leaving for where?

LL: Don’t you want to go to school?

MU: Le le, don’t talk nonsense!

S: You do not welcome me here?

All: Of course...

XW: ... you are.

MU: We’re very pleased that you came to my home...

XW: Yes, yes.

MU: We all welcome you to be here.

MA: We all like you...

All: Yes.

MA: You can stay here as long as you like.

All: Right, right.

S: (Happy) Great! Then I won’t leave.

All: (Surprised): Oh?

This scene is comical yet potentially face-threatening to the family (Susan: “You do not welcome me here?”). It also quite revealing of the ambivalence of the family towards Susan: They try to show Susan that they have nothing against her staying, regardless of the previous discussion. So in a sense, their inner feelings are disguised here, or acted out in a different light. One could argue that the idea that Americans invade other people’s space, which has been described as a representation of Americans in China (see chapter “How to Approach the Intercultural, Occidentalism and Othering?”) appears to be prevalent.

Yet the ending is positive for all. The father and the mother conclude the episode by renewing their vows of hospitality:

MA: No problem. From now on, just consider this as your own home.

MU: We’ll not consider you as an outsider.

The use of the word “outsider” at the end of the previous excerpt is an important one as it is opposed to the “foreigner,” a word which has been used

consistently by the family beforehand to talk about Susan.

Ambivalence towards the foreign guest is also found in the fourth episode of the series named “Chinese-style Hamburgers,” during which Susan wants to cook all meals for the family to thank them for their hospitality. The only food that she makes for them is hamburgers, which at first nicely surprises the family but then starts irritating them. They do not dare to tell her. Many discussions around American breakfast for example take place between Susan and the family or amongst the family members:

XW: Is this the most authentic American breakfast?

MM: This is the most authentic American breakfast, isn't it?

DW: Hot hamburgers! Eat while they are hot.

XW: Why, still hamburgers?

MU: Do you Americans only eat burgers?

S: (Laughs with a bit embarrassment) This kind of hamburger is different from that we ate this morning.

MU: How different?

S: The absence of vegetables. These hamburgers are filled only with seafood salad dressings.

Clear Occidentalism and thus Reverse Orientalism can be identified in these discourses. During the third meal where burgers are served, the mother makes the following potentially ethnocentric/sinocentric comment: “MM: Susan, don't you Americans pay attention to the nutritional balance of food?” In another comment, the mum biologizes her comment by putting forward what she calls “our Chinese stomachs:” “Still making that stuff? Can our Chinese stomachs withstand meal after meal of hamburgers?” All in all, no one dares to tell her straight away that they are tired of eating burgers, even Susan's friend, who catches her brother eating Chinese food in his room, complaining about the burgers:

XW: (With food stuffed in his mouth) Three meals of hamburgers in succession are really unbearable. But don't tell Susan about it.

MM: You want me to sympathize with you eating like a thief, and conceal it from my best friend?

XW: Yeah, okay?

Conclusion and Discussion

The Chinese educator Confucius left a famous, and often overused, sentence thousands of years ago: “It is delightful to have friends coming from afar” (Analects, 1.1.2, trans. 1861). Though not exclusively “Chinese” in terms of how

we should treat the “Other,” there is certainly some resonance in the way the family talks about their foreign guest in “Happy Chinese,” the sentence is actually used in Episode 1 without referring directly to Confucius. In general the family appears to find their new friend from America delightful; however, hospitality seems to disturb them at the same time, hence the feeling of ambivalence that has been noted in this paper.

As a foreigner in the family, Susan is first seen as strange and rude. As time goes by, the family becomes highly tolerant of her and often shows sympathy (the cake delivery scene), patience and encouragement (teaching her how to make *jiaozi* and sing Peking Opera), as well as easy forgiveness when Susan makes mistakes as they probably fear shocking her. This does not mean that Susan “wins” over the family but quite the opposite, as a guest she cannot “win” since the family who acts as the host has more power than she does (Dervin, 2011).

In the series, Susan is sometimes otherized and reduced to a simple figure of foreignness. Her identity often changes, sometimes she is “American” but most of the time she is generally described as “a foreigner” or simply as a guest. This allows us to say that even if elements of Occidentalism are present in the seven episodes that have been analyzed, the family labels Susan more as a foreigner or an American in general than a typical and generic “Westerner.”

Even though Occidentalism and Reverse Orientalism were present on many occasions, the first seven episodes of the series also seem to reject and modify traditional views and discourses on the Chinese. Lau and Mendès (2011) remind us that re-orientalism can also discard “perceived expectations of western readers” (p. 1). As a reflection of the “go global” strategy of Chinese media, the program of “Happy Chinese” follows the idea of “promoting the images and voices of China” through its educational function. What it also does is to allow the Other to see and hear what “China” sees and says about them, while s/he sees and hears what “China” has to say about itself (Sun, 2010, p. 54; Hartig, 2012, p. 54).

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