

Keeping up appearances before the ‘Other’? Interculturality and Occidentalism in the educational TV-programme *Happy Chinese* (快乐汉语)

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Abstract

Happy Chinese (快乐汉语) is an educational melodrama produced by the Chinese TV channel CCTV (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, we are examining the first 7 episodes marking Susan’s arrival in China for the Spring Festival. Basing our study on a postmodern and critical approach to the ‘intercultural’ (Holliday, 2010; Dervin, 2011; Dervin & Gao, 2012), as well as on a critical view towards Orientalism/Occidentalism, we are interested in how the programme constructs the arrival of the American and the way she is perceived and represented by the ‘locals’. We are also looking into what the Chinese family teaches Susan as being Chinese and, at the same time, the tensions that a certain tendency to “keep up appearances” to appear “real Chinese” before her trigger in the family, across generation and gender. The research tools used to analyse this “multifaceted interculturality” are derived from utterance theory and critical dialogism (Marnette, 2005).

Keywords

Intercultural communication, identity, Occidentalism, Chinese as a foreign language, education through media.

“If people were not different, they would have nothing to say to each other. And if they were not the same, they would not understand each other”.

(Arendt, 1958: 155)

1. Introduction

Since the beginning of China’s modernization process in the early 1980s, attitudes toward Mandarin Chinese have changed worldwide. As such a greater global demand for Chinese language education has emerged in recent decades (Zhao & Huang, 2010: 127; Ding & Saunders, 2006: 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 established non-profit public institutions such as “Confucius Institutes” in foreign countries in 2004 and the Chinese Language Council International and a subsidiary office known as ‘Hanban’ in 2006 (国家汉办/孔子学院总部官网, 2012; 国家汉办年度报告, 2006: 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: 53; Gil, 2008: 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 (CCP) about the shape and direction of Chinese media’s efforts to

“go global” and promote “the images and voice” of China (Sun, 2010: 54; Hartig, 2012: 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 article we examine a programme created by CCTV called *Happy Chinese* (快乐汉语). Produced by CCTV International Channel since 2009, *Happy Chinese* is an educational melodrama (“快乐汉语”栏目简介, 2012). The program proposes both language and cultural learning that aims to improve foreign learners’ Chinese language skills (ibid.). Currently there are two seasons of the program (ibid.). The first season, composed of 116 episodes, “Daily Life”, gives lessons on the use of daily language in family and school lives. The plot of the first season revolves around Susan, an American staying with her former Chinese classmate’s family. In this paper, we are examining the first 7 episodes marking Susan’s arrival in China for the Spring Festival. Our interest is in how the arrival of this stranger is depicted in the episodes, especially in relation to the “intercultural”.

A lot has been written on how the “West” perceives and constructs the “East” (often called *Orientalism* after Edward Said, 1979) but very little on the contrary (Grimshwa, 2010 represents an exception). In his 2010 book on *Intercultural communication and ideology*, A. Holliday only devotes a sentence to how the periphery also constructs discourses about the West (ibid.: 187). Our article represents an attempt to examine potential counter-discourses, which we name

Occidentalism after Carrier (1995).

2. The “intercultural”, Occidentalism and Othering

The intercultural is being increasingly described as a polysemic and problematic notion (Dervin et al., 2011; Piller, 2011; Aikman, 2012). Our approach to the intercultural critically reviews “ahistorical, depoliticized and uncritical ethnocentric benevolence” (Andreotti, 2011: 144), which is often found in the treatment of the notion. We also attempt to move away from an overemphasis on the problematic concept of culture, which is often an “ersatz of demonstration” (Bayart, 2005) when analysing 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 V. Andreotti (ibid.), an overemphasis on culture “tends to confirm racist assumptions of the superiority of the self as seen through the eyes of the others, disguised in a politically correct discourse of mutual learning” and casts aside questions of inequality and privilege (ibid.: 156). In a similar vein, A. Sen (2006: xv) argues that “invoking the magical power of some allegedly predominant identity (...) drowns other affiliations”.

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, “national identities are *mélange* identities, combinations of people that have been conventionally amalgamated under a political heading” (Pieterse, 2004: 33).

In the politics of differences that governs the intercultural, a lot of attention has been paid to how China has been orientalised 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-Preteuille, 1986), are also phenomena that can be identified in the Chinese context when the Other, the “Westerner”, is talked about. In other words, we argue that essentialism is a “two-way street” and that, if there is Orientalism, Occidentalism is also very much present in how e.g. China constructs the rest of the world. This is why we move away from an approach to the intercultural that relies entirely on knowledge on the actors involved (China/the West) and, following Shi-xu (2001: 280), we argue 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 globalised competition, mass human migration, unending local conflict and hostility, where social injustice and alienation are the order of the day”. 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 (*ibid.*: 280-281), far too many explanations for intercultural communication are flawed and lack taking 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.).

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 as 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 not some sort of revelation of a Truth that we are most probably witnessing in the programme.

In his postmodern critical approach to intercultural communication and ideology, A. Holliday (2010) also puts power at the centre of the 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 to “easily and sometimes innocently to the reduction of the foreign Other as culturally deficient” (2010: ix) when one tries to describe and define a culture in opposition to another (ibid: 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” (ibid.: 1). One interesting instance that Holliday takes up in his book is the dichotomy of individualism and collectivism (ibid.). His conclusions, based on a criticism of “Western” thinking, are that “individualism represents imagined positive characteristics, and collectivism represents imagined negative characteristics”

(Holliday, 2010: 9). He also argues (ibid.: 74) that the use of the concept of culture represents a “lack of belief that the non-western other can be complex and sophisticated just like ‘us’”.

Through social psychology (cf. Gillespie, 2006), amongst others, we now know that “people tend to positively differentiate themselves and their in-group from other people and out-groups” (Gillespie, 2006). Gillespie (ibid.) mentions for example the studies of 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. Othering 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 (Dervin & Keihäs, 2012) such as manipulation, refusal to do something, explaining a mistake, being polite, standing out from the rest. We argue that Orientalism and Occidentalism both represent two similar ways of othering.

3. 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-programme under scrutiny bearing in mind 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 & Sallah (2011) and Vanessa Andreotti (2011).

In her postcolonial approach to global education, Vanessa Andreotti (2011: 181) 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 positionings
- from ahistoricism to an awareness of the situatedness of selves, relationships and events”.

These are important for examining a programme such as *Happy Chinese*. We 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 a minority in China and a guest who has to abide by the laws of hospitality (Derrida, 2002); to introduce elements of situated selves, relationships and events in the analysis reflecting “imagined”/real Americano-Chinese relations in the program. Adrian Holliday (2010: 27) 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”.

As to Shi-xu (2001: 289), he also suggests that “we draw active attention to one’s own historical discursive practice in and through which the Other has been represented”. 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* we are interested in such aspects which will provide us with information about Occidentalism (cf. also Breidenbach & Nyíri 2009: 340).

Going back to the concept of culture, we also feel that it is important to take into account Hoskins and Sallah's recent advice on how to work with it when examining intercultural encounters. Amongst other things, they propose (2011: 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. (ibid.).

Finally we also bear in mind one warning made by Holliday (2010: 85) but which we 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 its bad name". This means that we need to pay attention to the analytical process which should not just consist in seeing Occidentalism everywhere.

4. Occidentalism in Chinese media productions

Happy Chinese is very much reminiscent of Chinese television drama serials (电视连续剧). Each of the 117 episodes lasts for 14 minutes and follows the same pattern: the first 5 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 Channel:

“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 Suzan, 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 programme was broadcasted by China Central Television (CCTV), which is the national TV station of China, the main news source in China. According to Zhaoying Han (2011: 300): “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”. As such the channel appears to have intercultural goals. The channel signals reach 140 countries (ibid.). Chinese language teaching and Chinese studies are part of Chinese public diplomacy (Zhaoying Han 2011: 301).

Happy Chinese is based in contemporary China and presents a modern vision of the country and its people, or as Liu Kang (2004: 4) puts it a China representing “a hybrid post-revolutionary culture that embodies the fundamental tensions and contradictions of globalization” (cf. also dong-Jie’s study on Chinese migrants within China (2011) which depicts well this diversity). Many different

generations are represented by the characters: parents, children and grandchildren.

In order to analyse the programme, we felt it important to acquaint ourselves with the literature on how “China” has represented the Other, the Western and the American in its cinema and television. In his 2010 article, Gao examines how the West has been imagined on Chinese television. He notes (ibid.: 615) 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”. He adds that these views, and especially the portrayal of America has been highly influenced by the first opium war of 1840-1842 (ibid.: 617). The idea of Western powers as invaders of people’s spaces is said to be still prevalent in representation (ibid.: 629). Yet Gao 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” (ibid.).

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 (ibid.: 305), the contrary is hardly the truth. In his history of the appearance of Westerners in the Chinese cinema, Xiao (ibid.) 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 (*滑稽大王游华记*, trans. *The King of Comedy Visits China*, dir. Zhang Shichuan, 1922). Xiao asserts that throughout the history of the Chinese cinema the few foreigners that have appeared in films “function to foreground the shining virtues of the Chinese people”. 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 the Western and the American in Chinese cinema and television gives a 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). Our study will try to identify potential intertextuality between the discourses produced for the series and discourses on these items.

5. Analysis of *Happy Chinese*

5.1. Keeping up appearances?

In the first section of this article, we argued, with 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. This construction “game” is omnipresent in *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 especially on one of the family members at the beginning of the series: 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 shows a certain playful misunderstanding between the children of the family who do not take the father seriously and the father himself (cf. e.g. "We've involved in foreign affairs just because of Susan's presence? Does Susan represent the US government?"). Susan's presence is qualified as extremely important and the family's become involved "in foreign affairs", leading to a "retreat" into traditions. The father continues explaining what this 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 no less. (showing his teeth)

(...)

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

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

We have named this phenomenon “keeping up appearances before the Other”, i.e. showing a typical and traditional (“imagined”?) side of Chineseness to please the Other. In other words, the father wants to give a positive, polite but also traditional image of the Chinese, of which the other members of the family do not seem to approve. For example the son of the family exclaims after hearing the list of ‘to dos’: “This is overregulation!”.

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. 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 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 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)

Eventually, the father gets very drunk and starts behaving in a strange manner. When he wakes up the next morning, his family criticises him for having tried to stick to tradition. This represents in a sense a criticism of the creation and maintenance of a "traditional" Chinese image:

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 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 to teach her and tells his family about this decision in what follows:

MU: Except Xiaowei away on business, all of you are here. I have something to say.

At the persistent request of Susan, I decide to teach Susan 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 deep from her heart: "I love Peking Opera!"

DW: I never said that. But...

MU (interrupts DW unpleasantly): But what? Both you and Xiaowei are grownups. 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 how 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 correct. It’s a good thing for a foreign friend to be so keen on traditional Chinese culture”. The argument about Susan being a foreign (“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”.

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. As Xiao (2011) puts it: the few foreigners who have shown up in films “function to foreground the shining virtues of the Chinese people”. When “confronting” the foreigner, Susan, 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 this virtue is imagined.

Imitation and encouragement are also shown when Susan decides to learn Peking Opera. As the older generation in the family, the father would like to pass the Peking Opera as a heritage to the next generation. When his will cannot be achieved, Susan’s strong interest in Peking Opera seems

to fill the blank. Furthermore, according to Tajfel and Turner's (1979) theory on the hierarchy of othering, the father seems to see Chinese culture as superior, and hence, teaching Susan Peking Opera does not merely mean to pass on the heritage, but also to "better" the foreign Other through this great tradition of China.

5.2. An intercultural farce?

As asserted in the previous section, in *Happy Chinese*, comedy and especially farce appear to be central to depict the intercultural encounters that are taking place. According to the Oxford dictionary, 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 (Ray-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/Chinese) but also between different generations, genders on several occasions. As such in episode 5 entitled *Someone Warmhearted*, a discussion emerges around the tradition of blind date set up by parents for their children. In the following excerpt, the niece of the family (MM), the American friend (S), the father (MU) and the mother (MA) discuss the issue:

MM: Don't compel Xiaowei to go on the blind date.

MU: I know you're sent here by Xiaowei.

S: No, not sent...

MM: We came on our own.

S: “Xiang qin, no!” Xiaowei doesn’t like it.

MM: He absolutely objects to it.

MA: What’s wrong with blind-dating? I first met your uncle on our blind date.

MU: Do I and your aunt live pretty well?

MM: But Xiaowei can’t accept this traditional way of making friends with girls.

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.

We 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 qui-pro-quo: the family 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 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 (the mother: “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 she doesn’t leave after delivering cake?”. Noticing that Susan looks tired, the parents hold the following discussion:

MA: They even employ foreigner 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.

Susan then brings in her suitcase and asks where her bedroom is, making thus their space her own (cf. section 3 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?" (both parents). 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).

In a similar vein, episode 4 (*Breakfast*) is based on a misunderstanding around a word that Susan misuses, because of a difference in tone (*Zaodian* (早点) = breakfast; *zao dianr* (早点儿) = be early). 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" (早点), which actually means "breakfast".

She takes the sign with her on her bike and cycles home. Her Chinese friend's uncle MU and his son XW 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.

In the end, the farce ends when the father of the family asks Susan what she is doing with a Zaodian 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...

In episode 5 (*Someone warmhearted*) mistaken identities (and their farcical tone) occurs in a different form: they are intended. This is the case when the aforementioned blind date (cf. previous section) takes place between Xiao Wei (the family’s son) and a neighbour’s niece. At first the young man does not want to go on the blind date and plans with Susan and her Chinese friend that they will “save” him from the situation by disrupting the date. When Xiao Wei meets the neighbour’s niece, he is enchanted. She appears to be clever and is extremely beautiful. Yet the girls go ahead with their plan and Susan comes to “rescue” Xiao Wei. She calls him “my dear” and thus gives the impression that they are a pair. The neighbour’s niece then leaves, feeling upset and humiliated. This is how Xiao Wei reacts:

XW: Don't be silly.

Wu & Mei: My dear?

XW: She was joking.

Mei: But it was too big a joke! (leaves with anger)

XW: Don't misunderstand...

Wu: Speak no more. Everyone knows what "my dear" means!

XW: Don't misunderstand.

Here the foreign other plays, in a sense, the role of the troublemaker but also the intruder, who is a 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.

The second episode (*Maintaining the image*) is also putting into scene intentional mistaken identities to tease a friend. In the following scene, the Chinese friend is sitting behind Susan 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/MM: Are you the owner of that restaurant?

XY: Yeah, but who are you?

S/MM: Why, you even can't recognize my voice?

XY: Mai Miao?

S/MM: Yes.

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

S/MM: Do I look like a foreigner?

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

This scene, even though it appears nice and friendly, gives the image of a foreigner pretending to be an Other, a foreigner hiding, masking or confusing her identity.

To summarize, farce and comedy, accompanied by the usual mistaken identities and qui-pro-quos, represent central components of how *Happy Chinese* constructs the relations and dialogues between the American student Susan and the Chinese family. As Susan gets involved in all the farcical scenes, she plays her role, as one of the main characters, which also indicates, overtime, her changing positions in the 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: ix). However, due to the “laws of hospitality”, Susan’s impoliteness is forgiven (willingly or not) (Derrida, 2002). In the second episode Susan uses her foreign image to tease a friend of the family. By doing this, she plays her otherness as a special way to integrate into

the family.

Later, the distance between Susan and the family seems to be reduced. In episode 4 (*Breakfast*), through the farcical scenes of “zaodian” (早点), Susan is considered more like a family member, as the family (especially the parents) shows more concerns for her beyond the 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 in 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. In the following section, we analyze how the family label Susan as well as the ambivalence the family encounters when they live with her.

5.3. Constructing Occidentalism/foreignism?

5.3.1. 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). As Gillespie (2006) sees from the perspective of social psychology, “people tend to positively differentiate themselves and their in-group from other people and out-groups”. 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 (Tajfel & Turner, 1979; Dervin & Keihäs,

2012). 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 to me, I shouldn't be impolite (MU), But I always feel a bit restrained with 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 (MU).*

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

Interestingly enough the dichotomy West/East is not used a single time, foreignness being the principal identity attached to Susan. Only three of the uses of these 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 vision of the Chinese in terms of health in these precise examples (Holliday, 2010).

Susan, don’t **you Americans** pay attention to the nutritional balance of food? (MM)

Do **you Americans** only eat burgers? (MU)

5.3.2. Ambivalence

Though the general tone of the series 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*². 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 with 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 could demonstrate that the family is experiencing some kind of stress because of the foreigner’s presence, especially the mother (note the use of the word guest not foreigner here: “I always feel a bit restrained with the presence of the guest”). The father’s answer is also telling as he speculates on Susan’s imminent departure (“guest” again).

² Meat or vegetable filling wrapped in dough.

The rest of the episode 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. 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 but also quite revealing of the ambivalence of the family towards Susan: they try to show to 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 here that the idea that Americans invade other people’s space, which has been described as a representation on Americans in China (cf. 3) 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 take this as your own home.

MU: We’ll not take 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, but they do not dare to tell her. Many discussions around e.g. American breakfast 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.

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 a 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”. 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 our article.

As a foreigner in the family, Susan is first seen as strange and rude. As time goes by, the family is 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 to shock 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 & Keihäs, 2012).

In the series, Susan is sometimes otherized and reduced into 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 we have analysed, the family labels Susan more as a foreigner or an American in general than a typical and generic “Westerner”.

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: 54; Hartig, 2012: 54).

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