

A Comparative Analysis of Sino-US Humor Culture: Case Study of *Ipartment* and *Friends*

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Abstract

Cultural shock is common due to cultural differences. Humor contains specific cultural connotations and has become an important tool to promote interpersonal communication. This paper compares and analyzes the differences of and reasons for Chinese and American humor culture by using sitcoms as examples. First, it describes the definition, classification, and characteristics of humor culture. Second, it compares the differences between Chinese and American verbal humor in the topic, target, and scene based on Chinese and American sitcoms *Ipartment* and *Friends*. Third, it analyzes the influence of historical origin, communication style and cultural value on the differences between Chinese and American verbal humor. Finally, three communication measures are proposed from the aspects of the context, empathy, and ethnocentrism to overcome intercultural communication barriers and promote Sino-American communication.

Keywords: humor culture, Chinese and American verbal humor, sitcoms

1. Introduction

In recent years, China and the United States have become increasingly engaged in exchanges, and the phenomenon of culture shock can be seen everywhere. Reflecting an individual's state of mind, perspective and outlook on life, humor is not only used as a way of interpersonal interaction, but a culture revealing the character of a nation and all aspects of life in society. It is likely to have negative effects on communication, if people fail to use humor appropriately. "Humor" is an exotic word, originally meaning "bodily fluids" in Latin. The study of humor has attracted the attention and consideration of many scholars since it entered the field of linguistics in the late 1970s. In the new version of the *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, the definition of humor is meaningful because it is funny or ridiculous. According to *The New Oxford Dictionary of English*, humor has two main meanings: "the quality of being amusing or comic, especially as expressed in literature or speech" and "the ability to perceive humor or to appreciate a joke". Jiang (2015) analyzed the subtitle translation of the movie *Lost in Thailand* using Neda's reader response theory as a theoretical framework, and found that Chinese humorous discourse can be divided into linguistic humor, cultural humor, and universal humor. Through analyzing the movie *Kung Fu Panda*, Liu (2018) pointed out the animated presentation of American humor culture in visual, auditory, and narrative logic, summarizing the social and commercial functions of American humor culture. Taking Aardman animation as an example, Yan and Liu (2021) studied the creative design of British animation characters' actions, dialogues, and plots, and found that British humor has such stylistic characteristics as subtle and introspective, intriguing, and naive. Li et al. (2022) studied the audience interview materials of humorous advertisements in China and the U.S. and found that humorous advertisements in China and the U.S. differed in contrasting punchlines, surprising punchlines, and others in terms of advertising creation techniques, and in expressions, family patterns and cultural values. Yin (2019) explored differences in the production of verbal humor in China's *Roast* and American *Roast* from the perspective of verbal presupposition, and found that China tends to revoke presupposition through non-verbal factors, while the U.S. tends to revoke presupposition through non-verbal and verbal factors. Li (2021) compared the Chinese sitcom *Home with Kids* and the American sitcom *Friends* from the perspective of high and low contexts and found that the two differed in their performance in cross-cultural communication. China belonged to a high context country and preferred indirect expressions while America is a low-context country and tends to express itself directly. To sum up, the existing research discusses the mechanism of humor production from the perspective of linguistics, ignoring the characteristics of speech itself and the participants' cognitive process of humorous speech. Therefore, the characteristics of Chinese and American humor cultures and their use of humor in sitcoms are the focus of this study.

2. Humor Culture

To make a deeper research on the differences of Chinese and American humor culture, it is of vital importance to learn what humor is and what characteristics of Chinese and American humor cultures are.

2.1 Definition and Classification of Humor

The word humor is a physiological term that refers to body fluids. By the European Renaissance, its meaning had been extended to indicate an unbalanced state of mind or eccentric behavior. After the 18th century, “humor” gradually lost its original meaning and became a concept of modern aesthetics, which refers exclusively to the ability to make people laugh or feel amused. Scholars in various disciplines in China and abroad have tried to define humor and give it a best interpretation, and because of this, there are many definitions of humor, and this thesis selects some scholars’ views to understand humor. According to Fang (2003), the root of humor is language, gradually formed by social and cultural development. It is an artistic language, which is ideographic and lyrical, and can be expressed in various ways. The finished product has artistic beauty. Li (2020) holds the opinion that humor is an artfully crafted form of language, an artful language. Humor makes people laugh, but has the characteristic of being subtle and evocative. Romero and Cruthirds (2006) consider humor as a kind of communication that generates positive emotions and is funny in an individual, group, or organization. In view of this, humor is an aesthetic concept belonging to the category of comedy, an art of laughter, which expresses thought-provoking ideas in the form of laughter, so that people can get spiritual pleasure, philosophical enlightenment, and artistic enjoyment. Humor is a product of wisdom and a wonderful means of linguistic expression. There are various classifications of humor. Depending on the medium of communication, Raskin (1985) classified humor into verbal humor and non-verbal humor. Verbal humor involves humor created, described, and expressed by words, while non-verbal humor involves humor achieved outside of verbal texts, such as body movement, gesture, and posture. In the field of intercultural communication, verbal humor plays an important role by integrating content, expressive form, and function. In terms of content, verbal humor is culturally constrained; in terms of expressive form, discourse is the vehicle of verbal humor; and in terms of function, it is an act of laughing with words. Non-verbal humor belongs to the humorous means within the non-verbal system, which can be mainly divided into visual non-verbal humor and auditory non-verbal humor. Visual non-verbal humor mainly uses exaggerated physical actions to suggest a specific environment or character behavior and express real emotions inside. Auditory non-verbal humor uses the rhythm, voice, intonation, and accent to convey different messages and create specific humorous effects.

2.2 Characteristics of Chinese Humor Culture

The concept of “humor” emerged relatively late in China, but has a long history as a comedic category that causes humor, except that at that time China did not call it humor, but “wit”, “satire”, “comic” or “grotesque”. Chinese humor was first developed from the ancient court comic opera and miscellaneous opera, reached a peak through the Tang Dynasty’s military opera, the Song Dynasty’s southern opera, and the Yuan Dynasty’s miscellaneous opera, and has continued in the form of drama to this day, with “The Northeast Errenzhuan”¹ being specific expressions of Chinese humor. The Chinese attach great importance to humor. Due to Chinese own cultural background, social customs and ways of thinking, the typical Chinese humor style emphasizes reasoning and virtue. There is an example of a two-part allegorical saying that is representative of Chinese humor—“the anti-aircraft gun hits the

mosquito”. A mosquito is oddly small compared to an anti-aircraft shell, and using an anti-aircraft gun to hit a mosquito is really overkill. This humorous way of expression will make the communication easy and pleasant, but at the same time sincerely tell the other one truth “waste one’s talent on a petty job”. Some allegorical expressions are used to recognize and praise the merits or achievements of someone in a witty and humorous way to express the speaker’s appreciation. For instance, “slap hands in mid-air” refers to a person who is particularly skilled.

2.3 Characteristics of American Humor Culture

American humor first developed in the expansion of capitalism on the North American continent and the growing conflicts between the native people and the immigrants, and between the various levels within the new immigrant society. As a result, many American writers’ works of this period, such as Edgar Allan Poe’s *The Spectacles* and Mark Twain’s *The Million Pound Note*, used ridiculous but meaningful stories to reveal the conflict between society and the people. In the 1960s, the end of World War II allowed the United States to expand its sphere of influence in Asia. At the same time, there is also a growing conflict between society and individuality, and between the general environment and individual will. Therefore, black humor that expresses tragedy in the form of comedy became popular as well. Faced with the absurdity of the world, the confusion of the breakdown of rational principles, and the futility of self-reliance, people make cynical laughter and use humor to maintain the dignity of the battered human being. For example, the film *Forrest Gump* is a tragedy in the guise of a comedy, in which all the characters suffer greatly because of the times, but the entire film is surrounded by a seemingly incongruous and light-hearted atmosphere, making the film not a tragedy in the traditional sense.

3. Differences Between Chinese and American Verbal Humor

Humor is a universal language that transcends cultural boundaries and brings people together. However, there are significant differences in the ways in which humor is expressed and conveyed in various cultures. The differences between Chinese and American cultures in verbal humor are reflected in the choice of topic, target, and scene.

3.1 Introduction to the Chinese and American Sitcoms

3.1.1 Introduction to Chinese Sitcom *Ipartment*

Ipartment has been filmed for five seasons in China since 2009. This thesis studies the fifth season broadcasted in 2020. The seven young people in the show live together in an apartment, where normal but humorous stories are played out every day, portraying the sadness and happiness between young men and women. In the fifth season, after years of love marathon, the old residents of the apartment have come to fruition, some of them have confirmed their relationships and some have decided to get married with a license. Everyone’s love has entered a new phase, with new surprises and new troubles coming one after another. The main characters include Hu Yifei—a confident and enthusiastic PhD graduate who works as a lecturer at her university; Zhang Wei—a kind and thrifty civilian lawyer; Zhuge Dali—Zhang Wei’s girlfriend and a smart and rational graduate student; Lv Zi Qiao—a self-employer who is trying to earn money to support his family; Chen Meijia—Lv

Ziqiao's wife, a lively and childish pregnant woman who is horrible at math; Zhao Haitang—a rich young man with a flamboyant and literary personality; and Galijiang—a simple and optimistic network anchorwoman who always spreads positive energy.

3.1.2 Introduction to American Sitcom *Friends*

Friends, having aired for ten seasons since 1994, is one of the most successful sitcoms in the United States and has been one of the most popular American dramas in China. This thesis studies the tenth season airing in 2003. The sitcom mainly describes a series of life events experienced by six best friends living together over a period of ten years. *Friends* is like a mirror, reproducing for us the life of ordinary American citizens. The main characters in the play include Rachel—an honest and kind purchasing assistant for a clothing company; Monica—Rachel's high school classmate, a competitive and perfectionistic cook; Chandler—Monica's husband, a humorous but a little crazy white-collar worker; Ross—Rachel's boyfriend, an emotionally dedicated and innocent PhD graduate who works as a lecturer at a university. Joey—a simple, passionate but flirtatious actor; Phoebe—an interesting and quirky masseuse. The six of them have distinct personalities, each with its own characteristics, each characterization having achieved unprecedented success.

3.2 Differences Between Chinese and American Verbal Humor Topic

The differences between Chinese and American cultures in verbal humor are reflected in the choice of topics for verbal humor. In Chinese humor, people like to discuss relatively subtle topics, such as daily trivialities or childish thoughts. However, American humor is open, Americans prefer discussing sex, religion, and other topics in their humorous expressions.

[e.g. 1] “Hu Yifei: Don't be too harsh on Ziqiao. It took him a lot of effort to get this sponsorship.

Lv Ziqiao: OK. I copied this online. I'm not good at writing stuff. In primary school, I was too naughty and got punished by the teacher to write a self-criticism letter. But the letter was so badly written that the teacher asked me to rewrite it. It turned out that the second version was still not up to scratch. The teacher asked me to write it again. But it still sucked. The teacher asked me to write it one more time.

Hu Yifei: Why do I have a feeling that you are playing an idioms solitaire game using only one word?” (S05E10)

（“胡一菲：你们别为难子乔了，他好不容易才拿到这个赞助的机会。

吕子乔：好吧，这段我是在网上抄的，写这东西我又不擅长。小学的时候，我因为太调皮，被老师罚写检查，结果检查写的太烂，又被老师罚写检查，结果检查还是很烂，又被老师罚写检查，结果检查依然很烂，又被老师罚写……

胡一菲：为毛我有一种在用为所欲为玩成语接龙的感觉。”)

It is an example about trivial things in life. Lv Ziqiao mentions that he was always punished for writing checks when he was a primary student, and Hu Yifei says he was playing idiom solitaire, which is typical of Chinese humor. The matter of writing self-criticism letters in elementary school is obviously insignificant and trivial. Lv Zi Qiao takes this matter as an example to express his poor writing skills in a humorous way.

[e.g. 2] “Chen Meijia: The race is at a much higher level this time. Everyone on the ranking list will be mentioned in news on the front page of our community tabloid. And reporters from TV stations will interview them. It will be a great chance to advertise the law firm and the cupcakes.

Zhuge Dali: Zhang Wei, join the race!

Zhang Wei: You mean you and I?

Zhuge Dali: No, it's you and Ziqiao. Consistency matters most in the three-legged race. There's too much differencee in our endurance, speed, and flexibility. Ziqiao is more suitable for you.

Lv Ziqiao: I won't go. It's not decent for two men to cuddle each other.

Chen Meijia: Take it as a chance to lose weight. You eat ice cream every day. It's a high-calorie snack. Look at your belly, it's almost as big as mine.

Lv Ziqiao: Come on. The ice cream is cold. How can it provide that?

Zhang Wei: The one I eat is warm. I think it'll be okay.” (S05E11)

（“陈美嘉：这次比赛含金量可不一样，只要拿到名次，社区小报就会做头版报道，到时候，电视台的记者也会来采访，那可是宣传律所和小蛋糕的绝好机会。

诸葛大力：张伟，你也去吧。

张伟：你是说，我们一起？

诸葛大力：不，当然是你和子乔。两人三足最重要的是一致性，咱们俩耐力速度灵活性都差太多，你们俩更适合。

吕子乔：我不去，俩大男人搂搂抱抱成何体统。

陈美嘉：你就当是去减肥嘛，你看你整天吃雪糕，这玩意热量最大了。你看你这肚子，都快赶上我了。

吕子乔：拜托，雪糕是凉的，哪有热量。

张伟：我这个是温的，应该也还好。”)

This example is about childish thoughts. Chen Meijia and Zhuge Dali persuaded Lv Ziqiao and Zhang Wei to participate in the community's three-legged race. Lv Ziqiao was eating ice-cream at the time, and Chen said that ice-cream was high in calories, suggesting that he should lose weight, but Lv said in all seriousness that ice-cream was cold and had no calories because he misinterpreted calories as hot energy. From this, we can see Lv's explanation is obviously childish. Though Lv's real purpose is to escape from the sports competition, he cleverly used verbal humor to indirectly reject others' suggestions.

[e.g. 3] “Joey: Okay. Look, I may not have treated your friends well in the past. But I have grown up a lot. Really. Honest. Rach?”

Rachel: Yeah, believe it or not, it's true. I mean... when Joey and I were together... he was wonderful. He was thoughtful and mature. And for the one week that we went out... he didn't sleep with anybody else.

Joey: Growth.

Phoebe: Fine. I'll give you her number.

Joey: Okay. Thank you. And I promise you I will not forget this one. Mandy.

Phoebe: Sarah!

Joey: Sarah.” (S10E09)

This is an example of the topic of sex. Dating and sleeping with others are private sexual topics. Joey is a cute actor with a simple mind who likes food and beautiful women. Here Joey wants to date Phoebe's friend, but Phoebe doesn't want to give him her phone number since Joey is a womanizer. Then Joey says he has become mature. And Rachel, who used to date Joey, says that he didn't have sex with another woman for a week during the relationship to prove it, easing the atmosphere in humorous way. What's more, Joey once again said the wrong name also shows that he is very philandering, which generates humor again.

[e.g. 4] “Monica: We may not be who she thinks we are, but no one will ever love that baby more than us.

Chandler: I know.

Monica: Who knows how long it's gonna take for someone else to give us a baby?

What if no one ever picks us?

Chandler: Oh honey...

Monica: Please? Please. We are so close.

Chandler: Monica, I want a baby too. But this woman is giving away her child. She deserves to know who it's going to.

Monica: Okay. You're right.

Chandler: So we'll tell the truth. And who knows, you know? Maybe she'll like us for us.

Monica: Maybe she will. Why couldn't I have been a reverend?

Chandler: You're Jewish.

Monica: Technicality!" (S10E09)

This is an example of a religious topic. Monica and Chandler want to adopt a child, and when they go to meet the pregnant mother, the woman expects the child's father to be a doctor and the mother to be a reverend. Monica lies to the pregnant mother that they are doctor and reverend to succeed in getting the child. After the pregnant mother leaves, Chandler says they shouldn't have lied. Monica repents why she is not a reverend, but she forgets that she is Jewish having her own religion and that reverends are products of Christianity. The difference between the two religious beliefs is used here to create a humorous effect.

3.3 Differences Between Chinese and American Verbal Humor Target

The targets of humor in China and the United States are very different. "Broadly speaking, in Chinese humor, the target of humor is the childish or the weak" (Qin, 2017). Most Chinese people tend to satirize others or social reality. However, in American culture, American humor is mainly self-deprecation, using satire of oneself as a humorous joke, flirting with one's own character or behavioral shortcomings, so as to draw the viewer's attention and scrutiny.

[e.g. 5] "Zhao Haitang: I've come here to study with Dali.

Zhang Wei: Cut it out! You're not even in the same grade. You're just using it as an excuse.

Zhao Haitang: That's right. So I've set a new learning goal: You!

Zhang Wei: Me? What do you want to learn from me?

Zhao Haitang: I just want to learn all your weak and strong points. And I'll learn your strong points and avoid your weak points, so when you break up with Dali, I'll be her next boyfriend instantly.

Zhang Wei: In your dreams! You're just a spare wheel. Get out!

Zhao Haitang: I want you to pay the three months' rent that I paid you in advance back.

Zhang Wei: Go out and come back with a chair for yourself.” (S05E05)

（“赵海棠：我是来跟大力一起观摩学习的。

张伟：别扯了，你跟大力根本就不是一个年级的，学习就是个借口。

赵海棠：说的没错，所以我定了新的学习目标：你。

张伟：我？我有什么好学的？

赵海棠：我要了解你所有的优缺点，保留优点，去掉缺点。等你和大力分手了，我可以直接上岗，无缝衔接。

张伟：别做梦了，你就是个备胎而已。出去。

赵海棠：上次提前预支给你的三个月房租，我忽然想收回来。

张伟：出去搬把凳子坐回来。”)

This example is about satirizing others, and both Zhao Haitang and Zhang Wei are childish men. Zhao Haitang likes Zhuge Dali, a female academic, but Dali favors Zhang Wei, a civilian lawyer. Here Zhao Haitang is sarcastically saying that Zhang Wei has no money and thinks that he and Dali will not last. Zhang Wei changes from the previous hardness to submit because of the money, creating a humorous effect effectively.

[e.g. 6] “Chen Meijia: My baby, now, mom will introduce you to mom’s best friends and this bar. Mom has attended many parties in this bar.

Galijiang: Isn’t it a bit early to introduce the bar?

Hu Yifei: Tell me about it. If you start to introduce the bartender now, when the baby is born, are you going to teach him or her to drink beer and roll dice?

Zhang Wei: It’s better than teaching nothing. If I was educated in my mother’s womb, I would have been much different. Poverty may not be able to catch up with me.

Zhao Haitang: Wake up. It’s your hairline that can’t catch up with you.” (S05E16)

（“陈美嘉：宝宝，接下来呢，妈妈就要给你介绍妈妈的老铁们，还有这个酒吧，这里

妈妈曾经参加过很多派对。

咖喱酱：现在安利酒吧会不会有点早啊？

胡一菲：就是，胎教认吧台调酒师，那早教不得教他划拳玩色子。

张伟：有的教总比没有强吧。我要是接受过胎教，现在就不一样了，贫穷可能就追不上我了。

赵海棠：醒醒吧，追不上你的是你的发际线。”)

In this example, the humorous target is someone with physical flaws. Chen Meijia is giving a fetal education to the baby in her belly, which Zhang Wei thinks is meaningful because that will help the baby become rich in the future. Zhao Haitang mocks Zhang Wei for having a high hairline and points out on the other hand that his lack of money has nothing to do with fetal education. This kind of verbal humor can also be very effective in creating humor.

[e.g. 7] “Rachel: I got a really incredible job offer.

Joy: Hey, great! All right!

Phoebe : Good for you!

Rachel: It’s in Paris.

Joey: What? No! No, too much is changing, okay? First Phoebe getting married. Congratulations. And then these two move in to a stupid house in the stupid suburbs.

Monica: Earlier you said you’d be supportive.

Joey: It comes and goes. I wouldn’t trust it.” (S10E15)

This example is typical self-deprecation. Phoebe is married and Monica wants to move to a new home with Chandler, which means the six friends will be apart soon. And now Rachel is leaving too, so Joey feels angry and sad. Monica says Joey was supportive about their moving before, and Joey deliberately said he was fickle and he couldn’t be trusted. Joy tries to use self-deprecation to express that he doesn’t want his friends to leave, which is humorous for outsiders.

3.4 Differences Between Chinese and American Verbal Humor Scene

Deeply influenced by Chinese Confucianism, Chinese tend to be conservative, modest, and implicit, resulting in scenes where Chinese humor occurs with many restrictions and taboos. Generally, Chinese verbal humor occurs between people of the same generation. Deeply influenced by individualism, Americans tend to express their feelings openly in any setting

regardless of age, so humor can be found in any occasion among people of different generations in the United States, and verbal humor is used more casually and frequently in both formal and informal settings.

[e.g. 8] “Zhang Wei: It’s attractive.

Chen Meijia: So beautiful.

Zhang Wei: This is so chic. What is this?

Hu Yifei: Why are you like Granny Liu entering Disneyland? How do you like it?

Chen Meijia: Much better than I thought. Almost as I expected.” (S05E27)

(张伟：这太气派了。

陈美嘉：好漂亮呀。

张伟：这太别致，这啥呀这是？

胡一菲：干嘛跟刘姥姥进迪士尼乐园似的，感觉怎么样？

陈美嘉：比我想象中好太多了，跟我想象中差不多。)

In this example, humor occurs between people of the same generation in an implicit way. Hu Yifei invites her friends to visit her newly renovated house, which they originally thought would not look too good, but to their surprise, the house was successfully decorated. The frugal lawyer Zhang Wei’s performance was exaggerated, so Hu Yifei spat out his ignorance, “Granny Liu entering Disneyland” is an ingenious adaptation of a hysterical saying, which is typical of informal occasions between people of the same generation humor, it is easy to make people laugh. Later, when Yifei asked everyone’s opinion, due to her domineering personality, Meijia implicitly changed the truth into a compliment, creating a humorous effect.

[e.g. 9] “Phoebe: Oh hey Joey. I need to ask you something. You know how my stepdad’s in prison?

Joey: Yeah.

Phoebe: Yeah. He was supposed to get a weekend furlough so he could go to the wedding. But he just called and... Well, apparently stabbing Iceman in the exercise yard couldn’t wait till Monday.

Joey: So he can’t come?

Phoebe: No.” (S10E02)

This example shows that Americans use humor casually in formal settings. Phoebe is getting married soon, and her stepfather in prison could have gone to her wedding on Monday, but couldn't come because he stabbed someone else. Weddings are formal occasions. Having a family member in prison would have been a disgraceful thing, but Phoebe was outspoken and the audience laughed in the situation.

4. Influencing Factors of Differences Between Chinese and American Verbal Humor

Although the increasingly close ties between China and the United States and the mutual cultural influences of the two countries have led to a gradual convergence of humor culture, some aspects are specific to each country due to social and historical developments.

4.1 Humanistic Thoughts

4.1.1 Confucianism

China has a history of over 2,000 years belonging to feudal society, during which the Chinese adopted an absolute monarchy and the emperor had absolute authority and supremacy, which resulted in people's rarely applying political topics to humor. "China is deeply influenced by Confucianism, which is an ideological system with benevolence as its core, advocating moderation and harmony" (Ma, 2019). The ethics and morality advocated by Confucianism have always been the guidelines for people's actions and judgments. According to Confucius, benevolence is a necessary virtue for a virtuous person and it belongs to the realm of morality and behavior, as well as to the realm of Confucian epistemology. Confucianism emphasizes the importance of self-cultivation, self-awareness, and self-restraint to achieve the goals of society and human values. A large part of Confucius' thought and doctrine has been accumulated into the Chinese nation's moral consciousness, spiritual life traditions, constituting a Chinese social customs and family life style. Therefore, Chinese culture focuses on social order, and subordinates should respect and obey their superiors, so in China, verbal humor mostly occurs between people of the same generation. For example, Hu Yifei and Zhang Wei are friends around the same age so that Hu can casually call Zhang "Granny Liu". For another example, considering Hu Yifei's domineering character, Chen Meijia changes her words from the truth into a compliment in order not to offend her.

4.1.2 Renaissance

Influenced by the European Renaissance, American people are relatively open and direct in the expression of humor. The core of the Renaissance is humanistic spirit, which is human-centered and emphasizes the value and dignity of the human being. It advocates that the purpose of life is the pursuit of happiness in real life, calling for the liberation of individuality. However, the Renaissance movement had a series of negative effects due to its over-emphasis on the value of human, which led to the expansion of individual selfishness and the proliferation of material enjoyment in the later stages of its dissemination. Thus, Americans use humor casually, regardless of the topic, which can be reflected on the topic of sex. In the sitcom, Rachel casually says that Joey didn't have sex with another woman for a week during their relationship.

4.2 Communication Styles

4.2.1 Indirect Communication Style

China is a country of high-context culture because meaning depends highly on the context of communication. China emphasizes the interpersonal function of communication—building a relationship. Chinese culture views communication as process-oriented and as receiver-centered. Consequently, Chinese people prefer indirect communication style. Chinese people are used to expressing their personal feelings politely and gently during communication, trying not to make the other party feel embarrassed and uncomfortable. In addition, Chinese people consider the atmosphere during conversation to be very important in linguistic communication, and they usually do not state their requests or viewpoints directly, always adopting a more euphemistic and subtle way of expressing them. For example, when talking about Hu Yifei's new house, Chen Meijia changes her opinion from “Much better than I thought” to “Almost as I expected” because she tends to create a harmonious and humorous atmosphere.

4.2.2 Direct Communication Style

The United States is a country of low-context culture, whose communication depends basically on the message and requires explicit encoding on behalf of the speaker. America emphasizes the instrumental function of communication—exchanging ideas. American culture views communication as goal-oriented and as sender-centered. Consequently, Americans prefer direct communication style. Americans tend to be very straightforward and they prefer to express their true intentions and meanings directly with verbal messages. In other words, in a low-context verbal communication environment, people prefer a direct mode of verbal communication. Therefore, in low-context cultures, people perceive communication as the way to exchange different information and opinions, and they prefer clear statements and rarely use non-verbal modes of communication. For instance, Phoebe explicitly asks Joey to do her a favor on her wedding day because her stepfather is in prison.

4.3 Cultural Values

4.3.1 Collectivism

Collectivism is the core of traditional Chinese values, and the formation of such values initially originated in the agrarian civilization of China. In the hard farming society, people had to work together as a family to survive which led to the evolution of a collectivist culture, in which the individual must be subordinate to the collective and give priority to the society. The main manifestation of this value is that collective interests take precedence over individual interests. Collectivism has led the Chinese to place great importance on maintaining harmonious and close interpersonal relationships, caring for each other, taking more care of each other's feelings and face, and communicating in an indirect and subtle way, trying to avoid arguments and unpleasantness, and therefore being other-oriented in their interactions. Taking Zhao Haitang and Zhang Wei as an example, when Zhang Wei tries to kick Zhao Haitang out of his office, Zhao asks Zhang to return the advance rent, reminding Zhang's poor condition, which saves Zhang's face and makes himself stay.

4.3.2 Individualism

Individualism is the core of the American spirit and values, the essence of which refers to the independence and struggle of the individual and the preservation and maintenance of the individual's unique personality, the belief that the individual's interests are supreme, and that all values, rights, and obligations are derived from the individual. Since the Renaissance, it has emphasized the status and value of the individual in society and demanded the freedom of individual will and behavior. The core concept of individualism is that everything should be human-centered, society should reflect the will of the individual, the government should protect the interests of the individual, and the individual has the right to decide everything about himself. Therefore, when Americans use humorous language, they have no restrictions on what they can talk about.

5. Measures for Sino-US Intercultural Communication Based on Humor Culture

Due to the cultural differences between China and the United States, the verbal humor in *Ipartment* and *Friends* has its own distinctive characteristics in terms of humor topics, expression objects and scenes. It is of vital importance to find out some measures to facilitate Sino-US intercultural communication.

5.1 Strengthening Contextual Analysis

The concept of context was first introduced by the anthropologist Hancher (1980), who believed that "discourse and environment are closely entwined with each other, and the linguistic environment is essential for understanding language." Firth (1957: 32) inherited and developed this theory, and further explained "context", which he considered as a necessary factor for understanding the meaning of sentences. When people use verbal humor, the actual message may be different from the meaning of the sentence itself, and if they do not understand the meaning behind it, they will not be able to understand the meaning of the verbal humor well, and cross-cultural communication will be hindered. Thus, listeners should not just passively accept the message in the communication, but strengthen the analysis of the context and make necessary additions or deletions to the meaning of the sentence.

5.2 Improving Empathy

Cultural empathy means that the subject of communication consciously changes his or her cultural position, consciously transcends the framework of his or her own culture in communication, gets rid of the constraints of his or her own culture, puts himself or herself in another cultural model, and realistically feels, understands, and appreciates another culture. The differences in language barriers, cultural backgrounds, social customs, ways of thinking, and values between China and the U.S. often lead to a failure of empathy. Therefore, In the process of understanding the differences between Chinese and American verbal humor, it is necessary to put oneself in the shoes of others and to actively understand the message behind the humor.

5.3 Overcoming Ethnocentrism

Ethnocentrism means to understand and measure everything in other cultures according to the

concepts and standards of one's own culture, including people's behaviors, communication styles, social customs, management patterns and values. When people measure foreign culture by the standards of their own culture, it will create a sense of rejection of foreign culture. Therefore, ethnocentrism may become an obstacle to the understanding of Chinese and American language and humor. Only by overcoming ethnocentrism and communicating with an objective and appreciative attitude can humor be better understood. Cultural diversity exists objectively. Under the combined influence of various factors such as historical backgrounds, communication ways and cultural values, the Chinese and American cultures present great differences, which poses certain challenges to understanding Chinese and American humor and adds obstacles to cross-cultural communication. When understanding the humor from different countries, cross-cultural recipients may feel confused or embarrassed about where the punchline comes from. Therefore, intercultural communicators should not use the standards of their own humor culture to understand foreign humor but communicate with an impersonal and appreciative attitude.

6. Conclusion

This paper takes Chinese sitcom *Ipartment* and American sitcom *Friends* as examples to compare and analyze the differences of humor culture between China and the United States from three aspects. First, it summarizes definitions and classifications of humor and expounds characteristics of Chinese and American humor culture. Chinese humor culture is rational and virtuous, whereas American humor culture is cynical and open. Second, the paper analyzes the differences between Chinese and American verbal humor in topic, target, and scene. In terms of humor topic, Chinese people tend to joke with subtle and trivial topics, while Americans use humor on a wider range of topics. In terms of humor target, Chinese people often take childish and weak people as objects of humor, while Americans tend to choose self-deprecation. In terms of humor scene, Chinese humor mostly occurs between same generation in informal scenes, while American humor can be seen between the same or different generations in any occasion. Third, the influencing factors of the differences between Chinese and American verbal humor are analyzed, including historical origins, communication styles and cultural values. In terms of historical origins, Confucianism, which advocates moderation and harmony, is revered in China. However, Americans, under the influence of European Renaissance, pursued excessively the liberation of individuality. In terms of communication styles, Chinese people are often indirect and modest, whereas Americans are relatively direct and open. In terms of cultural values, collectivism makes Chinese people place great importance on maintaining harmonious and close interpersonal relations. By contrast, American individualism emphasizes the freedom of individual will and behavior. Based on above analyses, the paper proposes three communication measures, that is, strengthening contextual analysis, improving empathy, and overcoming ethnocentrism, so that intercultural communicators can better understand and accept different humor cultures and promote Sino-US communication. Nevertheless, Given the inextricable relationship between language and culture, humor culture incorporates verbal humor and nonverbal humor. This paper focuses only on verbal humor by taking sitcoms as examples. It is hoped that future research will add non-verbal humor elements and study the differences of Chinese and

American humor culture more comprehensively.

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Notes

Note 1. "The Northeast Errenzhuan", previously called a "double play", is a rap folk dance performed by a man and a woman. It is known as one of the three major folk cultures in Northeast China.

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