

An Analysis of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in *Everything Everywhere All at Once* from the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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Abstract

This paper delves into the mother-daughter relationship in the film *Everything Everywhere All at Once* from the perspective of intercultural communication. Through an examination of the plot, character dialogues, and symbolic elements, it reveals the conflicts between mother and daughter arising from cultural differences—such as divergent values and ways of life—as well as their eventual reconciliation and mutual understanding against the backdrop of the multiverse. The findings indicate that, through its unique narrative and visual techniques, the film reflects the complexity and universality of intergenerational relationships in intercultural families. This study offers a fresh lens for applying intercultural communication theories to family relationship research and contributes to fostering understanding and communication among individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: intercultural communication, *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, mother-daughter relationship, cultural conflict, cultural integration

1. Introduction

In the current flourishing landscape of film and television art, cinema serves as a significant vehicle for cultural dissemination. It not only provides audiovisual pleasure but also embodies profound cultural connotations and social significance. *Everything Everywhere All at Once* has emerged as a focal point in the film industry, distinguished by its unconventional narrative structure and fantastical multiverse setting. The protagonist, Evelyn, is an ordinary individual busy running a laundromat. However, when she is unexpectedly drawn into a battle to save the multiverse, the strained relationship with her daughter, Joy, gradually surfaces throughout this

process, evolving from intense conflict to eventual reconciliation.

Upon its release, the film sparked a global viewing frenzy and garnered widespread critical acclaim. Breaking down cultural barriers, it has prompted audiences from diverse backgrounds to engage in profound discussions, with its impact far surpassing the cinematic medium to become a distinctive cultural phenomenon. Underpinning this heated discourse lies the film's incisive portrayal of pressing real-world issues, including familial relationships, individual value, and the clash of multiculturalism.

As globalization advances, multicultural societies have become the norm. Family members from different cultural backgrounds often cohabitate, and cultural differences present new challenges to the study of family dynamics. Intercultural communication theories offer a novel perspective for analyzing family relationships, thereby facilitating a better understanding of the interactions and influences among family members stemming from cultural disparities. Given this context, this study aims to conduct an in-depth analysis of the characteristics of intercultural communication within the mother-daughter relationship in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, excavate the cultural metaphors embedded in the film, and provide new insights and references for research on family relationships.

2. An Intercultural Communication Analysis of the Mother-Daughter Relationship in *Everything Everywhere All at Once*

2.1 Mother-Daughter Portraits and Their Cultural Roots

Within the distinctive narrative world constructed by *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, the mother-daughter relationship, interwoven with intercultural dynamics, resembles an intricate and delicate tapestry that vividly and profoundly reflects a series of real-world issues arising from cultural collision and integration. The film is not merely a feast for the eyes and ears but also an artistic vehicle laden with rich cultural connotations and familial emotional entanglements, offering an exemplary case for in-depth exploration of how intercultural communication manifests within family relationships.

Evelyn, the mother, as a member of the immigrant community, was deeply nurtured by traditional Chinese culture from an early age. This cultural immersion functions as an invisible force, indelibly etched into her patterns of thought and behavior. Familial values occupy a central place in her heart, where she regards the family as a closely-knit unit in which the well-being and interests of each member are intrinsically linked to the harmony of the whole. Filial piety, a core value in traditional Chinese culture, further serves as one of her guiding principles in life, leading her to respect elders, care for family, and regard familial responsibility as an inalienable mission. Meanwhile, diligence and frugality form the underlying fabric of her

existence, permeating every detail of her daily life. These values, like solid cornerstones, underpin her worldview and life convictions.

However, upon setting foot on the unfamiliar soil of the United States and attempting to integrate into the local society, Evelyn encountered unprecedented cultural shocks and challenges. Language, as a crucial tool for cultural exchange, became the first major hurdle in her acculturation process. Her limited English proficiency frequently placed her at a disadvantage when communicating with the outside world, making it difficult for her to articulate her thoughts and emotions accurately and leaving her susceptible to misinterpreting others' intentions. This linguistic barrier not only constrained her professional development, preventing her from securing employment opportunities commensurate with her abilities, but also created social estrangement, hindering her genuine integration into American social circles. Prolonged exposure to such circumstances gradually shaped Evelyn into a resilient yet somewhat conservative character. On one hand, she persevered with tenacity in adapting to the new environment; on the other, due to her adherence to her native culture and unease with the new one, she displayed a degree of conservatism in both conduct and mentality.

Joy, the daughter, as a second-generation immigrant, grew up in an environment markedly different from that of her mother. The American cultural milieu, akin to a melting pot, has indelibly imprinted Western cultural values—such as individualism, the pursuit of freedom, and egalitarianism—into the very core of her being. Nurtured within this cultural atmosphere, Joy places greater emphasis on personal feelings and needs, pursues independence and autonomy, and aspires to affirm her existence through self-actualization. These values have profoundly shaped her life choices and self-perception, leading her to orient major life decisions primarily around her personal interests and aspirations.

Yet it is precisely this disparity in upbringing that has engendered in Joy a sense of alienation from the traditional Chinese culture her mother represents. Although she is not entirely unfamiliar with her mother's cultural heritage, the vast differences between the two cultures throughout her growth have acted as an invisible chasm between them, giving rise to a palpable distance and estrangement. On her path toward

self-discovery, Joy has gradually come to question—and even resist—the traditional values and lifestyle upheld by her mother.

2.2 Value Conflicts

Value conflicts manifest with particular intensity in the mother-daughter relationship, emerging as a pivotal factor affecting their dynamic. On the question of prioritizing the family (the collective) versus the individual, Evelyn adheres to the traditional Chinese cultural notion of family primacy, believing that family members should make certain sacrifices for the overall interest of the family and that individual needs should be subordinated to familial imperatives. Joy, however, deeply influenced by Western individualistic values, prioritizes the pursuit of personal dreams and self-fulfillment. This conceptual divergence has given rise to numerous conflicts in their daily lives, most notably in areas such as Joy's sexual orientation and career choices, where their disagreements are particularly pronounced. Evelyn may struggle to accept her daughter's sexual orientation, perceiving it as a departure from traditional familial norms; regarding career choices, she tends to prefer that Joy pursue a stable, conventional occupation, whereas Joy aspires to follow her interests and seek a challenging and innovative professional path.

2.3 Communication Barriers

Communication barriers constitute another formidable obstacle between mother and daughter. Owing to her limited English proficiency, Evelyn often finds it challenging to articulate her thoughts and emotions accurately when communicating with her daughter, leading to frequent misunderstandings of her intentions. At the same time, Evelyn habitually employs an imperative and didactic tone when speaking to Joy, a tendency rooted in her upbringing within a high-power-distance cultural context, in contrast to her daughter's upbringing in a low-power-distance environment. The higher the power distance, the more individuals accept inequalities in power distribution within society, sometimes even perceiving this as desirable; simultaneously, social mobility tends to be lower. This phenomenon is commonly observed in collectivist cultures such as those in Asia, Africa, Eastern Europe, the Middle East, and Latin America—China's Power Distance Index (PDI) score is 80. Conversely, the lower the power distance, the less tolerance a society has for

power inequalities and the more it emphasizes equal opportunities for individuals, a pattern typical of individualistic countries such as the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Australia, and New Zealand—the United States has a PDI score of 40. Moreover, in the domain of nonverbal communication, disparities between Chinese and American cultures result in divergent interpretations of body language, facial expressions, and eye contact. For instance, certain implicit gestures and expressions common in Chinese culture may carry different connotations within the American cultural milieu familiar to Joy, impeding accurate transmission and reception of information during their nonverbal exchanges.

Regarding emotional expression, the restrained and implicit nature of Chinese culture stands in stark contrast to the direct and open style of American culture. Deeply influenced by traditional Chinese culture, Evelyn is unaccustomed to expressing her emotions directly; her love for her daughter is often conveyed through silent devotion and tangible actions. Joy, however, having been raised in an American cultural context, is more habituated to straightforward and candid emotional expression and yearns for her mother to reciprocate in like manner. This disparity in expressive styles frequently obstructs emotional communication between them, rendering them unable to truly comprehend each other's innermost emotional needs.

2.4 Intergenerational Transmission vs. Cultural Adaptation

The tension between intergenerational transmission and cultural adaptation further exacerbates the fraught nature of the mother-daughter relationship. Fully aware of the value and significance of traditional Chinese culture, Evelyn hopes that her daughter will inherit this precious cultural heritage, viewing it as an essential means of preserving family bonds and identity. To this end, she has resorted to various measures—such as compelling Joy to learn Chinese and adhere to traditional etiquette—in an attempt to impart the essence of traditional Chinese culture to her daughter. However, these efforts have instead provoked resistance and resentment from Joy. As a second-generation immigrant, Joy is more eager to integrate into American society and embrace the freedom and opportunities afforded by the new culture. In the process of adapting to American culture, she has

developed a rebellious stance toward the traditional culture represented by her mother—manifested, for example, in refusing to attend family gatherings and deliberately altering her appearance and behavior to fit in with her American peers. Such acts of rebellion not only wound her mother’s feelings but also deepen the rift between them, plunging their relationship into further turmoil.

3. The Process of Intercultural Integration

3.1 *The Impact and Transformation of the Mother-Daughter Relationship through Critical Events*

Within the distinctive multiverse framework of *Everything Everywhere All at Once*, a series of crisis events serve as pivotal turning points in the mother-daughter relationship. The multiverse crisis places both mother and daughter in life-or-death situations, compelling them, under extreme duress, to momentarily set aside their daily conflicts and begin re-evaluating their relationship, as well as their respective values and behavioral patterns. Evelyn, who has long adhered to tradition, gradually comes to realize during the crisis that her rigidity may have been detrimental to her daughter. Concurrently, Joy, amid her adventures, comes to perceive the love and helplessness concealed beneath her mother’s tenacity, prompting her to reflect on her own rebelliousness and willfulness.

Among these episodes, the role-reversal scenarios across different universes carry profound significance. Through experiencing each other’s roles, they gain firsthand insight into the pressures, difficulties, and inner worlds of the other. The mother experiences the struggles her daughter faces in pursuing self-identity within the American cultural context, while the daughter comes to understand the hardships her mother endures as an immigrant striving to sustain the family in a foreign land. This empathic perspective-taking enhances mutual understanding and compassion, laying the groundwork for reconciliation.

3.2 *Manifestations of Cultural Integration and Mutual Acceptance*

After enduring numerous tribulations, mother and daughter begin to reassess their cultural differences. Evelyn comes to recognize that the values of freedom and self-realization embedded in American culture, which her daughter represents, can infuse the family with new vitality and fresh perspectives. Conversely, Joy comes to appreciate the strengths inherent in

traditional Chinese culture, such as its emphasis on family solidarity and resilience. They come to understand that cultural differences are not irreconcilable contradictions but rather resources that can complement and enrich one another.

Throughout the process of reconciliation, they gradually adjust their communication styles and establish a new relational model. They learn to listen to each other’s viewpoints and respect their cultural differences. Evelyn no longer imposes her beliefs, and Joy ceases to reflexively reject her mother’s suggestions. Through this egalitarian and inclusive communication, they achieve a balanced relationship and rebuild a harmonious family environment, while simultaneously attaining personal growth and completing a transformative journey of intercultural integration.

4. Conclusion

Through its nuanced portrayal of the mother-daughter relationship, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* vividly presents common challenges in intercultural communication. The mother, shaped by traditional Chinese culture, upholds family-first values, while the daughter, raised in a Western cultural context, pursues individualism and self-actualization—resulting in pronounced value conflicts. Meanwhile, disparities in verbal expression, nonverbal communication, emotional styles, and power-distance orientations create communication obstacles, while cultural differences further intensify intergenerational tensions. These dynamics authentically reflect the dilemmas confronting multicultural families.

Intercultural communication theories offer both a theoretical framework and practical guidance for addressing cultural differences within families. Cultural relativism encourages us to respect each other’s cultural backgrounds and refrain from cultural judgment; intercultural adaptation theories assist us in understanding the psychological and behavioral changes that occur when confronting cultural differences. The reconciliation achieved by the mother and daughter in the film is ultimately rooted in their mutual recognition of each other’s cultural worth. This serves as a reminder to families in reality to embrace cultural differences with an open mind, engage in active communication, practice perspective-taking, and foster familial harmony.

Looking ahead, globalization will inevitably give

rise to an increasing number of intercultural families, suggesting broad prospects for relevant research and practice. Future studies may focus on the dynamic evolution of family relationships across diverse cultural contexts, as well as the impact of intercultural marriages on children's development—including the formation of their self-identity, values, and social competencies. In practice, family members should proactively employ intercultural communication strategies, acquire knowledge of each other's cultures, enhance communication skills, and respect differences, thereby transforming intercultural families into warm havens of cultural exchange and integration.

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