

Original Paper

The Most Familiar Strangers: Navigating Parent-Child Dynamics Through Communication

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Abstract

The essay analyzes the complex parent-child relationships in Yiyun Li's Gold Boy, Emerald Girl and A Thousand Years of Good Prayers. It focuses on the lack of effective communication between parents and children, leading to emotional estrangement. Chinese parents, often exerting control over their children's lives, assume they understand their needs, while the children feel misunderstood due to insufficient emotional exchange. In both stories, the characters suffer from imposed decisions and unspoken feelings, exemplifying how familial love, when mixed with cultural expectations, can become oppressive. The essay calls for mutually agreeable communication to bridge the gap and prevent families from becoming "the most familiar strangers."

Keywords

parent-child relationships, communication, estrangement

1. Introduction

From ancient times to present, family plays an important role in Chinese people's minds. In many families, the people we live with and love the most can often feel like the greatest strangers. This paradox is particularly striking in parent-child relationships, where the closeness of shared lives is often undermined by silence, misunderstandings, and unspoken expectations. In Chinese culture, with its deep-rooted respect for family and hierarchy, the bond between parents and children is held sacred, yet communication within these relationships is frequently one-sided. Parents, convinced that they know what's best, may overlook their children's individual thoughts and desires. This dynamic can create an emotional void, where love exists but remains unexpressed, turning family members into "the most familiar strangers." The tension between assumed understanding and actual emotional distance, and its toll on family connections, is the focus of this analysis of parent-child dynamics. By delving into this issue, we can uncover the emotional costs of unequal communication and explore how families can

navigate these challenges to build more authentic relationships.

Chinese people traditionally have strong family ties, not only close ties between the couple but also that between parents and children. Some Chinese parents tend to arrange everything for their children and wish them to take the path that they have paved. However, along with it is that most Chinese parents may take it for granted that they understand their children very well and they believe what they have thought is just what their children need. As parents, they feel that they own the power to impose their willingness without considering their children's thoughts. This phenomenon appears in Yiyun Li's stories---*Gold boy, emerald girl* and *A thousand years of good prayers* as well. In fact, the underlying cause of such imposition and obstinacy lies in the lack of communication, more specifically, lack of mutually agreeable communication. It is against such background that the problem of unequal communication between parents and children is raised. Hanfeng was forced to marry Siyu in order to comply with Professor Dai even though he doesn't have any interest in marriage; Mr. Shi thought unilaterally that his daughter was in great pain after divorce while ignoring the inner thoughts of his daughter. To some extent, both Hanfeng and Professor Dai and Mr. Shi and Yilan are the most familiar strangers since they talk with each other but they never truly communicate. This essay is intended to investigate the 'familiar as well as strange' relationship between parents and children and its underlying causes in Li's stories.

2. Dig into the "Familiar But Strange" Relationship

The "familiar but strange" relationship refers to the paradox where family members, particularly parents and children, know each other intimately yet remain emotionally distant due to a lack of real communication. Despite living together and sharing daily routines, they fail to truly understand one another's inner worlds. In Yiyun Li's stories, this emotional estrangement is evident in the way parents make decisions for their children without considering their feelings, and children retreat into silence rather than confronting their parents. This dynamic leads to an illusion of familiarity while, in reality, the emotional bond remains weak and unfulfilled. There is a famous writer once put forward that 'It is not what you have given to your children that counts but the love, care and attention you shower on them'. In fact, such love and attention can easily be realized through communication. However, the true communication is neither concerned with the language nor with culture. Instead, it is the emotional exchange that matters.

In Li's *Gold boy, emerald girl*, such lack of true communication can be found in the relationship between Hanfeng and Professor Dai. When "Hanfeng had half his money deposited in Professor Dai's account and told her that he wanted a break" (p. 207); what is different from other Chinese parents who always care about their children's behaviors is that Professor Dai did not ask about Hanfeng's future plans. What's more, Professor Dai is even less inclined to communicate with his own son since she thought deeply that no one can understand her and communication is nonsense at all. Likewise, Yilan under Li's pen in also shows no willingness to communicate with his father. "Every night after dinner,

Yilan either retreats to her bedroom to read or goes out for a movie and comes home at late hours” (p. 189) in order to avoid staying with his father. At the same time, Mr. Shi just remains silent. Both of these two pictures reveal that there is even no communication at all. In fact, the first step of realizing true communication is to start expressing thoughts and opinions proactively. Proactive communication can deepen the understanding of each other and further increase intimacy. However, as the foregoing examples, most Chinese family lack expressions of emotions and communication of thoughts. This kind of unhealthy family pattern is passed from generation to generation, which will do harm to the family ties eventually.

Admittedly, it is difficult to maintain equal communication between parents and children since the obsession of hierarchy has been deeply rooted at the bottom of most Chinese parents’ hearts. This is obvious in the case of Mr. Shi, who always talked about his profession as a rocket scientist with friends he made in America despite of his poor English but had nothing to talk with his daughter other than something like “eat more...” or “allow me...”. Parents tend not to treat their children as equal as adults as themselves and they believe that children are always children after all. Thus, it is unnecessary to talk with them about family things even though they have already become adults. Mr. Shi used to be quiet when his daughter was young and never talked about his work even when his daughter asked. Though there were some unspeakable reasons behind it, it did do harm to his daughter’s mentality so that they became the most familiar strangers due to insufficient communication.

Plots in “Gold boy, emerald girl” seem not to be so serious. However here comes another question that whether true communication brings about force and compromise. There is a saying goes that “Do not ‘love me’ under the banner of ‘for my wellbeing’”. Actually this kind of “love” is selfish and underneath this must be some kind of strangeness, which results from unequal communication. Playing the piano is one of the two things that Professor Dai considered herself successful in having given Hanfeng. However, we can know from the story that Hanfeng was less willing to play and he even believed neither of these two gifts had in any way contributed to his happiness. It can be seen clearly that unilateral considerations did not receive prospective effects out of insufficient communication.

In addition, like most Chinese parents, Professor Dai was also eager to arrange for his son’s marriage regardless of purposes. “Marriage as an institution remains as central to Chinese family and social life as ever” (Riley, 1994). Professor Dai asked Hanfeng to invite Siyu for a movie or have dinner without looking up as she asked, which shows that such suggestion is an ‘order’ indeed. What’s more, Hanfeng’s mother even asked “Do you dislike her” when Hanfeng said it is too quick since they have met each other for one time. To some extent, this rhetorical question was mixed with opinionated understanding of Hanfeng’s inner thoughts and it pushed Hanfeng to say things the way that his mother wanted him to (force). However, the fact is that Hanfeng had fulfilled his mother’s wish to meet with Siyu without disappointing and embarrassing her despite of his lack of interests (compromise). Admittedly, unequal communication causes the force and compromise indeed.

3. Enlightenments of Mutually Agreeable Communication

The concept of mutually agreeable communication emphasizes the importance of open, two-way dialogue between parents and children, where both sides feel heard and respected. Unlike traditional, one-sided communication that often enforces authority or expectations, this approach fosters emotional exchange and understanding. In mutually agreeable communication, parents and children speak as equals, expressing their true feelings without fear of judgment or dismissal. This kind of communication deepens emotional bonds, promotes mutual respect, and helps prevent the misunderstandings and estrangement that can occur in family relationships when silence or assumptions take the place of genuine conversation.

Truly equal communication means not merely talking but also bi-directional exchange of feelings and ideas, which I would like to call it mutually agreeable communication. That is to say, you are willing to express yourself because you firmly believe that you will get some feedbacks and then you invite others to share. Of course this is based on equal standing of both sides involved.

One case has been reported many years ago that a Chinese student expressed his dislikes towards study, what he received was endless criticism and complaints. In that case, the Chinese student found that he has lost the last way to relieve his own feelings and he chose to rob the bank. To be honest, I was lost in deep thought when I first read that shocking news report. What if the parents of that Chinese student care more about his reality and help him get rid of his fear and hates about learning? What if his parents could communicate with him calmly and equally instead of criticizing him in such a deterrent identity? On the one hand, parents' "faults" are bound to be responsible for their children's "behaviors". In "A thousand years of good prayers", Yilan grew up in a language that she never knew how to express her feelings because both of her parents never express their emotions to each other, therefore when she took up a new language, she felt more free to talk and communicate since there is less bondage of culture and thought.

On the other hand, these so called 'faults' can again be made up through equal communication. Making equal communication can bring the hearts closer and closer so that you can truly know what they are thinking about and what they really need. Otherwise, parents and children may become the most familiar strangers.

4. Conclusion

According to Marko Fong, Yiyun Li is the product of three cultures and among which the influence of William Trevor is the profoundest one and "both Trevor's and Li's characters are marked by an inability to articulate their deepest feelings to those closet to them." Hanfeng and Yilan are the typical representatives of that kind of image who confined themselves to enclosed space. Additionally, as Minjie FAN (2016) argued that the children in the one-child family in China tend to have low confidence, suffer from mental stress, exhibit a high depression trend, and have low sense of security. Both Hanfeng and Yilan are the only children in the family and that is probably the reason why

Hanfeng and Yilan are less willing to share their inner thoughts with their parents since they live in their own inner worlds.

In “Gold boy, emerald girl”, much have been written on the monologues of Hanfeng, such as he wondered if his mother believed that he just needed a wife and Siyu would be the most suitable person for the role (p. 213). However, these monologues didn’t turn into real direct questions. Similarly, in “A thousand years of good prayers”, Mr. Shi kept surmising his daughter’s ideas without asking for even one word before he found her affairs with that Russian man.

Can Professor Dai tell his son that she didn’t love his father and even hated him? Can Mr. Shi tell his daughter he was just a plain clerk rather than that respectful rocket scientist because of a woman? Can Yilan tell her father that she got divorced due to extramarital love? Some people may say ‘no’ since all of them didn’t have enough courage to face the reality so that they tried every means to escape. Nevertheless, all the answers can be “yes”, since only all of them open their minds to express feelings and make equal communication can they become truly happy. As parents, they have the obligation to pay attention to the inner worlds of their children, to try to be considerate and to avoid cultivating their children as the ideal model in their minds pushily. Similarly, as children, we should make efforts to be friends with our parents and try to communicate with them about our real thoughts. Only in this way, family can be called loving family and parents and children may not become the most familiar strangers in the world.

All in all, the strained relationships portrayed in Yiyun Li’s stories reflect a broader issue of communication within Chinese families. The emotional distance between parents and children often stems from a deeply ingrained hierarchy, where parental authority overshadows the need for open dialogue. This leads to misunderstandings, unspoken emotions, and ultimately, the creation of “familiar strangers”—family members who, despite their closeness, remain disconnected on a deeper emotional level.

To prevent this, families must foster an environment of equal, open communication, where both parents and children can express their thoughts and emotions freely. Mutual understanding and respect are essential in breaking the cycle of emotional estrangement. Only through genuine dialogue can parents and children rebuild their relationships, ensuring that love and care are felt, not just assumed. By doing so, they can bridge the gap between familiarity and emotional connection, transforming their relationships from distant to intimate.

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