



On the Differences Between Chinese and Western Cultures From the Perspective of Cultural Dimension Theory

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Abstract

With the advancement of technology and the societies, cross-cultural communication among diverse cultures has become increasingly frequent, which promotes the mutual learning of different cultures. Meanwhile, the cross-cultural misunderstandings and conflicts caused by cultural differences will continue to increase, resulting in cultural barriers. Hence, there is a growing sense of urgency that we need to enhance our understandings of people among different cultures and ethnic backgrounds which is conducive to eliminating cultural misconceptions. This study focuses upon the cultural differences in social hierarchy, interpersonal relationship, human-nature relationship as well as sense of time between China and the West from the perspective of Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, whose aim is to trace back to the roots of cultural differences, thus eliminating cultural misunderstandings to a certain extent and facilitating cultural exchanges between China and the West.

Key words: Cross-cultural communication; Cultural dimension theory; Chinese and western cultures

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INTRODUCTION

Living in an era characterized by globalization and cultural diversity, people from various cultures have been

communicating during activities such as commercial trade, religious missions, and cultural exchanges. As these activities increased in number, cultural frictions resulting from a range of differences exist within and between countries. Therefore, it is of great significance to boost the mutual understandings among peoples via cultivating the sensitivity of cultural differences, shortening cultural distance as well as developing cross-cultural communication abilities. Under such an international background, cross-cultural communication, an interdisciplinary field integrating anthropology, psychology and linguistics, has become a research field which arouses the interest of Chinese and foreign scholars. Headed by American anthropologist, Edward T. Hall, many theories about cross-cultural communication have been proposed. In 1980, Hofstede came up with the theory of cultural dimensions based on a worldwide questionnaire survey, which is employed to analyze the differences of values of people from different countries and utilized into multiple research fields such as the studies of teaching and translating. Additionally, there has been numerous cross-cultural communication studies conducted from the perspective of Hofstede's cultural dimensions both at home and abroad.

Based on the problems inherent in the process of cross-cultural communication, this thesis focuses on two aspects from Hofstede's cultural dimension theory. One is to distinguish cultural differences between China the West, while the other is to trace the roots of such cultural differences, aiming to strengthen cultural exchanges between China and the West in the era of economic globalization and cultural diversification. Significance of the study goes as follows. First of all, it is beneficial to draw a clear distinction between Chinese and western cultures so as to avoid misinterpretation and to promote the mutual interaction as well as enrichment within these cultures. Furthermore, it can somehow fulfill the theory of cultural dimensions from a perspective of time. Though

Hofstede's theory has matured which demonstrates a pattern of interdisciplinary intersection and multi-angle integration, more efforts should be made to gear the theory to keep pace with the times, since people's values as well as acculturation have changed over time.

1. CULTURAL DIMENSION THEORY

From a large-scale survey of an American multinational business corporation whose employees came from all over the world, Geert Hofstede first came up with cultural dimensions in 1980, covering power distances, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, uncertainty avoidance, among which individualism-collectivism is the foremost dimension. Later, enlightened by the survey about Chinese cultural values which was carried out by Michael Harris Bond, Hofstede proposed his fifth dimension, long-term and short-term orientation. Besides, World Value Survey also exerted an impact on Hofstede's theory resulting in the appearance of the sixth cultural dimension: indulgence and restraint.

In *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, Geert Hofstede, along with the co-author, Gert Jan Hofstede, has thoroughly illustrated these six cultural dimensions as well as analyzed the cultural differences at large.

1.1 Power Distance

Power distance focuses on whether different levels of power will influence people's life in all respects. It is portrayed as the extent to which the members with less power accept unequal power of institutions within a nation.^{[1](p61)} In order to know how people from different countries handle the unequal treatments, Hofstede did research on employees of multinational corporation who came from all over the world with similar occupations, from which he generated power distance index and drew a conclusion that a country's power distance dimension will be affected by its geographic latitude, population size and levels of wealth.

The PDI score tells the relation of dependence among people within a nation because of different family backgrounds, occupations as well as education. For the large-power-distance countries, the subordinates are heavily dependent on the superiors, showing two polarized performances for the subordinates. One is to be indulged in such dependence while the other is to reject it entirely. However, for the small-power-distance countries, interdependence exists within the subordinates and the superiors and both of them prefer to consultation rather than one-side arbitrage.

1.2 Individualism versus Collectivism

While national cultures differ in many dimensions, one dimension which has been considered as the core

dimension by Hofstede is individualism-collectivism dimension. According to Hofstede, the individualistic society refers to a society where the links among individuals are loose: people incline to merely care for his or her immediate family whereas the collective one is described as a society in which people are integrated into a cohesive group and are completely loyal to the group.

Individual and collective orientation is a measure of the relationship between the individual and the group. In a society where the interest of the group exceeds the interest of the individual will be regarded as the collective society, in which people emphasize the harmony of a group and strive for the honor of the group. Conversely, in an individualistic society, people place great emphasis on individual interest and everyone tends to be self-centered, advocating independence and freedom.

1.3 Masculinity versus Femininity

Masculinity versus femininity is a dimension of social distinction. Hofstede designed a questionnaire of fourteen work goals to analyze different behaviors of people from different countries. He utilized the terms "masculine" and "feminine" to illustrate these differences. A society where men are assertive, competitive and strong whereas women are tender and pay more attention to the quality of life is called masculine, while a society where the roles of men and women are flexible and both of them are treated equally is called feminine.

Masculinity Index is employed to measure a society. In a society of high Masculinity Index, man's life is orientated to careers and they endeavor to pursue success regardless of life and family whereas women centered on the family. On the contrary, in a society of low Masculinity Index, both women and men are concerned with the quality of life. However, feminine is not the same with feminism in which women struggle for their rights because of sexual discrimination.

1.4 Uncertainty Avoidance

The term "uncertainty avoidance" stemmed from James G. Mark's study about company management. In BMI survey, Hofstede measured how often employees felt anxious at work and their answers were recorded by Uncertainty Avoidance Index labeled as score one to five. Defined as the degree people can accept future uncertainty, uncertainty avoidance is a dimension about people's subjective feelings.^{[1](p191)}

There is a striking distinction among different cultures in dealing with the uncertainty avoidance. In a culture of strong UAI, people's life is beset with excessive anxieties and threats. Under such circumstances, people show preference to security rather than confrontations and conflicts so that norms and laws should be formulated to eliminate uncertainties. In a culture of weak UAI, people are accustomed to uncertainty and hold a positive attitude towards the development and change of novel things.

When the regulations are out of people's tolerances, they will overthrow these regulations.

1.5 Long-term versus Short-term orientation

Confucian teachings represent universal values so that his thoughts not only affect generations of Chinese, but also retain the interest of numerous foreigners. Although his thoughts were generated in 500 BC, the impact on modern people is still quite profound. Influenced by Confucian teachings, Hofstede proposed his fifth cultural dimension, long-term and short-term orientation. This dimension is employed to measure the extent of people's tolerance to which material, emotional, and social demands are delayed. Long-term orientation respects for future awards while short-term orientation stands for immediate benefits.

[1](p239)

Cultures and societies with long-term orientation lay emphasis on the importance of perseverance and thrifty, not only treating things with a dynamic perspective, but also focusing on savings. People who are influenced by this culture often consider the influences of current behaviors on the next generations. It opposite pole, the societies with short-term orientation, centers on the past and the present, emphasizing imminent interests as well as social responsibility.

1.6 Indulgence versus Restraint

The World Values Survey addresses the matter of happiness by asking people how content they are with their lives. Intrigued by this survey, Misho proposed the concept of indulgence versus restraint, from which Hofstede introduced the sixth dimension which stands for the level of allowance for basic social needs and human desires.

IVR shows a strong positive correlation with long-term versus short-term orientation. Like people in a society of short-term orientation, people in indulgent society pay attention to upcoming interests, stressing happiness and propagating hedonism. Nevertheless, this indulgence is not a kind of unrestrained and unregulated indulgence but in compliance with social laws. Reversely, people in restraint society tend to be thrift and self-restraint from a long term.

2. ANALYSIS OF DIFFERENCE BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURE

Hofstede drew a vivid analogy between culture and an onion where symbols, heroes, rituals and values are arranged layer upon layer. In other word, culture is described as the sum of beliefs and practices of a society. [2](p105) With the development of Internet, there are considerable opportunities for cross-cultural communication among countries so that it is universal to

encounter cultural differences. This chapter will discuss differences between Chinese and western cultures, respectively in social hierarchy, interpersonal relationship, human-nature relationship as well as sense of time, from Hofstede's cultural dimension theory.

2.1 Social Hierarchy

Hierarchy is a system in which, to maintain the dominance, the ruling class divides residents into various social groups according to their kinship, race, property, political status, etc. in the slave society and the feudal society. Social hierarchy exerts a more profound impact on China than the West, since under the feudal autocracy of more than 2000 years, hierarchical system has deeply ingrained in the minds of Chinese people. Moreover, Confucianism, which has a far-reaching influence on generations of Chinese people, highlights the function of *Li*, standing for rituals, traditions and norms in life. [3](p6) The radical significance of *Li* is to maintain social order and harmony among people by following the social hierarchy no matter in in-groups or out-groups. Though Chinese society has changed dramatically, traditional social hierarchy still influences Chinese life in contemporary society to some extent. However, the West, led by England and America, which used to emphasize the royal ranks, pursues equality and democracy for all walks of life in the new era. One of the most vital reasons is that the history of the West is so short that westerners' values mirror modern people's pursuit of freedom and democracy. Besides, the West is affected profoundly by the political philosophy of Locke, who promotes "common opinion" that man is naturally endowed with freedom and liberty. [4](p618) Renaissance also influences westerners, whose essence is humanism, emphasizing the dignity of human beings as well as the importance of present life.

Differences in social hierarchy between Chinese and western cultures can be illustrated by Hofstede's power-distance dimension. According to Hofstede's theory, China belongs to the high-power-distance country where people are willing to accept the unequal power while most western countries are low-power-distance in which people tend to pursue democracy and equality.

In such high-power-distance cultural situations, Chinese children are expected to be obedient and parents play the authority roles in the process of decision-making. Additionally, it is universally acknowledged that teachers are the controllers of the overall situations in traditional Chinese class while students have to obey the class rules. Nevertheless, in the West, parents and children work towards making a democratic decision, underscoring the equality among family members. Parents will not expect to live with adult children and they will make their own preparations for later life. In western class, it is common to see the round table which symbolizes the equality between teachers and students and children are encouraged to express themselves freely. Besides, the difference in

society hierarchy between China and the West also reflects in appellations. In high-power-distance countries like China and Japan where think highly of the social hierarchy because of deep-rooted patriarchal concept, people should not only behave respectfully, but mind their appellations to others. For instance, when communicating with the high-powered, Chinese people are accustomed to adding “老” to the appellations which is a kind of honorific showing respect, such as “老师” (teacher) and “老板” (boss) and they seldom call the superiors’ names directly but “王老师” or “王老板” instead. But in the West, it is universal to call the names of the high-powered, because most westerners are reluctant to be respected due to social identity. However, with the advancement of society and the popularization of education, Chinese people’s thoughts have undergone so tremendous changes that social hierarchy gradually withdraws from the stage of history and an increasing number Chinese people are pursuing the equality among people.

2.2 Interpersonal Relationship

Interpersonal relationship refers to the psychological relationship formed by people in the process of mutual interaction including kinship, friendship, teacher-student relationship, comrade-in-arm relationship, and so on. According to Hofstede’s research, China upholds collectivism whereas most western countries advocate individualism and their distinctions are demonstrated in dealing with interpersonal relationship.

The typical Chinese family is known as the extended family where relatives of several generations live together and they consider themselves as part of a “we” group. After adulthood, most Chinese young people will still continue to live with parents and parents take their children’s support for granted. Since ancient times, Chinese people have emphasized the importance of family and there is no greater happiness than that all family lives together including grandparent and great-grandparent. What’s more, China has inherited the culture of filial piety. Confucian teaching has advocated that “filial piety and fraternal duty” is the essence of *ren*.^{[3](p5)} When children grow up, they naturally regard themselves as part of the collective family, being loyal to the group and shouldering the responsibility to take care of their parents. But in the West, everyone is an independent individual, even in the family which is regarded as the nuclear family.^{[1](p91)} Children from such family consider themselves as “I” and after adulthood, they have to stand on their own feet, live independently and their parents will seldom interfere with their choice, resulting from their values of freedom and independence.

In the society, Chinese people advocate that the collective benefits surmount the individual ones, and if necessary, one has to sacrifice his or her individual benefits for the groups. This norm conforms to both Chinese history and its reality. Over the history, China has suffered humiliation

as well as suppression, during which all Chinese people united together to resist foreign enemies so that Chinese people have gradually cultivated collective consciousness. Moreover, in order to promote the modernization of China, people from all levels are supposed to unite in one purpose. Therefore, employees of China tend to be dependent on the organization and be honored for the collective honor, with an emphasis on opportunities, working conditions as well as abilities. Conversely, the West underscores the independence from the organization. Influenced by American Revolutionary War, America has become a nation with high consciousness of independence and freedom. Also, spirits of freedom and independence reflected in American literature also affects the generations of Americans. Benjamin Franklin, father of America, pointed out that God helps those who help themselves. Hence, employees in western counties stress the significance of self-independence, freedom and challenge.

2.3 Human-nature Relationship

As what has been pointed out by Hofstede, China is a long-term-orientation country, since Chinese people focus on the future. For instance, in the human-nature relationship, Chinese government adheres to Scientific Outlook on Development, striving to realize an all-round, coordinated and sustainable development. Though nature is in a wealth of fortune, Chinese people believe that humans are supposed to live in harmony with nature. In the course of socialist modernization of China, people should never seek benefits at the cost of nature. Instead, all across the world are responsible for the protection of nature for future generations. Nevertheless, in Western concept, nature can be conquered so that the West has endeavored to explore it, challenge it and finally change it for upcoming benefits. Most western countries are short-term-orientation such as America and England. In the 18th century, the Industrial Revolution, headed by the West, had swept over the world, which was a double-edged sword to the world. Though its advent had boosted the development of economy and technology, the environment suffered unprecedented disaster. What’s more, surplus value maximization of the capitalist world has galvanized the West to plunder the natural resources exhaustively without considering future interests, resulting in the imbalance between nature and human.

For China, the concept that human should live harmoniously with nature dated back to Ming Dynasty when the Emperor Yongle constructed the Temple of Heaven, symbolizing the Chinese pursuit of harmony between nature and human. The emperor used to provide oblations for the heaven twice a year, respectively in spring and winter, praying for a good harvest and fortune in the upcoming year. In addition, from Chinese traditional culture, one can find a strong eco-consciousness from ancient times. Confucius thought that Heaven was the source of all living things, so that

he considered “creation of life” as “Heavenly way”.^{[3](p27)} To Mencius, a distinguished scholar, accomplishment of one’s values embodied in his or her behaviors, that is, to love one’s family, then the people and finally all the living things in the world. Influenced by western philosophy, westerners hold a view of dualism. To the West, people’s mission is to shorten the distance between human and nature. Consequently, nature can be conquered by human beings. Also, the West focuses on the short-term interests, manifesting in endless exploitation of natural resources as well as severe contamination of the environment, which results in an ecological destruction to the earth.

2.4 Sense of Time

As an objective existence, time is a special form of life and, to various cultures, it is endowed with different connotations. For China, time is a cycle, during which seasons change from spring to winter continuously whereas, for the West, time is a thread, connecting the past, present and future. Klarence Kluckhohn has proposed three types of sense of time: past-oriented, future-oriented and present-oriented.^{[5](p199)} Time oriented to past or future is a relatively stable factor, contributing to cultural differences. Past-oriented societies find it crucial to follow traditions. People in these societies like China often look back at history and regard the leaders or philosophers from the past as a guide for their behaviors. The West is oriented to future whose actions focus on the future and they think the future can be controlled through concrete actions.

In line with Hofstede’s research, China stresses the effect of restraints, which supports the fact that China is past-oriented. One reason for emphasizing restraints is that China has a long history, during which Chinese people not only experienced the glory, but suffered the humiliation. Hence, Chinese people advocate that people should be restrained and keep the history in mind, cherishing what people have owned now. Another reason is that Confucianism calls for taking the history as a guide and Buddhism emphasizes the spirit of sufferings. Both Confucianism and Buddhism exert a far-reaching influence on Chinese people. However, westerners advocate more indulgences than Chinese people in Hofstede’s BIM survey, whose values reflect in the pursuit of happiness and freedom like American people. Owing a short history, American people seldom review the history but focus on future for the realization of American dream. They desire for democracy, freedom as well as rights of human, so that they are willing to be indulgent in the present happiness.

In addition, Hofstede’s survey also shows that China is a country with weaker uncertainty avoidance than the West. Facing with future uncertainty, Chinese people tend to be more anxious so that norms and standards are formulated to avoid social uncertainties. Influenced by the past, Chinese people are habituated to taking preventive

measures to future uncertainty such as purchasing education insurance as well as pension insurance. But westerners hold the view that we should cherish the day, being more peaceful to accept future uncertainty.

CONCLUSION

Though cultural dimension theory has increasingly matured in the research of cross-cultural communication, several limitations remain. First of all, Hofstede’s cultural dimension theory, to some extent, is outdated, since people’s values and cultural consciousness reflected in the data of the questionnaire of Hofstede in 1980 may change with the advancement of economy and society, which cannot cater to the change of the times. Furthermore, the respondents of Hofstede’s research, solely limited to the workers and elites, are not representative enough, because they cannot fairly stand for people from all walks of life. Moreover, the concept of cultural values itself is a generalization. In other words, Hofstede’s research places emphasis on national cultures rather than regional cultures within a nation. The cultural dimension theory is merely employed to stereotype a nation, while people from different areas may hold different values due to various levels of education and economic growth. One of the most striking limitations is that there is a certain bias in this theory, since Hofstede is a westerner whose thoughts and values base on the western values.

In view of the limitations discussed above, suggestions will be proposed for future research. For one thing, it is necessary to expand the respondents from an all-round level as well as to update the data. For another, levels of research need to be divided into individual, national and regional levels. In addition, attention should be paid to the following two aspects in the process of intercultural communication. Firstly, confronting with cultural diversity, equal attitude ought to be held towards any culture. Only in this way can we decrease cultural discrimination. Besides, every nation should strengthen its own cultural self-confidence which contributes to reducing cultural hegemony.

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