

Research Article

## A Study of the Differences between Chinese and Western Cultures from the Perspective of Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory

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**Abstract:** Cultural Dimension Theory is a framework proposed by the Dutch psychologist Gilt Hofstede to measure cultural differences between different countries. Since its birth, this theory has attracted wide attention from the academic community, and has become a classic theory in the field of cross-cultural research. Based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory, this paper analyses the differences between Chinese and Western cultural values from three different cultural dimensions: individualism and collectivism, power distance, long-term orientation and short-term orientation, and explores the causes of intense cultural conflicts. It is hoped that this study can improve people's awareness of cross-cultural communication, reduce or eliminate unconscious cultural conflicts, and better promote economic and cultural exchanges and development.

**Keywords:** Hofstede; Cultural Dimension Theory; cultural differences; cross-cultural communication.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays, with the development of information network linking the world together, the trend of economic globalization is becoming irresistible. The world culture will not develop independently, but will form a situation of multi-cultural coexistence under mutual influence (Davis, 2001). The communication between different cultures is becoming more and more frequent, and the intercultural communication has become the trend of the times. In this process, some unpleasant problems caused by the differences between Chinese and Western cultures also emerged. How to avoid cultural conflicts and collisions caused by cultural differences, eliminate communication barriers in cross-cultural exchanges, and establish good and healthy cooperative relations are urgent problems to be solved in practice. Based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory, this paper will analyze the cultural differences between China and the West from three different cultural dimensions: collectivism and individualism, power distance, long-term orientation and short-term orientation, and explore the reasons for their occurrence, so as to promote

further exchanges, complementarity and compatibility between Chinese and Western cultures.

## II. HOFSTEDE'S CULTURAL DIMENSION THEORY

From 1967 to 1973, psychologist Geert Hofstede conducted a large-scale cultural values survey of the International Business Machines Corporation (IBM) employees from 50 countries and three transnational regions. He believes that most employees working at IBM have similar educational backgrounds and intelligence levels, and their personality traits are similar. Therefore, their different answers to the same question should not reflect other differences, but rather the impact of culture on them. Based on this assumption and the analysis of IBM employees' questionnaires in different countries, Hofstede (1980) found that there are four factors that can help us distinguish the impact of national culture on employees' work values and attitudes. These four factors or dimensions are:

1. Individualism—collectivism: emphasis on individual goals, needs and success vs. group needs, satisfaction and performance.

2. Power distance (high or low): to which people accept power and status differences in society.
3. Masculinity—femininity: dominance, independence vs. compassion, interdependence, and openness.
4. Uncertainty avoidance: degree to which people are comfortable with ambiguity and uncertainty.

Since Hofstede's IBM questionnaire is a product of Western thinking, Professor Michael Harris Bond from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, designed a new questionnaire in 1980 containing non-Western cultural prejudices and added a survey of Chinese values to the questionnaire. His findings show another dimension of future orientation and its opposite, past and present orientation. Hofstede calls this dimension long-term orientation—short-term orientation, and takes it as the fifth universal dimension. Since then, the theory has become an important reference in the field of cross-cultural research, and its core ideas have been verified by hundreds of studies in 76 countries and regions.

### III. Cultural Differences between China and the West from the Perspective of Hofstede's Cultural Dimension

Hofstede's theory of cultural dimension is based on the actual survey data and has been widely applied in the field of cross-cultural communication, which has practical research value. It can be said that the differences between Chinese and Western cultures in cross-cultural communication can be attributed to these cultural dimensions. The following is a comparative analysis of the differences from three dimensions.

#### 3.1 Individualism—Collectivism

In Hofstede's theory of cultural dimension, individualism—collectivism refers to how individuals perceive their relationships with others and society, and whether society is concerned with individual or collective interests. Individualistic society refers to a society where the relationship between people is relatively weak, and people only care about themselves and their immediate relatives. Collectivist society means that people are born into powerful and close groups. Such groups provide them with lifelong protection and, in turn, they are undoubtedly loyal to their own groups.

China has always been a country with a strong sense of collectivism. Chinese culture pays attention to collective interests, advocates collectivism, emphasizes unity and cooperation, and people have a strong sense of collective belonging. "To worry before the common people worries; to enjoy only after the people can enjoy" and "Sacrifice individual interests for collective benefits" are all vivid portrayals of Chinese cultural collectivism, and people with personal interests as the center are often not allowed by the collective. Western

culture, on the other hand, advocates individualism, centers on individuals and pays attention to personality development. In China, individuals have loyal obligations and responsibilities to organizations. The interests of the state, the collective, the school and the family are always higher than the interests of individuals. On the contrary, in the West, the pursuit of personal freedom and interests is everyone's right. Governments, ruling classes, churches, families and any other external factors are not allowed to interfere.

In schools, students of the individualistic society are active in the classroom. The purpose of learning is to learn how to learn. Diploma can improve the competitiveness of individuals in the labor market. Collectivist society advocates that modesty is a virtue. Only when allowed can students answer questions in class. The purpose of learning is to learn how to do things. Diploma can enable individuals to enter higher social status groups.

In the workplace, the employee turnover rate is high in the individualistic society. Employment and promotion are based on rules and employee's own skills. There is a contractual relationship between employees and organizations. Both parties can terminate the contract under the prescribed conditions. Work tasks are more important than interpersonal relationships, and all customers are treated equally. In collectivist society, the turnover rate of employees is very low. Employment and promotion should give priority to the factors of internal groups, and interpersonal relationships are more important than work tasks.

In terms of political life, the individualistic society tends to put individual interests above collective interests, emphasizing individual views and personal privacy. Collectivist society emphasizes that collective interests are superior to individual interests and that minorities are subordinate to the majority.

#### 3.2 Power Distance

In the book *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*, Hofstede (2005) defines power distance as "the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally". Power distance covers a wide range of areas, including families, schools, companies, and so on.

The difference of power distance is reflected by "power distance index" (Jia, 2003). The higher the index is, the greater the power distance is. Therefore, people in large power distance societies accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place that needs no further justification, whereas those in small power distance societies strive for power equalization

and demand justification for power inequalities. However, due to the differences of cultures and other factors, each country has different understanding of power. For example, the United States pays more attention to individual abilities, while China, deeply influenced by Confucian tradition, pays more attention to the binding force of power, and Chinese social relations are more formal and strict than Americans. Chinese people attach great importance to the concept of hierarchy of elders and children, which is reflected in schools, workplaces and families.

1. Family. Chinese families are deeply influenced by the traditional etiquette concept of class and the order of different superiority and inferiority between the elder and the young. For example, as a younger generation, it is absolutely impossible to call the elder's full name directly. They need to add various honorific names, and the tone of conversation also needs to be very humble; while in Western families, it is more equal, and the younger generation can not only call the elder's name directly to show intimacy, but also can question their views.
2. (2) Workplace. In Western countries, supervisors generally do not force their subordinates to do things they do not want to do, and the working environment is relatively free and relaxed. In Chinese companies, subordinates often need to unconditionally obey the arrangement of their superiors, and the superiors have absolute leadership over their subordinates.
3. (3) School. In most Chinese schools, the knowledge taught by teachers cannot be questioned by students. Most teachers only give lectures to students unilaterally. Although many teachers now pay more attention to communicating with students, most students seldom take the initiative to talk with teachers. In the classroom of Western schools, students are often the main body of the classroom. Students will actively express their views, and there is more interaction between teachers and students.

### 3.3 Long-term Orientation—Short-term Orientation

Hofstede calls this dimension a new dimension of traditional Confucian ethics. It shows a value of long-term or short-term interests held by a culture, focusing on distinguishing the long-term or short-term investment of the society for the goal, which is embodied in long-term planning and short-term planning.

Culture and society with long-term orientation attach great importance to the future, treat things with a dynamic perspective, pay attention to saving, and leave room for anything. People affected by this culture often think of the impact of current behavior on the next generations. Chinese culture is the most typical long-term orientation of culture. Short-term oriented culture

and society are oriented to the past and the present, focusing on immediate interests and social responsibility. Western culture is a typical example of this kind.

Because of the long-term open geographical environment, Westerners pay more attention to temporary enjoyment, such as *Carpe diem* advocated in the movie *Dead Poets Society*. While traditional China is in a closed continental environment, people have developed introverted and conservative thinking. Despite the emergence of the "moonlight clan" in China in recent years, who live paycheck to paycheck, it is generally said that Chinese people have long-term plans and are more willing to save their property for future use.

## IV. Reasons for the Differences between Chinese and Western Cultures

On the whole, Western cultures are individualistic, low power distance and short-term oriented; while Chinese culture is collectivist, high power distance and long-term oriented. There are many reasons for these cultural differences, but the root of them can be attributed to differences in geographical environment, economic system and culture concepts between China and the West.

### 4.1 Geographical environment

China is a continental geographic environment country. Such countries are more likely to be confined to their own areas. Chinese people like to learn from history and summarize the experience and lessons of their predecessors. However, they lack interest in new things and prefer a stable and quiet environment. Most of the western countries are marine geographic environment countries, which are more open, full of exploration and risk-taking spirit, and pay attention to pioneering work.

### 4.2 Economic system

Historically, China's traditional economy was self-sufficient, conservative and culturally introverted. As an agricultural civilization country in history, it also makes Chinese people pay attention to ethics, morality, and harmony. Western civilization originated in the Aegean Sea of Greece, and the importance of farming for them is far less than that of China, while the attributes of industrial civilization in Western countries have a strong spirit of struggle. In addition, it has the characteristics of strong concern for its own interests.

### 4.3 Cultural concepts

China's thousands of years of Confucian culture has a profound impact on the way of thinking and handling affairs of the Chinese people, so the Chinese people are more modest, self-esteem and implicit, tolerant and respectful of the elderly, and pay attention to human relations and interpersonal relations;

while the Westerners, influenced by the Enlightenment's "natural human rights" thought, have always emphasized the play and respect of individual's ability.

## V. CONCLUSION

The world today presents an amazing cultural diversity. With the increasing exchange of business activities and the development of information science and technology, more and more cultural collisions appear in people's daily life. These cultural collisions are often unnoticed, but their subtle changes are enough to affect and hinder the normal exchange and development of international relations. As an oriental power, China's cultural background and values are quite different from those of the United Kingdom, the United States and other Western countries. As far as world civilization is concerned, the distinction between the two value systems is neither superior nor inferior to each other. In the development of their respective countries, there is a need for their respective modes of civilization and the existence of their respective values. In cross-cultural communication, there is no so-called universal code of conduct. Therefore, the cultivation of cross-cultural awareness can help us to carry out cross-cultural communication smoothly.

This paper analyses the differences between Chinese and Western cultures from Hofstede's three cultural dimensions, including individualism and collectivism, power distance, long-term orientation and short-term orientation. The purpose is not to change people's original way of thinking, behavior and feeling, but to reduce or eliminate unconscious cultural conflicts in communication. In order to adapt to cultural differences, enhance China's influence in international affairs and better promote the development of China's economy and culture, we should learn from each other and develop each other.

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