

Analysis of Chinese and American Family Culture Under Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory — *A Grandson from America*

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Abstract

Nowadays, globalization has become an irreversible trend, and cultural exchanges between China and the West are inevitable. The classic representatives of Eastern and Western cultures are China and the United States. The collision and integration of Chinese and American cultures is not only reflected in diplomacy, but also in all aspects of family culture. *A Grandson from America* is a typical reflection of the cultural differences between China and the United States, the film tells the story of an old Chinese shadow puppet artist Lao Yang and an American boy Brooks from twists and turns collision to tolerance and love. By interpreting the plot of the movie *A Grandson from America*, uses Hofstede's cultural dimension theory to analyze the cultural dimension of the film, and explores the differences in family culture between China and America.

Keywords: cultural dimension, Chinese and American cultural, *A Grandson from America*

1. Introduction

The film *A Grandson from America*, also known as *When Sun Wukong Meets Spider-Man*, primarily tells the story of Lao Yang and his grandson Brooks, who comes from the United States. Throughout their subsequent interactions, the grandfather and grandson often experience conflicts due to the cultural differences between Chinese and American families. However, during their time spent together, they gradually develop a deep bond that transcends their cultural backgrounds, ultimately leading to a harmonious relationship.

The differences in family culture between China and the United States are vividly portrayed

through the interactions between Lao Yang and his grandson. As the ties between China and the United States continue to strengthen, family culture has become an important topic of research that cannot be overlooked. This paper will employ Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory as a lens to conduct an in-depth analysis of the cultural differences between Chinese and American families, using the film *The Monkey King Goes to America* as a focal point.

1.1 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Between 1967 and 1973, Geert Hofstede conducted a large-scale cultural values survey at the renowned multinational corporation IBM (International Business Machines Corporation).

His team distributed over 116,000 questionnaires in more than 72 countries in more than twenty different languages and collected the responses. The focus of this survey and analysis was on the national differences in values exhibited by employees in various countries. In 1980, Hofstede published his seminal work, *Culture's Consequences*. This book is the analytical outcome of his investigation into cultural differences, categorizing these differences into four dimensions: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and uncertainty avoidance¹. After a decade of validation and further investigation, in 1991, Hofstede co-authored the book *Culture and Organizations* with his son, in which he added a new dimension — long-term orientation versus short-term orientation — building upon the original four dimensions².

2. Cultural Dimensions Theory and the Differences in Family Values Between China and the United States

2.1 Differences in Power Distance in Family Relationships

Power distance refers to the extent to which less powerful members of a society accept and expect that power is distributed unequally within that society or organization. There are significant differences in this dimension across countries due to varying interpretations of power. In Western countries, people do not place particular importance on power; rather, they emphasize individual capabilities. In contrast, Asian countries often focus more on the constraints of power due to systemic factors. Survey results indicate that China's power distance index is 80, while that of the United States is only 40. In China, the historical context of thousands of years of authoritarianism has fostered a general sense of reverence for power among the populace, resulting in a larger power distance. In countries with a smaller power distance, there is a looser democratic atmosphere, a smaller emotional gap between superiors and subordinates, greater independence among subordinates, and the ability to hold differing opinions, leading to

higher creativity but also more conflicts and overall dispersion. Conversely, in countries with a larger power distance, there is a strict hierarchy, with subordinates relying heavily on their superiors and having relatively less autonomy. Under the control of those in power, social development tends to be more cohesive, rapid, and coordinated³. The concept of power distance is also reflected in family culture, as seen in the differing educational philosophies presented in the film. In Chinese families, parents hold absolute authority, and the relationship between parents and children resembles a hierarchical structure. Chinese parents often have a negative attitude toward their children's exploratory activities. In the film, when Yang Dongliang returns home after a long absence with a widow and her child Brooks, his father, Lao Yang, initially reprimands him, expressing disdain for his son's choice of a partner with a "baggage." In terms of educating his grandson, when Brooks climbs a tree out of curiosity about sparrows and accidentally falls, his grandfather does not affirm his adventurous spirit; instead, he scolds him, saying, "Why don't you climb up to the sky? What kind of education do they give you in your country?" In contrast, American families place greater emphasis on respect, freedom, and equality. They view children as independent individuals, and the relationship between children and parents resembles a friendship, allowing for equal communication. Children have their own time and space for free imagination, and they are encouraged to explore and take risks. In the film, when Yang Dongliang leaves the child with Lao Yang, he emphasizes that while Lao Yang can educate the child, he must never hit him, reflecting American educational values. Brooks is independent and creative; after wetting the bed, he takes his sheets outside to dry, and in his leisure time, he enjoys painting. When Brooks shows his mother that he is good at Chinese, she tells him, "You are my pride; you are so much better than I am." However, when Brooks presents his artwork to his grandfather, Lao Yang says, "Painting requires talent, but you don't have it." These everyday interactions in the film vividly illustrate the educational differences between China and the United

¹ Hofstede, G. J. (2010). *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* (2nd ed.). Translated by Li Yuan and Sun Jianmin. Beijing: China Renmin University Press.

² Xie Shitong. (2016). An Analysis of the Differences between Chinese and American Family Education from Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions. *Journal of Liupanshui Normal University*, (2), 66.

³ Chen Qingfeng, Chen Zhixin. (2020). A Look at the Cultural Differences between Chinese and American Families from the Film *A Grandson from America*. *Study Monthly*, (06), 49-51.

States.

2.2 Differences in Family Values Between China and the United States

The dimension of individualism versus collectivism measures whether a society emphasizes individual interests or collective interests. In societies with a tendency toward individualism, relationships between people are relatively loose, and individuals tend to focus on themselves and their immediate families. In contrast, collectivist societies prioritize relationships within the group, caring for the extended family, where strong group ties provide ongoing protection, and individuals are expected to maintain absolute loyalty to the group. As early as the Western Zhou Dynasty, China's *Book of Songs* reflected a collective mindset with phrases like "Under heaven, all is the king's land; within the land, all are the king's subjects." In the United States, people uphold individualistic values, respecting differences, emphasizing personality, advocating freedom, pursuing equality, prioritizing personal interests, and highlighting heroism¹. The film's alternate title, *When Sun Wukong Meets Spider-Man*, illustrates this contrast between a typical Chinese hero and a typical Western hero. Sun Wukong, while powerful, is deeply connected to his master and fellow disciples; his success is inextricably linked to those around him, reflecting a collectivist perspective. In contrast, Spider-Man's portrayal focuses on the individual, emphasizing personal heroism. In the film, Brooks is a strong-willed character who often argues with his grandfather, Lao Yang, and even threatens to run away from home. When his grandfather accidentally breaks his Spider-Man toy, Brooks resorts to a hunger strike and becomes increasingly concerned about his personal privacy. When Brooks's mother, Ai Hua, is volunteering and does not return home quickly, Director Wang suggests Brooks call her. As Brooks walks outside with his phone, Director Wang comments on his age, noting that he knows to avoid others while making the call, to which Lao Yang remarks, "American kids are smart." China, as a typical collectivist nation, is exemplified in the film when Lao Yang, having retired from his craft for many years, is urged by Director Wang to return to the traditional shadow puppetry and

establish a shadow puppet factory. During this process, it is mentioned that Lao Yang's friends or partners all agree to this idea but are waiting for Lao Yang to speak up. When Lao Yang's son departs for Xi'an, despite his reluctance, he remains silent for the sake of the collective shadow puppet performance. The film also highlights the significance of Chinese New Year, the most grand and important festival in China, emphasizing the importance of family ties and the concept of reunion. These various elements in the film clearly illustrate that China is a collectivist country.

2.3 Differences in Gender Roles Within Family Relationships Between China and the United States

In masculine societies, gender roles are distinctly defined. Male members are expected to be confident and assertive, focusing on material success, while female members are expected to be humble and gentle, valuing quality of life. Conversely, in feminine societies, gender roles often overlap, with both men and women encouraged to be humble, gentle, and to prioritize quality of life². Under the influence of thousands of years of feudal culture, the hierarchical view of "a husband is the master of his wife" has deeply penetrated Chinese society. The accepted norm in Chinese culture is that "men work outside the home while women manage the household." In the mindset of the Chinese people, women are often expected to assume responsibilities such as supporting their husbands and raising children, and they frequently face various forms of unfair treatment. In contrast, Western cultures place greater emphasis on equality and individual consciousness, asserting that both men and women should enjoy the same rights. In the film, after Yang Dongliang and his wife bring their child back, they leave due to work commitments. Lao Yang shows dissatisfaction with this arrangement, turning away to sit in the car, and tells Brooks, "You stay at home and behave; I'll go bring your mom back." Such behavior is deeply influenced by entrenched traditional Chinese culture. Later, Lao Yang refers to his granddaughter-in-law, Ai Hua, as "an international warrior; she's like a female Bethune," reflecting how, in China, women are less frequently seen working outside the home,

¹ Huang Fukui. (2017). Conflict and Integration: Cultural Analysis of *A Grandson from America*. *Modern Business Trade Industry*, (25), 177.

² Xiao Shiqiong. (2009). Analysis of Chinese – American Cultural Differences in the Film *Gua Sha* from Hofstede's Cultural Values Perspective. *Journal of Suihua University*, (6), 127-128.

particularly in rural areas. When women do work away from home, they often receive high praise, as exemplified by Lao Yang's remarks. In contrast, the United States advocates for gender equality, where both men and women can pursue their own careers and strive for improved quality of life, with children encouraged to be independent and self-sufficient. For instance, in the film, *Ai Hua*, even as a single mother post-divorce, continues to work hard outside the home. This illustrates the masculine characteristics of Chinese society, while American society exhibits traits of a more feminine approach.

2.4 Differences in Approaches to Family Relationships Between China and the United States

Uncertainty avoidance refers to how a society deals with uncertain events and unconventional environments, specifically whether it seeks to avoid and control uncertainty through formal channels. Cultures with a high level of uncertainty avoidance place significant emphasis on authority, status, experience, and age. They strive to provide greater job security, establish more formal rules, and are intolerant of extreme views and behaviors, believing in absolute knowledge and expert evaluations as means to mitigate uncertainty. Conversely, cultures with low levels of uncertainty avoidance tend to be more tolerant of unusual behaviors and opinions, have fewer regulations, and allow for the coexistence of various philosophical and religious beliefs. Chinese culture advocates for "harmony" and adheres closely to established norms, making China a country characterized by high uncertainty avoidance. In contrast, the United States promotes risk-taking, values individuality, and leans toward directly expressing personal needs. In the film, the grandfather, Lao Yang, is concerned about others discovering that he has a foreign grandson. He hides the child in the house and instructs him to remain silent, fearing that their neighbors might come in and find out about his foreign lineage. When villagers inquire, he attempts to explain that the child is from Xinjiang, reasoning that he wants to give everyone some time to adjust. He even takes his grandson to the barber shop to dye his hair black, and they only dare to return home after dark. Lao Yang himself remarks that going home feels like being a thief, reflecting his anxiety and unease. In stark contrast, Brooks expresses himself very directly and is unbothered by the

opinions of others. When he argues with his grandfather, he shouts in defiance; when his grandfather accidentally breaks his toy, he slams the door and sleeps in a different room, even considering running away to express his dissatisfaction. He is also willing to take bold risks in his actions, such as attempting to crack walnuts with a stone before switching to a door, or trying to climb trees to find bird eggs. Even when he gets hurt or bitten by a spider, he is curious to see if it will transform him into Spider-Man. The behaviors of the grandfather and grandson encapsulate the essence of Chinese and American individuals. China is characterized as a high-uncertainty avoidance country, adhering to conventions, being modest, and exhibiting indirectness. In contrast, the United States is a low-uncertainty avoidance country that encourages risk-taking and advocates for the straightforward expression of thoughts and feelings.

2.5 Differences in Thinking Styles in Family Relationships Between China and the United States

The dimension of long-term orientation versus short-term orientation refers to the extent to which members of a culture are willing to delay the satisfaction of their material, emotional, and social needs. This dimension reflects the degree to which a moral life is considered worthwhile without the need for religious justification. Societies with a long-term orientation tend to prioritize social stability and the attainment of long-term benefits, while short-term oriented cultures focus more on immediate gratification of current needs¹. In long-term oriented countries, individuals emphasize long-term goals and are willing to make continuous sacrifices to achieve them. In contrast, people in short-term oriented societies prioritize present enjoyment and are reluctant to sacrifice the present for future gains. China exemplifies a long-term oriented culture. In the film, Lao Yang retains his shadow puppet props even after retirement. Wang, the village head and a representative of government policies, persuades Lao Yang to get involved again, emphasizing the importance of preserving the art of shadow puppetry. Although Lao Yang is initially hesitant, he ultimately decides to join

¹ Xie Wanxin. (2015). On the Chinese — American Cross-cultural Communication Conflicts in the Film *Pushing Hands* from Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory Perspective. *Data of Culture and Education*, (33), 52.

the shadow puppet troupe for the sake of its long-term preservation. The film also portrays Ai Hua, the wife of Yang Dongliang. When Lao Yang asks Yang Dongliang why he and Ai Hua are together, Yang Dongliang replies that they fell in love at first sight. However, after a short period of working away from home, they return and inform Lao Yang that they have broken up due to incompatible views. This on-again, off-again international romance illustrates the American tendency to make decisions based on immediate feelings. Clearly, the United States represents a short-term oriented culture that favors spontaneity and prioritizes immediate satisfaction. In contrast, Chinese individuals focus on long-term developmental needs and consider future circumstances when making decisions.

3. Conclusion

In the context of globalization, cultural exchanges between China and the United States will become increasingly close. While there are certainly differences and conflicts between the two cultures, it is essential that they strive for mutual understanding, tolerance, and learning from one another, utilizing effective cross-cultural communication methods. As Brooks in the film asks Lao Yang, "Can Sun Wukong really defeat Spider-Man?" Lao Yang replies, "Why should they fight? We should encourage Sun Wukong and Spider-Man to become good friends and work together to protect our Earth." Culture is not superior or inferior; in today's globalized era, we should respect, understand, and embrace each other in the face of cultural differences. We must maintain cultural confidence, reject cultural arrogance, and continuously enhance our cross-cultural communication skills to promote a harmonious and friendly relationship between the two countries.

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