

A Study of Cultural Differences in *A Grandson from America* - Based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

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Abstract

From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, this paper takes the cultural differences in the film *A Grandson from America* as a clue and applies Hofstede's five dimensions of Cultural Dimensions Theory. It also explains the conflict and fusion of Chinese and Western culture in the film and its enlightenment. It is of great significance to explore the countermeasures to the cultural conflicts between China and the West in order to promote the cultural exchange and integration between China and the West in the current international environment.

Key words: *A Grandson from America*; Cultural Dimensions Theory; cultural conflicts

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Research

Cultural conflict is that two or more cultures come into contact with each other, which leads to a state of competition and confrontation. Due to the differences in geographical environment, differences of living habits and values of people in different regions will also exist. However, with the development of social, the boundaries between different ethnic groups are broken, and people carry out social interaction with their own original cultural habits, so there will be cultural conflicts and frictions inevitably. If cultural conflict is not handled properly, it will bring huge contradictions between different regions.

In the context of globalization, cultural exchanges between China and the West have become increasing, which brings cultural conflicts inevitably. The movie *A Grandson from America* takes the conflict between Chinese and Western cultures as the story line, and there are various conflicts between the two roles. They have all been resolved in the communication of the protagonists, and the process of solution is worth going deep explore and research.

In the field of cultural studies, the Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory is most important and pioneering. In 1981, in his famous book *Cultural Consequence*, he put up four dimensions based on the experiments. He expanded the four cultural dimensions in

his theory into five and in 2015 developed them into 6 dimensions, including Indulgence and Restraint. Through literature search, it is found that most scholars apply the Cultural Dimensions Theory to the field of linguistics.

1.2 Purpose and Significance of the Research

From a cross-cultural perspective, this paper attempts to analyze the process from mutual incomprehension to mutual tolerance based on the Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions. And the significance of this thesis is as follows: first of all, this research attempts to reveal the cultural differences include various aspects between China and the West based on the movie with the help of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, thus extending the application of the Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory to more research fields. Secondly, the findings of the research will contribute to the further understanding of the cultural differences between China and the West. In today's multi-cultural environment, cultural exchange is inevitable, and the exchange of different cultures will always be the condition that start is collision, later is negotiation, and finally it is the trend of integration. As shown in the film, in the face of cultural conflict, individuals should actively explore ways to solve, respect differences and seek coexistence. There is no good or bad culture, only similarities and differences.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Previous Studies in "Cultural Dimensions"

2.1.1 Development

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory is proposed by the Greet Hofstede, a psychologist from Netherlands, based on the questionnaire investigation in 1970s. At first, according to Hofstede (1984), the Cultural Dimensions Theory was divided into four parts: Power Distance, Individualism and Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance and Masculinity and Femininity. Later, Greet Hofstede and his colleague Michael Harris Bond (1988) developed the Cultural Dimensions Theory by adding the fifth dimension, Long-term Orientation and Short-term Orientation, based on the Chinese values and Asian cultures. And the new dimension, Indulgence and Restraint, was added in Greet Hofstede's book entitled *Software of the Mind: Intercultural Cooperation and its Importance for Survival* in 2010.

2.1.2 Critiques

The significance of "cultural dimensions" is undeniable in terms of studies relevant to intercultural exchanges. Nevertheless, its good reputation fails to stop the criticism from others. Since the theory is based on the comparison made between countries or regions with different cultural backgrounds, it inevitably involves a lot of discussion Hofstede's theory received high commendations from numerous experts and was a heated topic for quite a long time after being published, while the fifth dimension had to bear harsh words and unpopularity. This is probably due to the dimension being the only one underpinned by the traditional Chinese value "Confucianism", which is beyond the interests and understanding of western scholars (Fang 2003). It is also criticized by many Asian

scholars for being culturally hegemonic and unfair in terms of Hofstede's reviews on Asian cultures.

Fang (2003) points out the deep-rooted problem consisting in the fifth dimension, namely "long-term orientation (Confucian dynamism)", stating it is confusing and has many philosophical flaws. As far as he is concerned, Hofstede is not scrupulous enough when making analyses. Besides, in his inquest of the fifth dimension, Hofstede deems many traditional Chinese conventions as negative by default, which leads to the division of interrelated values into two opposite extremes.

Another Chinese scholar Li (2009) maintains that Hofstede's theory, in spite of being conducive to the research on intercultural business and intercultural management, is formed on western values and full of prejudice. Meanwhile, the data collected in Hofstede's research is outdated and the education level of its subjects is homogenous since most of them are social elites. This may exclude lower-class people and thus lead to the final conclusion being over-biased.

From the perspective of evolution, Taiwanese scholar Wu (2006) denounces the theory as being obsolete, claiming that many factors such as democratization and globalization has caused great changes in every society and thus the stagnant contents of the theory don't match the reality anymore.

Fang (2003) also complains that Hofstede's theory about the fifth dimension remains unchanged. Later on, Jones and Michael L (2007) carried out an all-inclusive investigation to evaluate Hofstede's theory. Starting with going over the literature regarding the assessment of this theory, they enumerated negatives of the theory discovered by various experts including inaccuracy, problems concerning cultural homogeneity, national divisions, ideologies, time efficiency, research methods and statistical integrity. However, they also specify the positives of the theory such as relevance, rigor and relative accuracy.

2.1.3 Application

Considering the fact that Hofstede put forward his theory based on cultural diversity, a number of scholars apply it to their comparative studies featuring two culturally diverse countries. For instance, Li (2014) uses the theory to compare the Chinese society with the Japanese society, contrasting them by power distance, individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity-femininity. The survey shows that even if both of them are greatly influenced by Confucianism, they still differ from one another to a very large extent. Lai and Wang (2012) make a similar comparison, but it is between China and the United States. However, it is obvious that unlike Li (2014) who ignores the role of the fifth dimension, or long-term orientation (Confucian dynamism), Lai and Wang (2012) utilize the fifth dimension to describe the differences between China and America.

2.2 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory on China and America

2.2.1 Power Distance on China and America

Power distance refers to the degree of acceptance of unequal distribution of power in society by people with low social status. Hofstede defined the Power Distance Index by

the two ways. One is to judge whether the decisions made by superiors are democratic or not. Another one is the fear of subordinates in times of conflict between superiors and subordinates. The countries with high power distance suppose that power inequality is the basic fact of society, and there is a difference between people with high status and those with low status. While the countries with low power distance try to downplay the phenomenon of power inequality, so the high status people try to reduce the power distance, and the low status people think that they are equal to the high status people. All should be guided by laws and norms. According to Hofstede's survey, China ranks 12th out of 74 countries and the US 57th in power distance.

2.2.2 Individualism and Collectivism on China and America

Individualism and collectivism mainly describe the relationship between the individual and the collective in a particular society. According to Hofstede, individualism refers to a society in which people are loosely connected and care only for themselves and their immediate family, where individual loyalty to the organization is weak and there is a greater emphasis on individual rights, privacy and self-actualization. The collectivism refers to the strong and close-knit inner group that provides protection and support from birth and emphasizes individual belonging, integration and loyalty to the group. Hofstede uses an "Individualism Index" to measure Individualism and collectivism in a country. According to his survey, the United States ranks first out of 74 countries in the individualism index and 56th in China.

2.2.3 Masculinity and Femininity on China and America

Hofstede points out that societies where emotional gender roles are markedly different - where men are perceived as decisive, resilient and materialistic, and women are perceived as modest, gentle, and value quality of life -- are called masculine societies. When emotional gender roles overlap, when both men and women are expected to be modest, gentle and concerned about quality of life, such a society is called a feminine one. He measures this dimension in the Masculinity Index. Masculine society regards masculinization tendency as the dominant social values such as advocating decision-making, ambition, competition, self-confidence and other characteristics. The feminine society weakens gender identity, promotes gender equality and values such as care, cooperation and modesty, and men do not need to act decisively. According to Hofstede, China rank 11th and U.S. rank 19th on the masculine index.

2.2.4 Long-term and Short-term Orientation on China and America

The concepts involved in this dimension, such as dealing with relationships according to social status, frugality, perseverance, sense of shame, maintaining face, stability, respecting tradition and reciprocity, are all values advocated by Confucianism. Therefore, it is also known as "The driving force of Confucianism". The long-term orientation culture focuses on the cultivation of virtues oriented towards the pursuit of future returns, such as tenacity and thrift, and expects individuals to value social order and establish long-term goals. Besides, it advocates people to work hard to achieve better academic results. The short-term-oriented culture focuses on nurturing and encouraging virtues about the

past and present, focusing on consumption, caring for short-term results and rapid satisfaction of needs, and focusing on the individualized development of children. This Orientation is represented by “long-Term Orientation Index”. According to Hofstede, the long-term orientation index of Chinese mainland ranked first out of 39 countries and the United States ranked 31st.

2.2.5 Indulgence and Restraint on China and America

Indulgence-restraint refers to the degree to which members of society control their desires and instincts. Indulgence societies tend to allow their members to be with basic, natural desires and instincts, such as enjoying life and having fun, and their members believe that freedom of expression and leisure are important. Restraint Society tends to use strict standards to manage the desires of its members. Freedom of expression and leisure are of low importance, and it is important to observe social order. This orientation is represented by the Indulgence Index. According to Hofstede’s survey, the United States ranks 15th out of 93 countries in the indulgence index at 68, while the Chinese indulgence index is only 24.

3. HOFSTEDE’S CULTURAL DIMENSIONS THEORY AND A GRANDSON FROM AMERICA

3.1 Power Distance and A Grandson from America

China tends to have a high power-distance culture, while the United States tends to have a low power-distance culture. A country with high power distance requires children to be obedient and self-disciplined, while a country with low power distance requires parents and children to treat each other equally.

In the film, the way educating grandson Brooks of grandpa Old Yang epitomizes the high power distance in Chinese culture. When Old Yang was disciplining Brooks, he was asking him to be obedient more than he was communicating with him. When Old Yang found out that his son and his daughter-in-law, Aiwa, had left Brooks without saying goodbye, he told his grandson that he was going out to get Aiwa back and asked his grandson to wait at home. He asked his grandson if he understood his request at first, and when Old Yang saw Brooks shaking his head in confusion, he shouted angrily again, “Do you understand?” Then Brooks was shocked and nodded hurriedly. Instead of praising Brooks for being independent when he was drying his quilt by himself, Old Yang taunted his grandson, “How old are you when you still wet the bed? Aren’t you ashamed?” Brooks was shy and angry. He wanted to pick up the bag and left, but Old Yang headed to hold him into the house, regardless of how he struggled. Old Yang’s son left a letter to him before his son left, telling him that Brooks have a bit of a temper and he wish that Old Yang will not beat the child and talk to child properly”. It reflects the American culture of parents and children -- the communication of equal dialogue. In real life, Chinese people often teach their children what to say and what to do, and give them less space to play independently. Westerners pay attention to the cultivation of independent spirit of children, and children are required to have a strong independent ability to live.

3.2 Individualism and Collectivism and *A Grandson from America*

Chinese tend to be collectivism and Americans tend to be individualistic. In collectivism culture, people attach great importance to their own image in the public. At the same time, they protect the face of others and avoid confrontation with others. In the film, Old Yang scolded his son for “Marrying a foreign widow and embarrassing his ancestors” and tried to hide Brooks’ existence. On weekdays, Old Yang locked Brooks at home. In the evening, he put a hood over Brooks’ head. Besides, he hurried to the county to dye his grandson’s black hair. When Wang discovered the existence of Brooks, Old Yang falsely claimed that Brooks came from the Xinjiang ethnic minority. “You look like a little foreign devil,” he told Brooks. He is influenced by a closed-minded view of the countryside, but to some extent, it reflects the value of personal face.

In an individualistic country where personal self-actualization is the primary goal, people tend to display strong self-confidence because confident people are more popular. In the film, Brooks confidently tells his mother that his Chinese is the best in the class, and Aiwa, instead of reminding his children to be modest, “You are my Brooks and my pride.” In addition, individualistic values value independence and privacy. When Old Yang accidentally opened Brooks’ backpack and looked at his spider-man, Brooks rushed down the stairs and shouted, “Don’t move, it’s mine.” When it came to food, Brooks always told Old Yang, “I want to drink milk” and “I want to eat bread”. This is contrast to collectivism culture.

3.3 Masculinity and Femininity and *A Grandson from America*

The China’s masculinity index is higher than that of the US. In ancient China, the traditional idea that men were in charge of making money while women were in charge of taking care of children still exists in some areas of China. In the film, Aiwa threw the child to Old Yang and went out to work. At first, the old man is very unhappy and goes out to get his wife back. Of course, there are reasons not to accept foreign grandson, but the deeper reason is the deep-rooted traditional Chinese cultural concepts. Old Yang lives in rural county in China and has a low level of education. For Aiwa, who returned from the United States supports gender equality which means that everyone could have a career and strive for a better life.

3.4 Long-term and Short-term Orientation and *A Grandson from America*

Chinese people pay attention to persistence, frugality and pragmatism. People usually look at problems from a dynamic perspective, showing a quick adaptation to change, a positive preparation for the future, and a strong propensity to save, and have a clear purpose in life and keep working for it. Americans tend to live in the present moment, looking at problems from a static perspective, focusing on immediate responsibilities and social obligations; viewing social change from a skeptical perspective. If Americans are the quintessential hedonists, then the Chinese lifestyle is like of an ascetic monk.

Diligence and frugality have become the norm for Chinese parents. Old wooden tables, sun-dried corncobs on balconies, red peppers hanging from doorways and enamel cutlery that has been knocked off paint all reveal the frugal habits of the older generation in rural

China. In the short-term orientation culture, couples pursue common interests and hobbies. When Yang Dongliang first brought Aiwa home, he described their union as "Love at first sight, kindred spirits". Later, when they returned to Shanbei to pick up Brooks, Yang Dongliang confessed to Old Yang that he had broken up with Aiwa because "Their interests did not match." Old Yang did not understand this and felt that his son was taking marriage as a joke, because marriage under the influence of long-term orientation culture does not require the two sides to have common tastes and interests.

3.5 Indulgence and Restraint and *A Grandson from America*

The U. S. Indulgence index is far higher than China, is a typical indulgent society. Most Chinese parents think that spending too much time on entertainment is a sign of indulgence. In the film, Old Yang couldn't help but remind Brooks to finish his summer homework when he saw him indulging in entertainment. When the grandson got in trouble, Old Yang was always in control of his temper; when he was missing his grandson, he will regard the well as emotional sustenance. When the spider-man of Brooks was broken, he did a new one for his grandson at night and just put it beside the pillow of Brooks. All the signs show the restraint and forbearance of the Chinese people in the face of their desires and emotions.

4. STRATEGIES FOR DEALING WITH CULTURAL CONFLICTS AND *A GRANDSON FROM AMERICA*

4.1 Change the Old Mindset and Achieve Cultural Reconciliation

The first step to deal with the cultural conflict is to change the old cultural concept. It should be learn to look at other cultures with a rational eye. Different cultures have different values, goals and orientations. There is no high or low culture. Foreign cultures should be respected and understood with an equal attitude. As the film does, Old Yang initially has a huge prejudice against Brooks' spider-man, calling it a monster of spider. Brooks is also very unfamiliar with the Monkey King. But in the end both sides also accepted the "Chivalry" of the other country, especially when Brooks asked the Monkey King and spider-man who was better, and Old Yang replied that the two should become friends and get along well instead of arguing about who was better.

4.2 Build a Platform to Promote Cultural Exchanges

To solve the cultural conflict, there must be an appropriate cultural exchange platform. In recent years, Confucius College has played an important role in resolving the conflicts between Chinese and foreign cultures and spreading Chinese culture. The popularization of English has laid a solid foundation for the cultural exchange between China and foreign countries. With the further development of globalization, China's voice in the international community has significantly increased, and culture, as an important reflection of a country's soft power, should build a suitable platform for diversified exchanges, to promote the common improvement of cultural soft power of all countries. The shadow puppetry in the film is a platform for cultural exchange between China and the United States. Shadow puppetry is a traditional Chinese folk art. Old Yang made a shadow puppet of spider-man for Brooks. In the evening light, the grandfather and

grandson play with the Monkey King and spider-man's shadow puppetry. In addition, at the end of the film, a family of four reunited during the Spring Festival and took a family photo in traditional Chinese costumes.

4.3 Strengthen Innovation and Promote Cultural Integration

The final destination of cultural development is to preserve the cultural characteristics of the country while achieving cultural integration. Innovation is an important means to achieve cultural integration. To realize cultural innovation, intellectuals are needed because they are active in thinking, strong in innovation, relatively easy to accept the culture of other countries, and can boldly explore and employ new people in the cultural circle, encourage them to grasp the ancient and modern Chinese and foreign culture. At the same time, increase the incentive of cultural innovation and stimulate the enthusiasm of cultural innovation are also needed. KFC, the famous American fast food brand, has stores all over the world. One of the important reasons is that KFC is good at innovation. For example, since KFC entered China in 1987, it has introduced many Chinese-style food products, such as the old Beijing chicken roll, the French style steamed bread, congee and so on, which are tailored to the Chinese people. In the film, Brooks wanted a hamburger, but the hamburger is only available in the provincial capital. Old Yang had no choice but to ask the villagers to help him make one. Old Yang told Brooks that it was a Chinese hamburger. Yang thought, this is to replace the cake of Chinese Rougamo to bread. This is also a kind of innovation.

5. CONCLUSION

A Grandson from America artistically shows the fusion of two different cultures of China and America by describing the process from conflict and estrangement to communication and fusion. With the help of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, the various cultural elements in the film can be analyzed and the cultural differences of different countries can be understood in detail. The different cultural background of group behavior can be explained for daily work and life to provide guidance for communication. The cultural difference should be treated with an inclusive mind and an appreciative eye. Different cultures need to be enriched in the exchange and mutual learning, and the aim is to realize the real cultural coexistence.

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