

Cultural Differences between China and the United States: The Perspective of Cultural Dimension Theory

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The different social and cultural differences between China and the United States have led to differences in their values. This paper is based on Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, using the movie *The Farewell* as a research template, and analyzes the differences between China and the United States in life and death, family, and consumption perspectives from three aspects: power distance, individualism and collectivism, and long-term and short-term orientation. Through the above comparison, this paper hopes to face cultural differences briefly and to promote the harmonious development of Chinese and Western cultures on the basis of understanding the cultural differences between the two sides.

Keywords: *The Farewell*, Chinese and American cultures, cross-cultural communication

Research Background

The Farewell tells the story of a Chinese family where the grandmother is diagnosed with advanced cancer. However, the family chooses to conceal the truth and instead reunite under the guise of a wedding to see the grandmother for the last time. However, Billi, the granddaughter who grew up in New York, believes that knowing about her illness is her grandmother's human right, which has sparked a conflict and collision between Chinese and Western cultures. From a cross-cultural perspective, this paper utilizes Hofstede's cultural dimension theory to examine the cultural disparities depicted in the film *The Farewell* between China and the United States, and explores the reasons.

Theoretical Basis

This paper introduces the "five analytical dimensions of culture" (referred to as the "Hofstede cultural dimensions") expounded by the renowned Dutch management and psychologist Geert Hofstede, namely Power Distance, Individualism or Collectivism, Long-term versus Short-term Orientation, Uncertainty Avoidance and Masculinity Femininity (Hofstede, 2010, pp. 22-29). Hofstede believes that "culture is a common psychological process that makes a group different from other groups. This process forms the psychological stereotype that people in a certain area think, feel and act in a special way" (Hofstede, 1980, pp. 15-41). This paper focuses on the first three aspects to analyze the cultural differences between the East and the West in *The Farewell*.

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Cultural Differences between China and the United States in *The Farewell*

This part mainly analyses the differences between Chinese and the United States cultural values in the film from three parts of the cultural dimensions theory: power distance, individualism and collectivism, and long-term orientation and short-term orientation.

Power Distance in *The Farewell*

Several episodes in the movie reflect the differences in power distance between China and the U.S. This subsection will focus on the view of the family. For the sake of the grandmother's illness, the family discussed inviting the eldest grandson, who was far away from Japan, come to their hometown to hold a wedding as an opportunity to have a family reunion. However, instead of referring to the eldest grandson's opinion on the wedding, Grandma sets the venue according to her own wishes. Billi thinks that Grandma should rest when she is sick instead of wasting her time on a fake wedding, to which her mom replies, "Grandma likes to command people around her, which gives her a greater sense of presence and control" (Wang, *The Farewell*, 2019.7.12). Through the conversation between Billi and her mom, we can see that in China, elders have more power and their opinions are often decisive. At the same time, elders enjoy the majesty that the idea of hierarchy brings them.

Moreover, a conversation between Billi and her father when he saw her father smoking fully reflects China's high power distance:

Billi: Dad? Are you smoking? I thought you said you quit.

Billi' dad: I did, I will.

Billi: Stop giving him cigarettes.

Billi' uncle: Don't control him. He's your father. You shouldn't try to control him. (Wang, *The Farewell*, 2019.7.12)

In this conversation, Billi saw his father smoking and tried to dissuade him, asking Uncle not to give him cigarettes. Uncle believed that Billi had no right to control his father. In traditional Chinese families, parents hold absolute power and are in charge of the family. Other family members should obey their parents' orders. The obedience of family members to their parents is regarded as a moral code, namely "filial piety" (Liang, 2021, pp. 69-71). Compared with China, the power distance of the United States is obviously lower than that of China. Influenced by Christianity, Americans advocate freedom and equality and oppose hierarchy. Their mainstream belief is Christianity, which advocates that all people are born equal. They believe that the relationship between family members is equal. Parents will not and should not interfere in the decisions of their children. Everyone is independent and equal (Xuan & Lu, 2022, pp. 108-110).

Long-term and Short-term Orientation in *The Farewell*

Hofstede believes that long-term and short-term orientation can reflect people's time preference. Long term orientation refers to a tendency to pay attention to future earnings, such as paying attention to savings and investment, and taking thrift and perseverance as virtues; Short term orientation focuses on the past and present, such as instant gratification and consumption (Hofstede, 2001, pp. 359, 98, 161, 225, 259-360).

In the movie *The Farewell*, the conversation between Billi and her mother reflects the differences in their consumption views, as well as the differences in long-term and short-term orientations between China and the United States.

Billi's mother: Are you always going to live like this?

Billi: Poor but sexy. I hope so.

Billi's mother: Why you not try to save, huh? You should change your expansive lifestyle.

Billi: Mom, if you're going to give me shit every time I come home, I'm not coming home anymore. (Wang, *The Farewell*, 2019.7.12)

In the film, Billi's mother repeatedly expressed dissatisfaction with Billi's consumption philosophy. She told Billi to be frugal and save money for emergencies, which reflects that Chinese people like to focus on long-term development and plan for their future. As a short-term value orientation in the United States, Billi believes that it should meet current needs and be happy in the moment. Billi summarized her life as "poor but sexy" (Wang, *The Farewell*, 2019.7.12). This also reflects the difference between long-term and short-term orientations. Chinese culture presents an introverted and elegant cultural heritage due to its long-term infiltration by Confucianism. People are more in pursuit of stable and long-lasting relationships. On the other hand, Western civilization is deeply influenced by Christianity, and people pursue a "sacred religious sense" in their expressions. They pay more attention to grasping the feelings of the moment and pursuing short-term emotional outbursts (Zhao, 2022, pp. 143-145+149).

Individualism vs. Collectivism in *The Farewell*

In Hofstede's view, individual and collective are a set of relative concepts, which are the two poles of a dimensional continuum. Under different social and cultural backgrounds, there will be different relationships between individuals and groups. For example, individualism society emphasizes the individual center, while collectivism society highlights the collective purpose (Hofstede, 2001, pp. 359, 98, 161, 225, 259-360).

Under the influence of two different cultures, China and the United States have different views on life issues. As a result, the family had a conflict over whether Billi's grandmother should know her true condition. Billi, a granddaughter who grew up in New York, believes that it is her grandmother's right to know the truth. The practice of family members helping Grandma hide her condition is illegal in the United States. In addition, Billi believes that Grandma may have things she wants to do or wants to say goodbye to her family, and that if Grandma doesn't know the truth about her condition, she won't be able to organize the rest of her time and make the best use of her last moments to fulfill her wishes. But in China, a family is a collective, and every family member should be responsible for the collective responsibility. For family members of terminal cancer patients, they can make decisions for the patient, and they can choose not to tell the patient's true condition, in order to let the patient spend the rest of the day happily.

In *The Farewell*, the dialogue between the doctor and Billi during Grandma's visit to the hospital for a physical examination also reflects China's greater emphasis on collective interests:

Billi: Dr.Song, let me ask you...How bad is she? But you can tell me the truth.

Dr.Song: The cancer is quite advanced.

Billi: Shouldn't we tell her?

Dr.Song: In her situation, most families in China would choose not to tell her.

Billi: Isn't it wrong to lie?

Dr.Song: I mean if it's for good, it's not really a lie. I mean, it's still a lie. It's a good lie. (Wang, *The Farewell*, 2019.7.12)

In the conversation, facing the doctor who returned from England, the doctor also chose not to tell his grandmother the true condition. Dr. Song believes that in situations like this, most people in China believe it is a white lie. It can be seen that China places more emphasis on collective interests, where family members can make decisions for patients, which is exactly the opposite of the United States.

Conclusion

The English name of this movie is “The Farewell”, which means “goodbye” in Chinese. However, the Chinese translation of the movie is “don’t tell her”, implying that there is a “secret” in this farewell, which is also the core topic of discussion in the movie. The core issue is whether or not to tell grandma the true physical condition, which has sparked a conflict of cultural differences between China and the West.

Taking Hofstede’s theory of cultural dimensions as a starting point, this paper analyzes the cultural differences in the film *The Farewell*. This paper provides a new perspective and case analysis for cross-cultural research in the future. Meanwhile, conflicts are unavoidable in cross-border communication. Only by facing up to cultural differences and improving intercultural communication skills can we effectively communicate in the family and reduce conflicts caused by cultural differences.

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