



# An Analysis of Cultural Difference between Chinese and American Films and TV Series Under the Guidance of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

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**Abstract.** As globalization deepens, cross-cultural communication flourishes, leading to a greater interaction between global cultures. Yet, beneath such interconnection lies distinct and entrenched local beliefs and cultures. This difference is particularly evident in varying perceptions, customs, and interpersonal relationships, that are captured in films and television shows. Using Hofstede's cultural dimensions as a guide, this paper explores the cultural divergences between Chinese and American films. The paper analyzes four films: *The Farewell* and *The Wedding Banquet*, which explore the intersection of Chinese and American cultural values, and *A Grandson from America* and *Fresh off the Boat*, which highlight cross-cultural dynamics between traditional Chinese values and modern American society. This comparison looks at how these films differ in their storytelling and expression across four areas: individualism versus collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term versus short-term orientation. The analysis highlights pronounced disparities in portraying interpersonal relationships, societal hierarchies, individual roles within society, and perspectives on the future, underscoring the distinct cultural ethos of each country.

**Keywords:** Film and media; Hofstede's cultural dimensions; Power distance; Individualism and Collectivism

## 1 Introduction

The concept of the "global village" has become increasingly familiar, showing the profound interconnectedness of our world amid rapid globalization. This process is characterized by significant transformations in the global economy, advancements in technology, and changes in transportation and immigration policies. As a result, global communication and integration are reshaping human interactions, making it evident that no nation can remain isolated. Films and television dramas, as quintessential cultural products, play a pivotal role in this dynamic. They not only transcend national boundaries but also carry narratives and values across diverse cultural landscapes to global audiences. Their capacity to foster understanding and promote intercultural dialogue is vital in facilitating cultural exchanges [1].

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Cultural products can also influence individual values, behaviors, and cultural identities [2]. The film and television industries in individual countries therefore provide a critical and comparative lens to examine these cultural nuances. This thesis explores the cultural differences between Chinese and American films using Hofstede's cultural dimensions. It specifically examines *The Farewell* in terms of individualism versus collectivism, *A Grandson from America* through the lens of power distance, *Fresh off the Boat* with a focus on uncertainty avoidance, and *The Wedding Banquet* from the perspective of long-term versus short-term orientation. This focused analysis aims to uncover how these films reflect and shape the cultural identities of their respective audiences in China and the U.S.

## 2 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede's approach is based on large-scale survey data collected from the multinational corporation IBM. The surveys, conducted twice between 1967 and 1973, generated over 116,000 responses from 72 countries in 20 different languages [3]. Hofstede initially identified four value dimensions that significantly influence behaviors across all cultures: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, and masculinity versus femininity. In his explanation of power distance, Hofstede highlights that inequality has been a fundamental concern in human societies throughout history. This inequality can manifest in various forms, such as differences in physical or mental characteristics. Within societies, two opposing forces emerge: one emphasizes the distance between social ranks, granting more privileges to those in higher positions, while the other strives to reduce this distance and promote equality across different areas [4].

On the other hand, uncertainty avoidance relates to how comfortable members of a culture are with unpredictability. In cultures with high uncertainty avoidance, there is a strong preference for creating and implementing more laws and regulations to ensure stability, as people strive to reach a common ground. On the other hand, cultures with low uncertainty avoidance are more willing to embrace uncertainty, showing greater flexibility and less reliance on strict rules and regulations. According to Hofstede, individualism describes a society where individuals prioritize the protection of personal rights, the maintenance of privacy, and a focus on personal achievements. In such societies, individuals often have lower loyalty to organizations [4]. Collectivism refers to the integration of individuals into strong, cohesive groups from birth, where the group provides protection and support. This emphasizes a sense of belonging, integration, and loyalty to the group. Regarding masculinity versus femininity, Hofstede explains that in societies where emotional gender roles differ significantly, men are seen as assertive, determined, and materialistic, while women are expected to be modest, gentle, and focused on the quality of life. Such a society is referred to as masculine. "When emotional gender roles overlap -- when both men and women are expected to be modest, gentle, and concerned about quality of life -- a society is said to be feminine [5]". In a long-term-oriented culture, emphasis is placed on prioritizing social order, pursuing long-term goals, and fostering resilience. On the other hand, a short-term-oriented culture

focuses on consumption, immediate results, and the rapid fulfillment of needs, as well as the individual development of children [4].

### 3 Case Analysis

In the case analysis part, this paper will select some representative films to analyze the cultural differences shown in the films based on cultural dimensions theory,

#### 3.1 To Analyze the Cultural Differences from the Perspective of Individualism and Collectivism

In China, the majority of people are born into extended families, so they rely on and seek support from their large families. This strengthens their loyalty and commitment to the family over individualism, emphasizing the importance of collectivism [6]. The movie *The Farewell* clearly portrays the collectivism that heavily influenced the Chinese people.

*The Farewell* is a heartfelt film with distinct Chinese cultural elements, directed by a Chinese filmmaker. The story revolves around a Chinese-American family debating whether to inform their grandmother, who is suffering from cancer, about her condition. Many scenes in the film highlight the clash between Eastern and Western values. In *The Farewell*, after learning of their grandmother's terminal illness, the family arranges Hao Hao's wedding to bring joy to grandma's final days and reunite the family under the pretense of the wedding. Personal interests are set aside in favor of the family's collective well-being. Throughout the wedding preparations, the family endures the emotional pain of the grandmother's illness, with each member playing their part in the shared responsibility. The family's decision reflects the Chinese cultural value of prioritizing collectivism over individualism.

The film's protagonist, Billi, who grew up in the United States, maintains a close relationship with her grandmother despite the physical distance between them. She learns about her grandmother's illness from her parents, and upon reuniting with her, the film presents a conflict between Eastern and Western values—specifically, between the concepts of concealment and disclosure. Billi believes that withholding the truth from the patient is unethical, while the family's justification is: "You see life as an individual; it's just a cultural difference between East and West. The East views life as a collective." This reveals that, from Billi's perspective, American culture places a stronger emphasis on individualism.

#### 3.2 To Analyze the Cultural Differences from the Perspective of Power Distance

The most dominant and influential cultural philosophy that shaped China is Confucianism, which emphasizes order, respect, and adherence to societal rules. Confucian teachings advocate that a minister should obey the king, a wife should obey her husband, a child should obey his father, and a younger brother should obey his elder brother. This

hierarchical mindset is a clear reflection of power distance, a concept that is vividly portrayed in the film *A Grandson from America*. This movie depicts the journey of Brooks' parents, who volunteered in Hoh Xili, Tibet to protect Tibetan antelopes. They entrusted Lao Yang Tou, a shadow puppetry inheritor from Huaxian County in Shaanxi Province, to take care of Brooks, a young foreigner. Lao Yang Tou and Brooks initially clashed due to differences in living habits, language, behavior, and cultural concepts. However, after overcoming these differences through mutual tolerance, acceptance, and care, their relationship transformed into a deep and lasting friendship.

Lao Yang Tou's method of educating Brooks reflects the high power distance characteristic of Chinese culture. For example, when Lao Yang Tou discovers that his son and daughter-in-law, Aihua, have left Brooks without saying goodbye, he tells Brooks that he is leaving to retrieve them and instructs him to stay home. He first asks if Brooks understands, and when Brooks shakes his head in confusion, Lao Yang Tou sternly repeats, "Do you understand?" Brooks, intimidated, quickly nods in response. Lao Yang Tou then locks Brooks in the house and leaves. When Brooks wets the bed, Lao Yang Tou mocks him, saying, "How old are you to still wet the bed? Aren't you ashamed?" Humiliated and upset, Brooks attempts to leave, but Lao Yang Tou physically restrains him, preventing his escape. Before parting, Lao Yang Tou's son writes a letter instructing Lao Yang Tou not to hit Brooks and to communicate with him calmly, reflecting the American cultural norm of equal dialogue between parents and children.

### 3.3 To Analyze the Cultural Difference from the Perspective of Uncertainty Avoidance

The world is changing rapidly, and people cannot predict what the future holds. Generally, everyone feels some degree of uncertainty about the future or unfamiliar situations. However, extreme uncertainty can lead to intolerable anxiety. Over time, human societies have developed various ways to cope with and reduce this inherent uncertainty. In China, the cultural emphasis on harmony in personal relationships motivates individuals to work diligently to better understand nature and society. In contrast, the United States, shaped by its immigrant history, portrays its people as pioneers and explorers, constantly moving out of the wilderness and into new frontiers.

Research conducted by Dr. Nisbett found notable cultural differences between Americans and Chinese regarding conflict resolution. In their study, Dr. Nisbett and Dr. Kaiping Peng observed that American participants were more inclined to confront and address conflicts, whereas Chinese participants showed a tendency to avoid conflict. They noted that in family conflict scenarios, Americans tended to take sides (either the mother's or daughter's), whereas the Chinese participants demonstrated a more balanced perspective, emphasizing mutual understanding as the key to resolving the conflict [7].

Similar character traits can be observed in both Chinese and American films and TV dramas. The TV drama *Fresh off the Boat* tells the story about a Taiwanese family that moves from Chinatown in Washington, D.C., to Orlando between 1995 and 1997. The plot and numerous details in the film reflect aspects of Western culture, which differ

significantly from the East Asian culture we are familiar with. China is generally perceived as a country with high uncertainty avoidance, whereas the United States is seen as having low uncertainty avoidance. In low uncertainty avoidance cultures, people are more open to experimentation and risk-taking, a theme that is depicted in *Fresh off the Boat*. For example, in this TV series, Louis Huang (the role of father in the TV drama) is better integrated into the American environment, so his personality is more adventurous. Thus, he is more willing to give up the stable life in Washington and come to a new place, Orlando to seek better development. This decision reflects the American cultural tendency to embrace challenges and take risks. While, Jessica Huang (the role of mother in the TV drama) is deeply influenced by Chinese culture and does not integrate well into the American environment. She came to Orlando and found that their business was not as stable as expected, feeling very anxious, and overseeing all the trivia of the restaurant every day. Such performance shows that Chinese people are more willing to avoid uncertainty.

### 3.4 To Analyze the Cultural Differences from the Perspective of Long Term Versus Short Term Dimension

Cultures that exhibit a long-term orientation prioritize values like persistence, thrift, humility, and a sense of shame, reflecting a belief that significant life events lie in the future. These societies adapt their traditions to modern circumstances and typically save a substantial portion of any extra income they earn. In contrast, short-term-oriented cultures emphasize the maintenance of tradition, personal stability, and immediate reciprocity, holding a belief that key life events occurred in the past or are unfolding in the present. Such cultures demonstrate a deep respect for historical customs [4].

This dichotomy is starkly illustrated in the film *The Wedding Banquet*. The narrative revolves around Gao Weitong and his partner, Simon, as they navigate the pressures from Gao's parents for him to marry. To appease his parents without disclosing his relationship with Simon, Gao agrees to a sham marriage with Gu Weiwei, an undocumented immigrant from mainland China. This arrangement is intended to satisfy familial expectations and assist Weiwei in securing a green card to continue her studies without the threat of deportation.

After dropping Weiwei and Gao's parents at the airport, Gao's father persistently inquires about Weiwei's family background, including her parents' occupations and hometown. These questions underscore the traditional Chinese focus on well-matched marriages, where the union is not merely between two individuals but between two families. Such scrutiny is typical, as Chinese parents often consider factors like family lineage, social standing, and economic security before approving a marriage. This scene in the film reflects a long-term perspective common among the Chinese where marriage is seen as a lifelong commitment aimed at establishing familial harmony and mitigating future conflicts, such as those over finances or parental roles.

Conversely, many Americans choose romantic partners based primarily on personal affection and emotional connections. Their decisions are less influenced by external factors such as family approval, financial status, or educational background, and more by personal compatibility and shared passions. Just like in *The Way We Were*, despite

different backgrounds, political views, and ways of living, Barbra Streisand and Robert Redford's romantic relationship was driven by deep affection and personal connections. Their relationship faced external pressures from social expectations, class divisions, and career aspirations, challenging their bond. However, their bond remains strong due to personal compatibility. This approach exemplifies a short-term orientation, focusing on individual freedom and the immediate experience of love and companionship.

## 4 Conclusion

In *The Farewell*, we see the embodiment of collectivism in Chinese culture, which emphasizes strong family and community ties. In contrast, traditional American films tend to highlight individualism, focusing on personal freedom and self-realization. Similarly, *A Grandson from America* demonstrates the concept of power distance by depicting family relationships and authority structures within Chinese families. In contrast, traditional American films typically depict lower power distance, emphasizing equality and individual rights. In *Fresh off the Boat*, American culture's acceptance of uncertainty and encouragement of individual exploration are evident, whereas Chinese culture tends to avoid uncertainty, favoring stability and predictability. Lastly, *The Wedding Banquet* illustrates the short-term orientation of American culture, emphasizing instant gratification and personal gain. In contrast, Chinese culture is more long-term oriented, prioritizing long-term planning and collective well-being.

The cultural disparities depicted in these Chinese and American films offer a profound gateway into understanding the nuanced interplay of cultural values and their manifestations in everyday life. These films serve as cultural artifacts that encapsulate and convey complex societal norms and behaviors, allowing audiences worldwide to gain a deeper appreciation of both the distinctiveness and the commonalities of human experiences across different societies.

Ultimately, analyzing and engaging with these films can facilitate a more informed and respectful dialogue between cultures, promoting a richer, more inclusive global discourse. This is particularly vital in a world where cultural intersections are increasingly common and critical for fostering global peace and cooperation. By embracing the diverse narratives presented in these films, viewers can contribute to a more interconnected and mutually respectful world.

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