

An Analysis of Sino-American Cultural Differences based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory: A Case Study of the Film *The Farewell*

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Abstract: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory stands as a highly representative foundational theoretical achievement in the field of cross-cultural studies. Taking the film *The Farewell* as a case study, which has highly favored by the audience for its authentic portrayal of ethical conflicts within cross-cultural families, this paper systematically analyzes the differences between Chinese and American cultures embodied in the film from five core dimensions of Hofstede's theory: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term orientation versus short-term orientation. Adopting the method of film text analysis, this study aims to deepen the interpretation of the deep-seated cultural structures of China and the United States, as well as to offer practical implications for cross-cultural communication practices.

Keywords: Hofstede, Cultural Dimensions Theory, *The Farewell*, Differences between Chinese and American Cultures.

1. Introduction

1.1. Research Background

Against the backdrop of deepening globalization, China's rising international standing has forged extensive ties with countries worldwide, while global enthusiasm for Chinese language and culture continues to surge, motivating many foreign individuals to independently study and interpret Chinese culture. In this context, cross-cultural communication theories have developed rapidly in China, even as global cultures experience both unprecedented integration and fragmentation. The depth and frequency of cross-cultural interactions between China and the United States keep escalating. Meanwhile, cognitive divergences, behavioral conflicts and communication barriers arising from cultural disparities have become core obstacles restricting cross-cultural exchanges, as well as central research themes within cross-cultural studies. Notably, values, moral codes, and thinking patterns shaped by distinct cultural contexts profoundly influence perceptions and decisions in family relations, social practices, and logical reasoning. Ultimately, these discrepancies are rooted in divergent underlying value orientations and cultural dimensional divides.

This thesis takes *The Farewell* as its primary case study and employs Hofstede's dimensional model to scrutinize cultural divergences manifested in the narrative, with particular attention to individualism versus collectivism, power distance, and uncertainty avoidance, etc. By uncovering the value-driven roots of Sino-American cultural disparities, the study aspires to foster more refined and empathetic cross-cultural understanding between the two nations.

1.2. *The Farewell*

The Farewell, based on the director Lulu Wang's personal experience, revolves around the central conflict over whether to inform the grandmother of her terminal cancer diagnosis. The film recounts the cross-cultural conflicts faced by Billi, a Chinese-American girl raised in New York, and her family, and profoundly explored the differences in values and

behaviors between China and the United States. Having immigrated to the United States as a child, Billi shares a deep emotional bond with her grandmother. Upon learning of her grandmother's advanced cancer, the family decides to conceal the truth and stages a fake wedding as a pretext to bring overseas relatives together for a final farewell. Initially, Billi, who is deeply influenced by Western cultural values, strongly questions this "white lie", believing that it infringes upon her grandmother's right to know. She struggles between compassionate deception and truthful disclosure. Yet through her connection with her family, she gradually comes to appreciate the subtle depth of Eastern familial affection and chooses to join her family in keeping the secret.

The film weaves cultural conflicts, family bonds, and philosophies of life and death into its narrative. Through emotional interactions and ideological clashes among family members at this special "farewell gathering", it vividly reveals core Sino-American divergences in attitudes toward life, family ethics, and the relationship between the individual and the collective. Overall, the film offers a warm and delicate narrative, combining emotional resonance with intellectual depth, and demonstrates humanistic concern and ethical reflection within a cross-cultural context.

1.3. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

The cultural dimensions theory proposed by Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede stands as one of the most influential and widely adopted analytical frameworks to date, laying a foundational cornerstone for cross-cultural research.

Hofstede conducted statistical analyses on large-scale value questionnaires distributed to IBM employees, developing quantifiable cultural indexes. In 1980, he first proposed four cultural value dimensions in his monograph *Culture's Consequences*: individualism and collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity and femininity. This theory was subsequently expanded and refined. In 1991, Hofstede added a fifth dimension which called long-term and short-term orientation to the original framework, substantially enriching its theoretical

connotations and applicable scope.

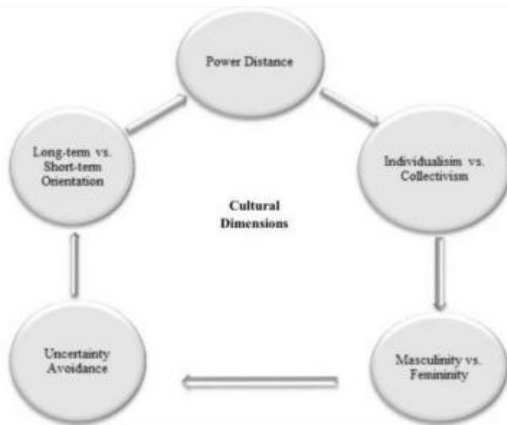


Fig. 1 Cultural Dimensions

Derived from systematic empirical research, the theory translates intangible cultural differences into measurable and comparable value dimensions, offering an effective analytical tool for interpreting discrepancies in values, behavioral patterns, and social structures across nations and regions. It also provides the core theoretical framework for this study to examine ethical conflicts within cross-cultural families and to explore the underlying value roots and cultural drivers behind such conflicts.

Hofstede supposes that every individual possesses a mental program, and that cultural patterns can be defined by people's orientations toward certain universal cultural values. The dominant pattern of a given culture can be established along the five dimensions mentioned above. To elaborate: power distance refers to the degree to which members of a society accept inequalities in social power and hierarchical status; individualism versus collectivism concerns the extent to which individuals identify with and are integrated into groups, together with their corresponding value orientations; masculinity versus femininity pertains to the differentiation of gender roles and power, as well as gender-related traits prevalent within a society; uncertainty avoidance denotes people's general tendency to avoid ambiguity or equivocation in social interactions; and long-term versus short-term orientation relates to the pursuit of particular virtues. These five dimensions represent universal societal choices that every culture is inevitably called upon to make.

2. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory and Its Manifestations in *The Farewell*

2.1. Power Distance and Its Manifestations in *The Farewell*

2.1.1. Power Distance

Mauk Mulder (1959: 178-225) defines power as the capacity to control or direct other people's behaviors and obtain their compliance. From his perspective, power distance refers to the extent of unequal distribution of power between less powerful and more powerful individuals within a single social system. Hofstede redefines power distance as the degree to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept unequal power distribution (Hofstede, 2010).

A comparison between Chinese and Western cultures reveals that traditional Chinese culture embraces a high

degree of power distance, making China a typical high-power distance country where citizens generally accept rigid hierarchical structures. In Chinese families, children are expected to obey the wishes of their parents and elders, with deference and respect for seniority strongly emphasized. By contrast, Western countries tend to tolerate low power distance and are categorized as low-power distance societies, advocating the minimization of social inequality and hierarchical gaps. For example, parent-child relationships in American households are built on equality, allowing children to question their parents' words and conduct.

2.1.2. Power Distance in *The Farewell*

Numerous plots in the film mirror striking disparities between China and the United States in terms of power distance. Within Chinese households, elders normally hold substantial authority. Case 1: When Billi's mother asks how many wontons she wants, Billi first answers "five", which her mother thinks is too few. After Billi revises her answer to "a dozen", her mother abruptly settles on "ten will be enough" in a blunt tone without eye contact. Although the mother seemingly asks for Billi's opinion, she retains the final say (Hu, W. Q., 2021: 204). This trivial daily scene reflects the cultural trait of high power distance prevalent in Chinese families.

Case 2: The whole story revolves around a fake wedding. While preparing for the ceremony, the grandmother selects the wedding venue, dishes and wedding photo styles by herself. She even demands Billi's cousin conceal the length of his romantic relationship to avoid gossip. Younger generations comply obediently despite holding different thoughts, revealing an elder-centered power structure within Chinese families.

Case 3: Billi tries to stop her father from smoking, only to be reprimanded by her uncle: "He is your father, you should not tell him what to do." This episode further illustrates the social norm in China's high-power distance culture that juniors ought not to lecture their seniors. As an ethics-oriented country with high-power distance, China arranges family members' power status strictly based on generational hierarchy and age.

By contrast, American culture advocates equality for all and does not rigidly abide by the hierarchical rule of respecting elders unconditionally. Case 4: Billi feels deeply upset that her parents concealed her grandfather's death from her. Raised in a Western cultural environment, she believes that as a family member, she deserves the right to know and participate in family matters; information concealment by her parents confuses and disturbs her. Furthermore, Billi directly stops her father from smoking and openly challenges the family's decision to hide the grandmother's illness. These actions jointly embody the low-power distance characteristic of American culture. Western families value freedom and equality, maintaining that every family member possesses equal rights and corresponding obligations.

2.2. Individualism and Collectivism and Its Manifestations in *The Farewell*

2.2.1. Individualism and Collectivism

Hazel R. Markus and Shinobu Kitayama (1991: 224-253) argue that the criterion to distinguish individualistic from collectivistic cultures lies in whether a culture fosters independent or interdependent self-construals for its members. People's self-identity and their bonds with diverse social organizations lay the foundation for individualistic or collectivistic value orientations. The relationship between

individuals and collectives not only shapes the formulation of social norms, but also directly governs people's behavioral choices and value judgments in daily life.

Members of collectivist societies manage interpersonal interactions from a group-centered perspective. They maintain close social ties, prioritize group identity and communal harmony, and subordinate personal interests to collective welfare. By contrast, as Hofstede(1991) states, every person is regarded as an autonomous individual in individualist societies, where social connections are loose, and people are expected to rely primarily on themselves and their nuclear families. Taking Chinese and American cultures as examples, traditional Chinese culture bears distinct collectivist traits, conceptualizing each person as an interconnected and interdependent member of an extended family. American culture, however, is highly individualistic, with people focusing primarily on themselves and their nuclear families while valuing personal independence and autonomy.

2.2.2. Individualism and Collectivism in *The Farewell*

Case 1: The film depicts a heated debate among family members over whether to disclose the grandmother's terminal illness. Billi insists that her grandmother deserves the truth, as concealing a patient's diagnosis is illegal in the United States. She worries that her grandmother has unfulfilled wishes which she will never get to complete if kept unaware of her condition during her final days(Cai, X. D., 2022: 111). This stance reflects the American cultural tenet of primate individual worth, granting each person absolute authority over personal matters and embodying strong individualist values.

Circumstances differ drastically in China. Within Chinese culture, individuals exist as interdependent parts of the familial collective. For this reason, relatives in most Chinese families make medical decisions on the patient's behalf and hide harsh diagnoses to spare the patient mental suffering. Billi's great-aunt recounts how the grandmother concealed her grandfather's fatal illness decades ago, proving that the ethos of sharing hardship collectively is not a random choice but an traditional code of conduct for Chinese families. Billi's elder uncle articulates the core East-West cultural divide: "Westerners see life as individual, while Easterners see life as collective." Billi views truthful disclosure as respect for her grandmother's personal autonomy, whereas the rest of the family frames secrecy as a shared collective obligation. This fundamental disagreement constitutes the central conflict between individualism and collectivism illustrated in the film.

Case 2: Billi's mother and aunt mention investing in their children's natural talents, framing their children's successes and failures as integral parts of their own life. This mindset stems from the core Chinese cultural belief that all family members belong to a unified collective, so an individual's glory belongs to the whole clan. In stark contrast, Billi lives alone and refuses financial support from her parents even when struggling financially. She also hides her failed scholarship applications from them. These behaviors demonstrate core tenets of American individualism: the high regard for independence and self-reliance, and the expectation that individuals resolve personal troubles autonomously. The culture celebrates self-actualization; consistent with this norm, Billi devotes herself to her passion for music and writing, striving to cultivate and showcase her talents to fulfill personal life value.

2.3. Uncertainty Avoidance and Its Manifestations in *The Farewell*

2.3.1. Uncertainty Avoidance

Dai Xiaodong (2011) defines uncertainty avoidance as people's general tendency to evade ambiguity and vagueness in social interactions. Cultures differ dramatically in their tolerance of uncertainty. Some cultures embrace high levels of uncertainty and do not feel threatened or disturbed by ambiguous, undefined matters. Other cultures, however, prefer clarity and predictability, and actively adopt various measures to avoid or remove uncertain elements. The dimension of uncertainty avoidance also shapes people's social conduct.

For instance, American culture features relatively high tolerance for uncertainty. Americans handle interpersonal relationships rationally, advocate minimizing ritualized social codes, reject rigid absolute values, and accept unconventional thoughts and inherent uncertainty. By contrast, Chinese culture leans toward uncertainty avoidance. It relies on stringent rules, regulations and age-old customs to standardize social behaviors. Its members tend to react emotionally in interpersonal exchanges, uphold traditions and absolute moral standards, and remain cautious about changes and risks.

2.3.2. Uncertainty Avoidance in *The Farewell*

Centered on the core uncertain event of the grandmother's cancer diagnosis and supplemented with trivial snippets of daily life, the film vividly unfolds cultural gaps between China and the United States along the dimension of uncertainty avoidance. Chinese families tend to evade unknown risks through conservative, indirect approaches, while American families are inclined to confront uncertainties head-on. Case 1: After learning about the grandmother's terminal cancer, all family members unanimously resolve to hide the truth, pacifying her by claiming the lesion is merely benign shadow. A line in the film states, "Chinese people believe it is not cancer that kills patients, but fear." Here, fear refers to the anxiety triggered by the uncertainty of illness. The family eliminates the patient's dread of the unknown via a white lie to steer clear of uncertain risks, which constitutes typical high uncertainty avoidance behavior. On the contrary, shaped by American culture, Billi possesses greater tolerance for uncertainty. She can accept the unpredictability brought by cancer and chooses to face death and reality squarely. Therefore, she strongly objects to concealing the truth and insists that her grandmother deserves the right to make autonomous decisions, a hallmark of low uncertainty avoidance.

Case 2: When Billi checks into a hotel during her homecoming, the elevator is under maintenance. She takes the stairs and asks the staff how many floors remain, yet receives no precise answer. This detail mirrors a classic communication pattern under Chinese high uncertainty avoidance. When confronted with matters that cannot be confirmed or guaranteed, Chinese speakers often employ vague, tactful expressions to sustain harmonious communication and prevent conflicts that may arise from explicit information. Such ambiguous communication serves as concrete evidence of China's high uncertainty avoidance culture. Yet this vagueness troubles Billi, since American culture favors direct, explicit dialogue with specific, clear responses. This contrast highlights cultural clashes between China and America regarding uncertainty avoidance.

Furthermore, Chinese culture's intense emphasis on traditional etiquette is closely linked to high uncertainty avoidance.

2.4. Masculinity and Femininity and Its Manifestations in *The Farewell*

2.4.1. Masculinity and Femininity

The masculine and feminine orientations embedded within cultures can be analyzed from two perspectives with concrete evidence extracted from the film. First, this dimension refers to disparities in social roles and divisions of labor between the two genders. In masculine cultures, gender roles are sharply divided, and gender inequality prevails. By contrast, feminine cultures advocate gender equality, strive to deliver equal opportunities and treatment to men and women, and refrain from behaviors that widen gender gaps. Masculinity and femininity not only regulate the conduct of social members but also profoundly shape their value systems. Second, this dimension can be interpreted as the dominant gender traits manifested by an entire society. Masculine societies prioritize material wealth and personal accomplishment, with competition, achievement and success acting as the primary driving forces of social development. In feminine societies, people refuse to sacrifice quality of life for career advancement and attach greater importance to interpersonal bonds and well-being. While both Chinese and American cultures carry masculine traits, such characteristics are far more prominent in traditional Chinese culture.

2.4.2. Masculinity and Femininity in *The Farewell*

The film illustrates Sino-Western cultural divergences in this dimension through subtle details including domestic role allocation and the distribution of decision-making power. Case 1: The pivotal decision to hide the grandmother's cancer diagnosis is collectively discussed and finalized by senior male relatives such as Billi's uncle, who take full charge of subsequent arrangements. Female family members merely carry out the plan or echo others' opinions and rarely raise objections voluntarily. This reveals unequal power distribution within Chinese households, where men usually occupy dominant positions. Raised under Western cultural influences, however, Billi maintains independent judgment. She directly challenges and opposes the decision of concealing the illness, refusing to withhold her opinions simply because of her gender or junior status. This contrast proves that American culture bears milder masculine traits compared with China, granting women a certain degree of autonomy and equal standing. Moreover, domestic labor division in the film displays obvious gendered tendencies. Case 2: Family dinners serve as vital occasions for communication among relatives. Female characters including Billi's mother and aunt undertake auxiliary household work such as meal preparation and family care; all figures bustling in the kitchen are women. It is evident that women are stereotyped as caregivers and givers, mainly responsible for domestic affairs and internal family matters.

Cultural discrepancies demonstrated in the film can also be interpreted from the perspective of overarching societal gender dispositions. Case 3: Billi's aunt takes the chance to boast about rapid wealth accumulation in China by asking Billi how long it would take to earn one million dollars in America. Billi replies, "Life is not all about money. There are many things money cannot buy." The aunt's mindset represents typical masculine cultural values, which emphasize personal success, material gains, competitiveness,

achievement orientation and external recognition. Billi's outlook, on the other hand, aligns with feminine culture, which prioritizes interpersonal relationships and life satisfaction without treating career accomplishments as an indispensable goal. Additionally, the mutual affection between Billi and her grandmother, as well as the family's protective act of hiding the terminal diagnosis, highlight the community's emphasis on emotional bonds and domestic harmony. Such relationship-centered attitudes and pursuit of life quality constitute core markers of feminine societies.

2.5. Short-Term and Long-Term Orientation and Its Manifestations in *The Farewell*

2.5.1. Short-Term and Long-Term Orientation

The dimension of long-term and short-term orientation is rooted primarily in Confucianism, essentially exploring the cultural values embedded in Confucius' philosophy. Hofstede(1991) points out that Confucianism is not a religion but a secular social theory centered on principles for building a harmonious society. Long-term orientation emphasizes moral cultivation geared toward future rewards, with particular stress on self-restraint and perseverance. In contrast, short-term orientation focuses on moral norms tied to the past and present, prioritizing reverence for tradition and fulfillment of social obligations (Geert Hofstede, 2008). This dimension mirrors a culture's temporal value predispositions and exerts a profound influence on the thoughts and behaviors of its members.

Comparing Chinese and American cultures, the United States exhibits prominent short-term orientation. Americans uphold mutual face-saving, reciprocity and courteous exchange in interpersonal interactions, valuing instant personal gratification and consumerism. China, however, features distinct long-term orientation, which advocates virtues such as frugality and modesty; individuals consistently strive for distant life goals. Social exchanges abide by hierarchical status disparities, following an ethical framework that distinguishes superiors from subordinates and elders from the young.

2.5.2. Short-Term and Long-Term Orientation in *The Farewell*

The film vividly illustrates cross-cultural divides on this dimension by contrasting the consumption attitudes of the mother and Billi. Chinese people generally hold conservative consumption values that prioritize diligence, thrift and living within one's means, while most Americans embrace an open consumption mindset favoring immediate spending and instant gratification. Case 1: Billi's mother advocates frugality and urges her daughter to save money and abandon wasteful spending habits, embodying the traditional Chinese virtue of thrift and the value of long-term planning. By contrast, Billi frequently spends beyond her means. Even when behind on rent payments, she uses a credit card to purchase her flight ticket back to China. These plot details reveal the Western short-term orientation that drives individuals to pursue immediate satisfaction.

In interpersonal communication, American culture preserves mutual face by respecting personal privacy and avoiding awkwardness, reflecting an equal and reciprocal logic of interaction. Case 2: When the hotel receptionist repeatedly asks intrusive personal questions, Billi gently evades inquiries. She avoids blunt rejection that would embarrass the staff while withholding private information, thereby preserving dignity for both parties. Furthermore,

although Billi disagrees with her family's choice to hide the grandmother's illness, she never provokes public arguments or forces others to accept her viewpoint, fundamentally out of consideration for others' face. This practice aligns with the American cultural logic of preserving face by avoiding offense and overstepping personal boundaries.

Chinese culture, by comparison, centers face maintenance on social rank and status, adhering to a hierarchical domestic ethical order. As the senior family member, the grandmother holds absolute authority over wedding preparations, and all younger relatives follow her arrangements. The decision to conceal the terminal diagnosis is made collectively by elder figures including Billi's great-aunt, uncle and father, with no junior family members participating in deliberation. This power structure not only embodies the hierarchical norm of respecting seniority but also reflects a long-term cultural logic: compliance with authority sustains lasting domestic harmony and stability, consistent with long-term orientation's emphasis on social ethics and communal peace.

3. Conclusion

Adopting Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory as the analytical framework, this study conducts an in-depth analysis of the film *The Farewell* to systematically uncover the concrete manifestations and underlying driving forces of Sino-American cultural disparities reflected in cross-cultural ethical conflicts within immigrant families. Based on theoretical framework construction and close textual analysis, the major findings of this research are summarized as follows:

First, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory possesses strong explanatory power for cross-cultural analysis of cinematic texts. The film selected as the research case vividly demonstrates prominent divergences between Chinese and American cultures across the five core dimensions proposed by Hofstede. To be specific, in terms of power distance, Chinese households feature high power distance, which emphasizes elders' authority and juniors' obedience, while American families are characterized by low power distance and prioritize equal interpersonal bonds among all family members. In the dimension of individualism and collectivism, Billi's insistence on an individual's right to information and independent decision-making echoes the American cultural tenet of prime individual value. By contrast, Chinese relatives' collective decision to conceal the diagnosis and share responsibilities fully embodies China's group-centered values. Regarding uncertainty avoidance, Chinese families adopt white lies to evade fears and risks triggered by terminal illness, a typical marker of high uncertainty avoidance culture; Billi's inclination to face reality and disclose the truth, however, reflects America's high tolerance of ambiguity. For masculinity and femininity, Chinese families exhibit distinct gendered labor division with males occupying dominant positions, whereas American culture embraces relatively egalitarian gender perceptions. In respect of long-term and short-term orientation, Chinese culture values forward planning and harmonious, stable social connections, while American culture prioritizes short-term goals and instant gratification accompanied by a prominent consumerist tendency.

Second, cross-cultural conflicts stem from profound discrepancies in core values. This research reveals that ethical disputes and divisions in the film do not merely arise from divergent behavioral preferences; instead, they represent collisions and interweaving of two complete cultural value

systems within specific real-life contexts. The Chinese family's choice to hide the illness results from the combined effects of multiple cultural dimensions including collectivism, high uncertainty avoidance, high power distance and long-term orientation, with the ultimate goal of sustaining overall familial harmony and stability. Billi's stance of truthful disclosure originates from opposing value orientations: individualism, low uncertainty avoidance, low power distance and short-term orientation, which attach paramount importance to personal rights and individual worth. The two sides assign entirely different meanings to the identical matter, which serves as the external embodiment of such fundamental value gaps.

Third, inherent correlations and synergistic effects exist among all cultural dimensions. The study verifies that Hofstede's dimensions do not operate in isolation. Instead, they are interlinked and intertwined to form a dynamic network of cultural meanings. The Chinese family's resolution to conceal the grandmother's diagnosis in the film not only manifests collectivism but also closely aligns with the cultural logic of high uncertainty avoidance, and corresponds to the cultural pursuit of long-term social harmony and stability. Such internal interconnections prove that culture ought to be regarded as an integrated organic whole. All dimensions often function synergistically in concrete social practices, jointly constructing a self-consistent network of cultural significance.

Finally, effective cross-cultural understanding relies on the cultivation of cultural sensitivity and contextual interpretative competence (Guo, J. W., & Su, D., 2019: 75-82). This paper argues that comprehension of cultural differences cannot remain confined to abstract theoretical concepts. Instead, researchers must delve into specific contexts and focus on the formation process and practical logic of cultural meanings. Static theoretical knowledge alone is insufficient to tackle complicated ethical dilemmas in real-life scenarios. Competence to interpret cultural behaviors and appreciate counterpart standpoints under specific contextual circumstances must be cultivated. Such contextualized understanding helps people move beyond cultural stereotypes and facilitates inclusive, constructive cross-cultural communication.

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