

The Differences in Time Perception between China and Japan: An Analysis based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

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Abstract: In response to President Xi Jinping's "Belt and Road" initiative, it is crucial to enhance relationships with neighboring trade partners, especially Japan, to further promote the healthy development of the global economy and build a community with a shared future for mankind. Despite the profound impact of World War II on Sino-Japanese relations, the trade ties between China and Japan have become increasingly close since the reform and opening up, demonstrating the potential and necessity for cooperation between the two countries. Therefore, this paper will utilize the Uncertainty Avoidance Dimension from Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory to analyze the cultural differences in time management between China and Japan. Through this analysis, the paper aims to explore how to optimize communication between Chinese and Japanese enterprises, improve work efficiency, and eliminate cultural misunderstandings, thereby fostering the deepening of Sino-Japanese relations.

Keywords: Time Perception; Sino-Japanese Comparison; Social Impact; Cross-Cultural Communication.

1. The Origins of Time Perception in China and Japan

Throughout Chinese history, numerous poems and maxims have urged people to value their time. For instance, "I advise you not to cherish cloth of gold, but to honor the days of youth," and "One hundred years of life, how many days are today? If you do not seize today, it is truly a pity." These expressions indirectly reflect the relatively relaxed nature of traditional Chinese time perception, which contrasts sharply with the modern precise concept of time. At the same time, this more relaxed perception of time in traditional Chinese culture is largely influenced by both geographical and historical factors.

China has historically been an agrarian society, a characteristic that persisted from the Qin and Han dynasties until the late Qing Dynasty. Within this small-scale farming economy, the rhythm of life for farmers followed the natural cycle of "working at sunrise and resting at sunset," reflecting the reality of ancient Chinese society's dependence on agriculture and natural conditions[7]. Additionally, ancient China divided the day into twelve two-hour periods, known as "shichen." This method of time division made it difficult for people to precisely define the exact time of events. The American missionary Arthur H. Smith conducted missionary activities in China during the late Qing Dynasty and provided an in-depth observation and analysis of the Chinese perception of time in his book "Chinese Characteristics." Smith noted that although the Chinese possessed clocks, they rarely used them, opting instead to clean them every few years to prevent them from stopping. On sunny days, people often judged the time based on the position of the sun, using phrases like "the sun is one pole high" or "the sun is two poles high." On cloudy days, they estimated time by observing changes in a cat's pupils. It wasn't until the advent of modern times, with the introduction of Western culture, that Chinese society's concept of time began to change, gradually forming a more modern time consciousness. However, compared to Western societies, the Chinese still had a relatively vague concept of

scheduling[1].

As an island nation, Japan's history and geographical conditions have fostered a relatively prosperous maritime trade, contrasting sharply with the agrarian-dominated China. In the late 16th to early 17th centuries, as the Netherlands surpassed Portugal and Spain to become the dominant global commercial and naval power, Japan's foreign interactions also underwent significant changes. The establishment of the Dutch East India Company in 1602 further deepened trade relations between the Netherlands and Japan[2].

During this period, Christianity, as one of the main religions of the Netherlands, indirectly influenced Japanese society with its linear concept of time. This concept, rooted in the Biblical narrative from the Creation to the end of human history at Judgment Day and eternal life, emphasizes a purposeful and ultimate meaning of history. This linear time perception contrasts sharply with Japan's traditional pantheism and cyclical view of time.

Furthermore, Japan's trade with the Netherlands not only facilitated the exchange of cultural ideas but also led to the introduction of technologies such as mechanical clocks[2]. Compared to China, Japan encountered and adopted mechanical clocks earlier, which further enhanced the Japanese society's understanding and application of precise timekeeping. Consequently, despite originating as an agrarian society like China, Japan's development of time perception diverged significantly, displaying a clearer emphasis on precision and efficiency.

2. Analysis of the Influence of Uncertainty Avoidance on Sino-Japanese Time Perception through Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

2.1. Concept Definition

"Uncertainty Avoidance" is one of the four dimensions for measuring cultural values proposed by Dutch social psychologist Geert Hofstede. The term "uncertainty avoidance" is borrowed from American organizational

sociology. Extreme uncertainty can cause intolerable anxiety, leading people to seek various methods to alleviate this anxiety. In essence, it refers to the extent to which people feel threatened by ambiguity and uncertainty and their tolerance for such conditions.

Hofstede's research, which surveyed 74 countries, found that countries with a high Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) tend to avoid uncertainty and ambiguity as much as possible. They establish more rules, dislike unconventional ideas and practices, and seek consistency. Japan is an example of a country with a high UAI. In contrast, countries with a low UAI experience relatively lower levels of anxiety. Anxiety often leads to expressiveness, so in countries with a low UAI, expressiveness tends to be lower [6].

2.2. Analysis of Sino-Japanese Time Perception based on "Uncertainty Avoidance"

Hofstede's cross-cultural research reveals significant differences in the Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) between Japan and China. Japan has a high UAI of 92, ranking between 11th and 13th, indicating a high level of anxiety and a strong tendency to avoid uncertainty. In contrast, mainland China has a UAI of only 30, ranking between 68th and 69th, reflecting a relatively low level of anxiety and a greater tolerance for uncertainty[6].

This difference is reflected in the time management and corporate cultures of the two countries. Japan adopted mechanical clock technology earlier than China, promoting precise timekeeping and influencing the overall time perception within Japanese society. As time became more precisely managed, the Japanese time perception also strengthened, aligning with their cultural trait of high uncertainty avoidance.

In corporate environments, this cultural inclination manifests in meticulous planning and execution of tasks. Japanese employees often prepare detailed work schedules and follow instructions closely under their leaders' guidance. According to Professor Qu Jun's field observations in Japan, it is common to see management records of work schedules in Japanese companies. Additionally, some business leaders regularly publish their work schedules, demonstrating a high level of organization and time management skills[5].

Japan's strict time management is not only evident in corporate culture but also permeates all aspects of social life. This includes punctuality for work, meetings, trains, and private appointments. The average annual delay time for the Tokaido Shinkansen is only 24 seconds, and for JR East's regular routes, it is just 1.1 minutes. This highlights the extremely high standards of time precision in Japanese society, making its train services renowned as the most punctual in the world[4].

In contrast, China's predominantly agrarian economy historically did not foster the same anxiety about resource scarcity as in Japan. This economic structure has influenced the perception of time urgency among Chinese people, resulting in a more relaxed attitude towards time. Within this cultural context, Chinese people often perceive time more leniently, which can sometimes leave foreign counterparts with an impression of laziness during international interactions[1].

Additionally, the Chinese cultural emphasis on the whole rather than the details can lead to a lack of organization and meticulousness in task execution[3]. Currently, with the spread of overtime culture, employees often feel significant

pressure. The term "摸鱼" (mó yú), which means to slack off during work hours by doing non-work-related activities, emerged during this period. This reflects inefficiencies in the modern work environment and represents a contradiction between the pursuit of efficiency in businesses and traditional time perceptions.

3. The Impact of Time Perception on Social Development in China and Japan

Japan's trains are renowned for being the "most punctual in the world," and this dedication to timeliness is often seen as a symbol of efficiency and reliability. However, an extreme adherence to time can sometimes lead to severe consequences. One such example is the train derailment accident that occurred in Amagasaki, Hyogo Prefecture, on April 25, 2005. In this incident, a rapid train derailed on a curve while traveling at a speed of 116 km/h because it failed to decelerate in time. Investigations revealed that the immediate cause of the accident was the driver's lack of experience and his attempt to make up for overshooting a stop by 70 meters. To correct this mistake, the train controller instructed the driver to reverse to the designated position, which resulted in a delay of 1 minute and 30 seconds[8].

Compared to the average annual delay of 24 seconds for the Tokaido Shinkansen and the average delay of 1.1 minutes for JR East's regular routes, the 1 minute and 30 second delay in this incident was considered a significant failure. The strict time requirements in Japan's railway industry reflect the deeply rooted collectivism and high sense of responsibility in its culture. In 1987, to address debt issues and improve operational efficiency, Japan National Railways (JNR) was divided and privatized, resulting in the formation of several regional passenger companies (JR companies). This organizational change reinforced a family-like management approach and a sense of shared destiny within the corporate culture[9]. Employees are not only encouraged to prioritize the collective interest but are also deeply influenced by stringent time management and efficiency principles. Consequently, the driver, facing potential professional penalties, chose to risk speeding to make up for the time discrepancy, ultimately leading to the tragic accident.

President Xi Jinping has emphasized that China's economy is transitioning from a phase of rapid growth to one of high-quality development[10]. In the internet era, the pace of social life has accelerated, and competitive pressure has increased. In response to this call for high-quality development, many companies have begun encouraging overtime work to boost annual productivity. However, this pursuit of speed often proves counterproductive. High-intensity intellectual labor can lead to the accumulation of metabolic waste products, such as glutamate, in the prefrontal cortex—the brain region responsible for control and decision-making. This accumulation can cause cognitive fatigue. As glutamate continues to build up, excessive amounts can impair brain function. Therefore, adequate rest helps regulate these molecules and restore brain functionality[11].

In the process of managing work-related stress, some employees choose to take appropriate breaks during their free time. The recently popular internet term "摸鱼" (mó yú), which originates from the phrase "浑水摸鱼" (hún shuǐ mō yú) meaning "to fish in troubled waters" and originally referred to profiting from chaos, now mainly describes

engaging in non-work-related activities during work hours. Academically, this behavior is referred to as workplace internet leisure[12]. In a digital society, the management of time costs has evolved from traditional costs to a blend of traditional and opportunity costs. As long as the time cost is low, "mó yú" practitioners have the opportunity to achieve self-satisfaction by creating a false image of diligence[14].

However, the widespread prevalence of "mó yú" behavior can lead to herd behavior, further impacting organizational efficiency. In addition to wasting time and reducing productivity, "mó yú" can pose security risks for companies. For instance, employees might inadvertently disclose company secrets while chatting on social networks or expose the company's network systems to viruses by visiting inappropriate websites, leading to network crashes[13]. Consequently, companies have begun to require overtime work, and some employees, driven by moral guilt, start working longer hours[12]. However, this prolonged workload can sometimes result in "karoshi," or death from overwork.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, Japan's strict control of time has earned it the reputation of having the "most punctual trains in the world." However, the excessive pursuit of time precision has sometimes led to irreversible disasters. In contrast, China's vast geography and long-standing agrarian economy have fostered a more relaxed perception of time. With the acceleration of globalization and the expansion of international exchanges, China is gradually recognizing the importance of precise time management. Nevertheless, this transition has also revealed a tendency towards short-termism, exemplified by the prevalence of "摸鱼" (mó yú) and other forms of workplace internet leisure. This behavior not only fails to improve work efficiency but also exacerbates employee stress and exposes companies to potential risks and losses.

Therefore, rushing can be counterproductive. As the saying goes, "sharpening the axe does not delay the job of cutting wood"; appropriate rest is essential for restoring brain function and regulating psychological states. In handling significant diplomatic events or important meetings, we can learn from and adopt Japan's punctuality to earn respect and leave a positive impression in international settings. However, in everyday management, it is crucial to moderate and balance, avoiding an overemphasis on efficiency at the expense of employees' well-being and the overall safety of operations.

For both China and Japan, understanding and respecting each other's cultural differences in time management can effectively promote cross-cultural cooperation. This not only helps optimize internal communication and collaboration between enterprises on both sides but also provides a solid foundation for cooperation on the international stage. By

learning from each other and complementing each other's strengths, China and Japan can better leverage their respective advantages in the wave of globalization, jointly driving sustained economic and social progress.

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