

A Study on the Differences between Chinese and Western Views on Death Based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory—Take the movies "Lighting Up The Stars" and "The Bucket List" for example

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ABSTRACT

Death education is a lifelong influence that runs throughout ones life and is an inevitable presence. As society advances, it also imposes higher demands on the methods and concepts of death education. In the process of educating their children, parents should establish correct values regarding death and adopt reasonable, scientific approaches to utilize resources effectively, providing their children with a positive perspective on death education. China and the United States, as two major countries in the world, have vastly different views on death education and death concepts. This paper uses Hofstedes cultural dimensions theory as its theoretical foundation, analyzing the differences in death education between China and the U.S. through the films "Lighting Up The Stars" and "The Bucket List," which explore themes related to death values. The aim is to provide some reference value for China's death education, promote a positive view of death education in China, absorb the essence of foreign education, and facilitate friendly communication and learning between China and Western countries.

KEYWORDS

Hofstedes Cultural Dimension Theory; Cultural Values; Death Culture Difference; Chinese and Western Educational Views

1 Hofstedes cultural dimensions theory

Hofstedes cultural theory encompasses five distinct dimensions: power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term versus short-term orientation. This paper will analyze the differences in death education between Chinese and American families from the perspectives of power distance (Power Distance), uncertainty avoidance (Uncertainty Avoidance), and long-term versus short-term orientation (Long-Term v.s. Short-Term Orientation).

In Chinese philosophy of death, emphasis is placed on the cycle of life and death, cause and effect. For example, Daoism advocates following nature and upholding the concept of "governance through non-action," viewing death as part of the life cycle and teaching people to face it calmly (Zhang Feiyan, 2021). Confucianism, on the other hand, emphasizes that "life should be useful, and death should have a proper place," believing that an individuals death is not just their own matter but a significant event for the entire family and even the universe (Li Xiangjun, 2018). In contrast, Western culture, influenced by the dominant religion Christianity, holds that the human soul is independent and does not depend on the body. A bound soul must undergo reincarnation, while an unbound soul will enter the divine realm (Li Xiangjun, 2018).

"Lighting Up The Stars" tells the story of Third Brother, a mortician released from prison, who unexpectedly takes in Xiao Wen, who has just lost her grandmother, while undertaking a funeral. Xiao Wens arrival unexpectedly transforms Third Brothers attitude towards his profession and life. From initial incompatibility to mutual dependence, the two form a bond that transcends blood ties, sharing the joys and sorrows of life together.

"The Bucket List" revolves around the narratives of Old Cole and Old Carter. The billionaire Old Cole is eccentric and short-tempered, confined to a double room in the hospital due to a terminal illness. In this shared ward, he meets Old Carter, who shares his predicament. The erudite Old Carter is a mechanic with enviable children and a loving marriage. However, behind this seemingly glamorous facade lies the fact that Old Carter has given up his dream of becoming a history professor. Despite their vastly different life experiences, Old Carter and Old Cole find themselves in the same predicament, becoming old friends in the ward. After a period of treatment, Old Carter learns that his life is entering its final countdown. He writes down his bucket list, but then feels it too difficult to fulfill, so he discards it on the floor. Old Cole picks it up and decides to help Old Carter complete his lifes wish, ensuring that both have a life without regrets.

2 The difference between Chinese and Western death is viewed from the perspective of Hofstede's cultural theory

2.1 Power Distance

The power distance index of some countries:

country	Malaysia	China	America	Britain
Power distance index	104	80	40	35

The table above reflects the power distance index of several representative countries in the East and West. According to Hofstede, the higher the prestige of parents in a family, the greater the power distance in that country. After their children become independent, the high power distance reflected by parents is manifested in the need for economic and behavioral support from parents (Ma Dong, Fan Shuling, 2021). "Lighting Up The Stars" aligns with Hofstede's definition of countries with high power distance. In the film, after the death of Little Wens grandmother, the family asks Third Brother to lead the funeral team to handle her posthumous affairs. Third Brother dresses Little Wens grandmother in her funeral clothes, breaks a basin in the alley, places her in the coffin, and carries her onto the hearse. A series of traditional funeral customs confirm Hofstede's interpretation of high power distance countries, reflecting respect for hierarchical order and paternal authority. In contrast, the American film "The Bucket List," influenced by religion, teaches children from a young age that all people are born equal, and that there is an equal relationship among parents, children, and teachers. Children raised under this educational model tend to be self-centered, have shallow family awareness, and develop selfish personalities (Ma Dong, Fan Shuling, 2021). Compared to "Lighting Up The Stars," "The Bucket List" reflects foreign societies structurally, it presents a loose state, emphasizing the supremacy of individual rights; China, influenced by traditional patriarchal society, has a more tightly knit social structure, valuing collective order and interpersonal relationships. In addition, Westerners are more at ease when facing the topic of "death," as there is no mandatory procedural system after someone passes away, and they are less constrained by hierarchical structures, placing greater emphasis on personal wishes.

2.2 Uncertainty Avoidance

Hofstede defines the attitudes and reactions of social members when facing unknown, ambiguous, or unpredictable situations as uncertainty avoidance. In societies with high uncertainty avoidance indices, members tend to be more vigilant about uncertainties. People living in such environments often seek stability and safety by adhering to strict rules and procedures, relying on experts and absolute knowledge to mitigate the harm caused by uncertainty. Conversely, in societies with low uncertainty avoidance indices, people are more tolerant and accepting of uncertainty, adopting an open attitude toward risk and change. In "The Bucket List," Old Cole takes Carter to fulfill their uncompleted dreams on the list. They leave the hospital to experience skydiving, drive extreme go-karts, and watch the sunset from the top of a pyramid. They also plan to climb Mount Everest together but have to give up due to weather conditions. After their passing, Cole's assistant Thomas places their ashes on Mount Everest, which they never made it to. The film approaches the theme of death with an optimistic and adventurous attitude, reflecting a Western low uncertainty avoidance culture. Although China also has a low uncertainty avoidance index, compared to America's low uncertainty avoidance culture, China exhibits a markedly different attitude. "In the story, a little girl dies of heart failure, and her parents decide to hold a funeral for her. The funeral director, Third Brother, customizes a pink urn for the little girl, which is then colored with a pen by the girl herself. When Third Brother thinks he will lose his job due to the family's reaction to Little Wens actions, the girl's parents come to him, claiming that Little Wen has left them the most precious thing. Chinese people alleviate their fear of death through traditional funeral rituals, reflecting that China is a country with a high level of uncertainty avoidance.

2.3 Long-term orientation versus short-term orientation

In traditional Chinese families, parents often spend their entire lives paving the way for their children. Under the protective umbrella of these parents, children in Chinese households generally struggle to be independent. Moreover, while Chinese parents focus more on their children's academic performance, they tend to overlook death education. In countries with a long-term orientation culture, there is a preference for social stability and long-term benefits, whereas societies with a short-term orientation culture are more inclined to meet immediate living needs (Ju Haining & Qin Wei, 2019). According to Hofstede's measurement of long/short-term orientation indices across 39 countries (regions), China scores 118, making it a typical long-term oriented society; the United States scores 29, indicating a more short-term oriented society (Wang Le, 2024). In the film "Lighting Up The Stars," five different funerals are depicted, one of which is a live burial arranged by the uncle that they meet in the park due to family reasons. This not only reflects the filial impiety of the elderly's children who only seek to claim the inheritance but also highlights the Chinese emphasis on the continuation

of tradition. Americans prioritize comfort in life and tend to indulge in the present (Ju Haining & Qin Wei, 2019). In "The Bucket List," two elderly individuals—Kohl and Carter—who are both ill, choose to challenge themselves before passing away, attempting what they have never tried before. The novelty of the new things. People generally view America as a nation of individualism, an perspective that can be traced back to the Western Middle Ages. During this period, Western Christianity dominated, emphasizing God's supremacy and collectivism. However, within scholastic philosophy, nominalism focused on individuals, laying the groundwork for the development of individualism. Later, during the Renaissance, various works emphasized human value and dignity, opposing theologys advocacy for pursuing happiness in real life. This laid the foundation for later generations pursuit of individualism and hedonism.

3 The cultural roots of the difference between Chinese and Western death concepts

3.1 Religious beliefs

The Western Christian doctrine of the soul, heaven and hell has influenced the Western peoples concept of death in many ways. Christianity believes that human mortality stems from "original sin." Because humans have original sin, they are not perfect. Due to their imperfections, everyone will eventually die. (Lin Kaiqiang, 2008)

In compliance with:

① The idea of immortality

According to Christian doctrine, the soul is an immortal entity given by God to man. Even though the body dies, the soul always exists. Christian believers do not regard death as the end of life, but as a process in which the soul is removed from the body.

② The reward and punishment mechanism of heaven and hell

Christianity depicts heaven as a sacred place where God resides, and only those who follow the doctrine can enter heaven; in contrast, those who do not follow the doctrine will go to hell, which is a place full of pain and punishment, and those who do not follow the doctrine will go to hell to receive the punishment of hell.

③ The impact on funeral rites and mourning

Christian funeral rites emphasize the blessing and prayer of the soul of the deceased to help them enter heaven smoothly. In mourning, believers will be sad for the death of their loved ones, but they believe that the pain will be relieved by the hope of eternal life and that they will meet again in heaven in the future.

China follows the traditional integration of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism, such as the Confucian concept of "cautious end and pursuit of the distant" and the Buddhist concept of reincarnation.

3.2 Social structural factors

① Western social structure and individual rights

Most western countries have democratic political systems, and their power is more dispersed than that of China. Citizens express their personal demands and safeguard their personal rights through elections and other participation methods. This political environment attaches importance to and guarantees individual rights at the political level, and also makes social members pay more attention to their own interests rather than collective interests.

② The trend of individualism

From the Renaissance humanism to the rationalism of the Enlightenment, they all emphasized the value, rights and dignity of individuals. For example, Rousseau proposed that "man is born free". This concept was deeply rooted in peoples hearts, making the pursuit of self-value become the mainstream of the society at that time, and thus reducing the social cohesion.

In contrast, China has a close structure and attaches importance to collective order and interpersonal relations.

① Blood ties are the bond

The patriarchal system takes the patrilineal blood relationship as the core, and divides the family members into large and small clans according to the closeness of blood relations, so as to determine the identity and status of family members. This blood relationship closely links the family members together, forming a huge family network.

② Pay attention to collective interests

The traditional patriarchal society emphasizes the supremacy of collective interests, and individual interests should be subordinated to the overall interests of the family and society. Family members should support each other and develop together, and be willing to pay personal strength for the benefit of the whole family.

4 Conclusions and recommendations

To sum up, we can clearly see that China and the United States have two completely different views on death because of their different cultural and educational views.

From multiple perspectives, China and the United States each have their own strengths and weaknesses when it comes to the topic of death perception. China has traditionally followed Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism, making it a collectivist country where elders hold high prestige within the family. Therefore, when Chinese people face the topic of death, they often opt for traditional funeral practices, using funerals to reflect hierarchical order and respect for senior authority. In contrast, many Western countries lack reverence for deceased elders due to the influence of Western Christianity, which generally views death as an inevitable festival. Instead of anxiously facing a weakening body in a hospital room, people prefer to use their limited time to experience new things. In recent years, traditional Chinese views on death have been evolving with the times, particularly evident in urban families. As the quality of life and cultural standards of the Chinese population continue to rise, many Chinese people are moving away from elaborate and complex funeral rituals, opting instead for more environmentally friendly ways to place their ashes.

China is renowned for its "family-oriented" society, where parents and children maintain close ties. Even as children grow up and leave home to study or work, they still feel a deep connection with their parents. When tragedy strikes, the family gathers to discuss and find the best solution, rather than treating death as an individual issue. This is something that Western death education needs to learn from.

First, China has long been regarded as a country with high power distance. In fact, the Chinese have traditionally been wary of the word "death," even deliberately avoiding it in daily conversations. Some people view death as absolutely negative, focusing only on its end while overlooking the spiritual legacy it carries. These feudal taboos to some extent limit rational discussions about death; people need to fully understand death and be mentally prepared for it.

Second, reduce the occurrence of practices like "burying alive." As an ancient Chinese saying goes, a person is only truly laid to rest when they are placed in a coffin and buried. Only then can their family feel at ease. Excessive burials often serve more to satisfy the family's pride and social expectations, potentially neglecting genuine emotional expression for the deceased, and may even lead to social competition. Therefore, we should simplify traditional funerals and discard the negative aspects of conventional mourning practices.

Third, extensively promote and popularize positive death education in public places such as schools and communities. In China, death education is relatively scarce, lacking a distinct and systematic educational sector. This results in many people's views on death remaining superficial. When faced with the passing of their loved ones, they struggle to cope effectively, often leading to emotional trauma.

Finally, in this vast world, China and the United States have their own unique perspectives on death. All educational concepts about death aim to help children and teenagers with less mature minds gain a more comprehensive understanding. When facing different views on death from various countries, people need to discern right from wrong, take the essence and discard the dross, and approach different perspectives on death with an open mind. This will enable young people to view death issues positively.

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