# A Study on the Differences between Chinese and American Concepts of Face Based on Cultural Dimensions Theory—Taking the American Film The Farewell as an Example

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*Abstract:* The Concept of Face, as a significant part of cultural psychology, holds paramount importance in Chinese and Western social interactions. Grounded in Cultural Dimensions Theory and Face Theory, this paper examines Chinese and American concepts of face through the plot and character behaviors in the film and specifically investigates their differences within the frameworks of Individualism and Collectivism, Power Distance, and Long-Term and Short-Term Orientation. The analysis reveals that the Chinese concept of face is intimately connected with hierarchical power, whereas Western culture accentuates individualism. Collective "face" garners more significance in Chinese culture, in contrast to the individual-oriented approach of the West; furthermore, Chinese culture focuses on positive "face", while Western culture is more concerned with negative "face". From a cross-cultural communication standpoint, this paper posits strategies to promote individual inclusiveness, improve heterogeneous cultural awareness, and enhance cultural adaptability. Such strategies are set forth to bolster cross-cultural comprehension, advance cultural sensitivity, and elevate communicative proficiency, thereby facilitating a more effective adjustment to the variegated cultural milieus of China and the United States.

## 1. Introduction

Amidst the wave of globalization, cross-cultural communication has increasingly become a focal point of academic research. It serves not only as the bridge facilitating exchanges from divergent cultural backgrounds but also as the vital force advocating the harmony of society and the integration of diversity. The Concept of face, as a "social-psychological construct rooted in culture," [1] manifests distinctly in Chinese and Western cultures. In Chinese culture, face pertains to individual dignity and family honor, whereas in Western culture, there is a greater emphasis on individual autonomy and authenticity. *The Farewell* vividly portrays this difference, offering audiences a lens through which the clashes between Chinese and Western cultural paradigms can be easily observed.

Academic research on the Concept of Face has yielded substantial achievements. Based on varied methodologies and theoretical foundations employed, face-centered theoretical research can be

bifurcated into two principal categories. The first category is grounded in sociolinguistics, with Politeness Theory serving as its cornerstone. In this vein of research, face is regarded as the driving mechanism behind the generation of polite language which is employed to mitigate the tension arising from face-threatening acts and facilitate harmonious relations between interacting parties (Brown & Levinson, 1987) [2]. Therefore, the Perception of Face functions as a critical metric for assessing the politeness and directness of language, which concentrates on the identification and analysis of potential face threats during communication, as well as the practical application of various face strategies (Limberg, 2009) [3]. The second category of research, underpinned by Face Negotiation Theory, predominantly adopts sociopsychological methods (Ting-Toomey, 2005) [4]. It critiques Politeness Theory's concept of face for overemphasizing the individualistic viewpoint (Chen, 2001) [5], defining face as a foundation of the self and considering it an embodiment of the actor's intrinsic qualities such as competence and autonomy, rather than an external characteristic like social status. Additionally, Politeness Theory assumes face acts to be discrete and contextualized independent behaviors, unrelated to long-term relationships or obligations (Cardon, 2005) [6], which significantly deviates from the Chinese concept of face (Zhai, 2006) [7]. On the basis of this critique, researchers led by Ting-Toomey began to explore the role cultural factors play in the formation of face (Oetzel, Ting-Toomey, Matsumoto et al., 2001) [8], subsequently advancing Face Negotiation Theory to explain specific cross-cultural communication behaviors. Furthermore, several Chinese scholars have delved into the distinct characteristics of face within Chinese cultural milieus from a native perspective (Chen, 2006) [9], providing a comprehensive analysis of its genesis, functional processes, and social roles (Zhu, 1987) [10].

Despite the fact that analyzing films through different concepts of face is not entirely novel, scant research has associated the Concept of Face with Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions to thoroughly dissect the differences between Chinese and American concepts of face and their underlying cultural drivers. This paper will commence from three dimensions—Individualism and Collectivism, Power Distance, and Long-Term and Short-Term Orientation—and analyze the film's behavioral pattern, dialogue, and plot progression. Through this analysis, the aim is to unveil the similarities and dissimilarities between Chinese and American concepts of face within these dimensions.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

Based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, this study constructs a theoretical framework for analyzing the differences between Chinese and American concepts of face. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory is one of the key theories in analyzing cultural differences, addressing cross-cultural conflicts, and enhancing cross-cultural competence (Wang Xinfang, 2019) [11]. The theory, originating from a comprehensive survey of a large number of employees globally (particularly those of IBM), encapsulates five core dimensions that depict and compare national cultural characteristics. These dimensions include Individualism and Collectivism, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity and Femininity, as well as Long-Term and Short-Term Orientation. Firstly, the dichotomy of Individualism and Collectivism pertains to the recognition of the relationship between self and collective. Individualistic cultures belong to societies with loose ties among individuals, where everyone prioritizes their own values and needs. Collectivism refers to societies where individuals are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups from birth (Hofstede, 2010) [12]. Secondly, Power Distance is the degree to which less powerful members within a country accept and expect that power is distributed unequally (Mauk Mulder, translated by Li Yuan & Sun Jianmin, 2010) [13]. Thirdly, Uncertainty Avoidance pertains to the extent to which formal means are employed to prevent or control unpredictable events and unconventional situations (Li Wenjuan, 2009) [14]. Fourthly, Masculinity and Femininity describes the different roles of men and women in different cultures, as

well as their different social division of labor (Larry et al., 2009) [15]. Finally, to rectify the "Western-centric" bias, Hofstede added the dimension of Long-Term and Short-Term Orientation based on his research among students in 27 countries. Hofstede (2010) [12] defines Long-Term Orientation as the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, particularly perseverance and thrift, whereas Short-Term Orientation refers to the cultivation of virtues related to the past and present, particularly respecting tradition, saving face, and fulfilling social obligations. These dimensions provide a comprehensive framework for understanding and comparing different cultures.

Existing researches on the Concept of Face often utilize Cultural Dimensions Theory, which underscores the importance of cultural factors. For example, Ho (1976) [16] indicated the Concept of Face is closely related to cultural dimensions, and it is not limited to collectivist countries; different concepts of face exist under different cultural dimensions. This study makes it clear that there is a close connection between the Concept of Face and cultural dimensions. Building upon this, Yu Xin (2005) [17] combined cultural dimensions with the Concept of Face to investigate different aspects of Chinese and American concepts of face in cross-cultural business communication and to analyze their associations with respective cultural characteristics. Fan Hongtao (2008) [18] further substantiated that different values explored through the Cultural Dimensions Theory lead to differences between Chinese and American concepts of face. However, current research in this field mostly focuses on Sino-American cultural differences within the dimension of Individualism and Collectivism. Thus, this research will focus on the three dimensions of Individualism and Collectivism, Power Distance, and Long-Term and Short-Term Orientation to examine the differences between Chinese and American concepts of face from the perspective of Cultural Dimensions Theory.

## 3. From the Perspective of Cultural Dimensions Theory: Differences in Chinese and American Concepts of Face in *The Farewell*

### 3.1. Individualism and Collectivism

When it comes to collectivism, an individual's honor tends to be inextricably intertwined with that of their family. A person's success or failure in their career, prosperity or decline in their endeavors, concerns not only their own reputation but also the face of all family members. In contrast, individualism places greater emphasis on personal independence, autonomy, and freedom, with the view that individuals have the right to determine their own lifestyle and values, free from the constraints of family and society. *The Farewell* illustrates the distinctions between individualism and collectivism. A quintessential example of collectivism is the grandmother, who believes that the grandeur of a wedding is closely linked to the family's honor. Only by hosting a lavish wedding and providing the best food for guests can one maintain face, thereby taking care of the guests' face as well. As for individualism, marriage is seen as a private matter between two people, with no right for others to interfere. In *The Farewell*, Billi represents the individualistic view; she believes that a pregnant bride does not tarnish face or interest. She prioritizes personal feelings and choices over external opinions and judgments.

The distinctions between collectivism and individualism can be traced back to the profound impact of the environment on the formation of human cultures. The Concept of Face, as a manifestation of cultural psychology, is also shaped and influenced by natural surroundings. China, situated in the vast expanse of East Asia, boasts a unique geographical setting that fostered the independence and spontaneity of Chinese culture. Bordered by land on three sides and by sea on one, the Chinese people have been relatively isolated from the outside world. Their distinctive worldview and cultural psyche have been shaped consequently. This semi-enclosed landmass fostered a self-centric worldview, providing a fertile ground for their pronounced sense of dignity or "self-awareness." Furthermore, their self-awareness evolved into a strong emphasis on face, leading to their intense concern for face

in various contexts. Historically, whether at weddings, funerals, or festival celebrations, Chinese people have consciously or unconsciously used pomp and circumstance as a means to manifest and maintain family honor [19], which has become an indispensable part of Chinese culture. In stark contrast to China's collectivism is the individualistic concept in Western society. During the ancient Greek era, peasants were marginalized while merchants thrived in urban centers, engaging in overseas trade. This diverse, fragmented, and competitive social structure led to the rise of individualism. As historians have noted, "In ancient Greece, peasants were relegated to the periphery as serfs, while merchants lived in urban centers, crossing seas for trade. Their way of living was disorganized, separate, and discordant. Those contentious and ambitious people explored outward restlessly and thus progressed forward continually. Consequently, the so-called individualism and historical materialism emerged." In modern Western society, there is a greater emphasis on self-expression and personal achievements, where individuals candidly express their thoughts and feelings and value the realization of self-worth on an equal footing.

Furthermore, the distinctions between collectivism and individualism are closely related to the family-oriented concepts in traditional Chinese culture and the individualistic ideas prevalent in Western cultures. In traditional Chinese culture, family is considered the fundamental unit of society, with an individual's identity and status deeply intertwined with the family's reputation and standing. Consequently, China has gradually fostered a familial form of collectivism, emphasizing the subordination of individual desires to the collective will, in pursuit of harmonious integration. [19] Maintaining the family's face and honor thus becomes the responsibility and duty of each family member. In contrast, Western cultures regard individuals as independent, entitled to determine their lifestyles and values. Marriage is seen as a private matter between two individuals, with no right for outsiders to interfere. The concept of face and honor are more often linked to personal achievements and efforts rather than the reputation of the family.

## 3.2. Power Distance

Chinese culture features high power distance and acknowledges hierarchical distinctions, mandating respect for the elderly, the influential, and those of higher status. Conversely, in Western cultures, the concept of face is largely devoid of hierarchical distance, allowing parents and children to maintain an equal relationship. This difference in perspectives is vividly illustrated. The family's decision to conceal the grandmother's illness reflects a commitment to protecting the elder's face, while the uncle's stern response to Billi's attempt to dissuade her father from smoking underscores a respect for familial authority. These actions reveal the strict family hierarchy and absolute authority of elders. Meanwhile, Americans, hailing from a culture of low power distance, favor direct and honest communication in the face of conflict and disagreement, rather than an excessive concern for saving face. Billi's insistence on financial independence and refusal to accept assistance from her father present the pursuit of autonomy intrinsic to low power distance cultures. Moreover, she doesn't fear her mother's authority when arguing with her and gets along with her as equals and friends, exemplifying equal familial relationships in low power distance cultures.

The variations in the concepts of face stem from multifaceted reasons. Firstly, there is a divergence in the understanding of relations between individuals and society across cultures. Within the high power distance family structure of China, the authority of the elders is deemed inviolable. They possess ultimate sway over family decisions with their opinions exerting a decisive influence. This authority manifests not only in daily family life but continues throughout the child-rearing process, even into adulthood. This family hierarchy, deeply entrenched in ancient Confucian and Legalist cultures, has shaped a rigid feudal hierarchy within Chinese society. Scollon's face theory corroborates this with its "deference politeness face system" reflecting the hierarchical distance

between communicators. Conversely, the low power distance culture of the United States emphasizes equality among members and individual independence to foster children's autonomy and critical thinking. Scollon's "solidarity politeness face system" also indicates the diminution of hierarchical distance among communicators. Given the lower power distance, Americans expect and accept negotiatory or democratic power relations, where relationships, regardless of their status, are built on equality. Secondly, as a sociopsychological phenomenon, the concept of face exhibits distinct characteristics in different cultural contexts. In the high power distance culture of China, face is tightly connected to hierarchy, with traditional Confucian thought emphasizing ranked social order and prohibiting overstepping authority. When parents admit mistakes or apologize to their children, it is perceived as losing face and undermining their status as elders. In contrast, every family member in American culture is an independent individual, with a primary focus on whether their actions and freedom are impeded by others.

### 3.3. Short-term Orientation and Long-term Orientation

Cultures with Short-Term Orientation stress immediate gratification and the pursuit of short-term rewards, where individuals are particularly concerned with safeguarding their liberty, space, and personal image from infringement. In contrast, cultures with Long-Term Orientation prioritize future benefits and relationship maintenance, with individuals more inclined to adopt positive face-saving strategies that maintain harmonious relations and mutual interests through supporting others' needs and desires. The film *The Farewell* poignantly reveals the distinct orientations between Chinese and American cultures. The short-term-oriented protagonist, Billi, frequently over-consumes to satisfy her immediate needs. For example, she bought a ticket back to China by credit card even though she was two months behind on her rent, which displays the influence of short-term-oriented culture on her, where instant satisfaction and joy are sought. Her long-term-oriented mother advocates frugality, advising Billi to save money and alter her previously extravagant lifestyle, as she cares about long-term benefits, reflecting the impact of the long-term-oriented culture.

According to Oetzel and Ting-Toomey (2001:145), "Individualists are often more concerned with the protection of their own face, whereas collectivists tend to care more about tolerating others' face or preserving mutual face." [8] This theory provides a crucial framework for understanding the differences between the Chinese and American concepts of face. Individualism is one of American core values with an emphasis on individual rights, freedom, and independence. Within this cultural context, Americans are more inclined to protect their negative face. Conversely, Chinese culture with collectivism as one of its core values, stresses responsibility, obligation, and relationships among individuals. Under this cultural backdrop, the Chinese prioritize the maintenance of others' positive face through behaviors such as supporting others, remaining humble and frugal to maintain interpersonal relationships and collective image, with a greater tendency to plan and focus on long-term benefits.

Additionally, historical and cultural backgrounds also play a significant role in shaping the variations in Chinese and American concepts of face. Qian Mu suggests, "The differences between Chinese and Western cultures essentially begin with the differences in their agriculture and commerce. China was founded on agriculture, with a typical family of five members tending a hundred acres of farmland. This practice is widespread and passed down through generations without change." [20] The traditional Chinese small-scale peasant economy, characterized by low productivity and slow wealth creation, necessitated frugality and controlled consumption to ensure the survival of individuals and families. Influenced by this production mode, China has developed a long-term-oriented cultural tradition, thus forming a future-oriented consumption view. Conversely, the West, significantly impacted by the Industrial Revolution, saw a dramatic increase in production levels, with abundant

products requiring to be purchased and used as soon as possible, making consumption one of life's purposes and means. Moreover, Americans advocate the values of enjoying life, freedom, and independence, naturally leading to a short-term-oriented culture of immediate gratification and overconsumption.

## 4. Implications for Sino-American Cross-Cultural Communication

### 4.1. Fostering Personal Inclusivity

The essence of cross-cultural communication lies in the reciprocal process of understanding and adaptation between the parties involved, without any culture being inherently superior or inferior. Therefore, it is vital to enhance personal inclusivity when engaging in cross-cultural exchanges. Besides our respect for other cultural customs and values from an intercultural standpoint and understanding of the conduct, communication styles, social norms, management modes, and values of different cultures, we must also grasp their cultural conventions and communication rules to circumvent cultural taboos. Furthermore, as no culture is better or worse, we should build cultural confidence on the foundation of embracing commonalities amidst differences. Although it is crucial to accommodate and respect other cultures, we should not simply accept and mimic them without discernment. In cross-cultural communication, the aim should be to earnestly pursue mutual inclusivity, thereby enhancing cultural exchanges.

### 4.2. Enhancing the Recognition of Heterogeneous Cultures

Navigating the inherent communication barriers in cross-cultural interaction demands a rational approach to cultural conflicts. A profound comprehension of heterogeneous cultures is integral to overcoming these communication obstacles. We need to proactively explore and understand diverse values, beliefs, and behavioral patterns in different cultural backgrounds, thus ensuring a thorough grasp of cultural variances. Additionally, developing cultural adaptability is essential—flexibly adjusting communication strategies in a multicultural context. Besides respecting cultural diversity, we must endeavor to seek common cultural ground that can reduce misunderstanding and conflict. Moreover, the awareness of 'third culture' should be fostered, meaning to transcend the confines of native and foreign cultures and consider cultural idiosyncrasies from a more open and inclusive perspective, thus facilitating more cultural exchanges and assimilation. Taking the conflict between Billi and her uncle in the movie as an example, if both sides could enhance their awareness and understanding of each other's cultures, they could effectively resolve conflicts and achieve more harmonious cross-cultural communication.

### 4.3. Improving Cultural Adaptability

In the context of an interconnected multicultural world, the improvement of cultural adaptability has become particularly critical. To that end, it is imperative that we proactively delve into the mindsets and communication habits of diverse cultures, free from the constraints of our entrenched cognitive models. Strengthening cultural exchanges empowers us to consciously adjust our conduct during interactions and adopt flexible approaches rather than sidestepping differences. For instance, Billi transformed from refusal to change herself to gradual accommodation when she faced the clash of Chinese and American cultures. Initially firm in her American individualism, her deepening understanding of Chinese culture led her to increasingly identify with and adapt to collectivist values, as reflected in her change in attitude towards her family and her grandmother. This transformation underscores the necessity of flexible choice and adjustment of our cultural stance and conduct across

different cultural backdrops. By reinforcing our cultural adaptability training, we can more effectively address the challenges in cross-cultural communication and foster harmonious cultural integration.

Cross-cultural communication is an inevitable trend in today's society, where cultural differences lead to significant disparities in thought and behavioral patterns. The film *The Farewell* is merely the tip of the iceberg of heterogeneous cultural conflicts. Lulu Wang's *The Farewell* is similar in style to Ang Lee's *Pushing Hands*, *Eat Drink Man Woman* and *The Wedding Banquet*; both endeavor to construct an imagined world where Eastern and Western values can coexist; "family culture" and "patriarchal culture" represent the common themes of the conflicts between Chinese and Western cultures; both strive to blend the essence and the flaws of both cultures from the perspective of cultural differences, presenting a new concept of culture that differs from traditional Chinese and Western ones. In other words, they aim to respect family ethics while simultaneously allowing for independence and personal fulfillment.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on Hofstede's cultural dimensions, this paper delves into the differences in the Chinese and Western concepts of face in the American film *The Farewell* in terms of Individualism and Collectivism, Power Distance, and Short-term Orientation and Long-term Orientation. The findings are as follows: Firstly, individualistic cultures place more emphasis on individual self-expression and independence, while collectivist cultures prioritize collective interests and image. Consequently, Individualistic Americans focus more on the negative face, reflecting the independent facet of face, whereas Chinese, influenced by collectivism, are more concerned with the positive face, highlighting the participatory facet of face. Secondly, in the American culture with low power distance, individuals emphasize equality and mutual respect, showing a tendency towards a solidarity face system. In contrast, Chinese in the culture characterized by high power distance are more inclined towards maintaining a deference face system. Lastly, in the short-term-oriented American culture, individuals seek immediate social recognition and respect by protecting their negative face; while in the long-term-oriented Chinese culture, there is a greater emphasis on the maintenance of others' positive face to avoid negative social evaluation or loss of respect. In light of these findings, this paper offers strategies for Sino-American cross-cultural communication: fostering personal inclusivity and promoting the understanding of and respect for diverse cultures; improving the ability to recognize heterogeneous cultures for an open and inclusive communication atmosphere to encourage participants to express their cultural characteristics and viewpoints during communication. Meanwhile, it is necessary to respect cultural differences and avoid discrimination or bias against other cultures; flexibly applying cultural adaptation strategies, which means adjusting communication methods and strategies according to the needs and habits of people from different cultural backgrounds, to meet the communication demands in diverse cultural environments, thereby achieving cultural integration, exchanges as well as mutual understanding.

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