

A Comparative Analysis of Chinese and American Family Structure Based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory

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Abstract: This article is based on Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions and constructs a comparative analysis framework that includes dimensions such as cultural roots, intergenerational relationships, and surname culture. It systematically examines the differences in family structure and cultural logic between China and America. The study selected four core dimensions of individualism/collectivism, power distance, long-term orientation/short-term orientation, and restraint/indulgence for comparative analysis, and found that: 1) Chinese families exhibit high collectivism, high power distance, long-term orientation, and restraint characteristics. Their extended family structure emphasizes the overall interests and ethical order of the family, and intergenerational relationships form a "feedback style" symbiotic model. Surname culture reflects patrilineal kinship identity, which is deeply related to cultural genes such as Confucianism's "filial piety and brotherly love" and "family state homogeneity". 2) American families exhibit typical individualism, low power distance, short-term orientation, and indulgence characteristics, while the core family structure highlights individual independence, and intergenerational relationships present a "contractual style". The interactive mode and surname culture reflect the identity mobility of immigrant society, and its cultural roots can be traced back to Puritan ethics, Enlightenment ideas, and liberal traditions. This study innovatively introduces film and television texts such as "Family with Children" and "Modern Family" for case verification. Through cross-cultural comparisons of parent-child interaction, educational philosophy, and family decision-making, it empirically examines the mechanism by which cultural dimensions shape family structure. The ultimate framework for explaining the cultural gene determinism is proposed, which points out that in the context of globalization, the Chinese and American family models should achieve complementary development through cultural dialogue, which has important implications for promoting cross-cultural understanding and constructing new family ethics.

1. Introduction

1.1 Research Background

With the deepening development of globalization, international exchanges and cooperation have become increasingly frequent, and collisions and blends between cultures have become an inevitable phenomenon. The exchange of different cultures not only brings about rich collisions of ideas and concepts, but also puts higher demands on people's cross-cultural communication skills.[1] This requires us to analyze the differences in family structures between different countries from different perspectives, and Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, as one of the important cross-cultural theories, is of great help in studying the similarities and differences between different cultures in China and the United States.

1.2 Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory

Since its proposal in 1980, Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions has undergone multiple revisions and expansions, and has become a core analytical tool in the field of cross-cultural research. The Hofstede cultural dimension model includes individualism and collectivism, masculine culture and feminine culture, power gap, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation and short-term orientation, self indulgence and restraint. Hofstede's cultural dimension theory suggests that humans will habitually think, feel, and act based on their existing experiences, and also explains that the thoughts, feelings, and actions of people in one country can differ greatly from those of people in another country when dealing with the most basic social issues.[2]

1.3 Research Objective and Significance

This paper aims to apply Hofstede's cultural dimension theory to analyze the differences in family structure between China and America, and explore how cultural values affect family structure. This paper applies Hofstede's cultural dimension theory to the study of family structure, expanding the scope of its application and enriching the theoretical perspective of cross-cultural family research. The practical significance is that study helps to enhance understanding of the differences in family structure between China and the United States, promote cross-cultural communication and understanding, and provide reference for relevant policy formulation. This essay also can provide guidance for cross-cultural families, helping them better adapt to cultural differences and build harmonious.

2. A Brief Introduction of Sino-US Family Structure

The family is the core of any culture and also the smallest cell that constitutes society. The internal structural framework of a family reflects its core orientation of civilization, as well as its core values of civilization.

2.1 Chinese Family Structure

The family structure in China is very tight, mainly reflected in the mortise and tenon structure. It reflects the Chinese nation's philosophy of pursuing harmony, balance and stability. It is a part of China's excellent traditional culture and has a profound impact on Chinese people's thinking mode and behavior mode.[3]The mortise and tenon structure is a commonly used structural style in traditional Chinese architecture, which refers to the combination of wood tenons and mortise and

tenons to form a solid structure by assembling parts into a whole. The core point is the interlocking relationship between components, and the position where two or more components are interlocked is generally located at the turning point or intersection between two components. The intersection formed by them relies on the combination of implicit components to satisfy the connection between explicit components, and this complementary relationship between implicit and explicit is also a manifestation of the Yin Yang hexagrams.[4] The design of the "yin-yang tenon" in the mortise and tenon structure corresponds precisely to the intergenerational relationships in Chinese families. Father's generation is like a tenon, bearing the rigid responsibility of supporting the framework in the family structure; The younger generation is like a pair of eyes, just like the structure of Chinese genealogy. Through inheritance and inclusiveness, the integrity of the structure is achieved, and there are layers of interlocking between generations, with each link tightly connected and inseparable. These family structures are then combined one by one to form the "mortise and tenon connection" of the Chinese family structure. The role and influence in the formation and survival of ethnic interlocking communities. The core of the traditional cultural concept of mortise and tenon joints lies in the independent existence and mutual support of each element, forming a stable and harmonious whole.[4]

2.2 American Family Structure

The family structure in America is relatively loose, more like a networked structure: an equal network with contractual spirit as nodes and individual rights as links. Individualism is at the core of American culture and is also deeply imprinted on the way Americans think, that is, family members maintain ties through emotional ties rather than obligations and responsibilities.[5] Of course, it cannot form close relationships between members within the family structure like in China. The traditional architectural structure of America is a product of a multicultural "melting pot", from European imitations during the colonial period to innovative local styles, essentially reflecting social power, economic resources, and cultural ideals. From collective survival in colonial times to the diverse choices of modern individuals, architecture has always responded to the changing needs of the basic unit of "family", while also shaping people's lifestyles and identity. This structural difference is essentially a tangible manifestation of cultural roots.

3. Methodology

3.1 Research Design

This study adopts qualitative research using Hofstede's Dimension Theory and constructs a comprehensive comparative analysis framework based on cultural dimensions. In terms of case selection, the Chinese TV series *Home with Kids* and the American TV series *Modern Family* are chosen for their strong representativeness and timeliness: *Home with Kids*, as a classic Chinese family sitcom, vividly reflects the typical features of contemporary Chinese families under the influence of traditional culture, such as collectivist values, intergenerational cohabitation patterns, and parental authority, which are widely recognized by audiences across generations. *Modern Family*, an award-winning American drama, showcases diverse modern American family structures and embodies individualism, low power distance, and emphasis on personal freedom, representing the mainstream values and family trends in contemporary U.S. society.

Through these cases, the study empirically analyzes the micro-level manifestations of cultural dimensions in family interactions, educational concepts, and decision-making processes, providing intuitive and authentic support for theoretical analysis.

3.2 Data Collection

Data collection in this study conducts in-depth analysis of film and television texts through comparative analyzing and quantitative statistics, as detailed below:

In *Home with Kids*, the study uses some plot segments, such as parents intervening in children's hobbies, discussions on college entrance examination volunteering, and more than 400 pieces of character dialogue are selected. The focus is on phenomena such as the suppression of individual will by family decisions under collectivist culture and the unchallengeable parental authority resulting from high power distance. These are empirically analyzed through responsibility-driven discourse in dialogues and behavioral control to demonstrate the influence of cultural dimensions.

In *Modern Family*, the study used several key scenes, such as Alex insisting on applying to MIT, Manny pursuing his dream of drama, and approximately 350 dialogue samples are extracted. The analysis emphasizes the respect for personal choices under individualistic values and the equal negotiation model in low power distance culture, as well as the manifestation of contractual spirit through surname blending.

Through the quantitative analysis of plots and dialogues, the research verifies the shaping mechanism of cultural dimensions on family structures from the micro-level of interactions, achieving an empirical connection between the theoretical framework and film/television cases.

4. Comparative Analysis

4.1 Cultural Roots and Family Values

Cultural roots refer to the core values, belief systems, traditions, behavioral patterns, and social structures formed by a nation or society through long-term historical evolution, which are deeply embedded in the collective consciousness. Shaped by factors such as philosophical ideas, religious institutions, and geographical environments, this system profoundly influences the cognitive styles, interpersonal interaction models, and social system construction of individuals within that culture.

Confucian culture, as the core of traditional Chinese culture, has had a profound impact on the formation and evolution of Chinese family structures. Firstly, Confucianism emphasizes the concept of "family harmony" as the foundation for governing the country and pacifying the world, and advocates for the "four generations under one roof" model of large families. In traditional society, the family structure of multiple generations living together is considered an ideal form, where parents have absolute authority and family members are required to obey the hierarchical order of "father as son". This structure strengthens the cohesion within the family. Confucian culture emphasizes filial piety and the obligation to support. Filial piety "is the core of Confucian ethics, and children need to" raise, die, and bury "their parents. Secondly, in terms of gender roles and family division of labor, Confucian culture advocates for male superiority and female inferiority, and "male leads the outside, female leads the inside". Confucianism emphasizes the "Three Obediences and Four Virtues", and women are given subordinate status. The division of labor in the family is characterized by male dominance in economic production and female responsibility for household chores and child rearing. In terms of educational and family values, Confucian culture emphasizes education as the core task of the family, and the Confucian concept of "learning well leads to officialdom" promotes families to view education as the key to changing their destiny. Meanwhile, Confucian culture advocates for "collectivism and individual sacrifice". Confucianism emphasizes the obedience of individual interests to the overall interests of the family.

In addition to Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism also have a profound influence on traditional Chinese thinking patterns. Founded by Laozi, Taoism, as a native religious and philosophical system in China, has had a unique impact on the formation and operation of Chinese

family structures through its core concepts such as "natural non-action," "harmony of yin and yang," and "cultivation of life and nature." Unlike Confucianism, which emphasizes hierarchical order, Taoism places greater emphasis on the natural harmony of family relationships and the realization of individual life values.

Buddhism originated in India and was later introduced to China. Buddhist culture gradually merged with Confucianism and Taoism in China during the Han Dynasty, forming a unique Chinese Buddhist system. It has also had a great impact on traditional Chinese cultural thought. Its core concepts, such as "cause and effect reincarnation," "equality of all beings," compassion and altruism, "have an impact on the structure of Chinese families that is different from the ethical norms of Confucianism and the natural philosophy of Taoism. Instead, it permeates multiple levels of family life through religious practice, reshaping the concept of life and death, and supplementing family ethics. Buddhism emphasizes the cycle of karma and believes that individual behavior affects both the present and the next life. This concept reinforces the obligation of mutual assistance among family members, such as parents doing good deeds to accumulate virtue for their children, and children supporting their parents in return for the "grace of life". The simple folk belief of 'good will be rewarded' is often combined with the Buddhist concept of causality, becoming a supplement to family ethics. The influence of Buddhism on Chinese family structure presents a "flexible embedding" feature: it does not directly construct institutional norms, but deeply participates in family life by reshaping the concept of life and death, supplementing ethical dimensions, providing religious rituals. In contemporary times, Buddhist culture is integrating into Chinese families in new forms such as "spiritual healing" and "ecological family", becoming an important buffer zone between traditional family ethics and modern individual consciousness. This cultural pattern of the "trinity of Confucianism, Buddhism, and Taoism" constitutes the spiritual foundation of the diverse and resilient roots of Chinese family culture.

The family structure in the United States is a product of the interweaving of multiple cultural genes, involving various factors such as history, religion, immigration, values, and social changes. Among them, liberalism, individualism, Protestant Ethic, and Enlightenment constitute the core ideological framework. The individualistic ideology in the United States is a core component of American culture, and its formation has been deeply influenced by the Puritan movement, European culture, and Christian culture.[6] The earliest cultural roots of American families can be traced back to the British tradition of Puritanism and Enlightenment ideas, which were part of the European colonial heritage. Puritan ethics regards the family as the cornerstone of a moral community. Within the family structure, each member strictly abides by religious rules and regulations. Puritanism sanctifies gender roles. Puritan ethics position wives as "devout assistants" and oppose extramarital sex, making the family a fortress against secular decadence.

The Enlightenment movement in 18th century Europe, especially the ideas of philosophers such as Locke, Rousseau, and Montesquieu, profoundly influenced the founding philosophy of the United States, emphasizing rationality, freedom, democracy, and natural rights, and became the philosophical foundation of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution. The Enlightenment movement advocated individual rationality and natural rights, challenging the Puritan view of the sacred family. In the subsequent development, it gradually evolved into individualism and liberalism in American culture. Meanwhile, religious beliefs have also had a profound impact on the cultural roots of the United States. Due to the fact that the United States is a cultural "melting pot" country, the ancestors of American family members may have come from various corners of the world, and their religions are also diverse. America has sanctified its founding principles of freedom and democracy, forming a "national faith" that transcends specific religious sects, reflected in patriotic ceremonies, presidential oaths, and other occasions. It is called Civil Religion. Liberalism and individualism have enabled individuals to have more choices,

leading to a shift in the family structure of the United States from a single to a diverse one. However, they have also brought about issues such as decreased stability and weakened intergenerational support. This process is essentially an eternal dialectical process of individual liberation and social integration in the modernization process. The family is no longer a fixed system, but a continuously evolving dynamic network of relationships.

4.2 Intergenerational Relationships

Intergenerational relationships are enduring connections between individuals or groups from distinct age cohorts or generations, characterized by interactions that bridge generational divides. These relationships encompass social, emotional, cultural, and economic exchanges, fostering mutual influence, shared responsibilities, and collective identity across generations. The impact of the differences in intergenerational relationships between Chinese and American families on family structure is mainly reflected in multiple aspects such as cultural values, intergenerational support models, housing arrangements, and social systems.

Intergenerational relationships are the axis of Chinese family relationships, maintaining the continuity of the family. Intergenerational relationships are formed through reproductive behavior, and as the offspring start their own families and careers, intergenerational relationships expand from the father son relationship within the nuclear family to the relationship between the mother family and the child family. In traditional family structures, the mother-in-law daughter-in-law relationship, as well as horizontal spousal and sibling relationships, are attached to the father son relationship. Therefore, "father son unity" is the core of family ethics, shaping the ethical trajectory of intergenerational interaction.[7] In intergenerational relationships dominated by the father son axis, the nuclear family needs to obey and expand the overall interests of the family. In the process of family continuity, intergenerational interaction includes two dimensions: upward and downward. The father nurtures the child, the child supports the father, and nurtures the grandson. This forms an ethical track of intergenerational succession, which is reflected as an intergenerational interaction process that runs through the life course of family members.[7] Intergenerational mutual assistance has been passed down in the Chinese family structure to this day, effectively maintaining the family structure and tightly linking each member of the family together. The intergenerational economic mutual assistance in Chinese family structure presents a "chain like" feature - parents provide their children with down payment for their marriage house and childcare funds, while their children "feed back" in the form of alimony, shared housing, etc., forming a close economic dependence. If parents provide economic support for their children and their children assume the responsibility of supporting them as adults, a close intergenerational bond is formed. Chinese families have a symbolic tradition of having multiple generations living together. The traditional family structure is based on the ideal of "four generations living together", and intergenerational cohabitation is seen as a manifestation of family harmony.

The American family structure is characterized by individualism and independence. Using Hofstede's cultural dimension theory to analyze American family structure, it is evident that individualism and intergenerational relationships within families are very loose. When children become economically independent as adults. The relationship between parents and children emphasizes equality and a sense of boundaries, and although emotional bonds exist, economic and life independence is strong. The intergenerational relationships in the American family structure are more characterized by a "contractual" approach, with parents and children placing greater emphasis on a "sense of boundaries" in their economic and emotional support. The intergenerational economic support in the American family structure is mostly "temporal," with children becoming self-sufficient as adults and clear economic boundaries between families, resulting in less long-term

binding. Intergenerational mutual assistance is often phased rather than lifelong responsibility. American families do not require close intergenerational connections, they are more like independent individuals existing in the family structure. For example, elderly people in American families generally do not require to live with their children in old age. They rely more on social security rather than child support, and have lower intergenerational housing needs.

Chinese culture tightly connects multiple generations through ethics, institutions, and economic chains, forming an "intergenerational symbiotic" family structure; the United States, on the other hand, has constructed an "intergenerational independent" family model due to individualization orientation and policy environment.

4.3 Symbolic Relationship

From the Yellow River civilization to the New World of North America, the division of surname cultures is like a prism, reflecting the essential differences in the genes of Chinese and American civilizations. This difference not only stays at the symbolic level, but also shapes vastly different family ethics and social structures in thousands of years of historical accumulation. When China's patriarchal system meets the immigrant culture of the United States, the two present a profound cultural dialogue in terms of blood identity, power relations, and intergenerational inheritance.

Firstly, the cultural origins of surnames in Chinese and American families are different. The culture of Chinese surnames is rooted in the soil of agricultural civilization. Since the establishment of the patriarchal system in the Zhou Dynasty, surnames have become a blood bond connecting the ancestral spirits of heaven and earth. The character "surname" in oracle bone inscriptions is adjacent to "female", implying the legacy of matrilineal clans. Later, with the strengthening of the patriarchal system, it gradually evolved into an ethical symbol of "separate marriage and clear lineage". In the Zuo Zhuan, it is recorded that "the emperor established virtue and was given a surname because of his birth", and surnames became the sacred carrier of the legitimacy of power. This cultural gene continues to this day: even though modern laws allow children to freely choose their surnames, the vast majority of families still instinctively follow the tradition of their father's surname, as if there is a collective memory of "prudence in death and pursuit of the distant future" flowing in their blood. The Chinese people's "emphasis on family names rather than names" reflects the value orientation of Chinese cultural collectivism. The Chinese names are in the order of family names first, family names last, family names represent "inner groups" - a family, and names represent individuals. This order of names illustrates the value orientation of Chinese culture: putting the interests of the internal group first and prioritizing collective interests over individual interests.[8] On the other hand, in America its surname system is like a footnote to an immigration epic. The surnames of European colonizers underwent spelling variations during transoceanic migration (such as Schmidt becoming Smith), African slaves were forced to accept their masters' surnames, and the names of Asian immigrants were truncated and reorganized during the process of Anglicization. This multi collision has spawned the world's most complex surname ecosystem - the number of surnames recorded by the US Census Bureau exceeds 5 million. The emphasis on given names over surnames among British and American people reflects the individualistic values of British and American culture. The order of English names before surnames indicates the value orientation of British and American culture: individual rights, individual freedom, and individual dignity should be higher than the interests of the "inner group". English surnames are more numerous than surnames.[8]

Surnames are no longer symbols of blood ties, but words used by individuals to reshape their identity: new immigrants often accelerate cultural integration by changing their surnames, artists use alternative surnames to promote individuality, and women retain their original surnames in marriage as a declaration of independence. This liquidity trait often leads to a "cultural mosaic"

phenomenon of three generations of different surnames in American families.

Secondly, the methods of recording surname culture are different. The "Book and Literature" policy of the Qin Dynasty incorporated the surname system into the national governance system, forming a strict structure of "surnames are used to unify the system, and clans are used to distinguish between high and low status". This tradition was elevated to a legal norm in the "Tang Law Commentary": "Descendants shall inherit the surname of their father and ancestors, and shall not change it without authorization. Even though the contemporary Civil Code allows for the selection of dual surnames, the combination of "father surname+mother surname" still dominates in practice, reflecting the flexible infiltration of patriarchal concepts into modern systems. The difference between the Americans and the Chinese is that the naming custom of the British and Americans is to directly use other people's names as their own names. Directly using the names of one's parents or grandparents is a common way of naming in the UK and the US. American surnames do not represent blood ties but only personal symbols. California's Family Law allows couples to freely combine and create new surnames, giving rise to the professional name design industry. This institutional design implies the Puritan spirit of contract: surnames are not a legacy given by ancestors, but a contract between individuals and society.

In conclusion, China's Surnames rooted in patriarchal kinship, Chinese surnames serve as symbols of collective identity and lineage continuity. In contrast, American surnames prioritize personal mobility and contractual identity. This contrast reveals: Chinese surnames reinforce hierarchical clan structures under collectivism, while American surnames embody individual freedom and contractual relationships, aligning with low power distance and individualistic values.

4.4 Case Study

Home with Kid and *Modern Family* are two typical family scenario dramas that fully reflect the parent-child relationship between Chinese and American families. The sitcom *Home with Kid* mainly tells the interesting events that happen between parents and their three children after two divorced families reunite, which has resonated with a large number of Chinese audiences. The narrative objects of *Modern Family* are three closely connected yet distinct families - a family of three consisting of ordinary parents and three children, a same-sex couple and an adopted Vietnamese daughter, and a family of three consisting of an old man in his sixties who marries a young Colombian girl and his stepson. The three unique and typical families selected in the drama showcase the rich and diverse daily lives between parents and children in the context of the melting pot in America.

In the Chinese sitcom *Home with Kids*, It firstly reflects that China's cultural roots are rooted in the tradition of collectivism. The combination of Xia Donghai and Liu Mei in the restructuring of the family always takes family harmony as the highest goal, emphasizing mutual assistance and sacrifice among members, and children need to obey their parents' arrangements. For example, Liu Xing wanted to join the school basketball team, but his mother Liu Mei believed it would "affect his studies" and forcibly confiscated the basketball and enrolled him in a math tutoring class. Liu Xing protested, 'Can't I have my own hobbies?' Liu Mei replied, 'This family is not yours alone!' This reflects the collective goal of suppressing individual will. Secondly, in terms of intergenerational relationships, Chinese families exhibit high power distance. In a culture of high power distance, parental authority cannot be challenged. For example, Liu Mei's 'dining table rules'. At the dining table, children must wait for their elders to use chopsticks before eating, and cannot interrupt at will, reflecting strict hierarchical order. Thirdly, in terms of surname culture, Surname is the core symbol of family inheritance. In the drama, the children who restructure their families still retain their original surnames, emphasizing blood ties and clan identity, reflecting the long-term cultural

emphasis on "family continuity" For example, after Xia Donghai remarried Liu Mei, their three children still retained their original surnames "Xia" and "Liu". This reflects the family responsibility carried by the patrilineal surname.

In contrast, in the American TV series *Modern Family*, a Firstly, it embodies the individualistic characteristics of American culture. In the drama, there are three families that emphasize individual independence and freedom of choice. Family members often focus on "self-expression", and children's decisions are more based on personal interests rather than family pressure. For example, Alex, as a top student, insists on choosing the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, which is far away from the family. Although his parents Claire and Phil have concerns, they ultimately respect her decision. Claire said, 'This is your life, we can only support you.' This reflects the priority of personal choice. Secondly, American families exhibit low power distance, and in a culture of low power distance, intergenerational relationships are more equal. For example, Haley was expelled from community college due to poor grades, and her parents. Thirdly, American family surnames better reflect individual identity. For example, Gloria and her ex-husband's son Manny took their mother's surname, while Mitchell and Cameron adopted Lily's surname "Tucker Pritchett", blending both surnames to demonstrate equality and reflect the individualistic culture's pursuit of "self-expression".

Home with Kid reflects the high power distance, collectivism, and long-term orientation of Chinese culture through details such as compulsory obedience, surname retention, and gender division of labor; *Modern Family* showcases the low power distance, individualism, and short-term orientation of American culture through plots such as equal negotiation, compound surnames, and character mobility. This comparison not only confirms Hofstede's theoretical framework, but also reveals how cultural differences permeate into family life through daily interactions, naming details, and even household chores, becoming a "microscope" for cross-cultural understanding.

5. Conclusion

Geert Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions provides a significant theoretical framework for cross-cultural research, which profoundly influences family structures, educational beliefs, and parent-child relationships in different cultural contexts. Hofstede's cultural dimension theory provides a systematic framework for interpreting the differences between Chinese and American families. The collectivism, high power distance, and long-term orientation of Chinese families have shaped an education model that emphasizes obedience and stability, while the individualism, low power distance, and short-term orientation of American families have given rise to educational concepts that focus on independence and innovation. Both models have their own advantages and disadvantages, and future family education needs to complement each other in cultural consciousness: China needs to increase attention to individual mental health, and the United States should strengthen family ties and social responsibility education. Only in this way can we cultivate a new generation that combines cultural adaptability and identity recognition in the era of globalization.

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