Cultural Values of Chinese Americans Portrayed in the Film 'The Farewell' (2019)

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ABSTRACT

This study investigates the portrayal of Chinese American and Mainland Chinese cultural values in the media, focusing on the movie 'The Farewell' (2019). Cultural stereotypes persist in today's society, shaping perceptions of different cultures. Despite their shared Chinese heritage, the film portrays the Chinese American and Mainland Chinese characters differently in terms of their values. The study adapts Hofstede's (2011) cultural dimension theory to analyse the data. Through a qualitative content analysis, the study intends to identify the cultural values of Chinese and American cultures. The purpose of this study is to identify and compare the differences in the cultural values held by Chinese American and Mainland Chinese characters in the film 'The Farewell'. There is a significant difference in the power distance between Chinese Americans and Mainland Chinese, while the uncertainty avoidance index shows that both Chinese Americans and Mainland Chinese share similar low levels of uncertainty avoidance. The implications of the study extend to promoting cultural sensitivity, fostering intercultural dialogue, and influencing future research and media practices to create more inclusive and accurate portrayals of cultural values in cinematic narratives

Keywords: intercultural, cultural values, communication

INTRODUCTION

A society uses its shared principles, worldviews, and customs to identify itself as a whole. Culture is crucial to establishing and upholding social order; it affects how one interprets the world and their place in it while influencing their behaviours and social experiences. (Cronk, 2017). Culture is the culmination of all of humanity's learnt behaviours, which are typically transmitted from one generation to the next (McMahon, 2023).

Over the years, the media, in particular, has greatly generalised and stereotyped Chinese culture. Ye (2022) highlights how mainstream media perpetuates harmful stereotypes and whitewashes Chinese culture, particularly through misrepresentations in popular films. The media's portrayal of both Chinese Americans and Mainland Chinese cultural values significantly influences how Chinese cultural values are perceived globally. Cultural stereotypes are still very much alive and prevalent in today's society. Stereotypes are frequently used in films and television shows to simplify complex cultural norms and reinforce prejudicial opinions. The media continues to portray them with little nuance and accuracy.

The 2019 film "The Farewell" by Lulu Wang brought to light some of the cultural values shared between Mainland Chinese and Chinese American characters. The film allows viewers to discern the similarities and distinctions between the two cultures, as well as the cross-cultural experience that is exemplified by their interactions. Ideally, an accurate portrayal of the Chinese cultural values by the media would promote cultural awareness regarding other cultures and produce culturally competent viewers.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Chinese culture has undergone rapid and intensive transformation and continues to evolve within the modern world. Today, China is increasingly visible on the global stage, yet its social behaviour remains closely regulated, and aspects of its culture still reflect the country's feudal past (Scroope & Evason, 2017). Collectivism is central

to Chinese culture, where individuals are encouraged to uphold family values and attitudes, believing that devotion to one's family ensures protection and solidarity. Relationships are highly valued, as the culture places strong emphasis on harmony and unity.

In contrast, Evason (2021) states that Americans possess a strong sense of individualism and are firmly committed to upholding deeply rooted social, religious, political, and economic ideals such as liberty, personal responsibility, and democracy. Historically, the notion of cultural assimilation has been especially influential, with immigrants expected to become "Americans" by adopting and sustaining American values and cultural norms. In recent years, as racial and ethnic diversity has become more visible, there has been a marked increase in multi-ethnic familiarity, tolerance, awareness, and acceptance. When examining the cultural values of Mainland Chinese and Chinese Americans, it is essential to consider the influence of culture on communication patterns. Cultural norms, beliefs, and values strongly shape communication styles, which in turn affect a wide range of interpersonal interactions (Harrin, 2022).

Yu (2023) concentrates on the cross-cultural communication strategy that the characters in the film "The Farewell" encounter. The investigation implements Lasswell's communication theory paradigm (1948). The study exclusively examines the extent of cross-cultural communication in American and Chinese films. Industry demands frequently influence cross-cultural communication in film. This distortion has the potential to perpetuate societal prejudices and lead to cultural misinterpretation.

Nuandini and Kustantinah (2022) focus on the cultural shock found in the movie 'The Farewell' and its implications for the characters. They examined the characters' responses to the various forms of culture shock depicted in the film. They looked at Billy Wang's experiences with cultural ethics and values and how they differed between Chinese and American cultures. Without a character-level study, comprehension of the manifestation of cultural values in interpersonal relationships remains superficial. This discrepancy limits media studies' ability to improve intercultural competency and cultural psychology.

Wei (2022) focuses on the traditional representation of values in American and Chinese films, as well as the distinctions between Eastern and Western values. The findings revealed the concealed meanings of various values, which are depicted from various perspectives through implicit and subliminal storylines, using films as a lens. It is essential to be aware of the differences in values, opinions, and attitudes when communicating with individuals from these diverse cultural and social backgrounds. (Kumbakonam, 2016).

Theoretical Framework

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (2011) serves as the framework for the examination of the cultural values embodied by Mainland Chinese characters and Chinese Americans in this study. Table 1 displays Hofstede's six cultural dimensions—power distance, individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity versus femininity, long-term versus short-term orientation, and indulgence versus restraint—influence communication and behaviour patterns, providing insights into how cultural values influence cross-cultural relationships.

Table 1: Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (2011)

Power Distance	The power distance index measures how much weaker members of a society accept inequality of power.
Masculinity and Femininity	The masculinity and femininity index examines how highly a society regards traditional gender roles for men and women.
Individualism and Collectivism	In individualistic societies, success and individual rights are highly valued, and self-interest is given priority.
Uncertainty Avoidance	The uncertainty avoidance index examines how well-tolerated uncertainty and ambiguity are in a society.

Long-Term and Short-Term Orientation	The Long-Term and Short-term Orientation index is to measure which cultures favour postponing gratification or the material, social, and emotional demands of their people.
Restraint and Indulgence	The degree to which a society indulges its desires is taken into account in the indulgence and restraint dimension.

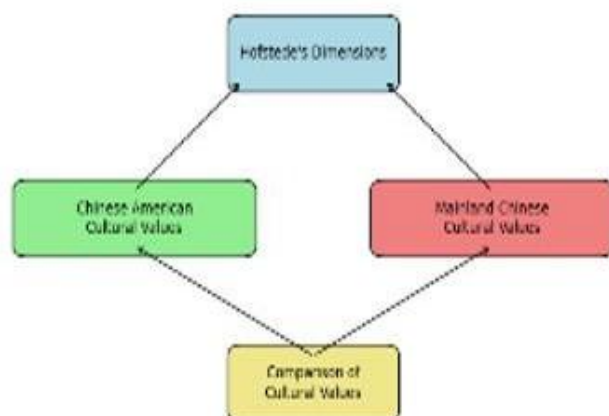Conceptual Framework utilising Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (2011)

Table 2: Conceptual Framework

Table 2 illustrates the conceptual framework for this study. A comparative analysis follows the appraisal of each cultural group, which is guided by Hofstede's theory. This analysis serves to support the research objectives of understanding the representation of cultural values among Chinese Americans and Mainland Chinese characters in the film. This conceptual framework relates to the perception of cultures and the varying values held by different cultures. It is crucial to approach this framework critically and use it as an instrument for analysing cultural tendencies, while appreciating the diversity and complexity of human cultures. The theory places a strong emphasis on comprehending and appreciating cultural variations, acknowledging that values may differ across countries.

METHODOLOGY

The researcher employs qualitative content analysis to collect data for this study. Building on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory (2011) as the guiding framework, the coding themes are structured according to Alan Bryman's four-phase analysis (Bryman, 2012). This approach aims to examine the portrayal of Chinese American and Mainland Chinese cultural values in the media, with a focus on the film The Farewell (2019). The data will be organised based on the coding guidelines and coding schemes outlined in Table 3.

Table 3**:** Coding Guidelines adopted from Byrman's (2012)

Cultural Dimensions	**Coding scheme for (Chinese American & Mainland Chinese)**
Power Distance Index	PD
Collectivism and Individualism	IC
Uncertainty Avoidance Index	UA
Femininity and Masculinity	MS
Short-Term and Long-Term Orientation	LTST
Restraint and Indulgence	RI

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 4: Data Analysis

Cultural Dimensions	Chinese American	Mainland Chinese
Power Distance Index	Low	High
Collectivism and Individualism	Individualism	Collectivism
Uncertainty Avoidance Index	Low	Low
Femininity and Masculinity	Masculinity	Masculinity
Short-Term and Long-Term Orientation	Short-Term	Long-Term
Restraint and Indulgence	Indulgence	Restraint

Table 4 highlights each of the cultural values of the Chinese Americans and Mainland Chinese based on Hofstede's six cultural dimensions. There is a significant difference in the power distance between Chinese Americans and Mainland Chinese, as American culture is a low power distance culture, and Chinese culture is a high-power distance culture. As for collectivism and individualism, America is an individualistic culture where one's life belongs to one person, while Chinese culture is a collectivistic culture where the well-being of the group is prioritised. The uncertainty avoidance index shows that both Chinese American and Mainland Chinese cultures have similarly low levels of uncertainty avoidance, indicating their tolerance for ambiguity and uncertainty. In addition, both cultures also share the same results in terms of femininity and masculinity, as both Chinese Americans and Mainland Chinese cultures share the same masculine values.

Regarding short-term and long-term orientations, American culture values short-term orientation, where focus is put on the near future, while Chinese culture values long-term orientation, where focus is put on a "long-term basis". Lastly, American culture values indulgence, as it focuses on its current personal satisfaction, while Chinese culture is a restrained culture, as it focuses more on practical needs.

In both Chinese American and Mainland Chinese contexts, "The Farewell" presents a moving portrait of cultural values and provides a detailed analysis of the similarities and differences between these two cultural groups. The movie touches on larger cultural topics that are consistent with Mainland Chinese cultural ideals, even though its main focus is on the experiences of a Chinese American family. Family duties and filial piety are highly valued by both Chinese Americans and Mainland Chinese people. The film emphasises the importance of family in both cultural contexts, as seen by the protagonists' strong feelings of obligation and commitment towards their elders. The film highlights how Chinese Americans and Mainland Chinese have different interpersonal interactions and communication styles. The Mainland Chinese characters in the film frequently use indirect and implicit communication techniques influenced by traditional Chinese cultural values, in contrast to Chinese American characters who might display more direct and clear communication patterns influenced by Western culture. Furthermore, the movie also examines the cultural expectations surrounding illness and death in the contexts of both Mainland Chinese culture and Chinese American culture. Although the film mainly centres on the Chinese American protagonist, Billi, struggling to hide a fatal diagnosis from their grandmother, it also addresses the more general cultural perspectives on illnesses and death, which are shaped by the Confucian ideas in Chinese culture.

In addition, the film explores the intergenerational dynamics and conflicts that exist within Chinese American and Mainland Chinese families. The film emphasises the universal themes of intergenerational conflict in cultural norms between generations, even though the nature of these conflicts may differ between the two cultural contexts. The movie portrays its characters as being torn between their cultural heritage and a sense of belonging as it explores the issues of assimilation and cultural identity in the context of Chinese Americans. The Mainland Chinese characters in the movie depict a more uniform cultural identity moulded by their upbringing in China, whereas Chinese American characters negotiate their dual identities as both Chinese and Americans. The film discusses the cultural ideals of moderation and thrift in the contexts of both Mainland Chinese and Chinese Americans. These ideals influence the actions of the movie's characters, who lead simple lives and are frugal

with their money. Ultimately, the movie offers a sophisticated examination of cultural values in the context of both Mainland China and Chinese Americans, bringing to light the similarities and differences between these two cultures while emphasising the universal themes of communication, family, generational dynamics, and cultural identity.

The findings of the study relate to the three past studies previously analysed. Yu's (2023) study on the cross-cultural communication strategy illustrated by the characters in the movie 'The Farewell' provides a foundation for comprehending the difficulties associated with intercultural communication. The study analyses the cultural values portrayed in the movie and how they influence communication dynamics between Chinese Americans and Mainland Chinese characters. Similarly, Nuandini and Kustantinah's (2022) study on the cultural shock experienced by the protagonist, Billi, in "The Farewell" offers ideas about the challenges of navigating cultural differences. The study examines how cultural values shape the characters' experiences navigating between the two Chinese and American cultures and how they navigate these differences. Furthermore, Wei's (2022) study on the embodied cultures and Eastern and Western values in Chinese and American movies provides a framework for understanding the cultural values portrayed in film.

Overall, the findings of the study complement and expand on related past studies by providing a comprehensive analysis of the cultural values portrayed in 'The Farewell' within the context of cross-cultural communication and intercultural dynamics. These findings provide profound understanding of the complexities of cultural representations in the media and offer insights for future research.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

The portrayal of cultural values in this film eliminates the misconceptions about the Chinese Americans and Mainland Chinese community and provides insightful information about the real-life experiences of Chinese Americans living in America. Viewers can gain insights into Chinese American and Mainland Chinese cultural values as portrayed in the film. This will ignite a sense of appreciation for the two cultures, as well as enhance empathy, foster cross-cultural understanding, and strengthen bonds between people from different cultures.

Furthermore, other cultures can learn from the study's analysis of cultural values to help create more inclusive and culturally aware communities and cultures. People with different backgrounds could foster social cohesion by acknowledging and appreciating other cultures. This entails developing environments, services, and programmes that are culturally responsive to societal differences. In summary, the exploration of cultural values portrayed in this film provides insightful notions for advancement encompassing individuals, groups, institutions, organisations, societies, and cultures.

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