

An Analysis of the Cultural Differences Between China and Spain in "Alcarràs" and "Return to Dust" Based on Hofstede's Theory of Cultural Dimensions

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Abstract: With the development of globalization, the number of cross-cultural studies is increasing, among which the articles that use film as a medium for cross-cultural studies mostly focus on the cultural differences between China and the United States, but there are relatively few articles that studied the cultural differences between China and Spain. Based on Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions, this paper analyzes the differences between China and Spain in five cultural dimensions through a comparative study of "Alcarràs" and "Return to Dust", two films shortlisted for the 2022 Berlin International Film Festival and both portrayed rural lives. The study finds that Chinese and Spanish cultures differ significantly in multiple dimensions, with the most apparent differences in the dimensions of masculinity and femininity, power distance, individualism and collectivism, and the more minor differences in the dimension of uncertainty avoidance between the two cultures. There are also differences between Chinese and Spanish culture in terms of long-term and short-term orientations, although the plot of the two films do not show much of this.

Keywords: theory of cultural dimensions, cross cultural, Chinese culture, Spanish culture

1. Introduction

Film is called the seventh art, according to Kolker, films have emotional and moral designs on us. They ask us to respond with our feelings and to think of the world in moral certainties, and even suggest ethical solutions to the problems of how we should act in the world [1]. To this certain extent, films is a reflection of culture. Therefore, by studying films, we can see the culture hidden behind the camera. The films "Return to Dust" and "Alcarràs" were both nominated for the Golden Bear Award for Best Film at the 72nd Berlin International Film Festival and " Alcarràs " won the Best Film. Since the two films share nearly the same theme and focus on the survival of the peasants at the bottom of society, there is no shortage of critics who compare the two films that were selected for the Berlin International Film Festival at the same time. However, the most significant difference between the two films is the different attitudes and responses of the protagonists in the two films to their harsh lives, which reflects the difference in cultural values between China and Spain. Therefore, the author will start from the five dimensions of Hofstede's cultural theory and study the cultural differences between China and Spain through the comparison of the two films.

2. Theoretical Framework

The Cultural Dimensions Theory is a framework developed by Dutch psychologist Geert Hofstede, which is used to measure cultural differences in different countries. He used to take employees of IBM, a famous multinational company, as the subjects of research. In this research, more than 116,000 questionnaires were distributed in 72 countries in more than 20 different languages. He then incorporated the additions to his theory by scholars such as Mike Peng and finally concluded five dimensions to define those country cultures: 1) power distance; 2) uncertainty avoidance; 3) individualism on the one side versus its opposite, collectivism; 4) Masculinity versus its opposite, femininity; 5) long-term versus short-term orientation [2].

Other cross-cultural monographs lack practical tests and are based more on conjectures and assumptions. Their system of dimensions is also less mature. For example, Edward Twitchell Hall Jr's theory, Condon and Yousef's theory or Peabody's theory. Therefore, Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory has high application value in practice research [3]. Film studies from a cross-cultural perspective also mostly choose Hofstede's cultural theory for the analysis of cultural differences. For example, there are discussions on the differences, exchanges and collisions between Chinese and American cultures from the perspective of different films [4-6]. However, there are relatively few studies that address the cultural differences between China and Spain and are therefore of great research value.

3. Introduction of the Films "Alcarràs" and "Return to Dust"

The film "Return to Dust" is set in a remote rural area of China in 2011. The story is about Cao Guiying, who suffers from urinary disease and is infertile. She is not only at the bottom of the rural marriage market but also disliked by her brother and sister-in-law. In the movie, she was forced to obey her brother and sister-in-law's arrangement to marry Ma Youtie from a neighboring village, even though they did not know each other before. Ma Youtie's two older brothers have both passed away, so he had to live with a donkey in an abandoned and empty house in the village. Another character in the film, the wealthy village grain collector, was sick and needed someone to donate blood. But only Ma Youtie's blood type matched his. In order for the boss to pay back the money owed to the whole village, Ma Youtie donated blood to the boss for free. Then, the village began to demolish vacant houses, Ma Youtie and Guiying had no home to return to and had to build their own houses. The two of them worked hard to build the house and plant the land, and finally, they built a house and had a good harvest. As their life improved daily, they became more dependent on each other. One day, Guiying, who was sick, fell into the river and drowned due to dizziness on her way to find Ma Youtie. Ma Youtie, who lost his wife, lost all hope for a better life, sold all his grain to pay back the money he borrowed and let go of the donkey that had been with him for years.

While the film "Alcarràs" tells the story of a small village in Catalonia, Spain, where the Quimet's family lives on the peaches they pick in their orchard every summer. However, with the death of the owner of their orchard, they face eviction. The owner's heir decided to sell the land, cut down the peach trees, and install solar panels. Faced with an uncertain future, the family begins a "battle" to defend their land, but no matter how hard they try, they ultimately do not escape the fate of all the peach trees being cut down.

4. Comparing Cultural Differences in the Films "Alcarràs" and "Return to Dust" with Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory

4.1. Power Distance

Power distance refers to the degree of acceptance and expectation of unequal power distribution by the disadvantaged members of an organization. High power distance usually means a high degree of acceptance of hierarchical differences caused by power and wealth in that society, and these societies generally tend to maintain hierarchical institutional systems. On the other hand, low power distance refers to a society that does not value hierarchical differences between people caused by wealth or power but emphasizes equality of status and opportunity. Hofstede pointed out that in a high-power distance environment, children are more expected to obey their parents, and sometimes such authority exists even among children, with the younger children obeying the older children. The gap between Chinese and Spanish cultures in terms of this power distance is evident in the film. In the film "Return to Dust", Cao Guiying is mistreated by her brother and sister-in-law because she has a urinary disease, and she cannot make her own choice when faced with marriage. However, when the father in "Alcarràs", Quimet, reprimanded his youngest daughter, Ilis, to stop playing with the tractor, the youngest daughter directly contradicted her father and ran away. When confronted with her father, Quimet also constantly rebukes him for not signing the land deed with the landlord's family in his early years, thus showing that the concept of the elder being the authority does not exist in the Spanish family.

In addition to this, the two cultures react differently when confronted with those who hold power and wealth. In "Return to Dust", Ma Youtie's reaction upon meeting a captain in the village is to stand up immediately from his seat, greet him respectfully, and then get up and take the initiative to see him off when he leaves. In "Alcarràs", however, when the farmers are confronted with the low price of peaches from a large wholesaler, they choose to gather at the large wholesaler to protest, crushing and smashing the peaches and holding up a banner of "fair trade". "Return to Dust" takes place in 2011 in a remote rural area of China, where poor economic conditions and mindsets are uncivilized, thus retaining some of the hierarchical concepts that existed in the old Chinese society. However, in contrast, the Spanish countryside depicted in "Alcarràs" is more culturally inclined to overthrow the hierarchical system and emphasize equality than the remote rural areas of China a decade ago.

4.2. Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance refers to the extent to which members of a given culture feel comfortable (or uncomfortable) in situations that are new, unknown, unusual, and surprising. Societies with substantial uncertainty avoidance view the presence of uncertainty in their lives as a constant threat that must be fought against, fearing ambiguous situations and uncommon risks. In Hofstede's study, both Chinese and Spanish cultures are at a moderately high level of uncertainty avoidance index. However, uncertainty avoidance is somewhat higher in Spain than in China. In both films, the protagonists face the problem of having to leave the land. In the film "Return to Dust", after the implementation of the new policy in the city, Ma Youtie and his wife could buy a house in the city at a low price and go out of the countryside, and they reluctantly go to the city to see the new home under the persuasion of people and media coverage. However, when returning to the countryside to sow seeds in the field, Ma Youtie said, "Where can our feet take us? We're also tied to our land. We can't go anywhere. Tell me, how can a peasant live without land?" From here, it can be seen that this rural couple is uncomfortable with the new and unknown city life and are reluctant to leave the land, yet their attitude toward this new life is not one of complete and resolute resistance, but rather a conservative and, at the same time submissive part.

Nevertheless, the reaction of the people in "Alcarràs" in the face of the impending loss of their land is vital. When the landowner's heir was trying to convince Quimet's father to let Quimet manage the solar panels, Quimet's father's reaction was that "he will burn his fingers". Quimet's response was even more intense; he said, "I am a farmer, not a solar panel operator, and I don't want to learn how to work with panels since I'm already old. " He even said, "I should have drowned you when I was young" to the landowner's heir when he was talking to him kindly.

4.3. Individualism on the One Side versus Its Opposite, Collectivism

Hofstede defines individualism versus collectivism as the degree to which individuals maintain personal independence or integration into a group such as a family. He argues that in an individualistic culture, where values and morals encourage the pursuit of individual achievement, individual rights, and self-independence, people tend to be responsible for themselves and do not need to be dependent on the group, in terms of emotions and other aspects. In contrast, in a collectivist culture, people are more concerned with group interests than individual interests, the group has priority over the individual, and personal identity is based on group membership. According to Hofstede's research, the index of individualism is higher in Spain than in China, and this is more clearly reflected in the two films.

In the movie "Return to Dust", the boss of the grain collection, Zhang Yongfu, is sick and needs a blood transfusion of Rh-negative blood to be cured, and only Ma Youtie in the whole village has the right blood type. At first, Ma Youtie and Cao Guiying were reluctant, and the boss's family took a group of village people to Ma Youtie's house. Ma Youtie was forced to agree to give Zhang Yongfu a blood transfusion for the benefit of the whole village as a "group". There are three blood transfusion scenes in the film, the second time when the boss's family brought a group of village people to meet Ma Youtie again in order to put pressure on Ma Youtie from the "collective interest". The film does not explain how Ma Youtie agreed to take the third blood transfusion but shows that during the transfusion, Ma Youtie had to endure the discomfort and ask the boss's family to give money to the whole village.

On the contrary, in "Alcarràs", when the heir of the landlord decided to cut down the peach trees to install solar panels, the attitude of Quimet's family varies. With Quimet and her father as the "conservatives" resolutely resisting the installation of solar panels, Quimet's sister Nati and her husband went against the collective interests of the family, and her husband Cisco chose to work as a solar operator, for which Quimet and Cisco even had a fight. Similarly, when Quimet, as a father, burned the saplings secretly planted by his son, Roger, Roger chose to vent his anger, ignoring the interests of the family as a group and deliberately changed the water valve back, nearly killing the family's peach trees. This kind of individual choice over the collective decision is difficult to happen in a society with a low index of individualism like China. The foundation of Chinese culture is the agrarian economy, and China's agricultural culture was a world leader for a long time. Due to the backward productivity and scarcity of living materials in the early days, a large, settled community had to adopt a collective production method in order to survive and to unite and help each other. Agrarian culture relied heavily on "collective power", and Chinese culture, influenced by its long history of agricultural culture, emphasized the value of collectivism [7].

4.4. Masculinity versus Its Opposite, Femininity

Masculinity and femininity refer to the distribution of emotional roles between the genders. In general, in societies where the "toughness" of men is dominant, gender roles are clearly differentiated, masculinity is promoted, men are usually dominant and have the power to decide on everything, and work responsibilities are generally considered more important than other responsibilities (e.g., family

responsibilities). According to Hofstede's research, the masculinity index is more potent in China than in Spain, and this is reflected in both films. In the film "Return to Dust," Ma Youtie let Cao Guiying sit on a donkey cart every time he went out and gave his jacket to Cao Guiying for fear that she would be cold. In the married life of Cao Guiying and Ma Youtie, Cao Guiying basically followed Ma Youtie's decisions on everything. When others came to Ma Youtie's house to discuss things, Cao Guiying would walk away and let Ma Youtie to make the decision.

However, in "Alcarràs", when Quimet was leading the black hired workers to pick peaches, Dolors as his wife took the initiative to ask his daughter to help to pick peaches. When Quimet said that he didn't need their help, Dolors' response was to directly ignore her husband's decision and asked her son, Roger, to give her daughter, Mariona, a bucket to help with the picking. What's more, when Quimet and her son, Roger, had a quarrel, Dolors directly slapped both her husband and her son. This act would hardly happen in a society with a high level of masculinity. In addition, there is a scene in "Alcarràs" in which those women were learning to sing, the lyrics of which are "Your father cooks, your mother washes the dishes, and your brother, who is responsible for chopping vegetables". This cultural phenomenon is related to the end of Franco's dictatorship in Spain, the increase in opportunities for women to advance to higher education, and the change in women's values from being family-oriented to no longer wanting to be tied to the family [8]. Such a division of labor in the family is clearly different from the traditional division of labor in Chinese culture, which is a segregation of women and men into different spheres: "outside" for men and "inside" for women (Nan Zhu Wai, Nu Zhu Nei) This culture is also related to the agricultural culture of ancient China, where agricultural fieldwork was considered men's profession and women were engaged in domestic activities such as weaving or spinning [9].

4.5. Long-term versus Short-term Orientation

Long-term versus short-term orientation refers to the degree to which members of a given culture are comfortable with delaying the satisfaction of their material, emotional, and social needs. This dimension essentially reflects the cultural scale of the Eastern perspective or Confucianism. Societies with a long-term orientation look to the future, emphasize long-term commitment, respect tradition, promote frugality, and tend to make long-term plans and investments. In contrast to this, cultures with a short-term orientation are more concerned with immediate benefits and seek immediate results. The film "Return to Dust", which takes place in China, the number one country in the Hofstede study's long-term orientation index, portrays protagonists who strictly follow the values of long-term orientation. For example, when Cao Guiying and Ma Youtie had just gotten married, both of them were poor. In order to make their lives better, they bought seeds on credit from their villagers, borrowed eggs to hatch chicks, and then returned the eggs to the villagers after they had raised the chicks, thus realizing the long-term gains of the chicks from generation to generation. Also, Ma Youtiao's attitude toward donkeys also has a long-term orientation. He was afraid that the donkey would be exhausted if he kept letting the donkey carry heavy things, so he would rather walk on the ground after each farming job than let the donkey carry him, which is also an important reflection of giving up short-term enjoyment for long-term benefits. In "Alcarràs", when everyone was saying that solar panel workers earn more for less work, Quimet's answer was that he was too old to learn, unwilling to learn new techniques and accept new things. The Spanish writer Larra once criticized the Spanish culture of laziness in his article "Vuelva usted mañana", in which he depicted a Spanish worker who delayed receiving an investor who might be beneficial to the Spanish economy because of laziness, which is actually a reflection of the short-term orientation of the Spanish culture [10]. Quimet's attitude towards learning to operate solar panels is the same, which shows that the Spanish culture is more concerned with immediate benefits and unwilling to look for a long-term result.

5. Conclusions

The comparative analysis shows that Chinese and Spanish cultures differ significantly in multiple dimensions. The cultural differences between China and Spain are most evident in the three dimensions of masculinity and femininity, power distance, and individualism and collectivism. The Chinese culture is more masculine, more collectivist and more power-distant, while the Spanish culture is more feminine, more individualistic and less power-distant. Both cultures have a higher degree of uncertainty avoidance, which is reflected in both films. The Spanish culture has a more drastic behavior of uncertainty avoidance, not only because the uncertainty avoidance index is higher in Spain than in China, but also because of the low power distance and individualistic values in Spain. In the film "Alcarràs", the high level of uncertainty avoidance makes the Spanish peasants in Alcarràs feel a sense of resistance against the big wholesalers, and the low power distance at the objective level provides the environment for the Spanish peasants to gather together to protest against the big wholesalers, and the pursuit of individual rights by individualistic values intensifies the intensity of this protest. Therefore, cross-cultural research should consider several relevant dimensions together after analyzing each one of them. Due to the limitations of the film's plot, this paper only briefly discusses the combination of these three dimensions of Spanish culture. Through the analysis of these two films from the same period, the applicability of Hofstede's theory in today's society is confirmed to a certain extent. At the same time, in addition to the objective analysis at the theoretical level, this study helps to enhance the identity and understanding between Chinese and Spanish cultures from the perspective of globalization.

In order to make the cross-cultural study of China and Spain deeper, a deeper multi-dimensional study should be considered. In the dimension of long-term versus short-term orientation, because the film "Alcarràs" is not very clear in its portrayal of the short-term orientation of Spanish culture, it is not possible in this study to compare the content of the film to show the very obvious difference between Chinese and Spanish culture in terms of long-term orientation and short-term orientation, while in Hofstede's study, this difference is pronounced in terms of the index of long-term orientation. In addition, since both films studied in this paper were filmed in remote rural areas, the specific cultures shown in the films may be different from the mainstream culture in China and Spain, and further research should analyze the cultural differences between rural and urban areas in China and Spain.

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