



Introduction

Understanding Culture and Cultural Differences



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Defining “Culture”

The Chinese word “wenhua” (Chinese: 文化) is the translation for the English word “culture”, which appeared in the *Book of Changes* (one of the oldest Chinese classics) in China or earlier. It “took on the main meaning of cultivation or tending... though with subsidiary medieval meanings of honor and worship” (Williams, 2015: 49). In 1926 and 1927, Liang Qichao expressed his view of “wenhua” in the *Research Method on Chinese History*. He pointed out that “wenhua” had two meanings: In the broad sense it included politics and economy, while in the narrow sense it referred only to the important factors in human activities, such as language, words, religion, literature, fine arts, science, history, and philosophy (as cited in Huang, 2006). According to Huang (2006), this definition is a mark of the formation of the modern concept of “wenhua” in China.

The English word “culture”, derived from the Latin root *colere* (to inhabit, nurture, or respect) and the Latin word “cultūra” (cultivating or agriculture), carries various meanings in different contexts. Gustav F. Klemm, an influential German ethnographer and the founder of anthropology, proposed that culture consists of customs, information, skills, family and public life in peace and war, religions, sciences, and arts. He was considered the first scholar to endow culture with an anthropological and ethnographical meaning (as cited in Xiao, 2012). English anthropologist Edward B. Tylor also used the term “culture” in his book, *Primitive Culture*, published in 1871. Tylor noted that “culture” is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, law, morals, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society” (Tylor, 1987: 1). In 1952, two famous American anthropologists, Alred L. Kroeber and Clyde Kluckhohn, compiled a list of 164 different definitions in their book named *Culture: A Critical Review of Concepts and Definitions*.

Different definitions of “culture” reflect different perspectives of or theoretical approaches to understanding human activities, or criteria for evaluating human activities. Apte (Asher, 1994: 2001), writing in the ten-volume set *Encyclopedia of Language and Linguistics*, summarized the problem as follows: “Despite a century

of efforts to define culture adequately, there was in the early 1990s no agreement among anthropologists regarding its nature.” If we try to list different elements that are true of culture, there may be an endless list of aspects including the following:

- Culture has to do with values and beliefs.
- Culture involves customs and traditions.
- Culture is collective, and shared by a group.
- Culture is learned.
- Culture influences and shapes behavior.
- Culture is transmitted from generation to generation.
- Culture is often unconscious; people are sometimes not aware of how their behaviors and attitudes have been shaped by their culture.
- People in all cultures have common needs.

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In this textbook, we regard culture as a system of beliefs, values, and assumptions about life that guide behavior and are shared by a group of people. If we compare culture to an iceberg, it includes both visible and invisible parts. The tip of the iceberg includes visible behaviors and artifacts which can be easily observed in our social life. The remaining huge chunk of the iceberg hidden below the surface includes the invisible aspects of a culture, such as one’s fundamental beliefs, values, ways of thinking, and worldview. While the visible tip may change—as an iceberg will melt with sun and rain, the culture’s invisible and fundamental aspects change very slowly (Weaver, 2006). Both visible and invisible aspects are transmitted from generation to generation, rarely with explicit instructions.



“Cultural Orientations” and Three Influential Analytical Models

Cultural orientations or dimensions refer to generalizations or archetypes that allow us to study the general tendencies of a cultural group and how most people



in a cultural group tend to think, feel, or act. It is not about identifying what is the right or wrong way of behaving, but about understanding how and why we are different. By describing and explaining cultural differences through the lens of cultural orientations, we can understand each other across cultures and avoid creating stereotypes.

Several approaches have been taken to quantify cultural orientations or cultural value dimensions. As summarized by Samovar and Richard E. Porter (2004), there are three paradigms at the core of these studies, namely, the cultural value dimensions of Hofstede (1997), the cultural value dimensions of Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (2012) and the high-context and low-context culture pattern of Edward Hall (1970).

2.1 Hofstede's Analytical Model

Geert Hofstede (1928–2020), a Dutch social psychologist, defined culture as “the collective programming of the mind distinguishing the members of one group or category of people from others”. He conducted a comprehensive study of how values in the workplace are influenced by culture, and observed patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving of people across different cultures. He and his colleagues then put forward six fundamental issues that social organization itself needs to address, and proposed a six-dimensional model (6-D Model) for analyzing and understanding cultural orientations (Hofstede, 1997). The six dimensions are power distance, individualism vs. collectivism, masculinity vs. femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long-term vs. short-term orientation, and indulgence vs. restraint. Each dimension is roughly measured on a scale from 0 to 100 points.

2.2 Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner's Analytical Model

Trompenaars (1953–), a Dutch organizational theorist and management consultant, cooperating with a British academician, Hampden-Turner (1934–), did meticulous research on cross-cultural dimensions of business executives. Their collaborative work *Riding the Waves of Culture* was first published in 1993. In this book, they postulated several cultural value orientations. Some of these value orientations can be regarded as nearly identical to Hofstede's dimensions while

others offer a somewhat different perspective. In the 2012's version of *Riding the Waves of Culture*, Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner identified five cultural value dimensions of how people relate to others and further summarized the differences between the two extremes of these dimensions. Later, they further added two dimensions to the model and proposed another two dimensions concerning people's attitudes toward time and environment. The seven dimensions are universalism vs. particularism, communitarianism vs. individualism, neutral vs. affective, diffuse vs. specific, achievement vs. ascription, sequential time vs. synchronous time, and internal direction vs. outer direction.

2.3 Edward Hall's Analytical Model

Edward Twitchell Hall, Jr. (1914–2009), an American anthropologist and cross-cultural researcher, introduced differing context cultures in his book *The Silent Language*, namely high- and low-context culture. High-context culture refers to societies or groups where people have close connections over a long period of time. Many aspects of cultural behavior are not made explicit because most members know what to do and what to think from years of interaction with each other. On the contrary, low-context refers to societies where people tend to have many connections but of shorter duration or for some specific reason. In these societies, cultural behavior and beliefs may need to be spelled out explicitly so that those coming into the cultural environment know how to behave. People's communication style also varies due to the differences in high- and low-context cultures.



The Six-Dimensional Model (6-D Model)

In this textbook, we mainly employed the 6-D Model to analyze the cultural orientations of 15 different cultures. If we examine a nation's culture from the perspective of the 6-D Model, we can obtain an overview of its culture in terms of



the following six dimensions. Although it may not be precise enough to present the complexity and diversity of a culture, it does provide us with a possible approach to reflect on our own cultural orientation and show us a rough picture of the nation.

3.1 Power Distance

Power distance is defined as the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. This dimension deals with the fact that all individuals in societies are not equal, and it expresses the attitude of the culture toward these inequalities among us.

With a high score on this dimension, a culture accepts that power is distributed unequally. People in this society believe that it is acceptable to have a certain degree of inequality among people. On the contrary, with a low score on this dimension, a culture prefers a relatively equal distribution of power, and people in this society believe that it is not that acceptable to have inequality among people.

3.2 Individualism vs. Collectivism

The fundamental issue addressed by this dimension is the degree of interdependence a society maintains among its members. It has to do with whether people's self-image is defined in terms of "I" or "We". Individualism refers to the societies or cultures in which the interests of individuals prevail over the interests of the group.

With a high score (individualism) on this dimension, or in individualist societies, people are expected to look after themselves and their direct family only. Individualism emphasizes individual goals, individual rights, autonomy, self-reliance, achievement orientation, and competitiveness. On the other hand, with a low score (collectivism), or in collectivist societies, people belong to "in-groups" that take care of themselves in exchange for loyalty. Collectivism emphasizes collective goals, collective rights, interdependence, and affiliation.

3.3 Masculinity vs. Femininity

The fundamental issue in this dimension is what motivates people in a culture, wanting to be the best (masculine) or liking what you do (feminine). A high score

(masculine) on this dimension indicates that society will be driven by competition, achievement, and success, with success being defined by “the winner” or “the best in the field” —a value system that starts in school and continues throughout organizational life. A low score (feminine) on the dimension means that the dominant values in society are caring for others and quality of life. A feminine society is one where quality of life is the sign of success and standing out from the crowd is not admirable.

3.4 Uncertainty Avoidance

The dimension of uncertainty avoidance has to do with the way that a society deals with the fact that the future can never be known. Should people try to control the future or just let it happen? This ambiguity brings with it anxiety, which different cultures have learned to deal with in different ways. Uncertainty avoidance reflects the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and have created beliefs and institutions that try to avoid these.

A high score on this dimension indicates that the members of a culture may feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and would exert every effort to create beliefs or institutions to avoid these ambiguities. On the contrary, a low score on this dimension indicates that the members of a culture feel relatively at ease when they are threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations and may be more tolerant of these ambiguities.

3.5 Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation

This dimension describes how every society must maintain some links with its own past while dealing with the challenges of the present and future. Different societies prioritize these two existential goals differently. Normative (short-term) societies, which score low on this dimension, for example, prefer to maintain time-honored traditions and norms while viewing societal change with suspicion. In contrast, those with a culture that scores highly on this dimension take a more pragmatic (long-term) approach. People with long-term orientation encourage thrift and efforts in modern education to prepare for the future.



3.6 Indulgence vs. Restraint

One challenge that confronts humanity, now and in the past, is the degree to which small children are socialized. Without socialization, we do not become “human”. This dimension is defined as the extent to which people try to control their desires and impulses, based on the way they were raised. Relatively weak control is called “indulgence” and relatively strong control is called “restraint”.



Understanding Culture and Cultural Orientations Critically

Cultural orientations refer to the inclination to think, feel, or act in a way that is culturally determined. Cultural orientations define the basis of differences among cultures such as self-identity, interpersonal relationships, communication, and ways of resolving conflicts. The concept of cultural orientation offers a framework for describing and explaining cultural differences. When we explore cultural orientations with the 6-D Model, we shall keep the following in mind:

- There will always be exceptions because each individual culture features its own history, complexity, and diversity, and our complete outlook is shaped by our background, experiences, and interactions.
- There is no right or wrong for each orientation style or one superior orientation over another. Cultural orientations are indicators of a culture’s preference in thinking, feeling, or acting. The six dimensions are about understanding the ways people move along different value spectrums.
- Understanding culture and cultural orientations critically enables us to expand our knowledge and improve our awareness of how other people may think and their potential reasons for acting in a certain way. Cultural orientations only explain cultural tendencies and are not inflexible descriptions or overgeneralizations (stereotypes). No one totally belongs to only one cultural orientation but could lie somewhere on a continuum bounded by the extreme

on both end. The analytical frameworks of cultural orientations provide us with possible approaches to better understanding and resolving intercultural and organizational culture challenges.

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