

**Cultural Mindset in the Workplace:
Creating a Work Environment for Chinese and American Cultures**

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Introduction

We currently live in a global community that is more interconnected than ever before. For this reason, it is essential to have an intercultural competence skillset, especially in the workplace. Intercultural competence is the ability to function effectively across multiple cultures (Leung et al., 2014, p. 490). To have intercultural competence, one must be able to adequately think, act, and communicate with others from a different cultural background, otherwise known as having a “cultural mindset.” Afsaneh Nahavandi (2021) defines a cultural mindset as “A way of thinking and a frame of mind or reference that considers culture as a factor when assessing yourself and other people and situations and when making decisions and acting on them.” Nahavandi also explains the importance of being aware of your own cultural background and acknowledging that culture just is (Nahavandi, 2021, p. 32). In other words, it is crucial to recognize that no culture is superior to another; there are differences, and being informed of these differences can help you navigate a global and interconnected world.

This paper focuses on the differences and similarities between Chinese and American work cultures. Before narrowing in on work culture, I would be remiss if I ignored the national cultures of these two countries. I will draw from the frameworks of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, the values orientation theory, and Edward Hall’s theory of low- and high-context communication to analyze each culture from a theoretical lens. Then, I will discuss how the knowledge of these cultural differences can be applied to the workplace. With a cultural mindset, I will discuss how to structure a workplace and motivate employees related to these two distinctive national cultures.

Cross-Cultural Theories: American vs. Chinese Cultures

Values Orientation Theory

In 1961, sociologists Florence Kluckhohn and Fred Strodtbeck established the values orientation theory, which proposes that all societies have a finite number of universal problems and, therefore, the value-based solutions to solve these problems are also limited (Hills, 2002, p. 2). As the name suggests, the theory indicates that each culture has a dominant value system, as values are a core component of culture (Nahavandi, 2021, p. 314). The values orientation theory argues that each culture has values that fall into five categories: human nature, the relationship between humans and nature, the relationship to other people, human activity, and lastly, time orientation. Within each dimension is a range of values (see Figure 1).

Human Nature

The philosophical inquiry into human nature dates back to Socrates' quest to understand human beings in the fifth century BCE. As the first orientation in the Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck model (K&S model), the theory argues a culture's value system (in regard to human nature) ranges from a Rousseauian view of human nature (i.e., humans are innately good) to a mixed perspective that human nature is a combination of good and evil, to a Hobbesian view that humans are naturally self-centered and evil.

Even though Chinese and American cultures seem to be polar opposites at times, both cultures (as a whole) have the propensity to believe that human nature is both good and evil. In China, this belief has been held for over 2,000 years. The philosophy of human nature being neither good nor bad derives from the Warring States period. During this era, there were several Chinese philosophers, including Mengzi, Xunzi, and Gaozi. All three philosophers had different views on whether humans were innately good or evil. Still, all believed, to some extent, that both

good and bad environments could influence human beings (Robins, 2001, p. 221). As abovementioned, Americans have a mixed view of human nature. They believe that some human beings are capable of growth and improvement, but others are untrustworthy or innately bad people (Nahavandi, 2021, p. 318).

Relationship Between Humans and Nature

The second value orientation relates to how a culture views the relationship between humans and our natural environment. The K&S model proposes that these values range from subjugation to nature, to harmonizing with nature, to domination (or mastery) over nature. At its core, Chinese culture values harmonizing with nature. For example, “The ancient Chinese practice of feng shui is based on a similar value of harmonizing individuals with their environment to take advantage of natural energy forces” (Nahavandi, 2021, p. 318). However, that philosophy has shifted due to the Chinese government’s ambitious socio-economic campaigns over the past four decades. In contrast, the United States is categorized as having a value of dominating its natural environment (see Figure 1.1). This may stem from the nature of the formation of the country as well as its value in productivity. Despite this categorization, it is evident that the U.S. has taken a turn (with its environmental movements) and started shifting its relationship with its natural environment.

Relationship to Other People

The relationship to other people's orientation focuses on how we view others around us. The orientation range is from individualistic, to collectivistic, to hierarchical. The United States is known for being one of the most individualistic cultures in the world. This may be due to American-espoused values such as freedom, equality, and justice, which indicate that everyone should be capable of “picking themselves up by their bootstraps.” In contrast, Confucian

ideology has heavily influenced Chinese culture, especially how they view relationships among people. “Confucius addressed the importance of both the common good, duty, and social order...” (Nahavandi, 2021, p. 323). Because this ancient ideology is ingrained in Chinese culture, I would argue that Chinese culture falls between being collectivistic and hierarchical.

Human Activity

The fourth dimension in the K&S model is human activity. In other words, this indicates what drives or motivates different cultures. The range of values is doing, becoming, and being. “Doing” societies value achievements and hard work. “Becoming” cultures acknowledge that they are continually growing and striving to do their best in life. And lastly, “being” cultures emphasize that life is fine as it is. In other words, “working to live,” not “living to work” (Weil, 2023). The United States is categorized as a “doing” culture that prioritizes accomplishments, work, and “busyness” over leisure and self-care. Chinese culture, as it relates to human activity, is a bit more complex. However, traditionally, Chinese society values the ever-evolving change of human beings. Therefore, this culture is categorized as “becoming” (Zhan et al., 2020, p. 86).

Time Orientation

Lastly, the time orientation component is significant because it focuses on cultures’ relationships with time – whether it is in the past, present, or future. Cultures that are past-oriented value tradition and learning from past experiences. Societies that are in the “present” pay attention to the “here and now.” And cultures that are more future-oriented look at the long-term impact of actions they may be doing in the present moment. Chinese culture is categorized in the “past” time value dimension, whereas American culture is labeled as both a present and future-oriented culture (Nahavandi, 2021, p. 321).

Orientation	Range of Values		
Human nature	Humans are innately good (Rousseauian view)	Humans are a mix of good and evil	Humans are innately bad/evil (Hobbesian view)
Relationship between humans and nature	Subjugation to nature	Harmony with nature	Domination/mastery over nature
Relationship to other people	Individualistic	Collectivistic	Hierarchical
Human activity	Doing	Being-in-becoming	Being
Time	Past	Present	Future

Figure 1: Values Orientation Theory Chart (Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961)

Orientation	China	United States
Human nature	Humans are a mix of good and evil	Humans are a mix of good and bad
Relationship between humans and nature	Harmony with nature	Domination/mastery over nature
Relationship to other people	Hierarchical/Collectivistic	Individualistic
Human activity	Being-in-becoming	Doing
Time	Past	Present

Figure 1.1: Values Orientation – China vs. the United States

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Geertz Hofstede, a Dutch social psychologist and management researcher, developed five cultural dimensions (with a sixth dimension to come later) in 1980. This framework laid a foundation for understanding cultures from a broad and positivist perspective. This high-level perspective of cultures is still widely used today. The six cultural dimensions in this theory are

power distance, individualism/collectivism, masculinity/femininity, uncertainty avoidance, long- and short-term orientation, and indulgence/restraint.

Power Distance

Power distance is the “extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organizations expect and accept that power is distributed and equally” (Hofstede website, 2015). In other words, there can only be somebody in power (i.e., a leader) if the followers allow them to be. Large power distance societies are more accepting of a hierarchical social structure, whereas small power distance societies believe that inequality should be minimized. As shown in Figure 2, China has a large power distance, and the United States has a small power distance.

Individualism/Collectivism

Hofstede’s cultural dimension, individualism/collectivism, seems to be the most widely known. It was actually Hofstede who created these two terms to describe these two different types of societies (Hofstede website, 2015). In general, individualistic societies value the importance of classifying everyone as unique individuals as opposed to collectivistic societies that see in-groups and out-groups. Hofstede also noted that individualistic countries have the propensity to be low-context societies, and collectivistic countries tend to be high-context cultures (I will discuss low- and high-context cultures later). The United States, like most Western countries, is considered a highly individualistic culture, whereas China is labeled a highly collectivistic society. Notably, this dimension has the highest degree of difference between the United States and China.

Masculinity/Femininity

The Masculinity/Femininity dimensions refer to stereotypical gender traits as they relate to each country. If a country is considered to be more “masculine,” the country has solidified and

distinct emotional gender roles. More feminine societies are cultures that tend to separate emotional gender roles (Hofstede website, 2015). When comparing the United States and China in this category, both countries were classified around the same range of masculinity, with China at 66 out of 100 and the United States at 62 out of 100. This score may be due to both countries valuing success and achievement. However, I question these scores. As someone who has worked and lived in China, my first-hand experience led me to believe that family and leisure time are very much valued in this culture.

Uncertainty Avoidance

The uncertainty avoidance dimension is the “extent to which the members of a culture of a national society feel threatened by ambiguous and unknown situations” (Hofstede website, 2015). The opposite of uncertainty would be the acceptance of unknown situations. Both China and the United States ranked on the lower end of this dimension (see Figure 2). However, China is ranked lower than the United States, with a score of 30. This means that Chinese society is more accepting of life as it is. They tend to be slightly more pragmatic and flexible with rules. Similarly, American culture finds an ample amount of rules and structure unnecessary.

Long-term Orientation

The long-term orientation dimension was introduced in 1991 as the fifth dimension (Hofstede website, 2015). Essentially, long-term orientation societies foster pragmatic virtues oriented to future rewards, whereas short-term orientation societies foster values of the past and present. Long-term orientation societies tend to be more adaptable and moderate. And short-term orientation societies are more inflexible, which can sometimes cause extremism (politically and otherwise). China is labeled a long-term orientation society focused on long-term societal goals.

In contrast, the United States is listed as a short-term orientation national society focused on the here and now.

Indulgence/Restraint

The sixth and most recent cultural dimension is indulgence/restraint. Societies with a high indulgence score value enjoying life and having fun. Low indulgence scores (restraint) indicate that these countries suppress their need for gratification. China is considered to be a restrained society with a low score of 24. These societies tend to have a more cynical and pessimistic worldview. The United States, however, is categorized as an indulgent society. However, its score of 68 indicates that it is actually somewhere in the middle.

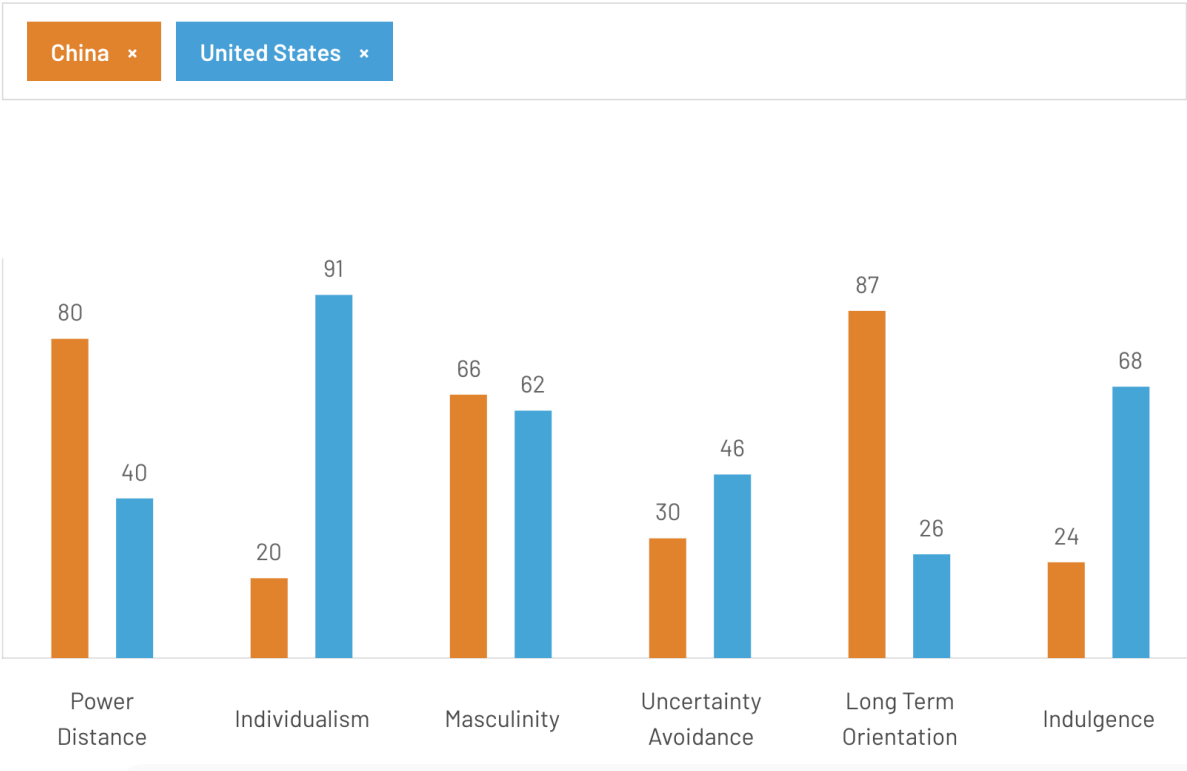


Figure 2: Hofstede's Insights China vs. the United States (Hofstede Insights, 2023)

Theory of Low- and High-Context Cultures

Edward T. Hall, an American anthropologist, developed the theory of low- and high-context cultures in 1976. This theory's primary focus is on the overarching communication style of cultures. A high-context communication style involves implicit messages that are not necessarily verbal. This type of communication is usually decoded by paying attention to "body language, eye movement, para-verbal cues, and the use of silence" (Raimo, 2008). In contrast, a low-context communication style is a more explicit form of communication. With this type of communication, there is little room for misinterpretation or reading between the lines due to its direct and explicit nature. The United States is considered a low-context culture, meaning that communication is generally direct. China, on the other hand, is labeled a high-context culture. The Chinese communication style consists of lots of non-verbal cues and cultural nuances. For example, it is common in China to "save face" when speaking. This means that people try hard to avoid saying something aloud that could be potentially embarrassing; thus, communicating in a circular way to avoid "losing face" or being embarrassed.

Creating a Thriving Work Environment in China and the United States

With a more globalized world and with China and the United States being two of the world's economic superpowers, business partnerships are inevitable. While an organization's overarching goal may be the same in both countries, the organization's leadership must have a cultural mindset for operations, productivity, and work culture to be successful. As abovementioned, although American and Chinese cultures have some similarities, they have quite a number of significant differences that could make or break a work culture. Keeping in mind these differences (e.g., low-context vs. high-context communication styles and

individualism vs. collectivism), I will explore ways that one may structure a workplace and motivate employees in China and the United States.

Workplace Structure and Employee Motivation

Drawing from the aforementioned cultural differences, we know that China is a highly collectivistic society that believes there should be somewhat of a hierarchical social order; and that values relationships, traditions, and making actions now that will impact the future. We also know that China is considered a restrained society with a high-context communication style. American culture is highly individualistic, focused on the here and now, and believes in more of a lateral, non-hierarchical social order. Americans also typically have a low-context communication style.

According to Sherrie Scott (2023), workplace structure is “the way individual departments and managers within an organization collaborate with one another to achieve workplace objectives.” In a Chinese workplace structure, there would need to be somewhat of a hierarchical order based on age and position. This social order reflects Confucian values and respect for authorities and elders. In China, it is also imperative to focus on relationships first. For instance, if a team of employees meets for the first time, it may be at a dinner setting. At the dinner, the focus would be on the individuals rather than business items. In my experience, it is common for the business owner or the boss/manager to pay for everyone at the table (as it is common for one person to pick up the dinner check). In the United States, as an individualistic society, the work structure would be slightly different and more focused on individual opportunities and the ability to have autonomy within the workplace. Even though relationships are important in the American workplace, the freedom to express ideas and to be appreciated and valued as an individual are more valued.

Nahavandi (2021) defines motivation as “a state of mind, a desire, and energy that translates into action” (p. 464). There are three factors in motivation as it relates to employees at the workplace: a person’s traits and characteristics, the organizational culture, and the nature of the job itself. As mentioned when discussing work structure, Chinese culture puts relationships (or guanxi) toward the top of the priority list. Because of this, it would be of the utmost importance for employees to be motivated by having a solid network within the office. The reputation of the organization must be in good standing, as well. A company's good reputation as being important is primarily due to the idea of “saving face” (as mentioned above). Due to the Chinese cultural value of long-term orientation, opportunities to move up in the ranks and constantly recognizing employee groups for achievements are also essential for motivation. For Americans, flexibility is an important motivation. In the American workplace, if employees feel like they have control over their time and work, they are more likely to be productive and feel valued as team members. This is due to the individualistic societal norm, having a relatively low power distance (non-hierarchical), and having a fair amount of need for indulgence (i.e., work-life balance).

Conclusion

International competence, especially in a multicultural workplace, is essential. By understanding different cultures and thinking, acting, and communicating accordingly, you are able to create a more efficient, productive, and happier work environment for all employees. If two or more cultures work together, employees must have cross-cultural training and competence. A leadership team (as well as its employees) of an international organization that has a cultural mindset is more likely to produce an organization that will continue to expand and thrive.

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