

# An Analysis of the Cultural Differences Between China and the US Reflected in *Pushing Hands* Based on Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory

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**Abstract:** This paper investigates Sino-American cultural differences as reflected in Ang Lee's film *Pushing Hands*, using Hofstede's cultural dimension theory as an analytical framework. It focuses on three core dimensions—individualism versus collectivism, power distance, and masculinity versus femininity—to illustrate the roots of cultural conflict. Through narrative and character analysis, the study reveals how deeply embedded value systems influence interpersonal interactions and family dynamics. By integrating qualitative research and interdisciplinary approaches, the paper contributes to understanding cross-cultural communication and proposes strategies for fostering intercultural competence.

**Keywords:** Culture dimensions; *Pushing hands*; Intercultural communication

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## 1. Introduction

The most crucial section of the whole thesis is this chapter. It provides background information on the subject, justifies its importance, lays out the research questions, and then employs the appropriate research strategy. The chapter also serves as the survey's primary subject introduction. This chapter also contains a description of what this study is about, how it is conducted, and its purpose and significance.

### (1) Brief introduction of the research

With globalization accelerating, intercultural communication has become essential to international relations. As the world's leading developed and developing nations, the United States and China maintain close ties, yet cultural conflicts persist due to fundamental differences in social systems, traditions, and values.

Edward Hall (1977) noted, "Culture is communication, and communication is culture," underscoring the role of cultural values in shaping interaction. Divergent beliefs and norms often hinder mutual understanding, making cultural awareness a prerequisite for effective cross-cultural communication.

This study examines the root causes of Sino-American cultural conflicts using Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory. As a microcosm of broader East-West dynamics, Sino-American exchanges reveal how deeply embedded cultural values—especially those transmitted through family structures—affect communication. Drawing on insights from scholars such as Guo Jun (2020), this paper aims to deepen understanding of these cultural differences and propose strategies to reduce misunderstandings and foster mutual respect.

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### About the Author

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## **(2) Significance and objective of the study**

One of the primary sources of friction in cross-cultural communication is cultural difference. Among various scholars who have explored this topic, Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory stands out as a foundational and influential framework. In his seminal work *Cultural Consequences* (1980), Hofstede identified four core cultural dimensions, later expanding the model in 1991 with a fifth—long-term orientation—based on studies conducted in East Asia, including China.

Hofstede's theory provides a valuable framework for comparing Chinese and American cultural values, offering insight into the underlying causes of cultural conflict between the two nations. Despite the relevance of this framework, few scholars have applied it to analyze the cultural tensions depicted in Ang Lee's *Pushing Hands*. While some research has touched on Sino-American cultural clashes through Hofstede's lens, a comprehensive analysis of the film in this context remains limited.

This paper seeks to fill that gap by using Hofstede's model to examine the cultural dynamics in *Pushing Hands*. As archetypes of Eastern and Western civilizations, China and the United States represent contrasting worldviews. By highlighting these differences, this study aims to enhance cross-cultural understanding and promote more effective cultural exchange and mutual respect between the two nations.

## **(3) Research methodology**

This study adopts a qualitative approach grounded in contextual analysis, drawing on grounded theory to explore Sino-American cultural differences. As qualitative research is inherently context-sensitive (Holloway, 1997), the study emphasizes immersion in the sociocultural background of the analyzed content. Relevant literature from databases such as CNKI, academic journals, and books on intercultural communication and cultural values was systematically reviewed and categorized.

A comparative analysis is employed to examine the cultural representations in *Pushing Hands*, allowing for a multi-angle interpretation of Chinese and American cultural constructs. Through character analysis and narrative comparison, the study identifies key cultural variables shaping cross-cultural misunderstandings.

Furthermore, an interdisciplinary perspective is integrated to enhance theoretical depth and practical relevance. By situating the analysis within the broader context of globalization, the research aims to uncover the roots of cultural conflict and provide insights for fostering intercultural understanding and dialogue between China and the United States.

## **(4) Structure of the thesis**

This study explores the root causes of Sino-American cultural conflicts through a case analysis of Ang Lee's *Pushing Hands*, applying Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory as the analytical lens. In an era of increasing intercultural exchange, many challenges faced by Chinese individuals in cross-cultural communication stem from deep-seated value differences.

The paper comprises six chapters. Chapter One introduces the research background, significance, and theoretical basis, evaluating its feasibility and innovation through a review of relevant literature. Chapter Two surveys existing studies on *Pushing Hands*, highlighting the lack of foreign scholarship addressing Sino-American cultural dynamics in the film and positioning this research within the broader academic context. Chapter Three details Hofstede's theory, focusing on key dimensions such as individualism–collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and time orientation. Chapter Four offers a synopsis of the film and a preliminary cultural analysis based on its narrative and character interactions. Chapter Five systematically applies Hofstede's framework to uncover deeper cultural values underlying the conflicts in the film. Chapter Six concludes with key findings, reflects on persistent cultural tensions, and calls for enhanced cultural awareness and mutual understanding to promote harmonious cross-

cultural relations.

## 2. Literature Review

This chapter first introduces the development of research on *Pushing Hands* at home and abroad, then introduces the content of *Pushing Hands* and finally summarizes the overview of domestic research on cultural differences between China and the United States.

### (1) Studies on *Pushing Hands* at home

Ang Lee's *Pushing Hands* explores cross-cultural and intergenerational conflicts within a Sino-American family, making it a focal point for studies on cultural difference. As part of Lee's "family trilogy" alongside *The Wedding Banquet*, the film is frequently analyzed in conjunction with related works for its depiction of East–West family dynamics.

Fang Mingwei (2021), in *Conflict, Reconstruction, and Integration*, examines both films through theories of value orientation, hierarchy, filial piety, and cross-cultural adaptation. He argues that they highlight deep-rooted cultural tensions between Chinese and Western conceptions of family and social structure.

Yang Qingqing (2017), in her study on intercultural communication, focuses on the maladjustment of Chinese elders abroad. Using *Pushing Hands* as a case study, she analyzes generational and cultural gaps between immigrant parents and their Americanized children, emphasizing the challenges in achieving mutual understanding.

Together, these studies underscore *Pushing Hands* as a critical text for examining cultural value clashes and the complexities of familial adaptation across cultural boundaries.

### (2) Studies on *Pushing Hands* at abroad

While extensive comparative studies by Chinese scholars have explored Sino-American differences in family upbringing, marriage, and ethics, foreign scholarship in this area remains relatively limited. Nonetheless, some contributions exist. Jianjun Wang and Chunyan Sun (2014) argue that divergences in thinking patterns, customs, and worldviews are primary causes of cultural conflict between Chinese and Western societies. Lizhi Shi (2015) emphasizes the need for Chinese parents to reform traditional family education by fostering independence and holistic development in children. Wei Liu (2019) examines *Pushing Hands* through themes such as marriage and migration, highlighting enduring value-based cultural clashes.

Despite these contributions, three key academic gaps remain

- 1) the underutilization of Hofstede's cultural dimension theory in analyzing Sino-American cultural conflict,
- 2) the lack of a comprehensive theoretical framework guiding comparative cultural studies.
- 3) the limited application of Hofstede's theory to Ang Lee's *Pushing Hands*.

Addressing these gaps, the present study aims to enhance intercultural awareness and provide theoretical support for promoting mutual understanding and effective cross-cultural communication between China and the United States.

## 3. Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, we will briefly introduce Hofstede's cultural dimension theory. This article will introduce the four dimensions proposed by Hofstede through examples, providing a theoretical framework for analyzing the embodiment of Chinese and American cultural values in *Pushing Hands* movies.

## **(1) The background of Hofstede's Culture Dimensions theory**

Hofstede, a Dutch sociologist, was the first scientist who used quantitative statistical techniques for studying values. From 1967 to 1973, his team conducted a cultural values survey of more than 110000 employees from more than 50 countries and regions in multinational IBM companies. In the 1980s, they published the book "Culture's Consequence," in which they proposed four dimensions for measuring values: individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, and positive-negative society. Later, Hofstede added the fifth dimension, long-term orientation - short-term orientation (also known as "Confucian motivation"), inspired by the Chinese Culture Survey Group led by Michael Harris Bond, a Canadian scholar from Hong Kong. In 2010, Hofstede co-authored Culture and Organizations - Software of the Mind with his son, Michael Minkov, a researcher from Bulgaria. In the book, Hofstede proposed the sixth dimension, the Tolerance-Restraint Orientation, based on Minkov's survey of world values. (Wang Qingping, 2014)

## **(2) Geert Hofstede's culture dimensions**

Geert Hofstede, born October 2, 1928, is a renowned Dutch social psychologist and former IBM employee. He is present-day an emeritus professor of anthropology in international management at Maastricht University in the Netherlands. Hofstede is widely recognized in the field of intercultural communication for his pioneering research on cross-cultural groups and organizations. His theory of the dimensions of culture has been a significant contribution to this field of study. This chapter of the paper will introduce some theories regarding Hofstede's cultural theory.

### **1) Individualism and collectivism**

The relationship between individuals and collectives in society is mainly described by the values of individualism and collectivism. Hofstede's thought that individualism referred to a society in which people had loose ties. Individuals tend to care only for themselves and those close to them, and tend to live in isolation. Individuals have a weak sense of loyalty to the organization, and more emphasis is placed on individual rights, privacy, and self-realization. Collectivism refers to people's integration from birth into a strong and close inner group that protects and supports people and emphasizes individual ownership, integration, and loyalty to the collective. To measure the individualism and collectivism tendencies of a country (region), Hofstede's "Individualism Index" is used. Among 74 countries and regions, the U.S. Index of Individuality came in first, while China was ranked 56.

### **2) Power distance**

Hofstede's Power Distance Index (PDI) measures the extent to which inequality and hierarchy are accepted within a society. In high power distance cultures, such as China (ranked 12th out of 74 countries), social hierarchies based on age, status, and wealth are widely accepted, and authority is rarely challenged. In contrast, low power distance cultures like the United States (ranked 57th) emphasize equality, where individuals expect more participatory decision-making and reduced status gaps.

This dimension reflects how power and authority are perceived, legitimized, and negotiated in different cultural contexts.

### **3) Masculinity and femininity**

Hofstede's dimension of masculinity versus femininity reflects cultural differences in gender roles and societal values. Masculine cultures emphasize assertiveness, strength, and material success, while feminine cultures value modesty, compassion, and quality of life for both genders. Although the U.S. and China show similar scores on Hofstede's Individualism Index related to this dimension, China ranks slightly higher in masculinity, indicating a stronger emphasis on traditional gender roles and achievement-oriented values compared to the U.S.

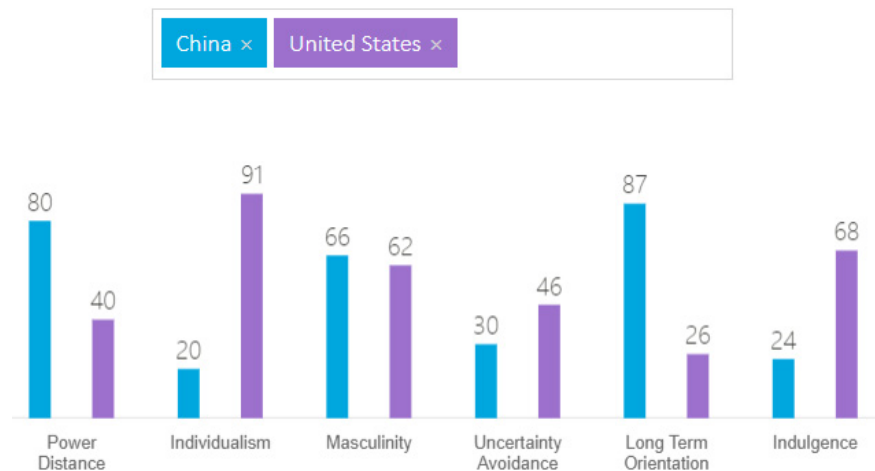


Figure 1 Comparison of six cultural dimensions between China and America

#### 4. The Conflicts of Cultural in the Movie *Pushing Hands*

This chapter will briefly introduce the theme and general plot of the film. To analyze the daily conflicts between China and the US, the conflicts between the two nations are summed up and analyzed on the basis of the film's plot.

##### (1) Introduction to *Pushing Hands*

The central conflict in *Pushing Hands* reflects the cultural tension between Zhu Lao, a traditional Chinese father, and his American daughter-in-law, Martha, symbolizing broader Sino-American value clashes. Zhu embodies Confucian ideals—filial piety, collective living, and reverence for tradition—while Martha upholds Western values of autonomy and personal space.

Their interactions mirror the Taijiquan metaphor of “pushing hands,” marked by resistance and a search for balance. Zhu's struggle to adapt in the U.S. and eventual retreat into Chinatown highlight the challenges of cultural integration without mutual understanding. This paper examines their conflict through the lens of intercultural communication theory, exploring the dynamics between competing value systems and the possibilities for reconciliation.

##### 1) The cultural theme in *Pushing Hands*

By portraying the everyday lives of ordinary families, *Pushing Hands* vividly illustrates the cultural clashes and integration between China and the West. The film underscores the importance of intercultural communication awareness, revealing how misunderstandings often stem from deep-rooted cultural differences. Effective communication requires mutual respect and sensitivity to these differences. While cultural conflict is inevitable, fostering understanding, tolerance, and respect is essential for meaningful cross-cultural dialogue and the harmonious coexistence of diverse cultures.

##### 2) General overview of *Pushing Hands*

*Pushing Hands* is the first movie directed by Ang Lee, a Chinese-American film director. The movie tells the story of Zhu Xiaosheng, a Chinese man who decided to stay in the United States to work after he graduated from college,

married an American woman named Martha, and had a son named Jamie. To help his father enjoy his retirement, Jamie sends his father to the US. But with the arrival of his father, Mr. Zhu and Martha have brought more and more conflicts into their family due to the cultural differences between them. After a series of twists and turns, the movie ends with Mr. Zhu choosing to live alone in a small apartment in Chinatown so as not to disrupt his son's everyday life and maintain an American-style relationship with Zhu Xiaosheng's family.

The differences in culture, lifestyle, and values between China and the United States are shown in the movie *Pushing Hands*. For understanding cross-cultural communication, this movie is a classic.

## **(2) Conflicts in the movie *Pushing Hands***

Ang Lee's arts film *Pushing Hands* examines the cultural conflicts that arise when the traditional values of a Chinese master clash with the modern, individualistic lifestyle of his family. Overall, *Pushing Hands* is a moving depiction of the obstacles that arise when different cultures collide and the difficulty of bridging the distance between them. Therefore, this chapter will introduce the conflicts that arise in the film.

### **1) Conflicts of family values**

*Pushing Hands* vividly contrasts Chinese and American family values, especially in intergenerational relationships. Influenced by Confucianism, Chinese culture emphasizes filial piety, and multi-generational cohabitation as symbols of harmony and respect. This collectivist mindset prioritizes family cohesion over personal autonomy.

In contrast, American culture values independence and flexible family structures, with adult children typically living apart from parents. The film reflects this divide through Zhu Xiaosheng's decision to bring his father to the U.S., embodying Chinese filial duty, while Martha, his American wife, sees it as an intrusion on her personal space.

Their conflicting views reveal the deep-rooted differences between collectivist and individualist family ethics and demonstrate how divergent cultural expectations can lead to everyday cross-cultural tensions.

### **2) The conflicts between Chinese emotions and US sensibility**

In *Pushing Hands*, Ang Lee uses the "dining table scene" as a key narrative device to reflect cultural conflict and identity struggle. The shared table, featuring both Chinese and Western cuisines and utensils, symbolizes Zhu Xiaosheng's role as an intermediary caught between two worlds. His efforts to translate both language and emotion between his father and wife expose the limits of cross-cultural understanding. Miscommunication intensifies as dialogue grows emotionally charged, culminating in Zhu's outburst and an abrupt end to the meal. The scene encapsulates the film's central theme: cross-cultural conflict persists unless one side first chooses to yield, breaking the endless cycle of confrontation.

### **3) Culture differences related to privacy concept**

In the movie, Martha expresses her objection to the arrival of Lao Zhu. In addition to the influence of individualism, what was more important was her resentment of Lao Zhu's rude behavior. Martha is a freelance writer. A quiet environment is a prerequisite for writing at home. However, Lao Zhu always turns up the volume on the TV, which is undoubtedly a disturbance to her work. Although Old Zhu accepted Martha's earphones and understood that Martha wanted him to be quiet, Old Zhu couldn't help singing along when he enjoyed the drama on TV. This conflict reflects the different attitudes of the Chinese and American, toward the gender roles of men and women. Martha stays at home almost every day. Writing is her most important thing, her career, and a manifestation of her social values, in addition to caring for her husband and son. Compared with American culture, Chinese culture tends to be more masculine. Traditionally, women are expected to take on more responsibilities for raising children and managing household affairs, while men usually hold greater authority in social and family decisions. It was because of this mindset that Lao Zhu had no regard for his daughter-in-law's work and had no understanding of the importance of her work. Just imagine if Zhu Xiaosheng were working at home. The old Zhu should have been quieter. (Wang 2021:3)

## 5. Reasons of the Cultural Conflicts between Chinese and the US

In this section, the author introduces the general phenomenon of China-U.S. cultural differences, analyzes the reasons for the above conflicts, and derives the following subtle and crucial values and norms. The different ways of communication between members of different cultures are shaped by these different values and norms. And communicators are not aware of these differences. They may not realize that their seemingly eccentric behavior comes from people from other cultural backgrounds, and they may view people from other cultural backgrounds as unusual or even rude.

### (1) General overview of cultural conflicts between Chinese and American

When comparing Chinese and American cultures, it is evident that the differences are predominantly reflected in the following aspects: parent-child relationship, face view, privacy view, harmony view, gender, role, and attitude towards uncertainty avoidance. In contemporary Chinese families, children are still expected to show respect and care for their parents. Although fathers have traditionally been seen as more authoritative, gender roles within families are becoming increasingly equal. In recent years, awareness of personal privacy has grown, though cyberbullying remains a pressing issue. Harmony continues to be a highly valued principle in Chinese society. Attitudes toward other cultures and homosexuality are gradually becoming more open, though certain conservative views still persist among some groups. In contrast, American culture values autonomy, equality, and fortitude in the face of life's challenges. People are extremely guardians of their self-esteem. They value their privacy, and other family members are unlikely to invade it. Concentration is placed on maintaining other and group appearances. Family status distinctions are tenuous, and people are more extroverted and optimistic.

### (2) Reasons of the cultural conflicts between Chinese and American

The United States, as a nation of immigrants, lacks deep-rooted familial traditions, resulting in a centrifugal family structure. Individuals are socialized to rely on themselves from a young age, fostering independence and self-sufficiency. Consequently, intergenerational obligations are minimal, and elderly care is largely entrusted to social welfare systems rather than family members.

In contrast, Chinese family structures are deeply influenced by Confucian values and feudal traditions. The concept of family priority is central to Chinese ethics, where individual interests are often subordinated to collective family goals. Filial piety is not only a moral expectation but also a cultural norm, with children bearing responsibility for the care of aging parents. Trust and emotional dependence within the family span from birth to death, forming a tightly knit support system that differs significantly from Western models.

These foundational differences in historical, cultural, and institutional development underpin the divergent family values between China and the United States.

### 1) "I" consciousness and "We" Consciousness

Individualism and collectivism reflect contrasting cultural orientations toward the relationship between individuals and groups. Individualistic cultures, such as that of the United States, emphasize autonomy, self-reliance, and personal goals, while collectivist cultures, like China's, stress group cohesion, shared responsibilities, and social harmony.

In American culture, independence and personal choice are core values, often leading to a transactional approach to relationships. By contrast, Chinese culture prioritizes familial duty, collective interests, and maintaining face, with communication tending to be indirect and context-dependent.

This contrast is vividly illustrated in *Pushing Hands*, where Martha negotiates with her son over milk and television, prompting Mr. Zhu's remark, "Americans raising children is like doing business." The scene underscores the fundamental divergence between the individual-centered American approach and the relationship-oriented Chinese model.

## 2) High-Power distance culture VS Low-Power distance culture

Contemporary China still reflects characteristics of a high power distance culture, though it has become more moderate compared with the past. Children are still expected to respect and listen to their elders, yet family environments are gradually becoming more democratic and open. In contrast, the United States is generally characterized by a low power distance culture, where fathers and children place greater emphasis on equal communication and mutual respect.

The characteristics of high power distance in Chinese culture are embodied in the way Mr. Zhu and Martha taught Jimmy in *Pushing Hands*. With such a cultural background, Zhu raised the issue of “not treating children as children” because he could not understand the democratic teaching methods of the United States. He was also critical of parents’ behavior as negotiators of terms and conditions with their children. According to his concept, children should not negotiate terms with their parents, and children should listen to their parents; and Martha could let Jimmy drink his milk before he watches television.

## 3) Masculinity and femininity

In Hofstede’s framework, masculinity refers to cultures with distinct gender roles and a focus on achievement and authority, while femininity emphasizes compassion, equality, and quality of life. China scores relatively high on the masculinity dimension, reflecting traditional views of male dominance and gender role division.

In *Pushing Hands*, Lao Zhu embodies these values—adhering to traditional practices like tai chi. His son, Zhu Xiaosheng, prioritizes career advancement, while showing limited flexibility in mediating family conflict. These attitudes clash with Martha’s egalitarian beliefs, revealing a deeper cultural divide rooted in differing gender expectations.

## 6. Conclusion

This study explored Sino-American cultural conflicts in *Pushing Hands* through Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, focusing on individualism vs. collectivism, power distance, and gender roles. The analysis illustrates how deep-rooted cultural values shape family dynamics and interpersonal conflict across sociocultural contexts.

The findings show that Chinese culture, grounded in Confucianism, emphasizes collectivism and hierarchy, while American culture promotes individual autonomy and egalitarianism. These cultural orientations are not abstract concepts but are embodied in daily interactions and cross-generational exchanges depicted in the film.

Nonetheless, Hofstede’s model has limitations—it overlooks intracultural diversity and the complexities of modern globalized societies. Future research should incorporate complementary frameworks, such as Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck’s value orientations, and draw on contemporary sources like digital media.

Despite these constraints, this study affirms the relevance of Hofstede’s theory in cross-cultural analysis and underscores the need for cultural empathy, adaptability, and intercultural competence in an increasingly interconnected world.

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