

Understanding Chinese and Western Culture

An Approach Based on Yin-Yang Theory

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Abstract

This paper looks at the understanding of Chinese and Western cultural values in the academic working environment of internationalised higher education. The research rationale is presented. The key cultural theories are discussed, including Western cultural dimensions, and Chinese Confucianism cultural concepts. Then the paper explains the approach of Chinese Yin-Yang theory, and its implication in analysing cultural values. The paper concludes with the research methods, findings and future implications.

Introduction

This paper looks at the understanding of Chinese and Western cultures within the academic working environment of internationalised higher education context. Particularly, based on Chinese Yin-Yang theory approach, this paper is to explain Chinese and Western cultures, and explore how they relate to each other. Moreover, this paper looks into the influence of such cross-cultural differences on academics' their working relationships.

There has been an increasing number of international cooperation between Higher Education Institutions from different nations and regions in the last two decades, including China (¹Wang, 2008; ²Huang, 2007). Taking courses jointly set up by Western and Chinese academic organisations, or even courses designed and delivered by Western higher education institutes in China are also favoured choices for parents who are willing to pay for their children's tuition fees and living expenses in China (³China Daily, 2005). In this case, internationalised higher education programmes set up by foreign and Chinese educational organisations are regarded as an opportunity to expand educational organisations' markets, increase their recruitment and therefore, generate substantial profit.

Whether setting up a local campus in China or having collaborative programmes with a Chinese partner, the leadership and management of new-born organisations are of vital importance for both parties. It concerns not only the direct effect on students' academic performance and results, but also possibilities of sustainable business profit (⁴NZ Education, 2009). As a result of such internationalisation of higher education, there is an increasing number of Western academics working as expatriates in China (⁴NZ Education, 2009), and also of Chinese working in the Western context as well (⁵Altbach, 2011; ⁶Cao, 2008). Both parties come from different cultural backgrounds from each other. To smooth the collaboration process, avoid misunderstanding in academic working environment, and lower business risks, it is important to investigate the cross-cultural interaction between academics

and its influence on their working relationships. This paper aims to explore cultural interaction between Western and Chinese academics, and the influence of different cultural backgrounds on their communication and working relationships. For example, coming from different national culture backgrounds, employees may have various definitions and understanding about certain things, so that people present themselves and interpret others accordingly. While two or more cultures respond and interact on the same issue, one may misunderstand the other, or be misinterpreted by the other, due to the cause of unidentifying relevant piece of information or overlooking their significance (⁷Selmer, 2006). Hence, proper understanding and interpretation of each other's cultural background are of great significance to avoid confusion and conflict, so as to build healthy interpersonal relationships among each other. Furthermore, well-developed management strategy guidance will be of great demand in such rapid-growing education markets.

The research involves both Chinese and Western academics. It focuses on exploring how Western academics understand Chinese cultural values, and vice versa, how Chinese academics understand the Western ones. The research questions investigate how Western cultural dimensions relate to Chinese cultural concepts, and how it affects academic staff's working relationships. Chinese cultural values are the core of the current research, in terms of interpreting and understanding Chinese staff's behaviours and response with their foreign colleagues. On the other hand, it is necessary to combine Western cultural theories, which are derived from Western philosophy and concepts, with Chinese Confucianism culture concepts, so that academic staff's cross-cultural interaction can be better investigated and understood. With Yin-Yang theory, this research is to apply Chinese philosophies and thinking as the principle theory. The differences between Chinese and Western will be discussed and explained on this platform, and explored for further analysis.

The Key Theories

Western Cultural Dimensions

Amongst studies of national culture, Hofstede's cultural dimensions are commonly utilised (⁸Barkema and Vermeulen, 1997; ⁹Gomez-Mejia and Palich, 1997; ¹⁰Fang, 2003; ¹¹Zhang et al, 2007; ¹²Blodgett et al, 2008). Hofstede's cultural dimensions will be applied as the main Western culture theory to examine the interaction between Western culture and Chinese Confucianism concepts.

In Hofstede's (¹³1991) research, culture was categorised into four, and in a later study, five dimensions. They are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and collectivism, masculinity and femininity, and long-term and short-term orientation. Each dimension is dichotomised into two poles to represent opposite characters.

In terms of interpersonal relationships, power distance is primarily to depict the prototype of working relationships between managerial and employee teams in organisations, although it can evaluate the distance of staff working relationships as well. Kâğıtçıbaşı (¹⁴1997) refined the definitions of Individualism and Collectivism, and categorised them into two main approaches to look at these two concepts, i.e. normative and relational individualism/collectivism. Normative Individualism/Collectivism emphasizes how people assume such individual-group relationships should be operated, which emphasizes people's assumptions of how such relationships should be like. It does not relate to how people's relationships are actually carried out. On the other hand, relational Individualism/Collectivism refers to interpersonal relations and connections of these two

concepts. It looks at the detailed interactions between people, including behaviours and responses. As the current research mainly focuses on investigating academics' individual relationships with each other, relational Individualism/Collectivism will be the focus of current research discussion. The other three of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, uncertainty avoidance, femininity and masculinity, Confucian Dynamism, are mostly concerned with the description of people's characteristics, which are used as the measurement of people's inner values about themselves.

Chinese Confucianism cultural concepts

Flynn et al (¹⁵2007) pointed out that Confucianism emphasized the importance of interpersonal relationships, avoidance of conflict to maintain harmony, the idea of Mianzi, and respect for age and hierarchy. Moore (¹⁶1967) claimed that in Confucianism, an individual was regarded as a social entity that interacted with others, rather than being isolated or separated from each other. That means Confucianism promotes a collectivistic perspective of individual behaviour and interpersonal relationships. Hofstede and Bond (¹⁷1988) stated that Confucianism were a set of pragmatic rules, with four key principles: the hierarchical relationships between people maintain the stability of society; the family prototype in all social organisations; human benevolence of treating others with virtuous behaviour; and virtues in life to be educated, work hard, be thrift, patient and persevere. Among these four principles, the first three are all related to people's interpersonal relationships with others, in the aspects of social orders, organisations settings, and individual contact.

In Confucianism, individuals were expected to respect and follow tradition and social hierarchy, such as rules, status and authorities, in order to maintain the priority of social integration and stability, and harmonious relationships (¹⁸Bond and Hwang, 1986; ¹⁹The Chinese Cultural Connection, 1987; ²⁰Zhang et al, 2005). Furthermore, the significance of hierarchy and harmony were highly emphasized in Confucianism. These values work closely within Chinese society. Serving as standards and rules for social interaction, Bond (²¹1996) stressed that these values reflected essential principles of Confucianism and had great influence on Chinese' attitude toward life. Wong et al (²²2010, p.1109) pointed out that Confucianism was possibly the most influential, and that it provided moral guidelines for the Chinese 'on how to behave, think, feel and act both in the private and in the public realm'. According to them, the essence of Confucian teaching in Chinese culture was maintaining harmony in interpersonal relationships, ranging from family members, to others in the clan, the community and society. In other words, harmony and relationships (Guanxi) are the foundations of Chinese social behaviour. Many researchers have found that Guanxi is related to Harmony and Face (²³Chen, 2002; Hwang, ²⁴1987 and ²⁵1997-1998; ²⁶Knutson et al, 2000; ²⁷Kirkbride et al, 1991).

Yin-Yang theory

Fletcher and Fang (²⁸2006) emphasized the significance of 'both/and' character of Asian cultures, which was different from the 'either/or' bipolarised national culture studies. Compared to classical Western logical resolutions to social conflicts, Chinese preferred dialectical resolutions and arguments, and accepted both apparently contradictory propositions more comfortably when they were presented at the same time (²⁹Peng and Nisbett, 1999). It was claimed that in a complex cultural background like China, which was dominated by Yin-Yang, the culture interacted between two extremes (³⁰Nisbett, 2003). Although the clarity and consistency were acknowledged as the strength of the bipolar national culture paradigm in identifying cultural dimensions and facilitating cross-cultural

comparisons, it was also pointed out that this approach might have missed the dialectical perspective as culture intrinsically consisted of paradoxes and change (³¹Osland and Bird, 2000; ³²Fang, 2006a).

In terms of Yin-Yang, the Chinese philosophical principle of dualism and paradox in the manifest world, Fang (¹⁰2003) claimed that Yin-Yang existed in everything, including Confucianism, and that each of the Confucian values involved both Yin and Yang, which had constructive and destructive qualities.

Taken as a cosmic symbol of primordial unity and harmony (³³Fang, 2006b), Yin-Yang theory contained contradiction, paradox and change, and offered a dialectic worldview with both a paradoxical and balanced approach to life, based on which Chinese people were taught to react and behave differently due to the change of circumstances (Fang, ³²2006a and ³³2006b). Faure and Fang (³⁴2008) pointed out that such 'paradoxical values' were seemingly contradictory, but also were true within the same society. They (³⁴Faure and Fang, 2008) suggested it was necessary to use the Yin-Yang perspective to study and capture the complexity of Chinese culture. Hence, it is essential to use Yin-Yang theory to analyse interpersonal relationships in the Chinese context.

Fang (³²2006a) stated that in each national culture, the internal Yin-Yang mechanism transformed a dynamic internal cultural change between Yin and Yang, sometimes even without the influence of external factors. Using Yin-Yang theory, Fang (³²2006a) emphasized external conditions which influence culture changes, including situation, context and time. That is to say Yin-Yang dynamics also depends on the circumstances of external influence. When situation, context and time change, Yin-Yang dynamics may change as well. Considering the external factors and internal change, dialectical paradigm of national culture does not rely on the stability of culture at the certain period of time only. Instead, it offers a more comprehensive approach to cultural research. It recognises the basic components of culture, which are the core elements in Hofstede's bipolar paradigm. Moreover, it takes both external factors and internal dynamic into account in cultural changes, which enhances the explanation for cultural change and increases the entirety of cultural research.

Hence, this research will use Yin-Yang theory to explain Hofstede's cultural dimensions and the key concepts of Confucianism, including Guanxi, Mianzi, and Harmony. The combination of both Chinese and Western cultural perspectives will give the researcher a holistic lens to examine related factors.

Methods

This research takes an interpretivist, qualitative approach. It is based on four different organisational contexts of internationalised higher education in Mainland China, Hong Kong and the U.K. Four organisational contexts include Chinese case, Collaborative case, Colonialism case and British case. Qualitative interview data were collected from seventy Chinese and Western academic staff. The research examines academic staff's understanding of Western (Hofstede's cultural dimensions) and Chinese cultural values (Guanxi, Mianzi and Harmony). Before the conference, more critical analysis will be conducted to examine the cultural understandings, to add further support to the research findings.

Conclusion

The key findings are Chinese cultural concepts, Guanxi, Mianzi and Harmony, are closely related to Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Particularly, based on Chinese Yin-Yang theory, this paper aims to explore the relevance of the dynamic relationships between Guanxi, Mianzi and Harmony in more detail, and their interaction with Hofstede's cultural dimensions. Furthermore, this paper demonstrates that Hofstede's bipolar cultural dimensions are not sufficient to explain the Chinese culture. Based on the analysis from four case studies with different settings, this paper will also highlight the practical implications of the cultural involvement of the management in internationalised higher education, and organisational and national contexts' influence.

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