

A comparative Study of Differences in Love and Marriage Values of Urban Women in China and the United States from a Cross-Cultural Perspective: Ode to Joy and Friends as cases

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Abstract: This study examines differences in urban women's love and marriage concepts between China and the U.S. through comparative analysis of the TV series *Ode to Joy* (China) and *Friends* (U.S.). The author uses Geert Hofstede's dimensions to explore how cultural values shape attitudes toward relationships, family roles, and marital expectations. The research aims to enhance cross-cultural understanding and communication while contributing to future studies on cultural influences in media and society.

Key words: cross-culture; urban female love and marriage value; China and the United States; TV series

DOI:10.69979/3041-0843.25.03.039

Introduction

Globalization amplifies cross-cultural exposure through TV dramas like *Ode to Joy* in China and *Friends* in the U.S., directly reflecting national values and lifestyles. Economically empowered women dominate urban workforces, yet research on their perspectives remains scarce. China's "affluent yet single" demographic reached 215 million (2018), with educated professionals delaying marriage for autonomy and careers, highlighting tensions between independence and traditional expectations. This study applies Hofstede's cultural dimensions to analyze Chinese and American urban women's love/marriage values via TV dramas. It examines how cultural frameworks shape attitudes toward relationships, marriage purposes, and spousal roles, aiming to enhance intercultural understanding, inform media production, and reduce cross-cultural conflicts.

1 Theoretical Framework

This part is about the cross-cultural theory used for case analysis in the paper.

1.1 Greet Hofstede's culture dimensions

Culture dimensions theory is an intercultural theoretical framework set up by a Dutch social psychologist Greet Hofstede. He analyzed these data and built up four value dimensions which are "power distance", "masculinity and femininity", "individualism and collectivism" and "uncertainty and avoidance". They influence a lot in behaviors in all cultures. His book *Culture's Consequences*, expounding these four dimensions, was published in 1980. Moreover, Hofstede and Bond added the fifth dimension called "long-term orientation and short-term orientation" (1988) into the theory after an independent research in Hong Kong. In 2010, a new dimension called "indulgence and restraint" (2010:41) was announced in *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind* written by Hofstede and Michael Minkov. So far, six dimensions have been put forward in the whole, three of which will come into use to analyze the data collected in *Ode to Joy* and *Friends*.

1.1.1 High power distance VS Low 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" (2010: 61). It refers to the acceptability of the fact that some

members of a social organization or institution have less power in the distribution of power. The higher extent people accept, the higher power distance is of the society. Due to the different understanding of power in different countries, there is a great many cognitive differences in this dimension. Asian people attach great importance to authority and power on account of systems and institutions, while Europeans pay more attention to personal ability rather than authority and power.

The characteristic of high-power-distance culture is to inequality and bureaucracy. Whereas, in low-power-distance culture, people believe that everyone was born to be equal and pursue equality of social status and right. For example, it is normal for British that prime minister takes subway, but it is unimaginable in China, which is an embodiment of high or low power distance.

1.1.2 Masculinity VS Femininity

Masculinity in intercultural communication refers to societies prioritizing competitiveness, assertiveness, and material success, contrasting with femininity's focus on modesty, cooperation, and quality of life. In masculine cultures, gender roles are distinctly divided. Men are expected to be dominant, ambitious, and rational, prioritizing career status and wealth, while women are steered toward nurturing and emotional roles. Values emphasize achievement. Social status and resource accumulation overshadow interpersonal harmony, reinforcing competitive dynamics in both professional and personal spheres.

In femininity society, males and females are supposed to be equal. Hofstede says that emotional gender roles are overlapped: "all the men and women are modest, kind and show solicitude for the quality of life" (2010:104). It is unnecessary for women to be family-centered or just be a good wife and mother. Both genders have same rights and are treated equal whatever situations they are in.

1.1.3 Long-term orientation VS Short-term orientation

It is also called Confucian dynamism and discusses the extent to acceptance of members in a culture to delay satisfaction of their material, emotional, and social needs. Hofstede redefines the meaning as follows, "Long-term orientation is to cultivate and teach the morality based on the pursuit of the future, especially insistence and thrifty. Opposed to the long-term orientation, short-term orientation means cultivating and teaching morality in the past and at present, especially respect to tradition and undertake the social obligations" (2010:171).

In long-term orientation culture, traditions and stability mean a lot. People have stronger willpower and tenacity. They assign high significance to honor and disgrace concept and always think tomorrow would be better. What's more, they are willing to abandon temporary pleasure to live a better life in the future.

In short-term orientation culture, people always live while they are young and enjoy the sweets of life here and now. They balk at giving up present leisure for their future. There is a representative American street slang "YOLO", which means that you only live once.

2 Case Analysis

It is found that there are few studies that analyze cultural phenomenon related to differences in love and marriage values in intercultural theories after consulting massive materials. This part is case analysis in three of Greet Hofstede's culture dimensions. The author compares the differences in love and marriage values of American and Chinese urban female groups through conversations in two TV series.

2.1 Brief introduction of Ode to Joy and Friends

Ode to Joy, a TV series about urban female in China, mainly talks about the story of five girls, Andy, Qu Xiaoxiao, Fan Shengmei, Guan Juer, and Qiu Yingying who have different backgrounds and live in an apartment complex named Ode to Joy.

Friends is an American sitcom about six single people, including three male characters, Joey, Chandler, Ross, and three female characters, Phoebe, Monica, Rachel. They live together in an apartment in New York.

2.2 Case Analysis

In this part, three culture dimensions "power distance", "masculinity and femininity", "long-term orientation and

short-term orientation" are used to analyze cases in Ode to Joy and Friends.

2.2.1 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. It is the first dimension that distinguishes one culture from another, which shows the authority of power to a great extent. For this dimension, there are great differences among countries because the meaning of power is not exactly the same.

High power distance in Ode to Joy

Example 1

Qiu: "But the thing is, my parents don't know. If I tell them I'm gonna get married, they'd be scared to death."

Fan: "Haven't you parents wanted you to be firmly established in Shanghai? When telling them, emphasize that Ying Qin is already established in Shanghai. He graduates from a famous university and has a house and car. Someone like that is a very sought after."

Example 2

Guan's mother: "Which university did you study in Shanghai?"

Xie: "I haven't been to university."

Guan's mother: "How much is your monthly income?"

Xie: "If it's a good month, then I'll make about 10000 yuan or more. If it's not a good month..."

Guan's mother: "Well, we don't object to you dating. However, you two should be able to help each other improve instead of holding each other back. Currently, you don't have a house, and don't know how to become a permanent resident. When will these realistic issues be solved? Why don't you tell me about future plans?"

China belongs to a high power distance culture. Parents hold a decisive voice in their children's marital choices, with parental approval serving as the "final screening" threshold for marriage. Material conditions frequently become the primary basis for parents to veto relationships, as depicted in Ode to Joy where female characters face family pressure due to their partners' economic disadvantages.

Example 3

Phoebe: "Fun Bobby is so great."

Monica: "Oh, isn't he? I think this time it may work with him. I mean he just makes me feel so good and I've been feeling so lousy this last couple of months, no job, and no boyfriend. Well, this time my cup is half full. For two-week anniversary, he's taking me to his cousin's cabin for the weekend."

Example 4

Monica: "I'm already seeing someone. He's handsome, sweet and I know you'd like him."

Monica: "This is the best relationship I've been in. For your information, I'm crazy about this man. This is a good thing for me."

The U.S. is categorized as a low-power-distance culture, emphasizing social equality and individual autonomy. Romantic relationships and marriage are regarded as a personal domain; while parents may offer advice, they possess no authority to impose decisions on their children. The core of decision-making lies in individual feelings rather than material conditions or familial pressure. Their interactions with parents regarding relationships are characterized by natural candor, reflecting a familial interaction model grounded in equality and mutual respect. This individual-emotion-dominated perspective on relationships underscores the prioritization of personal values within American low-context culture.

2.2.2 Masculinity VS Femininity

"Masculinity and Femininity" refers to the different extents of prominence of traditional masculinity and femininity in different cultures, indicating the extent to which people value competitiveness and achievement, and the importance of interpersonal relationships and happiness.

(1) Masculinity in Ode to Joy

Example 65 Guan: "My mom said that girls will eventually end up getting married and having a family. No matter how

goal of your job is, it is better to find a good man."

Qiu: "I think so too. If there's a possibility for me to marry a good man with a house and car, I would be so happy. So for a woman, work is temporary. The final goal is to find a good man."

Example 6

Qiu: "Guan is so lucky. So many guys are courting her. "

Fan: "A lot of nice young men like girls like Guan. Her family is relatively well-off and uncomplicated. Besides, She has a good job. Marring a girl like her, you will gain a lot."

Andy: "Do the young men who have some assets on demand right now?"

Fan: "Of course. Right now, when men go on a blind date, they would indicate that they own apartment and car. That is basic condition for going on a blind date."

Andy: "What if he has a great apartment and million-dollar car?"

Fan: " There will be handful of young women around him."

China is characterized as a femininity culture. In marital relationships, women's value is often emphasized through physical attractiveness and youth rather than personal capabilities or personality traits. As depicted in the Ode to Joy, women treat marriage as strategic investment decisions, prioritizing the evaluation of men's material conditions during mate selection. Emotional impulses are subordinated to pragmatic cost-benefit calculations, with some even avoiding potential relationships due to economic concerns.

(2) Femininity in Friends

Example 7

Monica: "Chandler, you don't believe in soulmate?"

Chandler: "No."

Monica: "I don't believe in soulmates either. I don't think you and I were destined to end up together. I think that we fell in love and work hard at our relationship. Some days we work really hard."

Example 8

Phoebe: "You are so going to Minsk. You belong in Minsk. You can't stay here just because of me."

David: "Yes, I can. Because if I go it means I have to break up with you. And I can't break up with you."

Phoebe: "Oh, yes, yes, yes you can."

The United States is characterized as a femininity culture, emphasizing gender equality and mutual cooperation. This cultural paradigm diminishes traditional gender divisions of labor, advocating for shared domestic responsibilities between genders. In romantic relationships, partners view each other as equal companions, valuing both economic independence and emotional resonance, thereby liberating women from dependency on men. American women prioritize personal fulfillment over social conformity. They actively reject stereotypical "marriage templates" to assert self-worth. Crucially, economic autonomy serves as the cornerstone of egalitarian relationships, empowering women to pursue authentic love while supporting their partners' aspirations.

2.2.3 Long-term orientation VS Short-term orientation

The dimension of "long-term orientation and short-term orientation" is a clear embodiment of national values, which directly reflect a nation's choice of long-term or short-term interests. It also proves that whether historical events or future events greatly affect any social decision-making and implementation.

(1) Long-term orientation in Ode to Joy

Example 9

Fan: "Young women should always be careful. What if you meet someone not virtuous, right?"

Qiu: "But there are a lot of couples now that get to be married due to being pregnant."

Fan: "Then can you get married while still renting a house. Without one year, you will already become old from stress. Dear, a swallow even knows to make a nest before laying her eggs, moreover you."

Example 10

Qiu: "He's so good to me. I don't know how to repay him. How should I treat him, Sister Fan?"

Fan: "You surely want this relationship to end in marriage, right? In order to have him respect you even more, you must be very reserved. Don't progress too quickly. Take it slow. Woman should still be a bit more attentive. But I have to be blunt with you. His financial status is very important!"

Qiu: "It's a lucky hit! I didn't expect him to have a car as well as his own place that he bought with mortgage."

China is characterized by a long-term oriented culture where motivations in romantic relationships transcend subjective emotions, prioritizing strategic life planning focused on marriage, family continuity, and descendants' future. Traditional norms emphasize that "A man should marry upon coming of age, and a woman should do likewise", positioning marriage as the ultimate goal of love relationships. This necessitates comprehensive evaluation of a partner's practical conditions including career trajectory, income stability, and family background to ensure alignment with long-term objectives. As illustrated in *Ode to Joy*, women's mate selection involves balancing material prerequisites with familial approval, reflecting core demands for intergenerational responsibility and lineage perpetuation.

(2) Short-term orientation in Friends

Example 11

Monica: "So we can be friends who sleep together."

Richard: "You know I do have a blind date with my sister's neighbor next Tuesday. Do you want me to cancel it?"

Monica: "No. Because if you did, that means you'd be canceling for me. And we just friends."

Example 12

Rachel: "It was actually really great. It was just so nice to see him again. It was comfortable and it was familiar. It was just nice."

Monica: "Rachel, what's going on? Isn't this the same Barry who you left at the altar?"

Rachel: "It was different with him today. He wasn't like, Orthodontist Guy. I mean, we had fun. Is there anything wrong with that?"

Based on Hofstede's framework, the U.S. exemplifies a short-term oriented culture, prioritizing immediate personal fulfillment over long-term commitments in romantic relationships. Americans view love as a freely chosen pursuit rooted in present-moment chemistry, emphasizing personal passion and physical or emotional attraction rather than enduring obligations. As depicted in *Friends*, female characters consistently initiate relationships based on intrinsic desire—prioritizing physical, intellectual, or sexual compatibility. Their approach aligns with the cultural ethos of "YOLO", embracing relationships as avenues for intimacy and self-discovery without societal pressure for permanence.

3 Conclusion

In core differences in values, Chinese urban women prioritize long-term stability, emphasizing practical factors like economic security, family background, and parental approval in relationships. Marriage is often viewed as a socioeconomic investment ("Marriage equals investment for women") and a mission tied to familial duty. Parents significantly influence partner choices. Women are typically depicted as dependent on men for financial security and social status, aligning with masculine cultural norms like career-driven success and high-context communication like indirect emotional expression. American urban women prioritize individual autonomy and emotional fulfillment. Romantic love and personal compatibility trump material considerations. Parents rarely dictate relationships.

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