

Cross-cultural Communication Skills in *River Town*

-- From the Perspective of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Jingyi Wang^{1, a}

¹School of Chinese language and literature, Hunan University, Changsha, Hunan 410082, China

^ajingii.wang@foxmail.com

Abstract: According to Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory, the Sino-American cultural conflict depicted in American writer Peter Hessler's documentary book *River Town* focuses on four aspects: Individualism versus Collectivism, Power Distance, Long-term versus Short-term, Indulgence versus Restraint. Hessler experienced inevitable cultural conflicts in physical and mental aspects. Finally good things wear out. He fitted into Chinese life and fell in love with this Chinese town. Through the textual analysis of the cases in the book, the cultural conflicts between China and the United States and the intercultural communication skills used by the cross-boundary communicators can be clarified. Under the background of reform and opening up, Chinese society has undergone great changes, the stereotype of traditional China has been broken in *River Town*. Thus, it is very important to use intercultural communication skills in different places according to local conditions and times.

Keywords: River Town, Peter Hessler, Cross-cultural communication, Communicative skills, Cultural dimensions theory.

1. Introduction

River Town is the overture of Peter Hessler's *Trilogy of Documentary China*. From 1996 to 1998, Peter Hessler taught in the foreign language department of Fuling Teachers College in Chongqing province as a volunteer teacher of the Peace Corps, and wrote about his life in this small river town Fuling. The book recounts the warmth and kindness, curiosity and rejection that Peter encountered in the foreign land. When Hessler first arrived in China, he was confronted with a huge challenge in language. In addition, the noisy environment, the traditional Chinese education system, and Chinese people's curiosity and rejection of foreigners made Hessler run into many obstacles. With the growth of life experience, Hessler gradually mastered a set of appropriate intercultural communication skills in the context of cross-cultural communication. Thus, Hessler entered the peak of his life, became proficient in many things, and established a deep friendship with local people.

The smooth acculturation came from Hessler's great intercultural communication skills. The ways and skills people face and cope with cross-cultural contact affect their acculturation process in subtle and profound ways. As mentioned in *Cross-cultural Communication*, human brain is an open system and people have free choices. These two axioms show that it is expedient and possible to choose independently and improve cross-cultural communication skills. No matter what the motivation of communication is, knowing how to communicate with people from different cultures is something worth pursuing.

Taking Hessler's process of adapting to Chinese culture as a sample, and applying Hofstede's cultural dimension theory to explain the differences between Chinese and American cultures and the possible problems in cross-cultural communication, we can finally analyze the cross-cultural

communication skills that can be used to overcome different communicative conflicts and cultural differences.

2. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory

Conflicts are caused by differences. In order to quantify and compare the psychological differences of traditional cultures in different countries, Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede conducted a sampling survey in the multinational company IBM from 1967 to 1973, and analyzed more than 100,000 employees from more than 40 countries by analogy. Hofstede pioneered the four main dimensions of cultural differences between different countries: Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity. In 1991, Mike Peng, a scholar from the Chinese University of Hong Kong, added the fifth dimension Long-term versus Short-term, based on the previously neglected Asian cultural patterns, which are of great significance for understanding Chinese culture and values. In 2010, scholar Michael Minkov conducted an investigation and analysis of world culture and values, updated the research results in the process of modernization, and on this basis proposed the sixth dimension--Indulgence versus Restraint. In 2019, Hofstede's *Culture and Organization: The Power of Psychological Software* (third edition) was published, followed up the latest research data, including studies from 92 countries and regions, quantified and ranked the degree of bias of the surveyed countries in the above six dimensions.

3. Cultural Dimensions Theory and River Town

Scores and rankings of China and the United States in the six cultural dimensions (See Table 1 for details) [1]:

		Power Distance Index of 76 Countries (Regions)	Individualism versus Collectivism Index of 76 Countries (Regions)	Masculinity versus Femininity Index of 76 Countries (Regions)	Uncertainty Avoidance Index of 76 Countries (Regions)	Long-term versus Short-term Index of 93 Countries (Regions)	Indulgence versus Restraint Index of 93 Countries (Regions)
China	Score	80	20	66	30	87	24
	Ranking	12~14	58~63	11~13	70~71	4	75
the United States	Score	40	91	62	46	26	68
	Ranking	59~61	1	19	64	69~71	15~17

There are significant differences between China and the United States in Individualism versus Collectivism, Power Distance, Long-term versus Short-term, Indulgence versus Restraint. On the other hand, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity versus Femininity show the same trend. Therefore, it is not discussed here.

3.1. Individualism versus Collectivism

Whether a society is individualistic or collectivist is determined by the higher or lower interest of the individual or the collective. Hofstede defined an individualistic society as “one in which people are loosely connected to each other,” whereas a collectivist society is one in which “people are integrated from birth into a strong and united in-group that provides lifelong protection in exchange for absolute loyalty.” [1] There is no good or bad between individualist and collectivist societies.

Hofstede's data shows that the United States is highly individualistic, ranking the first in the world, while China tends to be collectivist. However, Hessler questioned this feature and explained the characteristics of “Chinese collectivism”. In China, the strong and united group emphasized in collectivism does not refer to the broader concepts of community and society. For example, people of Fuling showed less interest and indifference to the Three Gorges Dam and the migration of cities downstream. When a passenger on a bus was threatened by a pickpocket, people often took a bystander's view and did not defend the victim. The reason is that the coming changes will not have a direct impact on the vast majority of people.[2] Only by narrowing the scope of the “collective” can Chinese people truly enter the circle of collectivism. “In Fuling, the family I know is undoubtedly closer than the family in the United States, because each family member is less self-centered. They are very generous with each other, and this generosity often extends to close friends, bringing them into a very tight social circle.”[2] Hessler summarizes the characteristics of Chinese collectivism. He thinks that “such collectivism is limited to small groups, families, friends and units, and these tight social circles also serve as a certain boundary: they are both inclusive and exclusive.”[2] In the United States, Hessler recalled, individualism often led to individual contributions to the group, and people needed a community that could help them, so that when another victim appeared in the community, the individual would surely come to the rescue. If something happened to a person, he/she would also get help from others in the community. In China, people defend the interests of their own small group against those of a larger one. Therefore, the contradiction between collective and individual is unified in opposition, and they just use different means to ensure the

maximization of their own interests. Hessler did not rule others by himself when he was aware of the cultural differences between China and the United States. “Later, I was like most Fuling people. I passively watched the preparation of the project and stopped making assumptions. After all, I was an outsider.”[2] It can be seen that the communication technique Hessler uses here is to adopt the assimilation, which requires the communicator to pay attention to the cultural environment and make necessary concessions to traditions, customs, and social mores. The assimilation strategy often enables communicators to maintain their respect for the choice of the other culture and merge themselves into the torrent of the other culture's thoughts. Becoming an unknown one is a wise decision to avoid unnecessary conflicts of ideas.

In his own workplace, the classroom, Hessler transformed communication to break down the drawbacks of collectivist thinking. “In class, the hardest thing to do is debate, because the students are always on the same page.”[2] To stimulate his students' minds and avoid uniformity, Hessler invented his own Robin Hood method. Robin Hood, a heroic figure in English folk songs, was active in literature from 1160 to 1247. The principle of the Robin Hood method is as follows: Hessler asked open questions like “What would happen if Robin Hood came to China today?” As a foreigner, Robin Hood was not familiar to Chinese students, so that students can not rely on existing knowledge to explain it. As a result, uniform answer would not be exist. Students were forced to come to their own opinions. In teaching, Hessler adopted a communicative strategy of encouraging feedback to open up new ideas for cultural contact between the two sides. Being able to invite feedback is an effective communication skill, and we must learn to create an atmosphere that encourages others to give us feedback because we need it to adjust our own behavior. Hessler improved the teaching method by using non-verbal behaviors to stimulate students' feedback in class. Such smart communication skills promoted the successful application of American teaching methods in China.

3.2. Power Distance

Inequality exists in every society, and the power distance index is used to measure the degree of social inequality. Hofstede defined Power Distance as “the degree to which disadvantaged members of institutions and organizations in a country (region) expect and accept the phenomenon of unequal distribution of power.”[1] The greater the power distance, the higher the social members' acceptance of unequal power distribution. The latest data show that China is a typical society with high power distance, while the United

States has a low power distance index, social members tend to break the relationship between superiors and subordinates. Hessler's most direct exposure to China's high-power distance culture was being in the school, where he was in the role of a teacher at the foreign language college and also a student of Mrs. Liao and Mr. Kong when studying Chinese. Mrs. Liao's Chinese tutorials adhered to the most traditional Chinese teaching methods. Even after the students have made some progress, the teacher still focuses entirely on the students' mistakes and gives direct criticism, which frustrated Hessler. He felt that "in China, the teacher is expected to be absolutely respected, and the relationship between teacher and student is often a very formal one. The teacher is in the position of teaching and is always right; The student, in the position of learning, is always wrong." [2] In the view of American tradition, inequality between people should be reduced as much as possible. If the party in power cannot put down its weight, the best way to conquer it is to gain its approval. "I am used to having my pride satisfied, and I need to be recognized for my efforts." [2] Hessler made up his mind to learn Chinese well, his stubborn achievement finally earned Mrs. Liao's attention. This is a very wise way of communication. In a high-power society, verbal outburst destroys the harmony between people, so usually people do not express personal feelings directly. For Chinese, the interaction that shows discord often causes people to lose face. Hessler knew that he couldn't tolerate the oppression of a high-power relationship between teachers and students, and also couldn't destroy the apparent harmony between himself and Mrs. Liao, so he changed the original communication style in a Chinese way. By the second year, Mrs. Liao was so proud of the progress Hessler had made. Hessler, a straight-A student, and Mrs. Liao, a strict teacher, formed a very comfortable relationship. Each adapted to the other's cultural traditions within their comfort zone.

As a teacher and a power player, Hessler was not assimilated into the tradition of high-power-distance relationships in the classroom, but joined the American standard. He advocated an easygoing teacher-student relationship. Hessler would first praise students for what was right and then gently correct their mistakes. "The relationship I have with them is both witty and serious, which seems perfect for China," [2] he says. In the classroom, Hessler embraced his students' taking orders from him. Outside the classroom, student accept that Hessler joked with them in dialect, broke the strict boundaries between the teacher and the student.

What behind Hessler's successful communication is his self-control, and knowing oneself is also an important communication skill in cross-cultural communication. First, we should understand our own culture and adhere to our own cultural stance. "No matter what kind of culture, the first step to introspection of communication style starts from our own culture. We should know that we are products of our own culture, and culture will help us control communication." [3] Second, we should understand our own attitude, identify the attitude, prejudice and discrimination we carry with us, and remove unnecessary communication barriers before we begin to communicate. Third, understand ones own communication style. Always ask yourself how do I communicate with others? how am I perceived? Only by fully understanding oneself, learning to accept the opposite culture in an open and inclusive way, and changing the communication mode flexibly, can we find the cultural commonalities of both sides

to achieve the balance point of communication.

3.3. Long-term versus Short-term

The German sociologist Norbert Elias saw self-control and taking a long-term view of life as important steps in the process of civilization. The longer its members can accept delayed gratification, the closer it is to a long-term oriented society, otherwise, a short-term oriented society. The latest data show that China and the United States are at opposite ends of the long-term-oriented spectrum.

In a long-term oriented society, the members of the pursuit of long-term returns and continuous efforts, often develop tough, thrifty, know the character of shame. Long-term struggle to encourage people to respect the setting of the environment, pay attention to the play of people's subjective initiative. Mr. Kong is Hessler's best colleague in the school, after learning about Mr. Kong's life experience from a poor farmer to a college teacher, Hessler believed that if an American can start from scratch like Mr. Kong and gradually rise, then he would be full of confidence in life, even proud and arrogant. However, Chinese people like Mr. Kong wouldn't be so. They are more long-term vision of survival, thinking about the future and worry about the future. They often endure and don't suffer for the timely effect of gain and loss. Under the influence of the long-term effect, the character of knowing integrity and shame is shaped, Mrs. Liao is a typical one. She is polite, looks and acts according to traditional standards. "Mrs. Liao is a married woman, while I am a single man. If she came to my room for six hours a week, people might talk. It's always my office where we take classes." [2] By the second year, Mrs. Liao was pregnant, but she insisted on carrying on the task of Chinese training. She resolutely walked up the sixth floor of the teaching building to Hessler's office even though it was difficult for her to move. "She always has a very Chinese style." [2]

In the short-term oriented society, social members believe that efforts should be rewarded in time. People tend to consume existing resources, pay attention to personal face, and emphasize that personal position should not be negated. Hessler, a newcomer who had been subjected to unfriendly banter and taunts, was determined to make his own athletic rebellion. "I want them to know that there is a foreigner living in their city, and I want them to know that although I struggle with the language, there is always one thing I can do well." [1] Hessler won the Fuling Long Distance Race. At the school meet, the athletic students made fun of him and shouted at him, luckily his competitive spirit led him to win the 5K meters race. Even having a fever because of his impulsivity after the race, Hessler still enjoyed the race, thought that "it was the only way I could cope with the taunts." [2] Face and personal values are seen as a vital part of a short-term oriented society.

The long-term orientation is so different from the short-term orientation, but they are not incompatible. Hessler choose to do as the locals do, to integrate all aspects of his life into the context of China's long-term oriented society. This cross-cultural communication technique takes into account the material and human environment. Verbally, Hessler called himself foreign devils and excluded America by calling "they American". He also used Chinese epithets for foreigners, and secretly asked his students to teach him the Sichuan dialect. In the last year of his Chinese life, he was able to argue with others in the event of a head-to-head confrontation using the dialect's profanity. Language is the key to Hessler's

acculturation. Whenever possible, both communicators should seek a common mother language to try to understand the cultural differences in the coding system. If the communicators speak different languages, it is difficult to form a common code, because language is not only a tool of communication, but also teaches people a cultural life time, way of thinking, and different modes of communication. In terms of clothing, Hessler bought a Chinese military uniform out of novelty and wore it to classes, which aroused the students' love. In terms of lifestyle, Hessler preferred to experience the consumption choices of local Chinese, taking the cheapest train tickets and eating cheap student food. This kind of communication skills forces Hessler to pay attention to the living environment around him. It is because people have the right to make free choices, so we can make concessions to customs and actively integrate into them. Just imagine, experiencing an exotic lifestyle is very interesting.

However, this is not the condescension of the communicators to the opposite culture. In cross-cultural communication, preserving one's own cultural traditions and thinking is the best way to eliminate narrowness. Even if he used nicknames to laugh at himself, Hessler would inevitably say proudly "we foreign devils have a splendid culture" to preserve his face. Even though he was happy to experience the low consumption of Fuling people, he would spend all his salary every month, buying whatever he wanted, never maintaining Chinese frugality. In short, there is not only a difference in the time of delayed gratification between long-term oriented and short-term oriented societies, but also a difference in national character generated by the two ways of thinking. In the process of cross-cultural communication, communicators should strive to find a common code and consider the overlapping comfort zone of physics and humanity in the two cultures.

3.4. Indulgence versus Restraint

Indulgence and restraint are directly related to the happiness of members of society. The indulgence pole is characterized by a person's sense of freedom to act as they wish, spend money, spend time with friends, or spend time alone. In the opposite restraint pole, human behavior is limited by various social norms and prohibitions. The enjoyment of leisure activities, consumption, and similar indulgences is somehow wrong.[1] However, the desires satisfied under indulgence are those of life and pleasure, and not of all human desires. China tends to be a restrained society. Ancient China has been under the small-scale peasant economy and centralized system for a long time. Lack of highly freedom and relative frugality of material resources made the demand for individual freedom and great wealth not obvious in the traditional Chinese concept, and ordinary and small wealth is the choice of most Chinese thinking. The United States, on the other hand, tends to be an indulgent society. Since the 17th century, the United States has been deeply influenced by the capitalist political thought and economic order. The political independence in the 18th century and the economic boom in the 19th century have brought great development benefits to the United States, and the thinking mode of instant gratification has been very popular since then.

The stereotypes of restraint and indulgence in both China and the United States have been hidden for a long time. In Fuling, Hessler met Gao Ming, an artist who was happy to talk to Hessler about his affair. In Gao's mind, having an affair

was a very American way of life and American society accepts extramarital affairs, but Chinese society denounces them, which is a sign that Chinese people are not open minded. Katherine, a Chinese student of Hessler, agreed that "Western girls are very open. They can marry anyone and divorce at any time. They don't care about people's judgment. They do whatever they want, regardless of right or wrong. Their lives are free and unstructured." [2] In Chinese stereotypes of American permissiveness, Hessler stated his perception that, the United States is too open and China too conservative when it comes to the freedom of divorce, and perhaps neither side is good. Hessler said "As a foreigner, I think the best thing to do is to listen." [2] This also shows that in cross-cultural communication, an important communication skill is to learn to tolerate cultural differences. On the one hand, to maintain one's own way of speaking and express oneself. On the other hand, to realize the diversity and heterogeneity among cultures, and respect for each other's ideas is often more applicable than blind opposition.

4. Cross-cultural Communication under the New Changes in China

Since the Reform and Opening up in 1978, Chinese society has undergone great changes, whether in economic conditions, political orientation, or folk values. China has gradually broken away from the traditional cultural structure and moved toward a new spiritual outlook. When Hofstede was interviewed by scholars from Shanghai International Studies University in 2021, he also mentioned that because of the Reform and Opening up, research in the field of cultural dimensions is worthy of in-depth discussion by Chinese scholars.[4] In the long run, some views in the cultural dimension can be retained, but with the gradual deepening of globalization and modernization, new findings can no longer be applied to traditional concepts. As a result, the cultural dimensions theory, which has been popular all over the world for many years, has also encountered challenges, and its limitations have gradually emerged.

On the one hand, the evaluation of cultural dimension is relative and static and cannot cover the actions of all social members, and the individual factors in it cannot be ignored. *River Town* includes typical Chinese characters such as Mrs. Liao and Mr. Kong, as well as marginalized characters such as Li Jiali and Gao Ming compared to traditional Chinese society. Pluralism is the common characteristic of human society.

On the other hand, cultural dimension refers to the characteristics of traditional cultural factors in a certain country or region. With the development of economic society, new ideas will gradually replace some traditional factors and take the upper hand. When the story of *River Town* takes place, Chinese society has been in the convulsion of Reform and Opening up for twenty years, accompanied by increasing inter-regional mobility, new ways of life and new attitudes shaped by foreign cultural influences. Even in this small town Fuling, China's new transformation is evident.

5. Conclusion

According to Hofstede's cultural dimension theory, Hessler recorded various cultural conflicts between China and the United States in River City due to stereotypes, political contexts, language barriers, personal likes and dislikes, etc. However, people from different cultural backgrounds finally

understand each other through the use of cross-cultural communication skills such as assimilation strategies, encouraging feedback, understanding themselves, and paying attention to the material and human environment. This shows that although there are big cultural differences between China and the United States, people do not have to abandon or deny their own culture, nor do they have to accept the different culture completely. Instead, being empathy and applying appropriate communication skills are great ways to achieve multi-cultural integration.

At the same time, we should also see that no theory is static. Relying on Hofstede's cultural dimensions theory can not reasonably explain the new changes of Chinese society in the new historical context, nor can it be fully applicable to the personalized communication between people. Therefore, in intercultural communication, we should pay attention to the

actual social background, adapt to local conditions and vary from person to person, make full use of intercultural communication skills, and properly handle the communication and collision between people and cultures.

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