



A Study on Chinese and American Power Distances from Chinese and English Proverbs

Cheng Hong-bo

School of Foreign Studies, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing, China

* Corresponding Author: **Cheng Hong-bo**

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Abstract

As China and the United States increase exchanges in a globalized context and proverbs, being an integral part of language, deserve due attention whether on diplomatic occasions or among folks conversations, a study on Chinese and western proverbs will definitely have a pragmatic implication and value. Since proverbs are closely intertwined with culture, an exploration on proverbs in different cultures will contribute to a better understanding of cultural connotations and a strengthened cultural awareness. This article is an analysis of Chinese and western power distances through proverbs, with a view to providing some references for Sino-US cultural exchanges.

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1. Introduction

In the context of globalization, China and the United States have frequent interactions. Language, as a medium, plays an irreplaceable role in the communication between countries and among people. Proverbs, as a variant of language, also play a significant role. Due to the uniqueness of different ethnic groups in terms of climate, geography, history, politics, and economy, unique ethnic cultures have emerged. Cultural differences between ethnic groups are also reflected in the proverbs that are interwoven with them. There are significant differences between Eastern and Western social cultures, and their languages inevitably reflect these differences. This article compares and analyzes Chinese and English proverbs based on one of Hofstede's cultural dimensions, namely power distance, with the aim of correctly understanding and grasping the connotations of Chinese and Western cultural differences, and to provide some assistance for cross-cultural communication.

2. Concepts and Characteristics of Proverbs

Proverbs provide important clues for people to understand geography, history, social fabrics and values of a locality. For instance, the Mongolian ethnicity is dubbed as "a nationality on the horseback", which illustrates the interwoven ties between horses and the Mongolians. Therefore, proverbs such as "different breeds of horses demand different whips", "a steed is not determined by its saddle and a beauty not by her clothing", "a steed walks steady and stable and a good guy speaks firm and solid"^[1]. Japanese proverbs like 浅（あさ）い川も深く渡（わた）れ (no matter how shallow the river is, we should not drop our guard), 石橋を叩いて渡る (watch for the stones of the bridge while crossing it)^{[2] 53} exhibit Japanese discreetness and solidness of their character.

2.1. Dictionary Definitions of Proverbs

The definitions of proverbs vary. The 2000 edition of the *Chinese Grand Dictionary* defines proverbs as: "Proverbs, also known as colloquialisms, are ancient teachings that have been passed down for a long time, rich in meaning, and have fixed and concise wording." According to the annotation of the *Longman Contemporary English Advanced Dictionary* (First Edition, 2014): "A proverb refers to a short, well-known statement that gives advice or expresses something that is generally true." The definition given by the "Global Chinese Dictionary" (First Edition, 2016) is, "Proverbs are fixed phrases that are popularly circulated among the people, with profound meanings, such as 'As you sow, so shall you reap,' 'With enough effort, an iron rod can be ground into a needle.'"

Any language is composed of symbols that include phonetics, semantics, grammar, and vocabulary. Proverbs are relatively fixed expressions that are gradually accumulated during the development of language. Proverbs are commonly circulated ready-made sentences among the masses, which are fixed sentences with relatively complete meanings. "Proverbs are fixed sentences with relatively complete meanings, an important idiom in language, and are wise sayings that are passed down among the people."^{[3]186}.

2.2. Features of Proverbs

The characteristics of proverbs can be described from three aspects: content, form, and function. In terms of content, it originates from folk oral language, literary classics, and religious culture, reflecting the survival status of a nation. Proverbs are the crystallization of the experience and collective wisdom of the masses. As for their form, proverbs are more often than not rhythmic, catchy, understandable, concise and clear, and vivid, hence its learnability and inheritability. With regard to social function, proverbs inspire life, guide people's behavior, and have social functions such as imparting experience, moral education, and propaganda positively and negatively^{[4]11}.

3. Power Distance

The term "power distance" hails from Dutch social psychologist Mauk Mulder, who studies power dynamics in international relations. Building on this, Hofstede proposes five dimensions of values that have had a global impact: (1) individualism-collectivism; (2) power distance; (3) uncertainty avoidance; (4) masculinity-femininity; (5) long-term versus short-term orientation. Power distance primarily measures the extent to which members of a society with less power accept and recognize the inequality of power distribution within an institution or organization^{[5]98}. Brislin suggests that cultures with a small power distance value the rule of law and norms, with daily behavior constrained by regulations, and strive to minimize power distance; conversely, in cultures with a large power distance, people accept differences in power and status and internalize them as part of the functioning of the social mechanism, taking the existence of power differences as a matter of course^{[6]255}.

Indeed, there is an objective existence of varying degrees of power distance within each cultural circle. The extent of power is directly related to the fairness of social resource allocation. "Cultural members who perceive a large power distance believe that power is a part of society, whereas cultural members who perceive a small power distance, on the contrary, believe that power can only be used when it is legitimate, tending to favor expert or legitimate power^{[7]58}."

4. Differences in Power Distance in China and US through Chinese and English Proverbs

This article selects power distance for study and examines the differences in power distance between Chinese and Western cultures through proverbs in both Chinese and English. "Power distance varies in magnitude, which can be represented by the Power Distance Index (PDI). China's PDI is 80, while the United States' is 40^[8]." This indicates that China is a typical country with a large power distance. The relationship between Chinese and American proverbs and power distance is reflected in their respective degree of acceptance on the phenomenon of unequal power distribution. In countries with a large power distance, people

are more likely to accept and recognize inequality, with social status and hierarchy determined by factors such as seniority and gender, and inequality is considered natural and taken for granted. The United States is a country with a relatively small power distance. In countries with a small power distance, people acknowledge the objective existence of inequality but downplay the importance of authority and power, believing that people are born equal, and thus should be equal in terms of rights and opportunities for employment.

4.1. The Manifestation of "High Power Distance" through Chinese Proverbs

Proverbs from China often reflect the characteristics of a traditional culture with a large power distance. For example, the four-character Chinese term 长幼有序 (respect for seniority) embodies respect for hierarchical order. In this cultural context, people typically hold an indifferent or tolerant attitude towards unequal power distribution. In parent-child relationships in China, parents often impose their own views and ideas on their children, who are expected to respect and obey their parents' wishes. This, to some extent, also reflects the influence of power distance. Another example is the phrase from Confucius "父为子隐，子为父隐，直在其中矣" (a father hides for his son, a son hides for his father, and in this, there is righteousness), which emphasizes the power relationship within family members, meaning that parents have absolute authority over their children, who should obey their parents' will. Power distance is closely related to the social relationships it involves. Relationships between superiors and subordinates in businesses, teachers and students in schools, and family members are all examples of social relationships in daily life. In the long history of China, since Emperor Wu of Han's "elimination of all schools of thought, and the sole promotion of Confucianism," Confucian thought, represented by Confucius, has long dominated. The hierarchical concept of "officials first" advocated by Confucianism has become deeply ingrained and internalized as a collective sub-consciousness. An official means power, and power confers status, face, money, and "benefits." The greater the power, the higher the status, and the more opportunities there may be to obtain "benefits." In ancient times, the saying "all trades are inferior, only scholarship is superior" encourages people to actively enter officialdom; today, it is still the case that "the national exam" sees thousands of people rushing to "cross the single-plank bridge" in hopes of securing a civil servant position. Ironically, while ordinary people complain about officials not doing their jobs, they also hope to "strike up a relationship with" officials someday and consider it a matter of honor. Of course, the ultimate goal is "to have someone in the official position to make things easier." The emergence of these phenomena is due to the "five relationships" under Confucian and Mencian teachings. The relationships between father and son, ruler and subject, husband and wife, elder and younger brother, and friend. As the saying goes, "a ruler is supposed to act like a ruler, and a subject like a subject, a father like a father, a son like a son." Otherwise, if a ruler does not act like a ruler, he offends; if a subject does not act like a subject, he is punished; if a father does not act like a father, it is unacceptable; if a son does not act like a son, it is against filial piety. The five relationships determine that from birth, a person begins to exist within a network of various

relationships. Different statuses and identities dictate different codes of conduct and the fulfillment of different responsibilities and obligations. In feudal society, this "difference" was strongly colored by class inequality. In today's society, despite significant changes in people's thinking due to the widespread dissemination of reform and opening-up ideas and the internet, the influence of the feudal society's "official first" and "power first" concepts, which have been deeply rooted for thousands of years, still makes people fear power.

In the superior-subordinate relationships within companies, subordinates must show great respect in their words and actions towards their superiors. Superiors and subordinates tacitly accept and identify with their status, naturally considering power as part of society, and the core task of the power center can veto decisions on matters, even if those decisions are sometimes unwise and subordinates disagree, they ultimately just swallow their pride and obediently follow, not saying no. The teacher-student relationship under China's high power distance is also reflected in proverbs. "A teacher once, a father forever" has become a tight-fitting curse on teacher-student relationships. For years, Chinese education has followed a teacher-centered approach. When teachers enter the classroom, students must stand up. The lower part of the classroom blackboard is a raised platform for teachers to stand and lecture. Perhaps being above the ground highlights the teacher's authority. The practice of "one-man show" in the classroom has been prevalent for many years, which is actually the "bureaucratic" style in the field of education. The consequence is doubtless that students lose initiative, enthusiasm, and creativity in the classroom. Thus, the ironic scene of "the teacher speaks enthusiastically on the podium, while students listen drowsily below" has emerged. In public, challenging and expressing different views on a teacher's opinions is still seen by many as a lack of cultivation and politeness. The concept of "five relationships" is also reflected in the complex relationships among family members, where children are taught to be "obedient" and to be filial to parents and elders. The film "Scraping" reflects a microcosm of Chinese family relationships. Due to space limitations, only one scene will be mentioned here. To save face for his boss, Xu Datong had his son apologize to the boss's son. When his efforts failed, Xu Datong slapped his son to make up for what he considered lost face for his boss. To Americans, father and son are equal in person, and a father hitting his son is a personal infringement and abuse. Xu's behavior reveals his ideological understanding of the patriarchal system of "the father is the ruler of the son" in traditional Chinese society—that is, the father has absolute authority over the son, and the son must be filial and obedient to the father. Even after their children have grown up and established themselves, parents still worry about their children's marriages. 不孝有三，无后为大 (There are three unfilial acts, not having descendants to carry the family line is the greatest), and 养儿防老 (raise sons to get cared for in old age)—such sayings are well-known. From a moral standpoint, kinship ethics has always been the main support for Chinese people to maintain their families, which is the traditional culture and virtue of the Chinese nation. However, objectively, with the rapid transformation of society, raising sons to provide for old age becomes increasingly unrealistic. The work and life pressures that lead to children going to cities for work, and the resulting issues

of left-behind children and the elderly unattended are the most powerful evidence.

In China, due to the large power distance, people often adopt an indifferent or tolerant attitude towards inequality. The general trend of history's wheel is forward. As modern people, the correct view should be to critically and dialectically view the five relationships. Although they are products of feudal society, they have their positive aspects: for example, the five relationships advocate for observing rituals and morality, maintaining order between the old and the young, being filial and respectful, and being honest and virtuous among friends. Furthermore, when "benevolence" leads to "forming cliques" or "making connections," and when it is linked to interests, the drawbacks become apparent. Therefore, we must seek benefits and avoid harm from these thoughts and take the essence.

4.2. The Manifestation of "Low Power Distance" through English Proverbs

In contrast, American proverbs more often reflect the characteristics of a smaller power distance. American culture emphasizes equality among all people, and this concept of equality is implemented in both family and society. In proverbs, such as "all men are created equal", this statement directly reflects the concept of power equality in American culture.

The United States is a "low power distance" country. Although there are still social phenomena such as discrimination against people of color by whites, the individualistic values that advocate for freedom and equality, and the realization of self-worth, have become deeply rooted in the hearts of the people and have become a guiding principle for people's conduct. The self is the core of everything, and in dealing with interpersonal relationships, there is a clear boundary between the self and others. The emergence of this viewpoint can be found in the works of the British philosopher Locke and the German philosopher Kant. According to Lawson: "Locke's starting point is a prima facie case against absolute governments and he postulates a minimal role for the State or Commonwealth. For Locke, the State is an institution for the protection of individuals. It is not and does not have, in the Hegelian sense, an entity with a prior existence to which individuals owe an overriding obligation" [9]221. "Kant therefore postulates 'selves' as centers of consciousness and reason...the individual is conceived as the irreducible 'I...'"[9]224.

Americans believe in the saying "God helps those who help themselves". Some scholars argue (Hu 1999: 511) that Westerners use individualism as their primary guiding principle in handling interpersonal relationships. They tend to maintain a certain distance from others, including family and friends, and interact on an equal footing, respecting each other's privacy and freedom of life. They hope others see them first as individuals, and secondly as members of a group. Of course, inequality is everywhere, but what is being discussed here is the extent of the issue. In daily interactions, Americans try to minimize the impact of hierarchical concepts and awareness on life, pursuing maximal "fair play". Due to the smaller power distance, people have a strong spirit of resistance to inequality in power distribution. This different response is also reflected in the proverbs of the two countries. For example, Chinese proverbs often emphasize obedience and submission, such as "顺我者昌逆

我者亡 (Prosper with me, perish against me) "; while American proverbs emphasize freedom and independence more, such as "Better to die than not to be free". In China, even in greetings among colleagues, one must say Mr. So-and-so, Dean So-and-so, to embody "自卑而尊人 (self-denigrating is respecting others) ", otherwise it is considered impolite and lacking in cultivation. In the United States, children can call elders, teachers, and even the head of state by their first names. The Independence Declaration officially declares: ".....all men are created equal.....that to secure these rights, governments are instituted among men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed....."^[8]. We can sense that in dealing with interpersonal relationships, both expect interaction based on equality; in dealing with the relationship between the individual and the group, they are also based on contractual relationships under free consent. Of course, Americans do not neglect interpersonal relationships, because NBA basketball games are not a solo show, but a reflection of team spirit. At least when an individual's achievement needs to be recognized, it requires the participation and evaluation of others. Similarly, Chinese people also do not neglect fairness and justice. There are also many proverbs in Chinese that reflect individual spirit, but they are mostly used in a derogatory sense, such as: 人不为己, 天诛地灭 (if a person does not act for himself, heaven and earth will destroy him) ; 事不关己, 高高挂起 (when a conflict does not concern oneself, one should refrain from interfering) and so on.

5. Summary

Both China and the United States are major powers in the world, each with its own cultural uniqueness. It is not uncommon for frictions to arise in their interactions. The article compares and analyzes the differences in power distance between China and the United States from the perspective of Chinese and English proverbs. This helps to enhance our awareness of differences in cross-cultural communication, better understand Chinese and American cultures, clarify their complex and intricate relationships, and gain insight into the national characteristics of Chinese and English language users. This, in turn, serves to facilitate communication and exchange between the two languages and cultures.

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