

An Intercultural Comparative Analysis of Eastern and Western Educational Concepts—A Case Study of the Documentary Childhood Elsewhere

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Abstract: Education is a common focus for parents worldwide, but teaching models vary across countries due to cultural values. This paper aims to explore the different and similar cultural values behind Eastern and Western educational concepts by analyzing cases from a popular Chinese documentary *Childhood Elsewhere* from an intercultural perspective. Theories of Cultural Dimension and High-context vs Low-context are adopted in the process of contrast and comparison. The results of the case analysis of the documentary shows that Eastern educational approaches tend to emphasize collectivism, higher power distance, and higher uncertainty avoidance values, and belong to high-context cultures in terms of communication. In contrast, Western educational methods lean more toward individualism, lower power distance, and lower uncertainty avoidance values, and are characterized as low-context cultures in linguistic expression. For similarities, cases from the documentary shows that some ancient Chinese educational philosophies, like Confucian thought, coincide with modern Western teaching practices, but modern Chinese people have somewhat lost their ancestors' spiritual wealth.

Keywords: Comparative Analysis; Education, Inter-Culture

1. Introduction

Childhood elsewhere is a highly watched Chinese educational documentary film made by media person Yijun Zhou and her team respectively in 2019 and 2024. Aiming to show Chinese parents different teaching models in the world and inspire them to think about educational philosophy so as to explore better educational methods, this documentary records the education in kindergartens, primary schools and secondary schools in different Eastern and Western countries. Yijun Zhou and her shooting team visited schools and families in Finland, UK, Israel, Japan, India and China for the first season, and Singapore, Thailand, France, Germany, New Zealand for the second season in *Childhood Elsewhere*. Different countries show their culture-specific models with their unique educational concepts and methods. This paper aims to explore the cultural values behind Eastern and Western educational concepts by analyzing the education in those countries from an intercultural perspective.

2. Theoretical Framework

Two theories are adopted by this study to analyze the cultural differences. American anthropologist Hall proposed High context-Low context theory. According to Hall, in strong high-context communication, the vast majority of information exists in the material environment or is internalized within individuals, but not in clearly encoded messages; low-context communication is just the opposite, that is, placing a large amount of information in clear coding [2]. Gudykunst believed that Japanese, Arab and Latin American cultures belong to high context communication, while Swiss, German and Scandinavian cultures belong to low context communication [1]. Hofstede, a Dutch psychologist, empirically proposed the Cultural Dimension theory based on his research and work, providing a comprehensive framework to understand the cultural differences in different societies [3]. Several dimensions, namely individualism-collectivism, power distance and uncertainty avoidance are closely related to this study. For the dimension "individualism-collectivism", it is used to measure whether a society is concerned with the interests of the individual or the collective [4]. Cultures of individualism lay its emphasis on personal goals and interests, in contrast, collectivist cultures focus on

the importance of group interests. Power distance refers to the acceptability of unequal distribution of power in society or organization by people with low status [4]. In cultures with higher power distance, people show more respect and obedience to hierarchy and authority; while cultures with lower power distance place more emphasis on equality and participation. As for the dimension “uncertainty avoidance”, it usually expresses the degree to which the members of a society feel uncomfortable with uncertainty and ambiguity [4]. Cultures with high degree of uncertainty avoidance tend to be more risk - averse and may follow established traditions and rules, while cultures with low uncertainty avoidance are more open to new ideas and experiences and are more willing to take risks and embrace changes.

3. Differences between Eastern and Western Educational Concepts

The countries visited by the director Yijun Zhou in the documentary span across the East and the West, and are spread all over the world across the east and the west, therefore, the education in those reflect different cultural values.

3.1 *Collectivism vs. Individualism*

In the Oriental country like Japan, collectivism is vividly shown in its school teaching, even in the kindergarten. In the first season of the documentary *Childhood Elsewhere*, Episode 1 is about Japan. The documentary records the morning ceremony of a kindergarten in Japan. There, all children of the kindergarten gather together in a hall in the morning, and teachers led them to meditate silently and then shout very loudly together, the purpose of doing these is to enhance the collective cohesion of the children, collectivism should be developed since childhood. For the eastern countries like China and Japan, people traditionally are in favor of collectivism, which means people should always put others and group first and being willing to sacrifice oneself when necessary. Under collectivism, people are highly interdependent, and they value modesty, humility, harmony and group loyalty. In another kindergarten in Kyoto, the door of the classroom is specifically designed to be broken, i.e. it cannot be closed automatically and children need to close it by hand, or else when cold wind blows into the classroom, students sitting at the door may catch a cold. These detailed design teach children to care about other and other's feeling, and explicitly prove Japanese interdependence and collectivism. In contrast, Western people belong to individualist culture, they always put oneself before other, that is to say, they consider personal interests above those of the others and group. With this culture, values like independence, privacy, fairness and competition are highly preferred. In the second season of the documentary, the team visit France, there, children are regarded as a completely independent individual, no matter how young he is. Therefore, even a baby will be treated respectively by the adults. French parents begin to train their children to sleep alone since 100 days after birth, and when children get older, they can choose to dress themselves without disturbed by their parents. Independence means gaining power for children, and their rights to be independent and self-reliant are well protected and respected. Just like a scene in the documentary shows us that the lunch at the kindergarten may last as long as an hour, and the kid who haven't finished his or her meal won't be urged by their teachers. As a derivative of individualism, privacy is attached greater importance for westerners. That's why People in Finland require larger space when they are queuing up for the bus in the documentary.

3.2 *Power distance*

Power distance is another important cultural dimension. Western people have lower power distance and lay stress on equality while eastern people prefer higher power distance and value obedience to hierarchy and authority. This difference is abundantly reflected in *Childhood Elsewhere*. Rattan is a legal form of corporal punishment in Singapore, just as Chinese kids are required to be obedient (Ting hua in Chinese) since childhood, children in Singapore must follow teachers' instruction (the authority in the classroom), or else, they will suffer severe corporal punishment. In sharp contrast, corporal punishment is strictly forbidden in Finland. Actually, any violence, including language violence, is not allowed there. In Finland Episode, Yijun Zhou and her team visited a Finland family, the father Yufei Zhang came from Beijing, and married a Finland wife and have three hybrid children. The father talked about the cultural conflicts he encountered there: Once he tapped his daughter gently as a small punishment, which is quite a natural parental behaviour in China, but out of his expectation, he was summoned for a talk by the child protection department three times for his behaviour. For Finns, children should be treated equally as adults, parents and teacher have no privilege to beat children. The concept of equality is also reflected on the choice of career for westerners. A Finland headmaster is

asked by Yijun Zhou what is a good job, he says: “All jobs are good jobs in Finland, you can go to university, you can go to vocational school. If your child doesn’t go to university, it’s not end of the world. If you ask what’s the best school in Finland, it’s the nearest school (to your home)”. Why does he make such a speech is because there is no distinction between noble and humble occupations, every worker is equally treated. Children also hold the same idea, a nine year boy is asked what does it mean for success, he says: “There is no success. If you get a job, and a wife, and get a little money, you almost get it. Everyone is equal”. The similar situation happens in Germany. In Germany Episode, the documentary film crew visits a vocational school, the headmaster says that two thirds Germans go to vocational schools, and the unemployment rate among German youth is the lowest in the European Union. When they choose a job, they only consider the division of labor, regardless of social status. Whether they are politicians, educators, plumbers or gardeners, they all receive the same respect. As a Western country, New Zealand also holds a lower power distance. In New Zealand Episode, a vocational school principal interviewed says: “You don’t have to be good at school to be a valuable member of society. The salaries of blue-collar workers such as electricians and plumbers are even higher than those of university professors.” There is a very interesting scene in the documentary, i.e, an university professor graded a Chinese international student’s paper zero because that student expressed the traditional idea “Only by enduring the greatest hardships can one become a superior person” in his paper. The professor comments that what does it mean for superior person, there is no superior person in New Zealand, everyone is equal. This cultural conflict proves that equality is the core value among Western people in their degree of power distance dimension, the sense of class is weak.

3.3 Uncertainty avoidance

The Eastern countries like China, Japan and Singapore have been under the influence of Confucianism for a long time, thus they share a similar cultural traits. As for “uncertainty avoidance”, people of these countries don’t like to take risks and avoid changes, they “tend to seek stability as they think stability is the prerequisite for development, and without stability, there would be no unity, let alone development. They have put more stress on “what a man should be” than on “what a man should do”, thus, they prefer being somebody than doing something.”[6]. That’s why so many Chinese parents hope that their children will succeed in the civil service examination and public institution recruitment, because they think civil servant is quite a stable job. Similarly, Singapore also has high degree of uncertainty avoidance. In Singapore episode, the documentary shows one of its national trait Kiasu (meaning being afraid of losing). With this culture, children in Singapore, even the quite young children in kindergarten, will attend many different academic tutorial classes after school for fear that they may be eliminated in the entrance examination for junior high school, the joy of their childhood is sacrificed. The diversion in Singapore begins as early as the transition from primary school to junior high school, students who pass that exam may happily go to university while those who don’t pass will go to vocational schools in the future, which is unfavored by parents since children graduated from technical schools cannot find a good job with fine salary. There are similar situation happening in China, and people call it involution(Nei juan in Chinese). This kind of over-competition behavior among parents and children in Singapore and China reveals that people seek to a stable and abundant life by urging children study harder and harder since a young age, losing and taking risk are not preferred. On the contrary, most Western countries have low degree of uncertainty avoidance. “They think everything in the world should be changeable. To them, change, development, progress, inventiveness, improvement, and future mean the same thing: without change, there would be no progress or future. They put more stress on outward behavior or action and like taking risks” [6]. These cultural traits are vividly reflected in the documentary. Different from Singaporean Kiasu (being afraid of losing), the core value of Israelis shown in the Israel episode in the documentary is called Chutzpah, which means being bold, straight and honest. Traditionally, Jews are renowned for their proficiency in doing business, they cultivate the children’s business skills from a young age. Currently, Israel is called as a Start-up Nation, almost every student begin to start their business from middle school although 96% of those start-up companies end up with failure. For them, one should be brave to try different things, failure is not terrifying, the result is not the most important thing, the effort made during the process is. Just as an Israeli school principal says in the interview: “You failed, Ok, you failed. Then what you are going to do, I gonna learn from the failure and I’ll do it again. Mistake is not the end of the world. If we have a question, let’s face it and try to get the fastest solution. You can enjoy this, there is joy there.” An entrepreneurial paradise is not equal to entrepreneurial success, what is important is to try. A German parent interviewed in German Episode also says: “Making mistakes is a necessary part of learning. Only when children are tolerated will they not provoke others.” The same attitude also applies to New Zealanders, parents there hold the opinion that children should take a risk to try and

explore the world, be brave to face failures and learn from failures, free play can release children's nature and cultivate their creativity. In the New Zealand Episode, primary school kids enjoy 35 minutes break every morning, during this large break, all children run and play wildly on the playground, they climb trees, swing on swings and play on the monkey bars, there no worry and protection from teachers. A teacher interviewed by the Yijun Zhou says: "the children should explore by themselves and learn what is dangerous and what is not. Once there were several students got injured while playing, like breaking their arms or legs, then they were sent for treatment, and next time they'll know they should be more careful while playing." This kind of situation where children play crazily is almost non-existent in Chinese schools, for teacher and parents are always over-protective and afraid of children getting injured, students are required to walk in an orderly manner, not to run or chase each other, let alone play wildly during breaks. Compared with safety and academic performance, playing is always sacrificed first.

3.4 High context vs. Low context

High context-Low context theory expresses people's attitude towards language. In high-context culture, most of information is conveyed in the material environment, ideas are not explicitly encoded into words. "Generally, Eastern cultures value silence more than the use of words; in Western cultures, the opposite is true" [5]. As a result of high uncertainty avoidance, "in social communication, Chinese people would avoid being aggressive, tend to talk less or even just keep silent" [6]. Similar to China, the morning meditation ceremony in that Japanese kindergarten shows the high-context cultural trait, people value silence, thoughtfulness, understanding and self-cultivation. On the contrary, Low-context culture requires people speak with precise and explicit language. "In low-context cultures where ideas are explicitly encoded into words, silence does not fit with emphasis on precision and clarity. People (as in America) usually consider silence as passivity, ignorance, apathy or hesitation in communication, and are generally uncomfortable with it" [6]. So Westerners attach importance to language expression and critical thinking ability, they tend to cultivate the children's communication skill, especially verbal communication skill, from a young age. In UK Episode, Yijun Zhou participates in a class at Dulwich College London in the UK. In that class, students are organized to have a group discussion about charity, everyone expresses his idea freely after an in-depth discussion. The teacher of that class says: "We specifically give them a lot of options to talk, to talk in front of class, to talk critically. So they have a lot of options to build their confidence. It's a fantastic skill." And the walls of classroom and corridor are covered with questions that trigger students' thinking, like "What is freedom?", "What makes a good friend?", "Is it easier to love or to be loved?", "Is it worse to fail at something or never attempt it in the first place?". Those critical questions place students in a rich and speculative environment. The French, who have a history of philosophical speculation, are particularly good at self-expression and debate. Compared the British, the French have a more systematic approach to cultivate children's critical thinking and debating ability. Philosophy and critical thinking classes are offered to very young children aged 5 to 7, these young children will be asked the question like "What is happiness?", teachers guide children to know what is the concept of doubt. And for older children aged 9-11, more abstract question will be discussed, like "What is love?". For high school students, Philosophy debate class becomes compulsory course. Not only at school, philosophical discussions are also everywhere in French daily life. It is very common in France that people of different occupations often gather in cafes to discuss a social or a political topic. They express their opinions freely and critically, and ideas are sparked. What is behind the French love for expression and debate lies their love for thinking and argumentation. The core of philosophy lies in re-examining the things we take for granted and liberating ourselves from the established framework.

4. Similarities between Eastern and Western Educational Concepts

Besides those differences, Eastern and Western countries do share some similarities on the educational concept. On a poetry class in UK Episode, students sit together to recite and discuss Emily Dickinson's poem. When asked by Yijun Zhou whether the teacher require them to memorize poems, the students say: "I suppose I decide to learn a poem because I enjoy the poem, not because you memorize it in your head". In Germany Episode, there is Opera concert for babies, it's very common and the price is quite affordable for ordinary people. Germans make music education a part of daily life. Learning music is not at all utilitarian there, except for professional students, kids learning musical instruments do not take music grading tests. The beauty of music accompanies children for a life-long time, they play music for their true love of it, therefore, people's persistence in music stems from their

passion. Just as the founder of Finnish company Angry Birds says: “Those who know something are not as good as those who love it, and those who love it are not as good as those who take pleasure in knowing it”, actually what he says is an old saying by Chinese Confucius. The ancient Chinese believe that interest is the best teacher, this idea shares similarities with the educational concepts of the British and Germans in the documentary. However, modern Chinese people have somewhat lost their ancestors’ spiritual wealth.

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