A Comparative Study of the Commencement Speeches in Harvard University and Peking University Presidents’ Commencement Speeches Based on the Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory

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Abstract. In recent years, a growing number of studies have probed into university presidents’ commencement speeches from various perspectives. Nevertheless, research from the perspective of cultural dimensions has received little scholarly attention. This paper explores the cultural differences revealed in the commencement speeches of the presidents of Harvard University and Peking University from 2012 to 2021, through which a deeper insight into the diversities between Chinese and American cultures can be gained. Based on four aspects of Hofstede’s cultural dimensions, namely, Power Distance, Individualism and Collectivism, Long-term and Short-term Orientation, and Indulgence and Restraint, this paper conducts a textual and qualitative analysis of commencement speeches. This study will be conducive to a better understanding of the cultural differences between China and America. Meanwhile, it contributes to further research on this subject from a new perspective.

Keywords: Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory; University Presidents’ Commencement Speeches; Cultural Differences.

1. Introduction

Commencement speech by the presidents of universities, as the last class before graduation, is a momentous type of educational speech. Sui contends that the speeches of the presidents of the universities are the expression of their rational thinking and their ideals on basic issues such as the value of the university [1]. What’s more, the inherent cultural characteristics of a country can be reflected in presidents’ commencement speech.

Harvard University and Peking University are two outstanding top universities in the United States and China, respectively. Both of them have a great impact and popularity in their countries and also the world. The differences in their presidents’ commencement speeches reflect different educational philosophies and core values of the two universities. More importantly, differences between China and the United States in terms of cultural dimensions can be revealed. So it is of momentous significance to analyze the text of the presidents’ commencement speeches of the two universities in order to have a better insight into the differences of the cultural values of the first-class universities, and that of their countries.

Although a rise of studies have been conducted to explore university presidents’ commencement speeches from the perspective of linguistics such as metaphor and discourse analysis, little systematic research has been done in terms of cultural dimension.

The Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory has been always used to measure cultural differences among different countries. Based on the theory, this paper conducts a textual analysis on the commencement speeches of the presidents of Harvard University and Peking University from 2012 to 2021 to explore the differences of cultural characteristics between the two universities, further reflecting the diversities of cultural traits of the two countries.
2. Theoretical Framework

The Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions Theory is proposed by Greet Hofstede, a Dutch scholar. Based on a questionnaire concerning national culture in International Business Machines Corporation, Hofstede identifies four cultural value dimensions which can be adopted to measure cultural differences between different countries, including Power Distance, Individualism and Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Masculinity and Femininity. Later, the fifth dimension, Long -term and Short-term Orientation, and the sixth dimension, Indulgence and Restraint, were added.

2.1 Power Distance

Power Distance measures the individuals’ acceptability towards the distribution of power. This dimension is defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally” [2].

People from high power distance cultures accept superiors’ power over them. Individuals who belong to low power distance cultures, in contrast, believe that they are free to express their opinions and even to challenge superiors’ views.

2.2 Individualism and Collectivism

Dimension of Individualism and Collectivism deals with how individualism and collectivism are valued in different countries. Hofstede defined it as: “Individualism refers to a culture in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism stands for a culture in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, often extended families (with uncles, aunts, and grandparents) that continue protecting them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty, and oppose other in groups” [2].

2.3 Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty Avoidance is a measure of the degree to which people accept ambiguity and avoid uncertainty. According to Hofstede’s definition, Uncertainty Avoidance indicates “to what extent a culture programs its members to feel either uncomfortable or comfortable in unstructured situations” [2].

2.4 Masculinity and Femininity

Masculinity and Femininity demonstrate the discrepancy of emotional gender roles in diverse societies. “Masculinity refers to a society in which emotional gender roles are clearly distinct: men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success, whereas women are supposed to be more modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life. Femininity refers to a society in which emotional gender roles overlap; both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life” [3].

2.5 Long-term and Short-term Orientation

Long-term and Short-term orientation emphasize individuals’ attitudes toward time. Long-Term Orientation “stands for the fostering of virtues oriented towards future rewards, in particular, perseverance and thrift. Its opposite pole”, while Short-Term Orientation “stands for the fostering of virtues related to the past and present, in particular, respect for tradition, preservation of ‘face’ and fulfilling social obligations” [3].

2.6 Indulgence and Restraint

According to Hofstede’s definition, Indulgence stands for a society that allows relatively free gratification of basic and natural human desires related to enjoying life and having fun, while Restraint stands for a society that controls the gratification of needs and regulates it by means of strict social norms [2].
Indulgence and Restraint mean the degree to which a society allows for the basic needs of people and their desire to enjoy the pleasures of life. In an indulgent culture, people are free to enjoy life and have fun. In a restrained culture, freedom and entertainment are not allowed.

3. Analysis on the Commencement Speeches of the Presidents of Harvard University and Peking University

Using the Country Comparison Tool published on the Hofstede Insights website [4], result of the cultural comparison between China and the United States is obtained, as shown in Fig 1 below. (Source: https://www.geert-hofstede.com/)

![Fig. 1 Cultural Comparison of China and the United States](image)

As indicated in the graph, among the six dimensions, the differences in scores between China and the United States are chiefly reflected in the four dimensions: Power Distance, Individualism and Collectivism, Long-term and Short-term Orientation, and Indulgence and Restraint, revealing different cultural characteristics between the two countries. However, there are little differences in the other two dimensions. Therefore, this paper only probes into cultural differences between China and the United States in the commencement speeches of the presidents of Harvard University and Peking University from the aforementioned four dimensions.

3.1 Power Distance

Figure 1 shows that China’s PDI score (the corresponding score is 80) is much higher than that of the U.S. (America’s PDI score is 40), reflecting that China belongs to a high power distance culture while America belongs to a low power distance culture. To be more specific, the Chinese are inclined to accept the unequal distribution of power. In contrast, Americans hold that everyone is supposed to be treated equally.

3.1.1 The Power Distance in the Commencement Speeches Given by the Presidents of Peking University

According to Hofstede, power is an essential fact, and the senior should be revered in a high power distance culture [2].

The remarks of President Xi Jinping are highlighted ((1), (2), and (3)), which clearly indicate President Xi Jinping has a leading role in society and that all people need to follow President Xi Jinping’s guidance, suggesting that power is vital in Chinese society.

(1)两个月前，习近平总书记来到北大考察，希望青年人要“爱国、励志、求真、力行”。
(Two months ago, General Secretary Xi Jinping came to Peking University to visit the university,
hoping that young people would “love the country, be inspired, seek the truth, and practice with earnestness.”) (Lin Jianhua, 2018)

(2) 新冠肺炎疫情暴发以来, 在以习近平同志为核心的党中央坚强领导下, 全国人民众志成城, 打响了抗疫阻击战。 (Since the outbreak of the new coronavirus pneumonia epidemic, under the strong leadership of the CPC Central Committee with Comrade Xi Jinping as its core, the people of the country have united as one and fought a war of resistance against the disease.) (Hao Ping, 2020)

(3) 七一前夕, 习近平总书记带领中央政治局同志参观北大红楼时指出, 北京大学是新文化运动的中心和五四运动的策源地, 最早在我国传播马克思主义思想, 也是我们党在北京早期革命活动的历史见证地, 在建党过程中具有重要地位。总书记还指出: “这是北大的骄傲, 也是北大的光荣。” 我们北大全体师生要弘扬光荣传统, 庶续红色血脉, 不负时代, 砥砺前行。 (On the eve of July 1, when Xi Jinping, general secretary of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China (CPC), leading the comrades of the Political Bureau of the Communist Party of China (CPC) Central Committee to visit the Red Building of Peking University, he pointed out that Peking University was the center of the New Culture Movement and the birthplace of the May Fourth Movement, the earliest to spread Marxist thought in our country, and also a place of historical witness to the early revolutionary activities of our Party in Beijing, which has an important position in the process of founding the Party. The General Secretary also pointed out, “This is the pride and the honor of Peking University.” We, all teachers and students of Peking University, should carry forward the glorious tradition, continue the red bloodline, live up to the times, and move forward.) (Hao Ping, 2021)

In the commencement speeches given by presidents of Peking University, there are some examples indicating that the elder should be venerated. The presidents of Peking University, Hao Ping and Wang Enge both emphasized that the young students are supposed to learn their school professors’ great virtues ((4) and (5)). Furthermore, veteran alumni’ dedication to the country have been mentioned many times in commencement speeches ((6) and (7))

(4) 彭老甘受清贫, 默默奉献, 正是老一辈北大人生坚守的群体特质的生动写照。希望这种高尚的道德追求能够在你们身上生生不息, 薪火相传。 (Peng’s willingness to suffer poverty and silent dedication is a vivid portrayal of the group traits that the older generation of Peking University people have adhered to throughout their lives. I hope that this noble moral pursuit will be passed on to you.) (Wang Enge, 2014)

(5) 北大还有很多老教授们, 虽然已到退休年龄, 依然从事着科学前沿领域的研究。老教师们尚且“志在千里”, 我们更应该向他们学习。 (There are still many old professors at Peking University who are still engaged in research in cutting-edge fields of science, even though they have reached retirement age. We should learn their spirit of “one aims for the far-off future”.) (Hao Ping, 2019)

(6) 老校友屠呦呦是我国第一位在本土荣获诺贝尔生理学或医学奖的科学家。她成功的背后充满着艰辛...(Old alumna Tu Youyou is the first scientist in China to win the Nobel Prize in Physiology or Medicine. Behind her success is a lot of hard work.) (Hao Ping, 2019)

(7) 我国翻译界泰斗、北大教授许渊冲先生今年虚岁已经满百。他毕生致力于中西文化交流....(Mr. Xu Yuanchong, a professor at Peking University and a leading figure in the field of translation in China, has reached the age of 100 this year. He has devoted his life to the exchange of Chinese and Western cultures...) (Hao Ping, 2020)

3.1.2 The Power Distance in the Commencement Speeches Given by the Presidents of Harvard University

One of the features of low power distance is the equality of every individual [2]. Both Bacow and Faust, the two presidents of Harvard University, had lunch with students and heard their thoughts or experiences in the university ((8) and (9)), which reveals that the relationship between presidents of university and students is equal.

(8) I had lunch with a dozen or so seniors about a month ago, and I asked them to characterize their
four years here. (Faust, 2018)

(9) This past week I had lunch with thirty graduating seniors. It was wonderful to hear how they think they have changed and matured during their four years here. (Bacow, 2019)

Bacow said “Thank you for sharing... and for teaching me so well” to students, indicating that he put himself on an equal footing with his students and there wasn’t a power distance between them (10).

(10) I helped to advise three of our incoming first-year undergraduates this year, and they helped me experience and understand Harvard through their eyes. To Andrew, Claire, and Karen, thank you for sharing your first year with me and for teaching me so well. (Bacow, 2019)

3.2 Individualism and Collectivism

According to Figure 1, Chinese culture (China’s IDV score is 20) is inclined to be collectivist while the United States (America’s IDV score is 91) belongs to an individualist culture. Individuals from collectivist cultures value the relationship with others and harmony of the society. On the contrary, individuals from individualist cultures pay more attention to self-realization and individual achievement.

3.2.1 Collectivism in the Commencement Speeches Given by the Presidents of Peking University

Hofstede pointed out some features of collectivist societies such as the emphasis on “we” consciousness and belonging [2].

The president of Peking University have “we” consciousness. For instance, in the commencement speech from 2012 to 2021 of Peking University, presidents all mentioned “Beida People”. It refers to the group of faculty and students at Peking University, revealing collective consciousness of Chinese university presidents ((11), (12),(13) and (14)).

(11) 无论选择了怎样的人生路径, 无论遭遇到怎样的艰难困苦, 你们都要永远牢记北大人的情感和品格......(No matter what path you choose in life and what kind of hardship you encounter, you should always remember the spirit and character of the Beida people...) (Zhou Qifeng, 2012)

(12) 同学们, “梦想”是当今中国最富有感染力的一个关键词, 也是激励一代又一代青年, 一代又一代北大人永恒的关键词。(“Dream” is one of the most contagious keywords in China today, and it is also the eternal keyword that inspires generations of young people and Beida people.) (Wang Enge, 2013)

(13) 勇敢地融入时代, 是每个北大人最好的选择。(Courageous integration into the times is the best choice for Beida people) (Lin Jianhua, 2016)

(14) ......用实际行动生动诠释了新时代北大人爱国、进步、民主、科学的使命担当。(...vividly presented the patriotic, progressive, democratic and scientific mission of Beida people in the new era with practical actions.) (Hao Ping, 2021)

A sense of belonging to one’s own country is stressed in Chinese collectivist culture. In commencement speeches, the president of Peking University, Hao Ping, always mentioned that young people should love China (15) and make great contributions to the country ((16), (17) and (18)). These sentences emphasize the cultivation of a sense of national belonging among the young generation, which suggests that China is a Collectivist country.

(15) 每一代青年都有自己的际遇和机缘, 国家需要青年, 青年也将自己的命运与国家的命运紧密相连。(Each generation of young people has its own opportunities and chances. The country needs young people, and young people also closely linked their destiny with the fate of the country.) (Hao Ping, 2019)

(16) 对国家和民族怀有赤子之心、报国之志, 是实现我们人生价值的最大定力。只有具备这样的定力, 才能为国家和民族尽到自己的一份责任, 贡献一份力量。(Having an utter innocence for the country and the nation and the will to serve the country is the greatest strength to realize the value of our lives. Only with this kind of determination can we do our part and contribute to the country and the nation.) (Hao Ping, 2019)
3.2.2 Individualism in the Commencement Speeches Given by the Presidents of Harvard University

According to Hofstede, individualist societies attach importance to self-actualization by every individual [3]. Individual development and realization of goals are very crucial to American students on the ground that personal success is paid much attention to. In commencement speeches, Faust, the president of Harvard University, mentioned that one of the goals of Harvard College is to achieve personal transformation (19). The president Bacow also mentioned “Celebrate your achievements” (20) and “discovered the truth about yourself” (21), which suggests that individual development is paid much attention to.

(19) Harvard College is a residential community of learning with a goal, in the words of its dean, of personal and social as well as intellectual transformation. (Faust, 2016)

(20) To the class of 2020, today is about you. Celebrate your achievements. Savor your successes. Rest—even for a day—upon your laurels. (Bacow, 2020)

(21) Faced with obstacles, each of you mustered your courage, set your sights, and overcame the insurmountable. You expanded your understanding of who you are and what you can do. And you discovered the truth about yourself—a veritas worth pursuing if there ever was one. (Bacow, 2020)

3.3 Long-term and Short-term Orientation

Figure 1 shows China’s LTO score (the corresponding score is 87) is much higher than that of the U.S. (America’s LTO score is 26), which suggests China is a high-LTO country while America belongs to a low-LTO culture. Individuals from high-LTO culture value events in the future. On the contrary, individuals in a culture with a Short-term orientation treasure things in the past or at present.

3.3.1 Long-term Orientation in the Commencement Speeches Given by the Presidents of Peking University

According to Hofstede, in societies with Long-term orientation, the most important events in life will occur in the future. Furthermore, thrift and perseverance are significant goals [2]. In commencement speeches, the president of Peking University, Hao Ping and Zhou Qifeng mentioned that students should exert great effort for future or long-term goals ((22), (23) and (24)), which reveals that Chinese tend to take the long view of things rather than focus on the immediate future.

(22) 同学们,让我们一起奋斗,一起拼搏,用扎扎实实的行动,在未来不同的岗位中,延续北京大学的光荣与梦想,谱写辉煌壮丽的人生篇章! (Let's strive together, work hard together, use solid actions to continue the glory and dream of Peking University in different positions in the future, and write a brilliant and magnificent chapter of life!) (Zhou Qifeng, 2012)

(23) 我们正处在实现“两个一百年”奋斗目标的历史进程中。青年一代的理想、本领和担当，就是国家的前途和民族的希望。我衷心祝愿同学们，在新的征程中，激扬青春，勇做走在新时代前面的奋进者、开拓者、奉献者，开创更加美好的未来! (We are in the historical process of realizing the “Two Centenary” goals. The ideals, skills, and commitment of the young generation are the future of the country and the hope of the nation. I sincerely wish every student in the new journey to make youth colorful with energy, to have the courage to walk in front of the new era as striver, pioneer, and dedicator, and to create a better future!) (Hao Ping, 2020)
3.3.2 Short-term Orientation in the Commencement Speeches Given by the Presidents of Harvard University

The Short-term Orientation is different from Long-term orientation in that individuals from societies with Short-term Orientation assert that most significant events in life will happen in the past or now [2].

In commencement speeches of the president of Harvard University, Faust paid much attention to challenges that globalization and technology bring, which is consistent with the feature of short-term orientation (25). Furthermore, he was concerned about the important current events across the country or around the world such as presidential contest and Brexit ((26) and (27)).

(25) We are now in another moment of dramatic shift in higher education: Globalization and technology are prominent among the forces that challenge us once again to examine how we do our work and how we define our aims...(Faust, 2012)

(26) “From comments of astonished pundits on television, in print, and online, to conversations with bewildered friends and colleagues, the question seems unavoidable—and mesmerizing: What is going on? What is happening to the world? The tumultuous state of American politics, spotlighted in this contentious presidential contest; the political challenges around the globe from Brazil to Brexit... (Faust, 2016)

(27) I want to speak today about one of the most important—and in recent months, most contested—of these values. It is one that has provoked debate, dissent, confrontation, and even violence on campuses across the country, and one that has attracted widespread public attention and criticism. (Faust, 2017)

3.4 Indulgence and Restraint

According to Figure 1, China (China’s Indulgence score is 24) tends to be a Restraint country while the United States (America’s Indulgence score is 68) belongs to an Indulgence culture.

3.4.1 Restraint in the Commencement Speeches Given by the Presidents of Peking University

People in cultures with restraint attach little importance to leisure [2].

Both Zhou Qifeng and Wang Enge stressed the significance of hard work and perseverance ((28) and (29)). Wang Enge quoted the saying of a professor to prove that what is momentous is to make and improve one’s own long-term plans (30). These evidences reveal that Chinese people hold that entertainment is not so indispensable and that persistent struggle is worth complimenting.

(28) ‘If you want to achieve success in your career, you must always have high expectations, persistent efforts, and the determination to make your dreams come true. It is the spirit of perseverance that will eventually lead you to success.’ (Zhou Qifeng, 2012)

(29) ‘In the future, in the face of challenges, we should be persistent, confident, and determined. Only in this way can we achieve the success we desire.’ (Wang Enge, 2017)
for throughout our lives. Set up such a goal as early as possible, and use your life experience to continuously enrich and improve this goal in a long time of exploring.”) (Wang Enge, 2013)

(30) 北大人 “爱国、进步、民主、科学” 的传统不会改变, “勤奋、严谨、求实、创新”的学风不会改变......(The tradition of “Patriotism, Advancement, Democracy and Science” of Beida people will not change, and the academic style of “Diligence, Rigor, Practicality and Creativity” will not change...) (Wang Enge, 2014)

3.4.2 Indulgence in the Commencement Speeches Given by the Presidents of Harvard University

Freedom of speech and the importance of leisure are foregrounded in cultures with indulgence [2].

Both Faust and Bacow mentioned graduation is a day with joy and hope, deserving celebrating with your families or friends ((31) and (34)). What’s more, Faust highlighted the significance of freedom of speech by saying “protecting and nourishing free speech is for us a fundamental commitment” (33) and talked about how to build an environment for the prosperity of free speech (32). These two instances unveil that freedom of speech is considered as an indispensable right in American society.

(31) This is a day of joy and celebration, of happy endings and new beginnings, of families and friends, of achievements and hopes. (Faust, 2017)

(32) For free speech to flourish, we must build an environment where everyone takes responsibility for the right not just to speak, but to hear and be heard, where everyone assumes the responsibility to treat others with dignity and respect. (Faust, 2017)

(33) Protecting and nourishing free speech is for us a fundamental commitment, and one that demands constant attention and vigilance, especially in a time of sharp political and social polarization. (Faust, 2018)

(34) One day, you will celebrate your graduation on campus with classmates and friends in familiar places—and that day cannot come soon enough. (Bacow, 2021)

4. Conclusion

In this paper, specific manifestations of cultural diversities between the Commencement Speeches in Harvard University and Peking University Presidents’ Commencement Speeches have been elaborately expounded from diverse aspects, including degree of equality among people, emphasis on students’ individual achievements or sense of belonging, concern about things taking place at the moment or in the future as well as attitudes towards leisure. Peking University’s speeches reveal that in China, the senior is revered, and “we” consciousness and belonging are paid much attention. People are also inclined to take the long view of things rather than concentrate on the immediate future. In addition, Chinese attach little importance to enjoyment. On the contrary, Harvard University’s speeches reflect that the relationship between presidents of university and students is equal. Much importance is attached to students’ personal development and the momentous current events. Furthermore, people place a high value of freedom of speech and the leisure. Moreover, this paper also demonstrates two different education concepts behind the commencement speeches.

So it is a good idea to adopt Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions to explore the cultural differences reflected in university Presidents’ commencement speeches. Through the detailed analysis, this study has contributed to a better understanding of this type of commencement speech through cultural dimensions, which also opens way for further study in similar types of commencement speech based on Hofstede’s Cultural Dimensions.

Nevertheless, the following limitations need to be noted.

First, the data collection of this study is not sufficient. The author has probed into the cultural differences of the presidents’ commencement speeches only in the two eminent universities and only from 2012 to 2021. Therefore, future studies can apply a larger sample of the speeches to make the conclusion of research more credible.

Furthermore, the author has only focused on the analysis of cultural differences on the basis of the
four dimensions including Power Distance, Individualism and Collectivism, Long-term and Short-term orientation and Indulgence and Restraint. However, the two remaining dimensions, namely Uncertainty Avoidance and Masculinity and Femininity are not analyzed. So, in the further research, more consideration should be taken to them when discussing cultural differences between China and United States.

By conducting a comparative analysis of commencement speeches, the author expect that Chinese English learners can have a better commanding of the cultural differences between China and America so that some cultural mistakes in cross-cultural communication can be averted.

References


