

## **UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL DIFFERENCES: A CASE STUDY OF CHINESE CULTURE**

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### **Abstract**

This paper aims to focus on differentiations of culture. Most cultural notions are stemmed from the concept work of Hofstede. They all begin with a classification of culture throughout the creation of an ontology that distinguishes relatable levels of reality. One illustration will be highlighted as a case study of Chinese culture because China continues improving with its process of globalisation. Then, it finds itself straddling different national cultures that can lead to a problem of cross-cultural communication. This can cause a problem of miscommunication and misunderstanding which arises because people in different cultures often understand complex messages differently. Hence, a level theory of Hofstede was to act as a basic for the evaluation not only of national culture, but also of corporate culture. However, these level theories are not a very dynamic representation of culture and its manifestations that impoverishes the way that phenomenal manifestations of culture can be explained. On the other hand an alternative approach was adopted by Schwartz that did not talk ontology at all, it has been demonstrated that there is some relationship between the outcomes of the Hofstede and Schwartz results. A new ontology is also provided that is distinct from Hofstede's level theory, and derives from the paradigm of knowledge cybernetics by Yolles since 2006. This enables both the outcomes from Hofstede and Schwartz to be identified, and provides a new way of directly comparing different cultural mapping theories.

**Keywords:** Culture, Cross-Cultural Communication, Corporate Culture, Knowledge Cybernetics

### **1. Introduction**

Since the 1970s, China has been subjected to an improving process of globalisation as the nation's commercial doors were opened to promote in foreign trade and global economic investment. Hence, cross-cultural communication is one of the problems which is often found. It always happens because each culture is unique and has some respect different. This leads to have an impact on the success of people's ability to communicate meaningfully, particularly when individuals from different cultures try to exchange information and knowledge through the exchange of messages. Major problem is due to the use of language applied to mediate exchanging meanings. These meanings are part of the cross-cultural communication process where misunderstanding and miscommunication can easily increase. Thus, the creation of a cultural mapping process that enables the exploration of the characteristics that compose culture, is further explored from the work Fan (2002) from his examination in the year 1987, called

'*Chinese Culture Collection*'. Therefore, the paper is elaborated on using a schema, called '*Knowledge Cybernetics*' with the purpose framing a new map of the nature of culture.

## **2. Understanding of Culture**

Culture is important as it influences not only how individuals behave, but how they perceive and understand the social behaviour of others as well (Spencer-Oatey, 2000). Culture presents language, behaviour, social behaviour, and a cognitive belief system (such as attitudes, values and beliefs). Moreover, the beliefs are conceived to have three significant components: cognitive, affective and behavioural (Rokeach, 1968). It can occur during cultural development patterns of social knowledge are developing which is effective in establishing shared meaning, called normative. For example, during the Chinese Cultural Revolution, Chairman Mao's little red book became an icon for life-style of a main group of Chinese. On the other hand, in Europe, there is a football star, named Mr. David Beckham has taken on a similar role for a significant subsection of society. From these two examples have given represent icons, but their natures are very different. The little red book was a symbol for the Chinese Cultural Revolution, on the other hand, David Beckham is a hero of the global social. Therefore, the global social elevated them by giving value their image and style of life.

Culture has an individual dimension where it can lead to the impact of the individual on a culture which is likely to be relative to the size of the population that make it up because of its normative nature, nevertheless other factors also come into play like how constant the culture is. Moreover, it is also composed of implicit and explicit patterns of social behaviour through the acquisition and transmission of its symbols (Kroeber & Kluckhohn, 1952). It can distinguish between macro-culture (a national culture) and its embedded micro-cultures (such as the Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank of China). However, both of them are not isolated from each other, but they are interacted. Therefore, this is not just for a particular language, customs, art, religion or metaphysic, but it is an implicit commonality between human beings that some might refer to as human nature.

### **2.1 The Level Theories of Culture**

When most people talk about a level theory of culture, there are two simple level models, which we can discuss; one level is constituted by values and the other by *behaviour* or *artefacts*. However, exploring the ontology of culture can also help to contribute an understanding of its nature as it is the study of being existence and it can be used to define the nature of reality through argumented systematization (Cocchiarella, 1991). Therefore, the values level is not directly visible, but the behavior or artefacts is.

However, Hofstede (1991) conceived of the levels as being embedded one with the other like the layers of an onion, creating a mutual dependency between them. Therefore, Table 1 shows the differentiations between values, rituals, heroes, symbols, and practices as well as the explanations.

<b>Manifestations of culture</b>		
	<b>Type of Manifestation</b>	<b>Explanation</b>
Practices: visible to an observer, and having culturally specific meaning	Symbols	Words, gestures, pictures, or objects that carry a particular meaning within a culture, and who thus serve as models for behaviour
	Heroes	Personifications having highly prized characteristics that serve as models for behaviour.
	Rituals	Collective activities that are technically superfluous but socially essential within a culture, and are carried out for their own sake
Values		Non-specific feelings of good and evil, beauty and ugly, normal and abnormal, rational and irrational; within work culture, assessment of work goals is made like the characteristics of an ideal job, general beliefs, like competition between employees usually does more harm than good.

Table 1: The Nature of Culture and its Manifestations (Hofstede et al, 1990)

**2.2 Critique of Hofstede’s Notions of Culture**

In the year 1992, Hofstede suggested that cultures are one of systematically causal and it credits strong causality to national culture (Hofstede, 1992). However, it can have a possibility to accept the existence of national culture (Mc Sweeney, 2002). On the other hand, Mc Sweeney (2002) concerned on Hofstede's work based on his assumptions about organisational, national and occupational cultures, and the methodology have been used. Moreover, Smith (2002) also raised a number of psychometric and methodological questions for Hofstede's work on the levels of analysis issue, the problems in relating individual behaviour to cultural context, and the validity of the dimensions. Williamson (2002) also pointed out some of Mc Sweeney’s criticisms are arguments against Hofstede’s logic from within the positivist paradigm he adopted, but others researchers seem to come from an alternative interpretivist paradigm. According to this perspective, they tend to reject Hofstede’s assumptions.

There are some criticisms about the fifth Hofstede (1991) dimension Confucian Dynamism (or Long-versus Short-Term Orientation) created to address elements of Chinese culture. It was formulated after an examination of a 'Chinese Values Survey' (CVS) undertaken by the Chinese Culture Connection (CCC) group (Bond, 1988, cited by McSweeney, 2002). None of the CVS factors could be correlated with Hofstede’s Uncertainty Avoidance, and his grafting on of this fifth dimension was intended to resolve this problem. Therefore, Uncertainty Avoidance, one of Hofstede’s four original dimensions, is seen to be irrelevant to Chinese populations, and as a result was reduced from being a universal dimension of national cultures to a non-generic dimension (Bond, 1988; Lowe & Oswick, 1996). While formulated as part of Hofstede’s generic model and thus intended as a dimension relevant for all cultures, it could not be identified in the

data Hofstede originally had because in that country due to the domination of sample short term orientation. In considering a connection between occupational and organisational culture, it may be thought that there is a relationship between organisational paradigms and departmental paradigms. Hence, it cannot be assumed that there is much cultural correspondence between related departments in different organisations. It may be said that occupational homogeneity occurs when two occupational cultures are qualitatively similar. For example, we may be a postulate that all departments of finance in all organisations in China have a similar occupational culture. There is also anecdotal evidence that such occupational homogeneity should not be assumed.

**3. Knowledge Cybernetics**

In the year 2006, Yolles developed a theory, called Knowledge cybernetics which has developed through cybernetic principles and metaphor. It adopts a level theory, but it is not related to the layer theory of Hofstede. It begins with an initial three level theory, but if its can be elaborated into more levels according to changing context. Yolles (2006) adopted a theory Knowledge cybernetic through cybernetics principles and metaphor from a level through which is not related to the layer theory of Hofstede. The theory is concerned with social dynamics based on knowledge and knowledge processes, and recognises the importance of communications and control. It also includes feedback and feed-forward that enables, for instance, thinking to be turned into behaviour in a way that can be controlled and evaluated, and knowledge to highlight this relationship. It is also concerned with social collectives that have both a social and cultural system. Therefore, Figure 1 shows the symbolic relationship between the three levels of Being: believing, thinking/ feeling and doing/ action.

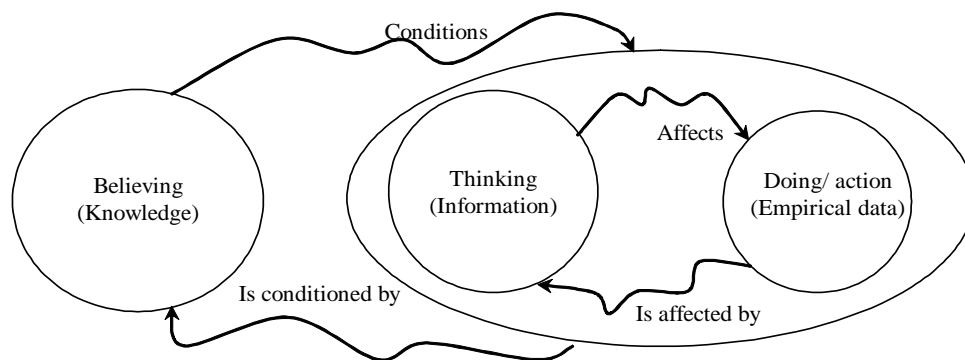


Figure 1: Elementary relationship between three types of reality

Figure 1 presents the elementary relationship between three types of reality. It is associated with knowledge, thinking is associated with information, and doing is empirically associated and is therefore data related. These three attributes do have a mutual relationship in the autonomous being. Moreover, Figure 2 shows more details of the three domains constitute distinct modes of being: measurable energetic phenomenal behaviour, information rich images or systems of thought, and knowledge related existence that is expressed through patterns of meaning.

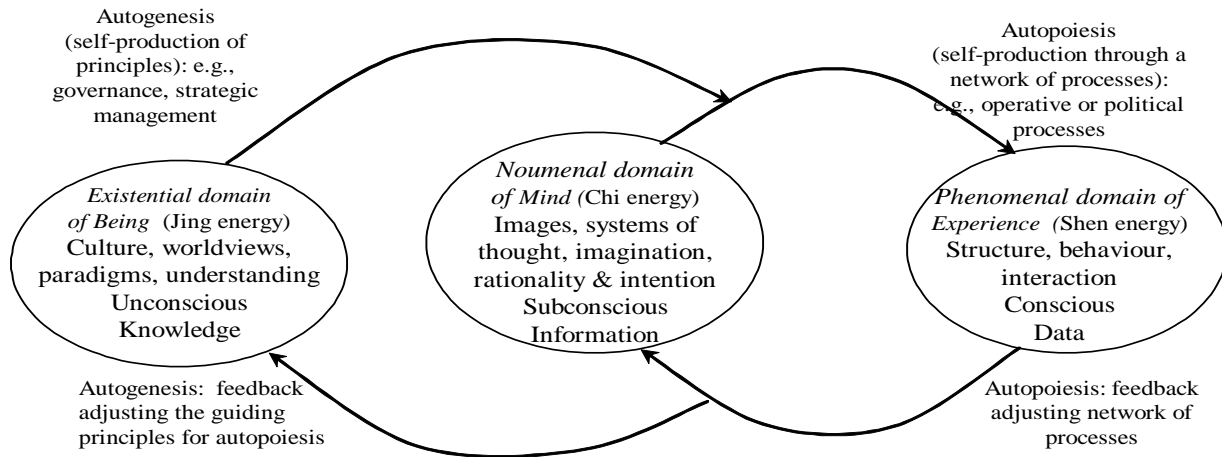


Figure 2: Social Viable Systems (SVS) model based on Schwarzian model of Autonomous Viable Systems, where autonomy is a function of both autogenesis and autoipoiesis

Figure 2 shows the three domains of Social Viable Systems (SVS) which are analytically distinct classifications of being, and they each have properties that are manifestations of knowledge. The linkage between the domains is explored using notions of relevance, as originally proposed by Schutz and Luckman (1975). It is clear that the level theory established through knowledge cybernetics provides a detailed way of exploring the nature and consequence of culture. However it can be reformulated in other ways too, explaining how the collective unconscious can be differentiated into states and disposition, which derives from the work in human psychology by Wollheim (1999).

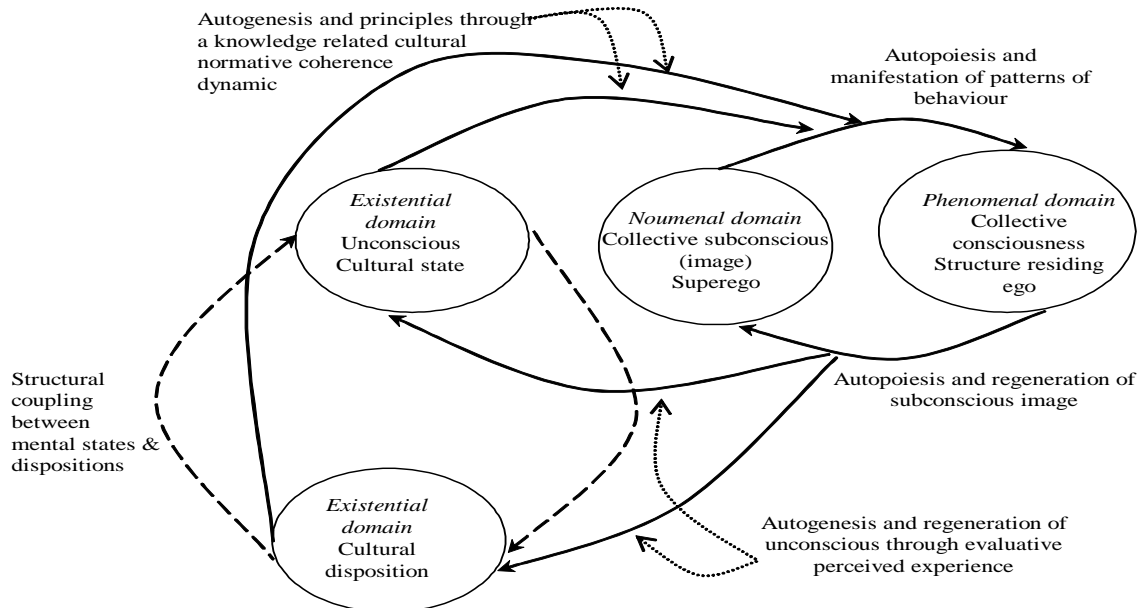


Figure 3: Relationship between the ego, superego, cultural states and disposition, where states and disposition have a shared history through their structural coupling.

Figure 3 shows that cultural state and disposition have a history of mutual interactive development and the future of one affects that of the other. Where no structural coupling occurs between the cultural state and disposition, analytical schizophrenia (adopting the analytical form of two minds, rather than the more popular clinical meaning of the word) might be diagnosed as having a potential manifestation in the organisation. It may be that the parts will be structured. Therefore, an identifiable group represents each of the parts, but it is more likely that it represents a meta-structure that simply indicates that these parts exist in some distribution across the executive. The conflict that might develop from this can result in the inability of the executive to come to normative decisions.

#### **4. Reflections on Chinese Culture**

Hofstede (1980) appeared to assume that national territory corresponds to cultural homogeneity, but China is not homogenous, with strong regional differences and minority ethnic/ religious subcultures. There is also a problem with the use of some of his terms. Hofstede's fifth dimension for Chinese culture, "Confucian Dynamism", constitutes a "long-term orientation", or the capacity to adapt traditions to new situations, willingness to save, thrifty approach to scarce resources, willingness to persevere over the long term, and subordinate one's own interests to achieve a purpose, and a concern with Virtue. It may be argued that the "capacity to adapt traditions to new situations" is not really something that is uniquely Chinese. All durable sociocultural collectives survive because they have the capacity to adapt, and a consequence of this is often a change in culture.

McSweeney's (2002) believes Confucian Dynamism is an inadequate cultural dimension, and its creation may be seen as a quick fix to respond to research from the Chinese Values Survey. In addition, Uncertainty Avoidance appears to be irrelevant to Chinese populations as generic dimension. Other approaches to examining Chinese culture would therefore seem useful. Other approaches have employed Hofstede's classifications, but used different methodologies. Jackson (2001) in a 10 nations study of the relationships between uncertainty avoidance and collectivism with managerial ethical behaviour, places China with Spain and Thailand (but not Hong Kong), in a 'moderate to high collectivism and high power distance' group. Using a sample of 65 managers attending a Beijing business school – a clearly unrepresentative group compared to the Chinese management population – the Chinese/ Spanish management group placed a high ethical importance to external relations concerning gift-giving and gift-accepting, and both judged organisational loyalty issues as having high ethical importance.

However, the Chinese viewed pilfering supplies and taking extra personal time as less ethical than the Spanish. Jackson (2001, p.1294) attributed this to the fact that China 'is likely to be higher in both collectivism and uncertainty avoidance than Spain' and that 'the higher obligation-based culture and higher levels of regulation explain why managers attribute a higher ethical importance....to issues involving relations with the organisation.' Similarly, Chinese managers attributed high importance to group issues, such as passing blame to others and claiming credit for others' work. Jackson (2001) concluded that Hofstede's dimensions are over-simplified, and that individualism in particular is more complex, bringing in the work of



Schwartz (1994) and ‘egalitarian commitment’ to explain the high ethical importance attached to group relations issues in supposedly ‘individualistic’ countries like the United Kingdom.

Other studies of Chinese culture have taken other research approaches, especially in considering the impact of Confucianism on culture in China. Confucianism is undisputedly the most influential thought that forms a foundation for Chinese culture and interpersonal behaviour (Pye, 1992). It provides both the behavioural and moral doctrine of human relationships, social structures, virtuous behaviour, and ethics. Its principles extol loyalty and duty, love and obedience, obligation and submission, seniority and trust (Fan, 2002). Confucianism is seen as influencing the way employees perceive the organisation as a symbolic family, amplified by Maoist ideology emphasising group rewards. This implies a stress on organisational hierarchy, authority and order, mutual obligations and the provision of benefits in exchange for loyalty, and harmony, long- term relationship, a concern for face, respect and integrity, and the avoidance of direct criticism in interpersonal relationships.

The impact of demographic and cultural values on organisational commitment in China has also been explored by Chen and Francesco (2000) in a survey of 333 employees in the Peoples Republic of China. They found that Chinese employees behaved differently from their Western counterparts in terms of organisational commitment. Some relationships between commitment and demographic variables were not consistent with the United States’ samples, with only position, but not age, gender, education or tenure, positively influencing commitment, and gender, but not education, moderating the relationship between turnover intentions and commitment (it being stronger for men, as in the US). Hence, these studies show the importance of looking at the changing dynamics of Chinese culture. Cultural arguments link Chinese economic performance to Confucian values (e.g., Hutchings and Murray, 2002). This tendency arose through the creation of a negative association up to the 1990s, but more recently with a positive relationship that, however, neglects the ways cultures change, and interact with, and influence, each other.

Confucian culture not only stresses holism, but also practical realism and pragmatism, valuing practical application (Hofstede, 1991), and China has always flourished when open to other cultures (e.g., Tang/ Song Dynasties), more so than when culturally closed (e.g., Qing Dynasty). Ideas have been introduced from outside, indigenous elements reinterpreted, links built with foreign ideas, and cultural elements refocused (e.g. education re-directed to science and technology rather than the humanities). An about face on Confucian values may also occur with *li* (profit) put ahead of *yi* (justice), and ‘outdated’ values may be rejected. Guanxi (relationships, networks or connections) which once may have been seen as good for business and useful for efficient informational financial channels, may now be seen as developing into ‘cosy relationships’. Their significance may be declining as price and quality become more important (Speece, 2001). However, in a comparison of networking in China and in Arab countries, Hutchings and Weir (2004) continue to emphasise the importance of guanxi in Chinese business.

**5. Distinguishing between Chinese and Western Culture**

According to Newell (1999), differences between China and the West occur primarily through its community nature as opposed to what we shall refer to the utility paradigm of the West. A modified version of Newell’s model is presented in Table 2. In particular, Newell notes that there are three attributes of Chinese culture that are not found in the West, which support an orientation it has towards the community paradigm. One of these notions is *guanxi*, or interpersonal relations. Through *guanxi* the Chinese have made personal relationships into a carefully calculated science (Butterfield, 1982). Personal networks are of key importance for conducting business, and authority is based on interpersonal relations rather than legal rationality (Boisot and Child, 1988). *Guanxi* is essential if approval is to be granted in order to access anything in China (Shaw and Meier, 1994). *Guanxi* produces personal obligations, for instance in response to requests for assistance by someone in the network.

Characteristics	Utility Paradigm	Community Paradigm
Nature of knowledge	Objectively defined concepts and facts	Tacit and socially constructed
Knowledge acquisition	Can be captured and codified	Developed through group based knowledge sharing
Best practice for organisational improvement	Objective rules universally applied to all organisations	Principles that organisations use to locally define their own rules
Knowledge migration	Transfer through formal explicit processes (e.g., notes) enhanced by exposure to exemplars	Personal/local knowledge developed through group learning processes that create experience
Dominant metaphor	Memory	Group processes
Critical success factors	Identified by Western narrative	Trust and belonging

Table 2: Relating the Western commodity and the more Chinese community paradigm

There is another distinction between Western and Chinese culture that arises through the notion of “best practice” that was originally seen as a set of universal rules<sup>1</sup>. Newell explains that this notion as supported in many institutions in the West is problematic for Chinese organisations. The reason is that it engages with a process of black boxing knowledge (Scarbrough, 1996), which leads to the adoption of technologies that are neither understood nor properly appropriated (Clark and Staunton, 1989). Blackbox mentality is worldview and ultimately cultural in nature and necessarily has societal effects. One of these is that best practice is likely to be conceptually inconsistent with Chinese culture because of the latter’s collectivistic nature (Hofstede, 1980). Chinese collectivism has an epistemology that accepts dynamism and paradox, and follows the notions embedded in Taoism. Therefore, it should be said that the Chinese aim to seek paradoxes by integrating opposites (Li, 1998). However, it is

<sup>1</sup> In the west today the notion of best practice has changed into meta-best practices, promoting *principles of change* rather than transferable rules.



interesting that the Western notion of the dualism as embedded in the subjective/ objective notions of Foucault, the cultural sensate/ ideational model of Sorokin (1937-1942), or the dialectic materialism of Marx are all theories of paradox in their own way. Like the Taoist principle of Yin/ Yang, all embrace the idea of there being distinct (enantiomer) opposites in interaction that create balance. Hence, just as two related paradigms that are in conflict can be represented as paradox, their interaction can often be depicted as resulting in an evolutionary resolution.

## **6. Conclusion**

It should be said that the notion of culture can be represented by a set of characteristics was practically developed by Hofstede. This work, while being credited with stimulating the area of cross-cultural communications, has also been criticised by a number of authors. Indeed, work by Jackson indicates that Hofstede's classifications are inadequate for Chinese culture. In the face of such criticism other work developed, notably by Schwartz, has been seen in a better light. Until now, however, none of the studies examined has been shown to be generic, and therefore able to operate as a frame of reference for all cultures.

The knowledge cybernetics paradigm, like that of others, adopts a level theory to explain culture and its attributes. It has been used to develop a framework that derives from Fan and his explorations of the Chinese Culture Collection, and this has resulted in a global model of 6 characteristics of culture. However, within the global context a 4 level model of reality has been adopted each of which is seen as a related local context. Each notion of migration, each of the 6 categories can be manifested in each of the local contexts, given 24 different characteristics. Hence, the model is context driven. This framework explicitly incorporates both the Hofstede and Schwartz characteristics across the distinct levels, and provides a comparative exploration of culture.

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