



An Analysis of the Resolution of Conflicts and the Growth of Characters in *A Lifelong Journey* from the Perspective of Cultural Dimension

Qinpei Fan

Department of Foundational Teaching, Shanghai Publishing and Printing College, Shanghai, China

Email: 39312543@qq.com

How to cite this paper: Fan, Q.P. (2023)

An Analysis of the Resolution of Conflicts and the Growth of Characters in *A Lifelong Journey* from the Perspective of Cultural Dimension. *Open Access Library Journal*, 10: e10119.

<https://doi.org/10.4236/oalib.1110119>

Received: April 5, 2023

Accepted: May 21, 2023

Published: May 24, 2023

Copyright © 2023 by author(s) and Open Access Library Inc.

This work is licensed under the Creative Commons Attribution International License (CC BY 4.0).

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>



Open Access

Abstract

This paper analyzes the resolution of conflicts and the growth of characters in the novel “*A Lifelong Journey*” from the perspective of five cultural dimensions (individualism/collectivism; uncertainty avoidance; power distance; masculinity/femininity; long-term and short-term orientation). Through the analysis of the changes in the social background and the development of characters and plots, this paper analyzes the deep value factors for solving the problems people encountered in the living and growing process in contemporary Chinese society.

Subject Areas

Literature, Intercultural Communication

Keywords

Individualism/Collectivism, Uncertainty Avoidance, Power Distance, Masculinity/Femininity, Long-Term and Short-Term Orientation

1. Introduction

1.1. Introduction to *A Lifelong Journey*

In December 2017, “*A Lifelong Journey*” was first published. In August 2019, the author Liang Xiaosheng won the 10th Mao Dun Literature Prize for this work. The author has strict logic and conveys accurate background information. The novel takes the changes in China in the past 50 years since the 1970s as the background. Through a series of social events, such as the educated youth going

to the countryside, workers participating in the third-line construction, the college entrance examination system restoration, the opening up, the enterprise's reform, the laid-off of workers, the transformation of shantytowns, and the fight against corruption, the life of each character is closely linked with social changes.

The main line of this novel takes the members of Zhou family in the "Light" district (a shantytown) of a provincial capital city in the north as the subject, by highlighting the contradictions and puzzles within or outside the family, the growth experience of each family member in each period is truly displayed.

The novel also describes Zhou Bingkun's friends in the sauce factory when he was young, such as the "Six Gentlemen". Some of them seized the opportunity to successfully change their fate when the national college entrance examination was resumed, some were laid off, some went into business, and some began to work part-time. These scenes are similar to what most of the post-70s and 80s experienced when they were young, so almost every reader at that age or older can find similar conflicts and familiar solutions in this novel, and find a microcosm of their own growth.

Since its publication, *A Lifelong Journey* has gained the attention of literary circles and numerous readers. The former researches mainly focus on such literacy perspectives as narrative style, realistic features, and personalities of the characters, while the cultural dimension perspective is not mentioned.

1.2. Introduction to Cultural Dimension Theory

Professor Geert Hofstede has investigated, analyzed and compared the cultures of more than 50 countries in the world. With the publication of his academic monograph *Culture's Consequences*, his theory has been applied worldwide. Through statistical analysis and theoretical reasoning, Hofstede identified five dimensions: Individualism versus collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity versus femininity, and long-term versus short-term orientation to time. Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory is an effective framework for measuring cultural differences and value orientations of different countries.

2. Analysis of the Resolution of Conflicts and the Growth of Characters from Five Cultural Dimensions

The background of *A Lifelong Journey* is authentic and the plot development is realistic. This paper analyzes the resolution of conflicts and the growth of characters in the novel from the perspective of cultural dimension. Through the analysis of the changes in the social background and the development of characters and plots, this paper analyzes the deep value orientations for solving the problems people encountered in the living and growing process in contemporary Chinese society.

2.1. Individualism versus Collectivism

Through statistical analysis of the data collected from more than 50 countries

and economic areas, Hofstede puts forward an individualism-collectivism index (IDV) to assess a culture's relative location on the individualism-collectivism dimension. The level of individualism and collectivism reflects that different societies have different attitudes towards collectivism. In an individualistic society, each person only takes care of his or her own interests, and each person freely chooses his or her own actions. Such cultures as the United States (91), Netherlands (80) and Ireland (70) [1] have relatively high IDVs and therefore are highly individualistic, believe that people are only supposed to take care of themselves, and perhaps their immediate families. In a country where collectivism prevails, everyone must consider the interests of others, and members of the organization have spiritual obligations and loyalty to the organization. Such cultures as China (20), Panama (11) and Guatemala (6) all have relatively low IDVs and prefer a collectivist orientation as a cultural value. These cultures require absolute loyalty to the group.

The preparation of food by the mother before the Spring Festival, the making of dumplings during family reunions and the taking of family photos are all rituals of the Spring Festival. The Spring Festival is different every year, but people's feelings for the Spring Festival remain unchanged. Before the reform and opening up, the mother of the Zhou family had to make great efforts to buy meat, so that the whole family could eat meat dumplings for the Spring Festival reunion. After the reform and opening up, there is no need to buy meat in advance. During the Spring Festival, you can sit in front of the TV and watch the Spring Festival Gala together. The focus of watching the Spring Festival Gala is not the program itself, but the family being together. The atmosphere of the reunion of generations is very typical of collectivism in Chinese culture.

As the eldest son, Zhou Bingyi adhered to the responsibility of being a good scholar and then a good official. He loved the people, and made great efforts in the restructuring of the military factory and the demolition of "Light" district (a shantytown), home of his childhood. As a good official who came out of poor areas, he often separated from his wife for work, and finally lost his life for work. In many cases, he didn't have time to eat in order to work, and was bent on doing more things for the people. What's more, in order to solve the employment problem of 300 workers, he drank more than 20 glasses of high liquor at the dinner table, which led to stomach perforation. He finally got gastric cancer because he didn't eat well for a long time. His wife had repeatedly advised him that it was OK to work for the sake of the people, but he should take good care of his own body before he can do more things for the people. The contradiction between the country and the individual was highlighted here, which puts the feelings of family and country into a new context: in the relationship between the family and the country, it has always been to give up the small family for the big family (the country), but there is a new interpretation in this episode. Only by taking good care of himself can he do more for the masses. His ideal and ambition is never his own happiness, but the real happiness of the people.

2.2. Uncertainty Avoidance

Uncertainty avoidance: refers to the degree to which people tolerate ambiguity (low uncertainty avoidance) or are threatened by ambiguity and uncertainty (high uncertainty avoidance). Hofstede puts forward an uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) to assess a culture's relative location along the uncertainty avoidance dimension. Such cultures as Greece (112), Uruguay (100) and Japan (92) [2], have relatively high UAI and prefer to avoid uncertainty as a cultural value. While such cultures as Singapore (8), Sweden (29) and the United Kingdom (35) have relatively low UAI and therefore have a high tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity.

The UAI for China (40) and the United States (46) comes quite close. However, that does not mean those two countries share similar attitudes towards uncertainty and ambiguity. The practical application of uncertainty avoidance at the value level is very complicated. The same cultural group will have different tendencies in different fields of social life, sometimes high and sometimes low, which has been confirmed by many studies. In China, there is low uncertainty avoidance in terms of language (contract) and internal regulations of organizations, while there is high uncertainty avoidance in terms of work choices, such as avoiding high-risk entrepreneurship but preferring stable and low-risk civil servant, tending to buy a house and settle down as soon as possible. In the United States, there is high uncertainty avoidance in terms of language, especially in the strictness of contract terms, while there is low uncertainty avoidance in terms of work choices, people in the United States like innovation and adventure, but don't like to live a disciplined life.

For low uncertainty avoidance aspect, in order to improve the housing conditions of his family, Bingkun spent 1600 yuan with debt against a spacious Russian-style house in the center of the city. However, it's only been a few days since he was called back by the Housing Authority to return this house to its original owner. It was because the original sales contract was invalid. At that time, the person who sold the house to him was not the owner of the house and had no right to sell the house at all. Bingkun's 1600 yuan was also lost because of the illegal transaction, and he was forced to return to the "Light" district, the shantytown. Nowadays, businessmen in China are quite good at risk avoidance in contracts, however, at that time, low-risk avoidance in words is truly the case.

For high uncertainty avoidance aspect, the kind-hearted and honest Bingkun worked steadfastly and conscientiously and finally was authorized as a "staff" in the magazine and "wept for joy with Zheng Juan" ([3], p. 58). An authorized staff is a term unique to China and exists in national administration, institutions, and enterprises and is generally referred to as a long-term employee. In China, that means "iron rice bowls". In most countries in the world, the vast majority of government functionaries are employed as long-term employees. However, in most capitalist countries people rarely value the identity of a long-term employee so much. Chinese people are absolutely high in uncertainty avoidance when choosing jobs. The status of a civil servant is worth striving for and celebrating.

2.3. Power Distance

Power distance “measures the extent to which the less powerful members of organizations and institutions (like the family) accept and expect that power is distributed unequally. This represents inequality (more versus less), but defined from below, not from above” [4]. In a culture with a large power distance, subordinates have a strong dependence on their superiors. People think that the ideal boss is an enlightened autocratic monarch and a benevolent dictator. In a culture with a small power distance, employees have a higher degree of participation in decision-making, and subordinates have corresponding autonomy within their prescribed scope of responsibility.

The novel starts with the formation of the architectural complex of City A in the 1920s and 1930s. From the perspective of material and style, City A has three architectural complexes, namely, the urban center, the suburban highlands and the depressions. In the center of the city are the single or one-piece buildings built by the exiled Russian aristocracies in the 1920s and 1930s and the horseshoe Stone Street, along which there are complete supporting facilities such as shops, bookstores, cinemas and hospitals. A dozen miles away from the center of the city, the residents of the highlands on the edge of the city are not very rich Russian fugitives, who built a number of small and large bungalows with “mud” walls and iron roofs. On the outskirts of the city, in the low depressions, are the yellow mud and grass houses of penniless Chinese farmers who have migrated from Shandong, Hebei, Henan, Shanxi and elsewhere. A railway separates the city center from the marginal highlands and depressions. On one side of the railway is the center of City A, and on the other side is the bungalow complex of highlands and depressions. The residents of the three building groups also split due to the differences in social wealth and power structure.

When Bingkun “bought” a spacious Russian-style house with debt on the first street of the city’s central cross street, he saw that “each house number represents a single building with a yard and a gatehouse”. Residents living in several cross streets are more prominent, and children in the latter few streets rarely play with children on the first street. Bingkun and Zheng Juan regard this house as a paradise, but for other residents of Hengjie, the first street is at the end of power, and the difference of social power is magnified here.

In addition to Bingkun, a temporary bystander, Bingyi became a newcomer to the deep house in the center of the city by means of class crossing. He said to his wife, “My father never met your mother until he died. Why? Because in my father’s and my brother’s view, people living in this courtyard on the street are powerful families.” The big change in Father Zhou is that he recognized and compromised with the social power authoritatively in his later years. After seeing the huge differences in life brought by different social strata, Father Zhou took the initiative to agree with his granddaughter to join his uncle. He “not only does not oppose, but also supports...” ([3], p. 327) Because living in a good environment is beneficial to the physical and mental growth of the next generation.

This change in Father Zhou is the result of the transformation of social power structure on family moral and ethical cognition.

2.4. Masculinity versus Femininity

Masculinity and femininity refer to the degree to which the “male” values in society are dominant: self-confidence, pursuit of money and material, while the opposite is that the “female” values are dominant: being modest and attaching importance to the quality of personal life. In this novel, the characteristics of femininity were displayed vividly: taking care of each other and leaning on each other through thick and thin.

Zheng Juan’s adoptive mother is the first incarnation of the contradiction between humble and noble. Zheng’s mother is very humble. She makes a living by selling popsicles and matchboxes. Her income is low. When Bingkun helped her straighten the cart, she repeatedly expressed her gratitude. When Zheng Juan refused the eggs and money sent by Bingkun, Zheng’s mother cried, “pathetically stretched out a thin hand, like an old beggar who has completely lost his sense of shame” ([5], p. 94). However, it was this humble lady who adopted Zheng Juan and the blind Guangming. She protected the noble goodness in her heart with her weak strength and finally left the world quietly. As a person who lives at the bottom of the society, Zheng’s mother is poor, weak but kind and tenacious, and has a humble status but a noble heart. She really embodies the beauty of human nature and the spirit of Chinese people.

Bingkun’s mother and Chunyan’s mother also exist in this way. They take care of their children and their neighbors as much as they can. In the same way, Bingkun inherited the generous and righteous manner of his father’s generation and became friends with others for moral reasons, such as Ganchao and Guoqing. Difficult life experience more honed his feelings between friends. They are a little happy in their distress, and they are honest in their compromise. Whether it is for the sake of friendship or the need to warm up in a group, their words and deeds show us a kind of good feeling of letting go of life difficulties and striving for a better life.

In addition, is being a senior official or making big money a success? The eldest son Bingyi is a senior official, and the second daughter Rong is a university professor. The youngest son Bingkun is not as knowledgeable or capable as his brother and sister, but he is the child who accompanies his parents the most. Chinese people pay attention to filial piety, and filial piety is the foundation of all virtues. Bingkun’s final approval from his father is the highest among the three children, which also triggered the thinking of Chinese people on the criteria for child cultivation.

2.5. Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation

Long-term and short-term orientation indicates a nation’s values of long-term and short-term interests. The culture and society with long-term orientation pay more attention to the consideration of the future, and treat things with a dy-

namic perspective. People focus on economy, thrift and reserve. There is room for anything. Short-term oriented culture and society are oriented towards the past and present, focusing on immediate interests and social responsibilities.

As the person who manages the family's financial income and expenditure, Mother Zhou has always insisted on saving: "Bingkun a salary, leaving a few yuan pocket money, the rest all to the mother. His mother would not spend his money and saved it for him. His mother also asked him to write to tell his father that he should not save clothes and diet and treat himself unfairly just in order to send more money home every month." ([5], p. 54). The traditional Chinese people are extremely self-disciplined and pay attention to economy, thrift and reserve. Only by forming the habit of saving can ordinary people get out of difficulties step by step. Saving is a necessary means of making a living. Saving is also the preparation and accumulation for ordinary people to be wealthier, not only in material but also in mind. It can ensure that you will be more powerful tomorrow than today.

Another typical feature of a long-term-oriented culture is the relentless pursuit of ideals. With their practical actions, the Zhou family composed a life hymn of nurturing their ideals, establishing their aspirations, pursuing and finally realizing their personal ideals and beliefs. Elder Brother Bingyi's ideal of justice is a rational responsibility and mission based on ideological progress. The idealism of the second sister Rong is reflected in her lofty pursuit of the ideal of individual life: Rong's love for the poet Feng Huacheng originated from the spirituality and pursuit of poetry, and she did not care to follow her lover who had nothing and was despised at that time. While life is stable, such a magnificent love dies away due to the vulgarity and loss of poetry. As a common people, Bingkun's ideal is to comfort and help each other with friends in a humble and difficult life. They seek virtue and acquire it.

3. Conclusion

In the current era of rapid changes in economic, social and material life, each of us is like a small dust in the world. How can small dust survive, embrace and protect each other? How to care for individual life in the grand era, balance the needs and contradictions between different individuals, and protect the purity and dignity needed by human beings are the questions left to every reader in the novel. The novel also tries to offer answers: stick to the moral bottom line, affirm idealism (long-term orientation), change fate with knowledge (long-term orientation), and focus on the development of the motherland (collectivism).

Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

References

- [1] <https://clearlycultural.com/geert-hofstede-cultural-dimensions/individualism/>
- [2] <https://clearlycultural.com/geert-hofstede-cultural-dimensions/uncertainty-avoidan>

[ce-index/](#)

- [3] Liang, X.S. (2017) A Lifelong Journey II. China Youth Publishing House, Beijing.
- [4] <https://clearlycultural.com/geert-hofstede-cultural-dimensions/power-distance-index/>
- [5] Liang, X.S. (2017) A Lifelong Journey I. China Youth Publishing House, Beijing.