The influences of national cultural constructs on marketing studies

Chen-yu Feng¹, Roger Collins² and Wei Song²*

¹International College of Business and Technology, Tianjin University of Technology, Tianjin, China.
²School of Business and Economics, Thompson Rivers University, Kamloops, Canada.

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This comparative study examines empirically, the influences of the national cultural constructs individualism-collectivism (IC) and power distance index (PDI) on marketing studies by examining the students’ learning experience and the ways in which these factors impact the students’ learning performance in the context of the marketing management studies. The study utilized a qualitative research method, namely, in-depth interviews with a group of students and faculty members in China and Canada. By investigating along the three dimensions: interaction with professors, peer relationship and evaluation on students’ performance in the marketing program, the findings of this study report that differences exist in the learning performance between the two countries in the marketing studies. These results will be the basis for making recommendations to both Chinese and Canadian educators and policy makers/administrators who are involved with the international marketing joint program. It also provides guidance to assist Asian, particularly Chinese students to advance their marketing knowledge via the cultural learning. The limitation and implication of the study, together with possible directions for future research, are also presented.

Key words: Hofstede, cultural factors, learning performance, marketing science, joint program, class interaction, fellow students’ relationship, course assessments.

INTRODUCTION

Extensive studies have investigated the impact of cultural difference on class learning style (De Vita, 2001; Lam and Lidstone, 2007; Levinsohn, 2007; Cheung and Chan, 2008; Sugahara and Boland, 2010; Hwang, 2010). However, specific investigations into the phenomenon in joint marketing programs between developing and developed countries remain scarce.

As a subject for study and research, the subject of Marketing Science has become ubiquitous in the field of global business education. Marketing courses are included in almost all international management programs. The dearth of studies concerning joint programs between countries at different levels of development – in particular, between China and the so-called “developed” nations, points to a need for more extensive research in this area. Such studies are of importance in the development of higher standards of marketing education in an international setting.

This study aims to identify the main differences in learning performance between Chinese and Canadian students in an international joint program of marketing science. It investigates the education differences by means of discussions with exchange students of the joint program whose major is in marketing science and who have learning experience at both Chinese and Canadian universities. Topics discussed include aspects of class interaction between professors and students, of peer relationships, and of the evaluation of student performance.

Further, a literature review of research relating to Hofstede’s national cultural dimensions model, with a particular emphasis on the power distance index (PDI) and Individualism-Collectivism (IC) constructs is carried out. Next, the qualitative methodology used in the study is explained. Following this, the findings of the study are
reported. The international implication for both faculty members and administrators is examined. The paper concludes with a discussion of the limitations of the study and with recommendations concerning the directions of future research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

During the last two decades, joint education programs between Western countries and China have flourished. In particular, there have been significant developments in joint education programs between China and Canada, and China and the USA. More than 10,000 partner programs between Chinese and Western universities have been established and developed (Willis, 2006). Many major universities in China have signed multiple agreements with different universities from the developed countries. For example, Beijing University alone has over 60 alliances with Western universities (Willis, 2006). It has become the common practice to have Western faculty to teach at Chinese universities or Chinese students to learn at overseas universities (Rodrigues, 2004; Dimmock, 1998; Lee and Bei, 2007).

Extensive studies have been undertaken in the area of Sino/foreign strategic alliances in higher education (Hayhoe, 1996; Lin, 1999; Willis, 2006; Cateora and Graham, 2006). However, while marketing science is one of the most popular subjects in international joint programs between China and Western countries, research on the cultural factors associated with marketing science students’ learning performance between Chinese and Western universities is limited. Some teaching techniques work well for a group of students who have similar cultures, but these same methods may not be suitable for students who come from a different culture.

In recent years, research on the influence (or impact) of cultural factors on behaviors of individuals, groups and organizations across different countries has attracted much interest (Rodrigues, 2006). Among several models, the Hofstede model has received a great deal of attention (Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005; De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010). Hofstede’s five dimensional model of national culture has directly influenced educators’ perceptions of students learning style preferences. The model evaluates the different types of cultures based on the seventy six countries investigated, on a scale of 0 to 100. Lower scores indicate a weaker level of influence of a given dimension, and vice versa. Table 1 show the raw scores in reference to the differences that can be attributed to two countries - Canada, and the People’s Republic of China - based on five dimensions and ranks.

Table 1 shows that China has much higher scores on power distance index (PDI), masculinity (MAS) and long-term orientation (LTO), while Canada has higher scores on uncertainty avoidance index (UAI) and individualism (IDV). These national cultural differences have a direct impact on the students’ learning performance.

Power distance (PDI) involves the way the less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. The laws and rules for subordinates should be different from the rules for superiors (Hofstede, 1980). Part of power distance involves human inequality in areas such as prestige, wealth, power, and law. People from cultures high in power distance are comfortable with power hierarchy, discrimination, and tolerance of inequalities (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005).

The dominant values for a masculine (MAS) culture are achievement and success, while the dominant values in a feminine culture are focused on the caring of others (De Mooij, 2010). Masculine societies value assertiveness, performance, ambition, and independence, whereas feminine societies tend to value nurturing, quality of life, service, and interdependence (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005).

Uncertainty avoidance (UAI) is the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations. With high uncertainty avoidance, people like clear rules and explicit situations; with low uncertainty avoidance, people can accept uncertainty without discomfort and tolerate inexplicit rules (De Mooij and Hofstede, 2010).

Individualism (IDV) exists in societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Collectivism, the opposite, exists in societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups that offer lifetime protection in exchange for loyalty. This sub-dimension can be summed up in two words: “I” versus “we.” The former refers to self-actualization while the latter stresses the importance of the social system related to them and avoiding the loss of “face” (De Mooij

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Countries</th>
<th>PDI</th>
<th>UAI</th>
<th>MAS</th>
<th>IDV</th>
<th>LTO</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>China</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>66</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>118*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Canada</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>48</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>80</td>
<td>23</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

Source: Adapted from http://www.geert-hofstede.com/hofstede_dimensions.php?culture1=18&culture2=94 (retrieved on March 7, 2011); Hofstede’s power distance and individualist and collectivist constructs.
and Hofstede, 2010).

The Confucian dynamic or long-term orientation (LTO) dimension refers to the way in which people look at the future. Long-term orientation emphasizes perseverance, ordering relationships by status, thrift, and a sense of shame. On the other hand, short-term orientation focuses on personal steadiness and stability, saving face, respect for tradition, and reciprocation of greetings, favors, and gifts.

With relevance to this study, two key constructs developed by Hofstede have been used as our theoretical framework: individualism-collectivism, (IC) and power distance index (PDI). The most extreme differences between the two countries occur in individualism. Canada on individualism has the high index of 80 whilst China is close to the bottom, with a very low index of 20. Canadian society has a tradition of individualism, while Chinese society tends to emphasize the merits of collectivism.

There are also significant differences in power distance. China ranks high in power distance with an index of 80, which means human inequality is more acceptable for Chinese.

These cultural values present considerable influence on educational management, in-class interaction between students and professors, teaching style, as well as intra-students relationship.

METHODOLOGY

A qualitative research approach was employed. The participants of this study came from a Chinese university located in Northeast China. The interviewees were selected on the basis of three criteria: they must have learned in both countries with the international joint program, they must have stayed in a Canadian university for at least one year and they must be enrolled in the marketing science program.

A total of 28 Chinese students from the marketing science program were selected for this study. Amongst these participants, 17 students were female. The significantly higher ratio of female students was due to the larger population of female students in the program. Through their international joint program between Canada and China, the students had studied at both the Chinese university and its Canadian partner school. The interviewed students have one or half year study experience at Thompson Rivers University (TRU), Canada, and the remaining study time at Tianjin University of Technology (TUT), China.

As a pre-requisite for enrolment, the Chinese students must pass a standard English exam before coming to Canada. Such students demonstrate a good command of English. The main data source for the study was from in-depth semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted in the classroom, coffee shop and the faculty office. The average interview time was 32 min. Five faculty members were also interviewed. Three of these were Chinese faculty in Tianjin while the other two were from the Canadian university.

In addition, classroom observation was also conducted. The present study explores the impact of cultural characteristics and norms on undergraduate education in China and Canada. We integrate existing cross-cultural research with in-depth interviews with exchange students to expand our understanding of different education systems.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study revealed some significant differences between the two universities in the areas of in-class interaction between professors and students, peer relationship, and evaluation of student performance. We discuss each difference in detail along with class observations which followed with propositions.

In-class interaction between professors and students

The major difference in the class interaction is that there is more interaction between professors and students in Canadian class than in Chinese class, which has justified that the tradition of education is student-centered in western countries, but the Chinese tradition in the field of education is to take the teacher-centered approach. A 22 years old male student who comes from Hebei Province said: “The significant difference of class climate in these two countries is the level of student's involvement in the class activity. The students in Canadian class are more active.”

As Chinese classroom instruction is designed for a lecturing based rather than facilitating based system, it is not very common for Chinese students to share or express their ideas and opinions with the professor or classmates during the class session. Our interview data reveal that Chinese exchange students in a Canadian university have benefited from the positive interaction with the professors and classmates, even though some evidence suggests that those interactions are far from common. Taking one of the exchange student's comments for example, he said: “I elected the finance management course in TRU.

The course lectured by a Canadian professor is much more interesting, which is beyond my expectation of stereotype on such course based on my learning experience in China. The professor is very kind and enthusiastic. He always greets students at the entrance of classroom and says "take your time, we will not get started without you." And he could always find some up-to-date real cases to match the theory he's lecturing. And I am surprised that he is familiar with Chinese situation in his case. The way of his teaching motivates my interest and understanding on the course." Generally speaking, the interaction with the professors and classmates in the class facilitates the initiative of students' learning, in-depth thinking on the subject study and reflective thinking on the methods used for individual study, as well as learning ability.

The differences of in-class interaction are attributed to a number of factors: educational tradition, pedagogy and class size. The tradition of Chinese professor dominance in class is deeply rooted in each level of education. As a collectivism-oriented society, professors view the students in the class as one group, and think it fair to take
the same procedure to teach each individual without paying special attention to their differences, even though they acknowledge those differences. Parents also expect their children to receive the same opportunities in school, because they pay the same tuition. According to this line of reasoning, a standardized procedure in education should be followed in class; it is the students’ responsibility to compete for opportunities such as more communication with the schools’ professors. In contrast, in Canada, different treatments to different individuals in a class are a common practice as long as such students could benefit from the education. As a consequence, Canadian educators pay much more attention than do Chinese educators to individual learning, and provide students with different opportunities. Canadian education focuses on fairness of the results against the Chinese focus on fairness of procedure. In other words, the Canadian system emphasizes teaching implementation while Chinese system stresses teaching planning. In Canada, a professor can always alter or modify the teaching materials in order to best suit the students’ needs as the class progresses, but in China, a professor must follow the class outline regardless of whether these teaching materials were appropriate for the specific students being taught. Chinese professors ensure that the course contents are delivered, but are not overly concerned as to whether the students understand the contents. In contrast, a Canadian professor would give more attention to the issue of whether the students understand the material well rather than worrying that the scheduled contents are delivered.

Through the interviews with Chinese exchange students we also discovered that power distance affects class interaction between professors and students. Canada has a low power distance, and relationships between professors and students are more equal in Canada than in China, especially in the classroom. The interruption by the students’ questions while professors are lecturing is acceptable in Canada, but is seldom seen in China, because Chinese students may think it rude to ask questions during the lecture session. The distance relationship between Chinese students and professors has made some students wary of communicating with their professors. One of the faculties from TRU said: “I have to motivate Chinese students more often than those I taught at TRU Canada while teaching the same course in TUT China.” On the other hand, one interviewee - a Chinese exchange student - was very much impressed by a Canadian professor who provided help for students even at the weekend. He said: “I was surprised at his patience. I always ask him some questions after class because I could not fully understand something in the class. Sometimes, it takes him more than 40 min to explain that for me. And even at the weekend, he is also ready to help; when I phone him for answers to a question, he comes back to his office from home in order to help me.” Another item that emerged from the interview process was that Canadian professors and students tend to be more tolerant on uncertain situation concerning the learning experiences. In contrast, Chinese professors and students are less flexible and more averse to an uncertain situation. This cultural tradition has an impact on the concept of education, in that many Chinese professors practice their teaching as a ready-made recipe or set of prescriptions instead of presenting complex and context-relevant intellectual activities that challenge and engage learner with concrete experiences, intellectual discourse and reflective thought.

Within any culture, the educational tradition has an impact on the pedagogy employed by professors. The teaching method used by Canadian professors in class is varied and flexible. The practical methods - such as research projects, oral presentations in the class and debates on specific topics, case studies, group discussions and seminars, aim at a student-centered exploration of new knowledge in the contemporary situation. Canadian professors view knowledge as temporary, socially constructed, and developmental. In such a situation, there are usually no definite answers for each student, and new findings are encouraged. In a traditional Chinese class, a lot of students expect a standard answer given by professors in order to get a high score in the exam, this causes Chinese professors to adopt the same teaching method in the class as the Canadian professors. In the classes conducted in China, the level of motivation for student involvement is low. The interaction in Canadian classes tends to be driven by intrinsic motivation of learning, but in Chinese classes the drivers appear to be extrinsic. For example, parental and/societal expectations from parents or societies could be the drivers of learning motivation. In some cases, Canadian professors would assign the different tasks according to the student level or encourage students to choose more difficult level of the task to learn more challenging knowledge.

This method is rarely used by Chinese professors and they prefer to practice standardized teaching; so, some students may feel frustrated in competing for the opportunity with their classmates in class. We also observed that the frequency of interaction of students is quite different from each other in a Chinese class. The reason for that could be individual differences on character, communication and learning or academic ability. Chinese professors tend to ignore the lack of opportunities of some students for the sake of adhering to a tight schedule of curriculum delivery.

Class size has also affected interaction between professors and students. The average number of students in a class of the Canadian university we studied is usually around 40 students, but in the Chinese university, it is around 90 students. It takes much more time for Chinese professors to get familiar with each student, and they are therefore liable to ignore the different needs of some students:
Proposition 1a: There is more class interaction in low power distance culture than in high power distance culture.
Proposition 1b: Professors would like to pay more attention to individual interaction in individualistic culture than in collectivism culture.
Proposition 1c: The interaction in class tends to be driven by intrinsic motivation of learners in individualistic culture, but by extrinsic motivation of learners in collectivism culture.
Proposition 1d: Students and professoors are less flexible in the condition of the uncertain situation in class in collectivism culture.

Relationship with peers

Peer relationship plays an important role in establishing the sense of belonging, security and self-awareness which facilitate the interaction of interpersonal relationship among Chinese students.

The peer relationship in a Chinese class setting is much more close and sophisticated than that in a Canadian classroom. Culture has a significant influence on the peer relationship and class atmosphere.

As an individualistic society, the ties between Canadian students are loose, and everyone is expected to be responsible for himself or herself. They prefer to promote one’s self-interest. On the other hand, the relationship between Chinese students is close and everyone is expected to build a good relationship and look after each other. Therefore, friendship and harmony are highly valued in a collectivism society.

It takes time for Chinese students to adapt themselves to the cultural differences in Canadian class. A Chinese exchange student had indicated that he experienced the conflict with his classmate in a group study. He said the reason for the conflict was that a Japanese student was reluctant to cooperate in the group because he thought one of the Chinese students had poor languageability which affected their performance, and the Canadian students in the group voted to excluding the Chinese student for their own benefit. The other Chinese students in the group could not accept the result, and they all left the group to form their own group. Apparently, Chinese students have different perception in dealing with the conflict. Even though some Canadian students could negotiate and solve the problem, they still largely make the decision based on their own interest, whereas Chinese students tend to avoid conflict with their peers via a teamwork approach.

Another reason contributing to the different interpersonal relationship between students is the method of curriculum management. After finishing a few prerequisite courses, students attending the Canadian university could select their courses according to their own needs or interests. It follows that each student may have a different course schedule from others even though all students in any given program have the same major. This means that it is hard for students to establish a long-term relationship in a Canadian class. Conversely, the regular courses and classes have already been set for Chinese students once they enrolled in the university; it is therefore easier for Chinese students to establish friendships with their classmates in the course of their four years of study:

Proposition 2a: Peer relationships are tight in collectivist society and loose in individualistic society.
Proposition 2b: Chinese students tend to avoid conflict through negotiation; Canadian student attempt to resolve the conflict in their own interest.
Proposition 2c: Chinese students have a tradition of establishing long-term relationships.

Evaluation on students’ performance

The use of standardized tests as a major evaluation tool reflects the Chinese culture of education, which stresses long classroom hours and far less time spent on extracurricular activities. In China, exams evolved thousands of years ago, and still play a vital role in Chinese students’ education. But attitude of students towards the test has changed significantly with the rapid change of Chinese society from a planned economy to a market economy. Thirty years ago, Chinese students viewed the test as a fair means of talent selection and knowledge retention. But today, most students do not agree with that view to some extent.

From this study, we have found that students are eager to reform the Chinese way of evaluation. One of the exchange students said that the Chinese model, which involves much rote learning, may not fit into the Canadian evaluation system. He remembered that a Canadian professor of international trade said to students: “I am not here to teach you how to recite, but how to think in business way.” So, the student took part in the exam of this course by finishing only one open case analysis within two hours. However, for his peers in China, the objective was to get a good result on the test rather than to acquire knowledge to be put to use at some time in the future. After that, they felt free to forget everything they learned prior to the test. Some of his Chinese-educated classmates do not know how to start analyzing a case, even though they may be in their graduation year, and so, it is hard for them to form their own way of thinking. The same student also commented that while Chinese professors have made some reforms of the evaluation of students’ performance so as to integrate with global education, and to reduce the percentage of final test on the whole evaluation of students’ performance, the content of the test still focuses on examining the ability to memorize rather than the ability to think.
Other exchange students have also experienced the different evaluation systems in both China and Canada. In Canada, students make much more effort in the process of learning the courses because Canadian professors usually have a detailed evaluation guideline on the student performance. For example, such a guideline will include the percentage of marks assigned to each evaluation items. Such student evaluation tools include – but are not limited to - homework, presentations, group discussion, company investigation, class involvement, mid-term(s) quizzes and the final exam. Although the combined way of evaluation is different from professors to professors and from courses to courses, generally, the evaluation focuses much more on the independent learning and thinking and less on reciting items recalled from memory. Besides, Canadian professors could clearly communicate class rules and evaluation standard with students and the percentage of final test on the evaluation for student performance is much lower than that in China.

Evaluation of student performance is a process that examines the outcome of student learning and which also assists educators in the continual improvement of teaching. It incorporates the objective of the course, a conception of education, teaching style, class management, and method of class interaction. Culture also plays an important role in the evaluation of student performance. As an individualistic society, the “master of our own destiny” philosophy is fundamental to Canadians, which means that people believe they can substantially influence the future; they are in control of their own futures. This viewpoint reflects the attitude that although luck may influence an individual’s future, on balance, persistence, hard work, a commitment to fulfill expectations, and effective use of time give people control of their own destinies. So, personal reward must be offered for merit. In fact, the merit by which one achieves advancement is frequently tied to one’s ability to make improvements. The prevailing question is “Can it be done better”, and if practices must change to achieve results, then change is in order. The aim of education is to enhance the individual ability to improve and to change. The practice of education is designed on this philosophy. Canadian professors pay much more attention to the individual ability to improve in ways that can facilitate the students’ ability to analyze and to learn. As a lower “power distance” country, Canada has a tradition of questioning which reflects their philosophy of life; questions raised by students are viewed as a positive contribution to the learning process. China, on the other hand, as a high power distance country, lacks the tradition of questioning; the strength and power of those in command frequently rests not on change but on the premise that the status quo demands a stable structure. In China, the traditional philosophy of education is to act as stewards to the heritage of human civilization; the Chinese teaching or learning style is reflected in relation to this culture. Chinese professors take it for granted that they will design their teaching around a textbook which is widely recognized by authority and by the public. Because the main aim of traditional Chinese teaching is to produce students who understand “textbook knowledge”, the personal needs or experience and character are, to some extent, ignored. Under such conditions the standard test is the most efficient way to examine knowledge acquired by students.

With respect to the improvement of individual ability to gain from education; the concept of ability is complex and varies according to the situation. It is hard for Chinese teachers to set a standard to evaluate students’ ability based on individual experience, but a level of knowledge is easily tested. In conclusion, Canadian education is aimed at facilitating the individual’s ability to improvement. Chinese education is to facilitate improvement of individual ability and knowledge; the logic influences the ways in which the performance of students is evaluated within the respective educational systems:

**Proposition 3a:** The evaluation on students’ performance focuses more on the individual ability of improvement in individualism society.

**Proposition 3b:** The evaluation on students’ performance focuses more on the improvement of individual ability and knowledge in collectivism society.

**Conclusion**

The present study explores the impact of cultural characteristics and norms on undergraduate education in China and Canada. This study integrates existing cross-cultural research with in-depth interviews with exchange students to expand our understanding of different education systems. The significant differences in education impacted by culture are interaction between professors and students, peer relationships, and the evaluation of students’ performance. Several implications are presented. The cultural factors affecting the marketing education courses of the international joint program can also influence other disciplines other than business. Therefore, any global alliance program should pay special attention to this particular area. Secondly, given the effects on education of cultural differences between Chinese and Canadian students, a strong case can be made for the need to pay attention to this phenomenon in respect of global alliances between other countries - for example, the difference between Chinese and American, German or Japanese students. These differences could be country-specific or ethnic group specific. Thirdly, while cultural differences are shown to exist in the classroom, the study implies that differences will also exist where the learning process takes place largely outside of the class. The research has validated Hofstede’s theory on the dimensions of individualism and power distance;
however, this study has not verified the dimension of uncertainty avoidance. Some evidence has been found that Canadian professors and students are more tolerant in uncertain situation. These findings are in line with conclusion from other research mentioned in the introduction.

The study has examined educational differences between China and Canada from a cross culture perspective. We should be aware that cultures should not be classified as superior and inferior types but that all cultures would influence human ideology as well as education. We should strive to understand the educational differences in their different contexts and to inspire educators to improve their practice in teaching instead of copying the different model without careful scrutiny. Education is an integrated system in which many functions interact with each other. We found there is scope for Chinese educators to tailor their teaching methods according to student’s ability in the era of mass instruction, and the evaluation of student performance in the future study. The main deficiency of this study is the small sample size - limited to two schools. More investigation from more universities in both countries is needed. In order to reduce the data bias, a common critique for qualitative studies, and some quantitative data should be used. In addition, studies other than marketing science should be conducted in order to enlarge the research portfolio in the area of cultural influence in the classroom performance of business schools.

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