

# A Study of Chinese Young Adults' Outlook on Marriage Based on the Framework of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory—An Interpretation of Bullet Screen Comments on Bilibili.com

GUO Qianqiu, HUANG Fengqiu

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

The objective of this paper is to gain an insight into the Chinese cultural union by exploring the viewpoints of Chinese young adults through analyzing bullet screen comments on marriage-related issues in prevailing online videos posted on Bilibili.com. Relying on the six facets of Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, the paper intends to pinpoint the urgent issues at hand and shed light on the current state of affairs that young people confront themselves with and how they perceive marriage and love matters in reference to relevant Chinese cultural customs and conventions. It seems that they set priorities differently compared with the elder generation when it comes to such matters as love ideals, dating and marriage rituals, childbearing practice, family dynamics, gender roles, and life pursuits. And their willingness to establish a married life or family of their own has dropped significantly due to negative influences of original family, peer pressure, and mass media.

*Keywords:* marital outlook, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, bullet screen comments

## Introduction

Marital outlook is, narrowly speaking, people's fundamental thoughts as well as attitude to issues concerning love, sex and marriage, family and fertility under certain social circumstances, which are affected by the individual values and belief system in life (Li, 2022). According to the official WeChat account of China Youth Newspaper, marriage customs are unique cultural symbols that distinguish our nation from others. As a social awareness, though the marital outlook is an expression of personal willingness, it reveals the cultural characteristics of a society (Yang, 2007). Marriages and families are elementary social units where individual cultural identity comes to full play in close encounters and relational dynamics.

With the ongoing economic development and continuous social progress, social values tend to diversify, profoundly changing people's beliefs and behaviors, striking and affecting the marital outlook as well (Cai, 2019). The general trend of marriage has been changing in China and the youth is the major promoter. According to the

---

**Acknowledge:** The paper was supported by the grant of USST Innovative Training Program (Fund No. XJ2023264).

GUO Qianqiu, sophomore student, English (scientific translation) major, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

HUANG Fengqiu, M.A., associate professor, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

*Chinese Marriage and Family Report of 2023*, the Chinese registered marriage rate has been descending from 9.9% to 5.8% since 2013, and people aged between 20 and 29 take up more than half the registered marriage population. This age group matches the last period of tertiary education. Thus, it is meaningful to analyze young adults' viewpoints in order to obtain an insight into the issue.

According to Edward T. Hall's Cultural Iceberg Theory, the culture of a society is an iceberg, which is divided into aspects above and below the water. The above one only takes up a little portion while the most of it is beneath the surface. The external part of culture, such as behavior can be observed, while the beliefs, values, and thoughts patterns are underlying and dictating people's behavior. Marriage is behavior underlined by marital outlooks. The distinct attitudes the older generation and young adults of this era hold reveal the conflicts of marital outlooks within.

Based on the framework provided by Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory, the study aims to perceive cultural phenomena and compare different cultural patterns. The Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Theory contains the Collectivism versus Individualism dimension (IDV), Masculinity versus Femininity (MAS), Long-Term versus Short-Term Orientation (LTO), Power distance (PDI), Uncertainty avoidance (UAI), and Indulgence versus Restraint dimension (IVR). The contents of the theory also include relative index of several countries such as China and they all come from Hofstede's *Culture's Consequences*.

This study lists and analyzes 11 typical sample barrages selected from 61 prevailing videos on the platform of Bilibili.com with over one hundred thousand view counts and three thousand barrages. The click counts of the videos indicate topic popularity and the density of bullet screens is positively relative to participation enthusiasm. Bilibili.com, an influential online community, claims to have the largest online youth community, with 90% of it below 25 years old. Originally as a video website for ACG (animation, comics, and games) creation and sharing, it has expanded into variegated fields and now a hot spot of interest, if not the hottest, for Chinese youth in terms of cyber interaction. Therefore, it is a reasonable and reliable source of primary data for further research and is likely to obtain meaningful results through careful analysis.

## **Marriage Outlooks Through the Cultural Dimensions Theory**

### **Conflicts Between Collectivism and Individualism**

Hofstede's (2001) Cultural Dimensions Theory uses the dimension of collectivism and individualism to value whether a society focuses more on individual interests or group interests. People in a collective society are group-oriented, interdependent, and collaborative, and they steadily dedicate themselves to establishing and maintaining group interests with absolute loyalty for the continuous protection that a compact and firm, inner relationship can offer them. The collectivism does not mean the absolute negation of personal well-being or interests, but to prioritize the well-being of groups in front of individuals (Sui, 2018).

In the context of marriage, groups refer to families and societies and interests refer to the benefits that belong to families as a whole. China has advocated collectivism since ancient times and it is a symbol of Chinese culture and society (Wang, 2012). In the conventional collectivism, marriage cannot be totally decided by individuals but should involve the participation of family members and often largely relies on the approval of senior members. Likewise, the conventional Chinese marital outlook considers marriage and breeding offspring an obligation that every member of the society should perform in order to safeguard the collective interests. The following two examples indicate the unwillingness Chinese young adults nowadays harbor towards assimilating collectivist traits.

**Example 1:**

My parents are always pressing me to get married so as to follow the so-called “ancestor’s teaching”, but I don’t want to rush and I am the boss of my own life.

我不想结婚，虽然父母总催我结婚，认为这是“老祖宗定下的规矩”，但这是我自己的人生，决定权在我手里。

This sample reveals a common but awkward situation for Chinese youth, where elder members of the family strongly hope their grown children to get married at the proper age and bring up offspring as the elder generations did; in other words, they urge them to follow the pre-set path. They believe their values are the only right way and expect their grown children to just “inherit and implement”, because their ideas have been proofed to the advantage of the group. Yet, it seems that, with the deepening of globalization in both economical and cultural life, the youth are now more apt to individualism, pulling away from collectivism. They place their self-values and own needs in the paramount place and consider marriage a private, personal issue that should be decided by oneself without interference from family members or intimate friend. This individualistic mindset displayed in such comments is not uncommon among Chinese youth.

**Example 2:**

To breed offspring is not the only aim of marriage, what matters to me is whether my partner truly loves and understands me or not.

结婚不只是为了传宗接代，我更看重对方是不是真的爱和理解我。

When it comes to marriage, the comment prioritizes sentimental feelings and inner understandings before breeding children, which is one of the important aims of marriage in traditional outlook because the extension of family can maintain the interests of family, meanwhile obtaining recognition from the collectivist society. Sentiments are, on the other hand, primarily for the individual needs and interests. Thus, the utterance is more inclined to individualism, which shows great differences between Chinese young adults and the traditional views.

Likewise, in the gender ranking of young adults’ perception of different effectiveness of marriage, more than 85% of female and male college students rank the perception that marriage can offer sentimental supports, companionship, and spiritual sustenance at the first place (Li, 2022). With Hofstede’s Cultural Dimension Theory, it can be further elucidated that the difference is a conflict between collectivism and individualism. As a patriarchal society, China uses ties of blood as a bond to weave social relationships and solidify social order. To be more specific, China’s conventional view towards marriage under patriarchal system seemingly aims at breeding offspring, but it is essentially for the goal of regulating social order, which enables the collective society to maintain and develop (Sun, 2021). However, it does offer individuals benefits, such as happiness of breeding one’s offspring and regaining love from them. But it still will not change the fact that collective interests are placed before individuals’ in the traditional marital outlooks. Chinese young adults nowadays pay more attention to their own mental health and sentimental needs, which can be one of the ways to promote their sense of happiness and satisfaction towards life, rather than conventional constraints. In general, the comments above give priority to his self-interests before that of groups, concerning more with their inner sentimental needs.

**Changes on the Dimension of Masculinity and Femininity**

According to Hofstede’s theory, masculine cultures value such qualities as competitiveness, assertiveness, materialism, ambition, and power whereas in feminine cultures more emphasis is placed on quality of life. A masculine society is characterized by distinct gender roles; men are supposed to be more aggressive, domineering,

and focused more on material success, hence more suitable for goal/result-oriented work. They tend to be work-centered, and are likely to sacrifice their individual life experiences for exterior recognition, such as pay raise and job promotion. In contrast, women are supposed to be more considerate, tender, and caring. Thus, they are expected to play the role of caretakers in family life. Whereas, in a feminine society, genders roles are overlapped or more fluid and flexible. Men and women work equally across many professions. Men are allowed to be sensitive and women can work hard for professional success. Both men and women take initiatives and shoulder responsibilities inside and outside the family, stressing self-values and inner satisfaction rather than outer recognition and acknowledgement.

China is characterized as a masculine society; wherein men are the primary breadwinners and bear the responsibility of providing for the family while their counterparts are assigned the societal role of homemakers, fulfilling caretaking duties. Consequently, in the professional world women are often underemployed or offered subordinate or assisting positions. The sexual prejudice can even compel some married women to retreat to the role of housewives. Yet, it seems that the traditional pattern is being challenged by a more equalitarian mindset. The Chinese young people today, especially young women, display a strong tendency to stress personal growth and achievement both in career development and married family life.

Example 3:

Though large number of companies, especially internet giants have high salary, it cannot counteract the torture brought by 996 work schedules (to work from 9 a.m. to 9 p.m. for six days a week). I still want my own life.

互联网大厂的工资是很高，但是他无法抵消996的痛苦，我还是想要有自己的生活。

In the above comments, it is clear that in the eyes of the young even handsome paycheck and promising career prospects offered by internet moguls are not comparable to personal freedom in life. Moreover, the heavy workload running on 996 work schedules entails excessive pressure and is simply not worthwhile. This is a clear indication of a shift from “live to work” to “work to live” attitude towards life, i.e., from a masculine society to a more feminine one, from seeking material benefits to pursuing contentment and happiness in individual life experience.

Another aspect of such a shift can be found in gender roles changes especially in the family undertaking. Today women are reconsidering the assumed part they are supposed to play in a marriage. The following example is a case in point.

Example 4:

Marriage is simply unfair. In most cases, women have to do all the chores and children's stuffs once they were married while men only need to pursue enterprise and do not have to involve in almost any household.

结婚太不公平了，大多数情况下女性一旦结了婚就得家务育儿大包干，可是男的只要忙事业，别的当甩手掌柜就行了。

Despite the fact that women are still doing most of the housework, the comments above show strong sentiments of dissatisfaction with the unequal role assignment in family life. According to previous data of CGSS in 2012, women aged between 18 to 64 spent 2.41 times more doing housework than men. Another data from CFPS in 2010 also indicates that in the workday, married wives aged 18 to 59 spent 2.75 times more doing housework than their husbands (Liu, 2022). It is under such substantial household pressure that young women nowadays develop a sense of disapproval and unfairness towards marriage. Like the above comments, more

women are protesting against traditional pattern of family duties and demanding for a more equalized planning, hence moving the Chinese masculine society towards femininity on this cultural dimension.

### China's UAI on the Rise

The Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI) deals with the degree to which members of a culture or society try to avoid, control, or eliminate uncertainties through variegated measures. Societies with high uncertainty avoidance have a low tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity; members within are in higher levels of anxiety and in greater need of strict formal rules with less tolerance for risks and unpredictability than members of low UAI cultures who appear to be more relaxed with lower stress levels and more acceptance for different ideas and unexpected change of plans.

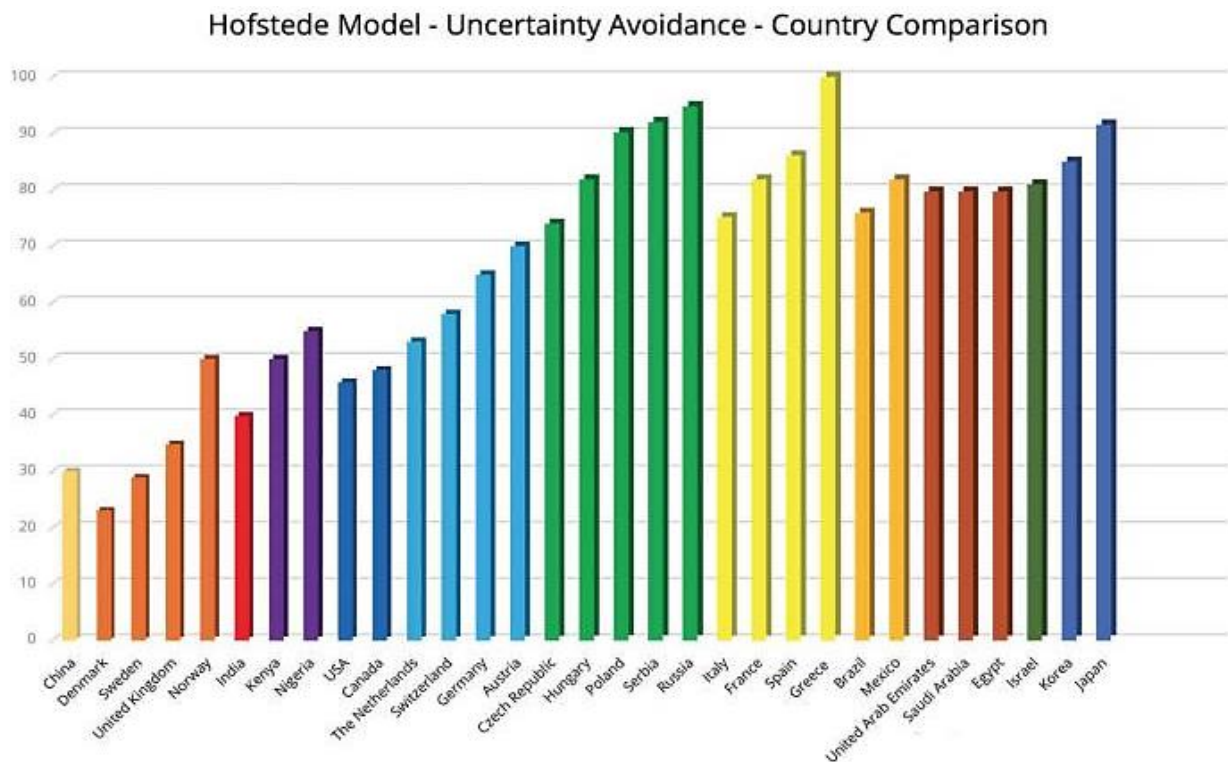


Figure 1. Country comparison of uncertainty avoidance (Source: <http://www.faria.org>).

As shown in the above Figure 1, China has a rather low Uncertainty Avoidance Index (UAI), gaining points of 30 compared with other occidental countries, especially with European countries, such as Greece (99) and Spain (85). The traditional Chinese society seems to be tolerant of uncertainties. For instance, arranged marriages and blind dates are an accepted way of finding a life partner. The uncertainty level involved in this procedure is rather high since one has to rely largely on parents, friends, or matchmakers to learn about the other person which leaves much room for interpretation. Though the trustworthiness or credit of the mediators is usually unquestionable, and standard background checks on qualities such as social status, financial eligibility, and family compatibility can boost the chances of successful matching, it is still quite risky to leave such personal matters into the hands of others.

However, the UAI among Chinese young adults nowadays seems to be on the rise as shown in the following sample comments:

**Example 5:**

You'll never know what your kid is like and whether he will take care of you when you are getting old or not. Therefore, I may as well spend all the fortunes on myself and turn myself into a DINK! That's more realistic.

养儿就一定能防老吗？你怎么知道生出来的孩子会不会听你的话！还不如把钱都花给自己、直接丁克来得实在。

The traditional Chinese advocates family heritage as an honor and producing offspring as an insurance policy for old age. However, the above comments argue that there is no absolute guarantee of old age security from child-rearing. To matters worse, the possibility of disobedient children can backfire. The potential risks in fostering children are pulling young people away from being parents, and they claim to remain DINK in order to avoid the risks altogether. In traditional Chinese culture, it is a moral obligation for adult children to offer their aging parents emotional as well financial maintenance. Compared with the elder generation, who show much more tolerance for the possible risks of bearing children, young Chinese adults are unwilling to do so even when they are assisted in diminishing the risks. Still, it may be too early to tell whether China now can be rated a high UAI; the above samples do indicate a strong tendency towards the opposite pole.

**Diminishing Tolerance of Uneven Power Distribution**

According to Hofstede's theory, power distance is the acceptance of less powerful members in a society, an organization or institution, towards unequal distribution of power. Societies characterized by a low Power Distance Index (PDI) promote independence and democracy while high PDI cultures are usually power-centralized and autocratic with higher acceptance towards hierarchy. Most Asian countries display high PDI, such as China, Japan, and Korea. Western countries, such as the United States and most European countries, on the contrary, have a rather low PDI.

In the realm of traditional Chinese marriage, the young couple should show obedience or "filial piety" towards the parents and refrain from open or direct protest when it comes to issues of disputes as they are not expected to challenge the authority of the seniors. In the family dynamics, the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law can be representative of this hierarchical structure. The daughter-in-law, being the young female, is supposed to answer to the mother-in-law and follow her instructions in domestic affairs. However, this traditional high PDI seems to be changing.

**Example 6:**

Daughter-in-laws have to be meek and put up with all the strictures made by their mothers-in-law in conventional society. Nowadays, however, it is mutual understanding and respect that matter in the relationship between mother-in-law and daughter-in-law. It is out of affection for your mother-in-law to help you bring up your kids while indeed she doesn't have to in legal sense. Don't you ever take it for granted, because apart from the position of mother-in-law, she is also an independent individual woman.

传统社会里做“小媳妇”都得低眉顺眼，忍受婆婆的各种苛责，但是新时代的婆媳关系中是相互理解、相互尊重最重要。婆婆帮你带孩子是情分，不帮你带孩子是本份，别觉得婆婆都欠自己的。婆婆也是独立的个体，也是一名女性。

**Example 7:**

You only need to be polite since there is no legal obligations for the daughter-in-law to support the mother-in-law, they do not have blood relationship anyway.

媳妇对婆婆没有赡养义务。所以客气就行了。婆婆与儿媳妇之间本来就没什么关系。

The above two examples complain about the unequal relationship between the young wife and the mother-in-law. It seems that young women today are no longer willing to follow the traditional path of being a meek daughter-in-law and tend to seek equal status in the family instead of adhering to superior-subordinate mode. Furthermore, they put emphasis on shouldering individual responsibility instead of interdependence for family duties such as childcare and provision. It can be inferred that compared with the elder generation, who show much more acceptance towards the unequal relationship, Chinese young adults nowadays tend to display lower tolerance for unequal distribution of power in marriage. Though it may be too hasty to make assertions about the change, the above samples do indicate a strong tendency towards the opposite pole.

### Focus on Long-Term Orientation

The Long-Term vs. Short-Term Orientation refers to the acceptance of members in a certain culture towards delaying their satisfaction in substance, sentiments, and social needs. In a long-term oriented culture, significant emphasis is placed on planning for the future and observing principles of thrift, perseverance, and persistence. In a short-term oriented culture, it is more important to satisfy one's instant needs and desires while in longer-term oriented societies they are repressed and delayed in quest of gratification on a more profound level. In Hofstede's experiments, the Long-Term Orientation Index (LTO) is used to differentiate the long-term and short-term oriented cultures. Most western countries, such as the United States (29) and United Kingdom (25) have lower index in contrast to Asian countries. China, with a high score of 118, is a typical long-term oriented society as delaying the satisfaction of substance and other needs are considered signs of admirable traits, such as patience and persistence. This value has hardly changed as is shown in the following example.

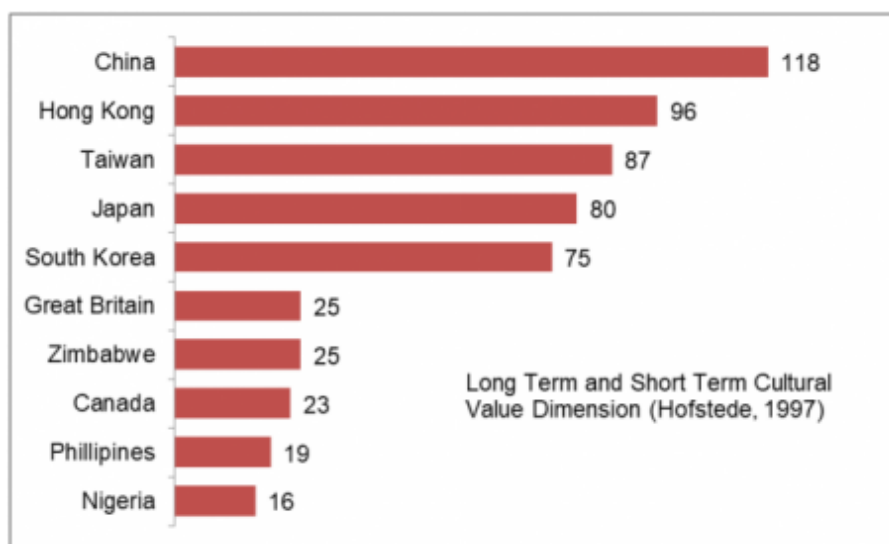


Figure 2. Country comparison of long term and short term cultural value dimension (Source: <http://open.maricopa.edu>).

#### Example 8:

Marriage is an essential part of my life schedule, though it may bring more responsibilities and perhaps sacrifice freedom to some extent, I deem it worthwhile once I think about the happiness of family reunion in my twilight years.

婚姻是我人生规划中很重要的一部分，虽然婚后会有更多责任，也可能牺牲掉自己的一些自由，但是一想到晚年的天伦之乐，我就感觉还是很值得的。

The above comment deems marriage as a crucial part of life even though it means sacrificing personal freedom and shouldering more responsibility. It clearly shows the willingness to persevere and persist through dozens of years of toil for the sake of fulfillment and gratification, which is characteristic of a long-term oriented culture. The inclusion of marriage as part of a life plan and acceptance of delaying satisfaction in sentimental needs demonstrates a strong long-term tendency. In the Chinese culture, marriage at youth is considered preparation for eventual happiness towards twilight years. No significant change is found in this orientation dimension among Chinese young adults; hence the Chinese society nowadays is still inclined to long-term orientation, which is also proved by the following comment.

Example 9:

I'd like to focus more on my vocation when I am still young and capable of making contributions to the society and just let nature take the course of sentimental issues, it doesn't matter to consider later.

我趁着年轻能对社会有作为的时候还是应该先多搞事业，感情的事顺其自然，晚点也行。

The comment clearly prioritizes career pursuit over sentimental needs with the belief that youth is the best and the most productive time to establish personal career status and the sentimental needs should give way if necessary. In fact, according to the *China Population Census Yearbook 2020*, the average age of Chinese young adults' first marriage is 28.67, which has increased 3.78 compared to the data in 2010. Moreover, the *China Statistical Yearbook 2022* indicates that the number of first marriages is 11 million and 578 thousand, which has decreased 708 thousand compared with last year's statistics and it is the lowest since 1985. In general, these statistics can be a strong proof of Chinese young adults nowadays postponing their satisfactions of sentimental needs.

### Priority of Indulgence Over Restraint

Geert Hofstede's cultural dimension of indulgence versus restraint describes the extent to which societies allow or suppress gratification of basic human desires and needs related to enjoying life. The indulgent society has slack moral discipline while the restrained society has stricter one. A society with more indulgence demands less self-constraint and people are less self-disciplined. Many western countries, especially those with a more individualistic and liberal mindset, tend to score higher on the indulgence side of the dimension. These societies generally place greater importance on personal happiness, individual freedom, and self-expression. They may have more permissive attitudes towards leisure, recreation, and pursuing personal desires.

China, on the contrary, was traditionally affected by Confucianism which believes one should strictly observe etiquette and restrain himself from indulging in the substantial needs. Hence, the Chinese society has a low tolerance towards indulgence and is more of a restraint society which places emphasis on self-discipline, self-control, and harmony with societal norms. Traditionally this is reflected in the aspect of marriage and love affairs by giving weight to hierarchy, collectivism, and conformity to social expectations. Yet the following comments exhibit some changes in the aforementioned tendency.

Example 10:

I cannot see what is wrong with being a cheerful "Single Dog" since life alone is so free and the only thing I need to consider is my personal feelings.

做只快乐的“单身狗”有什么不好的？一个人无拘无束多自在啊，我只需要考虑自己的感受就行。

Example 11:

Why do people have to get married if it doesn't render us to feel more comfortable and happy? Man only lives once for his own happiness.



如果结婚没有让自己变得更自在幸福的话，为什么非结不可呢？人活一次还不是就为了图个乐！

The first comment reflects a tendency to indulge oneself in satisfying immediate needs of personal freedom and enjoyment in life instead of taking trouble to end the single marital status, indicating a distinct turn away from the traditional Chinese cultural pattern. The self-deprecating phrase “Single Dog” originates online and has been used to declare the pitiful situation of being single, a self-mocking label for failing to gain popularity in the love market. Similar changes can be observed in the second comment above which claims that the purpose of life is merely seeking pleasure and comfort and marriage is optional with all its constraints and restraints. Both comments tend to prioritize indulgence over restraint, which may be hinting a rise of China's Indulgence Index on this dimension. Still, it is worthy to note that despite the rising number of “Single Dogs” and the popularity of the term, the “counter-culture” group may be prominent especially in big cities such as Beijing and Shanghai, but still remains peripheral to the mainstream society.

### Conclusions

On Geert Hofstede's cultural dimensions, China has traditionally been inclined to collectivism, masculinity, and restraint, which emphasizes harmony and order in a hierarchical society with long-term aims and patient endurance. People are supposed to exercise discipline, self-control, and considerateness in interpersonal relationships and observe social norms and cultural customs. In recent years, there has been a shift towards a more individualistic and indulgent mindset among Chinese young adults as a result of rapid socioeconomic changes. With greater access to education and job opportunities, young people today are placing more emphasis on personal goals and aspirations. When it comes to marriage matters, they are no longer solely motivated by familial expectations and are more likely to seek out partners based on compatibility and shared values. Marriage is viewed as more than a duty and obligation to fulfill one's filial piety and carry on the family lineage. The widespread availability of information and technology has enabled Chinese youth to gain a broader perspective on romantic relationships and marital issues, including alternative lifestyles, such as cohabitation and non-monogamous relationships. The exposure to western cultural values has rendered Chinese young people more indulgent and permissive towards personal desires and immediate gratifications. The sample comments in this paper clearly reflect such a trend especially among the Gen-Z and millennials who account for the majority of Bilibili.com users.

It is important to note that despite the increase in love marriages and non-traditional relationships styles, marriage is still highly valued in Chinese society as a means of maintaining social and economic stability. Many Chinese youths still prioritize their parents' opinions and seek their approval before making important marital decisions. This paper can conclude that most of the Chinese young adults nowadays are cautious towards marriage even under increasing familial and social pressure, but it is too soon to make revolutionary assertions since it will be years before the self-aware youngsters become legitimate cultural “spokesman”. While Chinese youth may lean towards indulgence, the overall society still exhibits more restraint behaviors. Given the truth that cultural values and attitudes can evolve over time, it will be interesting to observe in the coming years how these competing cultural forces continue to shape Chinese youth's attitudes and behaviors around marriage.

### References

- Cai, Y. L. (2019). Research on the intergenerational differences in modern marriage concept (Doctoral dissertation, Shanxi Normal University).

- Hofstede, G. H. (2001). *Culture's consequences: Comparing values, behaviors, institutions and organizations across nations*. California: Sage Publications.
- Liu, A. Y. (2022). Relative resources, gender role attitudes and its interaction on the division of housework in family. *Journal of China Women's University*, 34(2), 27-35.
- Li, T. (2022). Have marriage and childbearing been de-institutionalized in China?—Findings and discussion based on the survey of Chinese college students' views on marriage and childbearing. *Journal of Chinese Women's Studies*, 31(3), 85-102.
- Sui, Y. F. (2018). A brief analysis on Hofstede's cultural dimension theory. *Shanxi Youth*, 43(1), 78-79.
- Sun, X. (2021). The evolution of Chinese traditional marriage system and concept. *People's Tribune*, 30(16), 110-112.
- Wang, Y. (2012). The interpretation of Hofstede's cultural dimension theory. *Shi Ji Qiao*, 26(1), 35-36.
- Yang, Y. L. (2007). Contemporary undergraduates' view on love and marriage, and its influential factors (Master thesis, Dongbei Normal University).