International Journal of Arts and Social Science www.ijassjournal.com
ISSN: 2581-7922,
Volume 8 Issue 9, September 2025

The "Gap Year" In China —A Cross-Cultural Analysis of Differences Between China and the West

Rui Cheng[1]
1(School of English for Specific Purposes, Beijing Foreign Studies University, China)

ABSTRACT: Recently, the topic of the "Gap Year" has been abuzz on social media platforms, yet its implementation and reception in China remain low. The paper begins by introducing the concept of the "Gap Year" and its diffusion in China. Building upon this foundation, the paper employs Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory to analyze the differences between Chinese and Western perspectives on the "Gap Year" from the viewpoints of individualism and collectivism as well as long-term and short-term orientation. Meanwhile, the paper delves into the underlying reasons for these differences from five cross-cultural dimensions: historical context, educational system, family value, workplace culture, and the contrast between marine and agricultural civilizations. Furthermore, the paper offers recommendations for overcoming cultural barriers at both individual and policy levels.

KEYWORDS - *Cross-Cultural Analysis, Gap Year, Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory*

I. Introduction

The paper explores the heated discussions on the "Gap Year" within Chinese social media, contrasting it with the limited implementation in reality. And it introduces the concept and its reception in China, then leverages Hofstede's framework to scrutinize cultural disparities. The discussion extends to cross-cultural factors and concludes with strategies to foster greater reception of the "Gap Year" in China.

II. Gap Year

According to the Gap Year Association, an Oregon-based nonprofit, the gap year is a semester or year of experiential learning, typically taken after high school and prior to post-secondary education or career, in order to deepen one's practical, professional and personal awareness.

2.1 Forms and Practices of the "Gap Year"

For anyone considering a gap year, there are plentiful options that satisfy personal needs. Basically, it may include travel, volunteering, paid work, an internship, or a combination of these things. The younger generation use this time to understand themselves better and figure out what they want through stepping out of their comfort zones. Or to address their psychological problems through taking a break.

2.2 Historical Development

Gap years first became common in the 1960s in Europe when the young, baby boom generation, wanted to get away from the severity of war from their parents' generation. While the primary purpose of the gap year was for countries to exchange cultural ideals in the hope of preventing future wars, the outcome of this exchange was the rise of the gap year industry. In 1972, Gap Activity Projects was started to send UK youth around the

world on gap year experiences. Their participants, still called "Gappers", went a long way to branding the year between high school and university, which is the origin of the term "gap year".

Subsequently, the concept of "gap year" gradually spread and developed in other English-speaking countries such as Australia, North America, and other regions such as China.

III. "Gap Year" in China

Due to cultural diversity, taking a gap year as well as interrupting the education or career was not well accepted in China during the past decades. But recently, with China's economic and social development, discussions about gap year erupted on Chinese social media.

The rise and development of gap year in China was relatively late. It was not until 2009 that Chinese people became aware of the concept from the book My Late Arrival Gap Year. Thereafter, taking a Gap Year has gradually become popular in the last decade in China, with more and more participants sharing their gap year experiences on the Internet.

"Gap Year" prevails just in social media, but not in reality. Owing to the lack of supporting systems in China, the implementation of gap year faces some difficulties and risks. Our gap years are about preparing for retakes of senior year in high school, fifth year in college, second attempts at postgraduate entrance exams, or multiple attempts at civil service exams, totally different from what in Western countries.

IV. China–West Contrasts Under Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory is a framework for cross-cultural communication developed by Dutch sociologist Geert Hofstede who conducted a research project with IBM branches based in 73 countries and 3 regions and generalized five important cultural dimensions: Power Distance, Individualism vs. Collectivism, Masculinity vs. Femininity, Uncertainty Avoidance, Long-term vs. Short-term Orientation. These dimensions help to explain the underlying values and social norms that influence behavior and communication within different societies, providing a tool for understanding cultural differences in a systematic way.

4.1 Individualism and Collectivism

Western countries are individual-oriented societies, often referred to as "I-Culture", they have a loosely knit social framework and individuals are supposed to take care of themselves. Western people value personal rights and responsibilities, privacy, freedom, innovation and self-expression. In such cultural background, the gap year is celebrated for its potential to cultivate personal independence and self-discovery. It allows young adults to explore diverse interests, acquire new skills, and gain a broader worldview, all of which are highly valued in societies that prioritize individual growth and self-actualization. Besides, the gap year is seen as a beneficial stepping stone that can lead to a more informed and purposeful educational or career path.

In contrast, group-oriented societies such as China, often referred to as "We-Cultures", exhibit a tightly-knit social fabric. Collectivism upholds community, tradition and face maintenance. Therefore, collectivist cultures may view the gap year through a different lens, focusing on the potential drawbacks it poses to group harmony and continuity. To put it plainly, the decision to take a gap year could be perceived as a departure from the collective goals and expectations, potentially disrupting the established order and causing concern for the individual's commitment to shared values and responsibilities.

4.2 Long-term Orientation and Short-term Orientation

The Western approach to gap years aligns with a long-term orientation, where the benefits of gaining life experience and developing a broader perspective are valued over immediate academic or professional achievements. They emphasize the significance of persistence and thrift and are willing to delay gratification for long-term benefits. In this case, the gap year is advantageous as it positions younger generation to make more informed decisions about their future. It enables the accumulation of life experiences, skill development, and a deeper self-understanding, all of which are assets that contribute to long-term personal and professional success.

Conversely, societies with a short-term orientation, which are more common in East Asian, prioritize short-term results and adherence to traditional milestones. This can lead to a preference for uninterrupted educational progression and skepticism towards activities perceived as delaying entry into the workforce or advanced studies. As a result, there may be concerns about falling behind in the competitive race of academic and professional advancement. The loss of continuity in education or the delay in starting a career could be seen as drawbacks that do not align with the cultural emphasis on fulfilling short-term goals and seeking quick gratification.

V. Sociocultural Determinants of Gap Year Perceptions

To further contextualize the differing attitudes toward gap years, it is necessary to examine the broader sociocultural dimensions that shape individual and collective choices. Beyond personal motivations, historical trajectories, educational structures, family values, workplace expectations, and deep-rooted cultural traditions all exert considerable influence. These factors not only determine how the gap year is perceived in China and the West but also illuminate the structural conditions under which such practices are either encouraged or constrained. The following subsections analyze these dimensions in detail.

5.1 Historical Context

The Chinese mindset has yet to fully embrace slow living and sensory experiences after nearly 80 years of arduous struggle.

Following World War II, and particularly after the founding of the People's Republic of China, the Chinese nation faced the daunting task of rapidly expanding its economic scale amidst the ruins. Addressing the basic needs of the population and narrowing the gap with developed countries were urgent priorities. At that time, with a population of just over 600 million and a significant labor shortage due to the ravages of war, the Chinese government had to achieve a substantial economic leap in the short term by increasing working hours and improving work efficiency. "The spirit of the model worker (劳模精神)" and "the craftsmanship spirit (工匠精神)" are emblematic of the steadfast dedication of the Chinese people throughout the last century.

During the same period, on the other side of the globe, Western societies, having amassed considerable wealth through warfare and colonization, were free from the anxieties of economic backwardness. They focused on post-war psychological recovery, seeking solace in rock culture and psychedelic substances to heal their spiritual wounds. Moreover, as early as the nineteenth century, Western workers had initiated a series of labor movements to safeguard their rights. While it was not until 1995 that China implemented a "two-day weekend system".

Against the historical backdrop, even as China has now become the world's second-largest economy, the deep-seated genetic predisposition to labor has led the millennials, who have experienced the economic transformation, to subconsciously refuse gap or rest. This mindset has been perpetuated or even imposed on the younger generation. While the gap year system has become well-established in the West, the construction of China's spiritual civilization has only been placed on the agenda recently.

5.2 Educational System

Calling a stop is not easy for students in China during the university stage. In Chinese, gap years are referred to as "Xiuxue" (or rest from education). And unlike its innocent Western counterpart, Xiuxue implies that something wrong with you. It could impact college admittance that make one held back and potentially cast a shadow over one's resume, adversely affecting graduate school interviews and job interviews after graduation. According to the gap year experiences shared by college students on social media, Xiuxue often involves complicated procedures, which means all approvers or responsible parties associated may attempt to dissuade or even obstruct the student to make them abandon the idea.

In Western academia, a pronounced appreciation exists for students who have embarked on a gap year journey. It is widely held that such individuals, in comparison to their freshly graduated peers, possess a wealth

of experiences that significantly contribute to the cultural and experiential diversity of the university community. Harvard University, a vanguard in this regard, has fostered a culture that actively endorses gap year participation for more than four decades. Official data from the institution indicates that annually, a cohort of 80 to 110 students elect to postpone their enrollment to pursue this enriching interlude.

Similarly, Princeton University exemplifies its commitment to experiential learning through the "Bridge Year Program", an initiative that extends financial support to approximately 10% of its student population. This program facilitates global engagement by enabling students to immerse themselves in gap year endeavors overseas, thereby fostering a cadre of globally aware and culturally adept scholars.

5.3 Family Value

The attitudes of parents in China and the West towards the "gap year" differ significantly.

In China, the parents' recognition of Gap Year is still relatively low. Since childhood, Chinese students endure tight social clock, which is the idea that people should accomplish certain life goals at different stages. In the words of parents, it means doing the right things at the right age. Words like "First grade is really crucial" "Senior year is the most critical year" ... is frequently heard in the Chinese context. Missing a beat at any point means a "time difference" from the standard timeline, leading to an irreparable deviation from the "correct" life path. Therefore, behaviors that cause "being left behind" such as taking a gap year could make Chinese parents feel like "losing face".

Besides, due to the circumstances of their era, many Chinese parents were either denied the opportunity for higher education or were compelled to enter the workforce immediately upon graduation to support their families. Consequently, they often regard the "gap year" as an indulgence in wasted time, and even perceive it as a squandering of the efforts they invested in their children's upbringing. Their aspiration is for their offspring to commence employment promptly upon obtaining their undergraduate degree, thereby contributing to the family in a manner reminiscent of their own early contributions.

Furthermore, some East Asian parents desire almost complete control over their kids. They tend to instinctively reject their children's autonomy and independent thinking.

Unlike Chinese parents, Western parents are becoming more aware of the variety of options after high school or undergraduate study and seeing the benefits of taking a gap year. They tend to emphasize on self-development rather than academic success. They believe in a more holistic education where children are given situations to explore and develop their individuality.

5.4 Workplace Culture

Another barrier for Chinese youth to take a gap year is workplace culture.

In China, gap years are not widely accepted highly due to Chinese workplace culture. If fresh graduates did not seek employment or further education in a timely manner, they may encounter some questions in job interviews or lose some job opportunities. Even for those with job experiences, Chinese HR generally prioritize continuous work experience. Candidates with longer gaps between jobs face higher competitiveness risks compared to those without employment gaps, especially given the large population base. Additionally, Chinese HR values job seekers' "stability" over their abilities. The flip side of "stability" is obedience and resilience, which are traits that Chinese employers need and prefer most.

In the West, workplace culture often emphasizes work-life balance, with a strong focus on personal well-being and development. Taking a gap year is seen as a way to enhance personal growth and can be valued by employers for the maturity and new perspectives it may bring. Besides, Western cultures tend to have more flexible career trajectories, where it is common to change jobs or fields throughout one's career. A gap year can be integrated into this dynamic progression without significant impact.

5.5 Marine Civilization and Agricultural Civilization

Western culture has been influenced by maritime traditions where taking risks is seen as necessary for survival. Westerners enjoy challenges and are more inclusive. The concept of "gap year" conforms to their culture so they embrace it in every aspects of life rather than doubt or deny it.

China has a rich agricultural history. A successful harvest relies a lot on stable weather like the right temperatures, plenty of sunshine, and enough rainfall. Therefore, Chinese people tend to value stability and are naturally resistant, even opposed, to change. The gap year may be viewed as a disruption to the established cycle of education and work that brings risks and unpredictability.

VI. Alternative Pathways to "Gap" in China

Although the notion of the traditional "gap year" has not yet taken root in China due to cultural, educational, and economic constraints, alternative approaches have gradually emerged. These approaches do not replicate the Western model of a year-long hiatus but instead reflect localized adaptations that align with Chinese realities. By adopting fragmented pauses, rethinking life philosophy, and responding to demographic pressures, Chinese society could develop its own ways of addressing the need for rest, renewal, and balance. The following subsections illustrate these representative practices and perspectives.

6.1 Take a gap year in a Chinese way

Nowadays, the younger generation proposed a series of buzzwords to describe "the version of Chinese Gap Year", such as "Gap Day", "Gap Hour", "Gap Minute", and even "Gap Second". Since taking a gay year could be harmful to academic and professional advancement, these breaks allow them to step back from a daily routine they find oppressive and refresh themselves so that they could be back to the busy world with more physical and mental vigor.

6.2 Change your philosophy of life

Abandon the idea that enduring hardship ("吃苦(chiku)" in Chinese) for nothing, as we see our parents and grandparents having done. Engage in a variety of activities and behaviors that could be described as embracing slow living and sensory experiences, for example taking a walk in the park, preparing a home-cooked meal, going fishing, enjoying a cup of tea. Focus on life's little pleasures, even if it means not conforming to authorities' expectations.

6.3 Fewer but Better Births

The policy of "fewer but better births" should be advocated. As the population size continues to expand, the demand for employment will inevitably exceed supply, leading to an increasingly competitive job market. This demographic pressure can result in employers becoming more demanding and selective in their hiring practices, seeking candidates with a higher caliber of skills and qualifications. The burgeoning population, coupled with a limited number of job opportunities, may also give rise to a more stringent set of criteria for employment, potentially exacerbating the challenges faced by job seekers in securing suitable positions. It is imperative, therefore, for governments to implement strategic measures that balance population growth with economic development.

VII. Conclusion

The paper concludes that the "Gap Year" concept, while gaining traction on Chinese social media, faces significant cultural and practical barriers in its adoption within China.

Drawing on Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions Theory, the paper highlights that traditional Chinese values of collectivism and short-term orientation often conflict with the individualistic and long-term benefits that the "Gap Year" offers. Meanwhile, the historical emphasis on continuous education and work, combined with the educational system's structure and workplace expectations, create a reluctance towards gap years. Besides, the paper suggests that for the "Gap Year" to be more widely accepted in China, cultural reassessment and policy

support are needed to recognize its potential for personal development without academic or professional repercussions.

Nonetheless, the study is limited by its reliance on secondary sources and conceptual frameworks. Future research could incorporate empirical data, such as surveys, interviews, or longitudinal studies, to capture lived experiences of Chinese students who attempt alternative forms of gap years. Comparative research across different regions and socioeconomic groups would further refine our understanding of how culture mediates educational and professional choices.

Despite these limitations, the paper contributes to the study of cross-cultural education and youth development by situating the gap year within a comparative framework between China and the West. Drawing on Hofstede's cultural dimensions and an examination of historical, educational, familial, occupational, and civilizational factors, it uncovers the structural and cultural reasons behind the limited acceptance of gap years in the Chinese context while also highlighting the localized adaptations devised by younger generations. In doing so, the study enriches scholarly understanding of how global educational practices are mediated by cultural and institutional conditions, and it offers insights for policymakers and educators seeking to promote more context-sensitive approaches to experiential learning in China.

References

[1] G. Hofstede, Dimensionalizing cultures: The Hofstede model in context, *International Journal of Behavioral Medicine,* 2011, n. pag.

[2] M.Y. Wu, P. Pearce, K. Huang, and T. Fan, Gap year in China: views from the participants and implications for the future, *Current Issues in Tourism, 18(2),* 2014, 158-174.

[3] P. Jiang and L. Lu, Analysis of public opinion and sentiments towards gap year in China based on Weibo data mining, *Advances in Economics, Management and Political Sciences, 82,* 2024, 347-355.

[4] Teen Ink, Gap year in China: Keep calm and don't carry on if you can't, (n.d.). Retrieved June 21, 2024, from https://www.teenink.com/nonfiction/personal_experience/article/1203196/Gap-Year-In-China-Keep-Calm-And-Dont-Carry-On-If-You-Cant

[5] U.S. News & World Report, What a gap year is and how it prepares students for college, (n.d.). Retrieved June 21, 2024, from https://www.usnews.com/education/best-colleges/articles/what-a-gap-year-is-and-how-it-prepares-students-for-college

[6] The Vibes, Why are young Chinese workers taking gap days?, (n.d.). Retrieved June 21, 2024, from https://www.thevibes.com/articles/lifestyles/98296/why-are-young-chinese-workers-taking-gap-days

[7] Wikipedia, Gap year, in Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, (n.d.). Retrieved June 21, 2024, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gap_year#Description