

A Study of the Differences between Chinese and Western Social Communication Customs

Wenjuan He

College of Foreign Languages, Hengyang Normal University, Hengyang, China, 421002

Abstract: The great differences between Chinese and Western cultures have always been the main factors restricting the communication between people of different cultural backgrounds. They lack the necessary understanding of the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. In the process of communication, there are always many difficulties, and misunderstandings sometimes fall into an awkward situation. Therefore, understanding the manifestations of cultural differences and the underlying causes of differences, reducing cultural conflicts is necessary in the future and in the future. This paper analyses the customs of social interaction between Chinese and Americans by contrast, namely, forms of address, greetings, gratitude and thanks, hospitality and time concept. Then it points out that what result in the differences are different histories and values.

Keywords: differences; customs; intercultural communication

1. Introduction

Confucian saying goes “Human beings draw close to one another by their common nature, but habits and customs keep them apart.” Humans are social animals and no one in normal circumstances can live without any contact with others. However, diverse habits and customs may cause problems in people’s communication, especially when this communication takes place between people with distinct cultural backgrounds. We can avoid serious communication problems if we are aware of our surroundings and the cultural customs that influence the communication. Because we all have free choice, we can make the necessary concessions to custom, but first we must know the custom. Our ability to adapt to the customs of other culture will, to a large extent, determine the success of our intercultural interaction. Our communication will not be fruitful if custom requires us to remain standing when we enter a room, but we take a seat. Therefore, to improve intercultural communication competence, we need to understand significant differences regarding social customs, an important cultural aspect. Here the author will focus on the differences between the Chinese and the American cultures.

2. The Customs’ Differences

Many rules governing speech patterns are learned in childhood and people grow up thinking that everyone has the same rules for speaking. We unconsciously expect others to use the same modes of expression as we do. For the successful communication, we have the needs to understand the differences between the Chinese and the American cultures.

2.1. Forms of Address

In China, we usually address a stranger, even an acquaintance, with some titles, such as *daye* (grandpa), *dama* (grandma), *dashu* (uncle), *dashen* (aunty). Because we like close relationship and often extend kinship terms to people who are not related by blood or marriage[1]. Those terms are used after the surname to show politeness and respect to our acquaintances and strangers. Literary translation of those terms may sound odd to English-speaking people because these terms are not so used in equivalent English. Even with relatives, Americans tend to only use the first name and leave out the terms of relationship.

Some people may say that there are Brother Joseph or Sister Mary in English; however, these terms would commonly be understood as referring to persons belonging to a catholic group or some religious or professional society. In America, people usually use “Hi”, or “Could you tell me...?” to address a stranger. And if there is a difference in status or age between two individuals, formal titles and last names are used unless the person of lower status is told to use the first name.

For example [2]:

① Accountant (age 50): Hello, my name is Bob Thomas.

Clerk (age 20): It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Thomas.

Accountant: Please, just call me Bob.

It is also quite common for the Chinese to use position-linked or occupation-linked titles to address people, such as Wang jingli (Manager Wang), Zhang zhuren (Director Zhang), Ma zuzhang (Director General Ma)[3]. In more formal situations, the title along with the last name is appropriate. For example, when a secretary introduces herself to a general manager, she might say:

② Susan (student): Hello, Mr. Smith. My name is Susan Hall and I am reporting for the job.

Americans have only a limited number of titles to be used before a person’s last name — Doctor, Professor, Judge, President, Senator, Governor, Mayor, General,

Colonel, Captain, Father, etc. Terms like teacher, manager and director are occupations or positions.

As a result, no wonder Americans are surprised to see that it is important to clearly indicate their positions in their company at a business meeting, because we Chinese always treat them differently according to their ranks and status.

2.2. Greetings

There is a tendency for Chinese to show more concern for the personal matters of other people, which are taken as privacy by Americans and other westerners.

A typical Chinese greeting is literally "Where are you going?" or "What are you going to do?" or "Have you eaten?" In fact, it is not a genuine question for the common run of Chinese, but only a form of greeting. The equivalent greetings among the English-speaking people are "Good morning", "Good afternoon", "How are you?", "How do you do?", "Hello!", etc. If the greeting had been put literally into English "Have you eaten yet?" It would have sounded rather unusual. To Americans, this greeting is a kind of invitation to a meal, because it means: "I haven't either. Come on, let's go together and get something to eat." or "If you haven't, I was just going to invite you to my place."

Those who have lived in China for a long time may get used to this greeting and aren't annoyed by it. For example, an American doing business in China had an appointment at noon. As he was getting on his bicycle, a Chinese friend passed by. "Have you eaten yet?", the young Chinese asked. The American merely nodded with a smile, waved goodbye and went off. He realized that his friend's remark was nothing more than a Chinese way of saying "Hello" or "Hi". A similar Chinese greeting is: "Where are you going?" or "Where have you been?" The natural reaction of most English-speaking people to this greeting would most likely be "It's none of your business!" Fortunately, not all greetings sound strange or arouse displeasure. Many are similar, only some are merely different.

2.3. Hospitality

Chinese people usually prepare more than enough food to invite guests for "an ordinary home-cooked meal". Our traditional Chinese custom is to provide much more than the guests could possibly eat. We would feel embarrassed if the food tends to be not enough or even just enough.

The dinner the Americans give is, compared with ours, much simpler. A college president once jokingly summed up the western banquet this way: first, running water, then some thick liquid (soup), followed by raw vegetables (salad) and a slice of meat, finally some fruit or ice-cream.

Traditional Chinese custom requires that during the course of entertaining, the hosts have to always pour more wine or tea to the guests' glass or cup, and always add more food to the guests' plates or bowls without asking whether it's wanted or whether it will face a refusal. If the guests don't want anything, they simply

leave the wine or tea or food in the containers and stop having any more.

At a dinner party in America, it would not be unusual to hear the following conversation.

③ Host: Would you like some more dessert?

Guest: No, thank you. It's delicious, but I've really had enough.

Host: OK, why don't we leave the table and sit in the living room?

The host didn't repeat the offer more than once, because it is impolite to keep asking someone again and again or press something on the guest. If the guests feel like eating more, they will say directly, "Yes, I'd like some more, thank you." In case of the offer being declined, the hosts will assume that the guests' refusal is honest and direct.

And it's bad manners to leave food in one's own plate at dinner table. In the United States, "seeing the bottom" of all the plates is the ideal ending to a meal; it means that the guest has thoroughly enjoyed the meal. Clearly, in China it is a sign that the hosts have not prepared enough.

Whereas directness in speech is common in the United States, indirectness is the rule in China. Without any knowledge of the differences between the two cultures, a polite Chinese guest would suffer hunger or thirst at an American dinner party, because in Chinese culture it is a good manner for the guest to decline the offer of food or drink even though they need it badly.

2.4. Gift Giving, Gratitude and Thanks

In China, gift giving expresses the importance of the relationship. Whereas in the United States, even visiting a home in the United States, it is not customary to bring a gift, although a small token of flowers, a plant, or a bottle of wine is appreciated. Instead of gifts, letters of thanks are standard in the United States. As such, it is important to know not only the views concerning gift giving, but also what gifts are appropriate for the culture.

For example, when a Chinese receives the visitor's gift, often he puts the gift aside, meanwhile thanks the visitor. Only after the leave of the visitor, does he untie the gift. This way of ordinary day life shows his fine breeding. However, in English speaking countries, it is the opposite. The polite way is the host or hostess will untie the gift before the visitor to show him that he or she likes the gift, and expresses his or her thanks to the visitor[4]. The different ways of the daily life shows us the difference between Chinese culture and English culture.

Expressing thanks is universally held as being civilized. "Thank you" means that we recognize that someone has done something for us. Thus we thank people all day long, even for the smallest, most ordinary things. Yet both differences are easily found between gratitude and thanks in how people express and respond to.

Excessive expressions of gratitude make us extremely uncomfortable and give a sense of empty thanks, a sense of formal or required kowtowing which does not indicate gratitude but insincerity.

Chinese students would always thank their teachers for the latter's help, but would seldom do so to their parents.

Sometimes they might say something like “Do you feel tired?” “Have a rest.” to show their gratitude and concern. The traditional Chinese concept holds that it is the duty of the young and junior to do something for the elderly and the senior, so the latter don’t have to say thanks. And traditional Chinese customs don’t require people to express thanks for the small favors that others have done them.

In contrast, saying “Thank you” is very common in America, even between parents and children, husband and wife and for very small and most ordinary things. So they thank people all day long. For instance, they will thank the saleswoman after she has attended to them. They will say “Thank you” to a student who has just answered the question. At home, the husband will thank his wife when she brings him a glass of water. The wife will thank her husband if he helps her with her chair.

Chinese and American cultures have different expressions for thanks. Some English expressions for thanks can be confusing to Chinese. For example, “It doesn’t matter” or “Never mind” are responses to apologies, not to thanks. And “This is what I should do” or “It’s my duty to do so” are not responses to thanks in English. Therefore, in the second situation, a native English speaker should find it inappropriate to respond with “It’s my duty to do so”, which means “You don’t have to thank me. I had no choice but to do it, because it is my duty, otherwise I would not have done so.” This is, of course, far from the message the Chinese intends to convey.

3. The Reasons

Culture differences, to most extent, find their roots in history. China has been isolated by immense natural barriers for centuries, and the self-perception has prevailed for five thousand years [5]. In China, clan and family are usually noted more important than the state. Chinese values have been strongly influenced by Confucianism in which harmony is the axis of social interaction and the ultimate goal of human interaction. In Confucian-influenced cultures, seniority is the main source of power, which ultimately determines Chinese social interacting. Derived from age and length of service in an organization, seniority not only commands respect, but also disarms criticism in the Chinese society.

The history of the United States teaches young people that anything is possible and one can even become president. Its history books are full of stories about Abraham Lincoln’s log-cabin background and simple clothing-store clerk Harry Truman. Such history is deeply rooted in the American psyche. Another aspect of American history that has shaped the culture is violence. And the notions of freedom and independence, together with the challenge of developing a sparsely populated land, have produced a culture with a strong love of change and progress. Centuries later, these values still endure.

Generally speaking, Americans are viewed to be goal and achievement oriented, believing they can accomplish almost anything given sufficient resources. They tend to

resent governmental or external interference in their affairs and possess a strong work ethic. They tend towards friendliness and informality, yet in greeting behavior they tend to non-contact culture in public. In both play and business, Americans tend to be competitive and aggressive because of their drives to achieve and succeed.

Other factors such as the value system and the way of thoughts of the two languages are quite different. In the scope of the value system, we have Group vs. Individualism Orientation; stability vs. flexibility. Chinese people pursue “unification of heaven and human”; Western people propose “separation of heaven and human”. Chinese people are nostalgic; westerners like to look forward to the future [6]. On the whole, the thought of Chinese people reflects the wholeness. To them, the logic is from bigness to smallness. As to westerners, the case is just the opposite [7]. Due to these factors. We have cultural differences in language.

4. Conclusion

As the world trends towards globalization, intercultural communication is arousing increasing interest of many professionals, from anthropologists and sociologists to psychologists. We can hardly avoid communication with people from various cultures and backgrounds. Differences in customs, behaviors, and values result in many obstacles that hinder people from effective cultural interactions. Under the situation, it is necessary to understand some differences for the smooth trade cooperation and improving communication between Chinese and foreign people.

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