Some Similarities and Dissimilarities in Cultures Between China and English-Speaking Countries

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Chinese culture and the culture of English-speaking countries have both similarities and dissimilarities, which are reflected in many aspects of social life, such as naming and greeting, topics of chatting, response to praise, connotations of colors, connotations of animals and connotations of translated counterparts.

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Introduction

According to *Modern Chinese Dictionary*, broadly speaking, culture refers to “the totality of material civilization and spiritual civilization, especially spiritual civilization, eg literature, art, education and science, etc.” (LRI, 2005, p. 1192). The *New Oxford English-Chinese Dictionary* defines culture as follows: “the arts and other manifestations of human intellectual achievement regarded collectively; the customs, arts, social institutions, and achievements of a particular nation, people, or other social group” (Pearsall, 2007, p. 512).

There are both similarities and dissimilarities in cultures between China and English-speaking countries, which are reflected in different aspects of social life. Some of them are analysed in the following.

Similarities and Dissimilarities in Naming and Greeting

“The name of the human being is both a phenomenon of language and a form of culture” (Na, 2007, p. 2). The name in English-speaking countries usually consists of a given name, commonly referred to as a first name, forename or Christian name, and a (most commonly patrilineal) family name or surname, also referred to as a last name. There can be several given names, and some of these are often referred to as a second name, or middle name(s).

Similar to native speakers of English, the Chinese have given names and family names, but they don't have middle names, and family names of the Chinese precede given names. In addition to given names which are usually bestowed to children at the time of their beginning school education, Chinese people have infant names or little names which are given at the time of birth. Generally, infant names are called by parents or relatives of elder generations affectionately; if they are used by other people, especially when they are addressed to adults, the users are regarded as being offensive. Furthermore, besides given names (名, míng) most Chinese scholars and personalities have other names—characters (字, zì), which are mainly used among friends affectionately. For example, another name of Mao Zedong is Mao Runzhi; Mao is the family name; Zedong is the given name; Runzhi is the character.

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“Names are generally associated with a specific sex, although a relatively small number are gender-neutral”(Kramer, 2015, p. 2), which is the same both in China and in English-Speaking countries. For example, Jacob, Michael, Joshua, Matthew, Andrew, Joseph and David, etc. are the most popular male names, and Emily, Hannah, Emma, Ashley, Olivia, Isabella and Jessica, etc. are the most popular female names in the period of 2000-2005 in the US (Wade, 2007, 19-21). In China in 2007, the most common given male names were 伟, 强, 勇, 涛, 军, 刚, etc. , and the most common given female names were 芳, 娜, 丽, 艳, 娟, 霞, etc. (Qian, 2004, pp. 60-61).

In English-speaking countries, when a person talks to unfamiliar people, he uses “sir”, “madame” or “miss” as respectful terms. In China, roughly before the reform and opening to the outside world, people greeted someone unfamiliar with 同志 (comrade), which is now mainly used among members of the Communist Party of China. Nowadays, similar to English-speaking people, when speaking to someone who is not an acquaintance, the Chinese use 先生 (sir), 小姐 (miss) or 女士 (lady) as courteous terms. 师傅 (master) is also a widely used word to greet strangers. But in some cases, 小姐 is used to refer to a prostitute.

When familiar people meet, native speakers of English greet each other with “hi”, “hello”, “how are you?”, etc. Nowadays most Chinese people greet each other with 你好! (how are you?), but some prefer to use 你吃过饭了吗? (have you had your meal?), which is a traditional greeting and is still widely used among rural dwellers. When hearing a Chinese say so, native speakers of English may misunderstand that the Chinese wants to invite them to dinner, but most likely it is a courteous greeting instead of an invitation. In China, people like to put 老 (old) before a family name of a man who is a peer of them , to put 小 (young) before a family name of a young man or woman as friendly terms. But to native speakers of English, these terms may be annoying, as they regard old age as an unpleasant period of life, and being young as being inexperienced and immature.

In Chinese, family names can be used prior to almost any occupations to refer to or address someone. Besides Mr. Wang, Ms. Zhang, Uncle Li, you can also say Teacher Zhao, Director Zhu and Secretary Huang, etc. But in English, apart from Mr./Mrs./Ms./Miss, only several professions, such as Doctor, Judge, Professor, Governor and Mayor, can be used before surnames to address someone (Li, 1997, p. 71).

Similarities and Dissimilarities in Topics of Chatting

In English-speaking countries, when acquaintances chat, the topic is usually about weather or some other subjects that do not involve private affairs. In China, weather is also a frequently talked topic. But topics related to personal affairs like age, marital status, income, religious belief, etc. are also popular. Questions such as “how much do you earn?”, “how old are you?”, “have you got married?” etc. are often raised, and most people don’t mind answering these questions and consider it not impolite to ask others such questions. Besides, Chinese people, esp. women, like to talk about each other’s physical condition. A person may say to another: “You are getting fat.” or “You have become thin recently.”, the topic of which is thought of as a personal affair by native speakers of English.

Similarities and Dissimilarities in Response to Praise

Both the Chinese and native speakers of English like to be praised. In English-speaking countries, when a person is praised, he usually responds with hearty “thank you”, for he deems that the praise is sincere. In China, when someone is praised, he usually demurs, though the praise is also believed to be sincere. Why does he show disapproval? Because according to Chinese culture, if he accepts others’ praise without showing some

humbleness, he might be considered to be arrogant, which may cause others' displeasure. A traditional Chinese reply to others' praise is 哪里? 哪里? (where? where?), which means "where can I find so much merit?", to show modesty to the praiser. This may cause misunderstanding between the Chinese and native speakers of English, and the praiser may feel puzzled and awkward, for he may think that the praised believes the praise to be insincere. A story goes that a Chinese official shows a photo of his beautiful wife to an American. Seeing the photo, the American says: "Your wife is very beautiful." Hearing this, the Chinese official says: "Where? Where?" The American is surprised, but he is quick-minded and says humourously "everywhere." Nowadays influenced by Western culture, many Chinese, especially urban inhabitants, also respond to others' praise with "thank you".

Similarities and Dissimilarities in Connotations of Colors

In China, yellow is regarded as the most dignified color. During the period of empire, yellow robes were exclusive privileges for emperors. Without the emperor's permission, one who wore yellow robes would be presumed to be a traitor and would be beheaded. In English-speaking countries, purple is the most dignified color. It is the color of the clothes worn by the pope and monarch. Purple is also a dignified color to the Chinese. It is the second most dignified color in China, which is reflected in many Chinese idiomatic expressions, such as 紫气东来 (The Purple Air comes from the east, which is a propitious omen), 紫禁城 (the Forbidden City). According to the three Chinese characters, 紫禁城 virtually means "the Purple Forbidden City". To English-speaking people, blue has both negative and positive implications. On one hand, it means being gloomy, depressed and dreary. Melancholic music of black Americans is called blues. Blue also means indecency; for instance, a blue movie, which equals Chinese 黄色电影. On the other hand, it also symbolizes nobility and dignity. For example, the phrase "blue blood" means noble birth. A Cambridge blue or an Oxford blue means a sportsman who represents Cambridge or Oxford in a particular sport. Blue ribbon is a badge given as first prize to the winner of a competition (Pearsall, 2007, p. 221). In China, blue does not have any particular connotation.

To the Chinese, red is a quite popular color. It is a color of joy and happiness. At ceremonies of celebration and during joyous festivals, people usually wear red costumes. Traditionally, the bride wears a red robe at the wedding. But red is not so welcome to native speakers of English, who associate red with bloodshed and violence. Red is also linked with debt, the phrase "in the red" means "in debt". Moreover, red is associated (chiefly derogatorily) with communist or socialist, for example, the phrase "Red Menace". In the cold-war days, "better dead than red" (Pearsall, 2007, p. 1775), which meant that the prospect of a nuclear war was preferable to that of a communist society, was a slogan in English-speaking countries. Besides, red is used to denote something forbidden, dangerous or urgent, for instance, the red light of traffic lights. In this sense, it is the same to the Chinese.

Different from Chinese brides' red robes, white bridal veils are worn by brides at weddings in English-speaking countries. In English, white has the implication of being morally or spiritually pure, innocent and untainted, and white bridal veils suggest that the love of the couple is spotlessly pure. Because of the positive connotations of white, it is also used in names related to government departments, such as Whitehall, a street in London, in which many government offices are located and the White House, the official residence of the US president. A white lie is a harmless lie to avoid hurting someone's feelings and White Paper is the British government report giving information or proposals on an issue.

Similarities and Dissimilarities in Connotations of Animals

It is interesting that though the majority of both the Chinese and native speakers of English like dogs, dog is often a derogatory word in both Chinese and English. In English, a dog may be used to refer to an unpleasant, contemptible, wicked person or someone who is unattractive, uninteresting, or a thing of poor quality, or a failure. “A dog’s life” is used to refer to an unhappy life. “To go to the dogs” means “to go to ruin, to degenerate”. In Chinese, there are sayings such as 狗眼看人低 (A dog’s eyes see people low) (English: to act like a snob), 狗改不了吃屎 (Dogs can’t change the habit of eating feces) (English: You cannot make a crab walk straight), “dog” in all of which is derogatory. Similar to “dog”, “pig” is also derogatory to both the Chinese and native speakers of English. In English, a pig is used to refer to a greedy, dirty or unpleasant person. In Chinese, there are expressions such as 猪狗不如 (worse than pigs and dogs), which means “a person’s quality is rather abominable” and 猪脑子 (a pig’s brain), which means “very stupid”.

In China, the tiger, which is a symbol of strength, bravery and authoritativeness, is regarded as the king of all animals. A brave general is called 虎将 (a tiger-like general). In English-speaking countries, the lion is regarded as the king of all animals. A very brave person is called a lion. The greatest or best part is called lion’s share. The lion is the emblem of English royalty, and an alias of UK is British Lion.

The Chinese use the donkey to refer to a person who is obstinate. In China a stubborn person is called 驽 (a stubborn donkey). Bad temper is 驴脾气 (a donkey’s temper) (English: bad/hot temper). In English-speaking countries, a stubborn person is compared to a mule. There is an idiom “as stubborn as a mule”. Besides, both the mule and the donkey are used to refer to a stupid or foolish person.

The connotation of wolf is unfavourable to both the Chinese and native speakers of English. In English, a person that is regarded as predatory, rapacious, or fierce is called a wolf; a man given to paying unwanted sexual attention to women is also a “wolf”; one who feigns congeniality while actually holding malevolent intentions is a “wolf in sheep’s clothing”. In Chinese, a person who is cruel and unscrupulous is called 狼心狗肺 (having the wolf’s heart and dog’s lung). Two bad persons acting in collusion are said to be 狼狈为奸 (two treacherous wolves) (狈 is believed by the Chinese to be a kind of wolf with shorter forelegs). A man given to paying unwanted sexual attention to women or one that tries to seduce women is called 色狼 (color wolf) (somewhat similar to English “lady-killer”, but not identical).

The fox has the same connotations to both the Chinese and native speakers of English. In English, the fox can be used to refer to a crafty, cunning or sly person; it is also used to refer to a sexually attractive woman. It is the same in Chinese. In China, a sexually attractive woman, esp. a lascivious one, is called a 狐狸精 (fox spirit).

Similarities and Dissimilarities in Connotations of Translated Counterparts

In Chinese, the two characters “宣传” used to be translated into propaganda, and the government organs of different levels which are in charge of publicizing ideologies used to be called propaganda departments, such as the Propaganda Department of CCCPC (中共中央宣传部) (Wang, 2008, p. 4). But in English, the word propaganda is chiefly derogatory. It means “information, especially of a biased or misleading nature, used to promote or publicize a particular political cause or point of view” (Pearsall, 2007, p. 1698). Now most of these departments are translated into publicity departments.

To native speakers of English, a sanatorium is an establishment for the medical treatment of people who are convalescing or have a chronic illness. In Chinese, it is translated into 疗养院. But in China, the people who stay in a sanatorium are mostly not patients under medical treatment. They come to a sanatorium mainly to have a period of rest or relaxation as a privilege or bonus.

In China, 农民, a person who farms for a living, used to be translated into English as a peasant. But in English-speaking countries, the word peasant is often used derogatorily to refer to an ignorant, rude, unsophisticated person or a person of low status. Now most translators translate 农民 into a farmer. In China, people refer to something that is coveted as 肥肉 (fat). But in English, fat has no such connotation as that of Chinese. The Chinese idiom 杀鸡取卵 (kill a chicken to get its eggs) actually means the English saying “to kill the goose that lays the golden eggs”.

A Chinese may refer to his wife courteously as his 爱人 (lover). Nevertheless, in English “lover” may mean a paramour in an adulterous relationship. A famous American journalist Edgar Parks Snow’s wife once was translated into his lover, which made her quite angry (Zhou, 2006, p. 166). The Chinese 红茶 (red tea) is black tea in English, and 红糖 (red sugar) in English is brown sugar. The Chinese 自由恋爱 (free love) means that one’s marriage is not interfered with by his parents or other people, and one has freedom to choose his spouse. But in English, free love means love without restriction of marriage.

The Chinese character 龙 is translated into “dragon” in English. To the Chinese, 龙 is a symbol of strength, authoritativeness, auspiciousness and holiness. The Chinese regard themselves as offspring of 龙, and an emperor in China was referred to as a 龙. But to English people, the dragon means something very formidable or dangerous. It is a reptile-like monster that symbolizes chaos or evil. In China 凤 is a beautiful mystical bird which symbolizes beauty, perfectness and auspiciousness. An empress in China was referred to as a 凤, which is translated into English as “phoenix”. To native speakers of English, the phoenix is a bird in Egyptian mythology that lived in the desert for 500 years and then consumed itself by fire, later to rise renewed from its ashes. It has different connotation to that of 凤 in Chinese. But in English, the phoenix can be used to refer to a person or thing of unsurpassed excellence or beauty, which is similar to the connotation of 凤 in Chinese.

In China, 唯物主义 (materialism) is a laudatory term which excludes superstition and fantasy and the communists regard themselves as materialists. In English, it is chiefly a derogatory term which means a doctrine that physical well-being and worldly possessions constitute the greatest good and highest value in life, which stresses a great or excessive regard for worldly concerns. 唯心主义, the antonym of 唯物主义, translated into English as idealism, is a derogatory term in Chinese. In English, it means the act or practice of envisioning things in an ideal form, or the theory that the object of external perception, in itself or as perceived, consists of ideas, which is neutral in connotation.

In Chinese, 个人主义 (individualism) is an unfavorable term which means overemphasizing the importance or personal interest of oneself. In English, individualism can be both favorable and unfavorable. It means the belief in the primary importance of the individual and in the virtues of self-reliance and personal independence; it also means egoism or conceit (Yang, 2014, p. 3).

There are some idioms whose connotations are identical or similar to both the Chinese and native speakers of English, such as 泼冷水 (throw cold water); 上西天 (go west); 坏蛋 (bad egg); 浑水摸鱼 (fish in troubled waters); 拉着长脸 (pull a long face); 烫手山芋 (a hot potato); 沧海一粟 (a drop in the ocean); 花钱如流水 (spend money like water).

Some Chinese idioms are borrowed from English and their connotations are the same as those of English, such as 武装到牙齿 (armed to the teeth) and 酸葡萄 (sour grapes).

Conclusion

China and English-speaking countries differ a lot in geography, history, climate, economical development, etc., which results in different life styles and thinking modes of different peoples. But as common human beings, the Chinese and native speakers of English also share a lot. To know the similarities and dissimilarities may help people from different cultures learn from each other and cooperate with one another better, which is beneficial to all people in the world.

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