

# A Brief Analysis on the Differences of Gift-giving Culture and Its Origins Between China and Western Countries

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## ABSTRACT

With the development of social economy and the progress of the modern transformation as well as the current telecommunication, it has become a more and more universal phenomenon for the people from different cultural backgrounds to make a mutual communication or exchange. Gift-giving, as an important content of intercultural communication, is very common in people's daily life, which can not only express different kinds of emotion and decrease the mutual misunderstanding or conflict, but also shorten the mutual emotional distance and strengthen the relationship between each other. Starting with the overview on the purpose and the features of gift-giving, the thesis will make an overall comparison about the different aspects of gift-giving such as, the purpose of gift-giving, the choice of gifts, the taboo of gift-giving, and the response to gift-giving. Based on the above comparisons, the author will also make a complete analysis on the origin of the differences of gift-giving from the following three aspects — the cultural value, the religious belief and the cultural customs. Finally, some advice will be given on how to avoid the occurrence of some unpleasant things or embarrassment in the gift-giving activity especially when we face the persons from different cultural backgrounds so as to promote mutual understanding and deepen the mutual relationship as well as the friendship.

*Keywords: gift-giving, cultural value, difference, intercultural communication*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Gift-giving, as an daily communicative activity of the human being, has a close connection with different social customs, historical traditions, religious believes and life styles of different countries or regions. As a result, making a comparison on different aspects of gift-giving between China and the Western countries will be favorable for people to achieve a further understanding about the two different cultural values, which will promote the mutual exchange between different nations, and strengthen the consciousness of establishing a community with the shared destiny for the mankind, facing the common problems or challenges and creating the beautiful future together.

## II. THE OVERVIEW OF GIFT-GIVING

Gift-giving is a social tradition both in China and in the Western countries. In China it has a history with a few thousand years. During the past thousands of years, China has been famous in the world as the state full of ceremonies, and there been such sayings as "Courtesy call for reciprocity", "It is impolite not to reciprocate", as well as "Even a small gift like a goose feather form a

thousand Li away can convey a deep affection" and so on, all of which have passed down from generation to generation, being very popular with most Chinese people. As a result, gift giving has become one of the most ordinary communicative activities in the daily life of Chinese people. In spite of not being as highlighted as that in China, gift-giving still occupies an important position in most Westerners' mind, especially in some important occasions such as Christmas or weddings, it has become an indispensable part for expressing their best wishes or congratulations. As for the category of gifts, they can be classified into the following four different kinds according to their different functions, which are respectively practical gifts such as tea wares or table wares; decorative gifts such as celebrity calligraphy and pictures or art wares; durable gifts such as domestic appliances or expensive clothes; emotional gifts such as flowers or cards. When it comes to the purpose of giving gifts, firstly it can help demonstrate appreciation and gratitude, showing respect especially on some important occasions, also it can be used for making the best wishes or showing the congratulations. And in the business activities, a delicate gift will be favorable to convey the goodwill to continue the mutual

cooperation and maintain the good relationship between the business partners.

### **III. THE DIFFERENCES OF GIFT-GIVING CULTURE BETWEEN CHINA AND WESTERN COUNTRIES**

As far as the details of gift-giving are concerned, there are some great differences between China and Western countries because of different cultural values and religious beliefs. Generally speaking, the differences mainly represent in the following aspects.

#### *A. The occasion of gift-giving*

For most Chinese people, gift-giving is a very universal phenomenon in the social daily life, and people usually send gifts to each other on the festivals, weddings birthdays and some other important days. For example, when Spring Festival comes, it is common for sons and daughters to visit their parents or some other senior relatives by taking some gifts such as wines, rice, cooking oils, fruits or some other nourishment. And the grandparents tend to get their gifts (the lucky money) ready for their grandsons or granddaughters as early as possible before the Spring Festival. When our good friends get married or make a one-month celebration for their newly-born babies, it is a natural thing for all of us to give a red package with some cashes in it for expressing our best wishes to them. As well, we tend to show our congratulations by taking some gifts or giving the money directly when our friends move into a new house or when their children pass the college examination. In addition, in order to shorten the emotional distance or show our gratitude, sometimes it is possible for us to pay a visit to our leaders or teachers with some expensive gifts such as vintage wine or famous tea. And when we have finished a travel at home or abroad, it is normal for us to take some souvenirs with us send them to the colleagues in the same office in order to strengthen the mutual emotions and deepen the mutual friendship. What has been said has much to do with our daily life. However, it is a very common etiquette for the cooperative partners to send gifts in the business activity in China, which usually takes place when the business partners meet for the first time or reach an agreement through the negotiation in order to make the congratulation or continue the mutual sustainable cooperation in the future.

For most Westerners, the frequency for them to give gifts is much lower than that for Chinese to do. Generally, they tend to send gifts on some important occasions such as on some large festivals or on the weddings. However, the gifts, compared to those in China are practical or inexpensive relatively. Taking Christmas Day for an example, most Westerners will never give the lucky money to the children like most Chinese do during the Spring Festival, instead they will

prepare some little gifts like candies or chocolates in advance by putting them into the stockings hanging at the head of the children's beds. In addition, most westerners tend to send some gift card to the newly-wedded couples so that they can choose something in the supermarket according to their practical needs; sometimes the young couples will designate a purchasing website and tell it to their good friends or relatives in order for them to select the gifts ahead of time, making sure that they themselves can receive their desirable gifts in the end. As for the business activities, the westerners seldom send gifts to each other between the cooperative partners because giving gifts is usually regarded as a bribe, which intends to have an influence on the negotiating result.

#### *B. The content of gift-giving or the choice of gifts*

In terms of the detail content of gift-giving, Chinese people tend to choose some expensive or extravagant gifts to keep their dignity, and they usually decide the value of the gifts for they to send according to the intimacy degree of the relationship of both sides and the social status of the receiver. That is, the closer their relationship is and the higher the social status of the receiver is, the more valuable the gifts they will send are. Also some gifts are closely related to the traditional festivals. For examples, when the Dragon-boating Festival comes, most Chinese tend to send Zongzi with the delicate packages to their friends or relatives, and it is a traditional custom for most Chinese to buy expensive moon cakes for their parents or seniors as the festivals gifts. However, in most cases, Chinese tend to send the money as the gift directly, which is quite different from the Westerners. For examples, when the young couples get married, it is a common thing for their friends or relatives to send the red package with some money in it and the child can also get the lucky money from their parents or grandparents as the Spring Festival gifts. Of course, on some special occasions, it is likely for some Chinese people to send some practical gifts or some emotional gifts to their family members or friends. For example, when some friends move into a new house, what we usually do is just to send a set of tableware or utensils as our celebrating gifts; when a young couple get married or have a baby, as their good friend it is possible for us to buy a silk quilt with the high quality or a set of baby suit, and with the influence of the Western culture, some Chinese will buy a bundle of carnation or roses for their mother or their sweetheart to express their gratitude or convey their love when Mother's Day or Valentine's Day comes. What's more, when most Chinese package the gift, they tend to choose the red color because red stands for happiness, fervency and auspiciousness, which makes a striking contrast to most Westerners.

However, for most Westerners, they will never care about whether the gift is extravagant and valuable or

not, and what they pay great attention to is the emotional significance which the gift can convey. Consequently, while choosing the gift, they would like more to consider about whether the gift can help convey their emotions accurately. Therefore, when the Westerners pay a visit to their family members or friends, a book, a bottle of red wine, a box of chocolate even a bundle of flower will be a good choice for most of them. Also, when some important festivals such as Christmas Day or Thanksgiving Day come, celebrating cards can also be regarded as the appropriate gift for friends or colleagues. And for the children who are spending their birthday, the parents would like more to buy a good book, an interesting toy, an exquisite album or some other things they like as the birthday gifts. As well when the young couple get married, the young westerners would rather send a bundle of flower, a delicate album or some gift cards to show their celebration or convey their best wishes.

### *C. The taboo for gift-giving*

On account of different cultural values, life styles or religious believes, there are a great number of differences on taboos for gift giving between China and the Western Countries. In China, it is a taboo to send "clocks" to the old persons especially when they celebrate their birthday because the pronunciation of "钟" in Chinese is similar to another character "终", which means "being over" or "death". Also, it is very inappropriate to send "the umbrella" or "pears" when attending the weddings, that is because the above two words have the partial tone to the Chinese characters "散" and "离", meaning "separating from each other" or "being divorced". As well, most Chinese people don't send "shoes" or "medicines" to others as gifts in our daily life; the former is homo-phonetic to Chinese characters "邪", denoting "being dishonest or lack of sincerity" and the latter is just like a curse that he or she will be ill. In addition, a green hat in the Chinese culture stands for the wife's disloyalty to her husband. Therefore if it is sent to a man as a gift, it will be easier to be regarded as an insult. Finally gifts with the white or black color should be avoided using as gifts because white and black are both ill-boding colors, which will bring the misfortune or the disaster to others.

For most Westerners, it is not suitable to send some very valuable or expensive gifts to others around, especially to the persons who work in the government or the public institution because sending valuable or expensive gifts will be regarded as a bribery behavior in the Western countries. Also, thirteen is a taboo number in the Christian culture, so the gifts with the number "thirteen" tend to be refused in the Western countries. In Great Britain, people tend not to use lilies as the gift because lily is a symbol of death in British Culture. Most Frenchmen will not send chrysanthemums, azaleas or some yellow flowers because they are looked

on as the sign of being unlucky or unfortunate. Walnut is also prohibited from giving to others as the gift because it will bring some misfortune similarly. As well, cranes are not allowed to appear on the gift because it symbolizes the foolishness in the French culture. In Germany, people will not send the rose to others easily because it just belongs to the sweetheart. They don't like the gifts with black cats or magpies because black cats are the embodiment of the witch, standing for the evil, and magpies have the bad reputation of thieves. What's more must Australians don't like the gifts with the pattern of hares because people will suffer the misfortune if they confront hares in most Australians' opinions.

### *D. The response to gift-giving*

In China, in face of the gift given by others, out of politeness most Chinese people tend to show reluctance to accept it by complaining that it is not necessary to cost too much. As well, they will never open the gift in the presence of the guests because it is not good manners to open it in front of them. In addition while accepting the gift, it is necessary to do it with the both hands and look at the guests with the smile on the face sincerely, which is regarded as polite or appropriate whereas it is looked on as an disrespectful or impolite behavior to accept the gift with one hand or a casual attitude.

In the Western countries, when receiving gifts, it is necessary to show the gratitude to the givers by saying "Thank you" After accepting the gift, the receiver tend to open it in the presence of the guests, saying some words to praise the gift such as "It looks beautiful." "I like it." and so on, whether you like it or not actually because it is just an approval or a respect for the giver.

## **IV. THE ANALYSIS ON THE ORIGINS OF THE DIFFERENCES IN GIFT-GIVING BETWEEN CHINA AND THE WESTERN COUNTRIES**

### *A. Cultural value*

As we have seen, China is an ancient civilized country with the history of more than five thousand years, which has been influenced by Confucianism deeply and extensively. And it is well known that benevolence, filial piety and ritual are the main contents of Confucianism. For benevolence it means loving or caring about all the people around us in our daily life, and filial piety refers to respecting and appreciating our parents; not only should we keep a gratitude mind to our parents all the time, also we should take the responsibility for supporting them when they are old. As for ritual, it is the essential principle and the behavioral convention for all the people to obey in the society as well the base to keep up the social relationship and make the effective governance. In

In addition, collectivism is also a principal thought of Confucianism, which advocates taking the priority of the state or the collective interests rather than the individual ones. In accordance with such a principle, it is necessary for a person to integrate himself or herself into the society and keep a good relationship with the people around him or her. Owing to all the above traditional cultural values, during the past thousands of years, there has been some traditional gift-giving customs having been formed little by little. As a result, it has become a social convention for most Chinese to pay a visit to their parents, relatives or good friends with some gifts on Spring Festivals, Mid-Autumn Day or Double-ninth Day, and it has become a natural thing for them to express their best wishes or congratulation by sending some gifts or red packages when their friends get married or move into the new house. As well, most Chinese tend to pay great attention to their faces in others' mind, that is, no one wants to be looked down up by others especially in public situation, instead all of them try their best to look decent and leave a good impression on others at present. That is the reason why most Chinese lay a great emphasis on the price of the gift, which not only decides whether there is a closer relationship between friends or colleagues, but also reflects whether the givers are generous or not in others' mind.

In contrast, freedom, equality and independence are the most important cultural values in most Western countries, and individualism is the essential principle for most Westerners to get along with others. That is, while dealing with the conflict between the individual benefit and the collective interests, what they take into their consideration firstly is to try their best to protect their own individual benefits or rights in order not to be damaged. Also, in most Westerners' eyes, whatever they do, it is their personal affair or freedom, and they needn't care about others' opinions. As a result, there is no surprising for most of them not to mind the value of the gift, instead what they emphasize is whether the gift is exquisite or unique and whether it can convey their friendliness or best wishes accurately or not.

### *B. The religious belief*

As we have seen, most Chinese people believe in Buddhism and Taoism, which has had the great influence on the behaviors of gift-giving in our daily life. And such an influence has mainly represented in the implying meaning of gifts. For example, When celebrating the birthday for the old parents, most Chinese people tend to send some longevity peaches or longevity cakes, hoping that the happiness of their parents is immense like the running water in Chinese Eastern Sea and their health is forever like the old pine on the Southern Mount. Also, in some regions, when a young couple have a baby, their relatives or friends usually bring the gifts such as pairs of golden or silver

bracelets and golden longevity locks to hope that the child will be happy and healthy in the coming life.

For the Westerners, most of them believe in Christianity. Therefore, Jesus Christ plays an important role in their social life, which has still had a great implication on their gift-giving activities. For examples, when Christmas Day is coming, it is a common custom for the Westerners to send Christmas Eve apples or Christmas Cards just to pray for Jesus Christ to bring peace and happiness to the whole world. And all the children hope to get their favorite gifts from Santa Claus when they wake up on the morning of Christmas Day. In addition, now that Christmas Day is connected with the birth of Jesus Christ, as a result all the Westerners are prohibited from sending the gifts with the pattern of the cross on that day. Anyone who send such kind of gifts will be thought to be disrespectful to Jesus Christ, and he or she is doomed to be punished by the god in the coming life.

### *C. Cultural customs*

As we have seen, different countries has different geographical environment, life styles and historical cultures which has formed different social customs. And these different social customs has made a great effect on the gift-giving behaviors in different countries. For example, most Chinese people like the even number, so when they send some gifts such eggs, flowers, or fruits, they often try their best to buy them in even number or round figure in order to have a good fortune. Also, there are some numbers like three, six, eight and nine very popular with all the Chinese people in our daily life. Consequently, most people would like to send the gift money with the special numbers such as "666" with the meaning of "being smooth all the way" ,"888" meaning " making the fortune in the future" and "999" implying " being forever" while making the best wishes to the newlyweds" or celebrating their best friends. However, "four" belongs to unlucky numbers in the Chinese culture, so while preparing for the gifts, most people try to avoid the numbers such as "four" "fourteen" "forty-four and so on. When it comes to colors, red is the popular color with most Chinese people just because it symbolizes happiness, fervency and auspiciousness, so they tend to send the gifts with the red color especially when their friends get married.

As for most Westerners, "five" and "Thirteen" are not their popular numbers in their lives, so it is wise of us to avoid these numbers when sending gifts to a Western friend. In America, a bundle of flowers, a new book, a box of chocolate and a bottle of wine are good choices while sending gifts, but black paper should be forbidden to package the gift because black is the unlucky color in most Americans' eyes. Most Frenchmen are fond of flowers very much, therefore if

you pay a visit to a French friend, it is advisable to take a few unbound flowers. However, you should try your best to avoid taking the chrysanthemum and some yellow flowers because in the French culture chrysanthemums are usually used to worship the deceased and the yellow color symbolizes the unfaithfulness between husbands and wives. In Germany and Italy, knives and scissors are not allowed to send to others because these things are regarded as unfortunate, and it is very likely for them to bring dangers or disasters to people's daily lives.

## V. CONCLUSION

Since the human being entered the 21st century, the communication or exchange between different people from different cultural backgrounds has become more and more frequent than ever before. As a person living in the global modern society, all of us will involve ourselves into more and more intercultural communication and we have to confront more and more problems about gift-giving activities in our daily life. In order to reduce or get rid of some unnecessary misunderstandings or conflicts, first of all, it is necessary for us to know the purpose, the target and the occasion of gift-giving. Only by doing like this, can we choose the suitable gift and carry out the goal for gift-giving. As well, it is very important for us to purchase the gift according to our practical incoming standard so that we can not only make the gift receiver satisfied, but also avoid making ourselves get into the economical trouble because of sending too expensive gifts. Last but not least, there is a necessity for us to learn about some customs and taboos about gift-giving in different cultures in order to avoid the occurrence of some unpleasant things or embarrassment in the gift-giving activities. On by doing so, can the distance of the people from different cultural backgrounds be shortened indeed and can they achieve a real heart-to-heart emotional communication which will be favorable to the establishment of a harmonious world and the accomplishment of the community with the shared future for the mankind.

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