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A Comparative Study of Cultural Differences Between English and Chinese — A Case Study of Chinese and English Greetings

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ABSTRACT

Language is the carrier of culture. This paper explores the differences between Chinese and English greetings reflected from the purpose, function, applicable occasions and linguistic features of greetings. Chinese people like to live together and help each other. They are close to each other and tend to greet each other by caring about each other's food, clothing, housing and transportation in the form of interrogative sentences. In contrast, British people and Americans emphasize individualism, and their personal interests are higher than those of the collective, even higher than those of the state. English greetings do not involve personal privacy such as personal age, work, career, family and emotion. Chinese people are more implicit in expressing their ideas, and they focus on curved thinking. They are inclined to lay the groundwork one by one and express their own views at the end. Westerners focus on straight-line thinking, like to be frank and open to express their ideas. Western greetings often begin with talking about the weather and praising the other party. The author believes that in the process of cross-cultural greetings, Chinese English learners should be familiar with the cultural differences behind the greetings in English and Chinese, take into account the communication objects, avoid Chinese thinking, and thus enhance the friendship between the two sides.

Keywords: greetings, cultural differences between English and Chinese, cultural conflicts, linguistic features

1. INTRODUCTION

Greetings are widely used in people's daily life. However, due to the differences in geographical location, history, culture and cultural background, greetings are also very different. For example, Confucianism emphasizes that individuals obey the group, ethics and strict hierarchy; while the United States is a country composed of many immigrants who seek their own freedom, and the idea that private rights are greater than public rights and people are greater than the state is deeply rooted in the hearts of the people (Wang Jing, 2014). Since ancient times, there have been numerous comparative studies on the differences between Chinese and English greetings, such as the classification of greetings, the comparative study of English and Chinese greetings, the empirical research on the application of English and Chinese greetings from the perspective of politeness principle, and the exploration of the differences between Chinese and American Greetings. Taking greetings in both English and Chinese as an example, this paper explores the causes resulting to the differences between Chinese and English cultures so as to help Chinese English learners avoid cultural conflicts effectively in crosscultural communication.

2. DEFINITION OF GREETINGS

2.1. The purpose and function of greetings

Greetings are the foundation of social communication and the stepping stone to open social relations. Sometimes, the appropriateness of greetings directly determines whether there is the possibility of further communication between two parties. Appropriate greetings are the guarantee of smooth social communication. The purpose of greetings is to express concern, respect and politeness to others so as to strengthen the normal interpersonal communication and maintain the social relations between and among people. People have a psychological expectation of being recognized by others, and greetings can meet such needs, at least partially (Wu Yuhua, Zhang Faxiang, 2007). The basic function of greetings can be summed up as communicative function, that is to say, both parties can confirm the social relations they have established, thus establishing social communication with strangers. Greetings have the function of "opening a topic" (Chen LP 1997). Firth R (1972) described greeting as "a kind of recognition of social interaction between people. The most important thing is that

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it can establish or destroy social relations between people, or recognize others as a whole of society or an individual factor in social environment." Therefore, it is not difficult to see that greetings play an extremely important role in social communication.

2.2. Where to use greetings

As a common language in daily communication, greetings are simple and direct, but there are some differences in greetings used on different occasions. Compared with the greetings between the first meeting and the acquaintance meeting, we find that the former is more formal and polite, while the latter is more casual and friendly. For example, at the first meeting between two Chinese people, they may greet each other by such greetings as "I'm glad to meet you", "I've heard a lot about you" and "Can you adapt to coming here?" In contrast, acquaintances in China may greet each other by greetings such as "Have you eaten yet?"," Long time no see"," What have you been up to lately" and so on, showing concern for individual. It is also applicable in native English speaking countries, such as "How do you do?", "What is up?", "Are you okay?" and other cute and lovely greetings from close friends. In addition, the choice of greetings is also influenced and interfered by external factors such as environment, time and place, such as "Good morning" and "Good afternoon". For example, when you enter a mall, the salesperson may use greetings such as "Welcome", and when walking, they will ask if the other parties have eaten.

However, due to the increasingly frequent cultural exchanges between China and foreign countries, more and more Chinese people begin to use expressions such as "Hello" and "Hi" as greetings when they meet and greet each other. Nowadays, many international students studying in China also use "Did you eat?" as a greeting to the Chinese people they meet.

2.3. Linguistic features of greetings

Greeting is a kind of language form used by people to express greetings in communication. "Greetings in all languages have one thing in common, that is, they all use a few, rather concise language forms" (Wang Dexing, 1990). We divide Chinese greetings into exclamatory greetings and interrogative greetings according to the linguistic forms of Chinese greetings,

Exclamatory greetings are straightforward and full of strong feelings, which are more conducive to express the speaker's personal feelings than the declarative tone. Exclamatory greetings can be subdivided into three categories: pan time greetings, such as "Hello" and "You worked hard". Greetings related to pragmatic time such as "Good morning", "Good afternoon" and "Good evening", and special season greetings such as "Merry Christmas", "Happy New Year". The interrogative tone in the interrogative greetings is used to greet the other party.

Compared with that of the exclamatory greeting, the tone of interrogative greeting is more euphemistic and natural and intimate, which can shorten the relationship between interlocutors. The interrogative greeting can be further divided into three categories: "eating" greeting such as "Have you eaten or not?", which is unique to Chinese and has no corresponding to English greetings such as "How are things going" and "How do you feel?" And the greetings related to the speaker's real behavior situation, which is also unique to Chinese, has no corresponding way of greeting in English (Wang Baohua, 1999).

3. A COMPARSION BETWEEN CHINESE AND ENGLISH GREETINGS

3.1. The differences in the wording of Chinese and English greetings

Language is the carrier of culture. Different cultures embrace different languages, but different languages may share something in common. Take greetings as an example. Although Chinese and English are two totally different languages, their functions and structures are the same, that is, to show concern for others, to be polite, to welcome other and so on. Chinese and Westerners will say hello to each other when they meet for the first time. However, compared with Westerners, Chinese people are likely to adopt the corresponding wording and address according to different objects: when meeting people who are equal to their own status, similar in age or younger than themselves, they will use "hello" in Chinese to greet, and if they meet someone who has the status of higher or older than that of their own elders, the corresponding greeting will be "Hello!" For example, in the company application, Chinese people will use the other party's company's address to show their respect; in contrast, Westerners will not be so particular. Instead, Western greetings are more simple and basic, and have fixed patterns and rules. "Good morning" and "Nice to meet you!" are good cases in point. The appellation and language form of such a universal greeting model have not changed much so far.

3.2. The differences between Chinese and English greetings in inquiry

Both Chinese and Westerners will say hello to each other when they meet, and use greetings to express their concern for each other. However, the expression forms and specific their greeting methods and contents of their greetings are quite different. In China, "Have you eaten yet?", "Where are you going?" and "What are you doing?" are most commonly greetings between people. However, in the West, it is difficult to understand why the Chinese people seem to always talk about eating. "Don't they eat enough?" many Westerners feel perplexed. Second, many Westerners don't understand why the Chinese people are too nosy



(inquisitive), and they think that they are too nosy (Deng Yanchang, Liu Runqing, 1989). In fact, this has its historical roots and basis. First, China has been a big agricultural country since ancient times. Food and clothing are the common concern of ordinary people. Naturally, eating is the top priority. Second, as Zhao Wei argued in the Warring States strategy, why there have been people and how you can have a king if there have no people and the proverb "Food is the most important thing for the people" reflects the importance of food for Chinese people. So it's not hard to see why Chinese people like to ask "Have you eaten yet?" However, to those Westerners who have the least knowledge about Chinese culture, this kind of greeting is difficult to understand.

In addition, compared with Westerners, Chinese people, especially acquaintances, like to ask "Where are you going?", "How much do you make a month" and "Do you have a partner?" This kind of Chinese greeting, in the eyes of Chinese people, is to show concern for others, and the meticulous way of greeting helps to make close the relationship and intimacy between the two sides. In the eyes of Westerners, however, this kind of greetings is an invasion of their personal privacy. Westerners, whether they are meeting for the first time or close relatives and friends, will not ask such questions related to personal privacy. Westerners pursue freedom and the development of personality, personal interests are greater than collective interests, and these problems are classified as personal privacy and they emphasize space consciousness and maintain a certain distance. In contrast, China has been advocating Confucianism since ancient Confucianism advocates the basic concept of "Benevolence loves others", which requires people to care for each other and be kind to others (Zhu Lichai, 1999). So they care more about each other. In the eyes of Westerners, it is an invasion of personal privacy, and in the eyes of Chinese, however, it is a common daily greeting (Cheng Hongbo, 2011).

3.3. Functional differences between Chinese and English greetings

Compared with Chinese greetings, Westerners' greetings are more neutral, objective, equal and without emotional color, and the amount of information is obviously less than that of Chinese. "Where are you going" or "What are you up to recently?" Chinese seem to feel like getting a definite answer, while Westerners tend to employ such greetings as "Hello" or "Hi". Greetings such as "How are you?" are just out of politeness rather than real concern. Compared with the enthusiasm and openness of the Americans, the British are more euphemistic and reserved. As we all know, Britain is a country surrounded by the Atlantic Ocean. Influenced by the ocean climate, the weather in Britain is changeable. Therefore, talking about the weather has become a daily discussion during greetings. This is also because the British attach great importance to personal space, and it is very important to find a topic that is safe and does not infringe on other people's privacy. So talking about the weather has

become the main pastime of the British nation. Wilde once said, "Talking about the weather is the last refuge for boring humans." Then some people think, isn't it boring to talk about the weather all the time? As a matter of fact, British people don't need a definite answer when they talk about the weather. It's just the beginning of the topic. Just as Chinese people are worried about food and clothing, they always ask if the other people have eaten. For a country like Britain, which attaches great importance to private space, talking about the weather is definitely the safest topic. Such a topic will not infringe on other people's privacy, but also can relieve embarrassment and enliven the atmosphere, enabling people to have something to say when they meet. It is really a suitable topic. Compared with China and Britain, Americans express their wishes more directly and pay more attention to their mood and behavior (Wang Jing, 2014).

4. ON THE DIFFERENCES BETWEEN ENGLISH AND CHINESE GREETINGS

4.1. National differences

Aside from the UK and the USA, there are some other native English speaking countries such as Australia, New Zealand, and Canada and so on. Here the United States and the United Kingdom are taken as examples to compare the differences of national conditions.

In 1787, the United States passed the Constitution, which stipulates: the implementation of a bourgeois federal system, the separation of legislative, executive and judicial powers, and the principle of checks and balances between the bourgeois presidential Democratic Republic. This reflects the American spirit of pursuing freedom and equality. The preamble of the constitution of the United States reads, "We, the people of the United States, in order to form a more perfect Union, establish justice, insure domestic tranquility, provide for the common defense, promote the general welfare, and secure the blessings of liberty to ourselves and our posterity, do ordain and establish this Constitution for the United States of America"(extracted from the Constitution of the United States of America). From this extraction, we can see the Democratic demeanor, broad mind and extraordinary inclusiveness (Wang Jing 2014) as well as the pursuit of human rights-individual rights and personal freedom. This is not only reflected in the Constitution of the United States of America and the governance of the country, but also reflected in the style and daily greetings of the United States of America. Their greetings embody the characteristics of freedom and respect for personal privacy.

The British government is a constitutional monarchy with parliamentary system. Parliament is the highest judicial and legislative body, which is composed of the king, the upper house and the lower house. Since ancient times, Britain has been ruled by a monarch. Up to now, Britain still has a monarch. Although monarch is a symbol of the head of state and has no real power, it can be seen from this that the



monarchy of Britain is deeply rooted in the hearts of the British people and conservatism is still rooted in the British people's hearts. Britain is the birthplace of conservatism. In the history of the world, there are countless countries ruled by feudal monarchs. However, Britain is the only country with strong conservative atmosphere. From June 15, 1215, when the British aristocracy coerced King John to sign a document to protect the rights of the nobles and priests in Lanymedegrassland, and the final bill of rights came into effect, it is not difficult to see that the British were familiar with the subject of compromise. Whether it is between the Conservative Party and the Liberal Party, or between the king and the parliament, both sides are constantly struggling, but they can make necessary compromises at the critical moment. Therefore, it is not difficult to see from the historical tradition and national conditions of Britain that conservatism is no longer a political term, but has penetrated into the character of British people and become part of their daily life. It is not difficult to understand that British people like to choose safe and low-key topics when greeting, and use greetings that do not contain information and do not invade other people's privacy and personal space. In China, this seems pale and stiff, but it represents the characteristics of British conservatism and prudence.

Since ancient times, China has been a great country with the largest population in the world. It is not difficult to see the close relationship between Chinese people from the typical Chinese courtyard. Chinese poems such as "small bridge, flowing water, people in the depths of white clouds" and "another village with hidden willows and flowers" can be seen that Chinese people like to live together and have close relationship with each other. Confucianism has a farreaching influence on Chinese culture. He emphasizes the core of benevolence, righteousness and rule of rites. Confucianism emphasizes benevolence, the core of which is that people love each other. It is not difficult to see that this tradition of benevolence is not only reflected in Confucianism, but also can be seen from people's daily necessities of life. Greetings are often conducted in the form of interrogative sentences. In the Western view, this is an act of invasion of privacy. In the eyes of Chinese, it is a kind of sincere concern for others. Through the comparison of the national conditions and historical experiences of Britain and the United States and China, the differences of greetings have their roots.

4.2. Differences in thinking mode and culture

In addition to the above-mentioned greeting differences between Chinese and English due to different national conditions, the difference in thinking mode is also a very important factor. Chinese people are more implicit in expressing their ideas, focusing on curved thinking, like a spiral or wavy curve (Chen Wen 2020). In other words, whether written or spoken, Chinese people are used to putting forward secondary information and irrelevant words first, and then throwing out the main information, that is, the views they really want to express. Chinese people do not express their own demands directly, but tend to adopt

euphemistic and implicit expressions in the hope that the listener can understand their own implication. This can be found in Chinese classical poetry, such as: "Cuba swing, get up lazy whole fiber slender hand. Dew thick flower thin, thin sweat light clothing. When the guests come in, the stockings are full of gold and hairpins. He walked with shame and looked back at the door, but smelled the green plum (Li Qingzhao, point the crimson lips and strike the swing).

Chinese people like to lay the groundwork layer by layer, focusing on the end and express their views at the end; while Westerners focus on straight-line thinking and prefer to be frank in their expressions. They tend to put the most important and most wanted information at the beginning of the most attractive place, and then add secondary information layer by layer. In written language, they like to use attributive clauses and put the modifying words behind the main information, which is a good example. In addition, from the report of an event, we can see that Westerners like to tell the result of the event first, and then explain the cause of the event; while Chinese are inclined to explain the reason first, and then put forward the result after all the reasons have been analyzed. Therefore, it can be concluded that China is a kind of euphemistic and implicit curve thinking, while English speaking people prefer a more direct straight-line thinking, which is not only reflected in written language, but also in spoken language and greetings. Therefore, in daily greetings, Chinese people will employ the names of "teacher", "sir", "grandfather" and "grandma" to greet the other party, while Westerners are don't think it improper to call their given names directly. For example, if Chinese children call their grandparents by their first names, adults will reprimand them for being rude and lack of respect for their elders. In the West, calling an elder by his or her given name is considered to be the most normal thing. You can use the corresponding appellation or directly use the other party's given name. The two are compatible and do not conflict with each other. This also reflects the idea that Chinese people attaches importance to hierarchy and order. In China, the concept of "the top and the bottom have a sense of decency and order in childhood" has been deeply rooted in the hearts of Chinese people, while in the West, the idea of harmonizing people's life and equality has been strengthened.

4.3. Differences in values

The formation of values is closely related to the society at that time. Different social differences may well produce different values. Different values are reflected in people's daily communication. The formation of China's cultural tradition and values can be traced back to Confucianism. From the Confucian doctrine of monarch, ministers, father and son, we can see that Chinese people attach importance to being governed, to authority and to an orderly and morally constrained society. Therefore, in order to maintain the social order and the order of feudal rule, the individual should obey the collective. In order to meet the needs of the collective, individual interests can be sacrificed. Although



Confucianism attaches importance to development and virtue cultivation of human beings, it ignores the development of personality, emphasizes the role of the collective and destroys personality and personal interests. By contrast, starting with the revival of ancient Greek literature, Western people began to look for inspiration from the ancient Greek literature. The pursuit of personal worldly happiness is no longer a sin. From the beginning of the Renaissance, human dignity and concern for the life of the world have become the most important themes. Therefore, gradually Westerners began to pursue democracy and freedom, which runs through the value standard of Western countries' social development. Individualism has become the value pursuit of the United States and other major English speaking countries. Take the United States as an example. We can see the importance of individualism by emphasizing various freedoms, such as freedom of speech, freedom of the person, freedom of demonstration and so on. Westerners believe that everyone should have his own identity and personality, and should be recognized and supported. Individualism believes that individual rights are the most important in society (Kong Dehua 2015).

It is not difficult to understand why in China, people greet each other by talking about age, work, career, family and emotional issues, while in the West, people tend to regard these issues as personal privacy and choose low-key and safe topics such as weather as the beginning of daily greetings and topics instead because they don't want to pry into other people's privacy and vice versa. They don't want to know other people's secrets. When you ask questions like "How old are you this year", it is very much likely to be regarded as an embarrassing question in English speaking countries. Such a questioning greeting may well imply that he or she looks old for his or her age. As a result, he or she won't be willing to befriend you. Understanding the differences between Chinese and English values can help us avoid embarrassment and rudeness caused by cultural conflicts in our daily cross cultural greetings.

4.4. Differences in customs and habits

In English speaking countries, people are used to greeting the other party by asking "How are you?" while Chinese like to greet others by asking "Have you eaten yet?" Westerners feel baffled why Chinese greetings cannot be separated from food, while Westerners' greetings seem so cold and pale to Chinese people. In fact, this is closely related to the differences in customs. Lin Yutang, a prominent Chinese scholar in the 20th century once said, "The most ideal thing to do in life is to live in an American house, marry a Japanese wife and hire a Chinese cook." As can be seen from the above, Chinese cuisine is well-known in the world. Not only does China have eight famous cuisines in the world, but Westerners also praise Chinese cuisine. In China, restaurants are also important occasions and places for communication, many of which are achieved in the process of entertaining and dining. Mr. Qian Zhongshu, a household figure among Chinese intellectuals wrote in his article that

"eating has many social functions, such as connecting feelings, talking about business, etc. To offer food to people who have their own food is to invite for food. If you have your own food to eat, you will enjoy your face." So it's not just about filling your stomach in social activities. Whether a lot of business can be concluded depends on one get together meal. It can be seen that Chinese people attach great importance to eating. Little wonder when greeting each other, they are accustomed to asking "Have you eaten yet?" and "Come to my house for dinner when you are free.' Different from the Chinese food culture characterized by family dinner or going out to the restaurant or entertaining guests, the Western catering culture is mainly characterized by pub culture. Take the most traditional Britain people as an example. Compared with what Chinese people say at the dinner table, visiting each other or treating each other for dinner on holidays, British people do not visit other people's homes for chatting, and they seldom visit other people's homes unless invited. British pubs are equivalent to Chinese dining tables. Most of the social activities are held in pubs, where they can talk all night long. But after leaving the bar, they return to the previous reserved conservative, remaining silent. Pub is one of the main places for British social activities. As a result, Britain people have developed a culture of chatting in bars and talking about the weather in daily greetings.

Traditional festivals can very well reveal the cultural differences between China and the United States, too. Chinese traditional festivals have strong secularity and pan divinity, and most festivals do not involve religion and God. This is because China's early social structure is based on the combination of natural worship and humanistic spirit of agricultural civilization, which emphasizes the harmonious coexistence of humans and nature, as well as the coordination and balance between gods and humans, which is the so-called "unity of man and nature". In contrast, traditional festivals in the United States and the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland are of very strong religious and cultural characteristics. Festivals such as Christmas, Easter and so on embody this theology; the core of Western humanism in modern times also involves the Bible and Christianity. Therefore, most of the festival celebrations in the West are of a strong religious color, centering on Jesus Christ. Christian festivals almost run through the whole year in the United States and the United Kingdom. American and British festivals are associated with Christian culture. Christianity is the return of humanism, emphasizing individualism, and the individual interests are higher than those of the collective and the state. Therefore, American and British festival culture excavates individual value and emphasizes individual rights and freedom. It is not difficult to see that in a country that attaches great importance to personal rights and freedom, when greeting people in daily life, they pay great attention to personal privacy. They regard work, age, whereabouts and things to be done as their own privacy. When meeting, Westerners tend to greet a stranger by "How do you do?" and greet acquaintances by "How are you doing?", "How's tricks?", "How's everything?", "How are you doing?", "How are you getting along?, etc.



4.5. Different cultural backgrounds

It is found that the focus of attention of Westerners' is different from that of Chinese in cross cultural communication. Westerners exceptionally may well praise the other party in the communication for his or her appearance. When two American or British women meet each other, one may greet the other party by saying, "Your hair is really beautiful. Did you just dye it yesterday?" If the other party bought a watch, her friend would find out when they met for the first time, and she would immediately praise her for the watch. Chinese may be puzzled by how Westerners like to praise others so much. In fact, this is closely related to the different cultural backgrounds between China and the West. Since ancient times, China has been influenced by the idea that men and women are different, men and women are not compatible with each other, and Chinese people pay more attention to a person's internal quality and moral cultivation. Therefore, Chinese people generally do not evaluate other people's appearance, clothing, hair style and other external things, and men's comments on women's appearance are also against the idea of gender difference. Therefore, even if the Chinese notice the change of each other, they will not praise it. In contrast, Westerners as early as several centuries ago, when China was still under the rule of the feudal monarchy, had been liberated from the shackles of Christianity for human nature. Men and women are equal, free and open, and they do not taboo comments of the opposite sex and the same sex. They pay more attention to clothing, appearance and dressing. They are particularly good at observing changes. They may well notice and praise anything that is different from before. After understanding these, it is not difficult to understand why the greetings of Westerners are full of exclamatory words of praise.

5. HOW TO GREET APPROPRIATELY IN INTERCULTURAL ENGLISH COMMUNICATION

5.1. Be familiar with the differences between English and Chinese greetings

In cross-cultural communication, it is important to be appropriate in greetings. The first step is to be familiar with the differences between English and Chinese greetings. These differences include not only the differences in sentence patterns and language forms, but also the differences in the content of greetings and how to reply to them. Take privacy issues as an example. When meeting Chinese acquaintances, we can employ some expressions of concern such as "Have you got a raise again?", a very appropriate greeting, can bring two sides much closer in the cross-cultural communication. Chinese people are more concerned about people's working and living conditions, which reflect a strong sense of human feelings for Chinese. But in the eyes of British and Americans', greetings like

"Have you got a raise again?" between two parties are viewed as being nosy and meddling as well as an invasion of other people's privacy. Westerners regard personal work and life as personal privacy and do not want others to know about.

5.2. Avoid Chinese thinking

For Chinese English learners, English is a foreign language. When communicating with people from English speaking countries, it is inevitable for Chinese to encounter certain cultural differences and conflicts. In the face of cultural differences or incompatibility with Chinese culture, Chinese English learners should not judge and speculate on English speakers' ideas and thoughts based on Chinese national cultural habits and language environment as well as the thinking mode of Chinese people. Instead, they should attach importance to the differences in languages and cultures between Chinese and English, establish an equal attitude towards different cultures from the subjective consciousness, and accept the language differences between China and the West, abolishing the notion of viewing their culture superior to the others. In cross cultural communication, they are suggested to seek common ground while reserving differences, be good at discovering the similarities and differences of different cultures in different countries, find out the differences between Chinese and English greetings, and avoid preconceived thinking and Chinese thinking. When learning English, Chinese English learners should cultivate English thinking, so as to better improve their cultural adaptability and switch freely and easily between English and Chinese cross cultural communications.

5.3. Consider for the object of communication

It can be seen that, influenced by various factors such as culture, thinking and values, different countries have formed their own language patterns and greetings. Therefore, in cross-cultural communication, we must have a certain degree of understanding of the culture of the country where the communication object is located. When greeting and communicating with the other party, we must guarantee that the communication language used must conform to their language and cultural norms, strive to minimize the mistakes and embarrassing scenes in the process of cross-cultural communication, and better promote the development of communication activities so as to achieve the purpose of cross-cultural communication.

6. CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, it can be seen that there are differences between Chinese and English greetings in many aspects. Through specific analysis, we have a more in-depth understanding of the reasons for the differences between



Chinese and English greetings. In cross-cultural communication, we should be aware of the differences in the way and content of greetings caused by the differences in cultural backgrounds, and make appropriate adjustments to their communicative language according to their language habits, values and cultural traditions, so as to promote the smooth development of the whole communication activities.

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