

Differences of Cultural Taboos Between China and Western Countries and Their Influence on the Intercultural Communication

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ABSTRACT

Cultural taboos, as a very important social phenomenon, have a great influence on the intercultural communication. Therefore carrying out the research about the difference of cultural taboos is very significant to promote international exchange and the world harmony. This thesis starts with the explanation of the definition of taboos and its origins. Then the differences of taboos between China and Western countries are illustrated in details from the following aspects such as the religious belief, social communication, festivals, dietary, numbers, colours, animals and gift-giving. After that, the author mainly talks about the influences of cultural taboos on intercultural communications both from the positive side and from the negative side. Finally the thesis summarizes the significance of carrying out the research about the differences of cultural taboos between China and Western countries, pointing out that such a research not only will be helpful to decrease the misunderstanding and the conflict between different countries, but also it will be favourable to the harmonious coexistence of the mankind and the building-up of a beautiful world together.

Keywords: Cultural taboos, Difference, Intercultural communication, Influence, Social phenomenon.

1. INTRODUCTION

As we have seen, with the development of social economy and the increasingly deepening of globalization, more and more people need to communicate with the people from different cultural background. As a result, different cultural taboos have become the common issues for them to take into consideration while making the intercultural communication. Understanding taboos and the difference between the Chinese taboo culture and that of the western can not only help us get rid of some misunderstandings or conflicts in the international communication, but also it will be favourable to establish a good relationship, which will be beneficial to the establishment of a shared future for human.

2. THE DEFINITION OF TABOOS AND ITS SOCIAL ORIGINS

When it comes to the definition of taboos, different people have different understandings. In

China such a word appeared in a classical book with the name of History of the Later Han Dynasty; in the biography of Langping, there were some sentences such as "I have grown up in the country without knowing some taboos, so I just try my best to express myself frankly without paying great attention to the choice of the words for writing". In these sentences, "禁" means prohibiting or confining, and "忌" refers to taboos, taking notice of the words or behaviors for not offending others [6]. In a classical book entitled "Book of Rites", there were some other words related to taboos such as "Ask for what is forbidden when entering the territory; ask for some customs when coming into a country and ask for some taboos when paying a visit to a person for the first time." From these sentences, we can conclude that "禁" refers to a social confining form logistically, meaning the confinement of others whereas "忌(讳)" belongs to a behaviour to refrain ourselves in our daily life. In such a Chinese compound word "禁忌", we emphasize "忌" more than "禁", that is because "忌" comes earlier than "禁" [6]. However, in the

western culture especially in the modern society, taboos usually refer to some things or some words that should be prohibited, if not, the god or other persons will be offended, which will bring some disastrous punishment or negative influences on the interpersonal relationship among people.

As for the origin of taboos, some of them are closely related to the religious belief. That's to say, according to the religious belief, the disciples are prohibited from doing something or saying something. For example, Indians are forbidden to eat beef and Muslims are prohibited from drinking wine because cows are the sacred animals to most Indians and wines are the sources of all the sins according to the Muslims belief. As far as Western Christians are concerned, they are not permitted to worship the idol and they can't do anything in the name of God, which has something to do with their religious belief obviously. Also, most Buddhist are not allowed to drink, to steal anything, to marry, to eat any meat and tell lies as they belong to disciplines of Buddhism. Some taboos are closely linked with people's habitual thinking or cultural value. Taking the colour for example, red is the symbol of fervency and happiness in Chinese culture, however it means bloody and violent in Western culture. Black is not a fortunate colour both to Chinese and Westerns, so black cats are usually regarded as the symbol of witches in most Westerns' eyes, for them, they will bring the disasters. The number "Four" is not very popular with most Asians including most Chinese just because its pronunciation is similar to the Chinese character "死" and the number "Thirteen" is unlucky to all the westerners because it is easier for most Westerners to think of Christ's death at the last supper [2]. Finally, some taboos have a close connection with the social customs. For example, in Britain, people are usually forbidden to send the white lily especially at the wedding because it predicts the death. In China when the persons hold the wedding, it is not appropriate to send the umbrella because its pronunciation is similar to the Chinese character "散" which suggests that the young couples will be separated in the end. During Spring Festival, most Chinese people are very cautious to avoid breaking any glass or ceramic utensils which will bring something unfortunate in the new year from their point of view; they tend to stop doing the cleaning on the first day of the Lunar New Year because most of them believe that the treasure or fortune will be taken away with the rubbish in the coming new year. Similarly, on the first day of the new year all the westerners would

not like to meet the persons with the red hair, the cross-eyes and the connected eyebrows earliest because these persons will bring something unlucky in their opinions.

3. THE DIFFERENCES OF TABOOS BETWEEN CHINESE AND WESTERN CULTURES

As we know, taboos exist in almost the nations in the world. However, because of some social, religious or cultural differences, there are lots of distinctions between Chinese cultural taboos and Western cultural taboos. Specifically, these distinctions are mainly manifested in the following aspects.

3.1 Religious Taboos

Different nations have different religions. Generally speaking, there are three major religions in the world, i.e. Christianity, Buddhism and Islam. These religions have different doctrines, and it is natural that there are lots of distinctions between their religious taboos. For most Christians, according to the Bible, there are Ten Commandments, that is, the ten things to be forbidden. For example, all the Christians are not supposed to believe in other divinities except the only one God and they are not permitted to worship any idol in their daily life. All of them should not kill or seduce others for it is a criminal to steal anything from others. For Buddhists, they are prohibited from drinking wines, telling lies, having meat as well as killing, getting married and stealing anything from others [1]. For Muslims, they are not allowed to have the pork and the blood of any animals, to drink the wine and any drinks with the spirit. Meantime, they are forbidden to use pigs as the decorating design, or to marry close relatives or the persons with different religious belief. When Ramadan comes, all the Muslims are not permitted to have any meal from the sunrise to the sunset. All the female Muslims must stay at home, and they are prevented from going out to work, looking at each other or hugging any male. It is a taboo to send anything with the animal image or go into the Mosque with shoes. In their daily life, they are forbidden to have the meal or touch the food with the left hand. As an indigenous religion, Taoism has the history of more than 2000 years in China [1]. The taboos for Taoists are almost similar to the ones for Buddhists. Of course, there are still some differences. For example, all the Taoists need to show filial piety to their parents and respect their

teachers. They are prohibited from betraying the throne as well as the country, seducing their own sisters or some other women and slandering the Taoist doctrine or the scriptures. In addition, it is a sin to expose the body, insult orphans or widows, abandon the old or the sick and indulge themselves to commit crimes.

3.2 Social Communicative Taboos

Because of the cultural difference, there are lots of distinctions in social communicative taboos between China and Western countries. It is well known that China is a country with an ancient civilization and a state of ceremonies. During the past thousands of years, Confucianism and its ritual doctrines have had a deep influence on all aspects of the social life, which has resulted in different kinds of taboos in our social communication. For example, when meeting the old person or the person with the high rank, we need to stand up and make a greeting actively to show our politeness; it is not a good manner to sit there without any responses. On the buses, it is a good habit to offer our seat to the old person for showing our respects to them. If not, probably, you will leave a bad impression on others, making a negative effect on your social communication. While paying a visit to the friends or the relatives, all of us need to pay attention to our words and behaviours. When the host open the door, it is not appropriate to come in directly without asking for a pair of slippers. After sitting down, it is not proper to take the host's things casually without his or her permission. When the host offers you some food or fruits, it is good to decline out of politeness. Also it is necessary for all of us to control the time of the visit to decide what time to leave properly [3]. While having a conversation with our friends or colleagues, we should try to avoid some obscene topics especially when some females are present. Also, it is not a good manner to talk about others' shortcoming or physical deficiency in public. In Western countries, independence, equality and freedom are the popular cultural value. Accordingly, it is common for most westerners to pay great attention to the protection of their privacy. Therefore, if you want to pay a visit to Western friends, the first thing to do is just to make an appointment with them in advance and it is not appropriate for us to pay a visit when they are at working, having a dinner or having a rest. While having a conversation with Western friends, we need to avoid some topics such as income, age, health, marriage or families because all of them belong to Westerners' privacy [3]. If the

conversation involves these topics, they will feel offended and unpleasant. Finally, in the public situation such as in the restaurant or at the airport, it is best for us to keep quiet and it is not polite to talk and laugh loudly and freely.

3.3 Festival Taboos

As everyone knows, festivals are the most classical representation of the national culture. There is a close connection between different festivals and different social customs. Consequently, Lots of differences of cultural taboos exist between Chinese festivals and Western festivals. When it comes to Chinese Festivals, They are usually related to the reunion of the family and the pursuit of a beautiful life. As a result, when Chinese celebrate their festivals, they tend to say some blessing words instead of some inauspicious words. For example, when Spring Festival comes, all the people try their best to avoid saying the words such as "nothing" "over" "death" "end" "lose" "poverty" in order not to destroy the happy and peaceful atmosphere. Also all the Chinese people should be very cautious in case that some utensils such as glasses, bowls and plates are broken. If so, they believe that something unfortunate will happen in their life in the New Year. At the same time, all the women try not to do some sewing with knives and scissors in order not to hurt the divinity. On the first day of the Lunar New year, people tend not to cook the food with knives and shovels because the ironware belongs to unfortunate things in their eyes; they refuse to sweep the rubbish in order not to throw the treasure or fortune away in the New Year. During Qing Ming Festival, people need to sweep the tomb before three o'clock in the afternoon and it is forbidden to greet each other with some blessing words. After all, Qingming Festival is the moment for most Chinese people to sacrifice their deceased families or relatives to show their respects and filial piety. Mid-Autumn Festival is the moment for all the Chinese families to get together. Thus, people tend not to take some peaches and pears to see their parents or friends, and they don't have such above fruits at the dinner either because the peach wood has been used for warding off the evil since the ancient time whereas the pronunciation of pears in Chinese is similar to the character "离" which means separating each other. Christmas is the most important festival in Western countries. When Christmas comes, most Western families tend to make puddings and disturb them with the promise. And it must be done clockwise then the promise can be carried out successfully. If

it is done counter-clockwisely, maybe the promise will not work and it is not possible for people to carry it out [4]. When Halloween comes, it is common for children to ask for some candies or sweets from door to door by disguising themselves as the ghosts with some horrible masks and Jack lantern. However, the children can't go to all the houses. Generally, only the persons with their houses decorated or the lantern lighted at the door tend to welcome the children. If not, it is advisable for the children not to disturb them. Also, after the children get the candies from the neighbours, they can't eat them immediately. They only eat the candies after their parents' carefully checking.

3.4 Dietary Taboos

Dining is an important social communicative activity. Because of different historical culture, religious belief and life style, there are lots of differences on dietary taboos between China and Western countries. In China, Dietary taboo is mainly reflected on table manners. When Chinese persons are invited to have a dinner, what should be avoided is taking a seat randomly. At the table the old and the person with the higher rank should be respected fully by asking them to take the main seat [4]. While having meal, it is not appropriate to take the food for the guests with our own chopsticks to show the warmth and friendliness. Instead, it is appropriate for people to make use of the public chopsticks while serving the dishes. When proposing the toast to the guests, it is necessary to fill the cup with the wine and take it with both hands. It is not a good manner to do it with one hand. If the guest has drunk enough or he can't drink too much, we'd better not force him to go on drinking, and it is advisable to follow the guest's opinion. While having the dinner, it should be banned to insert the chopsticks into the rice bowl vertically because people usually do this when they worship the deceased. It is also not permitted to put the bowls upside down on the table because it is behaviour to curse the host [5]. In addition, the guests are forbidden to knock the bowl with the chopsticks because it is what the beggars usually do. In the northern China, when the noble guest comes to the house, the host tends to serve him with Jiaozi, meaning reunion with each other; when the guest leaves, he usually cooks the noodles to hope that they can keep in touch mutually as long as possible. When Spring Festival comes, people in the southern China tend to have fish or Niangao (a food made of glutinous rice flour), predicting that they can get the promotion and the spare money year by

year. However while having the fish on the boat, it is a taboo to turn the fish over because it suggests the boat will turn over or sink. It is well known that Westerners tend to make use of knives and forks for having a dinner. Therefore, the guests must be very cautious so as not to make any sound by knocking the cups or plates because such a sound will bring the misfortune to the host in their opinion. While adding some salt into the food, the guest can't spread it onto the table because salt is the valuable treasure in the eyes of most Westerners; if it is scattered on the table, the host will lose the money. As for the food at the dinner, Westerners tend not to have the fat, the chicken or the duck's skin, the animal's internal organs, the dog meat, and the snake meat, they also refuse to have the food with the strange taste such as stinky tofu, thick broad-bean sauce, shrimp sauce and preserved eggs, all of which are very popular with most Chinese persons.

3.5 Taboos for Numbers, Colors and Animals

Though the human being has entered the 21st century, there are still lots of people who fetishize some numbers, colours or animals both in China and in Western countries. Naturally there are some differences on the taboos for the above things. For most Chinese people, three, six and nine are auspicious numbers which will bring a good fortune to their life in most Chinese' eyes. Therefore whether they go out for travelling, set the wedding date or pick the number for their cars or their mobile phones, they tend to choose the above three numbers. In the same way, eight is also an auspicious number just because its pronunciation is alike to that of the Chinese character "发" which means making a fortune. As a result, when people choose the number for their phones or their licence plates, 18, 188, 1818, 888 and 16888 are very popular with most Chinese [2]. Comparing to the popularity of 3, 6, 8 and 9, "four" is a number that nobody would be fond of just because its pronunciation sounds like that of the Chinese character "死"; most Chinese even Japanese or South Korean believe that this number will bring a great disaster to them. Consequently most people try to avoid such a number in their daily life. In the hospital, you can't find the inpatient building or the hospital bed with the number "four"; when you have a bath outside, it is very difficult to see the cabinet door with such a number. When people go out for travelling or choose the number for their house, they tend to try their best to avoid this number. In Japan, classmates or good friends try

not to go out at the fourth day in order not to encounter some misfortune; in South Korea the fourth child in one family is usually looked down upon by their parents because such a child will bring the disaster to them in their opinion. In addition to the number "four", when people leave the hometown or go back home in the northern China, they try to avoid the dates with the number "7" and "8" just because of such a proverb "Don't leave the house on the date with '7' and never return home on the date with '8'". For the persons who want to purchase the house, most of them tend to avoid the eighteenth story just because of the expression "the eighteenth hell" in Chinese. In the Western countries, Friday is an unlucky date because Adam and Eve were expelled from the Garden of Eden for eating the forbidden fruit secretly on Friday; thirteen is a dangerous number because it was Judas, the thirteenth disciple who betrayed Jesus and resulted in Jesus' death. Thus, it is difficult to see the number thirteen in the hospital or in the hotel. Most Westerners try to avoid going out on the thirteen of each month especially when it is Friday at the same time for most of them are sure that the disaster will come down upon them on such a day [7]. As for the colour taboo, there are also lots of distinctions between China and Western countries. Therefore it has become the popular colour at the wedding. But in the west red is a horrible colour full of violence, bloodiness and danger which most persons try to avoid in their daily life. White is a good colour to most Westerners because it denotes purity, innocence and nobility. Therefore the bride tends to wear the white dress at the wedding in Western countries. However, white is an unlucky colour in China for implying the meaning of failure, doing nothing or having no ability, it is also popular for people to wear white clothes when their families or relatives die. Naturally, most Chinese tend to avoid the white colour when a baby was born or when a wedding is being held.

The differences of the animal taboo between China and Western countries are mainly embodied in the following aspects. Dragon is an auspicious animal as the totem of all the Chinese nations, which is very popular among the Chinese. However, it symbolizes a horrible and disgusting animal like the lizard in the west. If a person is like a dragon in English, it means that he is horrible, dangerous and disgusting. Dogs are usually regarded as the loyal friends of the human being in most Westerners' eyes, so they are usually their favourite pets. Because of that, the expressions like "an old dog"

or "Every dog has its day" imply the positive meaning. But in China, dogs are the disgusting and dangerous animals; the words like "a dog" or "an old dog" are the insulting words to most Chinese [7]. The owl is a misfortunate animal in China; when an owl makes a strange voice on the roof of the house, it predicts that somebody will leave the world in the family. However in the west the owl is the symbol of wisdom. A person like an owl in English means he is as wise as an owl. Peacocks and magpies are both auspicious birds in China. Peacocks' spreading their tails is usually regarded as the symbol of peace and prosperity; magpies are usually related to the story of the cowherd and the weaver girl in China. Conversely, a peacock is the symbol of being proud of oneself or showing off oneself whereas magpies means being talkative in Western culture.

3.6 Taboos for Gift-giving

It is known to all that gift-giving is a very important interpersonal communicative activity, and it is closely linked with the social custom and the cultural value. Therefore there are a lot of differences in gift-giving taboos between China and Western countries. Generally speaking, the differences of gift-giving taboos are mainly manifested in gifts and responses to gift-giving. As for gifts, in China when we send gifts to others, it is best to send them with the even number instead of the odd number to bring a good luck to the receiver. When accepting the gift, it is a good manner to show the reluctance, and it is not appropriate to open the gift in the presence of the gift-giver. When the old persons celebrate the birthdays, it should be forbidden to send the clock which means a curse to them. When someone is ill in the hospital, we can't go to see him or her by taking some yellow or white chrysanthemum because they are usually used for worshipping the deceased. At the wedding, the gift which the young couple would not like to accept is the umbrella because it predicts that the couple will separate in the end sooner or later. In the west, it is best not to send the valuable gift to others because it is usually regarded as bribery. Also, it is forbidden for the men to send some underwear or cosmetics to the women, which is easier to be misinterpreted as a dubious relationship between the gift-giver and the female. In addition, people will never be permitted to send the gift with the logo of a company which will be considered to be advertising for the company. As well, it is not allowed to send some discount gifts to the guest, which will make them feel looked down upon [5].

While accepting the gift, it is appropriate to open the gift in the presence of the gift-giver and make some gratitude. If not, Western gift-givers will feel unhappy. In Great Britain, people are prohibited from sending the gifts with the design of peacocks and goats because peacocks are regarded as the misfortunate birds and their spreading the tail usually represents a self-showing-off whereas goats tend to be the symbol of the frivolous or wicked males. The French persons tend not to send the rose and the begonia to others because the rose symbolizes love for the sweetheart and the begonia stands for anxiety; they are also forbidden to send the gift with the design of black peaches or red crowned cranes for black peaches are not auspicious whereas red-crowned cranes are the symbols of foolish men or immoral women; All the Frenchmen refuse to send walnuts, azaleas and paper flowers as gifts because all of them are unlucky. In Germany, the things with the design of black cats and magpies can't be used as gifts because black cats are usually looked on as the symbol of witches who will bring the misfortune while magpies tend to have the bad reputation of thieves. Finally, all the Russian refuse to accept the money as the gift because sending the money means a scorn as far as they are concerned.

4. THE INFLUENCE OF CULTURAL TABOOS ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

As a popular social phenomenon, cultural taboos have a great influence on intercultural communications. While making communication with the persons from different cultural background, if we pay great attention to the cultural taboos mutually and try our best not to offend each other, it will be much easier for people in the world to get along well with each other, and it is favourable to promote the mutual understanding and respect of the human being as well as create a beautiful world together. In contrast, if there is lack of understanding and respect among different nations, if people offend others' cultural taboos casually without concerning their national emotions, misunderstandings, contradictions and even conflicts appear as often as possible, which is not beneficial to the stability and the sustainable development or prosperity of the whole world. What's more, as for some taboos about the details in our daily life, it is not necessary to care about them too much. If so, these taboos will become a confinement to some degree and they will have some negative influence on us. For example, in our

daily life, people get used to go out for doing something at the third, sixth, eighth or ninth days, trying to avoid leaving our home at the "seventh" day. However, if the company or the working unit tells us to be on business on the date with the seventh or the eight number, confining ourselves into some travelling taboos is obviously inappropriate and rigid, which will make a negative effect on our work and our interpersonal communication. Also, most Chinese people don't like the number "four", instead all of them would like to have an auspicious number for their houses, their cars and their telephones. However it is not certain for us to pick these lucky numbers all the time. Once we choose these unlucky numbers, it is not necessary for us to add so much psychological burden to ourselves as to influence our life or family harmony. Of course, Friday and the number thirteen are unlucky to all the Westerners. But there are four Fridays in each month and every month includes the date of thirteen; furthermore, it is probable for the date of thirteen and Friday to meet coincidentally in a month. However, it is not possible for most Westerners to stay at home, doing nothing on Fridays or the date of thirteen. Instead they have to go on with their life and work as well as the social communication normally. Therefore, it is necessary to keep a reasonable attitude towards the cultural taboos, and it is not advisable to pay too much attention to cultural taboos when dealing with some trifles in daily life.

5. CONCLUSION

Cultural taboos are universal phenomena in the society, which have a close connection with the intercultural communication. As a result, it is of a great significance to carry out the research about the differences of cultural taboos between China and Western countries, which will not only strengthen the mutual understanding and respect between the persons from different cultural background, but also promote their intercultural communication successfully and smoothly. In short, it is necessary to study the difference of cultural taboos and their influence on the intercultural communication, which will help all the nations from different cultural background to live together friendly and cooperate with each other merrily, and will also be beneficial to the establishment of the community with a shared future for the mankind.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

This paper is independently completed by Jingguang Li.

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