Comparing the Taboo Level Between Chinese Society and European Society

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Abstract. The level of taboos in Chinese and European societies has been discussed not only in some literatures and also in daily life. However, it is mostly reflected that European people have a higher level of taboos about privacy than Chinese people, and overarching claim that this phenomenon is attributed to the differences in living environment and the communal spirit between China and the west. After contrasting past arguments, the paper finds that the widely accepted theories that European people have a higher level of taboos about privacy than Chinese people and the two reasons which is the differences in living environment and the communal spirit between China and the west that they put forward do not fit the data. Thus, this paper argues the level of taboo in two societies cannot be simply defined as which one is higher than the other. It can be considered that the degree of social taboos is closely related to the development of society.

Keywords: Privacy taboo, Salary taboo, Stereotype, Chinese, Westerner, Comparison

1 Introduction

The topic of privacy taboos in both Chinese and Western societies especially the European society has long been a subject of discussion. Privacy taboos refer to the avoidance or tabooing of personal intimate information or topics. It is commonly believed that European people have more taboos about privacy than Chinese people,

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but is this really the case? This essay taps into taboo issues in both Chinese and European societies. It fills gaps left by isolated previous studies and offers comparative analysis to provide new insights. By examining taboo topics from a fresh perspective, this study hopes to help break the inherent cognition and prejudice through research and demonstration, so that people can view taboo differences in light of the development of different societies.

This essay starts by summarizing and comparing past literatures and finds flaws and provide data to refute their arguments. Then, it takes some views on privacy, and further attempts to examine the broadly perceived taboo differences between European and Chinese societies. Finally, this paper argues that the level of privacy taboos in China and Western societies is incomparable, and also reflects the shortcomings of this paper and suggestions for subsequent relevant studies.

2 Literature Review

Collectively, current research argues that European society has a higher level of taboos regarding privacy than Chinese society and they indicate that Europeans tend to exhibit a greater prevalence of taboos in everyday communication compared to the Chinese. This perspective attributes the differences to cultural values and norms surrounding privacy and personal space. For example, Ma Xiaowei and Liu Zhengbing (2020) argue that English-speaking individuals prioritize privacy and are reluctant to disclose personal information such as age, income, and relationship status; in contrast, Chinese culture tends to embrace open discussions about these topics as a form of care and politeness. [1] Contrary viewpoints also exist, with some studies suggesting that Chinese individuals may have more privacy taboos than Europeans: Goodwin and Lee (1994) found that Chinese students demonstrated a greater level of taboo in conversation compared to their British counterparts. [2] However, such perspectives represent a minority within the broader body of research, which overwhelmingly supports the notion of Europeans exhibiting more privacy taboos.

There is a widely recognized and cited explanation for such observation. In a paper published in 1989, Deng explained close living arrangements common in China, with many families residing closely packed together in villages for centuries, poses a stark contrast to the individual homes typical of Western countries. The difference between the level of taboos in Chinese society and European society is further influenced by the communal spirit prevalent in Chinese culture, fostering close

contact, mutual dependence, and mutual concern among neighbors and the broader community. As a result, one's affairs are not only personal but also deeply intertwined with the welfare of one's family, neighbors, and community. [3]

It can be seen that Deng's opinion that the notion of Europeans exhibiting more privacy taboos than Chinese, and the two reasons mentioned in his literature is one of the most believed by the public at present as it has been cited more than 150 times. Thus, this essay takes his opinion as the main research object. It endeavors to assess, through a comprehensive examination of Chinese and European literature, which culture, between the Chinese and European societies, manifests a higher degree of taboos in daily life. The primary focus of this investigation lies in exploring the taboos related to privacy in daily routines.

3 Reflecting on Existing Theories and Provide New Ideas.

3.1 Countering the Two Reasons

Combining experimental data with theory shows that Deng's widely recognized explanation is not in line with actual current data. According to a study published in 2020: "Detached houses provided a home to only 14.2 % of city-dwellers in the EU-28, while 59.9 % of the population living in cities occupied a flat (with more than two thirds of these living in flats that were composed of at least 10 separate dwellings)." [4] Therefore, not everyone in Europe has an independent living environment, not very different from China. This kind of living environment is influenced by multiple factors such as economic development rather than cultural differences. There are also big differences within Europe. "Almost two thirds (63.3 %) of the rural population lived in a detached house." [4] It follows that even within Europe, there are great differences in people's housing. So, it can be seen that living conditions also depend on the level of economic development and population density and the reason of close living arrangements is not exactly in line with the social situation.

Then, for the second reason that Deng provided, the "communal spirit" or "spirit of brotherhood" in China, he does not give a specific definition of "communal spirit" or "brotherhood". This essay regards them as a spirit of solidarity that helps each other and also argues against it. As Yan wrote in his research: "Since the reforms, the social scope of personal networks has expanded remarkably, involving not only

kinship ties but also friends and partners both within and outside the village. As a result, gift exchange, the traditional method of cultivating personal ties, has intensified over the past decade." (Yan, 1995) [5] Therefore, Deng's opinion seems true in China in the 1990s, especially in rural areas. But with the rapid development of China nowadays, especially in those modern cities, more and more people come to make a living in cities, which leads to a phenomenon: people focus more on their own busy life to make a living and do not have enough time to know about their neighbors. Even though they are only a wall away from their neighbors, they may still don't know each other. Therefore, the "communal spirit" or "spirit of brotherhood" does not exist as before, that is, this reason is no longer fully in line with the current social situation.

3.2 Taboo Levels Cannot Be Compared

Based on Deng's opinion and other research it mentions above, this essay puts forward a new argument: the level of taboo in two societies cannot be simply defined as which one is higher than the other. The existence of taboo is closely related to social development, but it is far more than that. It can also be influenced by cultural concepts and historical traditions. As societies continuously develop, the influence of culture and historical tradition on social taboo might become smaller and smaller, but it still exists. Take death as an example, it has long been considered taboo in many cultures and societies. However, the book Death in Contemporary Popular Culture argues that "death does not stand still." It believes that death is not as sacred as it once was. But even though attitudes toward death have now become more open, death has not been fully civilized. [6] This shows that society's views on taboo things will change with the development of society. At the same time, the influence of economic level on social taboo is growing. Nowadays, with the continuous development of Chinese and western societies and globalization impact, people in different societies have the same views on privacy taboo in some aspects.

3.3 An Example of Taboo Level Change

Take salary, a matter of privacy, as an example, the topic is generally considered a taboo topic in conversation among Europeans, who avoid asking others about their salary and keep it private. In the past, in China, especially in rural areas, people didn't

pay much attention to this, but nowadays, more and more young people will pay attention to this issue. They begin to avoid asking questions about other people's salaries, which seems to have some similarities to Western society. A study that took an experiment with 755 employees at a large commercial bank in Southeast Asia asked employees whether it is socially acceptable to ask coworkers about their salaries and whether they feel comfortable doing so. And it shows that "many of its employees are both unwilling to reveal their salaries to coworkers and reluctant to ask coworkers about their salaries." [7] Even in some societies, governments have introduced regulations to prevent employers from asking job applicants about their salary history. Starting January 1, 2020, New Jersey employers will no longer be able to use a job applicant's salary history to screen job applicants, and employers may be fined if they request or obtain a job applicant's salary history. Even though the measure is aimed at closing the gender pay gap, it also partly reflects the existence of salary as a taboo for personal privacy. [8] Even though these examples is not directly about Chinese society and European society, but similar sentimental can be frequently observed in contemporary China.

3.4 The Summary of The Study

By studying past literature data and their theories and compares them with research data this study demonstrates that it is impossible to accurately define which Chinese society or European society has a higher level of taboos. According to the study, the level of taboo in society is closely related to the social environment and development. It is impossible to compare exactly which societies have higher levels of social taboos. However, it can be found that the level of social taboos is greatly affected by social changes such as urbanization, and the rapid social development makes people's pace of life faster and more focused on their own life. At the same time, this development leads to the development of social consciousness, and people pay more attention to their privacy, which makes the level of social taboos constantly higher.

4 Conclusion

This paper demonstrates that the degree of taboo between China and the West especially the Europe cannot be compared in detail, that is, it is impossible to determine which society has a higher degree of taboo. In addition to historical factors,

this study argues that the degree of social taboos will be affected by the social environment and development. Nowadays, the acceleration of social progress has led to the acceleration of the pace of life, and people pay more and more attention to personal affairs. At the same time, this advancement has raised social awareness and prompted individuals to prioritize privacy. Therefore, it can be considered that the degree of social taboos is closely related to the development of society.

Although this study is based on the existing research data, there is still a lack of exact data to support this theory. At the same time, the sample size of this study is limited, only the general phenomenon in China and Europe is discussed, and other regions are not specifically involved.

Thus, the next research should expand the coverage of the sample and conduct deeper studies in different regions. The conclusions of this study are all based on previous research methods and data, and still rely on traditional research methods and fail to make full use of emerging technologies and big data analysis methods, which may limit the depth and breadth of the research. The next step could be to make research more accurate by leveraging big data and advanced digital technologies to capture social changes and individual behavior more accurately. This research is still lacking of sufficient practical significance. In the next step, we can try to strengthen cooperation with other disciplines and focus on applying the theoretical knowledge of social research to the solution of practical problems, so as to make the research more practical and influential.

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