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A Glimpse of the Cultural Differences between China and the US and the Implications on Intercultural Communication

ABSTRACT

In the context of globalization and the increasingly frequent intercultural communication, the author illustrated some of the typical cultural differences between China and the US, bearing in mind that cultural knowledge is one of the indispensable element for developing intercultural communicative competence. The major differences include communication rituals, customary symbols and expressions, values, and ways of thinking, etc. The purpose is to inform readers who may be interested in both cultures and are motivated to learn cultural knowledge as the basis for more effective and appropriate intercultural communication. The research goal is to study the cultural differences and reflect on their implications on intercultural communication.

Keywords:

intercultural communication, China and the US, cultural differences, communication rituals, customary symbols and expressions, values, ways of thinking, implications

INTRODUCTION

With the unstoppable tide of globalization, mutual understanding is needed between nations, that is, to transcend the barriers of different values, beliefs and national conditions, and to deepen the understanding and trust of each other. The term ‘intercultural communication’ generally refers to “the symbolic exchange process whereby individuals from two (or more) different cultural communities negotiate

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shared meanings in an interactive situation” (Ting-Toomey & Chung, 2005, p. 39). The question of how to develop one’s intercultural communicative competence has been researched and discussed since decades ago. Byram constructed the Model of Intercultural Competence from the perspective of language teaching and culture teaching, and on the basis of attitude, communicative knowledge and communicative skills. He believes that linguistic competence, sociolinguistic competence and textual competence can promote successful communication. And intercultural competence is the appropriate and effective behavior of the communicator in a specific context (Spitzberg, 2000). Although this definition is simple, it shows that intercultural communication is related to a specific context. And either the “textual competence” or this “specific context” mentioned above to a large extent refer to different and diverse cultural background and knowledge, which will be the main focus in this article.

With the deepening exchanges and cooperation between China and Western countries, especially in the context of Belt and Road Initiative proposed by President Xi Jinping in 2014, intercultural communication has become a hot topic of public concern and discussion in China. UNESCO Director-General Irina Bokova said in the “One Belt, One Road” International Cooperation Summit Forum that the “One Belt, One Road” initiative advocates cross-cultural dialogue and cultural exchanges while promoting economic and trade cooperation among countries along the route. UNESCO and the “One Belt, One Road” initiative share a common belief in promoting intercultural cooperation and exchange. Therefore, she called for the establishment of an international society that promotes peace, mutual understanding and intercultural competence. In such context, the author is motivated to research and explore in detail the transferring cultural knowledge needed in the process of intercultural communication so as to avoid unnecessary misunderstandings and troubles while at the same time promote more effective and harmonious intercultural dialogues. This article will illustrate some major cultural differences under Chinese and American contexts from the aspects of communication rituals, customary symbols and expressions, values, and different ways of thinking. The purpose is to inform readers of some basic cultural knowledge and hopefully people could realize the importance of developing intercultural communication competence when working or making friends with people in China and the US. Of course, those cultural knowledge only serves as a starting point before people from different cultural backgrounds prepare to engage in real intercultural conversations; and sometimes those cultural knowledge may also be regarded as stereotypes yet it is still worth researching since stereotypes of different countries at least provide people with a cultural map as reference to get to know this diversified world.

THEORETICAL FOUNDATION

In 2004, a developmental Model of Intercultural Communicative Competence was proposed by Dr. Darla K. Deardorff in her PhD dissertation *The Identification and Assessment of Intercultural Competence as a Student Outcome of Internationalization at Institutions of Higher Education in the United States*. In her paper, she identified specific components of intercultural communicative competence based on experts' agreement. Deardorff's model stressed on the development of specific attitudes, knowledge, and skills inherent in intercultural communication. Deardorff pointed out that by having the attitudes of respect, openness, curiosity and tolerance, the deep cultural knowledge and comprehension, along with the skills of listening, observing, interpreting and relating, the internal competence of adaptability, flexibility, ethnorelative view and empathy toward one's own and others' cultures will be developed, hence realizing the desired external outcome of effective and appropriate communication and behavior in an intercultural situation.

However, though Deardorff's theory is widely recognized, intercultural communication is still a complicated concept and due to the varieties of competences needed there is no agreement yet reached by experts in this field. This paper will not attempt to illustrate and discuss all the components necessary for successful intercultural communication. Instead, cultural knowledge and comprehension will be the key of this paper; the focus will be laid on the introduction to some specific cultural knowledge, making comparisons and indicating the possible impact on intercultural communication. Bearing those cultural differences in mind and along with sufficient language competence, it will enhance interlocutors' confidence and willingness to engage in an intercultural conversation.

RESEARCH DESIGN

With the purpose of informing readers of the cultural differences that may have impact on intercultural communication between China and the US, the author is motivated to use typical culture-related examples of both sides, compare the differences and discuss the implications of cultural knowledge on intercultural communication. Population of interest may involve those who study cultures and intercultural communication, or employees in multinational companies, travelers, English/Chinese language (as a second language) teachers, etc. It is necessary for them to comprehend those cultural differences and gradually acquire intercultural awareness and perspectives. Therefore, this paper provides readers with a glimpse of Chinese

and US cultural differences in the hope of promoting better mutual understanding. With Deardorff's Model as the theoretical guidance, the research was conducted with the proposition that those cultural differences are vital in the preliminary preparation for intercultural communication; yet it should also be reminded that the knowledge about them is far from enough to guarantee a successful result. This paper leaves a huge space for further research on intercultural communication and competence. The merit of this article is being informative and it may act as a starting point for future research on cultural differences between China and the US, as well as an impulse to find more ways to promote better intercultural communication and exchanges. While the weakness might be that this article alone is far from enough to introduce all the cultural differences between China and the US; instead, it only serves as a guide for readers to have a brief look at some of the typical cultural aspects. There is still so much more to explore, both on the cultural differences and their implications on intercultural communication.

A GLIMPSE OF CHINESE AND US CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

THE DIFFERENCES IN COMMUNICATION RITUALS

APPELLATIONS

Decent appellation is the start of good communication. It is especially true in the communication between strangers since correct and appropriate appellations help to leave a good impression on others as well as shorten the psychological distance. There are some major differences between China and the US in the use of appellations, as follows:

- 1) In China, family name comes first, then it is followed by a given name. For example, Mr. Xi Jinping (China's President), Xi is his family name and Jinping is his given name. While in the US, it is exactly the opposite. For instance, Mr. Donald Trump (the US President), Donald is his given name and Trump is his family name. Without knowing this, it is quite likely for a Chinese to assume Donald is his family name and call him Mr. Donald which will make English natives feel weird. What is more, the expressions for family members also differ a lot. In China, different family members have different appellations which are way more complicated than English expressions, such as Jiu Ma (wife of mother's brother), Gu Ma (father's sister), Yi (mother's sister), while those are generalized as "aunt" in English. And this also applies to

uncle, grandpa, grandma, cousin, nephew, etc. What are the reasons behind the differences? The feudal society in China had a long history, and the feudal clan system emphasized the importance of consanguinity which made the concept of consanguinity highly valued in the traditional family model of China, i.e., paying attention to the distinction between kinship and alienation, and between inside and outside, and between the elder and the younger. In American society, the core family structure is simple, the children will live independently when they grow up, and the kinship relationship is relatively weak, at least not as strong as the Chinese family concept. Therefore, the English kinship terms are relatively broad, vague and simple.

- 2) Some of Chinese appellations deliver extra emotional meaning while this is quite uncommon in Western culture. For example, to show respect and authority, students usually call their teacher “Teacher” instead of calling the name; while in the US, teacher is just a common profession and students call teachers’ name directly. And this also applies to other titles such as director, manager, head coach, general secretary, etc.

The differences between Chinese and English languages and cultures lead to differences between the two appellation systems. If Chinese appellations are directly transplanted into English, it will often cause unexpected cultural confusion or even shock. Appellation is a category of folk language; people use it in daily communication and literary works. Language is the carrier of culture and a mirror reflecting culture. As a result, different cultures have different appellations due to differences in historical traditions and national psychology. It is very important for intercultural communicators to understand the differences between them and to explore the social and cultural roots behind the differences.

GREETINGS

Greetings play an important role in the construction and continuation of harmonious interpersonal relationships. Interpersonal communication follows certain rules, which are subject to cultural differences. And different history and culture lead to different greeting habits. China is one of the most traditional agricultural country and its greeting language has been deeply affected by agriculture. For example, when meeting acquaintances or friends, Chinese people usually say “Have you had dinner already?” as a way of saying hello, or “Where are you going?”, and “Just came back?” as ways to show intimacy. This will certainly confuse Americans. In this case, it would be better by just saying hello to each other as this is a more common way of starting a conversation worldwide.

COMPLIMENT AND RESPONSE

Chinese and Americans have different response when receiving compliment. In most cases, Americans will directly express their opinions. For example, when someone says, “Your daughter is so beautiful!”, they will say “Thank you!”; however, Chinese people will respond with a negative answer due to the influence from traditional thoughts of humbleness. A negative answer does not mean denying the compliment; it is just an attitude of being humble. When someone says, “You did a good job!”, Chinese people will mostly respond like, “No, no. I have a lot to improve”. For Chinese people, it will be regarded as being too proud or arrogant if directly accepting the compliment while for Americans, it may seem insincere if not accepting. Therefore, in the process of intercultural communication, misunderstanding or conflicts may occur if both parties do not know each other’s culture.

DRINKING AS A WAY OF SOCIALIZING

If you ever encounter a foreigner who is interested in Chinese culture, there is no possibility that he has little knowledge of Chinese way of drinking as socializing. Though there are not as many categories of booze in China, as is the case in the Western countries, booze does exert a great impact on daily life, especially on catering. Drinking is indispensable on the table and in some places of China if you are not wasted, the host will feel disappointed. Such strange culture may at first perplex the foreigners or even cause embarrassment or frustration if the Chinese host is urging the foreign guests too hard to drink. However, if looking back into the Chinese history, it is not difficult to find that the history of booze is almost as old as human history, and the Chinese had mastered the brewing technology long before the Chinese characters were developed. Many classics had records about booze-making and drinking for socializing, which have been deep into the blood of Chinese people and had a profound influence. Persuading others to drink is a Chinese way of socializing inherited from ancestors; but as the society is progressing, there are more and more people resisting this culture due to its negative influence such as corruption of officials and health hazards by overdrinking. Some even hold the view that this drinking culture should be abandoned. With more international exchanges between China and the world, whether this tradition should be applied to foreign guests should be reconsidered. By contrast, drinking in the US is more mild and easily accepted. Drinking usually happens among friends instead of colleagues or business partners in the workplace. In the Americans’ view, business is business; and this concept has been widely advocated in the process of intercultural communication.

THE DIFFERENCES IN CUSTOMARY SYMBOLS AND EXPRESSIONS

THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF COLORS

Customs are one of the cultural heritages accumulated by a country or region in a long history. They mainly refer to the lifestyles of people in the country or region, including economic, political, literary, artistic, religious aspects, etc. Therefore, it is a comprehensive collection of ideological domains covering all aspects. Take the symbolic meaning of colors for example, due to the different geographical location, historical traditions and cultural customs of China and the US, the interpretation of colors also has obvious regional characteristics.

RED

To a large extent, red is a representative color for China. It symbolizes luck, celebration, success and revolution. During the Spring Festival, the most important traditional festival in China, people hand red lanterns and put up red couplets as good signs for the New Year. For the most important moment in life – the wedding – not only should there be red character “Happiness” posted on doors and walls at home, but also the bride and groom should wear red dresses to celebrate. However, red mostly delivers a negative meaning in the US. Speaking of red, Americans may associate this color with violence or danger such as red revenger, or red alert.

WHITE

In Chinese culture, the symbolic meaning of color white is opposite to that of color red. More often than not, it is associated with death and failure. For example, the Chinese expression “Hong bai xi shi” (literal translation: ‘red and white affairs’) refers to marriage and funeral in one’s life. When a family member passes away, relatives will put on white robe and wear a white flower on the robe. However in the US, white represents purity, kindness and honesty. That is why the wedding is called white wedding, and a white lie means a lie with kindness.

YELLOW

In Chinese culture, the color yellow is like a continuation of the color red which represents power and authority. In ancient China, yellow symbolized centralization of power; it was a color solely belonged to royal families; common people were not allowed to wear yellow clothes. However in modern China, yellow is now sometimes being interpreted with negative meanings. For instance, “yellow magazine” and “yellow movie” (literal translation) are related to pornography. In the US, there are expressions like “yellow press” or “yellow pages” which are generally neutral.

THE SYMBOLIC MEANING OF ANIMALS

Chinese people considered themselves the decedents of dragons. The image of dragon is respected as the symbol of Chinese nation. In ancient times, only the Emperor could wear the supreme “Dragon Robe”. However, in American literature, dragon is regarded as devil that would bring disaster to the world. Thus, when translating the Chinese set phrase such as “Sheng Long Huo Hu” (literal translation: ‘as lively as dragon and tiger’), “full of vim and vigor” is a more proper translation for intercultural communication. Of course there are also other animals which are interpreted differently due to different cultural backgrounds and history, such as lion (negative image in China while positive in the US), crow (represents luck and fortune in China while associates with darkness in the US) and so on.

THE DIFFERENCES IN VALUES

COLLECTIVISM VS. INDIVIDUALISM

China and the US hold different value system, with collectivism and individualism as the representatives. According to Craig Biddle (2012, p. 19), individualism is “the idea that the individual’s life belongs to him and that he has an inalienable right to live it as he sees fit, to act on his own judgment, to keep and use the product of his effort, and to pursue the values of his choosing. It’s the idea that the individual is sovereign, an end in himself, and the fundamental unit of moral concern”. And collectivism is “the idea that the individual’s life belongs not to him but to the group or society of which he is merely a part, that he has no rights, and that he must sacrifice his values and goals for the group’s ‘greater good’”. According to collectivism, the group or society is the basic unit of moral concern, and the individual is of value only insofar as he serves the group”. Collectivism is deeply rooted in Chinese culture. Take the differences in family value for example: Chinese people usually attach great importance on family ties, and the concepts of family ethics, blood relationship and respect for elders are highly valued. Children are supposed to shoulder the obligation of supporting and taking care of their parents after they get married and start a career. And parents also feel obligatory to look after their grandchildren. However, it is different in American society. For instance, children will fly out of the nest as adults, and parents will no longer raise them. Similarly, children will no longer care about their parents’ family affairs after independence. For another example, it is quite often to see a large family shopping together, and it is normal for adults to buy things for children as well as

for adult children to pay for their parents. However, in the US, parents and adult children are financially independent; bill is paid separately. In some American families, young children have to pay for things by themselves with the money they make for their parents' housework, which indicates that China and the US almost have two totally different views on family relationship. Therefore, the values of each other should be fully considered in the communication process.

POWER DISTANCE

The idea of power distance is an important cultural concept. 'Power distance' is a term that describes how people belonging to a specific culture view power relationships (superior/subordinate relationships) between people, including the degree that people not in power accept that power is spread unequally. Individuals in cultures demonstrating a high power distance are very deferential to figures of authority and generally accept an unequal distribution of power, while individuals in cultures demonstrating a low power distance readily question authority and expect to participate in decisions that affect them.

China is a country with relatively high power distance that advocates authority. Power plays an important role which results in a strict hierarchy. Every profession has a fixed identity, status, power and obligation in society. Advocating authority is directly related to Confucianism, under the influence of which, interpersonal relationship becomes hierarchical, and the value orientation of interpersonal relationship is strongly emphasized. Subordinates should obey and follow the instructions from their superiors; young people should respect the elders; children should be obedient to their parents. All of the above demonstrated a very different way of communication from that of Americans. In the US, "Everyone is equal" is a common belief. Concepts such as liberty, freedom and equality are advocated as the mainstream culture. In face of the two value systems, proper communicative strategies should be considered in a intercultural environment, such as working in multinational companies or teaching international students in schools.

THE DIFFERENCES IN WAYS OF THINKING

INDIRECTNESS VS. DIRECTNESS

Scholars have long been incorporating culture into communication studies because of culture's impact on communication and especially the impact of different ways of thinking. There is always a contradiction between the direct communication in the US culture and the indirect style in Oriental culture such as China. Chinese

people are implicit and mild while Americans are direct in expressing their ideas. Taking writing letters for example, Chinese people were used to writing a few lines of polite formula before showing their real intentions. By contrast, Westerners always showed their intention first, then followed by some complimentary close at the end.

SENSE OF PRIVACY

Chinese people usually ask each other's age, marriage, income and so on when they meet for the first time as a way to show concerns for each other. But in the eyes of Americans, these questions are very personal and others have no right to invade their privacy. It is especially impolite to ask these questions when people meet for the first time, which will make the communication hard to continue. For example, if you ask a lady from the US, "How old are you?", she may answer, "It's a secret!". Americans hope that they will always be full of vitality in the eyes of others, and they think it is necessary to always keep a young mindset. That is why they do not want to mention age. Those that are considered common for Chinese people as daily greetings may seem an invasion of privacy for Americans. Other examples include greetings such as "Where are you going?", "What are you doing?" and so on. Those are all ways of saying hello in China but American people may feel uncomfortable answering those private questions.

IMPLICATIONS ON INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION

Just as Dr. Deardorff and many other researchers have suggested, by having the right attitude, sufficient knowledge and necessary skills, one will surely become a competent intercultural communicator; different cultures will surely exist in harmony. However, despite of those hard-working researchers' beautiful wishes, the reality is rather cruel in the current "global village". There are people from different cultures and governments of different countries who seem not so willing to establish harmonious intercultural relationship or have friendly intercultural conversations. For example, while China is currently making every effort to cope with the Novel Coronavirus Outbreak since the beginning of 2020, many racist reports have made headlines in Western media, advocating anti-China and anti-Asian sentiment. As shown in an article titled "China Is the Real Sick Man of Asia", which was published on February 3, 2020 by *The Wall Street Journal*, deep-rooted discrimination and prejudice are clearly displayed in the mainstream media of the United States. While the WHO is calling for support to China worldwide,

the US Republican Senator Tom Cotton suggested in public that the virus was actually a biochemical weapon released intentionally by the super laboratory located in Wuhan, the epicenter of the outbreak. Not to mention the constant Trade War between China and the US, and the recent discriminative advertisement video against yellow people by D&G, etc. It seems so difficult to be friendly with each other, just because we are from different countries and cultures.

It is such a diversified world with people of different colors, races, life styles, and countries with different architecture, history, customs, art and music, etc. The charm of intercultural communication lies in cultural diversity. We are different; that is why we are curious about each other and wanting to know each other. If everyone and everywhere were the same, then how boring the world would have been. Hopefully those cultural differences introduced in this article may serve as catalyst to bring people closer, instead of setting us apart.

CONCLUSION

This article mainly introduced some major differences between Chinese and US cultures in the context of intercultural communication. There are differences in communication rituals, customary symbols and expressions, values, and ways of thinking which, on the one hand, are amazing heritage from ancestors that make this world more interesting and diversified; on the other hand, they may become barriers for the two cultures to understand each other. Thus, they are important references and indicators for further promoting intercultural communication. Of course, we should also realize that having a storage of those cultural knowledge does not guarantee successful intercultural communication. Along with an attitude of openness, respect and tolerance, they merely serve as a fine beginning for an intercultural conversation. A critical intercultural awareness and the skills of listening, observing, interpreting, analyzing and relating are also crucial for an appropriate and effective intercultural communication.

Based on the above research and author's reflection on cultural differences, here are some suggestions for better intercultural communication. First of all, it is vital to constantly explore for something in common in the process of communication, such as starting with a shared attitude of openness, mutual respect and tolerance for ambiguity. Second, intercultural awareness and sensitivity need to be fostered by always looking at cultural differences with a critical eye. Cultural differences are inevitable; they are always there no matter what. Instead of either abandoning and denying one's own culture and catering to other cultures or

being ethnocentric, one should cherish his or her own cultural heritage meanwhile learning from each other. What is more, cultural knowledge should be integrated into language learning process so that young people would foster the awareness to respect each other's national culture, instead of presumptuously evaluating or measuring each other's national culture with their own cultural value. As said by Prof. Simon Greenall (2014), "intercultural communication does not imply assimilation or mimicry but the understanding and appreciation of different values. It should help us enjoy recognizing similarities between cultures, and celebrate our differences". The world has become a global village; people from different cultural backgrounds will build friendship and learn from each other through communication; and human civilization will flourish through communication.

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