

Studies on Taboo Customs in China and Western Countries From the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

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With the continuous process of globalization, the intercultural communication between China and Western countries is steadily expanded. Due to different cultural backgrounds, misunderstandings are inevitable in intercultural exchanges, which may cause embarrassing situation or unnecessary trouble. As a part of culture, taboo customs involve political, economical, social, and many other aspects, ranging from people's daily life to the global diplomacy. Thus, studies on taboo customs in China and Western countries are meaningful to the understanding of different cultures. This paper mainly discusses the taboo customs from two aspects, in intercultural verbal communication and nonverbal communication, which is necessary for the smoothness and effectiveness of intercultural exchanges.

Keywords: taboo customs, intercultural communication, China and Western countries

Introduction

Cultural differences may exist between people in the aspects of generation, gender, religion, socioeconomic status, ethnicity, or nationality, etc. Intercultural communication refers to the communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. From the psychological point of view, intercultural communication is the communication process in which message is encoded and decoded by people with different cultural backgrounds. They might belong to different nationalities or different political system in a macro view; and they might have different gender, age, occupation, region, educational background, socio status, and so on in a micro view.

There are two channels of human communication: verbal and non-verbal. In the communication process, a message can be a verbal or nonverbal sign, while meaning can also be encoded in both verbal and nonverbal forms. Thus intercultural communication has two forms naturally: intercultural verbal communication and intercultural nonverbal communication. Verbal communication means that people communicate by language, i.e., word combined by sound and meaning and grammar system. Nonverbal communication is the form of communication through body language mainly, for example: sign language, facial expression, eye contact, sitting posture, standing posture, gestures, and even people's dress is also treated as one nonverbal communication form. Both intercultural verbal communication and intercultural nonverbal communication convey information in their own way, expecting to be understood and accepted.

Comparison of Taboo Customs Between China and Western Countries in Verbal Communication

Taboo is a very sensitive issue in intercultural communication. It tends to hurt other's feelings, if you do not pay attention to or do not respect their taboos. As a custom, taboo has become the stable practice which people mainly use to regulate their behavior in social life. Generally speaking, taboos are not implemented in isolation, but combined with superstition or divination and popular in a variety of festival life manners. Reflected in the verbal communication process are the language taboos. In short, it means that you can't say certain words in some cases. Taboo is not only a linguistic phenomenon, but also a social phenomenon. It is deeply rooted in the culture of a particular society. It is the linguistic refraction from the specific social and cultural fields. It is universal, as well as has its cultural specificity. Therefore, as an intercultural communicator, we should pay special attention to the different taboo customs between China and Western countries in the following aspects.

Greetings

We all have the habit of greeting when people meet, but there is a great difference in greeting habits between Chinese and Westerners.

In China, "Have you eaten yet?" and "Where are you going?" are the most common greetings. While in Western countries, these two questions should be taboos for greeting, because the first one may be seen as a kind of invitation; the second one may be considered as an invasion of others' privacy. Actually, the first Chinese ways of greeting reflect Chinese people's traditional thinking on "food". China is a farm-based community since ancient times, so the issue of food is always concerned highly by people. Traditionally, Chinese people take food as the first need. Therefore, it is not surprising to use "Have you eaten yet?" as a greeting. But in Western countries, this greeting may cause communication obstacles. If greeted in this way, westerners might think the speaker wants to invite them for dinner. While the following statements will have nothing to do with invitation, westerners will be confused and misunderstood.

While under the influence of Western culture, westerners often talk about weather in the greetings after simply saying "Hello" or "How are you?" In Western countries, especially in England, due to the geographical environment and the weather features, westerners have a special feeling about the topic of weather naturally.

Appellations

Kinship terms have different meanings between Chinese and Western cultures. Chinese kinship is a cultural symbol and carries specific cultural-spirit, which is plentiful and complex. There are profound cultural connotations behind these complex kinship terms. One common taboo for Chinese appellation is that people cannot address the names of ancestors or elders, while there is no particular taboo in the Western appellations, except some stringent rules for high status clergy or royal family members.

In China, among family members and relatives, appellations are determined in strict accordance with seniority and relationships, which is seen as a basic courtesy. In Western countries, especially in English-speaking countries, people no matter young or old, can still address each other directly by name, while this is considered impolite and irreverent and is likely to be severely criticized in China.

Differences in appellation taboos are mainly because there is a great difference in cultural values between Chinese and Western society. Under the influence of patriarchy in ancient China, there are rigorous distinction

and strict rules for people's appellations. Westerners are mostly influenced by the ideology that "All men are created equal", so they advocate men's natural and equal rights and emphasize non-hierarchical distinction between people, advocating equality and freedom.

Privacy

The concepts of privacy have many differences between China and Western countries. Frankly speaking, most Chinese couldn't understand the Western concept of "privacy" completely. There is no equivalent word to the Western "privacy" in Chinese. According to Chinese customs, in order to understand each other better, people would like to ask some questions to acquire each other's basic information at their first meeting, such as "How old are you?", "Are you married?", "Where are you living?", "What's your salary?", "Where did you buy this coat?", "How much did this coat cost you?", "What's your religion?", so on and so forth. According to the Chinese way of thinking, the above questions are all polite question to show people's kindness and concern for each other and to narrow the distance between each other.

However, westerners are always avoiding talking about this kind of questions related to one's personal privacy, such as income, age, family, and so on. In addition, in the intercultural communication process, we can praise each other for one's hair or dressing, but can never talk about the personal issues about one's body, so such words as "fat, bald, white hair" are all taboo terms. Westerners are very sensitive to the words related with the body. Because these words may remind that they are becoming old constantly and lose charm gradually. This "unintentional reminder" may be a kind of insult to westerner to some extent.

Certain Words

One important taboo word is "old". In China, "old" is the symbol of qualification, dignity, and authority. For instance, there is a proverb in China, "the older, the wiser". "Old" is relevant to respect. But westerners are "dissatisfied with the old". In China, respecting the elder is seen as a virtue, and youngsters are encouraged to help the old. However, in Western countries, if a young man helps an old man without permission, it is likely to annoy him. If you don't understand the meaning of the taboo word "old" in Western culture, the intercultural communication cannot be successful. In Chinese culture, "old" not only refers to the aged, but also implies the meaning of "knowledgeable and skilled". There are many compliments with the word "old" in China, such as "old gentleman" and "veteran". But in Western culture, the word "old" is a kind of taboo. "Old" means incompetent and useless in a sense. Furthermore, for westerners, especially for women, age is a sensitive topic, and they are not willing to disclose their own age casually. So it is an offense and a rude behavior to say a westerner is old. Thus, using "old man", "old lady", or "old woman" is impolite in Western countries.

Another important taboo is related with the word "black". The words "black", "nigger", "Negro" in English, and the expressions consisting of "black" in Chinese are very easy to touch this taboo. All these terms relate to racial discrimination, which happens to be an important part of language taboos. Because of the emotional factor of discrimination, these words "Nigger", "Negro", "black" become taboo words. "Nigger" is a completely insulting taboo word. "Negro" has contempt meaning. "Black" is often connected to "evil", "sin", "dirty", and other derogatory meanings, for example, blackguard, blacklist, black mark, black sheep, and black lie. In modern Chinese, derivative words of "black" are always associated with the bad, unfortunate, disastrous, and other evil things, such as "gangsters", "black market", "smuggled goods", "evil mind", "black list", "scapegoat", and so on.

Therefore, it can be said that “black” is a taboo word both in China and in Western countries to a large extent.

All in all, it is necessary for communicators to learn the different taboo customs between Chinese and Western cultures, so that intercultural communication can be conducted without misunderstanding or even conflicts.

Different Taboo Customs Between China and Western Countries in Nonverbal Communication

Communication happens via verbal and nonverbal signs. In the intercultural communication process, except from verbal communication, we should also pay enough attention to nonverbal communication. To communicate effectively, we should closely observe and accurately interpret nonverbal messages by referring to their cultural and contextual meanings. Otherwise, it may also lead to cultural obstacles, misunderstandings, or even cultural conflicts. Nonverbal communication is a human behavior that can be acquired through learning and is shared by all the social membership in a cultural community. Thus nonverbal communication has sociality and cultural characteristics. As an important part of culture, taboo customs are closely connected to nonverbal communication. Keeping a keen perception to the taboo customs of nonverbal communication can help to make communication smooth and effective. Therefore, it is necessary to learn the different taboo customs between China and Western countries in nonverbal communication, including taboos in body language, taboos in some social behaviors, and so on.

Body Language

As verbal language, body language is also the culture carrier. The cultural differences in body language would lead to misunderstanding in intercultural communication (Zheng, 2010, p. 50). Cultural misunderstandings or violation of taboos of body language accidentally will lead to unexpected consequences. Body language and its applications are different according to different culture. Take eye contact as an example, in the Chinese politeness principle, people always avoid having eye contact to show courtesy, respect, or compliance. Meanwhile, in order to talk comfortably and listen carefully, people do not make eye contact stay too long on other’s body. In fact, such long-time direct eye contact, when facing superiors or elders, might be considered a sign of disrespect and challenge. In contrast, the English-speaking countries make eye contact much more often. They believe that the lack of eye contact is insincere, dishonest, or the reflection of avoidance and decline.

To call someone to come closer is a kind of body language commonly used. For Chinese, this kind of body language is distinguished by different ages of the information receiver. The gesture to children is palm up, and to adult is palm down. Westerners express this message in two ways: palm upward toward someone while bringing back the forefinger; or hooking four fingers toward themselves. In Chinese culture, palm upward toward someone while bringing back the forefinger has a frivolous meaning to some extent. It is a hidden taboo gesture of social convention which should not be used in daily communication. The root cause for this difference lies in the different psychology in different cultures. Chinese believe that palm down means serious attitude in a formal situation, while palm up contains a frivolous or teasing attitude. Different from Chinese thought, westerners think palm up means real and sincere; palm down implies depression.

Physical contact is also worthy to notice, because there are great differences in the physical contact between

China and Western countries, especially for people with the opposite sex. According to the Confucian tradition in China, it is improper for men and women to touch each other. Body contact is not allowed in handing over or taking over between men and women. Physical contact between the sexes in public is a strict taboo in China. However, unlike Chinese, westerners like expressing their friendly feelings or kind emotion through physical contact. Therefore, they have much more social-polite body contacts in public. Actually, some religions prohibit opposite-sex touch between unmarried or unrelated individuals.

Social Behaviors

One familiar social behavior studied here is a social visit. In English-speaking countries, a social visit to someone needs an appointment in advance. A sudden or abrupt visit is a social taboo in most English-speaking countries, because the host or hostess may feel displeased or annoyed for this kind of sudden visit which may disrupt his or her plan and cause some inconvenience. Abrupt visit is a kind of taboo behavior to some extent. While in China, many people like paying a visit without make an advanced appointment. They may see it as surprising visit without taking the host or hostess' arrangement into consideration. The reason for this difference should be the different sense of time between the Chinese and westerners. To a certain extent, the Chinese are the masters of time. That is to say, they use time much more casually than westerners. Unlike Chinese, westerners manage time more strictly due to the fast-paced and stressful life. Fast food shops, frozen food, and microwave ovens are best examples. If we are not aware of the different senses of time, misunderstanding or conflicts will be generated in intercultural nonverbal communication process.

Another popular social behavior is dating. Many westerners are affectionate, romantic, and demonstrative in a close relationship. On the contrary, the Chinese tend to be shy and undemonstrative in date, which is not well appreciated in Western culture. In addition, after getting in close relationship, Chinese couples tend to show closeness by being very demanding and possessive with each other, which is a taboo for Western couples, because westerners need privacy and freedom even in a close relationship. Generally speaking, social context has a powerful impact on people's nonverbal communication.

It is necessary to realize the different social and cultural context in nonverbal communication. These factors may imply certain different taboo customs for social behaviors between China and Western countries. Ignorance or violation of the taboo customs may cause obstacles or failures in the intercultural communication process.

Cultivation of Intercultural Competence

Intercultural communication happens in interpersonal encounters. It brings about many benefits, such as, increased contact with people from different cultures, more information about oneself and others, better understanding of our own position in larger political, social, and historical contexts, and improved coordination among communicators when tackling such universal challenges. In the process of the intercultural communication between China and Western countries, different taboo customs should be pay special attention to, so that the communication can achieve optimal outcomes. Thus, it is quite meaningful for communicators to cultivate their intercultural competence.

Intercultural competence is the comprehensive ability of language skills, non-verbal ability, intercultural adaptability, and other aspects. It is the basic and effective interpersonal skills, including emotional and relational capabilities, and strategic capability (Linell, 2001, p. 140). Intercultural competence is demonstrated when a

communicator's behavior is appropriate and effective in a given intercultural context. With the increasing amount of intercultural communication, there are higher requirements put forward to people's intercultural competence.

The cultivation of intercultural competence is contributed at least by the following three aspects: enhancement of multicultural awareness; intercultural awareness training; the emotional and cognitive attitude to cultural differences.

Multicultural awareness refers to the attitude towards cultural diversity and cultural differences in intercultural communication. Communicator should learn to imagine oneself in someone else's shoes. The enhancement of multicultural awareness can help people to analyze cultural differences and acquire cultural knowledge.

For intercultural awareness training, people are required to understand and recognize that in different countries people's attitudes and behaviors may be different from each other. The training process can be divided into four steps: first, having the wishes to respect local lifestyle; second, going deep into the local life and getting their recognition and trust; third, having a complete understanding of local culture and experiencing the feelings of the local people; four, viewing the world through their eyes and accurately understanding their feelings, emotions, meanings, intentions, and expectations.

The emotional and cognitive attitude to cultural differences requires communicators' relational competence. It requires mutual adaptation by both communicators. An experienced intercultural communicator will respect cultural differences and create opportunities to contact people of diverse cultural background with relational competence.

Under the influence of one national culture, one's values, ethics, ways of thinking will form to a combined and habitual pattern gradually. Thus it is of great significance to respect cultural differences and to cultivate intercultural competence. In essence, positive attitudes, knowledge, communication skills and behaviors are all integrative elements. The ultimate goal is to achieve a smooth and effective communication in the intercultural contexts.

Conclusion

Our world is far more accessible than ever before. In virtual reality, information from across the globe appears in the blink of an eye. In the real world, people can fly to any destination within a short time. Cultural exchanges are increasingly so frequent nowadays that taboo custom becomes an important issue to focus in intercultural communication, otherwise misunderstanding of different taboo customs may result in failure of communication. Taboo is a very sensitive issue in intercultural communication, including not only verbal language, but also body language, social behaviors, etc. It is easy to hurt each other's feelings if you do not respect their taboo custom. It is necessary to study the differences of taboo customs between China and Western countries from both verbal and nonverbal aspects. Taboo custom is an important part of culture. Therefore, the cultivation of intercultural competence is the basic and essential factor. In this process, competence for empathy, non-judgment, alter-centrism, and adaptation is required. Empathy is the ability to imagine oneself in other's shoes. Only by knowing about other people's experiences and lives, are we likely to view the world through their eyes. Non-judgment requires us not to judge others according to our own cultural frame of reference. We should learn to interpret facts to express opinions and make logical evaluations. Alter-centrism involves the

communicator's ability to accurately understand the other communicator's feelings and meanings. Adaptation means subtle variation of one communicator's behavior to the other communicator's style. All these efforts are made to cultivate communicators' intercultural competence so that a positive and effective intercultural communication can be developed.

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