

Cultural Customs Learning and Intercultural Communication --- A Case Study of Chinese Character “Fu”

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Abstract

Cultural customs learning should be a component part of foreign language learning. Cultural customs have very important functions in intercultural communication, which influence the people's behaviors and ways in special cultural context, and even essential conditions that people from different cultural backgrounds make better and smoother intercultural communication. However, foreign language learners often overlooked learning cultural customs and misunderstood cultural customs, so that they always made unsuccessful intercultural communication with the native people. In this article, the author takes a Chinese character “Fu” for an example, elaborates a real story that the author experienced in person more than ten years ago and analyzes the relationships between language and culture, and then discusses about the important effects of cultural customs in intercultural communication and adaptation. Finally, the author gives some suggestions of how to adapt to a new culture, especially a new cultural custom in order to have a better understanding one new culture and have a good communication with the native people.

Keywords: foreign language learning, cultural custom learning, Chinese culture, intercultural communication, Chinese history, cultural custom

1. Introduction

Nowadays, more and more people are eager to learn foreign languages and want to communicate with different people from different countries. However, language learners often overlooked learning cultural customs and misunderstood cultural customs, so that they always made unsuccessful intercultural communication with the native people. Everyone knows that every country is defined by its own set of cultural customs, acceptable behaviors that provide individuals with a base line of how he/she should conduct himself/herself under some cultural environment. Meanwhile, some things just like posters, habits of doing things and so on, always reflect diverse cultural customs and indicate various cultural connotations in different cultural backgrounds of different countries and areas. To some extent, it is not easy for any foreigner to learn and understand diverse cultural customs from another country. If people misunderstand cultural customs from another country, they cannot have an effective communication with the native people. Sometime, peoples will not only make many jokes for the strange cultural customs, but also make serious mistakes in intercultural communication.

Therefore, the author takes a real case for an example, elaborates the story that the author experienced in person and analyzes the relationships between language and culture, and then discusses about the important effects of cultural customs in intercultural communication and adaptation. Finally, the author gives some suggestions of how to adapt to a new culture, especially a new cultural custom in order to have better understanding of one new culture and have a good communication with the native people.

2. A Case

A story happened more than ten years ago. At that time, The author was in charge of foreign affairs in our university.

It is known that Spring Festival is a big event in China. The Chinese people always go home to get on with family member for reunion, no matter how far they live or work. Especially, most of the Chinese people keep Chinese traditional customs, such as fireworks, Jiaozi, and so on. Some of them still post the Chinese characters on the door in order to celebrate New Year in Chinese Lunar.

Once, a new year was coming, foreign guests in our university were invited by me and had an opportunity to spend Spring Festival at my house. One of my foreign guest was Mr. Davis, a part-time English teacher in our university while he studied Chinese for more than two years. He knew some knowledge about Chinese language and culture. He could speak very fluent Chinese. I was living at the teachers' apartment. Before he arrived at my house, he called me and I went downstairs to meet him and other foreign guests. And then Mr. Davis accompanied with me to my house. In front of the door, Mr. Davis with his friends was very interested in the Chinese characters on the door. Both the two sides of the door had Chinese Tiao Fu. I explained the meanings of the Chinese Tiao Fu in English. Mr. Davis bowed his head to show that he had known what I explained quiet well. At this time, Mr. Davis suddenly looked at the square paper with Chinese character “Fu (English meaning is happiness and blessing) which was post down on the door center. He could not help himself to say to me with great laughter:

“Mr. Zhang, you have made a big mistake!”

The author was surprised at hearing what Davis said and could not understand what he said to him completely. So, the author said to him “Why did you say so?”

Mr. Davis pointed at the square paper with Chinese character “Fu” on the door center and gave the author an answer with a smile.

“How did you post the square paper with Chinese character “Fu” down on the door center? I think you'd better put the square paper upper on the door center. Maybe it is a right way. Because I learned this Chinese word quite well, this word means ‘feeling or showing pleasure.’ Am I right, Mr. Zhang?”

At that time, Mr. Zhang just replied in this way: “Mr. Davis, according to Chinese traditions, the people put the Chinese character “Fu” down, it is not wrong. It implies that “happiness has come to his or her family.” It shows that people hope that New Year will bring happiness to their families. Every family member will live a happy life in New Year. In this way, the Chinese character “Fu” which is post down only indicates the people's desires and wishes in the Chinese New Year.”

After Mr. Davis heard what Mr. Zhang answered, he flushed his cheeks with shame and felt a little sorry about what he said to Mr. Zhang. “Oh, everything in Chinese culture is really expansive and meaningful. It is not easy for any foreigner to understand that. I should study harder than before. Maybe, I'll understand Chinese culture and its customs better than before. Is that so? Mr. Zhang”

“Oh, you can learn Chinese cultural customs well some day. Don't worry about that, Davis.”

Later, Mr. Davis with other foreign guests and my family spent an unforgettable evening together on the eve of Chinese Spring Festival.

3. Analysis and Discussion

Before our discussion about the important effects of cultural customs in intercultural communication and adaptation, it is an essential prerequisite for us to analyze the relationship between language and culture, and know some fundamental knowledge about the characteristics of Chinese language and its culture. As a result, the author will analyze the relationships between language and culture, and the unique features of the Chinese language and culture including its cultural customs from different perspectives and different scholars' theories

both at home and abroad.

3.1 Language and Culture

Language and culture are interdependently and inseparably related. They construct an integral whole. Though they are by no means the same, neither of them could survive without the other. Metaphors can be employed to vividly describe the relationship between them. Language is just like a mirror that reflects its national culture (Trugill, 1983). Thus, learning of the cultural differences from different countries has become a major part of learning foreign languages including Chinese language to any foreigners. The famous American linguist Edward Sapir(1921:60-90) says“There is a language environment and each of the speakers of the foreign language belongs to one range (one group of people) separated from the other range (the other group of people) on the basis of physical difference... Language can't exist without culture... Culture can be explained as what the society thinks and does, and the language is the expression of the ideas of the society.”

Also, others consider that language culture together come from the iceberg. The visible part is the language with a small part of culture is the language, with a small part of culture standing out above the sea surface while the greater part, lying hidden beneath the surface of the sea, is the invisible aspect of culture. Still others say that language and culture make a living organism, by which they mean that language is flesh and culture is blood. Without culture, language would be dead and without language, culture could have no shape (Jiang, 2010).

In a word, language and culture, different as they are, form a whole. To put in another way, language is a symbolic guide to culture, as Sapir (1970) says, and is considered as the keystone of culture. Without language, culture could be impossible. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture and it reflects culture. We can draw a conclusion that language is actually one expression of the culture (Bernard, 1989).

In the simplest sense, a language is a set of symbols, with rules of combining the symbols that a large community uses and understands. Verbal languages are the principal means by which we express our thoughts and feelings.

Culture, however, is more expansive. It consists of all the institutions, all the behavior, in fact all the man-made aspects of a very large group of non-homogeneous people (Cullen, 2000). As Edward T. Hall points out, “culture hides much more than it reveals, and strongly enough, what it hides, it hides most effectively from its own participants.” And he also says that “culture controls behavior in deep and persisting ways, many of which are outside of awareness and therefore beyond conscious control of the individual.”

Therefore, culture can be viewed as an iceberg. Nine-tenths of an iceberg is out of sight (below the water line). Likewise, nine-tenths of culture is outside of conscious awareness. The part of the cultural iceberg that is above the water is easy to be noticed (Xu, 2012)

Nowadays, the number of Chinese language learners across the world have been on the rise in recent years. While those used to phonetic languages often find Chinese characters difficult to learn, some learners may experience the gratification of discovering historical and cultural elements in the process.

3.2 Culture, Cultural Customs and Intercultural Communication

Culture is a system of shared beliefs, values, customs, behaviors, and artifacts that the members of a society use to cope with their world and with one another, and that are transmitted from generation to generation through learning. This definition includes not only patterns of behavior but also patterns of thought (shared meanings that the members of a society attach to various phenomena, nature and intellectual, including religions and ideologies), artifacts (tools, pottery, houses, machines, works of art), and the culturally transmitted skills and techniques used to make the artifacts. (Seidensticker, 1987)

Culture is a complex concept, with many different definitions. But, simply “culture” refers to a group or a

community with which we share common experiences that shape the way we understand the world. It includes groups that we are born into, such as gender, race or national origin. It also includes groups we join in or become part of. For example, we can acquire a new culture by moving to a new region, by a change in our economic status, or by becoming disabled. When we think of culture this broadly, we realize we all belong to many cultures at once.

Needless to say, every culture has its ways of doing thing in daily life, such as ways of eating, drinking, dressing, finding shelter, making friends, marrying, and dealing with death. People have to learn the cultural ways of their community to satisfy their basic human needs. These ways are not something that the people in the group are born with. (Xu, 2012)

At the same time, every culture has its own customs that are acceptable behaviors and ways by the people in the same culture. The different behaviors and ways that are the various cultural customs are neither right nor wrong. It is simply that different people do the same things or have the same behaviors and ways in diverse manners and attitudes.

In all, differences of cultural customs may cause people from different cultures to misinterpret both what is said and what is done, leading to misunderstandings. Effective communication and culture are integrative, and thus can't be treated separately. Therefore,, a good knowledge of cultural customs first is very important in intercultural communication.

Intercultural communication occurs whenever there is communication between people from different cultural back grounds (Fu, 2009). That is to say, people have differences in cultural backgrounds, living patterns, educational, political and economical conditions, even hobbies and characters, so there exist all kinds of problems and difficulties in intercultural communication.

3.3 Characteristics of Chinese language, Culture and its Cultural Customs

In recent years, the number of Chinese language learners across the world have been on the rise while those used to phonetic languages often find Chinese characters difficult to learn, some learners may experience the gratification of discovering historical and cultural elements in the process.

When learning Chinese language, people from foreign countries, especially from the western countries, may find that Chinese language and English language have a big difference in terms of dialects, orthography, phonetics, grammar, and in many other important ways. Some pictographic symbols of Chinese characters express people's keen observation and experience of the world. "Chinese characters are one of the oldest forms of writing in the world bearing more than 5,000 years of Chinese culture and civilization."(Fan, 2011) Today, Chinese characters still have traces of the pictograms in the form and structure of some characters, allowing people to easily guess their meaning. In addition, the ideographic nature of the Chinese writing system sets it apart from alphabetic writing systems. Generally speaking, Chinese language is such a fascinating language that one may not only benefit from communicating with others, but also benefit from the magnificent culture.

Chinese culture can be defined as a cultural system rich in distinct national style which took shape within the terrain of China. The culture includes the spiritual culture and behavioral culture as well as their materialized presentations. It is these cultural forms that signify the fundamental features of the Chinese culture. It belongs to the historical category, having undergone 5,000-year's development before it turns into today's splendid sight, both extensive and profound (Fan and Yu, 2011) To some extent, the Chinese culture indicates the Chinese tradition, we may say, is one of the important integrative part of cultural customs. For example, Spring Festival couplets (which posted on gateposts or door panels during the Spring Festival, expressing good wishes for the year) are very popular in China. These are many Chinese good luck proverbs on red paper, often with golden trimming and are usually about happiness, wealth, longevity, a satisfactory marriage, and more children.

Some Spring Festival couplets are pasted or pinned in kitchens or on doors, while others can be placed anywhere. Although they are usually taken down after the New Year celebrations, some remain all year in the

hope of attracting ongoing good fortune. In the countryside, pictures of the God of Door and God of Wealth are pasted on front doors to ward off evil spirits and to welcome peace and abundance. (Liao, 2007)

Another Chinese cultural custom is that people like to past the Chinese character “Fu” (The English meaning is “blessing” or “happiness” upside down on the center of door, because the utterance in Chinese describing the character pasted in such a way is pronounced as “fu dao le”, which means that blessings for wealth have arrived. In this way, it shows that the people have a strong feeling and desire to have a happy life in the coming year.

4. Conclusion

From the above case, we can clearly see that learning Chinese language is not a easy thing. The foreign language learners including Chinese language learners should learn some fundamental knowledge about language and culture, especially know some thing about culture, cultural customs and intercultural communication. Specially for Chinese language learners, they should know the characteristics of Chinese language, culture and its cultural customs because learning the meaning of Chinese word and trying to find out some specific cultural information and it is beneficial for Chinese language learners to understand that Chinese language is an essential part of Chinese culture, and that Chinese culture is deeply embedded in Chinese language.

Meanwhile, Chinese language learners should be aware that cultural custom learning plays an important role in Chinese language learning and that cultural customs is an integral part of specific culture. Chinese cultural customs are different representative forms and traditions of Chinese culture including Chinese people’s behaviors and ways

To some extent, any Chinese language learner wants to master Chinese language and its culture, he or she should learn more and more Chinese cultural customs in order to develop his or her ability in intercultural communication. In this way, the Chinese language learners can not only obtain Chinese language and common Chinese cultural knowledge, but also learn Chinese cultural customs, so as to communicate successfully with the Chinese people step by step.

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