

A Comparison of Taboos Between Chinese and Western Culture

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Abstract: Taboos are almost associated with every aspect of Chinese and western Culture. As we all know, taboos usually belong to the most delicate part of a culture, which, when transgressed, may cause misunderstanding or even conflict. Therefore, it is important and necessary for us to understand the differences between Chinese and western taboos, which can be of great help for cross-cultural communication. With the comparison of taboos between Chinese and western culture, we can have a better understanding of them and furthermore effectively avoid the misunderstanding and culture conflict caused by taboos.

Key words: taboos, culture, comparison

1 Introduction

It is well known that language, as an inalienable part of culture, is an important cultural carrier. As a special language, taboos exist virtually in every culture and its language and they are associated with almost every corner of people's lives. They can be used as a mirror to reflect what people in a specific region or culture like, hate, or try to avoid. For instance, there is an old Chinese saying which goes, troubles come out of the tongue. In the views of superstitious people, fortune or misfortune was brought about by the language itself. As a result, they created taboos to restrict the careless use of language. If a person faithfully obeyed the restrictions of these taboos, he or she would be protected; otherwise this person would get punished. It reflected that people here were very careful with the use of language and tried to avoid the careless use of it. This example vividly reveals that sometimes taboos are extremely crucial in a specific region or culture.

As to taboos between Chinese and western culture, there are lots of differences due to different social and cultural backgrounds. Although Chinese and western culture are in agreement on some taboos such as privacy taboo, color taboo, number taboo and so on, not all of their meanings and priorities are the same. Therefore, it's important and necessary for us to compare these taboos in Chinese and western culture, finding out what they are about, what they have in common and that what the differences are. By doing so, we can have a better command of these taboos, which is quite beneficial to cross-culture communication. This thesis mainly elaborates on taboo words related to privacy, colors, numbers and religion, offering an in-depth perception on taboos between Chinese and western culture by comparison.

2 Taboo Words Related to Privacy

We all know that people in western countries place a high value on privacy. In their views, privacy is extremely important in their lives and their individual interests shouldn't be ignored. For instance, we should make an appointment with him or her in advance if we want to pay a visit to someone in western countries. Otherwise, it can be considered rude. With the development of society and economy, nowadays more and more Chinese, especially businessmen and politicians, begin to make an appointment in advance before visiting someone. But comparatively speaking, Chinese people don't take it too seriously. In western countries, there is a saying which goes "A man's home is his castle", which means that one's home is too sacred to be disturbed without permission. It can be used as a good example to illustrate the importance of privacy in western countries. And it is also inappropriate to ask western people questions related to

their personal information such as income, marital status, age or family background unless they show that they don't mind or they talk about them first. Below are some of these questions:

How much do you earn each month?

You are not married, are you?

How old are you?

How much does your new watch cost you?

However, it is more than common that people talk a lot about others' income, marriage and age in China, particularly in the rural area. They usually don't think it is impolite. Instead, they feel it is warm-hearted to do so.

3 Taboo Words Related to Colors

There is also difference in colors between Chinese and western culture. Generally speaking, in western culture, the color of white is associated with innocence, purity, cleanliness and chastity, all of which have positive and nice connotations. For instance, in western countries, the bride wears a white gown appearing in her wedding ceremony to show her purity and other good virtues. As to the color of black, it usually represents wickedness, dirty, evil and filth. When we talk about the color of white in China, it means cleanliness, but sometimes it also represents weakness, coldness and insensitivity. We can take the White Face in Beijing opera as an example. It stands for a villain. As to the color of red, it is often associated with celebrations and joyful occasions in Chinese culture. It means joy, happiness, good luck, success, prosperity and so on. However, the color of red is not welcome by most people in America. They don't like the color of red. In their view, the color of red means stop and it can make people annoyed. It is commonly used in phrases like "to become red-faced" or "his/her face turned red" to show one's embarrassment and unsightliness.

4 Taboo Words Related to Numbers

Apart from taboo words related to privacy and color, there are many taboo words on numbers in Chinese and western culture. They are equally important in our communication with people from different countries or regions.

4.1 Odd Numbers and Even Numbers

There is a striking contrast in people's attitude between Chinese and western culture when it comes to numbers. Chinese people like even numbers very much. They are fond of expressions such as "好事成双" and "成双成对". Besides, Chinese people particularly like the even number "6" and "8", which the saying "六六大顺" can prove clearly. However, in western countries, people take fancy to the odd numbers. For instance, Virgil, a famous Roman poet, once said, "The god delights in an odd number". What's more, in Shakespeare's play *The Merry Wives of Windsor*, the protagonist Falstaff says, "Good luck lies in odd numbers." Westerners tend to hold the view that there is divinity in odd numbers, either in nativity, chance or death.

4.2 Number Four in China

It is a common phenomenon that Chinese people don't like the number "4". The reason is that the number "4" and the word "死" (death) almost sound the same in the Chinese language. So Chinese people are unwilling to have this number either in their telephone numbers or licence plates. Moreover, senior people tend to think "73" and "84" are two key ages where their risk of passing away is very high. That's why so many senior people avoid talking their

exact ages.

4.3 Number Thirteen in English

While in western countries, "13" is one of the most influential taboo numbers. According to the Bible story of The last supper, it is Judas, the person who betrayed Jesus, who sat in the No.13 chair. Consequently, the number "13" is universally considered to be unlucky. And this taboo exists in almost all the Christianity countries. In these countries, they avoid the number thirteen nearly in every aspect in their life. For example, no door's number is thirteen; no hotel has Room No.13; thirteen people are not advised to have dinner together; and people generally don't go traveling on the 13th. Obviously, the number "13" is a very influential taboo word in western countries. Hence, in order to better communicate with people from western countries, we should pay close attention to these taboo words.

4.4 Friday

Friday is thought to be another number concerning taboo in western countries and it has been considered as an unlucky day in a week for a long time. Why does this taboo word affect people? It probably owes to two aspects. On the one hand, western people generally believe that Jesus Christ was put to death on the cross on Friday. On the other hand, Friday had been the day of execution of criminals for many years in history, commonly called the "hangman's day".

5 Taboo Words Related to Religion

Around the globe, almost every country has its own taboo words. In many western countries, large quantities of people believe in Christianity or Catholicism, which offers fertile soil for English taboos. With regard to English-speaking societies, people have a strong sense of religion. And they create many expressions to avoid directly mentioning holy names or words. There are a large number of substitutes for "God" in English, such as "Gosh", "Golly", "King of kings", "the Creator", "the Maker", "the Supreme Being", "Holy One", "the Saviors", "Lord of lords", "the Light of the world", and "Our Father", etc.

Similarly, China also has related taboo words. Take the word tiger for example, in some areas of China, "tiger" is regarded as jinni, like the god in western countries. As a result, people usually don't say the word "tiger" directly which is often superseded by other

words. For instance, the word tiger is substituted for the word "cat" by some minority groups who live in the southwest of China; while in some villages in the northeastern part of China, the villagers usually call tiger "big worm".

6 Conclusion

In short, it is of great significance for us to learn the taboos between Chinese and western culture by comparison. By analyzing and comparing different taboos in Chinese and western culture, we can have a better understanding of them, knowing what they are about, what they have in common and what the differences are. Meanwhile, it is also easy for us to find that taboos often belong to the most delicate part of the culture, which, when transgressed, may cause misunderstandings or even conflicts. Hence, we should pay much attention to those taboos between Chinese and western culture when we communicate with people from western countries. Only by doing so, can we effectively avoid the misunderstandings and cultural conflicts caused by taboos. Hope that the comparison of taboos between Chinese and western culture can improve our knowledge of taboos and be helpful in cross-culture communication.

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