

# *A Brief Analysis on the Differences of Chinese and English Cultural Customs and Translation*

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**Abstract:** In the age of globalization along with more frequent cross-cultural interactions, the importance of translation cannot be understated. Translation plays a vital role in facilitating intercultural communication between different countries and cultures. Through translation, people can understand and learn the culture, history, traditions and customs of other countries. Therefore, this paper explores the influence of Chinese and English cultural customs and translation through the study of literature and case studies. It is found that cultural practices have a great impact on language shaping and expression, and there are many difficulties in translating culture-specific terms and cultural customs. In order to better realize the communication and diffusion of cultures and translate effectively, translators need to be sensitive to cultural differences and thoroughly research the similarities and differences among cultures.

**Keywords:** cultural customs, translation, culture, intercultural communication

## **1. Introduction**

With the rapid development of the times, we are now in an era of globalization and cross-cultural communication, and the study of the relationship between cultural customs and translation is of great significance.

Languages are fundamentally a component of culture, and without the underlying cultural phenomenon for which a word is a symbol, it is impossible to comprehend it properly. Translation is culture, and culture is translation. Thus, translation is the transmission of language. As a result, the translator is constantly challenged with figuring out how to handle latent cultural elements in source languages and how to successfully express these elements into target languages [1].

Translation promotes intercultural communication, language exchange and language development, and is of great significance and value. Culture gives language different contexts. When passed from one culture to another, the same word may have different meanings. Sometimes, these differences in meaning represent slight or strong differences in value, which should be taken care of in translation. Different cultural backgrounds will lead to differences in people's behaviors, languages and ways of thinking. Learning and respecting the customs of different cultures is the basis of communication. Nida believes that cultural differences are a big challenge in translation, "differences between cultures may cause more severe complications for the translator than do differences in language structure" [2]. When translating without understanding and respecting the cultural elements of the other party, misunderstandings and unnecessary conflicts can arise. Translators need to understand audiences in

both languages. Cultural customs play an important role in shaping language and expression, and are unavoidable for translation.

Therefore, through the analysis and integration of other relevant papers, this paper discusses the evolution of customs in different cultures and the relationship between customs and language, and the difficulties in translating culture-specific terms and the strategies that can be adopted to deal with this problem. Then, it carries out case studies on translating cultural customs and summarizes lessons learned. Finally, it further proves the importance of cultural studies to translation, so translators should have cultural sensitivity and sufficient cultural knowledge reserve.

## 2. Cultural Customs and Translation

### 2.1. Understanding Cultural Customs

Custom culture is the term used to describe the culture created by countries' regular social interactions and communication practices. When greeting, addressing, thanking, complimenting, apologizing, saying goodbye, and making phone calls, different countries have varied cultural norms [3]. Different cultures' evolving customs go through a complicated and diverse process that is influenced by many different things. The establishment and development of customs in Chinese and Western cultures are significantly influenced by the economic system, geographic surroundings, way of thinking, religious beliefs, and historical events. Additionally, cultural norms have a strong influence on verbal communication that practically permeates every aspect of daily life. Language differences between Chinese and English can influence customs, and language differences can in turn influence customs. We can more effectively translate between cultures by studying the origins and development of conventions in order to better comprehend how Chinese and Western cultural customs have shaped language and expression.

Chinese and Western nations both have a range of holidays with distinct national traditions that contribute to fascinating or solemn holiday customs. These celebrations have significant cultural overtones, and the variations in festival traditions also have an impact on the development of Chinese and English idioms [4].

Chinese culture has produced many idioms related to the Spring Festival, such as "pay a New Year call," "lucky money," "closing the door to wealth on New Year's Eve," and many others. The Spring Festival is a significant festival with a long history and many customs and cultures that have been passed down.

Halloween is a significant Western holiday. Children will dress up in unusual costumes the night before Halloween and knock on their neighbors' homes carrying pumpkin lights. The neighbors will get ready candies to entertain the children. As a result of this tradition, some phrases related to Halloween have become commonplace in the West, such as trick-or-treating, thumb-the-door night, like a bat out of hell, and the pumpkin has not turned into a coach. Another important holiday in the West is Easter. Westerners celebrate Easter with figs and eggs. Many Easter-related idioms, such as "worth a fig," "fig leaf," "from egg to apple," "have eggs on the spit," and "have eggs on the boil," came along as a result of people boiling eggs painted in a variety of colors and making their own eggs for the game on this day [4].

In addition to the above mentioned differences between Chinese and Western festivals and customs, there are also some other differences in social customs that may affect English-Chinese translation. For example, in the daily greetings of people in cross-cultural communication, Chinese people often say, "Have you eaten?" "Where are you going?". As a collectivist culture, China pays more attention to the collective, and the boundaries between people are not obvious enough. These words are very common in Chinese culture, and they do not have a deep meaning, but are just a polite way of greeting people. However, western countries are individualistic culture, focusing on personal

privacy and distance between people, so this behavior is very impolite in the eyes of westerners, which belongs to the invasion of personal privacy, and will cause their resentment. “Have you eaten yet?” will make them think that you want to invite them to dinner, so people do not know how to reply is good. “Where are you going?” is a private matter for them, and unless they are close acquaintances, it is prying into someone’s private affairs. For this difference in social customs, we need to be flexible when translating and shift accordingly to the specific situation. Therefore, “Have you eaten?” can be translated as “Hello!” or “How are you?”; “Where are you going?” can be translated as “How have you been?” or “How are you doing?”.

People’s different understanding of color words also illustrate the differences of civilizations and conventions. White, for instance, represents innocence and purity in the West, where brides frequently wear white dresses to weddings, but in China, mourners frequently wear white to funerals. Correspondingly, brides in traditional Chinese weddings generally wear red clothes to symbolize happiness and auspiciousness, while red is often associated with blood and death in the West [5]. Yellow color is a very important word in Chinese. In feudal society, it can symbolize the authority of the ruler, so the palace and dragon robe are yellow. In addition, yellow also symbolizes the harvest in autumn, and people often use golden yellow to describe harvest scenes. In Western culture, yellow does not have these meanings. Instead, “yellow” can mean “cowardly” or “despicable”, such as “He is a yellow man.” and “yellow dog” [6].

## 2.2. Translation of Culture-specific Terms

Cultural terms refer to things and ideas that are unique to one culture and do not exist in another, leaving a gap in the vocabulary during bilingual conversion because the target language’s vocabulary does not have any terms that are culturally equivalent to those in the original language [7]. When faced with such culturally specific terms, there may usually be a corresponding statement, but there is no exact match, and the emotion and meaning cannot be conveyed 100%. This situation is a big challenge in translation.

There are some culture-specific terms in Chinese that are more difficult to translate into English. For example, when Chinese children are learning to speak, it may be an extremely difficult hurdle to correctly grasp the general term for various relatives. The complicated addressing of relatives in China is rare in the world. Only men of the same generation as their fathers have five titles. But there are not so many corresponding terms in English, and the relatives have their own collective names: uncle, brother, grandma, aunt, nephew, grandson.

Due to the difference in social system between China and Western countries, there will be differences in the translation of some words. For example, there are great differences in the titles of some positions between China and the West. China is a socialist country, and the country’s leaders are called “chairman”. In the United States, since it is a capitalist country, the leader is called “zong tong” in Chinese, and “president” is used to express it in English. China calls the supreme leader of the ruling party “General Secretary”, but the West does not have such an expression. Another example is that China uses “premier” to express the title of prime minister, but there is no corresponding position in the United States [6].

It can be seen that the audience should be considered in the translation process. Sometimes the audience is sensitive to some translated words, or has some cultural taboos. These are the things that the translator should pay attention to when translating. When translating, it is necessary to deal with some sensitive issues, such as personal taboos, religious taboos, color taboos, etc. For example, in terms of personal privacy, Chinese people do not have a strong sense of private affairs, so they are easy to talk about other people’s private affairs. People frequently ask each other questions like “How old are you?” “Where do you live?” “How much money do you earn?” and “Are you married?” when they first meet. While in American and British society, it is impolite to inquire about things like age,

address, place of employment, income, marriage, family circumstances, and religious beliefs because they fall under the area of personal privacy.

There are also taboos in terms of color. Red is a traditional festive color for Chinese people, and Red double happiness, red candles, red wedding dresses, red lanterns, red couplets, big red flowers, etc., all symbolize joy and happiness. However, Chinese people are taboo to write letters with red pens, because it is a sign of severance. They also avoid wearing red clothes or using red objects during funerals or mourning, because it is disrespectful to the dead. Red is frequently used in Western culture to signify something negative, such as brutality, fanaticism, tragedy, blood, etc. Examples include “red hands,” “be caught red-handed,” “red-headed,” and so forth.

In traditional Chinese culture, both black and white symbolize bad luck. At Chinese funerals today, the relatives and friends of the deceased usually wear black gauze on their arms and small white flowers on their chests to express their condolences and respect for the deceased relatives. It can be seen that Chinese people show aversion or even fear to black and white on quite a few occasions, and even avoid them. In Western culture, there is a tradition of emphasizing white and avoiding black. White symbolizes joy, beauty, happiness, hope, and innocence. Black symbolizes the evil, pain, devil, and misfortune, so black is also called “dead color”. In modern European and American countries, black has become the exclusive color of funerals. During funerals, people wear black suits, black ties, black top hats, black scarves or black veils. Westerners believe that black makes people look serious, expressing mourning and respect for the dead. But in the eyes of Europeans and Americans, black also symbolizes solemnity, majesty and dignity. On solemn occasions, dignitaries and celebrities like to wear black clothes. Almost all members of the symphony orchestra are in black suits to show solemnity [8].

### 2.3. Case Study

#### 2.3.1. Successful and Unsuccessful Translation of Cultural Customs

In Chinese culture, most of the idioms about dogs are pejorative, such as “A dog will leap over a wall in desperation.”, “a dog threatens based on master’s power”, “lapdog”, all of these words degrade the dog to nothing. But in Western culture, dogs are regarded as loyal friends of mankind, such as “lucky dog” and the proverb “love me, love my dog” [9].

In Chinese folk culture, the tiger is regarded as the king of all beasts, and the word “tiger” is often used in everyday language to describe the mighty and strong, as in “add wings to the tiger” and “act with the courage and strength of the tiger,” etc. Common proverbs related to the tiger include “pulling hair from a tiger’s head”, “When two tigers fight, one is bound to get hurt.”. In Western folk culture, the lion is regarded as the king of all beasts, replacing the tiger, especially the British people take the lion as a symbol of the country. The British King Richard I is known as “the Lion Heart”. “Lion” is also often used as a metaphor for world celebrities. English proverbs about lions include “beard the lion in his den,” which is similar to the Chinese saying “one should not twist the lion’s tail.” [10].

When we encounter this kind of cultural customs related to animals in translation, we must consider the factors of western culture and avoid replacing western customary expressions with Chinese customary expressions. Similarly, when translating from English to Chinese, we have to take into account Chinese idioms and convey the western culture to Chinese people by means of paraphrasing [11].

When Chinese people welcome guests who have traveled a long way, they usually say “xin ku la”. But there is no equivalent in English. The pragmatic meaning is not to ask the guests how they feel about the journey, but to express their greetings and concerns to the guests. “How did you enjoy your journey?” in English mainly expresses the inquiry about the guest’s journey, of course, also contains

greetings to the guest. The semantics of the two are not equal. The English phrase “How did you enjoy your journey?” cannot fully express all the semantic meanings of “xin ku la” [12].

In Chinese culture, a small dish of food is of such low value that almost anyone can eat it if they want to, hence the birth of “a dish”. In English, there is also an idiom for it, but instead of a small dish, it describes a cake. Westerners use “a piece of cake” to show how easy it is to do something. This is because in the English culture, cakes appeared very early and were very cheap [11].

### 2.3.2. Lessons Learned from These Translations

Having seen so many successful and unsuccessful cases, there are some lessons that can be learned from translating cultural practices:

**In-depth understanding of culture:** Before translating cultural customs, translators should study and understand the relevant culture in depth. Only by truly understanding the cultural background and values behind them can the meaning of the custom be better conveyed.

**Avoid direct translation whenever possible:** Sometimes, direct translation of cultural customs may lead to misunderstanding or loss of the original meaning. Therefore, translation strategies should be utilized flexibly in the translation process to ensure that the target audience understands and accepts the cultural practices conveyed.

**Value feedback and timely correction:** It is very important to collect timely feedback after translating cultural practices. By communicating with the target audience and understanding their reaction to the translation, it can help the translator to continuously improve and revise the translation strategy.

All in all, the successful translation of cultural conventions requires in-depth cultural understanding, language skills and adaptability to the target audience. Lessons learned teach us to focus on learning, apply translation strategies flexibly, and establish effective feedback mechanisms with target audiences.

## 3. Conclusions

Language plays the role of transmitting information and communicating, and is closely related to culture. As a cross-cultural carrier, translation is restricted by cultural context, which brings many difficulties and challenges to the translation of culture-specific terms and cultural customs. Translation is not only the mutual conversion of languages, but also the bridge of communication and exchange between different cultures. Therefore, it is crucial to translate with cultural sensitivity. In order to better carry out translation work and accomplish cultural interchange and dissemination, translators should conduct more in-depth cultural research and have a thorough understanding of the similarity and individuality of culture.

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