

A Comparative Study of Face Culture between China and America

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Abstract. From the aspect of culture, face has something to do with one's dignity and authority. Due to different historical background and value concept, Chinese and Americans have different understanding of face, which often causes obstacles in intercultural communication. So, this thesis makes a study of the differences between Chinese face culture and American face culture. Through exploring and analyzing, it is found that the following factors, history and value contribute to these differences, among which individualism and collectivism are the root causes. In this thesis, the author gives some constructive suggestions for people on how to get a successful intercultural communication. This research is expected to help avoid some problems and build a harmonious atmosphere in intercultural communication.

Introduction

With the development of globalization, intercultural communication gets more and more universal. Successful communication in a cross-cultural setting brings about more wealth, peace and opportunities. However a failure in this respect likely entices more prejudice, conflict, and hostility. People often have conflicts due to cultural differences. The fact is that they go all out to be careful in interaction but misunderstanding still exists.

Among all the factors that impact the cross-cultural communication, the different understanding and practice of face is a challenge.

Face has a great impact on people's psychological state, which can be easily seen in social communication. Face leaves traces everywhere and forms another kind of culture---face culture.

Americans rarely take face as a subject of discussion, so one might think that only Chinese are concerned with face. But sociologists find that both Chinese and Americans pay attention to "face". Scholars who studied the face declared that all people are concerned about face.

Literature Review

Many Scholars in the World have ever Studied Face Culture. Goffman, one of the representatives of western scholars, pointed out that face refers to the positive social value a person successfully claims for himself during a specific social interaction, which is taken as the positive social value of others at the same time. (Goffman, 1972) It is a kind of self-image recognized by society. So, in order to keep his self-image, a person will try to do things to save his face. Goffman thinks that the surrounding environment and situation have great impacts on face.

Face Culture in America and China

Face Culture in China. Chinese scholars put much focus on face. It is really important. In this chapter, the author will introduce a lot of knowledge of face on the Chinese side.

Many scholars have already given definitions for face from different perspectives, such as psychology, sociology, etc. From the psychological perspective, they hold that if one gets the social recognition and good assessment of others, it means he or she has obtained true face. From a sociological viewpoint, scholars believe face is a kind of prestige through one's visible achievement

and popularity.

The reason why face plays such an important part in Chinese daily life is that it can keep the harmony of interpersonal relationship and regulate the behavior in social communication.

Wedding Banquet. As is displayed in Chapter 2, Chinese people attach great importance to others' recognition. They get a card to ensure a legal marriage first. The newly married couple and their parents will host the guests on the wedding ceremony with a luxurious banquet. The poor people will try their best to offer a possible decent meal to the guests. The more guests there are attending the wedding banquet, the more face the owner thinks he has gained and it is believed that the new couple will have a happier life in the future. Chinese think that wedding ceremony is the most significant event in one's whole life. They try their best to earn money, so as to buy a big house and car to ensure a better marriage. For many young people, the material is the first factor to be considered to choose a good partner of life. Chinese parents want to arrange everything for the newly married, including choosing an appropriate wedding room, a decent luxurious restaurant to host the guests or even when to have babies. Chinese whole life involves face.

Gift-giving. In the process of gift giving and receiving, both the giver's face and recipient's face are involved in China. Chinese attach great importance to how precious the gift is. A good interpersonal relationship can only be set up by satisfying the face of both the gift giver and receiver.

Chinese pay much attention to the value of the gift. In order to match the recipient's social status, the gift giver will be careful to choose appropriate gifts. According to a research, the luxury consumption account for a substantial part of Chinese market and it is in a leading position all over the world. Wong and Ahuvia pointed out that the consumers in the oriental society have the tendency to buy luxurious goods, because they pay more attention to their family and personal face. (Wong and Ahuvia, 1988) Two factors determine what kind of gifts the gift giver will choose for the recipients, firstly, the social status and prestige of the recipient; secondly, the economic capacity of the gift giver. So the gift giver with low income often bears economic and social pressure when buying gifts.

Toasting Culture on Wedding. Proposing a toast is a kind of social interaction. It can not only advance relationship between the two sides of drinkers, but also expand new relation. When a new couple proposes a toast to the guests, the guests should stand up to show respect. And then, there will be some friends encouraging the bridegroom to drink, in order to display their close relationship. The newly-married couple will sometimes drink more than they can to meet the guests' requirements. Under such circumstances, they'll seem to have forgotten everything, even health. They think happiness is the most important thing. In this process, it is impolite for some guest to refuse others' toast proposition, especially from the newlyweds. The refusal from the guests will make the newlyweds feel embarrassed and have no face. For Chinese, such toasting practice is a symbol of happiness, while for Americans, it is a violation of others' rights.

Face Culture in America

Americans' Interpretation of Face. For Americans, face is the individual consciousness of his or her public image. Gaining face or winning approval is the most important social motive for individuals. In order to establish this positive image, the person has to talk, behave, and act in ways that should be consistent with his or her expected self-image, for otherwise he or she will be "in wrong face" or "out of face". An American will build a positive image through self-conscious efforts. The whole process, including motives, preparations, and public performances, which are all under the individual's conscious control, is "impression management". Face captures individualized identities and everybody has a unique and self-defined face through strategic and tactful performance of self in others' presence. Being rational becomes a crucial feature of American face. When everyone in a society is rational with their actions, they are able to respect each other's faces: A person's performance of face-work, extended by his tacit agreement to help others perform theirs, represents his willingness to abide by the ground rules of social interaction. In a word, face is self-oriented, individual-based and rational, and it functions as a transactional symbol that regulates

social interactions and helps create social order. Embedded in such a face concept are cultural beliefs that a person is an independent, self-reliant, and self-oriented being (Carbaugh, 1988; Hsu, 1973) who tactfully interacts with others as unique and self-contained individuals (Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987).

Wedding Banquet. American wedding ceremony involves not only religion, but also law. The couple makes an oath to show the faithfulness to each other. They kiss and take pictures. The ceremony is held by the National Notary Office, and then they get married legally.

Gift-giving. In America, gift-giving is just for politeness. The meaning of the gifts is more important than the value of the gifts. The way of gift-giving is also very casual. They have no obvious consideration on the relationship between the gift and recipient's face.

The Americans like this manner very much, because it is an economic way in daily life. Once the owner finds the gift not fit to him, he can change another one with the gift receipt. To some extent, it is a way of eliminating waste.

Solutions to the Issues Concerning Face between China and America

The different understandings of face between Chinese and Americans always bring about a lot of conflicts in communication, so it is necessary to find solutions to the issues concerning face.

First, in order to achieve successful cross-cultural communication, one has to have some self-education of his own consciousness and the identity as a communicator, that is, he has to make some efforts consciously to expose himself to another culture and understand it. To become an effective cross-cultural communicator, one has to put efforts to withdraw from communication dissonance. Prior to interacting with a person from another culture, both sides of communication should cherish the idea that any culture has some hidden treasures worthwhile to be learnt by people from another culture.

Next, one has to take any effort to get rid of any ethnocentric feelings he may have. Ethnocentrism is judging another culture solely by the values and standards of one's own culture. In a multicultural setting, simply assuming that one's own culturally-accepted gestures or style of communication is appropriate to use among others is a form of ethnocentrism. In cross-cultural communication, many communicators act on ethnocentrism with clear self-consciousness. Therefore, one must strive to be aware of the accepted verbal and nonverbal communication for various cultures, and should try to avoid the idea and actions to show his own culture is over others. This is similar to cultural relativism, in which all social practices are equally good. However, unlike cultural relativism, the goal of effective intercultural communication is not to state that all cultural practices are good, but to strive to develop an intercultural consciousness and understand others in order to enhance communication to increase understanding among all communicators. In China, face has been a challenging problem since the ancient time, but that does not mean that Chinese face culture is inferior to other cultures; Americans admire dignity, which is mainly realized through personal performance, but that does not mean all the other cultures should follow American culture.

Finally, to simplify the situation can make intercultural communication more efficiently. The key is to understand the individuals' communities and accept and appreciate the culture norms of the community. In order to avoid jumping to conclusions about another culture, one should do minor research or have some casual observations about the alien culture. In this way, can one build up close relationship with people from another culture and have effective cross-cultural communication. So, while Americans and Chinese are communicating, they should both take the face culture of the other side into consideration. To do this well, both sides need to learn more about the other side's face culture. Both sides should keep in mind that individualism is the core thread of American culture and collectivism displays itself in every corner of China. Hence, it is understandable how influential the culture of face and dignity is in China and America respectively.

Conclusion

This research focuses on the differences of face culture between China and America. The study shows that Chinese highly value collectivism, while American believe in individualism, which leads to the different understanding and practice of face culture between the two nations: Chinese regard face as their glory or even reputation, so they pay much attention to it when doing things, not only for themselves but also for the community that they belong to; Americans would rather understand face as dignity, which they have to strive to realize to demonstrate their competence and self-value.

When Chinese and Americans carry out cross-cultural communication, conflicts may arise due to the different face culture, so this thesis shows the occasions on which different characteristics of face culture are displayed and explores the reasons behind the differences.

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