



Comparison and Contrast Between English and Chinese Idioms From Cultural Connotation Perspective

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Received 8 November 2014; accepted 27 December 2014

Published online 26 January 2015

Abstract

Idiom, being a special and indivisible part of language, is the crystallization of culture. With the development of globalization, idiom plays an increasingly important role in spreading national culture. Due to its special and close relationship with culture, idiom is very difficult to learn. In view of the difficulty in and significance of idiom learning, due attention and efforts should be given to the cultural comparison and contrast between English and Chinese idioms.

This article attempts to analyze the cultural phenomena reflected by the cultural comparison and contrast between English and Chinese idioms from three aspects: cultural connotation overlaps, cultural connotation conflicts and cultural connotation vacancy. By introducing the knowledge of cultural overlaps, cultural conflicts and cultural vacancy, the article analyzes idioms from a relatively new cultural perspective. It starts with an introduction which includes basic knowledge of idioms. Then each part deals with a cultural phenomenon in the following order: introducing the cultural phenomenon, analyzing the causes and effects of the cultural phenomenon, putting forward solutions. The last part is conclusion which includes the implications and limitations of the article. It is found that some English and Chinese idioms have equivalent cultural connotations. But the majority of them have different cultural connotations. They are either opposite or vacant in cultural meaning. Meanwhile, many examples are cited to illustrate the cultural similarities and differences between English and Chinese idioms.

The article may serve to enrich language learners' knowledge on the cultural connotations of English and Chinese idioms. Consequently, the increasing cultural awareness would help learners get rid of the interference of mother tongue. At the same time, their foreign language proficiency and intercultural competence will be improved.

Key words: English and Chinese idioms; Cultural overlap; Cultural conflict; Cultural vacancy

Shi, W. J. (2015). Comparison and Contrast Between English and Chinese Idioms From Cultural Connotation Perspective. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 10(1), 102-113. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/6338> DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/6338>

INTRODUCTION

Idioms, with their frequent appearance, are commonly recognized as the core and essence of language and culture. Without idioms, any language is sure to be proved lifeless. The prominent translation theorist Eugene A. Nida (2001) maintained that idioms usually carry more impact than non-idiomatic expressions because of their close identification with a particular language and culture. Idioms hold great interest of linguists. As the saying puts it, "A thousand-li starts with the first step". Some basic knowledge is needed to further idiomatic studies.

The word "idiom" is from the ancient Greek word "idioma", meaning "peculiarity" or "specialty". In lexicology, an idiom is a fixed group of words or a single word or even a sentence with a special meaning that can not be guessed from its structure. In a broad sense, idioms may include colloquialisms, catchphrases, slang expressions, proverbs, etc. Professor Koonin defined idiom as "a stable combination of words with fully or partially figurative meaning." This definition emphasizes the very important features of the idiomatic expressions:

semantic unity, structural stability and rich in figures of speech. An idiom is a semantic unity, that is to say, the meaning of the idiom cannot be guessed from the literal meaning of each word. The relationship between the meaning of each word and the meaning of the idiom is illogical. Many idioms are semantically inexplicable. For example, “till the cows come home” actually means forever or taking a long time. An idiom is a fixed group of words or a single word or even a sentence. This definition well reveals the second feature of idioms, which is structural stability. The structure of an idiom is to a large extent unchangeable:

The constituents of idioms cannot be replaced. For example, “in a brown study” means deep in thought. The word “brown” cannot be replaced by “blue”, “in a blue study” has no special meaning. It only means in a study which is blue.

The word order cannot be changed or inverted. For example, “tit for tat” means an equivalent given in return. The word order cannot be changed into “tat for tit”, which is totally a wrong expression.

The constituents of idioms cannot be deleted or added, not even an article. For example, “out of the question” means impossible while “out of question” means no question. With only an addition of the article “the”, “out of the question” and “out of question” are opposite in meaning

Many idioms cannot be analyzed grammatically. For example, “(as) sure as eggs is eggs” means quite certain.

Both English and Chinese are rich in idioms. In everyday life, idioms are widely used in almost all sorts of communication, such as speaking, reading and writing, for an appropriate use of them in communications will certainly add a lot to the vibrancy and vigor of the language. Because people use idioms frequently, especially those native speakers, they take idioms as daily routines. So language learners need at least to understand the more common ones. However, idioms can often be very difficult to understand. One may be able to guess the meaning from the context but if not, it is not easy to know the meaning. The reason why idioms cannot be literally understood is that they are indispensably associated with the geographical environment, historical background, economic life, religious beliefs and customs, ethnic psychology and moral values of an ethnic group. Idiom is a unique mirror that impressively reflects the cultural features of a race or nationality. Accordingly, lack of cultural knowledge of the target language will definitely lead to partial understanding or even misunderstanding of idiom. As a result, idioms inevitably cause cultural confusions and translation barriers during the process of intercultural communication. For example, the idiom “in the arms of Morpheus” means “在梦乡里 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “zai meng xiang li”). If one does not know that Morpheus is the goddess of sleep and dream in the Greek myths, he or she will be at a loss

as how to interpret this idiom. Another example is the expression “to kick the bucket”. If the learner only knew the meaning of “kick” and “bucket”, he or she would be unable to deduce the idiom’s actual meaning, which is “to die”. Although this idiom can literally refer to the action of kicking a bucket with one’s foot, native English speakers rarely use it that way.

From the above analysis, it is not difficult to conclude that learning idioms well is of great significance. In order to make idiom learning easier, many scholars have done a lot of research about idioms. There are a large number of previous works which mainly focused on the cultural origins of idioms, the relationships between idioms and culture or the translation strategies of idioms. However, only a few of their studies covered the topic of cultural comparison of idioms. As the saying puts it: Knowledge is infinite. So there is much room left in the area of idiomatic studies. And comparing and contrasting idioms from cultural connotation perspective is undoubtedly one of those rarely covered topics.

This paper focuses on the comparison and contrast of cultural connotations between English and Chinese idioms. It will illustrate the cultural phenomena reflected by English and Chinese idioms from three perspectives: cultural overlaps, cultural conflicts and cultural vacancy. There is no doubt that cultural comparison and contrast between English and Chinese idioms are of great importance to help learners of both nations master idioms better. Thus, people will perform better during the cross cultural communication. For instance, in antiquity, because of scientific knowledge deficiency, both English and Chinese people take heart as the core of human thoughts. As a result, there are numerous idiomatic expressions about heart in both languages. In English, there are idioms like “heart and soul,” “with a heavy heart,” “our heart burst into bloom”, while in Chinese, these idioms have counterparts “全心全意 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “quan xin quan yi”), “心情沉重 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “xin qing chen zhong”), “心花怒放 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “xin hua nu fang”). These are examples of cultural overlaps. As to cultural conflict, the following expressions can illustrate this phenomenon very well. In Chinese culture, dragon (龙, in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “long”) occupies an important position. It symbolizes not only power, prosperity and wealth, but also flourishing spirit. Almost all the expressions related to dragon have positive connotations, such as 望子成龙 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “wang zi cheng long” which mean parents hope their children will have a bright future), 龙马精神 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “long ma jing shen” which means someone is full of vigor), 龙凤呈祥 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “long feng cheng xiang” which means something delightful or something is in extremely good fortune), 乘龙快婿 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “cheng long kuai xu”

which means an ideal son in law). However, in English culture, especially during the medieval period, dragon is a symbol of sin and evil. Nowadays, it usually refers to a person who is cruel and short-tempered. For instance, the sentence “she is a real dragon” should be translated into Chinese as “她真是个母夜叉 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “ta zhen shi ge mu ye cha”). The last cultural phenomenon reflected by idioms is cultural vacancy. Take the word “crane” for example. Chinese people view crane (鹤, in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “he”) as a symbol of long life, as in the phrase “松鹤延年 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “song he yan nian”) and “龟鹤齐龄 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “gui he qi ling”). It also has the connotation of being outstanding, free, elegant and precious, as in the phrase “鹤立鸡群 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “he li ji qun”) and “闲云野鹤 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “xian yun ye he”). While in English crane has no other meaning than a kind of bird. Occasionally, English people use the extended sense of crane to describe one’s action of stretching his or her neck. For example, she craned her neck to look for her husband in the crowd. After learning those idioms above, people of both countries will have a better understanding of the similarities and differences between English and Chinese idioms and the way people use them. All in all, comparing and contrasting English and Chinese idioms from cultural connotation perspective will surely lay a solid foundation for conducting more intensive studies of idioms in the future.

1. OVERLAPS OF CULTURAL CONNOTATION IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE IDIOMS

1.1 General Introduction to Overlaps of Cultural Connotation

Idiomatic expressions generate from people’s everyday life, social experience, and folk wisdom. Since all the people live in the same world, humans’ experience is bound to have commonalities. And these commonalities would be reflected in idioms and inevitably lead to cultural overlaps. This part will give an introduction to the cultural overlaps reflected by English and Chinese idioms.

1.1.1 Brief Introduction to Culture

Culture is a very complicated entirety. Consequently, it’s a real tough job to give culture a clear definition. Though hundreds of definitions have been suggested, no consensus has been reached. According to a recent investigation, no less than 200 definitions for “culture” have been cited in the academic field. These definitions vary from book to book. Some of them focus on the material products; others deal with the spiritual things.

Among these definitions, some are of great importance and enjoy popularity in the academic world.

Edward Burnett Tylor, the pathfinder of cultural anthropology, defines culture in his primitive culture (1871): Culture is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society. This definition has been viewed as the most classical one. After Tylor, many definitions have been put forward by scholars, but the majority of them are based on the definition proposed by Tylor.

Following the definitions of sociologists, our term culture refers to the total pattern of beliefs, customs, institutions, objects, and techniques that characterize the life of a human community. “Culture consists of all the shared products of human society” (Robertson, 1981). This means not only such material things as cities, organizations and schools, but also non-material things such as ideas, customs, family patterns and languages. Putting it simply, culture refers to the entire way of life of a society, “the ways of a people.” (Deng & Liu, 2007)

Culture also bears some common features: sociality, historical inheritance, systemic character, indicator of time and nation. Culture is learned, not innate. Culture is dynamic and seldom remains constant. The various facets of culture are interrelated. Culture is invisible and ethnocentric. In a word, culture is the combination of universality and particularity. Since culture is universal, it is sure to produce the phenomenon of cultural overlaps.

1.1.2 Introduction to Overlaps of Cultural Connotation in English and Chinese Idioms

Due to the similarities of life experience and ways of thinking, people of different nations can get across to each other. Cultural similarities can lead to the correspondence of language, and furthermore, lead to the correspondence of idiomatic expressions. It goes without saying that idiomatic expressions are a reflection of a nation’s culture. The similarities of idiomatic expressions give rise to cultural overlaps. Generally speaking, cultural overlaps of idioms can be classified into three kinds: complete overlaps, concept-shared overlaps and image-shared overlaps.

To start with, complete overlaps refer to the fact that English and Chinese idioms are extremely identical both in forms and meanings. This coincidence can frequently be found in cross-cultural communication. It is because humans live on the same planet, enjoy the same nature, go through the same development procedures that they have cultural overlaps. Cultural overlaps can be found in many aspects of people’s life. The following is some examples and they will provide the readers with better knowledge of cultural overlaps.

Through the back door 走后门 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “zou hou men”)

Walls have ears 隔墙有耳 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “ge qiang you er”).

Fire and water have no mercy 水火无情 (in Chinese

Pinyin, it is pronounced as “shui huo wu qing”).

Bite off more than one can chew 贪多嚼不烂 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “tan duo jiao bu lan”).

They that know nothing fear nothing 不知者不惧 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “bu zhi zhe bu ju”).

A lazy youth, a lousy age 少壮不努力, 老大徒伤悲 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “shao zhuang bu nu li, lao da tu shang bei”).

The water that bears the boat is the same that swallows it up. 水能载舟亦能覆舟 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “shui neng zai zhou yi neng fu zhou”).

He who plays with fire gets burned 玩火者必自焚 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “wan huo zhe bi zi fen”).

Great oaks from little acorns grow 合抱之木, 生于毫末 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “he bao zhi mu, sheng yu hao mo”).

(10) Pie in the sky 天上掉馅饼 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “tian shang diao xian bing”).

Complete overlaps also include those loan expressions which exactly have the same forms and meanings as in the source language. Due to its historical relations with other countries in the world, English language is rich in borrowed words. Although Chinese influence may not as obvious as the Latin and Greek influence on English language, people can still find some examples of English words borrowed from Chinese idioms. The following is some examples.

(11) Paper tiger 纸老虎 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “zhi lao hu”).

(12) To lose one's face 丢面子 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “diu mian zi”).

(13) To save one's face 留面子 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “liu mian zi”).

On the contrary, Chinese language also contains loan words from English idioms. Some of those commonly cited examples are:

(14) 连锁反应 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “lian suo fan ying”) Chain reactions.

(15) 流鳄鱼眼泪 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “liu e yu yan lei”) Crocodile tears.

(16) 以眼还眼, 以牙还牙 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “yi yan huan yan, yi ya huan ya”) An eye for an eye, a tooth for a tooth.

(17) 条条大路通罗马 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “tiao tiao da lu tong luo ma”) All roads lead to Rome.

(18) 一石二鸟 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “yi shi er niao”) To kill two birds with a stone.

Then, concept-shared overlaps mean that a large number of Chinese and English idioms have different images, but they share the same concept. In other words, Chinese and English idioms may be formally different, but semantically similar. Chinese and English belong to different language families. The former is a member of the Sino-Tibetan languages, while the latter falls into the Indo-

European languages. In addition, Chinese and English people have vast differences in geographical environment, customs, beliefs, values and so on. But their brains work in the same way. So they found different objects to represent their similar feelings. For instance, “a piece of cake” and “小菜一碟 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “xiao cai yi die”)” both mean doing something is extremely simple; “pull out all the stops” and “费尽九牛二虎之力 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “fei jin jiu niu er hu zhi li”)” both refer to taking great efforts to do something. Other examples of concept-shared overlaps are:

(19) Water off a duck's back 耳边风 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “er bian feng”).

(20) like a drowned rat 落汤鸡 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “luo tang ji”).

(21) Rob Peter to pay Paul 拆东墙补西墙 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “chai dong qiang bu xi qiang”).

(22) His bark is worse than his back. 刀子嘴, 豆腐心 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “dao zi zui, dou fu xin”).

(23) six of one and half a dozen of the other 半斤八两 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “ban jin ba liang”).

(24) Kick over the ladder 过河拆桥 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “guo he chai qiao”).

(25) The chickens have come home to roost. 搬起石头砸自己的脚 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “ban qi shi tou za zi ji de jiao”).

(26) Small rain lays great dust. 秤砣虽小压千斤 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “cheng tuo sui xiao ya qian jin”).

(27) All the fat is in the fire. 竹篮打水一场空 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “zhu lan da shui yi chang kong”).

(28) A new broom sweeps clean. 新官上任三把火 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “xin guan shang ren san ba huo”).

(29) Where there is smoke, there is fire. 无风不起浪 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “wu feng bu qi lang”).

(30) Speak of the devil, and he is sure to appear. 说曹操, 曹操到 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “shuo cao cao, cao cao dao”).

(31) Searching for a needle in a haystack. 大海捞针 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “da hai lao zhen”).

(32) Spend money like water. 挥金如土 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “hui jin ru tu”).

(33) One boy is a boy, two boys half a boy, three boys no boy. 一个和尚挑水喝, 两个和尚抬水喝, 三个和尚没水喝 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “yi ge he shang tiao shui he, liang ge he shang tai shui he, san ge he shang mei shui he”).

The third type of cultural overlaps is image-shared overlaps. Image-shared overlaps happen when Chinese and English idioms have similar image but different concepts. That is to say Chinese and English idioms are formally similar but semantically different. The following are some examples of image-shared overlaps.

(34) Thorn in one's flesh≠眼中钉, 肉中刺 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "yan zhong ding, rou zhong ci" which means the people one hates most).

(35) Out of sight, out of mind≠眼不见, 心不烦 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "yan bu jian, xin bu fan" which means one won't be worried about or feel bothered by something as long as the thing is out of one's sight).

(36) Beggars are no choosers≠饥不择食 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "ji bu ze shi" which means people who are desperately in need of food have no intention to choose what to eat, that is to say they eat whatever is available to them).

(37) A miss is as good as a mile≠差之毫厘, 谬以千里 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "cha zhi hao li, miu yi qian li" which means one false step will make a great difference).

(38) Once bitten, twice shy ≠一朝被蛇咬, 十年怕井绳 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "yi zhao bei she yao, shi nian pa jing sheng" which means once a person is hurt by something, he or she would be afraid of the things similar to those that hurt him or her).

The third type of overlaps is a little confusing and difficult to deal with because people usually take it for granted that the English idioms are semantically identical with the Chinese idioms after the equality operator. When it comes to image-shared overlaps, people are liable to make mistakes. That's the reason why lots of contrastive research has been carried out by scholars.

1.2 Causes of Cultural Connotation Overlaps in English and Chinese Idioms

Even though cultures through out the world vary from nation to nation, they still have something in common. As is mentioned above, these similarities are called cultural overlaps. Cultural overlaps are the results of humans' internal as well as external similarities.

Internal similarities refer to the fact that human beings have similar psychology, physiology and cognitive ability. As the crystallization of culture, idioms are used in many ways to reflect culture. In addition, due to humans' universal cognitive model and mentality, some English and Chinese idioms happen to have similar implication. For instance, humans need food to maintain physical life as food provides people with the essential energy. As a result, both English and Chinese people attach great importance to food. The significance of food is clearly reflected in both nations' idioms. In English language, there are such idioms as "bread is the staff of life", "An army marches on its stomach", "When meat is in, anger is out" etc.. In Chinese language, such idioms include: "千事万事, 吃饭是大事" (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "qian shi wan shi, chi fan shi da shi" which means people put food or eating in the first place)", "国以民为本, 民以食为天" (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "guo yi min wei ben, min yi shi wei tian" which means the countries are people oriented and food is what matters

to the people)".

External similarities include similar living conditions, life experiences, historical events, customs and so on. To illustrate this phenomenon, the most commonly used example is "burn one's boat" and "破釜沉舟" (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "po fu chen zhou"). They are both the products of historical events. The former came into being under the influence of Roman Conquest. In 49B.C, Julius Caesar invaded Italy. After crossing the river, Caesar ordered to burn the boat, so as not to leave any leeway to the soldiers who would have to fight bravely against the enemy troops. This story gave birth to the English idiom "to burn one's boat". In the late Qin Dynasty, Xiang Yu led the people to fight against tyranny. After crossing the Zhanghe River, Xiang Yu ordered to stove the boats, broke the cookers and burned the houses nearby, so as to force the troops to fight against the enemy at all costs and win the battle.

Owing to the internal and external similarities, cultural overlaps come into being. Through the comparative study of English and Chinese idioms, cultural overlaps will be better understood and learning idioms will be much easier.

1.3 Effects of Cultural Connotation Overlaps in English and Chinese Idioms

Sometimes idioms are very easy for learners to understand because there are similar expressions in the speaker's mother tongue. In other words, cultural overlaps help people to make English learning easier.

However, idioms can often be very difficult to understand. As the crystallization of culture, idioms are often culture-specific. Consequently, in intercultural communication, people of another culture may find it difficult to understand and use the idioms in the target language.

The difficulty may first come from different geographical conditions. China is an agriculture-oriented nation and people attach great importance to agriculture. So many idioms concerning agriculture were produced by people. By contrast, Britain is an island country, with no place 110 miles away from the coast. British people are closely connected with the sea and have created many idioms concerning the sea.

In addition, due to the different histories, customs, religions and arts, people of different nations have different attitudes towards the same thing. That also adds difficulty to intercultural communication.

These difficulties can be removed by cultural overlaps. Having a better knowledge of cultural overlaps will be of great significance in enhancing the mutual exchanges and compatibility.

2. CONFLICTS OF CULTURAL CONNOTATION BETWEEN ENGLISH

AND CHINESE IDIOMS

Even though humans all over the world do share something in common, their cultural similarities are relative while cultural differences are absolute. Due to cultural differences, the same image in different countries may have different or even opposite meaning which inevitably causes cultural conflicts in intercultural communication.

2.1 General Introduction to Conflicts of Cultural Connotation

Cultural conflict is a state of discord caused by actual or perceived opposition of needs, values and interests due to cultural differences. Generally speaking, cultural conflicts can be classified into five categories: Affection conflict, cognitive conflict, value conflict, goal conflict and conflict of interests.

Affection conflicts come into being when people feel that their feelings and emotions are incompatible. For instance, English people always say “thank you” when they are praised by others. By contrast, Chinese people often appear to be too modest to accept other’s appreciation. Instead of saying “thank you”, Chinese people always say “oh, you praise me too much” or “I don’t deserve it”. So affection conflict occurs when a Chinese and a westerner are in cross-cultural communication.

Cognitive conflict refers to the situation in which people are aware that their ways of thinking are in conflict. For example, Chinese people are likely to say “Have you eaten yet?” when we meet friends or neighbors. It is a way commonly used to greet someone, like the westerners saying “hello”. However, western people do not take it for granted. After hearing “Have you eaten yet”, westerners tend to think that their Chinese friends may want to invite them to dinner. Actually it is not true. Thus, cognitive conflict often creates misunderstanding.

Value conflict occurs when people of different values are together. A frequently cited example is Chinese people’s collectivism and western people’s individualism. Goal conflict is a situation where people disagree about a preferred outcome or end state.

Conflict of interest refers to the fact that people have incompatible preferences for a course of action or plan to pursue.

2.2 Causes of Cultural Connotation Conflicts in English and Chinese Idioms

The previous part has discussed the classification of cultural conflict. A better understanding about causes of these conflicts will be of great importance to make a comparative study of English and Chinese idioms. The following part will deal with causes of cultural conflicts in idioms from different perspectives.

2.2.1 Different Geographical Conditions

Every nation is surviving and reproducing in a certain

natural environment. From the perspective of geographical condition, Britain and China belong to different regions. As an island country, Britain has long coastlines which create good conditions for fishery and navigation. Therefore sea exerts great influence on British economy ever since ancient times. Consequently, there are many idioms concerning sea in English language.

All at sea

Fish in the air

Teach a fish to swim

Like a fish out of water

Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea

By contrast, there are a limited number of idioms concerning sea in Chinese. In ancient China, agriculture is considered as the main meanings of living. As a result, Chinese people pay great attention to agriculture and many idioms concerning agriculture are produced.

挥金如土 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “hui jin ru tu” which means spend money like water).

男耕女织 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “nan geng nv zhi” which means men plow the fields and women weave cloth).

瑞雪兆丰年 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “rui xue zhao feng nian” which means a timely snow promises a good harvest).

种瓜得瓜, 种豆得豆 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “zhong gua de gua, zhong dou de dou” which means you reap what you sow).

一分耕耘, 一分收获 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “yi fen geng yun, yi fen shou huo” which means you will only receive a harvest in proportion to what you’ve sown for).

2.2.2 Different Historical Backgrounds

The historical development in every country has undoubtedly exerted great influence on idioms. Britain and China have undergone different historical development. Therefore, English and Chinese idioms are bound to be different. A brief look at the history of Britain and China will be of great help to understand the differences of both countries’ idioms. English idioms were greatly influenced by such historical factors as geographical changes, immigration, conquest of other peoples and warfare between different ethnic groups. The following are some examples of English idioms from historical events.

The die is cast (from Roman Conquest);

To cross the Rubicon (from Roman Conquest);

Cut someone to the quick (from Germanic Conquest);

Rain cats and dogs (from Scandinavians Invasion);

Stew in one’s own juice (from Norman Conquest);

A Dutch agreement (from Anglo-Dutch Wars);

Bury the hatchet (from War of Independence of American);

Eat a crow (from other historical events and anecdotes).

Compared with Britain, China has a longer history of more than 5,000 years. Many Chinese idioms are derived from the time-honored history. The following is two examples.

During the Warring States Period, a battle was fought between State of Qi and State of Wei. The battle gave birth to the idiom “围魏救赵 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “wei wei jiu zhao”)” which means relieving the besieged by besieging the base of the besiegers. Another example is the idiom “完璧归赵 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “wan bi gui zhao”)” which means returning something to its owner in perfect condition. This historical event also happened during the Warring States Period. Lin Xiangru, an official of State of Zhao, was entrusted with an instruction of the King. He was ordered to give a piece of precious jade to Qin in exchange for fifteen cities. However, the King of Qin didn't intend to do so. What he wanted to do was to privately take possession of the jade. Finally, with his intelligence, Lin Xiangru returned the jade intact to the State of Zhao.

2.2.3 Different Literary Works and Mythology

It is commonly known that literary works and mythology exert great influence on idioms. Both in English and Chinese, there are many idioms concerning literature and mythology. Shakespeare's works and the Bible are the two major sources of English idioms. They greatly enrich the English idioms. For instance, “A rose by any other name would smell as sweet” was first used by Shakespeare in *Romeo and Juliet* and it means “a thing is what it is, no matter what it is called.” Besides, Greek and Roman mythology played an important role in the formation of English idioms, which can be seen from such ones as “Be aware of Greeks bearing gifts” and “The Pillars of Hercules”.

By contrast, the four classic works of Chinese literature and other myths are generally considered as a major source of Chinese idioms. For example:

万事俱备，只欠东风 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “wan shi ju bei, zhi qian dong feng”). The literal meaning of the idiom is that everything is ready and all needed is an east wind. The idiom came from the classic work *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* and actually means everything is ready except what is crucial.

精卫填海 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “jing wei tian hai”). The literal meaning of the idiom is that the bird Jingwei tries to fill the sea. It came from the Chinese mythology and means people should be brave and persistent to reach the goal.

2.2.4 Different Religious Beliefs

Many idioms originated from religious beliefs. Different religions gave birth to different idioms. Christianity is the most widespread religion in the west and it believes in God. As a result, there are many idioms concerning God and church in English. For example:

As poor as a church mouse

God gives every bird its food but they must fly for it.

God helps those who help themselves.

Chinese idioms are deeply rooted in the religious culture. Buddhism and Taoism are the two most important religions in China. For the westerners, God is important, but in Chinese people's eyes, heaven is the most powerful. The following is some examples.

谋事在人，成事在天 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “mou shi zai ren, cheng shi zai tian” which means the planning lies with man, the outcome with Heaven).

苦海无边，回头是岸 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “ku hai wu bian, hui tou shi an” which means the sea of suffering is boundless, yet a turn of the gear is the other shore).

放下屠刀，立地成佛 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “fang xia tu dao, li di cheng fo” which means a butcher can become a Buddha after laying down the knife).

不看僧面看佛面 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “bu kan seng mian kan fo mian” which literally means not for the monk's sake, but for the Buddha's, but actually means do something for a person out of deference to somebody else).

2.2.5 Different Social Customs

Generally speaking, custom is the widely accepted behavior among people of the same social group. Everyone's attitude towards things is shaped by the social environment, experience and customs. Different social customs and social experience of English and Chinese people give birth to the huge difference between the two languages. The most typical difference is the attitude towards animals and colors.

Take the different attitude towards elephant as an example. In ancient China, elephant is a symbol of authority and social position. Powerful figures in mythology often take the elephant cart. Clothes made from elephant skin are symbol of nobility. In modern China, some enterprises even use white elephant as product's brand. For example, the White Elephant Battery and the White Elephant Instant Noodles both enjoy popularity in China. However, in western countries, they don't sell well, because white elephant in English symbolizes someone who is useless and clumsy.

2.2.6 Different Values and Thinking Modes

Due to those above-mentioned differences, English and Chinese people have different values and thinking modes. Different values and thinking modes have great impact on language.

On the one hand, English and Chinese people hold different values. In China, people attach great importance to collectivism and harmony. This is reflected in such idioms as “众人拾柴火焰高 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “zhong ren shi chai huo yan gao”

which means when everybody adds fuel, the flames rise high), “一方有难, 八方支援 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “yi fang you nan, ba fang zhi yuan” which means when one is in trouble, all others come to help)” and “冤家宜解不宜结 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “yuan jia yi jie bu yi jie” which means it’s always better to lose an enemy than to make one)”. However, English people and Americans think highly of individualism and equal competition. This can be seen from the following idioms:

Everyone thinks his own geese swans.

All men are created equal.

Diamonds cut diamonds.

On the other hand, thinking mode determines the way of expressing. As the essence of language, idioms are influenced a lot by thinking modes. Generally speaking, Chinese thinking mode is synthetic. In other words, Chinese thought strives for unity between events or objects. By contrast, English thinking mode is analytical and inductive. This point of view can be illustrated by the different expressions of places in English and Chinese. In China, the sequence is from big to small and in English is just the opposite. Moreover, Chinese people tend to think concretely and specific images are used to express things. Chinese characters originated from concrete images and they are all pictograph. However, English thinking modes are abstract. English people use concepts, instead of images, to express ideas.

2.3 Effects of Cultural Connotation Conflicts in English and Chinese Idioms

The differences rooted in such factors as geographical conditions, historical backgrounds, literary works, mythology, religion, customs and values cause cultural conflicts. Since cultural conflicts closely relate to these components, they are sure to cause some problems in the process of intercultural communication.

On the one hand, people may understand the meaning literally or guess the meaning wrongly. The meaning of idioms is expressed by a group of fixed words or phrases and both English and Chinese idioms are characterized by heavy local culture and the frequent use of rhetorical devices. Consequently many idioms are not logically or grammatically analyzable. Very often people just understand the idiom word by word. As a result, many mistakes have been made. For example:

“A horse of another color” should not be understood as “另一种颜色的马 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “ling yi zhong yan se de ma”)”. Its correct counterpart in Chinese should be “风马牛不相及的事 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “feng ma niu bu xiang ji de shi”)”.

On the other hand, due to lack of cultural knowledge, people may replace the original idiom with one from the target language incorrectly. For example, the English idiom “A miss is as good as a mile” is always translated into “差之毫厘, 失之千里 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is

pronounced as “cha zhi hao li, shi zhi qian li” which means one false step will make a great difference)”. Actually these two idioms have different meanings. The former means a failure is always a failure no matter how it is close to success; a narrow escape is the same in effect as an escape by a wide margin. Therefore, its counterpart in Chinese should be “毫米之错仍是错, 死里逃生总是生 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “hao mi zhi cuo reng shi cuo, si li tao sheng zong shi sheng”)”.

2.4 Strategies for Handling Cultural Connotation Conflicts

The previous part focuses on the problems caused by cultural conflicts. This part will deal with the strategies for handling cultural conflicts. Only with the guidance of these strategies can people be successful in cross-cultural communication.

First and foremost, people should further the study of idioms. That’s to say, people should not only be familiar with the general knowledge of idioms but also be familiar with such contents as the relationship between idioms and culture, the differences and similarities between English and Chinese idioms and so on.

Besides, cultural conflicts are caused by the lack of cultural knowledge; therefore people should enhance the acquisition of cultural knowledge. Culture is not innate, but learned. It is true that culture is a learned behavior. So both English and Chinese people can enhance their cultural capability by learning culture. On the one hand, laying a solid foundation for native culture is the first and most important step. On the other hand, attentions should also be paid to the foreign culture. Just as the saying puts it: He who has a thorough knowledge of the enemy and himself is bound to win in all battles. So, how to learn culture? To start with, people should have the awareness of respecting foreign culture. Then, people can enhance cultural competence by reading literary works, newspapers and magazines, watching TV programs, and taking part in the real intercultural communication. Finally, do remember “When in Rome, do as the Romans do”.

Last but not least, in the spare time, remember as many idioms as one can for occasional use. Meanwhile, try to bear these idioms’ counterparts in the target language in mind. In daily life, take every chance to use these idioms. After all, practice makes perfect.

3. VACANCY OF CULTURAL CONNOTATION IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE IDIOMS

Due to the different geographical conditions, historical backgrounds, social customs, religious beliefs and thinking modes, every nation’s culture has distinctive

features. In other words, certain cultural components can only be found in a particular nation. No equivalent can be found in any other country. Consequently, cultural vacancy occurs.

3.1 General Introduction to Vacancy of Cultural Connotation

In the 1950's, the American scholar C.F. Hockett first named the phenomenon of vacancy in languages as "random holes in pattern". Later, many scholars made further study of vacancy. Vacancy can be classified into two types: Language vacancy and cultural vacancy. Language vacancy includes vocabulary vacancy, grammar vacancy and rhetorical vacancy. This part mainly focuses on cultural vacancy. The following is some definitions put forward by the scholars:

Cultural vacancy refers to a kind of uniqueness of a given culture that cannot be understood or accepted by people from other cultures, which may cause misunderstanding or may lead to cultural vacancy in other cultures (Wang, 1995).

The unique phenomenon of language and culture which is specific to a nation while does not exist in another culture (Pan & Li, 2000).

To sum up, cultural vacancy is the absence of such factors as ideology, regulations and speech acts in different countries. For example, Chinese people traditionally believe everything includes two aspects: Yin and Yang. So even number usually has positive meaning in Chinese language. This point can be seen from the following idioms: "四面八方 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "si mian ba fang" which means all directions)", "六六大顺 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "liu liu da shun" which means everything goes smoothly)" and "十全十美 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "shi quan shi mei" which means somebody or something is perfect in every way)". However, western people think oppositely with Chinese people. In western culture, odd numbers, except thirteen, are more popular. When English people express the deeper meaning of something, they usually add "one" after one hundred or one thousand. For instance, one hundred and one thanks; have one thousand and one things to do.

3.2 Causes of Cultural Connotation Vacancy in English and Chinese Idioms

As is mentioned above, cultural vacancy is mainly caused by the uniqueness of geographical conditions, historical backgrounds, social customs, religious beliefs and thinking modes. In a word, cultural peculiarity is the main reason causing cultural vacancy. To be specific, the causes of cultural vacancy can be classified into the following types:

The different cultural origins of languages lead to cultural vacancy. English and Chinese are two different languages originated from different cultures.

English culture contains such factors as independence, extroversion, adventurousness and effectiveness. These factors are reflected in the following idioms:

Devil take the hindmost

One for all and all for one

An eye for an eye, and a tooth for a tooth

All men are created equal

By contrast, China is a self-sufficient agricultural country. Chinese culture is the outcome of such cultural factors as introversion, modesty, harmony, peacefulness, balance and conservativeness. Here are some examples:

有福同享, 有难同当 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "you fu tong xiang, you nan tong dang" which means people share happiness and sorrow).

家和万事兴 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "jia he wan shi xing" which means a harmonious family can lead to the success of everything).

得饶人处且饶人 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "de rao ren chu qie rao ren" which means we should be lenient whenever it is possible).

The subsequent developments of culture lead to cultural vacancy. These developments include the rise of history, the rise of culture, geo-configuration, social development, religion, politics and economy. According to Qian Mu, a master of Chinese national culture, the differences in cultural essence originated foremost from the different natural environments especially the different climates and products. Both natural and social conditions have played important roles in the development of language. The following is some examples of cultural vacancy resulted from different cultural developments.

a) Cultural vacancy caused by different historical and social changes:

Chinese idioms:

围魏救赵 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "wei wei jiu zhao" which means relieving the besieged by besieging the base of the besiegers), 焚书坑儒 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "fen shu keng ru" which means burning of books and burying of scholars), 卧薪尝胆 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "wo xin chang dan", the literal meaning of which is sleeping on the brushwood and tasting gall, while it actually means people undergo self-imposed hardships so as to strengthen their resolve to do something)

English idioms: Achille's heel, to cross the Rubicon, to set Thames on fire, to meet one's Waterloo

b) Cultural vacancy caused by different religious beliefs

Chinese idioms:

苦海无边, 回头是岸 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "ku hai wu bian, hui tou shi an" which means the sea of suffering is boundless, yet a turn of the gear is the other shore), 放下屠刀, 立地成佛 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as "fang xia tu dao, li di cheng fo" which means a butcher can become a Buddha after

laying down the knife), 不看僧面看佛面 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “bu kan seng mian kan fo mian” which literally means not for the monk’s sake, but for the Buddha’s, but actually means do something for a person out of deference to somebody else).

English idioms: all things to all men, the law of the Medes and Persians, the valley of the shadow of death, to give the devil his due.

c) Cultural vacancy caused by different customs

Chinese idioms concerning marriage:

门当户对(in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “men dang hu dui” which means perfect match)、郎才女貌 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “lang cai nv mao” which means a perfect match between a talented man and a beautiful woman)、良辰吉日 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “liang cheng ji ri” which means an auspicious occasion).

English idioms concerning marriage: marriage of true minds, a white wedding, honey moon

d) Cultural vacancy caused by different thinking modes:

Chinese idioms concerning numbers:

四平八稳(in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “si ping ba wen” which means somebody act in a methodical and well-balanced way), 五光十色 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “wu guang shi se” which means multicolored), 六六大顺 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “liu liu da shun” which means everything goes smoothly), 一言九鼎 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “yi yan jiu ding” which literally means one word is as heavy as nine tripods, while it actually refers to a person who is authoritative), 十全十美 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “shi quan shi mei” which means something or somebody is perfect in every way).

English idioms concerning numbers: three-ring circus, the seventh son of a seventh son, on cloud nine, thirteen at table.

3.3 Strategies for Handling Cultural Connotation Vacancy

Since idioms are the essence of language and the crystallization of culture, they are frequently used in intercultural communication. From the above analysis, cultural vacancy inevitably causes misunderstanding and misinterpretation of idioms. Consequently it creates some barriers in cross-cultural communication. Taking the fact into consideration, it is of great importance to find strategies to handle cultural vacancy.

3.3.1 Furthering the Study of Intercultural Communication

Cultural vacancy occurs in cross-cultural communication. This part will deal with some ways to further the study of intercultural communication.

On the one hand, people engaging in cross-cultural communication should have a better knowledge of both nations’ cultures. Since culture covers a wide range,

people should know all the basic contents of culture, ranging from the theory to the actual intercultural communication. Whatever one learns, one should put it into practice, because practice makes perfect. Only by trial and error can be people really further the study of culture.

On the other hand, since cultural vacancy occurs in cross-cultural communication, people should know how to cope with cultural vacancy in cross-cultural communication. Firstly, people should be aware of the inevitability of cultural vacancy when they are in a foreign culture. Secondly, people should think about some typical examples of cultural vacancy and prepare for the coming cultural vacancy. Third, people engaging in intercultural communication should avoid cynical and hostile attitudes towards other cultures and treat national culture and other cultures equally. Finally, people engaging in cross-cultural communication should not be afraid to ask for help from those who are native to the culture.

3.3.2 Translation Strategies

Knowing the basic contents of intercultural communication and how to cope with cultural vacancy is not enough to be successful in real intercultural communication. During the process of intercultural communication, people not only receive foreign cultures, but also spread their own culture to the rest of the world. To spread national culture effectively, people must know how to translate the original form into a proper one which would be accepted by foreigners without losing its original flavor. The following parts are some examples of translation methods used to deal with cultural vacancy.

Generally speaking, translation methods of idioms include literal translation, free translation, substitution, transformation, foreignization, domestication and other translation methods.

Idioms from allusions can be translated using the above mentioned methods. There are often no corresponding Chinese idioms to represent the idioms from English literary works and free translation would lead to the loss of cultural connotation, so the best translation method is using literal translation together with paraphrasing. For example, the idiom “the patience of Job” can be translated into “约伯般的忍耐力 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “yue bo ban de ren nai li”)” (Job is a character in the Bible and his loyalty to God has been tested by various disasters). Whenever literal meanings of idioms can be understood, literal translation can be used. For example, “ivory tower” can be translated literally into “象牙塔 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “xiang ya ta””. Free translation can be used to translate idioms with obscure meanings such as “handwriting on the wall” (不祥之兆, in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “bu xiang zhi zhao”). To translate the idiom “the apple of one’s eye”, people should use substitution. The actual meaning of “the apple of one’s eye” is “someone’s favorite person or thing”.

It is functionally equivalent with the Chinese idiom “掌上明珠 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “zhang shang ming zhu”)”. Therefore, it can be translated into “掌上明珠”. Domestication and foreignization can be used to translate idioms with part cultural vacancy. Some idioms relating to regional and customary characteristics fall into this group. Domestication can be used to translate idioms with rich cultural connotation. For example, the idiom “by hook or by crook” can be translated into “想方设法 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “xiang fang she fa”)”. Foreignization can be used to translate idioms with clear cultural connotation. For instance, the idiom “in all weathers” can be translated into “风雨无阻 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “feng yu wu zu”)”.

CONCLUSION

With the development of globalization, people from different nations are becoming more closely linked than before. Idiom, as the essence and indispensable part of language, plays a crucial role in cross-cultural communication. As the products of natural conditions, common people’s life experience, historical development, religious beliefs, social customs and literary works, idioms are the embodiment of national culture. Because of their typically localized cultural features, idioms often pose a problem for non-native speakers in cross-cultural communication. To solve the ongoing issue substantially, people engaging in cross-cultural communication should have a better understanding of the cultural differences and cultural similarities between English and Chinese idioms. Therefore, a comparative study of English and Chinese idioms from cultural connotation perspectives will benefit the readers a lot.

This paper explores the cultural phenomenon of English and Chinese idioms from three perspectives: overlaps of cultural connotation in English and Chinese idioms, conflicts of cultural connotation between English and Chinese idioms, vacancy of cultural connotation in English and Chinese idioms. Every central part deals with a cultural phenomenon. Every part has similar structure: introducing the cultural phenomenon, analyzing the causes and effects of the cultural phenomenon, putting forward solutions. The following is the implications and limitations of the paper.

(a) Implications of the Study

To start with, by introducing the knowledge of cultural overlaps, cultural conflicts and cultural vacancy, the paper analyzes idioms from a relatively new cultural perspective. Through the analysis of cultural phenomena from the angles of concept, cause, effect and solution, the study has discussed the topic in a very logical order. Therefore, readers can have a deeper understanding of what is cultural phenomenon, how does it occur, what’s the influence of cultural phenomenon and how to cope

with it. In other words, this paper has explained the topic both logically and comprehensively.

Besides, in this paper many examples have been cited in order to illustrate the point. Through the analysis above, it’s not difficult to find that some examples can be used to illustrate more than one cultural phenomenon. For example, the idioms “挥金如土 (in Chinese Pinyin, it is pronounced as “hui jin ru tu” and it is functionally equivalent to the idiom “spend money like water”)” and “spend money like water” can be used to represent the concept-shared overlaps of cultural connotation as well as the conflicts of cultural connotation caused by different geographical conditions. That’s why some idioms are used more than once in this study. With the help of examples, learning idioms surely becomes very interesting.

Last but not least, through the comparative study of English and Chinese idioms and the analysis of cultural phenomena reflected by idioms, readers can clearly see the differences and similarities of English and Chinese idioms. By introducing the concept, cause, effect and solution of cultural phenomena, the study has covered a new topic rarely discussed before. In the paper, the following factors have been involved: idiom, cultural connotation, relationship between idiom and culture, cultural phenomenon reflected by idioms, intercultural communication.

To sum up, the study helps readers to improve their language proficiency and enhance their intercultural competence. With the help of comparative study, learners can be aware of the negative transfer and positive transfer of mother tongue. The awareness would help learners get away with the interference of mother tongue. Therefore, foreign language learning will become increasingly easier.

(b) Limitations of the Study

Firstly, even though there are quite a few data relating to the cultural phenomena of idioms, the majority of them deal with the concept of cultural phenomena and the examples reflecting cultural phenomena. Only a limited number of them have involved the cause, effect and solution of cultural phenomena. Consequently, due to lack of information, maybe there is misinterpretation in the paper.

Secondly, due to lack of vocabulary and the interference of Chinese, some points may not be expressed clearly and coherently.

Finally, analysis of examples and the quotations cited in this paper may be not persuasive.

All in all, this paper only focuses on some aspects and there is still much room left for improvement and exploration. As a result, further research must be carried out.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I owe a great debt of thanks to many individuals who have helped me and encouraged me to complete the article.

First and foremost, special thanks must go to Professor Jiang Yuhong, my supervisor, whose valuable instructions and consistent patience have helped me a lot.

In addition, I am equally grateful to many scholars and experts whose theoretical works have given shape to my study. Without consulting the previous studies, I couldn't have finished this article.

I have also benefited immensely from discussions with my classmates and friends. They have provided valuable suggestions and given me inspirations to continue my work.

Finally, I offer my deepest gratitude to my dearest family members and boy friend. Without their emotional and material support, this article would have been much harder to finish.

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