

# AN INTERCULTURAL STUDY ON CHINESE DAILY GREETINGS

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## **Abstract**

*Although daily greetings are very simple expressions, they are used to show respect to others when meeting together. Also, the purpose of daily greetings is to establish or maintain social communication or social interaction, not to transfer any information, so formulaic expressions are often used in both English and Chinese. However, Chinese daily greetings have their own features and meaningfulness. This paper started with the introduction of Chinese history and culture, especially Chinese daily greetings which play a unique role during intercultural interaction and communication, takes a British friend's story as a case, and then discusses the relationship between language and culture, and culture and intercultural communication. The paper highlights that the factors of language and culture influence on daily greetings and gives four suggestions of how to acquire intercultural awareness, how to properly use daily greetings, how to adapt to a new culture and how to improve intercultural communication competence, so as to avoid the misunderstanding and puzzle in intercultural communication.*

**Key Words:** daily greeting, Chinese culture language, intercultural communication, intercultural interaction, intercultural communication competence

## **1. Introduction**

China is a large country with a long history and is one of the four homes of the world's earliest civilizations. It has a recorded history of nearly 4,000 years throughout the history of Chinese civilization. During these 4,000 years, China has nurtured many great thinkers, scientists, inventors, statesmen, strategists, men of letters and artists, yielding a rich cultural heritage and fine cultural traditions. The ancient civilization of China has exercised great influence on the modern world. (Zhou, 2010)

Especially in recent years, with the development of China's reform, more and more foreign people have come to China and visited many places of interest. When they met people, they always wanted to know something special and unfamiliar about China and its historical culture. The foreigners were interested in understanding more things about this mysterious country and wonderful people. They liked to communicate with local people in Chinese when they learned Chinese language. However, some of them lacked some basic knowledge of Chinese culture and know little about Chinese customs including daily greetings. They

would misunderstand Chinese language and its culture. Even some of them made some very funny joke when interacting with Chinese. Thus, the author will take some cases for examples, analyzes these cases from an intercultural perspective and put forth some suggestions of how to improve intercultural awareness and to enhance intercultural communication competence, especial how to build the first good impression with Chinese people from the very beginning, so as to benefit intercultural communication between Chinese and other foreign people.

## **2. A British Friend's Story**

Many years ago, one British friend of mine, William David came to China for his first time as a Summer Program teacher in our university. He spoke a little Chinese. He almost had no any ideas about the Chinese language and the Chinese culture. One day, David went to the supermarket near our university, and was extremely surprised when the supermarket clerk, who was kind, beautiful and young woman asked him with smile if he had had his lunch. He did not know why the Chinese young woman asked him in this way and wonder how to give the Chinese woman a reply. In British culture, this question would be regarded as an indirect invitation to lunch, and especially between unmarried young people it indicates a young man's interest in dating a girl. Because the clerk was a stranger to my British friend, he was quite taken aback about the clerk's question. He just pretended not to speak Chinese and went on to our university for summer program teaching. He was even more surprised when one of the university teachers asked him the same question. Later, he gradually realized that he was still puzzled aslo why they kept asking it.

In the following days, as he was asked such a question again and again, he came to the conclusion that people must be concerned about my health. He was somewhat underweight, and the assumed that the Chinese people must be worried that he was not eating properly. He thought of this question again and again, and did not get any result about this question.

Once, he told his puzzle to one Chinese professor who knows Chinese and British cultures quite well. The Chinese professor told him that the question "Have you had lunch?" had no real significance at all, it was only a Chinese daily greeting.

## **3. Discussion**

From the above story, we can easily understand that different countries have different cultural customs. Different cultural customs have different daily greetings. Different daily greetings reflect different cultural customs. Therefore, people with different cultural backgrounds meet together and communicate with each other in daily greetings. They should understand real meanings of daily greetings in the target language or target culture. Daily greeting may be simple expressions regardless of intercultural settings, and just show someone's politeness to another when meeting. However, the purpose of daily greetings is to establish or maintain social communication or social interaction, not to transfer any information, so formulaic expressions are often used in both English and Chinese. Thus, it is necessary for people from different cultural backgrounds to know some basic knowledge about the relationship between language and culture, culture and intercultural communication.

### 3.1 Language and Culture

A language not only expresses facts, ideas, or events which represents similar world knowledge by its people, but also reflects the people's attitudes, beliefs, world outlooks etc. In a word, language expresses cultural reality (Dai and He, 2008). One compares language and culture to a living organism- language is flesh, and culture is blood. Without culture, language would be dead, without language, culture would have no shape. (Zhang, 2008)) Anybody gained his or her own mother tongue, when he or she was a child. And also anybody obtain a language-specific culture and becomes socialized in certain ways. If he or she moves to another community or country, he may be recognized easily not as a member of the local community group but as a newcomer from the ways the uses his language. This implies that language embodies cultural identity. To dig it further, a language, as a system of signs with their own cultural substances and values, may be viewed as a symbol of social identity. People are identified via their use of language. In this sense, language symbolizes cultural reality.

In some extent, language is part of culture and plays a distinct role in it. Some social scientists consider it the key stone of culture. Without language, they maintain, culture would not be possible. On the other hand, language is influenced and shaped by culture; it reflects cultures. In the broadest sense, language is the symbolic representation of a people, and it comprises their historical and cultural backgrounds as well as their approach to life and their ways of living and thinking. It provides a window to the culture in which it is used. To sum up, language is both a means of communication and a channel of culture.

Language and culture are interdependently and inseparably related. They constitute an integral whole. Though they are by no means the same, neither of them could survive without the other. Metaphors can be employed to vividly describe the relationship between them some people say that language is the mirror of culture, which means that people see a culture through its language. Others consider that language culture together form the iceberg. The visible part is the language, with a small part of culture standing out above the sea surface while the greater part, lying hidden beneath the surface of the sea, is the invisible aspect of culture.

### 3.2 Culture and Intercultural Communication

People often hold the naïve view that contact between cultures necessarily results in greater mutual understanding, unfortunately the historical record does not support this belief. Achieving mutual understanding is not easy.(Davis, 2010)

Just as a British Professor Gillian Brown said, "Communication is a risky business", which means the process of communication is the process of complete interaction. Yet it's not an easy thing to fully communicate, because of different histories, cultures, social habits in different groups. Communication is a complex process in which meanings are created and reflected in human interaction with symbols.(Zhang, 2005).

Culture may be defined as the process of (a) knowing and behaving in a manner acceptable to persons who are members of a culture;(b) developing the semantic or cognitive frame work to facilitate appropriate knowledge and behavior; and (c) transmitting and /or perpetuating this knowledge, framework, and behavior. Because communication is a sine qua non of society, and society is a major dimension of culture, these three interrelated constructs form an essential dimension of our humanity.(Hill,2009)

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

And, intercultural communication can be simply defined as communication between people of different cultures. The need for intercultural understanding does not begin or end with national boundaries. One does not necessarily need to cross an ocean to have a cross-cultural experience, for virtually every country around the world is undergoing increased diversity with its own borders. Even within his own country, communication can often be somewhat intercultural.(Xu, 2012)

In other words, culture in practical cross-cultural communication “is seen to involve patterns of everyday life that enable individuals to relate to their place under the sun”(Seelye, 1993)

In daily communication, when people address and greet others, describe things, and pay compliments, they usually abide by certain social norms. Social norms involve factors such as the relationship between the people in the particular situation, the speaker’s attitudes or feeling towards the person to be addressed, the ethnicity of the speaker, the power difference between the addresser and the addressee, and the solidarity.

Context is important in all communication, but it is relatively more important in some situations than in others. There are also significant differences across cultures in the ways and the extent to which people communicate through context. (Davis, 2010)

Generally speaking, in daily greetings culture is central to how to express ourselves when meeting people from different cultural backgrounds. Nevertheless, cultural differences may cause people from different cultures to misinterpret both what is said and what is left unsaid, leading to misunderstanding. It is of vital importance for foreigners to know to values of the target culture. Around with knowledge in those aspects, they can then draw inferences from language phenomena as to why people of the target culture speak that way. Thus, effective communication and culture are integrative, interactive and then can’t be treated separately. Any person with a good knowledge of cultural differences first is vital in intercultural communication.

#### **4 Suggestion**

Globalization enters a world in which people of different cultural backgrounds increasingly come to depend on one another. To understand and accept cultural differences becomes imperative to be effective in intercultural communication in global society. (Chen, 2010)

Nowadays, with the rapid development of communication and transportation technology, people with different cultural backgrounds not only easily more from one country to another to communicate with others in face-to-face, but also brings about other impacts including misunderstanding cultures and cultural clash. As a result, the requirement for intercultural knowledge and skills that lead to intercultural communication competence becomes critical for an effective intercultural communication and interaction in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

First of all, people should acquire intercultural awareness when they enter another strange cultural nation. Intercultural awareness is the cognitive aspect of intercultural communication competence that refers to the understanding of cultural conventions that really affect how people think and behave. So, it is

imperative for people to learn some basic knowledge of the target culture especially including daily greetings and cultural customs before they want to travel, work and study in another country.

In this way, people will quickly and smoothly effectively communicate with and interact other people from the target culture, and then completely avoid misunderstanding culture and cultural clash.

Secondly, first impressions play such a significant role in people's interaction that knowing how to behave properly for the first encounter is very important. (Liu, 2008)

In daily intercultural communications including daily greeting, it is necessary for people to attach great importance to the daily greetings that influence the expectations of social behavior, or the conventional norm. These greetings required by good breeding and expected to be observed are called etiquette. Etiquette is equivalent to protocol, decorum, etc. Different cultures have different etiquettes. People should know respect different cultures and etiquettes and learn some fundamental knowledge about the etiquettes from another culture.

Thirdly, people should have intercultural adaptation to a new culture, and don't want to change different cultural customs including daily greeting. Greetings aim to establish a harmonious relationship between communications, but if daily greetings are used improperly, interference will be caused in intercultural communication. Thus, if westerners come to China, they should learn Chinese greeting and really know that some of the common ways of greeting for the Chinese such as "Where are you going?" "Have you had your meal?" are typical daily expressions for Chinese people, they don't want to invade their privacy and offend them. The westerners don't think "Have you had your meal?" is regarded as a prelude to an invitation or to suggest that they go to dinner together. Thus, the westerners should learn some common Chinese daily greetings if they want to go to China.

Fourthly, people should have their own intercultural communication competence. Intercultural communication competence can be defined as a person's ability to engage in productive intercultural dialogues of meanings and relationships and relationships with people from different cultural backgrounds.(Song, 2009). To make the intercultural interaction productive, people need to have the following ability: a) ability to communicate interpersonally, (b)ability to adjust to different cultures, (c) ability to deal with different societal systems, (d) ability to establish interpersonal relationships, and (e)ability to understand others to construct meaning and support with people from different cultural backgrounds through appropriate and effective use of verbal and nonverbal language.(Chen, 2010,p.25)

## **5 Conclusion**

Daily greeting, a very important part of language communication in which people respect each other when meeting together to make first impression and show friendship between one another, is one of the social etiquettes and language phenomenon. Daily greeting also indicates the social and cultural phenomenon. It is obvious that Chinese daily greeting has its own greeting form which reflects its culture history and heritages. We know both Chinese and English belong to different language system which reflects its own features and varieties in many aspects. However, Chinese daily greetings are different from English daily greetings in the meaning of daily greetings.

Therefore, westerners should learn some basic knowledge about Chinese culture, further master Chinese language well, and finally correctly use Chinese daily greeting and understand Chinese daily greeting, so as

to interact with Chinese friendly. Thus, people should understand the relationship between language and culture, and culture and intercultural communication. In this way, westerner does not only take advantage of Chinese daily greeting or other Chinese etiquettes , but also can know Chinese culture well. Furthermore, the westerners should be cultivated to own better intercultural communication competence and achieve an effective communication with Chinese people..

Daily greeting is a simple expression and also a good beginning for people from different cultures to first interaction or communication. Any westerner wants to know and to understand China. This first thing is that the westerner should learn Chinese daily greeting. Maybe, it is a first step for them to know Chinese culture and its people.

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