



Cultural Invasion and Cultural Protection: Should Chinese Celebrate Christmas

Xiang Ye

School of Foreign Languages, Shandong University of Technology

Zhangzhou Rd., Zhangdian Dist., Zibo 255049, Shandong, China

E-mail: yexianghello@gmail.com

This study is sponsored by the social science research project fund of Shandong University of Technology [Project Name & No.: Net-Based Chinese-English Corpus and Computer-Assisted Translation, 4032-708013].

Abstract

This article centers on the celebration of Christmas, the most important western festival, in the Chinese mainland to look at globalization in a cultural dimension. It also analyzes signs of cultural invasion from the west and provides approaches to cultural protection in China under the background of globalization.

Keywords: Christmas, Cultural identity, Cultural invasion, Cultural protection, Globalization

1. Introduction

On 23 December 2006, the College English Test Band 6 selected a culture-related title “The Celebration of Western Festivals” for its writing part. That such a nation-wide test selects this topic just two days before Christmas shows a growing number of people in China are immersed in the thrilling atmosphere of the upcoming Christmas. In comparison with the Spring Festival, the equally high status is given to Christmas by some of them. The popularity of a western festival in China also reflects that our cultural identity is fading bit by bit because of “alien” culture from the west. Thus cultural protection should be highlighted in the era of globalization to counter such kind of cultural colonization in avoidance of the dissolution of our 5,000-year Chinese tradition. This article centers on the celebration of Christmas, the most important western festival, in the Chinese mainland to reflect cultural invasion from the west and provide approaches to cultural protection in China with the acceleration of globalization in 21st century.

2. The Concepts of Cultural Identity and Globalization

According to *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*, festivals are days or time of “religious or other celebration” in the east and west. “In the history of a nation, people record the most meaningful days for the survival, development and reform of a whole nation. When the same date comes next year, people bear a special mood, perform some rituals and even organize some activities to memorize it. As such memorizing activities are repeated consecutively for a long period of time, such celebration on the special date will become a custom, thus a festival comes into being and goes down from one generation to the next.” (Qiu, 1994, p. 484) Here, festival celebration can characterize cultural identity, which “is created when a group affiliation is enacted, when an individual or group members claim membership in one or more groups” and “is based on what members of a group or community say and think and feel as they affiliate with others who share their history, origins, or biology” (Collier, 2003, p. 418).

Collier states that festival celebration is one source of information about “how people use cultural membership to establish community” (2003, p. 427), so Spring Festival celebration may strength our cultural identity, while Christmas may have an opposite effect. Furthermore, “Cultural identities are both enduring and changing.” (Collier, 2003, p. 421) So there is no culture which remains static for ever, neither does any culture loss its identity overnight. Due to this, the loss of one’s cultural identity---ethnic identity or national identity---is an imperceptible process, but once people within one culture sense or find out their culture is defamiliarized with the past one, their culture has already broken. In other words, their cultural identity is no longer complete. It may happen as a result of cultural invasion with the process of globalization. The cultural assimilation or the disappearance of aboriginal cultures in Africa, Australia and North

America are just examples. Now such kind of loss of Chinese membership is happening quietly throughout the Chinese mainland. What should be emphasized that the concept of cultural identity here does not refer to individual identity but collective identity, though Llosa (2007) doubts such connotation for two reasons. First, collective identity is “an ideological fiction”; second, “the individual differences prevail over the collective characteristics when individuals are examined on their own terms and not as epiphenomena of the collectivity.” In fact, these two reasons can be put aside if the consideration on culture identity is not geared to politics and individual membership. And this article has left these factors out of focus for this purpose, for example, the similar things as is so religiously related and politically oriented in Huntington’s *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order* will not be applied to explaining status quo in China.

As for globalization, a buzzword today, Tomlinson develops a particular concept of globalization, defining it as a “complex connectivity”, or “the rapidly developing and ever-densening network of interconnections and interdependencies that characterize modern social life” (1999, p. 2). Referring to globalization in this way, Tomlinson is concerned with the manner in which cultural relations and representations are effected by and, at the same time, help constitute, global connectivity. Globalization, he suggests, cannot be understood simply in terms of increased mobility around the world or through the development of electronic networks, but must be set in relation to a host of cultural practices that are embedded within the “mundane” experience of everyday life, from shopping at the supermarket to watching the evening news. He also relates one result of globalization to deterritorialized identity, one form of cultural identity fading, and points out “the impact of globalization is felt not in travel but in staying at home.” (1999, p. 128) We can easily find that globalization impacts people everywhere, in city or at countryside, and all kinds of people, at the low or high scale of the social ladder. Of course, the impact varies for geographical and social factors. Take Christmas celebration for example, it is more popular among urban young people exposed to the western culture. Surely, in the global “cultural supermarket”, we may choose traditional and familiar products, or try something totally new and cool only if we can AFFORD them.

3. Cultural Invasion in China

3.1 Reasons for Christmas Celebration

At present, Chinese people celebrate Christmas mainly on streets and campus, which is different from western people who do at home. Also, Christmas Day has not been listed as a legal national holiday yet. Westerners observe Christmas mainly from the perspective of family reunion and religion. But in our Chinese mainland, there are different purposes for celebrating Christmas.

On campus, young people tend to find as many chances as possible for getting together, strengthening cohesion, activating campus atmosphere, constructing more diversified campus cultures. Furthermore, learning English has its high popularity in Chinese mainland and mastering English has become a must for college graduates to hunt even an average job. At the same time, more and more universities are advocating a cultural orientation to learning a foreign language. Naturally, celebrating the most important western festival is a preferred teaching method.

In recent two decades, Christmas celebration has gained increasing popularity in China with the acceleration of globalization. Celebrating Christmas, in practice, promotes the intercultural communication and increases our knowledge of the west. In addition, as a wonderful business opportunity just like what happens in the west, it benefits our Chinese businessmen, corporate owners, sales clerks and peddlers alike.

3.2 Signs of Cultural Invasion

As for customs and festivals, we Chinese people, especially our youth, are so much attached not only to Christmas, but also to St. Valentine’s Day, Halloween and other western customs and festivals, that we forget we are Chinese and try to come closer to the western culture in observing western festivals and even imitate the western people, especially US American people’s daily behavior, such as chewing gums, tattooing the body, and hip-hopping.

Concerning business, December is a shopping month for Christmas in the west. Now the same thing happens in China. In December, we may easily find everyday articles sell together with cheap Christmas toys or Christmas cards. At the entrance of any large supermarkets, we are welcomed by Santa Claus. And we are accustomed to Christmas “discount” marketing at a restaurant, a hotel, a healthcare institution and a theme park. So what we eat, drink, use, and play with is all earmarked by Christmas in December.

Take a look at public places and facilities. In December, almost every inch of public places at downtown is decorated with red and white, two characteristic colors for Christmas, which can be found no matter at plazas and cafes with neon lights; or at shabby water closets, inns, and schools; or on any type of traffic facilities, such as airplanes, trains, cars, ships, subway, and taxis; or at church which becomes a special place for thousands of non-Christian Chinese to sense the most living western culture on Christmas Eve.

With regard to mass media, several long-expected and extremely expensive Christmas moving pictures are imported

from Hollywood each year and always boast a profitable ticket box. Hong Kong, Taiwan and even the mainland will also shoot such movies and are also welcomed with cheers in the mainland.

As for TV ads, in December too many “For Christmas” are imbedded, not to mention those images and videos on Santa Claus and Christmas trees.

The most influential media should be Internet. When we log on the dot coms in December, Santa Claus flashes out and Mary fades in with the beautiful music of “Jingle Bell”. The most eye-catching words always are “Christmas”. Even Google.com.cn (Chinese station of Google) redesigns its “face” as a lovely Santa Claus at the end of 2006.

Mobile phone, as a newly rising media for SMS (Short Message Service) and image transferring, provides a rather convenient way to express Christmas wishes to families, friends, and colleagues.

3.3 The hidden reasons and negative influence of cultural invasion

Llosa (2007) writes that there is no doubt that globalization presents many problems of a political, judicial, administrative, and cultural nature. In the information era, globalization brings skyrocketing increase in the amount of products output, capital output and cultural output. These three influence each other. Nowadays, in the mainland, celebrating Christmas has been more a result of cultural invasion, than cultural output. It is at this point that globalization becomes a problem from the cultural identity perspective:

In the global economy, culture has almost become only a one-way operating manner of business; cultural goods and services produced by rich and powerful countries have invaded all of the world’s markets, placing people and cultures in other countries, who are unable to compete, at a disadvantage. These other countries have difficulties in presenting the cultural goods and services, which they have produced to the world market and therefore are not able to stand up to competition. The natural result is that these countries are unable to enter the areas of influence occupied by multinational companies of developed countries. (Örnek, 2007, pp. 4-5)

When we establish plants to make Christmas toys with or without foreign investment and when we pay for these toys, we have bought some concepts of the western culture. We also consume these foreign concepts and enjoy ourselves with those exotic festivals by losing bit by bit our cultural identity, our belonging, and our spiritual home.

4. Cultural Protection

4.1 The Importance of Cultural Protection

A slogan which is frequently heard is “What is more nationally defined will be more internationally accepted”, so to keep our cultural identity is to keep our own cultural integration and cultural life, and is also to strengthen the cohesion of 56 nationalities. The diversity of worldwide cultures is one end of intercultural communication, so we should put our Chinese identity at the core of our hearts while celebrating Christmas.

4.2 Approaches to Cultural Protection

In a broad sense, an appropriate nation-wide cultural policy, including language policy, can be made. On this point, France and Canada may be good examples to follow. According to Rothkopf (1997), “France and Canada have both passed laws to prohibit the satellite dissemination of foreign-meaning American content across their borders and into the homes of their citizens.” Both countries are trying to fight against cultural hegemonism from the USA. Second, cultural consideration should outweigh business consideration, that is, the concept of “Money has the highest priority” may be thrown away. For example, in 2006, there are two Lovers’ Days (on July 15 of the lunar calendar) because of a leap month. But both Lovers’ Days were so popularized by businessmen for the only purpose of more profit, few have the mood to praise the pure love between the Herd-boy and the Weaving-girl) who value free love and reunion over any worldly things. As St. Valentine’s Day is clearly more popular among the young than the Chinese Lovers’ Day, our Spring Festival gets less and less “share of market” among young people and may gradually give its way to Christmas Day. Therefore, we have the reason to worry about our tradition and our cultural identity and we shall change our mind in the long run.

Third, we shall output our Chinese culture to the west through various means in order to strengthen our national self-respect and enhance our pride for the country and culture. Only with a certain portion of balance between cultural input and cultural output can we find an easier approach to keeping our cultural identity. “In the year 2000 nearly half of the world’s cultural industries were located in the USA, 30% were located in Europe, with the remainder being located in Asia. Today, 85% of movies seen in the world are made in Hollywood.” (Örnek, 2007, p. 4) Although China is one of the world’s five largest cultural exporters in 1998 (Örnek, 2007, p. 4), there is still a long way for us to walk.

Last but not the least, increase of our comprehensive national strength will consolidate the practice of the above all approaches. Economics is the most important dimension of globalization, which affects politics, and politics in return affects economics, and both of these affect the cultural dimension of globalization. The cultural trade of goods and

services between countries is conducted within the framework of a global economic system.

Between the years 1980 and 1998 a 5-time increase in the market for cultural goods and services occurred. The information-society's most important component is the cultural industry, which is expanding at an incredibly rapid rate. Just as the products of these industries can create cultural values, or change them, as well as function to strengthen cultural identity, they can also hasten their disappearance. (Örnek, 2007, pp. 3-4)

Let us examine how much of a portion of our lives is encompassed by cultural goods and services: in the view of Örnek, cultural goods consist of a variety of products such as books, magazines, multimedia products, software, records, CDs, films, videos, audiovisual programs and fashion designs. Cultural services are comprised of libraries, documentary centers, museums, theatres, and orchestras, even circuses, press, cable news broadcasts, and satellite broadcasts. (4) Herein, the development of economy is directly related to our regular day's life and maintenance of cultural identity.

In a narrow sense, we as individuals should keep a Chinese heart when we observe Christmas wearing the west suit, drinking Cappuccino and eating KFC.

5. Conclusion

It can be predicted that Christmas will become more popular in the Chinese mainland and this tendency cannot be shifted in the near future. But what's more important is whether we will still keep our culture Chinese-characteristic and whether we will still be recognized as "descendants of the dragon". From the perspectives of culture, business and trade, we shall embrace Christmas and other imputed "cultural products" on a broader scale because intercultural communication promotes economic development and civilization progress. In this sense, we will not refuse the cultural globalization since "One of the ways in which we come to know who we are is to compare our own group identities with the character of other groups." (Collier, 2003, p.416) On the other hand, we shall celebrate Christmas in our Chinese way with the Chinese culture as the core in our mind.

This article only selects Christmas celebration in China to reflect one dimension of the relation between culture and globalization. And cultural invasion and cultural protection, the natural results from the interaction between strong and weak cultures backed by overall national strength may also be approached for further study from the political, ideological, economic and judicial perspectives.

References

- Collier, Mary Jane. (2003). Understanding Cultural Identities in Intercultural Communication: A Ten-Step Inventory. In L. Samovar & R. Porter (Eds.), *Intercultural Communication: A Reader*. N.p.: Wadsworth pp. 412-429.
- Festival. (1997). *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*. (4th ed.).
- Huntington, Samuel. (1996). *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of the World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
- Llosa, Mario Vargas. (2007). Local Cultures and Globalization. [Online] Available: <http://www.trilateral.org/annmtgs/trialog/trlgtxts/t54/var.htm> (Jan. 13, 2007).
- Örnek, Yusuf. (2007). Globalization and Cultural Identity. [Online] Available: http://www.studienkreis.org/common/news/referat_oerne.pdf (Jan. 13, 2007).
- Qiu, Yunhua, and Gugang Ma (Eds). (1994). *An Overview of Chinese and Foreign Cultures*. Changsha: Yuelu Press.
- Rothkopf, David. (1997). In Praise of Cultural Imperialism? *Foreign Policy*, 107, 38-53. [Online] Available: <http://www.mtholyoke.edu/acad/intrel/protected/rothkopf.html> (Jan. 13, 2007).
- Tomlinson, John. (1999). *Globalization and Culture*. Cambridge: Polity Press.