



Different Interpersonal Relationships Underlying English and Chinese Greetings

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Abstract

Greeting behaviors are important tools for establishing and maintaining social relationships. Greeting expressions are abundant in English and Chinese. One major difference of greetings in English and Chinese lies in the content. They are influenced by the orientations of interpersonal relationships which in turn are underpinned by value orientations. Increasing awareness of intercultural differences is a key step to heighten intercultural communication.

Keywords: Greeting, Value, Interpersonal relationship

Differences in English and Chinese greetings are remarkable. Through the contrastive study of the repertoire of greeting expressions in English and Chinese, it is found that the differences exist at least in four aspects, i.e., content, semantics, syntax and lexis (Qian, 1996). One major difference of greetings in English and Chinese lies in the content. In English culture, personal matters are regarded as one's privacy which people do not like to talk about except with intimate friends. This fact may account for the neutral character in the content of many English greeting expressions. Therefore native English speakers are accustomed to greeting each other with linguistic routines such as 'It's a fine day, isn't it?', 'Good morning/afternoon!' or some other greetings that do not have anything to do with personal matters. Whereas Chinese people like to greet people with 'Have you eaten?', 'Where are you going?' or 'What are you busy with?' to show politeness and warmth and even consideration according to Chinese custom and tradition. Yet some people in English culture may find Chinese greetings unacceptable or even offensive for these greetings seem to be concerned about personal business although they are quite appropriate and friendly in Chinese culture. Apart from tradition and history, the difference in the content of greetings in the two languages embodies their different values and the interpersonal relationships in different cultures.

1. Different Values in Different Cultures

Values are the basis for our actions. They guide our behavior and help us determine what is right and what is wrong; what is good and what is bad. Value systems are culturally diverse, and they determine differences of communicative acts among different cultures. The most important dominant orientation--individualism in English countries and the principle of *ren* and *li*--the key concept of Confucianism in China actually act as shapers of the patterns of interpersonal relationships which in turn affect interactions and communications on both sides. As these principles in the West and the East are entirely different, the interpersonal relationships are also entirely different.

1.1 Equality and Human Rights in Western Culture

What is emphasized in English culture is individualism and as a result equal or horizontal relationship is highly valued. Broadly speaking, individualism refers to the doctrine, spelled out in detail by a seventeenth century English philosopher, that each individual is unique, special, completely different from other individuals. What is advocated is humanitarianism and human rights of each member and thus the slogan: everybody is born equal--democracy, liberation of the individual is everybody's wish. In this case, the love and benevolence humanitarianism advocates are symmetrical in nature. The relationships are symmetrical in that behavior which is appropriate to one person in each pair is identical with what is appropriate to the other person. This symmetry presupposes role equality rather than differentiation as is the case in China.

Take the United States for example, the origin of individualism has had a long history. In fact, the advocacy of individual rights has been existing throughout American history. Independence Declaration officially guarantees the

rights of equality, freedom, etc., for every member of the society. Individualism manifests itself in individual initiative ('Pull yourself up by your own boot straps'), independence ('Do your own thing'), individual expression ('The squeaky wheel gets the grease'), and privacy ('A man's home is his castle'). Whether it is in sexual or personal matters, the self for American holds the private position. So strong is this notion that some Americans believe that there is something wrong with someone who fails to demonstrate individualism. Think of the power of the concept in the words of former Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter: 'Anybody who is any good is different than anybody else.'

Closely related to individualism is the American value of equality, which is emphasized in everything from government (everyone has the right to vote) to social relationship ('Just call me by my first name'). Americans believe that all people have a right to succeed in life and that the state, through laws and educational opportunities, should ensure that right. The value of equality is prevalent in social relationships and even children are often treated as adults. Americans like to treat others as equals and choose to be treated in the same manner when they interact in social environments.

In contrast, Confucianism in Chinese culture, especially *ren* and *li*, virtually determines almost all aspects of the Chinese life--they have become the collective unconsciousness for the Chinese programming their social behavior such as greetings, compliments, addressing, etc; as well as interactional rules, such as politeness principles, face work, etc. And obviously the understanding of *ren* and *li* can help explain why the Chinese people behave the way they do.

1.2 The Key Concepts of Confucianism in China

Ren and *li*, the key concepts of Confucianism, complement each other in nature. If we take a look at these two concepts in terms of ends and means, we can say that *ren* serves as the goal of life, while *li* serves as the norms and means for achieving the acceptable ends of social life. And at the same time these two concepts overlap with each other.

Ren, etymologically a combination of the Chinese ideographic characters for 'human being' (represented by the radical on the left of the Chinese ideograph) and for 'two' (represented by the radical on the right), means, on the one hand, the ideal manhood, defining all the fine qualities that make up an ideal man and the ideal reciprocal relationship that should pertain between people on the other hand. Men should be warm and benevolent to others or love them and respect themselves. Self or an individual must emerge himself into the group or collective. We can say that *ren*, the cardinal principle of Confucianism lays great emphasis on relationship. To some extent, the largeness of heart which *ren* renders knows no boundaries as *ren* advocates that 'within the four seas all men are brothers and sisters.'

Li, as we have pointed out, serves as a norm or a means for people to achieve ideal manhood or good relationships. It defines almost all the norms or rules for the appropriate conduct and behavior for every social member according to his or her social position. It defines the specifics of obligations and responsibilities for every member in the society. The norm consists of the prescriptions for acceptable behavior concerning almost every aspect of life, such as morality, social and political order, social rituals, customs, social interactions, and so on and so forth.

Unlike the Western humanism, the love and reciprocity *ren* advocates is based on the kinship relationships in the patriarchal Chinese society or rather it is a symbol of patriarch. It is best expressed in the obligations and responsibilities ascribed to people according to their social positions in the society. As for *li*, it specifies Five Constant Relationships that constitute the warp and woof of social life. The relationships are those between ruler and subject, parent and child, husband and wife, elder sibling and junior sibling, elder friend and junior friend. These relationships are asymmetrical. Rulers should be benevolent, subjects loyal; parents be loving, children reverential; elder siblings gentle, younger siblings respectful; husbands good, wives obedient. Three of these five relationships pertain within the family while two are the extensions of family relationships, which is indicative of the importance of family institution.

Moreover, *ren* and *li* in fact is a system of moral codes in the Chinese context predisposing a society in which relationship is complementary, asymmetrical, and reciprocally obligatory. The relationships are asymmetrical in that behavior that is appropriate to one party in each pair of the five relationships is not identical with what is appropriate for the other party. It is just this asymmetry that predisposes role differentiation and details its specifics.

Under the influence of *ren* and *li*, the core concept of Confucianism, *lunli* ethic principle has ruled over China for several thousands of years. *Lun* in Chinese means the hierarchical order while *li*, (meaning principle in Chinese) homophonic with *li*, in fact means exactly what *li* means. Therefore *li* becomes the important principle in China. That is why China becomes a country of *lunli*, both in terms of politics and morality. And when we say that China lays emphasis on *li* (for example, *li yi zhi bang*), we do mean to say that it is a country with *lunli* ethic.

In short, the Chinese people, no matter what social positions, can all best be characterized by the spirit of *li*--people from all walks of life have each of his or her own *li*. People can only do what *li* allows them to. All the concepts, all the ways of life and patterns of behavior are underpinned by the principle of *li*.

2. Differences in Interpersonal Relationships

Under the impact of individualism in English culture and *ren* and *li* in Chinese culture, two entirely different interpersonal relationships exist on the globe.

2.1 Individualism vs. Harmonious Relationship

As mentioned above, people in the West emphasize the importance of individualism and human rights. Individual identity, individual rights, individual needs are emphasized on 'I' identity rather than on 'we' identity and the interest of the group or in-group, and obligations and commitment. As some scholars have pointed out, there is only one principle in the West that regulates interpersonal relationship and that is individualism. Hofstede (1991) defines individualism as follows:

Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: Everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family.

The core building block of individualism is the 'autonomous self'. Individualism tends to dispose each member of the community to serve himself from the mass of his fellows and to draw apart with his family and his friends, so that after he has thus formed a little circle of his own, he willingly leaves society at largely to itself. Almost every American believes that 'God helps those that help themselves.' Anything that would violate making their own decision, judging for themselves, making their own decision, living their lives as they see fit, is not only morally wrong, but not accorded with religion. The obligation and responsibility are contractual in nature. Even though Americans get involved, they are also committed to equality and individualism--they can cut free from anybody they are involved and define their own self.

While *ren*, the most important principle underlying almost all aspects of the people's life in the Chinese context, deals with relationship. Obviously, relationship must be the predominant value in China. The Chinese society, traditionally speaking, is hierarchical in nature. In a society as such, *li* is used as norms and means to maintain this hierarchical social order by differentiating the difference between the emperor and his subjects, father and his sons and daughters, brothers and obligations according to their positions. If the people in lower social positions are obedient to and respect those in higher positions and the humble respect the venerate, the younger respect the elder as *li* advocates, the society will be in order. As a matter of fact, *li* advocates nothing but vertical or hierarchical relationships and its essential function is to build social order upon this hierarchical relationships. It functions in the society as law does in the Western society. Virtually, every person, ever since he or she was born, was placed into complex and orderly warps and woofs of hierarchical relationships. Though people's social status may be unequal, they are equally essential in making the whole society operate.

What calls for attention is that harmonious relationship that the Chinese people seek to build up is based on the fulfillment of the obligations and responsibilities ascribed to each member of the society according to his or her social position. In this light, the reciprocity is asymmetrical in nature.

Today relationship in China has become so important that it is virtually being taken the most advantage of almost in all kinds of everyday transactions and activities, such as promotions of one's position, opening up a new enterprise, transferring from one place to another, etc. Relationship, in this case, however, refers to people including relatives, friends, or even useful persons.

2.2 Solidarity vs. Power

Solidarity and power relationship are a universal phenomenon in all the societies. However, different societies generally have different attitude towards these two relationships. Comparatively speaking, solidarity may be more important in one culture while power may be more important in another. In other words, people in one culture may be sensitive to solidarity while people in a different culture may be sensitive to power.

Solidarity is a sociolinguistic term not only referring to the equal and informal relationship, but also the desire for the setting up of equality, intimacy, common interest, sharing, etc. Whatever it may possibly mean, its core notion is equality. The emphasis on solidarity over power on the Western side can best be demonstrated in the use of first name in everyday interaction. Even words functioning as compliment is more often than not used by American women to achieve solidarity. Each member of the Western society enjoys independence and equality, which lays the foundation for the establishment of solidarity relationship as the main relationship in the social interactions in the West. Solidarity as an embodiment of equality and the result of individualism is no doubt a dominant value in the Western culture.

Comparatively speaking, power relationship is the predominant norm or value orientation in the Chinese culture, just as individualism is the important value orientation in the Western culture. The Chinese social structure is basically hierarchical or vertical in nature and the principle of *ren* and *li* help reinforce the asymmetrical or vertical relationship by advocating the maintenance of differences between the emperor and his subjects, father and his son, elder brother and younger brother, male and female; and obedience of the lower position to those who are superior in the society. Logically, in terms of interpersonal relationship, it has become an unwritten rule that authority and power relationship should be valued in daily transactions. What authority refers to vary with time. Nowadays it may include, for example, leaders at different levels, the elder and the aged, and even people who are considered to be useful in the society. In old times, government officials meant control or govern while common people must be obedient to government officials,

the phenomenon of which in Chinese is called *shun*. And in old times, *shun* meant *xun* (meaning adhere to or follow in English). The implication is clear: authority is respected and listened to and power relationship, in sociolinguistic terms, is highly valued. Power relationship is best demonstrated in the use of titles or honorifics when addressing occurs. Power in case of point here is associated with age, education, social class, sex, social positions and ranks, and family relationships, etc. today.

To make clear the differences in interpersonal relationships in different cultures, it seems proper to take address forms in different cultures as an example. In conditions that terms of address are used as politeness intensifiers of greetings in the two languages, Chinese kinship address system is much more complicated which reflects the asymmetrical relationship in Chinese society different from English culture to some extent.

Differences of greetings in English and Chinese also largely exist in lexis. It is well known that address terms are frequently used as greetings in both cultures, but there are some differences. Here the author just emphasizes on differences of personal pronouns and terms of address in the two languages.

2.2.1 Difference in the Use of Personal Pronouns

First, Chinese has two forms of the second person pronoun, i.e., ‘*ni*’ and ‘*nin*’ like ‘*tu*’ and ‘*vous*’ in French with the latter being more polite, whereas English has only one form, i.e., ‘*you*’.

Second, personal pronouns are more widely used in English greetings than in Chinese. Compare the use of second person pronouns in greetings in the two languages:

(1) English: How are you?

Chinese: *Zuijinzenmoyang* (How [are you] recently?)

(2) English: How is your work?

Chinese: *Gongzuozenmoyang* (How [is your] work?)

The first person pronoun is also sparingly used in Chinese greetings. For example:

Jiuyangjiuyang ([I] have long respected [you].)

Xinghuixinghui ([I am] pleased to meet you.)

2.2.2 English and Chinese Terms of Address

As a matter of fact, terms of address are frequently used as summons or politeness intensifiers of greetings. Take English for example:

(1) A: Tom!

B: What?

(2) A: Good morning, Mr. Smith.

B: Good morning, Mrs. Jones.

‘Tom’ in example (1) is used as a summon; ‘Mr. Smith’ and ‘Mrs. Jones’ in example (2) are used as politeness intensifiers. Similar use can be found in Chinese. For example, ‘Professor Wang!’, ‘*Xiao Zhang*, have you eaten?’, etc.

However, although English and Chinese terms of address are similar in function, they differ considerably in address system. Next some special features in Chinese system of address terms will be examined.

First, Chinese has evolved a much more complex system of address terms in kinship than English has. The age difference of the same generation and the difference between paternal and maternal relationship are reflected in kinship address terms in Chinese but not in English. Table 1 (Chao, 1968, p.200-201) might be helpful to compare the difference.

Insert Table 1 about here

The Chinese terms of address in the table are to be directed to the person in the brackets (Chao, 1968, p.200-201).

Second, Chinese has evolved a whole set of honorific and humble bound forms prefixed to terms of address, one’s house and so on, in place of first and second person pronouns (Chao, 1968, p.212-213). The prefixes ‘*gui*’ (noble), ‘*bi*’ (humble) and ‘*bi*’ (shabby) are often used for the sake of politeness in social interactions, especially in greetings. For example:

A: *Qingwenninguixing* [What is] your noble name?

B: *Bixingzhang* [My] humble name [is] Zhang.

The above segments from greetings are extremely polite and formal though somewhat out of fashion. There are some other prefixes available in Chinese to increase the degree of politeness, for instance, ‘*zun*’ (respected) and ‘*da*’ (great) in

'*zunxingdaming* (your respectable family name and great given name), '*ling* (excellent)' in '*lingzun* (your father)' and '*lingtang* (your mother)' and '*han* (humble)' in '*hanshe* (my house)', etc(Chao, 1968, p.214).

There are two common prefixes in modern Chinese, i.e., '*lao* (old)' and '*xiao* (little/young)' affixed to people's family names to form direct and indirect terms of address widely used in everyday conversation to enhance solidarity between interactants.

Third, Chinese has evolved a set of honorific terms of direct address for persons of various social status and professions which are illustrated in table 2.

Insert Table 2 about here

Since the founding of the People's Republic, the Chinese government has promoted the use of '*tongzhi* (comrade)' as a common address term which indicates symmetric social relationship between speakers instead of '*taitai* (madam)', '*xiaojie* (miss)' and other direct terms of address which indicate asymmetric social relationship (Scotton and Zhu, 1983, p.471-494). In recent years '*xiansheng* (master)' has become a common polite direct term of address used for most types of addresses (Scotton and Zhu, 1984, p.326-344). Moreover, '*taitai* (madam)', '*xiansheng* (master)' and '*xiaojie* (miss)' have become fashionable address terms again.

To conclude the above system of address in English and Chinese, at least two sources of variation in the use of greeting expressions can be identified. First, there are cultural differences. Second, even within the same culture, there is considerable freedom to select one or other of the acceptable general patterns of greetings on an individual basis. They briefly illustrate the differences in terms of values and interpersonal relationships underlying greetings in different cultures.

Greeting behaviors are important tools for establishing and maintaining social relationships. Yet they may impose special problems in intercultural communication as a result of different cultural backgrounds. They are influenced by the orientations of interpersonal relationships which in turn are underpinned by value orientations. Understanding and adapting to each culture's value systems is the key to promoting communication across cultures.

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Table 1. English and Chinese Kinship Terms

English	Chinese
Brother	<i>Gege</i> (elder brother) <i>Didi</i> (younger brother)
Sister	<i>Jiejie</i> (elder sister) <i>Meimei</i> (younger sister)
grandfather	<i>Yeye</i> (father's father) <i>Gonggong</i> (mother's father)
grandmother	<i>Nainai</i> (father's mother) <i>laolao</i> (mother's mother)
Uncle	<i>Bobo</i> (father's elder brother) <i>shushu</i> (father's younger brother) <i>jiujiu</i> (mother's brother)
aunt	<i>Guma</i> (father's elder sister) <i>Gugu</i> (father's younger sister) <i>Shenshen</i> (father's brother's wife) <i>Yima</i> (mother's elder sister) <i>Yi</i> (mother's younger sister) <i>Jiuma</i> (mother's brother's wife)

Table 2.

Indirect Address	Direct Address
<i>Jiaoshi</i> (teacher)	<i>Laoshi</i> (senior teacher)
<i>Yisheng</i> (doctor)	<i>Yishi</i> (master doctor)
<i>gongren, siji</i> (worker, driver, etc.)	<i>Shifu</i> (master)