

The Difference of Time Culture Between Eastern And Western View: A Linguistic Perspective

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Abstract—Time is the basic element of the motion of substances. Different country has different time culture. Only by knowing the differences between countries can we avoid cultural shocks in intercultural communications. This essay is making a comparison between China and America by studying some proverbs and sayings, to see the differences between eastern and western view of time, in linguistic perspective.

Keywords—Time culture, Lineal time concept, Cyclic time concept, proverbs

I. INTRODUCTION

Time is of great importance to human beings. Different view of time may cause culture crashes in intercultural communications. In a culture, the members' view of time and the way they use it may manifest their views of the world and even what class their society belongs to.

In 1955, Anthropologist Edward T. Hall elaborated how the different concept of time lead to misunderstanding between people of different culture. In the magazine "The Scientific Americans", Hall stated: "If an ambassador had been waiting for a foreign visitor for half an hour, then the ambassador should put it in this way, 'if this visitor simply apologize for being late, it wouldn't be considered as an insult to this ambassador'. The time system of this visitor's country may consist of different elements that he won't aware of the seriousness of his being late as the ambassador himself may think it was. You will never know to what extent really need apologizing until you get to know the time system in their culture. Different culture has completely different understanding of units of time." [1]

That is the topic this essay is focusing on: the differences between Eastern and Western view of time, in a cultural perspective.

II. THE DIFFERENCE IN TIME CONCEPTS

Edward T. Hall said in the book <The silent language> that Westerners are of typical lineal time concept, while the Easterners are of cyclic one.

A. Lineal time concept

In the westerners traditional ideas, time was compared to a line, a running river, time is straight. It is called "lineal view of time".

Being deeply influenced by the "lineal view of time", Americans' view of time is lineal. Americans are "future" oriented. The typical American believes in trying something new in an attempt to make life better. Because life was getting easier, people assumed that it was getting better. So Americans are initiative and, always willing to try something new, challenging.

B. Cyclic time concept

Hall pointed out, cyclic concept means, the change of time coordinate with nature. That is, time returns to itself and it eternally moves follow the orbit of motion in a cyclical or spiral way. For instance, the alternation of day and night, the back and forth of the seasons, months fling and even the cyclicity of the growth of plants. All are cyclic.

Arthur Schopenhauer had ever said in the <Easterners' view>, time is like a spiraling circle, the descending segments are the past, the rising ones are the future, the intersections are the present.

Influenced by the cyclic time concept, Chinese people have formed national characteristics. Everything is moving in a circle way, backward and forward. Therefore, the past is of great value in judging the present and future. Chinese people always behave carefully according to the rules, which have been "proved" to be true by the predecessors. In this sense, Chinese are more passive towards things, being reluctant to new things.

III. COMPARISON OF TIME CULTURE BETWEEN EASTERN AND WESTERN COUNTRIES.

Time culture is flexible in different culture. Here, let us focus on the differences between Eastern and Western, stating China as the representative of the Eastern and America as the representative of the Western.

Time culture is something abstract. You are not likely to ask for it directly. This paper would endeavor to research on the proverbs and sayings about time, aiming to make a comparison of different concept of time.

A. Proverbs and Sayings

Proverbs and sayings are the quintessences of human beings' intelligence. They are the models that guide a group of people's behavior. The following table compares some proverbs and sayings both in America and China .

TABLE I PROVERBS AND SAYINGS

Proverbs	In English	In Chinese
TIME'S VALUE	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time is money. 2. Time is life. (Franklin) 3. Time is efficiency. 4. Nature, time and patience are the three great physicians. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time means life, Time means speed, Time means strength. (Guo moruo) 2. An inch of time is worth an inch of gold. An inch of gold will not buy an inch of time. To idle away one's own time equals to suicide, to idle away others' equals to murdering. (Lu xun)
TIME'S EFFECTS	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 5. Time works wonders. 6. Time is the measurement of achievement, money is the measurement of goods. (Francis Bacon) <p>Time is the father of truth.</p>	<p>Long road tries a horse ,and long time tries a man.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Time provides the scope for the development of one's ability and other accomplishments.
TIME'S PASSING	<p>Time and tide wait for no man.</p> <p>Time flies.</p> <p>Time has wings.</p> <p>I wasted time and now doth time waste me. (William Shakespeare)</p>	<p>Time flies like an flying arrow, time runs like a running shuttle.</p> <p>The decisive part of a year is in spring; the decisive part of a day is morning; the decisive thing for a man all his life is in diligence.</p>

B. Similarities

In the following aspects like time's effects, it's passing, efficiency and opportunity, the appropriate time, both Chinese and American's share the same opinion. To sum up, in either Chinese or Americans' point of view, time passes quickly, it's not controlled by human beings. We should cherish time by making good use of it. Everything should be done in the right time, if you want it to turn out to be a success.

C. Differences

a) Value and time

Both Chinese and Americans value time greatly. In my opinion, it is common to all human beings that time is life. Time is thought to be something as visible as any materials. To most Americans, time is something closely linked with life, money and efficiency. It manifests in some words, for instance, "time is on, it is kept, it can be borrowed, it can be used, it can be gained, it can be saved, it can be spent, it can be wasted, it can be lost, it can be given and it can be killed..."[2]

Westerners consider time as important as money, they said, time is the only thing that may favorably be compared with money, which is of the most influential. They are always in the stage of shortage. To most Americans, time and money are the basic elements lacking permanently for existence of human beings.

On the contrary, Chinese people value time in a different way. Time is something natural. It cannot be bought. "An inch of time is worth an inch of gold, however, an inch of gold will not buy an inch of time." Time passes quickly, having nothing to do with human beings' consciousness. Time is seldom linked with money, economy, especially in ancient China. There are some old saying ,like "Everything is ready except the east wind.", "Man proposes, god disposes."Ancient Chinese were used to waiting for the proper time. Worshipping the god greatly, they thought the god is the one who decides whether you succeed or fail.From their view of time, we can know their view of value, even their value of the world. Let's still look at some proverbs and sayings.

TABLE II PROVERBS SHOWS CULTURAL VIEWS

EAST	WEST
<p>What is possible depends on the circumstance.</p> <p>One does not make the wind but is blown by it.</p> <p>Greatness of a person may be measured by one's humility, not by one's assertiveness.</p> <p>The intelligent always behavior like foolish.</p>	<p>All things are possible.</p> <p>Where there is a will, there is a way.</p> <p>I am the captain of my soul; the captain of my fate.</p> <p>The word impossible is only in the dictionary.</p> <p>It's the sneaky wheel that gets the oil.</p>

In this sense, Chinese are passive. By comparison, Americans seems to be initiative,they believe "God helps those who help themselves."

b) Punctuality

In America: as we see from table A, Westerners view punctuality as the politeness of a princes, the soul of business. They learn to treat time seriously from their childhood. If the party begins at 7,you may arrive in 7:05,but not later than 7:15.For those who arrive after 7:20,they have to "murmur" to apologize. It is considered impolite to arrive in 7:30.The hosts may worry about the guests, thinking the possibility of accidents. An intellectual person would do anything but keep his friends or colleges waiting for even an hour long. This behavior commits a kind of neglecting, and if it so happens, any apologizing words are useless for its effects. Americans are also serious about "deadline" and "appoint time".

Things are different in China, especially in ancient China. I want to illustrate it by an abstracts from a novel. It is about a

love story in Qing Dynasty.

The first sentence means, “in order to show one’s haughty manners, he has to be late.” Here, it use the phrase “has to”. It was essential and commonly accepted that a powerful man should be late. “The hero thought about it seriously for a long time, finally, he decided to be one hour late for the feast. This manner was “neither overbearing nor servile”.

Even nowadays, there are still some people like to be late in order to show off. The higher rank he is in, the later he will be when going to appointments. Chances are that in the interview with some superstars, people are used to waiting for them, just because they are famous. Being late is to show off.

Therefore in traditional manners: punctuality is not well kept by Chinese in the old world. On the contrary, they would be late on purpose. It has something to do with one’s prestige, which is of great importance to Chinese.

c) Making an appointment

In western countries, if you want to pay a visit to a friend, to have a talk with a professor ,or a manager, you have to make an appointment beforehand, in case that you may disturb others schedule. The way of making an appointment varies according to the relationship between each other. There are many different rules in different ranks of the society, yet getting the permission or making an appointment show the respect to each other. Most of westerns make schedules . When talking, westerners would go straight into business after saying “hello” to each other, rather than running about like Chinese. When business is done, you should end the talk as soon as possible.

If it so happen that one fail to inform the guest before paying a visit to him, and things happen so suddenly that you have to call on him in very short notice, then, you should apologize and give sensible reasons. Meanwhile, do make words short in case that you take longer time than expected.

However, in China. Traditionally, appointment making are usually for important business. For close friends and relatives, they would enjoy playing the game of “surprise”, visiting guests with no notice at all. If appointments are necessary, people usually use the phrase (let’s not leave until we see each other.). In China, if someone says to you “I am visiting you on Sunday.” That probably means you have to wait at home for the whole Sunday. Chinese people’s sense of time and punctuality is not so strong as the westerners. Even when a Chinese is late, he (she) would not feel so guilty as westerners do.

d) The past, present and future

In Chinese, the old saying “The overturning of the chariot in front is a warning for the one behind. ” and “Don’t forget about things happened in the past ,it would be the teacher for those that follow.”tell us that, experiences are of such great importance that we cannot ignore. What happened in the past would be the very right judgment for the present and future. Therefore, in Chinese culture, age, experiences, teachers and the elders are the authorities. Teachers and elders are respected by Chinese. Teachers are called “Lao(old)shi”. People enjoy being addressed by adding Lao(old) in front of the family name.

In Americans’ point of view, past is past, it cannot be recalled. In contrast, they value the present. The present can judge whether what you have done in the past is right or not.

As for the future, both Chinese and Americans have the same idea. Nobody can tell what is happening tomorrow. However Americans are interested in “future”, they are “future oriented”. They believe that human beings are able to improve the present conditions. Actions and diligence do count for success. American enterprises always set targets for half a year. They are thought to have the virtue of “effort—optimism” (C.Kluckhohn and F.Kluckhohn, 1947). Nothing is impossible to a determined person.

The origin of the modern Americans’ view of time dates from the era of colonization. At the beginning, workers worked 4 hours per day, paying little attention to efficiency. However ,everything are replaced by the “time thrift” concept.(Richard Brown,1976,43-44).It had been prompted strongly by Benjamin Franklin, who warned people: “Always keep in mind, Time is money!” It resulted to the popularity of clocks and watches. By the year 1840,clocks and watches extended all over the U.S.A. They became a necessity to every family. Time and efficiency changed Americans’ life.

IV. ELASTICITY OF TIME CULTURE IN CHINA

There are no better or worse in time culture, however, it is adaptable. It would adjust itself to adapt the new trend.

As I had stated, Chinese culture is cyclic. The traditional sense of time is not so strong. However, since The Great Reform and Opening to the world, China has experienced a great deal of changes, either in economy or culture. Does the time culture in China remain the same, or it has changed somehow?

In order to illustrate this question, I carried on a small survey on it. I investigated about 100 persons, most of whom were young people. Their academic credentials ranges from middle school to undergraduates.

There are 10 multiple choices and one question-and-answer in this questionnaire. They can be divided into five aspects: the attitude towards lateness, making good use of time, sense of time, punctuality between people in different ranks, making appointments and words to demonstrate one’s sense of time.

I conclude that: the updated Chinese concept of time has changed a lot, the latest Chinese time concept are changing, driving closer and closer towards the westerners.

V. SUMMARY

Time culture varies from country to country. It is formed over many years and has some effects to the characters of a nation. Only by making clear of the differences can we avoid cultural shock in intercultural communications. Generally speaking, Americans and people in Western countries hold the lineal time concept. Americans are “future oriented” and initiative, willing to accept new things.

On the contrary, Chinese people hold the cyclic view of time. Their sense of time is not as strong as westerners. However, a small survey shows that, in the new era, modern Chinese time sense are changing. Most Chinese, especially younger generations, value punctuality because time nowadays is closely linked with money and life. The latest Chinese time concept are drawing closer and closer towards the westerners. It is the result of economic and cultural globalization. The concept of time culture is adaptable.

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