MAJOR FACTORS OF CULTURAL DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE ANGLO-AMERICAN AND THE CHINESE AND CONSEQUENT CULTURALLY-LOADED LEXEMES

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Introduction

In recent years there has been a 'culture craze' sweeping over the linguistic circles at home and abroad. Quite a number of sociolinguists, applied linguists and foreign language teachers have been engaged in the study of the relationship between language and culture. In China many researches have been undertaken in this field and the past few years saw the publication of some academic works and papers on cultural difference and linguistic difference between English and Chinese on the various levels of syntax, lexis, semantics and discourse (Xu, 1980, 1986; Hu, 1988; Deng & Liu, 1989; Gu & Lu, 1990).

On the whole, there are two approaches to the study of the relationship between language and culture and of linguistic and cultural differences between English and Chinese. One takes linguistic differences as the point of departure and then probe into reflection of culture by language. This approach lays stress on how language mirrors culture rather than how culture influences language, and seems unable to sufficiently and systematically expose the root causes of linguistic differences, for linguistic differences stem from cultural differences and only by clearing up what cultural factors contribute to linguistic differences can we really see the inner link between language and culture. The other approach is one that starts with cultural differences before examining their influence on language and the con-
sequent linguistic differences. This from-culture-to-language approach is usually what the discipline of intercultural communication adopts in its study of socio-cultural variables that affect communication between people of different cultural backgrounds.

With this approach, the present thesis attempts to look into some major factors of cultural differences between the Anglo-American (i.e. the British and the American) and the Chinese (mostly the Han nationality) from the perspective of intercultural communication, discuss the influence of these cultural factors on the lexical system of both English and Chinese, and exemplify the influence by furnishing a number of lexical items loaded with unique cultural message or distinctive cultural information, i.e. 'culturally-loaded lexemes' as is termed in this thesis. The principal factors of cultural difference in question will be grouped into six categories. Though by no means exhaustive, most of them are considered in the field of intercultural communication as major socio-cultural variables that affect interaction between members of diverse cultural settings. A cross-cultural contrast or comparison will be made between certain aspects of Anglo-American and Chinese cultures and not a few culturally-loaded lexemes given as linguistic evidence of cultural influence on the English and Chinese lexis. At the end of the thesis an analysis will be made of the semantic features of such lexemes
in English and Chinese, with emphasis on their semantic differences that often constitute a barrier to the intercultural verbal communication between native speakers of English and the Chinese-speaking Han people.

Chapter 1 The Dynamic Process of Cultural Influence on the English and Chinese Lexis: Input & Output

1.1. Culture revisited

Much has been said of the definition of culture since 1871 when the British anthropologist Sir Edward Tylor first defined it as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society" (Tylor, 1958:1). So far, however, no precise definition has been found, for culture permeates every aspect of human life and is so pervasive that it seems impossible to give an adequate definition of it.

Yet, culture can be approached from different angles and defined in different ways. Generally, culture in the narrow sense refers to "the sum total of a people's achievements and contributions to civilization: art, music, literature, architecture, technology, scientific discoveries, and philosophy" (Allen & Valette, 1977:325), often referred to as 'large C culture' or 'culture with a big C'. In addition, culture in the broad sense stands for "the way of life of a people, for the sum of their learned behavior patterns, attitudes, and material things" (Hall, 1959:20).
On the other hand, the culture of a society shapes and influences its linguistic system, and thus language is a product of a culture. In the interaction between culture and language, most of the elements of a culture exert an influence on the various levels of language, especially on lexis, because lexis is the most fundamental subsystem of language and the most active component as well. Lexis is most sensitive to development of a culture or society, so any socio-cultural changes will soon leave their traces on it.

The influence of culture on English and Chinese lexis can be taken as a dynamic process and certain cultural elements as the input, which may embrace almost every aspect of culture—world views, values, political and religious beliefs, history, literature, art, geography, family and social roles, interpersonal relationship, symbolic conception of nature, environment, way of life, customs, etiquette, pattern of thought, verbal language, concept of time, nonverbal behaviors, to name just a few.

1.3. Output of cultural influence on lexis: culturally-loaded lexemes in English and Chinese

Since culture affects the lexical system of language, "each culture places its own individual imprint on word symbols" (Porter & Samovar, 1985:27), consequently putting out lexical items that mirror particular cultural uniqueness or distinction. That is, these lexical items carry unique cultural message or
cultural distinctive information. In a word, they are culturally loaded. Moreover, the content and the amount of cultural load in such lexical items are culturally conditioned. As a result, their denotative and connotative meanings differ in English and Chinese, which will be analysed at the end of the thesis.

The idea of 'culturally loaded words' was first put forth by Professor Xu Guozhang (1980) in a most thought-provoking paper, in which he proposed that some words have cultural loads and the loads vary with cultures. In the present thesis the term 'culturally-loaded lexemes' is employed instead, partly because 'lexemes are words and phrases that a dictionary would list under a separate entry' (Lyons, 1977:23) and partly because idiomatic expressions and even proverbial sayings also take on national coloring and socio-cultural meanings, as can be proved in most of the following chapters. For these reasons, the term 'culturally-loaded lexemes' is used to cover words, phrases, idioms and some proverbs.

1.4. Major factors contributing to cultural differences between the Anglo-American and the Chinese

We have pointed that cultural elements as input of the process of cultural influence on lexis cover almost every aspect of a culture. However, some cultural elements become more important and influential than others when human communication occurs cross-culturally. When people of different cultural settings interact differences in certain aspects of culture may affect or put impediments to their communicative encounters, and even cause
misunderstanding.

Just as the proverb goes, "Every land has its laugh, and every corn has its chaff", "East is East, and West is West", each nation has unique content in its culture. This also holds true for the British, American, and Chinese cultures. Difference in particular cultural elements between these peoples, like political and economic systems, history, geography, belief and value systems, customs, way of living, etc., may result in some cultural uniqueness or distinction. By cultural uniqueness, we mean that certain cultural element exists only in one culture and is absent in the other culture, and by cultural distinction, that certain component of one culture differs from its counterpart in the other. This kind of uniqueness or distinction in one culture in contrast to that in the other is what we call 'cultural difference'.

Although it is not easy to work out an exhaustive list of factors contributing to cultural differences between the Anglo-American and Chinese cultures, this does not exclude the possibility of determining some major areas where cultural difference may arise when the British, the American and the Chinese communicate interculturally. Porter and Samovar (1985) identify some major socio-cultural variables that affect intercultural communication and group them under three categories: perception (belief, value, attitude systems, world view and social organization), verbal processes (verbal language and patterns of thought), and nonverbal processes (nonverbal behaviors, concept
of time, and use of space). With these variables as a theoretical basis we have determined some principal cultural elements that influence English and Chinese lexis and regarded them as major factors contributing to cultural differences between the Anglo-American nations and the Chinese people, even though they are by no means comprehensive or exhaustive. These major factors of cultural difference are divided into six categories under which they will be contrasted or compared respectively, along with exemplifications of many culturally-loaded lexemes in English and Chinese as linguistic evidence and output of cultural influence on English and Chinese lexis. Given below are the six categories to be discussed in detail in the following chapters: A) perception: world views, beliefs, and values; B) social organization and relationship; C) symbolization of objects in nature; D) environments and way of life; E) verbal processes, and F) nonverbal processes.
Chapter 2  Perception: World Views, Beliefs, and Values

In the field of intercultural communication, 'perception' refers to "the internal process by which we select, evaluate, and organize stimuli from the external environment" (Porter & Samovar, 1985:24). In other words, it is the way in which we perceive natural objects and social events. Included in 'perception' are three major cultural elements: world view, belief, and value, which are considered in the thesis as chief sources of cultural difference between the Anglo-American and the Chinese.

2.1. World views

As one of the important elements found in the perceptual aspect of intercultural communication, world view refers to the way we look out on our world, including philosophical issues about human beings, nature, the universe, etc.

Take views of the creation of the universe as an example. Most Westerners "have been dominated by the view that the universe was initially created, and has since been externally controlled by a divine power" (Kim, 1985:401). This world outlook has produced many culturally-loaded lexemes in English, as mirrored in the words and phrases like 'the Creator', 'the Maker', 'the Master Workman', 'the Author of all things', 'the First Cause', 'Sovereign of the Universe', etc., all of which mean 'God'. On the other hand, a traditional Chinese cosmological view holds that there are two opposing principles in the universe, i.e. 'yin' and 'yang',

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one feminine, dark and negative, and one masculine, bright and positive, whose interaction influences the destinies of creatures and things. This cosmology is reflected in such Chinese lexemes as 阴阳 (geomancer), 阴文 (characters cut in intaglio), 阳文 (characters cut in relief), 阴差阳错 (a mistake due to a strange combination of circumstances), 阴虚 (deficiency of yin), 阴阳异路 (the dead and the living are in different roads), 寒热 (chill and fever), 上火 (suffer from excessive internal heat), 乾坤 (heaven and earth, male and female), 虚实 (feeble and forceful), 刚柔 (firm and gentle), etc., which are loaded with this unique Chinese culture. Another view maintains that the physical universe is composed of five elements, i.e. metal, wood, water, fire and earth, as mirrored in五行, 水火不相容 (mutual aversion), 相生相克 (mutual promotion and restraint between the five elements), and so on.

Another example is about the shape of the earth. Westerners have long considered the earth ball-like and thus refer to it as 'this earthly round'. Other two expressions, 'in all the round of Nature' (i.e. everywhere in the world) and 'all round', also reflect this concept of the earth. On the contrary, ancient Chinese believed the earth to be square or octagonal, and the sky, round. They described them as 天圆地方. As a result, 地方, 四面八方, 四通八达, etc. entered the Chinese vocabulary long before the word 地球 did.
2.2. Beliefs

"Beliefs, in a general sense, can be viewed as individually held subjective probabilities that some object or event possesses certain characteristics" (Porter & Samovar, 1985:25). Two kinds of belief commonly cherished by people are political beliefs and religious beliefs.

Political beliefs differ from culture to culture and even from person to person within the same culture. Words and phrases about politics in English and Chinese are so innumerable as to call for a dictionary of political terms. To illustrate influence of political beliefs on lexis, however, let us cite two cases in America and China respectively.

Americans believe in the presidential election system. This political faith has given rise to words and expressions like 'canvass', 'coalition', 'caucus', 'primary', 'electoral college', 'favorite son', 'on someone's coattails' (with the benefit of another's political prestige), 'jump on the bandwagon' (support a candidate who seems assured of success), 'stump'(make political campaign speeches), etc., which are characteristic of the American culture and consequently heavily loaded with this cultural uniqueness.

The other case is the political beliefs of most Chinese people during the 'Cultural Revolution', when 'Leftspeak' (Wang, 1989:16) affected the Chinese language so negatively. Here are
just a tiny handful of them: 违反派 (rebel faction), 走资派 (capitalist roaders), 革命闯将 (revolutionary pathbreaker), 割资本主义尾巴 (cut off the capitalist tail), 反潮流 (go against the current), 斗私批修 (struggle against pri-
vatism and criticize revisionism), 忠字舞 (loyalty dances),
which serve as an index to the social reality in China during
those tumultuous years when the whole nation was dominated by
one political belief, i.e. 'It's OK to make revolution'.

Now let us discuss religious beliefs. For a long time in
history Christianity has been followed by most Westerners while
Buddhism and Taoism have owned a number of worshippers in China.
Naturally, stories about and doctrines of these three religious
faiths find expression in many English and Chinese lexemes.

For instance, the Bible teaches Christians not to resist
any evil. (If one is given a slap on the right cheek he is sup-
powed to 'turn the other cheek' for more) After Adam ate the
'forbidden fruit' it got choked up in his throat, hence 'Adam's
apple'. And "it was because of the apple that God drove us from
paradise and made us earn our daily bread 'by the sweat of our
brow'" (Sutcliffe & Berman, 1978:86). Given below are some more
allusions to the Bible, though a drop in the bucket, to exemplify
Christian and biblical influence of the English lexicon: 'a good
Samaritan', 'Ishmael', 'Judas kiss', 'as patient as Job', 'as
wise as Solomon', 'bear one's cross', 'search one's heart', 'go
to the dogs', 'a lost sheep', 'sheep and goats', and so on.
Another illustration of Buddhist and Taoist influence on the Chinese lexis. It is said that Bodhisattva is kind-hearted and merciful, hence the set phrase 菩萨心肠. Buddhist believers are supposed to burn incense (烧高香) at ordinary times but not 'to embrace Buddha's feet (抱佛脚) when in need. Some followers become monks or nuns late in life (半路出家). Once initiated, however, they usually beat wood fish (敲木鱼) when chanting scriptures and at times give an empty talk about Buddhist creeds without practice (口头禅). Although the phrases in brackets are now used figuratively, they are derived from the Buddhist belief and practices. Other lexemes loaded with this cultural aspect are such phrases as 开山祖, 成正果, 老法门, 暮鼓晨钟, 顶礼膜拜, 献花献佛, 鬼八卦, 护身符, 道高一尺, 魔高一丈, and so on.

Superstitious beliefs in both the cultures also affect the English and Chinese lexis. "It is unlucky, for instance, to walk under a ladder, or to spill salt, or break a mirror...whereas a horseshoe or a piece of white heather bring good luck, and people jokingly 'touch wood' to prevent the return of a past misfortune" (Tregidgo, 1971:72). Sneezing is associated with death because it is widely believed that sneezing can expel the soul, and thus life, from the body. That is why native speakers of English say '(God) bless you' to a sneezer as a charm against the danger of death. They 'touch wood' or 'knock
on wood' for continuous good luck or against something unpleasant. The phrase 'ear burning', as "a sign of some distant malice and violence" (Tuleja, 1987:190), is used when someone is speaking ill of another out of that person's hearing. The theatrical greeting 'Break a leg' is said to an actor as a wish for luck because "it is bad luck to wish a person 'good luck' before a performance" (Sutcliffe & Berman, 1978:178). Even the verbal phrases like 'break a mirror', 'walk under a ladder', 'spill salt' have some cultural loads, for they are associated with bad luck in the Westerners' mind.

Likewise, superstitious beliefs in China find expression in many lexical items, such as 财神爷 (a wealthy person or source of wealth), 桃符 (Spring Festival couplets), 狐狸精 (seductive woman), 迷魂汤 (magic potion), 夜游神 (night owl), 刀山火海 (most dangerous places or most severe trials), 生死簿 (something that determines a person's fate), 周王债 (usurious loan), 活阎王 (an extremely cruel and violent person), 替死鬼 (scapegoat), etc.

2.3. Values

"Values are more general ideas, also strongly held, about what is desirable and undesirable" (Persell, 1984:118). In other words, they are culturally derived notions the individuals share about what is right or wrong, good or bad, true or false. Many studies have been conducted on basic American values (Seelye, et al., 1984:37-42; Persell, 1984:112-113; Hess, 1985:77; Deng, 1988:10, 52-37).
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