The Comparative Study of Culture Differences on Chinese and English Idioms

Manling Wang
Lanzhou Jiaotong University
1403091707@qq.com

Abstract: Language is the carrier of national culture and the medium of human expression thoughts and communicating feelings. Idiom is a special phenomenon and plays an important role in language. Both English and Chinese idioms bear different national cultural features and cultural information, also they are closely related to their cultures and traditions. The article makes a comparative study of English and Chinese idioms from a cultural perspective. It analyzes and compares the culture differences in three aspects that are geographical environment, historical events and fable stories.

Keywords: English idioms, Chinese idioms, Comparative study, Culture.

1. Introduction

Idioms are the core and essence of language and fully reflected a nation's geography, history, social system, social views and attitudes. The idiom highly condenses the value orientation and belief of the national culture. The definitions of the word “idiom” in English are varied in the different dictionaries. In Oxford English Dictionary, the definition is “a group of words whose meaning cannot be deduced from those of the individual words”. In Webster's New World Dictionary of the American Language, the definition is “an established phrase, construction or expression contrary to the usual pattern of the language or having a meaning different from the literal”. Eugene Nida, an American translator, believes that translation is the communication between two cultures. For a truly successful translation, it is more important to be familiar with two cultures than to master two languages. Because words only have meaning in the cultural context. Therefore, by comparing culture connotation of English and Chinese idioms, scholars can gain a deeper understanding of the culture of English and Chinese then trends of current language development.

2. Classification of English Idioms and Chinese Idioms

Idioms are unique fixed expressions that are formed during the use of language. Generalized English idioms include set phrases, allusions, proverb, slang, colloquialism and various idioms.

Chinese idioms can be roughly divided into Chinese set phrase, Chinese common sayings, Chinese proverbs, two-part allegorical sayings and Chinese maxims.

3. Geographical Environment

One of the essential reasons for the differences between English idioms and Chinese idioms is the difference of natural geographical environment. The climate is different, so their lifestyles are different. Different lifestyles can cause different material civilizations. At the same time, it will be derived from the concept of a variety of different beliefs, interests, habits, cultural and even psychological development direction, character, forming two distinct cultures.

3.1 Geographical Environment Reflected in English Idioms

Different regional cultures affect the associative meaning of vocabulary. The east wind is warm and the west wind is cold. People always give connotative meaning to those words that the east wind and the west wind to symbolize the warmth and decay of the world. Britain is the opposite. The east wind from Eurasia is very cold. The west wind from the Atlantic brings spring. The West Wind was written by British poet Shelley in this situation. The illustrious sentence is “O, wind, if winter comes can spring be far behind”. The maritime climate of the British is located in the Western Hemisphere. The summer in the British has a warm climate. Shakespeare sees his lover as summer in his sonnet. An exceedingly famous sentence that is “Shall I compare thee to a summer's day? Thou art more lovely and more temperate”.

British has a long history of marine civilization. A great number of English idioms have derived from the sea, shipping, marine climate and relevant experience. Such as fish in troubled waters; all at sea; get into deep water; swim like a fish; hook one's fish; etc.

3.2 Geographical Environment Reflected in Chinese Idioms

Chinese idiom is a part of the Chinese culture. The geographical environment exerts great influence on Chinese culture which cannot be separated from each other. In addition, idioms can reflect a certain geographical culture. These are some examples in the followings. Such as, 四面八方 (All directions; far and wide); 朝西 大 风 (Breathe the north-western wind; be down and out), and so on. China has abundant mineral resources and diverse climate. There are many Chinese idioms about climate and resources. For example, 两袖清风 (There is nothing but a breeze in the sleeves. The analogy is to be honest. It is also a metaphor for being poor); 金玉满堂 (Rich in wealth, rich in knowledge), and so on.
4. Historical Event

The dynasty alternation is frequent in Chinese feudal society. Foreign invasions are rare. Chinese traditional culture is relatively closed. Because foreign culture has little influence on Chinese culture. On the contrary, foreign culture has a great influence on British culture and idioms.

4.1 Historical Events Reflected in English Idioms

In British history, the Romans occupied the British Isles for nearly 400 years. Roman culture has a profound influence on British culture. Nowadays, people can find the shadow of Roman culture in English idioms. For example, Roman was not built in a day; Appeal to Caesar; Do in Roman as the Romans do. Britain and France had a bad relationship in one century ago. In order to complete for overseas hegemony, British and Netherlands fought a war in 17th. Therefore, the British have a bad impression of the French and the Dutch. Reflect on language, Dutch and French as idioms have a pejorative connotation in the context of English. For instance, go Dutch; in Dutch with somebody; excuse my French; take a French leave and so on.

4.2 Historical Events Reflected Chinese Idioms

China is an old country with a history of more than five thousand years. Chinese culture is profound, which contains a lot of unique culture. Many historical events and historical figures have a great contribution to Chinese idioms. For example, 上阵杀敌 (people are knowledgeable, but never practice); 毛遂自荐 (to recommend oneself); 三顾茅庐 (sincerely, invite somebody time and time again); 沉鱼落雁 (four great beauties in ancient time).

5. Fable Stories

From the perspective of the history of world culture, fables have emerged in the late Spring and Autumn Period. Protagonists of most stories in western fables are animals. The author adopts anthropomorphic techniques, and the article is vivid and humorous. Aesop's fables are independent fables, each of them with deep philosophical thoughts, reflecting Western value. However, Chinese fable is mainly narrative, which is obviously different from ancient Greek fables. The languages are basically four-character words, which are short, precise and meaningful.

5.1 Fable Stories Reflected in English Idioms

Fables are a form of literature that usually anthropomorphizes animals and things. Fable, using a story to illustrate a truth or philosophy, has short-form, appropriate metaphor, vivid images, profound implications. The fable story is condensed into idioms in the process of circulation.

Aesop's Fables are regarded as the father of Western fables and the most widely spread fable in world literature. It has a profound impact on philosophical thoughts and literary arts around the world. Many English idioms are derived from Aesop's fables. For example, Sour grape, Cry wolf, Kill the goose that lays the golden eggs and Pandora's box, etc.

5.2 Fable Stories Reflected in Chinese Idioms

Chinese idioms have their Source, background and metaphor. Taking “指鹿为马” for example, During the Spring and Autumn Period, king of Qi took a fancy to music. There were 300 musicians who were good at playing. There was a man who wouldn't play, pretend that he would, and he wanted to get through. One day the king asked them to play one by one. He was afraid of being known by others and fled the night. The metaphor for this idiom is that one has no ability to pretend to have the ability. There are many such idioms in Chinese history. Such as, 坐井观天 (to have tunnel vision); 画饼充饥 (draw cakes to allay hunger); 盲人摸象 (the blind and the elephant); and so on. These idioms illustrate that Chinese idioms have a profound culture.

6. Conclusion

As the essence of language, idiom can reflect national culture. In this article, contrastive method is applied to studying the cultural factor in Chinese idioms and English idioms. People can find many differences between English idioms and Chinese idioms in the aspects such as classification, cultural sources, geographical environment, historical events, fable stories, etc. Because they are the products of their unique cultures. It is beneficial to the development of cross-cultural communication.

References