

# **Exploration of Cultural Similarities and Differences in Custom-loaded Idioms between English and Chinese**

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## **Abstract**

This paper argues that there exist cultural similarities and differences in custom-loaded idioms between English and Chinese and explore the reasons for this kind of phenomenon in order to correctly understand and translate and apply Chinese and English idioms.

**Key words:** Similarities, differences, custom-loaded idioms, culture, communication.

## **1. Introduction**

Custom is an accepted way of behaving or of doing things in a society or a community. “So many countries, so many customs”, from this sentence we can see that every country has its unique custom. Idioms, which contain a lot of information about custom, will surely be closely connected with the custom. So the English and Chinese idioms, which contain a lot of cultural information, do have differences, which bring cross-cultural communion barriers between people. In these barriers, some are even insurmountable. So what’s the most important is to know the differences in Custom-loaded Idioms between English and Chinese.

Idioms are the language that derives from the long-term use of common words. These are the crystallization of the wisdom of people. Most of the idioms are concise, vivid, and contain historic and cultural meaning. Chinese and British idioms are of great differences, so that the information the idioms contain is disparate. If it is misunderstood or used improperly, there will be misunderstanding, and even the communication will be a failure. This requires that people should be familiar with the cultural information and fully understand them.

With the development of the world’s culture, a rich variety of language forms come into being, the idioms are one of the very important components. Both in the written language and spoken language, idioms are playing an increasingly significant role. Idioms, especially custom-loaded idioms, because of its brilliant images, vivid features, firmly establish an important position in language. Chinese Idioms, because they are most concise, vivid, are always welcomed in the political, cultural scientific and technological styles.

## **2. The Relationship between the Two Kinds of Idioms**

Concerning the relation between two cultures, most people will think about their differences.

It is inaccurate. All the cultures in the world have commonness as well as individuality. As we all know, all of the peoples live in the same world, so their cognition of the things and hypostasis is basically the same. Therefore, there must be lots of similarities in the languages. Both the Chinese idioms and English idioms are the things that people derived from the process of their practice and the understanding of the world, so besides the individualist, they also have commonness. For example, “fish in troubled waters” in English is almost equal to Chinese idiom “fish in muddy waters”.

Language and culture are closely related with each other. Culture includes and affects language; language is the mirror of the culture and can reflect the culture. So we all can understand that languages of all ethnic groups are deeply related with their specific cultures. Different ethnic groups have different geographical conditions, historical background, customs and religious beliefs, so the language must be different too. These differences are also reflected in the Chinese and English custom-loaded idioms. Customs can well reflect culture, so custom-loaded idioms can better reflect culture than other idioms, because custom-loaded idioms are closely related to every aspect of life.

### **3. The Source of Cultural Difference**

#### **3.1 The Meaning of Culture**

In the course of historical development, because of the differences of geographical environment, customs, religious beliefs, a wide variety of cultural forms come into being. The word “culture” also frequently appears in various aspects of people's lives. However, only few people really understand the meaning of culture. Customs are the basic reflection of the culture, the origin and source of the culture. British anthropologist Edward Taylor first put forward the concept of culture in the book *original culture*: “Culture is a complex system, which includes knowledge, beliefs, arts, ethics, laws, customs and its ability of acquisition from the society. This idea shows that the broad coverage of culture. Language, as an integral part of culture, reflects a luxuriant culture of a nation. Only to combine the study of translation and the knowledge of the culture, people can get better achievement in the translation. Zhu Guangqian said: “the most difficult aspect in the learning of foreign literature is that people do not know the associative meaning of the foreign language... it carries with special emotional meanings, which is extensive and delicate, and can not be found out in the dictionary. If people are not familiar with a country's cultural and historical background, it will be very difficult to cope with this problem in the translation, and the meaning in the original language will be at a loss.” This shows that the cultural differences exist in every aspect of human life, handling the cultural differences well between the two languages are very important. The idioms, which are based on the various different cultures, have their specific cultural characteristics. From the study of many scholars' paper, author sorts out several main aspects of cultural differences.

#### **3.2 Idioms Come from a Variety of Customs**

Idioms come from a variety of customs. For example, “at Later Lammes”, “as tall as a Maypole”, “Christmas comes but once a year”; these idioms come from customs of festivals. “Read coat”, “wear the stripes”, “the Queen Berets”, “cap and bells”, “flower child”, “blue stocking a feather in one's cap”, “put on the black cap”, these idioms come from customs of clothing. In addition, “daily bread”, “a piece of cake”, “Adam's apple”, these idioms come from customs of eating. “Go to church”, “ask in church”, “for better or for worse”, “take somebody for better or for worse”, “fleet street marriage”, “left-handed marriage”, “jump over the broomstick”, “wear the willow”, these idioms come from customs of wedding and funeral, so from above examples we can see that custom-loaded idioms imply various differences in cultures and meanings.

#### **3.3 Main Aspects of Cultural Differences**

Different ethnic groups have different geographical conditions, historical background, customs and religious beliefs.

### 3.3.1 The Influence of Geographical Environment on the Formation of English and Chinese Idioms

The natural environment is the basic of human existence and development, different natural environment have different effects on the formation and development of national culture. Chinese people live in the vast fertile area on the East Asian mainland, since ancient times, China is an agricultural country, to people, lands are their lives. Therefore, there are a considerable number of Chinese agricultural and land-related idioms such as "wu gu feng deng: an abundant harvest of the five cereals", "tie fan wan: iron rice bowl, a secure job", "cha yu fan hou: over a cup of tea and after the meals, at one's leisure " and so on.

Britain is an island nation, which is surrounded by water. The main body of the British territory—Britain, has an area of 229,800 square kilometers, which accounts for 94% of the total area of the island. The distance between any place in the island and the sea is no more than 120 km. Unique marine resources and fishery resources make sea, fish, and water the very common things in people's life. Thus, in English there are a lot of idioms, which are related with water, fish and sea, for example, "drink like a fish" (drink enormously), "to miss the boat" (to miss the golden chance).

### 3.3.2 The Differences in Customs Reflected in the Formation of English and Chinese Idioms

Customs and habits are inherited from generation to generation. Differences in customs are the main aspects of the English-Chinese cultural differences.

This is commonly seen in the use of the idioms, especially the idioms concerning the customs of the royal family, diets, festival and clothing, from which, we can see the idioms with specific cultural aspects.

#### **First, the idioms concerning with the customs of the royal family:**

In Chinese and Western cultures, dragon represents two completely opposite images. In traditional Chinese culture, dragon is a symbol of auspicious animals. In feudal society, the dragon represents kings, authority and elegance. Therefore, the Chinese idioms contained the word "dragon" always have commendatory meanings, such as "hold high hopes for one's child"(expect the child to be a dragon), "in extremely fortune"(prosperity brought by dragon and phoenix), "lucky son-in-law"(a handsome son-in-law drives the dragon)and so on. However, in the Western myths and legends, dragon is an animal with wings, scales and a long tail, and is able to spray fire from its mouth, usually it is a terrorist. About in A.D.700, *the Song of Beowulf* expressed the story between Beowulf and a dragon. Beowulf fought against dragon for three days and nights, and finally killed the dragon. Thus, in Western culture, dragon is usually the representative of evil. A dragon is always used to describe the arrogant, unpleasant person.

#### **Second, the idioms concerning the customs of clothes:**

The clothes customs are different between the western and China.

Red means "good", "great" in Chinese history. It is commonly used as the symbol of happiness, good luck. When the festive comes, people can see red things everywhere, red lantern, red couplets and so on. When Chinese New Year comes, families paste red couplets on their doors. In the matrimony, the bride wears red clothes, covers red veil on her head; the groom wears big red flower on his wind. Therefore, the idioms include "red" always means flourishing, successful and popular and so on such as "a riot of colors"(ten thousand purple colors and a thousand red colors). In English, except a very small number of idioms, such as "red letter day"(a happy day), "to roll a red carpet for somebody"(to warmly welcome somebody), the idioms concerned with "red" always represent bad things. It is often related with "bloodshed, violence, danger, warning" or some awful things. So in the matrimony, the bride will not wear red clothes, but white clothes, which represent purity in the western.

It is probably that just because of such a cultural psychology, English translator David

Hawkes, when translating *A Dream of Red Chamber*, translated it into *The Story of the Stone*.

### **Third, the idioms concerning the customs of diet:**

English-speaking people live in different area and has different climate, so that the English people have different diets, hobbies, the way of entertaining guests, cooking utensils from us. From the following idioms we can know that the bread is the staple food of the English people: “as I live by bread”(it is very true), “bread and butter”(something to be depended to earn a living), “bread and cheese”(common tea and rice), “break bread”(dine), “daily bread”(daily diet), “earn one’s bread”(earn one’s living), “out of bread”(out of work), “quarrel with one’s bread and butter”(disagree with one’s job).

Cakes and pastry, pies, pudding, potato and hamburger are the important food of the westerner. So the idioms concerning this food are commonly seen. First, the idioms concerning cake: “a piece of cake”(a very easy thing), “cake and ale”(eat, drink and be merry), “sell like hot cakes”(sell well), “have one’s cake baked”(live a rich life) and so on. Second, the idioms combined with pies: “as easy as pie” (very easy), “in apple-pie order”(in right order), “as good as pie”(very pleasant), “cut a pie”(mind other’s business), “pie in the sky”(happiness that is hard to got), “have a finger in the pie”(mind other’s business) and so on. Third, the idioms concerned with pudding are still of a great number: “As fit as a pudding for a friar’s mouth”(very proper), “live on wind pudding”(starve), “more praise than pudding”(more compliments but less benefits), “puddings and pies”(eyes) and so on. Fourth, the idioms combined with potato: “hot potato” (problem that is hard to solve), “small potatoes”(good for nothing), “the quite clean potato”(a decent man), etc. In addition, hamburger is also one of the most popular foods in the Western. All the fast food shops provide this kind of food. The idiom “make hamburger out of somebody” means “beat somebody into hundreds of pieces”, which shows us a vivid image.

Enjoying the sweet food after meals is a habit of the westerners. Offering them the onion after the meals is stupid. So there is an idiom “garlic for desert” (the last thing).

In ancient, if English people entertained guest the shoulder of sheep, it means that the host do not like this guest. So “cold shoulder” means “cold treatment”. The ancient English people will invite the respected guest to sit in the seat of honor, which is at the front of the salt bottle, and the ordinary people to sit below the salt bottle, so there is the idiom “sit below the salt”. Furthermore, in the West, pot-luck means a party that everybody who joins in this party should bring one kind of food, so the idiom “come and have pot-luck with us” means “come and have dinner with us”.

Pan is the main cooking utensil of the westerners. There are a great number of idioms with the word “pan” such as “dead pan”(a face without expression), “as flat as a frying pan”(very flat), “on the pan”(very strictly criticized), “out of the frying pan into to the fire”(out of minor trouble but in big trouble), “as flat as a pan cake”(very flat), etc.

Knife and fork are the main tableware of the westerners. They do not only the tableware, but also means eating and the people who can eat a lot such as “see somebody over a knife and fork”(expect somebody to eat something), “a capital knife and fork”(a man with a very good appetite), “play a good knife and fork”(have a big meal) and so on.

### **Fourth, the idioms concerning festival customs:**

Different countries have different festival culture such as Spring Festival in China and Christmas in the Western. Like the other cultures, this can also be reflected in idioms. For example, white Christmas, April fool.

### **3.3.3 The Influence of Religious Customs**

Every nation has its own religious beliefs and religious culture, and these have great impacts on the formation of habits and language.

In the long history of china, people mainly embrace the Buddhism and Daoism. Therefore, there are many Buddhism-related and Taoism-related idioms, such as "chieh-hua hsien-fo"(give other’s flowers to the Buddha), "seek help at the last moment"(embrace the

feet of the Buddha at the last moment), “become a monk later in life”(start midway), “one never go to a Buddhist temple for nothing”(without any important thing one will not visit somebody), “saving one life is better than setting up a seven-storey pagoda”(saving one life is the most important), “many a little makes a mickle”(many a little makes a lot) and so on. In addition, Chinese people also worship god, so there are the idioms such as "God's truth"(right and proper) and "Thank Heaven"(God bless us), “vet hard”(the heaven will not fall down) and so on. Chinese emperors also regard themselves as "the son of the God".

In the United Kingdom and other Western countries, the impact of the Christianity is the greatest. In the Westerners' hearts, God has the supreme power. So there are many English idioms, which are associated with God such as “God helps those who help them elves”, “Man proposes, God disposes”. People often say “God damn you” when he or she curses somebody, and say “Thank God” or “God bless you” after the danger. Christian doctrine—*Bible* has been regarded as a classic of Western culture. Many English idioms come out from it such as “finger on the wall”, “cast one's bread upon the waters”. In the westerners' churches, there is no food for mouse, so there comes the idiom “as poor as the church mouse”.

As we all know, the impact of culture on idioms is versatile, and the translation of English and Chinese idioms is feasible. The method of translation of custom-loaded idioms translation, especially those that contain rich cultural information, is not fixed, so translation method should be used flexibly. As long as we study conscientiously and dig into the implication of two cultures, we can find their similarities and differences and identify appropriate translation method. They can not only be translated, but also can promote the development and dissemination of Western and Chinese culture, which plays an important role in cross-cultural communication.

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