

# A Comparison between Chinese and English Salutation from the Cross-cultural Perspective

Qi Pan

English Department, Zhenjiang Watercraft College, Zhenjiang, China

Ying Wu

English Department, Zhenjiang Watercraft College, Zhenjiang, China

Jiao Xue

English Department, Zhenjiang Watercraft College, Zhenjiang, China

**Abstract**—As one important part in speech communication, address form is considered as the first message conveyed from speakers to hearers in many situations. Address forms play a very important role in the social life. Different types of address forms can express rich emotional information and implied meaning. Through different address forms, the social relationships, social position and roles can also be reflected. The thesis endeavors to decode the differences and similarities from the perspective of the salutations of the two languages, by discussing respectively the underlying differences on culture, value and other levels. Based upon the plentiful examples extracted from daily life, this paper provides illuminating insights about Chinese and English salutation from the two cultures. Such research is a joyful delight for those working in the cross-cultural fields of the global village.

**Index Terms**—salutations, cultural differences, Chinese and English

## I. INTRODUCTION

### A. The Definition of Salutation

Culture is a legacy of the society, through the older generations to young generation, salutations are also like this. The salutation became the first words in the communication. A salutation is the first that treat people and relative present, it is like a present given to somebody on first meeting, also like a passport enter the gate of communication. According to The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, the definition of address form is the correct title or name that you use for someone when you are speaking to them. Fasold states that address forms are the words speakers used to designate the person they are talking to while they are talking to them. (Fasold, 2000) In our daily life, address forms are common phenomena during human oral communication, they are also very common across cultures, just like the barometers of interpersonal relationship.

### B. Research on Salutation Helps Improve Cross-cultural Communication

The differences between Chinese and English Language and between Chinese and Western culture, are just like “from China to Peru”. Cross-cultural communication becomes a kind of really need. With the development of the modern society and technology, the internet fast develops in the world. Nowadays there are more intercultural encounters, they are different from early times. When we are going to abroad, the interconnection is more important all over the world, only in a matter of hours, a plane can fly anywhere in the world, and with the development of the global economy, today’s contacts for more common than in any other period of the world’s history. If China wants to become a powerful country in the world, it should communicate with other nations. More and more people recognize that the differences of cultural background, not only need to grasp foreign language, but also need to deeply understand the difference between target language and mother tongue. At the same time, we can learn the differences between the Eastern and Western culture from the Chinese and English Language, such as natural environment, productive labor, custom habit, religions belief, mode of thinking, etc. Hofstede said that Culture is the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one category of people from another. (Hofstede, 1991) With the development of the modern society and technology, and with the reality of a global economy, compared with other period of the world’s history, today’s contacts for more common.

As the lead of contact, address forms play an irreplaceable role in improving cross-cultural communication. To further study the differences of Chinese-English salutation and their shaping factors is of great significance. This paper is further researches the Language, the outer cultural and cross—cultural communication, and makes use of some evidences to analysis the differences between China—British salutation and culture. On the one hand, it helps cross—cultural communication; on the other hand, it helps the foreign Language teacher and students study language. At the same time, it makes the foreign people and Chinese understand the cultures of each other.

## II. THE COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS OF CHINESE-ENGLISH SALUTATION

### A. In Name

In English language, their names include first name, middle name and family name, e.g. William Jefferson Clinton. Usually the middle names are omitted or replaced by abbreviation such as George Bush or George W. Bush. However, the structure of Chinese names is Xing (姓)+Ming (名) like 张伟.

#### a. Asking Names of Each Other between The Strangers

In English, the typical way is like that:

A: What's your name?

B: My name is Jane, and you?

A: My name is John.

This is another way in Chinese:

甲: 请问您贵姓?

乙: 不敢当, 小姓张。您贵姓?

甲: 免贵姓李。

Different from that of English, Chinese usually use their family name to introduce themselves. As for it, there exist cultural roots behind. So during the communication, something unexpected occurs. For example:

A Chinese named Chang Weiming came across an American called John Smith by plane. Mr. Smith wanted to buy the products of Chang's. Here is the dialogue of self-introduction between them.

Mr. Smith: By the way, I'm John Smith. My friends call me Joni. This is my business card.

Mr. Chang: I'm David Chang. Pleased to meet you. This is my card.

Mr. Smith: No, no. Call me Joni. I think we'll do a lot of business together.

Mr. Chang: Yes I hope so.

Mr. Smith (reading Mr. Chang's card): Chang Weiming, Wei Ming, I'll give you a call as soon as I get settled at my hotel.

Mr. Chang (smiling): Yes, I'll expect your call.

This dialogue leaves each other different impressions. Mr. Smith is glad to meet Chang. And he considers it an excellent beginning. By directly addressing Chang's name, he builds a relationship of friendship and equality. Chang's smiling indicates that he is satisfied with this conversation, willing to develop further business cooperation. On the contrary, Chang feels quite uncomfortable that Mr. Smith directly calls his name. And he thinks it is difficult to work with him. Obviously, different habits of each culture result in the misunderstanding of the intercommunication.

#### b. Names Called between Friends

Based upon the equality and openness, English friends call their first names each other directly whether their relationship is close or not. Of course, it is true that they also may call "honey", "dear" or something like that. However, friends of Chinese are not. They usually call their nick names if they are very intimate. As to those ordinary friends, their full names are called between them. From what a person call another, it is easy to see their relationship. Take a girl named "张惠" as an example. Calling her name directly indicates that they are not that close. But addressing her "惠" or other nick names may hint that their relationship is quite intimate.

### B. In Kinship Terms

The way in which people use language in our daily life to refer to many different kinds of relatives is very interesting. When describing how people in different parts of the world refer to brothers, sisters, cousins, uncles, aunts and so on, the literature on kinship terminology is considerable. Kinship system is a common characteristic of languages as a result of the importance in social organization. In kinship system, people must take some factors into consideration, such as sex, age, generation, blood and marriage in their society. And people can use the actual words from these factors to describe a particular kin relationship.

There are many differences between English and Chinese address terms, but refer to the relatives address terms, there are two common points: one common point is the quantities of both are becoming less, the quantities of both English and Chinese kinship address go through a process from more to less; the other common point is that some basic address terms have the same meanings in both languages, for example, father="父亲", mother="母亲", son="儿子", daughter="女儿", husband="丈夫", wife="妻子". Meanwhile, most of the address words have different forms in the two languages, because the culture and language forms of the two countries are different, From such phenomenon, the differences of the two countries are reflected.

### C. In Social Titles

In the address system, social address forms (non-kinship address forms) are another group system of terms.

#### a. Universal in English-speaking countries

In English-speaking countries, social address forms are experiencing a process of revolution. Whatever one's social status or occupation or age is, most people intend to use First Name about addressing the boss, elder person and parents. As long as the address form to "Doctor" has kept "Title Name". The exact nature of this change is as what Brown and

Gilman pointed out: “power” in daily communication is replaced by “equality” and “intimacy”. “Mister”, “Sir” and “Miss”, “Ms”, “Madam” are widely used to address person you are familiar with or not. (张安德, 2003). Therefore, we can see that “power” is becoming less important on address forms in the western society. Other social address forms in English address system are terms like ladies and gentlemen, which is usual formula to address a mixed gathering like in offices, in meetings, in press conferences and etc. Ladies or gentlemen may also be used separately, like “Good morning, ladies!”

#### b. More Complicated Social Address Forms in China

Chinese address system is more complex than that of English-speaking countries. As the social and political situation has changed, the use of social (non-kinship) address forms has also changed. For example, instead of Mr., Miss, The form Tongzhi (同志) “comrade” is the replacement, since the equal ideals of the new order are reflected. Tongzhi can be used alone to address someone, or with name or another title: Tongzhi (title alone) “comrade”. Li Tongzhi (surname plus title) “Comrade Li”. Li Ming Tongzhi (full name plus title) Comrade “Li Ming”. It is also possible to use Tongzhi with a first name, especially between newly acquainted persons of equal standing in formal letters and from superiors to inferiors. In Chinese society, some titles were retained, such as laoshi (老师), “teacher”, zhuren (主任), “director” and Shifu, “master” (师傅). The meanings of master include experienced workers as machinists and carpenters.

Some leadership positions were canceled during the Culture Revolution of 1966-1976, and their functions were replaced by revolutionary committees. As the technical people were sent to do the work in the factories, the workers were sent to the vocational positions to do some professional work. This phenomenon led the use of Shifu, “master craftsman” increase greatly, because there were more and more responsible working people, and the goodness of the working people was very important, the virtue of working people is encouraged. Tongzhi is also used to address whose vocation is already known, but there is no title for this occupation.

But nowadays, the use of Tongzhi has been distinctly decreasing. When we want to address the unfamiliar people, or when we want to write to the strangers, we might use Tongzhi. Even it is too formal to use Tongzhi to address someone, particularly in the north of China, it is unnecessary to use Tongzhi to address someone who you have already known. Instead of Tongzhi, when we want to address an unknown person, we can use the most common address forms lao (old), and xiao (little) or Shifu. If the unknown person is female and seems to be in the middle age, we can address her dajie (大姐) “big sister”. In a way, the use of Xiansheng (Mr) and Xiaojie (Miss) is adding, especially in the coastal areas of China, such as the city of Fujian and Guangdong, because the communication of the coastal areas are much more. Besides, Laoban (Boss) or plus family-name, for example, Li laoban (李老板), this address form is recently used in daily communication, the use of Laoban is more common in business communication. Most of the vocation titles are widely used in address forms in Chinese. On the contrary, people only use “Mr.” or “Sir” and “Madam” or “Ms” then plusing surnames in English. Nowadays, with the social and political changes, the use of Tongzhi, Shifu and other forms is also decreasing.

Shortly, there are several ways to address others in social address forms, that is names, common salutation “comrade”(同志) or “master”(师傅) and titles. Besides, the so called “zero salutation” as “Excuse me”(喂, 劳驾) is also used in daily life.

### III. POSSIBLE REASONS THAT SHAPE THE DIFFERENCES OF CHINESE-ENGLISH SALUTATION

There are great differences in the Chinese-English salutation. But the salutation of English has its characteristics. For instance, teacher is commonly speaking in China, and often call foreign teacher in this way. In fact, this does not accord with the habits of English-speaking countries. In English, “teacher” can’t be used in verbal communication. Generally speaking, they call male teacher of primary school and second school “Sir” and the female teacher “Miss”; in college and university teacher is called professor or Doctor. If the students and teacher are very familiar, they can directly call the teacher’s name. But Chinese often address others by adding the post of them, such as Direct Wang (王主任), Manager Zhang (张经理) etc. But Englishmen usually not use the surname. As a student no matter how old is she or he and in place, all calling teacher who teaches them at once, we call teacher directly or by adding the family name. When introducing a teacher to someone, one can introduce like this, “This is teacher Chen.” One also can plus his full name behind the “teacher”, such as, “This is teacher Chen Qiang.” Also an example showed below indicates this point a lot.

The dean of a university once introduced a new foreign teacher by addressing her “girl”, which leads her very embarrassed. The word “girl” is a synonym for ignorance in America. Here using “girl” to describe an adult female is quite offensive.

#### A. Historical Reasons

In ancient China, clan was the primary unit of the society composition, the history of clan lasted for 3,000 years in long-term history of patriarchal. Then the address forms system are being integrated with the development of the patriarchal clan. In Chinese salutations, the address forms are divided according to patriarchal and non-patriarchal clans, marriage relation and blood relation. And the address forms in the clan are also influenced by the seniority order and younger-elder relation and the difference between paternal and maternal relative terms. From the analysis above, it tells us one of the most important characteristics of Han culture is clan. The clan is a basic feature in the address forms at

that time. During the 20th century of China, the feudal clans were attacked, but the kinship terms still took an important part in social interaction.

Anglo-Saxon people are the ancestor of British, they came from the north of Europe. As Ancient Roman, Dane and Germanic people are merged by British, the feudal clan had also been immersed, but the clan was less important than the Chinese one. In 1066, British centralized state power was founded by William I, it was 1,200 years later than Qin Dynasty (the first feudal centralized state power in China). In the 17th century, the feudal clans was badly influenced when the first bourgeois revolution was held in Britain. So it becomes unimportant to specify address forms because the feudal clans had been eliminated.

### B. Cultural Reasons

#### a. Chinese Self-Abasement VS English Self-Confidence

There are a number of words to compliment others, while few words to express modesty, which are quite different from Chinese. When praised by others, English responds "Thank you", smiling. But Chinese are shy and decline immediately. A typical way to answer is that, "哪里哪里".

China is a country which pays much attention on the etiquette, so as Chinese people, people are usually more self-abasement. On the contrary, the English people seem to be more self-confidence. Instead of showing reverence in Chinese, the word "old" In English is quite unacceptable, which is shown in the following instance.

One day a student discussed with her foreign teacher about news that a 100-year old man took part in the competition of 100-meter race. She said: "He is such an old man. Could he run anymore?" Her foreign teacher then reminded that it was suitable to call him "elderly" or "senior citizen" instead of the "old". It gives her deep feelings.

#### b. Traditional Chinese Rank Concepts VS English "All Men Are Created Equal"

In the ancient China, people think Man is superior to woman, this kind of thoughts deeply affect the Chinese people. In the past, women are confined at home under the feudal society; they are forbidden to take part in the social activities, especially women had no opportunity to take the imperial examinations. So the social position of women in the ancient China is lower than men, even the status of children is higher than women. At that time, if the couple meets relatives or friends or other people, the husband usually introduces like this: "This is 贱内 (an address forms with a derogatory sense)". But in the west countries, the westerners are different, they think that everyone is born to be equal. So in the English, the unfair and impolite address forms are seldom be found. Nowadays, the movements of feminism are supported in the west, so more and more new vocation salutations for female people as the following:

Common gender: Male, Female:

Waiter: waiter, waitress

Lawyer: lawyer, lady lawyer

Doctor: doctor, woman doctor

Usher: usher, usherette

Surgeon: surgeon, female surgeon

Hero: hero, heroine

#### c. Chinese Collectivism VS English Individualism

People of English-speaking countries pay attention to the individual privacy and individual characters, show one's own value, respect one's own choice, and they think that the liberal, social status and the wealth are equal in social, so the single person in groups is very relaxed. But in China, people lay emphasis on collective spirits, because people live in one village, live to be close and keep in touch more, and like asking some private matters, personal life and privacy easily to be reverse. In addition, they like help each other, so they are willing to understand other personal things and be told one's own things. This is differences background both of sides, also the differences in political, economic, religions relief, etc.

In China, the "code of conduct" seems to be the Confucianism. The Confucianism has deeply affected the Chinese people during their daily life, and it also affects the Chinese government and education. People's attitudes toward right individual manners and the personal responsibility to the society are influenced. One of the most important rules of Confucianism is: "What you do not want done to yourself, do not do unto others". Confucius also said "The injuries done to you by an enemy should be returned with a combination of love and justice". Confucius thought that the society consisted of five types of relationships: Those of husband and wife, of parent and child, of elder and younger brother, or generally of elders and youngsters, of Ruler and Minister or subject, and of friend and friend. So He advocated that people should try to unite with each other all over the world so that the society can be more harmonious, this is just the view of collectivism. Because of the collectivism, the relative address forms are influenced, for example, when child calls his father's friend or neighbor or even an unfamiliar person, he might address like "uncle, aunt or grandpa", such address forms are uneasy to understand by the westerners. Because in the western countries, people usually call their parents' and grandparents' names directly, which is very informal and impolite for Chinese people.

### C. Conceptual Reasons

#### a. Concepts of Bearing

There is a sentence in China: "the more sons one has, the more happiness one enjoys", "bearing up children with the aim to guard against troubles in one's late year", "of three kinds of ungratefulness to one's parents, the greatest is not to

have a male descendant”, these old sayings express that big families with rules are important, they are the foundation of the society. So according to the division of the younger and the elder, the blood and the marriage relation in big family, it is needful to standardize the address forms.

While, replaced by nuclear families (三口之家), after their entrance to the industrialized society, the quantity of big families in America and Britain is increasing. Because more and more couples just want only one or two children. In 1990, a survey report held in Britain showed: family made up with a couple and one or two children amount to 65% of the total; families made up with a couple and three or more children amount to 14% of the total. Recently, a new family unit called Dink appears, they have double income but no kids, and they advocate the value of individual, self-development and self-enjoyment. So it leads to the family members are increased and the kinship terms are becoming more simplified. Besides, with the implementation of family plan, the kinship terms will be decreased.

#### b. Concepts of Friendship

Nowadays, the American Style friendship seems to be a kind of functional friendship. So people have neglect for interpersonal relationship and they pay more attention on self-development and individual efforts. However, “at home one relies on one’s parents and outside on friends” (在家靠父母, 出门靠朋友) is a common remark greatly influenced in the ideas of Chinese people. Such the thinking as “all under heaven are of one family” (天下一家) makes Chinese people regard the whole society as their own family.

#### c. Different Beliefs

According to the natural law “Conceit results in losses while modesty bring benefits” (满遭损, 谦受益), Li (礼) played a significant role in Ancient China. Modesty can not be a kind of virtue, it is a key standard to judge one’s moral character. Similar with Chinese, “Respecting others” is also a principle for people in English-speaking countries. They hold the idea that he would meet with others’ brows and angry eyes and lose his dignity at the same time, if respecting others in an impolite or arrogant way. On the other hand, there is a mind “all men equal in front of God”, they believe that God gives equal opportunities to each person and they can enjoy everything. Therefore, it is unnecessary to be self-disapproval.

### IV. CONCLUSION

Language is a mirror of the society, which has such close relation to culture that it truly reflects all aspects of the society. As an indispensable unit of language, address forms just like the barometer which can measure people’s thoughts, and relationship. We learn about the differences existing in Eastern and Western culture. We will have a deeper understanding to the culture of both sides despite their differences and characteristic. Because it can help us learn bilingual. To be bilingual, one must know the culture of the two countries. Culture is created by human beings, it is the combination of material treasure and spiritual treasure. Every country has its own culture, just like every country has its own language. So language determines how speakers recognize the world around them. We also should deeper understand the cultural background knowledge and the language characteristic. To get along with people, we need to understand their way of thinking, acting and their cultural rules in communication. At the same time, we need to compare them with our own culture, traditions and ways of responding to salutations by doing it. We not only can make deeper friendships with others, but also learn more about ourselves and our own culture. The development of modern science and technology makes our economy in the globalization, but the Eastern and Western have kept their own characteristic.

During the cross cultural communication, it is necessary that there exist conflicts. Only when we learn and respect the differences and the reasons behind them can we communicate with each other smoothly.

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**Qi Pan** was born in Zhenjiang, China in 1987. She received her B.A. degree in English language and literature from Jiangsu University of Science and Technology, China in 2009.

She is currently a tutor in English Department, Zhenjiang Watercraft College, Zhenjiang, China. Her research interests include Second Language Acquisition Contrastive Studies of English and Chinese.

**Ying Wu** was born in Zhenjiang, China in 1979. She received his M.A. degree in Translation Study from Nanjing University, China in 2009.

She is currently a lecturer in the English Department of Zhenjiang Watercraft College, Zhenjiang, China. Her research interests

include Linguistics and Foreign Language Teaching.

**Jiao Xue** was born in Yangzhou, China in 1986. she received her M.A degree in foreign linguistics and applied linguistics from Jiangsu University of Science and Technology, China in 2011.

She is currently a tutor in English Department, Zhenjiang Watercraft College, Zhenjiang, China. Her research interests include second language acquisition and intercultural communication.