

A Comparative Study of Chinese and Western Cultures from Yu Gong Moves the Mountain and Meira Moves the Mountain

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ABSTRACT. Each nation has its own peculiar historical background and way of thinking, thus forming different cultural traditions. The purpose of cultural comparison between China and the west is to gain more insights into the different cultures, learn from each other, and understand the diversity and relativity of cultures, which is conducive to intercultural communication and the healthy development of human cultures. This paper mainly compares the similarities and differences between Chinese and western culture from the perspective of collectivism and individualism, local complex and way of thinking through the analysis of two literary works: American fable Meira Moves the Mountain and the Chinese fable Yu Gong Moves the Mountain.

KEYWORDS: Cultural difference, Conflict, Complementation, Harmony

1. Introduction

With the gradual deepening of China's opening up to the outside world, people and things in western society have progressively entered visions of the public. These increasing cross-regional, inter-ethnic, and cross-cultural exchanges provide us with many opportunities to engage and communicate with westerners. But at the same time, we are more and more aware that in the process of dealing with people in other countries, there will inevitably be conflicts because of their different historical backgrounds, special ways of thinking, values, and ethics.

Yu Gong Moves the Mountain and Meira Moves the Mountain are fables of China and the United States respectively, which reflect different cultural norms. Yu Gong Moves the Mountain is a mythological fable story about more than 2,000 years ago in ancient China. It was extremely inconvenient for people to get in and out because of the blocks--Taihang Mountain and Wangwu Mountain. Yugong, a man nearly 90 years old proposed that every family member should unite to remove these two steep mountains, and he gained the support of his family. He was ridiculed by his neighbor -Zhisou, who said that Yugong was crazy about his stupid idea. But Yugong was not discouraged, and he firmly believed that as long as his descendants didn't give up, they would be able to remove these two mountains. In the end, the God of Heaven was moved by the sincerity and perseverance of Yugong. He ordered two immortals to take away these two huge mountains. Since then, there was no more trouble to go out. Faced with many obstacles, Yugong was still able to stick to his original heart and persevere. Meira Moves the Mountain is written by a famous American children's writer Arnold Lobel. It mainly describes two westerners - Meira and his wife living at the foot of the mountain. They were very satisfied with the place where they live. But the only dissatisfaction was that there was a huge mountain in front of their house, shutting out the sun from their view. So Meira decided to ask the most intelligent person for advice to remove this mountain. The smart person proposed a lot of solutions, but none of his solutions worked. Finally, the wise man told this couple: "you pack up your belongings and then keep going back, until you are far away from this mountain, and then build your house again". Meira did it as the wise man proposed, and finally, the sun shone into his house. Meira Moves the Mountain reflects the wisdom and flexibility whenever western people come across difficulties.

When two seemingly similar stories appear in front of readers, the author of this study comes up with some questions: What can we learn from these two stories? what are the similarities and differences between the two cultures?

2. Comparison of Chinese and Western Culture

The American cultural scientist Ogburn, once put it, “Individuals and nations have difference in biology and so is in culture” [1]. As the creation of society and the occurrence of history, culture indeed determines that there may be differences among different regions, groups and times. Specific social and cultural differences are objective phenomena that can be observed. There are many wisdom words about cultural differences, such as “people are born with different habits.”; “people’s habits beyond a hundred miles are different, people’s habits beyond a thousand miles are different” [2]. It is not difficult to point out the similarities and differences of things, but it is not so easy to find out why they have similarities and differences. This is the ultimate goal of comparative study. The author mainly discusses the cultural differences between China and the West from three aspects: Collectivism and Individualism, local complex and way of thinking.

2.1 Collectivism and Individualism

Chinese and Westerns have formed many different values due to differences in cultural traditions, religious beliefs, politics, and regional environment. Hofstede extends that individualism and collectivism are embodied in all aspects of cultures [3]. Chinese emphasize collective interests over personal interests, and advocate unity, cooperation and harmony. Collectivism is the group value of the Chinese and the core of Chinese culture. On the contrary, individualism emphasizes that the value of the individual man, and it’s interdependence with the collective is weak [4]. Society is a collection of individuals, therefore, individualists believe personal interests is supreme and pay more attention to the individual’s personality, feelings, independence, autonomy, power, competition and personal achievements [5]. Personal achievement is often regarded as an important standard to evaluate a person. The cultural values of western countries typically are individualism. American individualism stems from the rational principle of the Christian spirit and the pursuit of individual freedom. In the development history of American culture, individualism plays a decisive role, and becomes the essence of American culture.

Whether people struggle with the outside world by the strength of the individual or the collective? Yugong decided to remove the mountain, and his family, neighbors, even a kid of seven or eight years old have come to help him. All people work together to remove the mountains. Yugong overcame the great difficulties by the power of his descendants, fully embodying the spirit of cooperation and the power of the collective. Chinese praise the spirit of Yugong, and regard it as a kind of national spirit. Chinese always emphasize collectivism and teamwork. Chinese traditional culture believes that the power of a person is insignificant, but there is strength in numbers. A drop of water will not dry up in the sea. This spirit is embodied incisively and vividly in the story of Yu Gong Moves the Mountain. The collective thought runs through the Chinese traditional philosophy and culture. The Orientals tend to cope with difficulties from a “holistic” perspective, and pay more attention to interpersonal relationships. In the story of Meira Moves the Mountain, from beginning to end, Meira and his wife made their decision and didn’t ask for anyone’s support. In Western society, more emphasis on individualism can be found here. Moreover, it also reflects that Meira is experimenting and brave.

2.2 Local Complex

The culture created and enjoyed by a nation is different from other cultures, forming a long-standing traditional spirit and national spirit, which has a great impact on the nation [6]. As an important fulcrum of Chinese culture, the local complex grows deeply in the hearts of Chinese people and is revealed in their behaviors. The “local complex” is formed in the ancient Chinese ethical society and is closely related to cultivation culture. Because of their strong family value, Chinese people unbearably leave their hometown. In modern society, the impact of the cultivation society is gradually weakening, but as a cultural psychology, the local complex has been deeply condensed in the Chinese people’s ideology. Local complex has become a cultural symbol that is difficult to give up and has become an important support point for Chinese culture.

The local complex is a kind of “special symbol” in Chinese people’s hearts, which fully is reflected in Yu Gong Moves the Mountain. The source text: “出入之迂也”, “迂” means detouring. Yugong had a long way to round before he went out unless he removed his house. But he did not choose to do this, which showed his deep and heavy local complex. Meira Moves the Mountain was written by the famous American writer Arnold Lobel. American history is the history of immigration. When the United States was once a British colony, the immigrants (the European impoverished aristocrats or landlords, the poor European peasants and the “indentured slaves” who were trafficked began to immigrate to North America) constituted the basis for establishing the United States and promoting and supporting the development of North America. Moreover, Americans are adventurous. Before the independence of the United States, they began to expand to the western part of the North American. After the independence of the United States, the westward movement became more planned and organized. In the story of Meira Moves the Mountain, Meira chose to move his house rather than removing the

mountain. It can be seen that westerners do not have a strong local complex. Because of historical factors, they prefer adventure and expansion.

2.3 Way of Thinking

Whether it is Yugong or Meira, people praise their positive attitude towards life and eulogize the spirit embodied in them. We can find a lot of common qualities in the two characters. They all show resistance to harsh natural conditions and reproduce the tenacity and perseverance of human beings. They are all manifestations of the essential strength of human beings. However, they pursue ideals and the way they achieve these ideals are very different. The mountains in these two stories both symbolize the difficulties in life. Yugong chose to deal with difficulties directly, and Meira took a roundabout way to solve the problem. They adopted different ways due to the differences between Chinese and Western ways of thinking. People who live in different regions for a long time have different cultural characteristics, thus forming different ways of thinking.

The traditional Chinese thought regards the subject itself as the center of the universe, and “All Are for Myself”. Traditional thought focuses on intuitive image rather than logic [7]. It also emphasizes that the object integrated into the subject, and highlights the initiative of the subject, which makes the thought subject to emotion and emotion replaces rationality. Facing the mountain with a wide of seven hundred miles, height of seven or eight thousand feet, Yugong, decided to remove it. In spite of several setbacks, he did not give up and eventually his perseverance moved the god. The god helped him remove the mountain. The process of moving mountain symbolizes ambitious ideas and huge persistence. It tells us that people should believe themselves, and be optimistic when encountering difficulties. One achieved his goal without giving up, which reflects national spirit of the Chinese. At the same time, it also reflects that Oriental people are tend to be quiet, introverted, conservative. Meira takes a lot of ways to remove the mountains, such as: hit the mountain, send the Mountain God a piece of cake, but these are useless. The final way to remove mountain which he and his wife adopt is to dance, and keep back, until they are far away from the mountain. The author tries to tells people with a metaphor way: When people encounter difficulties that they can't overcome, they can choose to “turn a blind eye” to difficulties, and solve the problem in another way. Compared with Chinese people, the way of westerners is more diverse. The wise man in the Meira Moves the Mountain symbolizes knowledge and science. Westerners have always attached great importance to science, and regard science as a standard. Ancient Greek culture had a clear scientific tendency from the beginning. Socrates, the great philosopher in ancient Greek, put forward “knowledge is virtue”. Aristotle has established logic, which lays the scientific thinking of westerners. Since then, this way of thinking has been radiated in western culture to all areas of cognition. In this story, the wise man proposed a series of solutions, and Meira did it without hesitation, which mirrored that westerners' absolute trust of knowledge and science and also embodied that Westerners were active, extroverted, and changeable.

3. Conclusion

There are a lot of commonality transcend geographic and national boundaries in culture. No matter when or where people live in, they have almost the same feelings: joy, anger, sorrow, love, evil, desire, etc.; they also have roughly same physiological and psychological needs of survival, sex, interpersonal communication, etc. These similarities make people with different languages and cultural backgrounds can understand each other, so that the exchange and integration of different cultures become possible. What's more, with the development of global economic integration and communication, transportation and media technology, different cultures can interact, absorb and learn from each other in our “global village”, which will inevitably promote cultural integration [8]. Yu Gong Moves the Mountain and Meira Moves the Mountain show us distinct cultures, but we must understand that cultural differences are rooted in different national psychology and different values. There is no good or bad culture in the world, so we should respect the uniqueness of each culture. Gilroy puts forward the concept of “double consciousness”, which emphasizes that cultural differences must be viewed dialectically. His claim is to stand beyond the boundaries of ethnic groups and to integrate the advantages of different cultures for their own us [9]. Therefore, we must consciously cultivate a spirit of tolerance for different cultures, different communication norms and customs. Moreover, there are other hills where stones are good for working jade. In the process of cross-cultural communication, Chinese people also should make full use of the strengths of others, supplement their own shortcomings and learn from the essence of western culture. It can effectively resolve conflicts and misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication. Cultivating awareness of intercultural communication and improving the ability of intercultural communication is imperative for Chinese to enhance mutual friendship and better realize the exchanges with various countries and nations in the world. Only when all kinds of cultures integrate with each other in the course of conflicts, and add vitality to each other in the complementary course, can they create more brilliant human civilization.

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