

Differences in Chinese and Western Culture from the Perspective of the Twelve Zodiac Signs

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Abstract: As China's traditional culture, the Chinese zodiac has a long history and cultural connotation. Due to the differences in historical traditions, values and living environment, different zodiac cultures have been formed in China and the West. Therefore, in translation, there is bound to be a loss of some Zodiac cultural information. This paper reveals the cultural differences between China and the west by discussing the respective cultural connotations of the Chinese and Western zodiac animals. All these in order to provide some reference for the translation of the animals of the Chinese zodiac and promote cross-cultural communication.

Keywords: Chinese Zodiac, Cultural difference, Cross-cultural communication, Translation strategy.

1. Introduction

The twelve Chinese animals, also known as zodiac signs. It was created by ancient Chinese alchemists, using twelve animals to match the twelve Earthly Branches. As traditional Chinese culture, the twelve zodiac signs have a long historical and cultural connotation. The images of the twelve zodiac signs often appear on Chinese and Western screens, but due to their respective cultural characteristics, the cultural associations represented by the twelve zodiac signs are different. This paper compares the twelve zodiac signs to identify the differences between Chinese and Western cultures.

2. Translation Theory

The famous American translation theorist Eugene Nida once proposed that "absolutely accurate language communication is impossible, even in the same language. Because there has never been a situation where two people have exactly the same understanding, let alone a completely identical equivalence between two different languages." Due to cultural differences between China and the West, there may be cultural loaded word gaps in translation, mainly vocabulary gaps and semantic gaps. The translation of the twelve zodiac signs not only has semantic gaps, but also lexical gaps.

3. Chinese and Western Cultural Connotation of the Twelve Zodiac Signs

3.1. Rat

When it comes to rat, the meanings in China and the West are basically the same. When Chinese mention rat, they often have a derogatory connotation. In the eyes of Chinese, rat represent greed, despicable, and dirtiness. In traditional Western culture, rat is carrier of diseases, representative of shame and betray.

3.2. Ox

Due to the fact that ancient China was in the agricultural society, oxen provided great assistance to humans in

agricultural cultivation, reducing the workload of the working people. Therefore, oxen represent the spirit of hard work and diligence. The spirit of the old ox is still praised and respected by people today. Nowadays, due to the great strength of ox, it have been given new connotations in modern times. When describing a person who is powerful, we often say: "true ox", "ox man", etc. In the West, oxen that provide human with beef and milk are seen as symbols of roughness and strength. The bullfighting behavior in Spain has given us a deeper understanding of the roughness of oxen.

3.3. Tiger

In traditional Chinese culture, the tiger is the king of the animals, with both powerful and dangerous meanings, and is a representative of bravery and authority. In Western culture, the frequency of tigers is very low, mainly because their habitat is in Asia. In the eyes of West, tigers are just a big cat and are no need to afraid. Therefore, in west, the position of the tiger is basically replaced by the lion, and the lion's image is relatively powerful, while the tiger rarely appears.

3.4. Rabbit

The symbolism of rabbits in Chinese and Western cultures is basically consistent. The rabbit has a very cute appearance and also holds a place in Chinese culture. Like Chang'e in the palace of the moon, she is accompanied by the Jade Rabbit. The fast running speed of rabbits is often extended from time to describe the speed of actions and the speed of time, such as "The Jade Hare rises in the east" and "Quiet like an elegant lady and brisk like a rabbit". In the West, rabbits refer to small animals with soft fur and a cute short tail. Rabbits are generally associated with timidity, running quickly when suffering danger, such as "run like a rabbit". People who are timid are called "rabbit hearts".

3.5. Dragon

Dragon is a special animal in Chinese mythology, a symbol of mystery and power. In ancient China, only the emperor could wear a dragon robe. It can also evoke wind and rain, representing auspiciousness and power. Dragon is a totem of the Chinese nation, symbolizing the outstanding and extraordinary character "the dragon of the people". In Western culture, dragon is an evil animal with threatening

claws and venom fangs, and they can also spout fire, posing a threat to human safety. Many Western literary works praise the struggle between human heroes and dragons. It can be seen that the image of dragons differs greatly in Chinese and Western cultures.

3.6. Snake

Snake in Chinese culture means insidious, cunning, malicious, and cold-blooded. In Western culture, it is also a representative of evil and carries the meaning of betray and ingratitude. In Chinese fables *The Farmer and the Snake* also reflects the viciousness and insidiousness of the snake, where kindness is rewarded with malice. In the West, it can be seen from the *Bible* that the West have a dislike for snakes. Adam and Eve were tempted by the snake to eat the forbidden fruit.

3.7. Horse

Horse represents a spirit of speed and courage in Chinese culture, and most of the Chinese idioms about horse are commendatory. In ancient China, horse not only played an important role in wars and horse races, but also in the process of transmitting information. Therefore, Chinese people has special emotions towards horses, and they also referred to talents as “a thorough-bred horse. The horse in Western culture has similarities with the ox in Chinese culture, as it is diligent and strong. In Western culture, horses are often positive, but when describing a person as domineering and arrogant, they become the opposite image.

3.8. Sheep

Sheep is regarded as a symbol of gentleness in Chinese culture, and the Chinese character of sheep has a homophonic meaning of Chinese character auspicious, representing propitious. Whether in Chinese or Western cultures, sheep are used as a positive symbol, and we can learn many beautiful qualities such as gentleness and leniency from them.

3.9. Monkey

Monkey represents cleverness and intelligence in Chinese culture. This can be seen from the classic work *Journey to the West*. Sun Wukong escorted Tang Monk westward to obtain scriptures, subduing demons, punishing evil and promoting good along the way, which is a symbol of justice and agility. But in Western culture, monkeys are not so "lucky" anymore. The monkey is been seen as a symbol of mischievous behavior.

3.10. Rooster

In Mandarin, Chinese character rooster is homophonic with Chinese character auspicious. Therefore, rooster carries the meaning of auspiciousness in Chinese culture. The idiom “golden rooster brings good news” carries this meaning. But at the same time, the rooster also represents the meaning of stinginess, such as “the iron rooster never pulls out a feather”. There are many expressions of rooster in the West, such as chicken, hen, rooster, cock, etc. Different words represent different cultural connotations. Rooster cannot be directly translated due to the cultural differences between Chinese and Western cultures, which are caused by language differences.

3.11. Dog

Dogs have always been good friends for humans, but

traditional culture does not highly value dogs. But in the West, dogs have a relatively high status. In Chinese culture, dogs represent people who follow the trend and are despicable and shameless. Idioms such as “dogs take advantage of others”, “dogs jump over walls in haste”, and “dogs' eyes look down on others”. In the West, dogs have always been human's best friend, and even now, many people choose to raise dogs instead of having children, and treat them as their own children.

3.12. Pig

Pigs are ridiculous and lazy, so in Chinese culture, pigs have always been a symbol of laziness, stupidity, and gluttony. In Chinese film and television works, pigs often appear as comedic characters on the screen. Zhu Bajie in *Journey to the West* brings a lot of joy to the audience. In Western culture, the cultural meaning of pig is similar to that of China, and it is also a representative of dirty, lazy, and foolish.

4. Conclusion

By comparing the cultural connotations of the twelve zodiac signs in Chinese and Western cultures, different translation strategies can be adopted based on the same or different cultural connotations of these animals. If the cultural connotations are the same, such as sheep, rat, pigs, literal translation and annotation can be used to convey their cultural connotations. If the cultural connotations are different, such as tigers, dragons, dogs, free translation can be adopted to avoid misunderstandings among the target readers.

In summary, there are certain language and cultural differences between different countries and nations. And these differences will inevitably create obstacles to cross-cultural communication. To achieve success in cross-cultural communication, it is necessary to recognize the similarities and differences between our own national culture and Western culture, and correctly choose expressions that conform to Western cultural norms to achieve the purpose of communication, thereby better spreading Chinese culture.

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