

# The Influence of Cultural Background on the Acquisition of Chinese as a Second Language

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**Abstract:** In the process of acquiring Chinese as a second language, cultural background is very important. The cultural background factors that affect the acquisition of Chinese as a second language include value orientation, national psychology and cultural distance. Under different cultural backgrounds, there is a big gap between Chinese students and China people in value orientation and national psychology, which hinders them from learning Chinese. However, students in Chinese cultural circle who are close to China culture have obvious advantages in Chinese acquisition compared with students in non-Chinese cultural circle, which is more conducive to second language acquisition. On the basis of previous studies, this paper analyzes the cultural background factors that affect the acquisition of Chinese as a second language, and on this basis, puts forward some suggestions for Chinese teaching, such as finding the commonalities of different cultures, strengthening the understanding of students' background and paying attention to the communicative function of Chinese teaching.

**Keywords:** Cultural Background; Chinese; Second Language Acquisition; Culture; Affect.

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## 1. Introduction

There is something behind language, and language cannot exist without culture. Language and culture are interdependent and mutually restrictive. In the process of second language acquisition, it is essential to know the cultural background of the target country. In 1980s, influenced by the discipline of cultural linguistics, there was a "cultural craze" in China's foreign language teaching and teaching Chinese as a foreign language, which was summarized by some scholars as the "cultural linguistics China tide". Influenced by the "cultural craze", the circle of teaching Chinese as a foreign language is paying more and more attention to the cultural background. In 1987, the Chinese Teaching and Research Section of Fudan University issued a paper entitled "The Relevance between Language Teaching and Cultural Background Knowledge", which pointed out that language teaching must be accompanied by relevant cultural background teaching, otherwise the whole teaching process would be incomplete.

In recent years, with the development of China's economic level and the improvement of its international status, more and more people are learning Chinese, and the teaching of Chinese as a second language has also made great progress. In teaching Chinese, students' cultural background is a problem that has to be considered. Chinese teachers should use the perspective of cross-cultural communication, and when teaching students from different cultural backgrounds, they should change their inherent teaching thinking and teach in a more targeted way. There are many papers about cultural background and the study of Chinese acquisition, many of which are from the perspective of cross-cultural communication. For example, Hai Liang and Chang Li (2021) used the cross-cultural perspective to put forward some countermeasures for teachers of Chinese as a foreign language to overcome cross-cultural communication. Jiani Feng (2022) put forward some corresponding countermeasures to cultivate Chinese students' intercultural communicative competence in teaching Chinese as a foreign

language. There are also some papers that focus on the acquisition or teaching of cultural words in teaching Chinese as a foreign language, and put forward corresponding solutions to cultural teaching in Chinese teaching. Shihai Zhang (2012) made a comparative study on the acquisition of Chinese cultural words by foreign students in Chinese character circle and non-Chinese character circle, analyzed the gap between them in cultural acquisition, and put forward some suggestions for Chinese teaching. Ming Zhao (2012) first introduced the background, definition and practical value of the concept of cultural words, and further put forward the teaching principles of cultural words in teaching Chinese as a foreign language.

Generally speaking, many articles take students' cultural background as the starting point to analyze and discuss students' Chinese acquisition, but there are relatively few papers about the influence of cultural background on Chinese acquisition as a second language. On the basis of previous studies, this paper further analyzes the influence of cultural background on Chinese as a second language by consulting a large number of documents, hoping to put forward some targeted suggestions on Chinese teaching by analyzing the cultural factors that affect Chinese as a second language acquisition.

## 2. The Analysis of Cultural Background Factors that Affect the Acquisition of Chinese as a Second Language

### 2.1. The Value Orientation

Different values have affected the acquisition of Chinese as a second language to a certain extent, which has brought many obstacles to second language acquisition. Among them, the most typical is the significant difference in value orientation between China and the West. Especially, some European and American students do not understand some expressions in Chinese because of their different value

orientations when learning Chinese, which brings obstacles to learning.

China has been deeply influenced by Confucianism for a long time, attaching importance to social responsibility and mission, cultivating ideal personality, putting collective interests above personal interests and advocating collectivism. The west, far away from the other side of the ocean, has completely different values from ours. Influenced by the Renaissance and the Industrial Revolution in Europe in the Middle Ages, western society paid more attention to individual value, emphasized individual freedom and advocated individualism. In the process of learning Chinese, some Chinese words are culturally colored, which implies the personality characteristics of China people. However, European and American students with different cultures from China are confused and don't understand. For example, when Mr. China explains the idiom "the Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains", he often tells us to persevere and have the courage to overcome difficulties and obstacles by telling the fable of the Foolish Old Man. However, students in western countries are puzzled by the Foolish Old Man's decision to move mountains. They don't understand why the Foolish Old Man insisted on moving mountains, but he didn't choose to move and find a more suitable place for himself. In their view, the Foolish Old Man's behavior is really stupid. Through this case, we can see that the values of western students' individualism are obviously quite different from those of us in China who emphasize focusing on collective interests.

## 2.2. National Psychology

Influenced by the natural environment, there are also many differences in national psychology between China and the West, which also brings a lot of confusion to western students who acquire Chinese as a second language. Taking the word "dragon" as an example, China and the West have shown two very different attitudes towards it. In China, the "dragon" is a symbol of sacredness, nobility and auspiciousness, which originated from the primitive totem worship in China. People imagine the appearance of "dragon" according to the images of other animals and regard it as worship. It has "horns like deer, head like snake, eyes like rabbit, neck like snake, abdomen like a slug, scales like a fish, claws like an eagle, palms like a tiger and ears like an ox". In ancient myths and legends, the "dragon" has great power. It can do anything from heaven to earth. For a long time, "dragon" has been regarded as a symbol of praise in the Chinese nation's psychology. "Dragon" was a symbol of nobility and power in ancient times. The emperor was called "the real dragon emperor", the clothes he wore were called "dragon robe", the chair he sat in was called "dragon chair" and the car he rode in was called "dragon chariot". As a love of "dragon", our Chinese sons and daughters have always called themselves "descendants of the dragon". In western culture, the "dragon" is a ferocious-looking, fire-breathing monster. In the eyes of westerners, "dragon" is a symbol of harm. Therefore, "dragon" has a derogatory color in western culture. Therefore, China people's worship of "dragon" is incomprehensible to some westerners.

Similarly, "dog" has different emotional colors in Chinese and western cultures. In Chinese, a dog is a humble animal, which is often used to describe people who live in poverty and have no social status. The description of "dog" often means "despicable, bad and domineering", such as "hanging sheep's head and selling dog meat." "Dogs take mice and mind their

own business" and so on. In recent years, the social status of "dog" has been improved, but the common saying about "dog" still has a derogatory color. For example, when we describe ourselves as single, we often use "single dog" to belittle and laugh at ourselves, so as to show our present situation. After a busy day, we also say "tired as a dog" means exhausted. Among English-speaking people, "dog" has always been a pet and "the most loyal friend of mankind". Therefore, "dog" is often used as a symbol of praise in the west. "dog" mostly describes people, such as "lucky dog" means "lucky dog" and "old dog" means "old man" or "experienced man".

## 2.3. Cultural Distance

In the process of second language acquisition, students in Chinese cultural circle who are close to China culture are more conducive to second language acquisition than students in other non-Chinese cultural circles. For cultural words whose expressions can be found in another language, positive transfer between cultures can be used to bring out words. Lado believes that when some language elements (vocabulary, grammar, etc.) or cultures in the mother tongue and the target language are consistent or similar, there will be a positive transfer between languages, which is beneficial to students' acquisition. China's neighboring countries, such as South Korea and Japan, have been in close contact with China since ancient times. Influenced by Confucian culture, their values and ways of thinking have much in common with China people. Even for a long time in history, these countries used Chinese characters as written language. Therefore, when students in these countries learn Chinese, factors such as culture in their mother tongue will be positively transferred, which will promote the target language learning.

However, when some students from non-Chinese cultural circles learn Chinese as a second language, it is difficult for them to understand the cultural characteristics of the target language because of the great difference between the cultural background of their mother tongue and the cultural background of the target language, which to some extent forms obstacles and produces negative transfer between languages, which is not conducive to their acquisition. For example, China and the United States, as two typical countries of the East and the West, have very different cultural backgrounds, resulting in fundamental differences in values and ways of thinking. Therefore, some American students are much more confused and puzzled when learning Chinese than Japanese and Korean students.

## 3. Suggestions for Chinese Teaching

### 3.1. Looking for Similarities between Different Cultures

Even though there are obvious differences between different cultures, there are always commonalities between the two cultures. For example, when teachers explain the fable "the Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains", we can look for stories similar to "the Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains" in western society to explain it in the face of western students' incomprehension. For example, Hemingway's work "The Old Man and the Sea" describes the story that Santiago, the hero, is not afraid of the storm, fights with sharks to the death at sea and finally drags the skeleton of a big fish home. The hero of this story has many similarities with "the Foolish Old Man". First of all, they are very old. the

Foolish Old Man is nearly ninety years old, and Santiago is in his fifties. Secondly, they all have an optimistic attitude towards life. After being laughed at and puzzled by the people around them, they did not lose heart, but firmly moved towards their goals. The Foolish Old Man laughed at the Foolish Old Man's dying years, and trying to move mountains was simply beyond one's ability. The Foolish Old Man didn't care about the Wise Old Man's ridicule, but believed that the mountain in front of him would be leveled one day. The old man Santiago didn't catch a fish for 84 days in a row, and everyone around him laughed at him, but he still believed that he would catch a big fish. In addition, they all have a tenacious will to persevere despite difficulties. The Foolish Old Man believes that his children and grandchildren are endless. As long as he persists, the two mountains of Taihang and Wangwu will be leveled one day. Santiago hasn't caught any fish for eighty-four days, but he still hasn't given up. On the eighty-fifth day, he decided to go fishing in the deep sea. In the struggle against marlin and sharks, even though Santiago was exhausted, he still tried his best to meet these challenges at all costs. Therefore, when teachers explain "the Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains", they can compare it with "The Old Man and the Sea" to help students understand the Foolish Old Man's optimistic attitude towards life and perseverance. By combining students' cultural background, it is more conducive to students' learning. However, it is worth noting that when explaining the story of "the Foolish Old Man Moves the Mountains", we should explain to students the cultural concepts of relocating to another place, family-oriented and self-improvement in China culture.

### 3.2. To Strengthen the Understanding of Students' Background

When teaching Chinese, teachers should understand the backgrounds of different students and carry out targeted teaching. Facing different students, teachers should fully grasp the students' learning motivation and adjust the teaching progress according to the students' learning motivation. If students' study because they are interested in Chinese, teachers can appropriately expand some cultural knowledge when explaining, so as to help students learn Chinese better and understand China culture. If students learn Chinese only because of employment, tourism and other motives, then teachers should reduce the difficulty and teach more daily life terms to promote students' better communication and improve their oral expression ability. Similarly, teachers should also distinguish between students in Chinese cultural circle and students in non-Chinese cultural circle. Students in Chinese cultural circles have obvious advantages in acquiring Chinese as a second language, and they are generally better than students in non-Chinese cultural circles. Therefore, when teaching students in the cultural circle of Chinese characters, teachers can simply introduce the Chinese cultural background, and then expand the content appropriately when explaining the content, which will increase the difficulty in time. When teaching students from non-Chinese cultural circles, teachers should introduce certain cultural background, so that students can learn Chinese better on the basis of understanding culture. This can not only enhance the interest of classroom teaching and arouse students' interest in learning, but also help students reduce the obstacles of cross-cultural communication and learn Chinese more effectively. In addition, teachers should reduce the difficulty of teaching and enhance students' confidence and interest in learning Chinese

for students who are not in the Chinese cultural circle.

### 3.3. Pay Attention to the Communicative Function of Chinese Teaching

Language is the most important communication tool for human beings. To learn a language, the most important thing is how to use it to achieve the purpose of communication. In Chinese teaching, we should pay attention to the communication of Chinese teaching, integrate cultural background into Chinese teaching, and help students achieve the purpose of communication. Teachers can organize various forms of classroom activities, and let students feel the expression habits and ways of thinking of China people by simulating China people's shopping, traveling and other practical activities, and learn to master the basic expressions of Chinese in the context. After class, teachers can also encourage students to communicate with China people in canteens, shopping malls and other places run by China people by arranging homework, feel the expression habits of China people, and find out the similarities and differences between Chinese and their own languages, and then let students share the cases of using Chinese to communicate. The whole class can also speak freely, analyze the typical characteristics of China culture and the psychological characteristics of China people through this case, and feel the communication and charm between different cultures.

## 4. Conclusion

There are many cultural background factors that affect the acquisition of Chinese as a second language. Value orientation, national psychology and cultural distance all affect the acquisition of Chinese as a second language to varying degrees. The differences in value orientation and national psychology between China and the West have caused many puzzles and obstacles for some Western students in learning Chinese. Compared with these western students, students in the Chinese character cultural circle who are closer to China culture are more conducive to Chinese acquisition. In view of the above situation, teachers should find the commonalities of different cultures, strengthen their understanding of students' backgrounds and attach importance to the communicative function of Chinese teaching. Judging from the current Chinese teaching, there are numerous introductions about cultural background, but there is no clear outline about cultural teaching, and it has not yet formed a certain scale. I hope that in the future, teaching Chinese as a foreign language can achieve more rapid development in cultural teaching, and become more scale and system.

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