

# *Exploring the Situations and Challenges That Non-native Speakers of Chinese Meet in Cross-Culture Communication*

## *—Taking Translation and Literature as Examples*

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**Abstract:** In the current society, people are living in an era of cross-cultural communication, where they are influenced by a variety of cultural differences. In the process of learning a new language, individuals face numerous difficulties and challenges due to this cultural diversity. Language and culture are closely interconnected. This article examines the specific challenges encountered by non-native speakers of Chinese when learning the Chinese language, arising from cultural differences, with a particular focus on the domains of translation and literature. After reviewing previous literature, the main arguments of this paper are: 1) Language is closely tied to culture; 2) There are significant differences in expression between Chinese and English; 3) Translation often lacks precision in terms of vocabulary; 4) Learners easily overlook context, leading to misunderstandings; 5) The use of imagery in Chinese and Western literature differs; 6) The origins and preferences in the development of Chinese and Western literature diverge. Consequently, it sheds light on the efforts required by educators and learners involved in intercultural Chinese language communication.

**Keywords:** Cross-cultural communication, Non-native speakers of Chinese, Culture, Translation, Literature

## 1. Introduction

With the liberation of thought and the development of technology, China, the largest developing country, has increasingly stronger national strength and a higher international reputation. With the development of China, the Chinese language is becoming increasingly popular worldwide. Chinese language learning was available in more than 180 countries and regions around the world by the end of 2021, the ministry said at a press conference, Xinhua reports. In 2016, recent news suggests that there are now more than 40 million foreigners studying Chinese around the world, expecting that as many as 100 million foreigners will be studying Chinese within the next few years. Besides, based on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis [1], language is not only a compass to understand the reality of society

but also helps to shape and express thoughts, shaping the culture. In a broad sense, culture refers to the overall way of life of a nation, including the patterns of beliefs, customs, objects, institutions, technologies, and language in human society. For many non-native Chinese scholars, learning Chinese requires great efforts to gain knowledge about traditional Chinese culture and unique history. Because people in contemporary society live in a cross-culture communication era, it is difficult and challenging for non-native Chinese learners to not only study Chinese but also Chinese culture. Therefore, on this page, we will explore the situation and challenges that non-native Chinese speakers meet in intercultural communication from the perspectives of culture, translation, and literature. In today's society, cross-cultural communication research is focused on ELT - the study of English as a global language and a common language. However, there is relatively little research on Chinese language dissemination and research based on the Chinese language. This article expands comparative research in this area. At the same time, studying the difficulties and challenges of learners whose first language is not Chinese can promote communication between different language groups, cultivate people's awareness of cross-cultural communication, and enhance everyone's tolerance for different cultures. In the following paragraphs, this paper will analyze the aforementioned issues from the perspectives of culture, translation, and literature.

## **2. OVERVIEW IN CULTURE**

Culture, in a broad sense, refers to the characteristic features of daily existence shared by people in a certain place or generation, including customary beliefs, social groups, shared values, and goals [2]. Because culture has such a profound inclusiveness, it almost permeates all aspects of human life and primarily influences people's behaviors, including language behavior. Language is a mirror of culture. Language in a specific region can reflect the exclusive culture, complex history, and unique traditions of a country or even a region. Besides, based on the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis [1], the language structure of a person will influence how they perceive society and the world. Therefore, understanding the development of Chinese culture and the system of Chinese society is an essential path to learning the Chinese language for many non-native speakers of this language.

### **2.1. Cross Culture Communication**

Every country has its unique cultural background, but in contemporary society, people are in an era of cross-cultural communication with the emergence of a global perspective and close interactions and exchanges between nations. Cross-cultural communication is commonly emphasized in intercultural communication, examining how individuals from diverse backgrounds, regions, and cultures engage in verbal and non-verbal communication. On the one hand, more different culture from different countries is interacting with each other due to globalization. On the other hand, people are permeated by their country's culture, but, at the same time, whether through education, the Internet, or daily life, they are silently and potentially influenced by the culture of other countries. According to a psychologist named Carl Rogers, true and effective communication is generated and collided through people's listening and speaking. Cross-cultural communication has promoted the advancement of human civilization, encouraged the fusion of diverse cultures, and expanded individuals' knowledge and worldviews [3]. However, for second language learners studying under cross-cultural communication circumstances, these might present many challenges and problems. Mastering a foreign language requires an understanding of the country's culture, but cultural differences make language learning even more difficult. This paper will focus on the issues and challenges encountered by non-native Chinese learners due to cultural differences when learning Chinese.

## 2.2. Difference Between Chinese and Western Culture

First and foremost, this paper will introduce some distinct differences between Chinese and Western culture, including the perspectives of language, religion, communication, education system, and the relationship between the collective and the individual. Firstly, from a linguistic perspective, Chinese and English belong to completely different language families, with significant differences in grammar, vocabulary, and pronunciation. For example, Chinese uses Chinese characters, with each character typically representing a word or meaning, while English uses the Latin alphabet, with each letter typically representing a phoneme. Secondly, the main religions in China include Buddhism, Taoism, and Confucianism, while Christianity is the predominant religion in the Western nations, and different religions impact the local culture and values. Third, the communication styles between East and West are different. On the one hand, Chinese people prefer indirect communication: When they disagree with someone's viewpoint, they believe that hiding their true feelings is a matter of politeness and respect. On the other hand, Westerners prefer direct communication and often defend their viewpoints to persuade others to agree with them. Unlike the subtle and indirect approach of Chinese people, Westerners do not mind seeking the truth in a direct manner. Starting with the education system, Chinese education emphasizes learning and exams, and parents have high expectations for their children's academic performance. In contrast, education in Western countries focuses on academic and personal development, encourages students to think critically, and promotes critical thinking. Last but not least, Chinese culture stresses collectivism, and people generally consider the big picture and make compromising decisions. However, Western culture encourages individuals to take risks and gain courage [4]. Differences in cultural aspects will inevitably result in different thinking modes between Chinese and Westerners and lead to difficulties for non-native Chinese speakers to learn Chinese. In the following paper, we will explain this from the perspectives of translation and literature.

## 3. CHALLENGES IN TRANSLATION IN CHINESE AND ENGLISH

To reduce communication barriers between people from different cultural backgrounds, Translation is a process of converting source language into target language material, which plays an indispensable role in cross-cultural communication. Different cultural backgrounds lead to language differences, which strengthens the obstacles to communication. Only through translation can we ensure the fluency of inter-culture communication and establish a bridge for the exchange between East and West [5]. However, there are various mistakes in translation, which make non-native speakers of Chinese even laborious to acquire this language. These translations usually overlook the cultural differences between East and West, and the lack of accuracy of vocabulary could also lead to misunderstandings among non-native speakers of Chinese, bringing certain challenges to cross-cultural communication and TCSOL (Teaching Chinese to Speakers of Other Languages). In this category, these challenges will be dilated upon from the following perspectives.

### 3.1. Language Expression

Due to the discrepancies in language expressions and daily routines between China and the West, there is a gap for non-native speakers in learning Chinese. Chinese people have been influenced by Confucianism, whose character is gentler and whose language style is more euphemistic. The West, on the other hand, advocates freedom and individuality, which is more direct in its language style [5]. As a result, learners will have some difficulties acquiring Chinese language expressions. For example, when expressing a negative opinion, it is common for learners to say "no" outright in their language. In contrast, Chinese people will start with a string of polite euphemisms to lead to the final negation. Another example is the public slogan: “请勿” can be translated into “Don't” or “No” in foreign

countries, they probably use “No,” which is a more native approach, whereas in China, “don’t” could be used more because Chinese may think “No” is full of aggressiveness, so there may be some misunderstandings during the learning stage of non-native speakers of Chinese. At this time, replacing “Don’t” with “No” or “Please don’t” seems to be a good choice in translation.

### 3.2. Accuracy of Vocabulary

In multicultural communication, the accuracy of vocabulary in translation has always been a non-negligible issue. Chinese and English are from different language systems. As there are a lot of differences between Chinese and, British & Americans in terms of thinking patterns and national cultures, the usages of the two languages are far from each other [6]. Due to the lack of understanding of the difference between the two, many non-native Chinese speakers are often unable to distinguish the usage between the two and translate Chinese into non-corresponding English with low accuracy of vocabulary, leading to misunderstanding. In a class taught by Miss J.L. Zhu, a professor at the College of Overseas Education at Nanjing University, a student from America was asked to say, “He got dumped by his girlfriend for smoking” in Chinese. The answer from the student was “他为了抽烟被女朋友甩了”. It shows that the speaker couldn’t distinguish “in order to”(为了) from “because of”(因为) in Chinese. When it came to “canceration,” another student said, “变癌” instead of “癌变” [7]. It can be seen that non-native speakers of Chinese face certain challenges in terms of the accuracy of vocabulary in translation. Professors should focus on these confusing items and give as clear explanations as possible.

### 3.3. The Ignorance of the Context or Language Situation

Another challenge for non-native speakers of Chinese in translation is that they easily ignore the language situation when learning. Professors often design dialogue scenarios in the teaching process so that learners can acquire the different meanings of language expressions in different environments, thus enhancing their communicative competence [8]. It is difficult for non-native speakers to acquire the meanings of some Chinese phrases and sentences. Take the Chinese phrase “往心里去” as an example: through observation, non-native speakers often consider this phrase only as putting one thing into mind, whereas its true meaning in Chinese is caring about something and taking it into heart. Another example is that “由于早高峰堵车，我不会开车，而是坐地铁去公司”：“我不会开车” is often taken by non-native speakers to mean “I don't have the ability to drive,” which is a normal understanding of the situation, but in this context, it means “I don't want to drive.” In multicultural communication, the translation relies on the language situation, which is a challenge for non-native speakers of Chinese. It’s easy for them to ignore the language situation because they are beginners and can’t handle Chinese fluently. In this case, Chinese language teachers should, on the one hand, explain Chinese phrases in native English and, on the other hand, ask students to use these Chinese phrases to make sentences to better understand the meaning of Chinese sentences.

## 4. CHALLENGES IN LITERATURE

### 4.1. The Role of Chinese Literature in Cross-Cultural Communication

In the increasingly prosperous era of cross-cultural communication, learning Chinese is not just about how to speak or write but also requires non-native Chinese speakers to have a deeper understanding of the underlying aspects of a Chinese language based on Chinese culture. The use of literary works as tools for cross-cultural teaching can assist teachers and students in exploring and interpreting the deep cultural and intercultural meanings inherent in the works to answer the question of why people

express and act in certain ways [9]. Through this approach, students can gain a profound understanding of Chinese values, beliefs, social norms, and behavioral guidelines, thus enhancing their Chinese language learning. For instance, teachers can guide students in reading and analyzing literary works, leading them to examine cultural elements such as specific customs, traditions, and rituals, as well as the associated emotions and attitudes. Through discussing the roles and plots in literary works, students can discover the influence of cultural background on character behavior.

From this perspective, intercultural communication can assist scholars with different native languages better understand literary works, while literary works also play a positive role in cross-cultural education and practice by helping students gain a deeper understanding of Chinese culture. This implies that the study of Chinese literary works is an important component of Chinese language teaching to non-native speakers of Chinese. However, those often encounter difficulties in comprehending Chinese literature during the learning process. In this article, Chinese literature is roughly categorized into classical Chinese and vernacular Chinese, and their respective challenges for learners are analyzed from these two perspectives. This reflection addresses the challenges faced by Chinese language teaching to non-native speakers of Chinese.

#### 4.2. Classical Chinese Literature

In the process of comparing and analyzing the imagery of "horse" in ancient Chinese and Western literary works, scholars have found that the symbolic meanings of the same term "horse" vary in different linguistic contexts. In ancient Chinese poetry and literature, animal imagery, particularly that of horses, is primarily employed as a means of conveying emotions and sentiments indirectly through the depiction of specific external objects. Conversely, in ancient Greek literary works, authors tended to utilize a personification approach, likening humans to well-known external entities, imbuing their writings with an obscure nuance to achieve their desired literary effects [10].

Thus, as mentioned earlier, it becomes apparent that literary works shaped by diverse cultural backgrounds also exhibit distinct employment of imagery. Non-native Chinese speakers are likely to approach the study of Chinese literature with preconceived literary notions, leading to comprehension difficulties. These difficulties are mostly a form of cultural misinterpretation arising from differences in language, concepts, history, religion, etiquette, and other aspects, leading to misunderstandings of different cultures. It is a subjective conjecture of learners based on their culture regarding the target culture.

Chinese writers often use natural scenery in ancient poetry to metaphorically express the emotions and fates of their characters. For instance, a poem may depict a field of withered flowers to convey a sense of loneliness and despair. Non-native Chinese speakers may envision the imagery but find it difficult to grasp the underlying emotions and significance. A classic example is Li Bai's "Quiet Night Thoughts." In this poem, the moon is used as a symbol representing homesickness when far away from home. The moon is a well-known symbol in Chinese culture, often employed to express separation and yearning. The moon's bright and cold radiance symbolizes the poet's solitude and longing. Chinese students are acquainted with these common poetic images through both school and family education, which lays the foundation for their future study of Chinese literature. However, for non-native speakers of Chinese, without familiarity with these universal symbols, it becomes challenging for them to recognize the profound meanings conveyed by the works of literature, resulting in a lack of resonance.

#### 4.3. Vernacular Literature

Classical Chinese is often far removed from the students' living backgrounds and has significant differences compared to modern Chinese, making it more complex to learn [11]. For Chinese, learning



Modern Chinese is relatively easier than learning Classical Chinese, and this disparity is even more pronounced for non-native Chinese speakers. Vernacular literature adopts simple sentence structures and focuses on direct expression and practical situations, emphasizing fluency and readability, improving the style to become more widely understood in daily communication. However, non-native Chinese speakers still face difficulties learning the vernacular language, which is not inferior to learning classical Chinese.

Tracing back the two distinctive paths formed during the initial development of Chinese and Western literature, taking Western literature as an example, its works primarily focused on novels and dramas, emphasizing narrative structures and expressive techniques. The narrative mode played a vital role in showcasing the storyline, with authors preferring to present the plot through ingenious narrative techniques. In contrast, in ancient times, scholars in China generally admired poetry, considering it an elegant and noble form of literary creation. This preference had a long-lasting impact on Chinese literature, leading to a greater emphasis on emotional expression and the articulation of abstract concepts. The emphasis on aesthetic perception that is difficult to convey in words, such as mood and artistry, was accentuated.

Returning to contemporary literature, before the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chinese novels had not truly flourished. With the invasion of Western culture and the influence of the Western learning movement in the late Qing and early Republican period, Chinese intellectuals initiated the New Culture Movement. They advocated for the use of vernacular Chinese. Vernacular Chinese incorporated English grammar into the Chinese language, making it more accessible to the general populace and enhancing its narrative capability. As a result, both vernacular Chinese and classical Chinese still retain some common writing techniques, such as description, metaphor, and contrast.

For example, in the work "Diary of a Madman" by the Chinese modern literature writer Lu Xun, the term "eating man" appears. It is only after experiencing or studying modern Chinese history that readers understand that "eating man" is a symbolic imagery used to reveal the cruelty of society and the greedy nature of human beings. Through observation and contemplation, the novel's protagonist deeply realizes the phenomenon of deception, oppression, and exploitation among people in society and the lack of genuine care and sympathy for one another. In such a context, people are like wild beasts devouring each other, mercilessly harming and ravaging one another, that is, "eating man." It is difficult for beginners in Chinese to grasp the true meaning of the term "eating man" when appreciating this chapter from the perspective of appreciating Western literary works. Apart from not understanding Chinese history, there are also many other cultural misunderstandings formed due to the different literary forms that they have been exposed to.

## 5. Conclusion

Based on cultural differences and cultural diversity, this paper focuses on the challenges encountered by non-native speakers of China in learning Chinese regarding translation and literature. Through the study, it is found that in translation, the differences in expression between Chinese and English, the accuracy of vocabulary, and the significant role of context pose certain challenges to learners. In previous literature, imagery and the developmental origins of Chinese and Western literature are also very different, making it difficult for learners to understand. As more people learn Chinese, professors should improve their teaching strategies, and one of the most important points is cultural empathy. Cultural empathy means that the subject of communication consciously changes one's cultural position and transcends the framework of his own culture, removes the constraints of his own culture, and puts himself in another culture so that he can feel and understand the other culture as he sees it. In translation and literature and Chinese language teaching as a whole, improving the cultural empathy of professors and learners will also greatly enhance the efficiency of teaching and learning and enable non-native speakers of Chinese to acquire Chinese culture better.

## Acknowledgments

Le Chen, Yiduo Xu, Yuhan Yi contributed equally to this work and should be considered co-first authors.

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