

A Brief Discussion on “Chinese Culture Aphasia” – A Case Study of French Majors in Chinese Universities

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Abstract: Cultural exchange is an integral means of showing a country’s image. From the perspective of cross-cultural communication, cultural exchange between two countries should be equal and bidirectional. However, at present, a common phenomenon is occurring among many French majors, in which they are unable to portray the Chinese culture accurately in French. This article analyses “Chinese culture aphasia” from three aspects: specific performance, main causes, and corresponding coping strategies.

Keywords: Chinese culture aphasia; Bidirectional communication; French

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1. Specific performance

In the context of globalization, cultural exchanges among countries are major issues. As major cultural powers in the world, China and France share good diplomatic relations, and between these them, the cultural exchanges and cooperation are ever-increasing. With the firm support of the Belt and Road Initiative, several countries involved are forming partnerships with China, including French-speaking countries, such as Lebanon. With this initiative, more than a hundred Chinese universities are offering French major courses today.

Without the help of dictionaries or other tools, it is indeed a difficult for Chinese French-learners to equivocally express the Chinese culture in French. Tourism, for instance, an important industry for the national economy in China. According to the *2019 China Tourism Development Report*, the industry makes a combined contribution of 9.94 trillion yuan to China’s gross domestic product (GDP), accounting for 11.04% of the total GDP ^[1]. Nevertheless, for French learners, it may be difficult for them to accurately introduce well-known attractions, such as “The Great Wall,” “Summer Palace,” and “Forbidden City,” in French the right way immediately. However, it is easy for them to introduce famous sites in France as they have learned the language and historical allusions during classes, such as “Notre-Dame de Paris,” “La tour Eiffel,” and “Musée du Louvre” ^[2].

Considering the reasons, for one thing, Chinese French-learners have a sense of fear toward expressing ideas about the Chinese culture in French. As is in the case of many, these students are less confident when speaking in a non-mother-tongue language. For others, they lack professional knowledge in related fields. This is due to the fact that Chinese students are more interested to understand French culture while neglecting the maintenance of Chinese culture. In such a context, Chinese students usually lack cultural confidence; that is, a diminishing sense of cultural identity and pride.

2. Main causes

During the foundation of the People's Republic of China, the country has emphasized introducing western techniques, including those in the cultural field, such the translation of books into foreign languages. Being granted, this practice has greatly contributed to the development of China, which is now the country with the second largest economy in the world. However, in the face of this rise of economic power, China is still lacking at sharing Chinese stories.

2.1. Imbalance French curriculum in universities

Chinese and French belong to different language families: Chinese belongs to the Sino-Tibetan language family, whereas French belongs to the Latin language family. There are apparent differences in vocabulary, phonology, and grammar. It is widely understood that a person's own culture and speaking habits would influence the learning of a second language. In view of that, students should discard the interference of their mother tongue in the learning of foreign languages.

As far as the French specialty is concerned, it focuses on the French culture, the effectiveness of which is demonstrated by exam results. For example, in consideration of the French department in Zhejiang International Studies University, the courses mainly highlight the development of oral proficiency, written proficiency, oral expression, and writing ability, such as *Oral French*, *French Writing*, etc. Literature courses attach great importance to the French culture, such as *Regards sur la France* and *Brève histoire de la France*, which aid students in equipping themselves with knowledge about geography, history, etc. Currently, there is only one course that is related to the Chinese culture in the talent training plan, which is the *Introduction to Chinese Culture (in French)*. In short, almost all of them are unidirectional imports of French culture. Therefore, in activities such as the "Sino-French Bridge," Chinese students are able to share about the French culture with their French friends, but with regard to introducing Chinese culture to their counterparts, they are trapped in an embarrassing situation of not being able to express it clearly in French. All this reflects an imbalance in the ratio of French and Chinese elements in French courses, as well as in textbooks and exams.

In the course, the materials used by Chinese students are mainly French textbooks, whether they are textbooks edited by Chinese professors, such as *Français*, *Regards sur la France*, etc., or textbooks edited by French professors, such as *Le Nouveau Sans Frontières*, *Bienvenue en France*, etc., the objective is to help students lay a solid foundation in the French language and develop a broad knowledge base of French culture. There are a few textbooks that introduce the Chinese culture in French, such as *L'histoire et la civilisation chinoises* and *Parle-moi de la culture chinoise*. The lack of French textbooks about the Chinese culture also contributes to the imbalance of the curriculum.

In French professional level exams in China, many materials are excerpts from French newspapers and magazines as exemplified in the National Test of French Intended for Students Specialized in French Studies-Level 8 in 2017. The themes of the writing section as well as those of translations from Chinese to French and from French to Chinese are mainly France-concentrated. This is probably also an implication for students to read more French materials.

All of the above accounts for the cultivation of students' intercultural awareness, tends to lead to the accumulation of insufficient knowledge of the Chinese culture, and further aggravates the "aphasia of Chinese culture."

2.2. Deficit of cultural exchanges between China and the west

As a socialist country, China's ideology is extremely different from that of western countries along with many cultural differences. Hence, cultural exchange plays an indispensable role. However, in terms of

cultural exchange between China and the west, the import and export of culture is still hardly in proportion considering the quantity and quality.

In recent years, several western cultural brands such as Disney have become very successful. Disney is acknowledged as a cultural symbol whose influence radiates all over the world, including China. Not only has it created many renowned animated characters, but also many tourist destinations, which is undoubtedly a verification of its influence. In effect, the open market has brought many western products to China, including the western culture. The latter has a strong influence on Chinese students, especially those who read western books. To some extent, the preservation of their own culture is overlooked.

The export of Chinese cultural products is imbalance. Taking Peking opera for instance, as a typical representative of traditional Chinese opera, Peking opera does not have much comparative advantage in the world cultural trade although it is a living symbol of China. Peking opera is usually performed offline, thus requiring a relatively high cost. With the support of the Chinese government, the number of Peking opera plays in the western world has increased, but these plays are only seen during events such as the “Chinese Culture Festival.” As a consequence, westerners do not have the opportunity to appreciate them often. Moreover, Peking opera, different from Tai Chi, involves not only the mere imitation of gestures, but also of specific tunes along with an understanding of poems in this opera, thus making it difficult to make it a part of life.

2.3. Lack of new-media platforms for “narrating Chinese stories in French”

China has invested a lot in “hard power,” such as economics and politics, which has achieved remarkable results. But at the level of “soft power,” China still has a lot to do to reach the same level as the former.

Taking Zhejiang Shao opera as an example, although it has been included in the second batch of the national intangible cultural heritage list as early as 2008 and had already made a wonderful appearance at the *8th Paris Traditional Chinese Opera Festival* in 2018, it only has a small group of audiences. Due to the epidemic, its opera troupe has not been able to perform offline in the past two years. Even then, the construction of an online platform is still blank, thus hindering its dissemination.

In the era of popular mass media, new media platforms have become a modern way of cultural dissemination, such as WeChat, websites, Bilibili, Youtube, etc. WeChat is a platform that has long been used in China to tell the story of China in French, but it lacks novelty in content and format. To name only a few, *CCTV-français* and *People's daily French Version* share latest international and domestic news in a relatively serious manner with an advanced language level. They bore the young generation with their political passages.

The development of new media platforms is at a rapid pace and the number of users is ever-increasing. There are public WeChat platforms, such as *Prélude*, which are dedicated to sharing the French culture, local customs, and even the French ways of thinking, but there are only a few platforms for “telling Chinese stories in French.” Even so, their contents are not systematic, and their operational framework are not mature.

3. Coping strategies

3.1. Strengthen traditional Chinese culture education in universities

In order to strengthen the education on national culture, the proportion of Chinese elements should be increased from three aspects: curriculum, teaching materials, and examinations. In regard to the curriculum in universities, a section about Chinese culture should be included, so that students can improve their cultural confidence through the continuous learning of their own culture. For French majors, there is also a need for courses that would systematically teach Chinese culture in French. As an indicator for most

students, examinations should increase the proportion of Chinese elements to encourage students to pay more attention to the Chinese culture. This is also related to the preparation of textbooks and other reference books. Relevant state departments should actively prepare textbooks and other related books that depict Chinese stories in French. For example, the translated texts in *French Translation Practice* are mostly related to China, which is suitable as a textbook for translation courses in universities or as a reference book for those undergoing the China Accreditation Test for Translators and Interpreters.

3.2. Enhance the Chinese cultural penetration in various industries

According to the *Tourism Competitiveness Report*, France and China ranked 2nd and 13th, respectively in the global tourism competitiveness list in 2019^[3]. The competitiveness of French tourism is strong not only because of its geographical predisposition but also the integration of French culture into its tourism. Although Chinese tourism is booming, its ability to spread Chinese culture to the world is far from adequate. Even today, many foreigners still have an impression of China in terms of landmarks, such as the Great Wall, but they have not heard of famous buildings such as Tengwang Pavilion or its historical allusions. Accordingly, Chinese culture should be promoted even more. For French majors, they are only able to use French accurately to introduce Chinese famous places provided they know their own history. Through this process, French majors can then experience the charm of Chinese culture and disseminate it more actively so as to improve the phenomenon of “Chinese culture aphasia.”

3.3. Establish new media platforms to narrate Chinese stories in French

“Sixth Tone” is a new kind of integrated public WeChat platform with foreign propaganda. Its success has given inspirations. Firstly, the adoption of an international editorial team and the integration of a Chinese-based management are effective for operations. Secondly, telling Chinese stories from people’s point of view with their contents rooted in China is beneficial. In addition to inviting Chinese experts to provide their opinions on heated-discussed issues, foreign visitors should also be welcomed. Using the public WeChat platform, it is not only important to share Chinese stories that are of interest to western audiences, but also provide high-quality written reports in French as desired by Chinese audiences. It is paramount to narrate Chinese stories in French in an understandable way and in a variety of communication forms, both domestically and internationally^[4].

4. Conclusion

“Chinese culture aphasia” is a recurring phenomenon among Chinese students majoring in French. It is due to the difficulty of learning French as a foreign language along with the incompetence of Chinese students in terms of their understanding toward their own culture. To conclude, Chinese students should not only actively face the challenges in Chinese culture and its expressions in French, but also prioritize the continuous and effective import and export to form excellent two-way cultural exchanges between the two countries.

Disclosure statement

The author declares that there is no conflict of interest.

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