

Comparative Analysis of National Character of China and the United States

Weichen Lv

Guilin University of Technology, Guilin 541003, China.

Abstract: People from each and every nation have given birth to their unique national characters during the river of different history. Studying the difference and similarities can do good to cross-cultural communication, and also learn advantages from others. Chinese people are commonly considered modest but reserved while American are rather more confident. This paper analyzed their different behavior pattern and the possible reasons behind these two different personality.

Keywords: National Character; China; The United States

1. Introduction

National character studies is a set of anthropological studies conducted during and immediately after World War II. This involves the identification of people, ethnicity, and races according to specific, indomitable cultural characteristics. While a number of investigations were considered benign, there were some scholars[who?] of the opinion that these studies should never have been attempted at all. This is demonstrated in the case of social Darwinism, which holds that a successful people - as demonstrated in a victory in war or economic development - is presumed to have advanced in the evolutionary tree ahead of a vanquished nation or those people in developing or poor countries.^[1] An essay on National Character, as applied to foreign economic aid to developing nations, is contained in Ludwig Rudel's Memoir Agent for Change in International Development (Volume 2 Annex 1B, page 352). Shortly after the end of World War II, the U.S. undertook programs to provide economic assistance on a global scale, initially to rebuild Europe through the Marshall Plan, then under Truman's Point Four program. The U.S. was soon accused of imposing our system on other societies which had their own, very different, value systems and behavior patterns. The U.S. was said to be making other countries into its own image with a "one size fits all" approach. The International Cooperation Administration and then USAID took this criticism seriously. A battery of anthropologists and sociologists was hired to correct this bias. There was recognition that societies do not all follow some universal standard of behavior. What may work well in one country to serve its social objectives, may not work in another. It was argued that one should not be judgmental about the efficacy of one societal behavior system over another. A major work on national character is Ruth Benedict's book, "Patterns of Culture", written in 1934. In it, she argues that, "A culture, like an individual, is a more or less consistent pattern of thought and action". Margaret Mead, in her foreword to the book, summarizes Benedict's conception as "human cultures being personality writ large". Benedict was one of the cultural anthropologists recruited by the US government after its entry into World War II. She played a major role in grasping the place of the Emperor of Japan in popular Japanese culture and formulated the recommendation to President Roosevelt that the continuation of the Emperor's reign should be part of the surrender offer.

On the other hand, there are scholars who cite benefits in pursuing national character studies such as those who cite its contribution to the modern anthropological understanding of the rise of nations and international relations.^[2]

2. Modest VS Confident

China may be considered by most westerners a "humble" nation. Modesty holds rich connotation in China, which can be roughly divided into three parts: first, to correctly evaluate and know oneself, to have self-knowledge, to be able to see the strengths of others and their own shortcomings, to learn humbly and never be complacent, to be modest to treat those around you with respect, to be tolerant of their shortcomings, to be courteous and restrained, and to be courteous, correct treatment of

personal interests, achievements and reputation, performance for humility, do not take credit, do not strive for fame and fortune. Chinese people are shy and modest in the face of praise. The open and confident character of the American people is obvious to all of us.

Americans do not emphasize unity as Chinese do. The American culture originated from Ancient Greece has formed the scientific cultural tendency of “Seeking truth”. The knowledge of natural law comes from hypothesis, and in the process of testing hypothesis, we should pay attention to analysis or through the syllogism and deductive method of linear logical reasoning, focusing on differences and opposites, so “Either/Or” reasoning and judgment has become the western way of thinking. As a result, the American character is open, frank, active, aggressive, and adventurous spirit, personality independence, advocate struggle. American culture requires people to look each other in the eye when communicating, which is a sign of confidence, otherwise it is impolite. In the face of praise, Americans think “I am worthy of praise.”. Americans like to actively defend themselves-using a variety of rational principles to make a point, and when necessary, using more aggressive means such as humor, sarcasm, or condemnation.

3. Possible Reasons

3.1 The Doctrine of the Mean in China

The Doctrine of the Mean is a text rich with symbolism and guidance to perfecting oneself. The mean is also described as the “unswerving pivot” or *zhongyong*. *Zhong* means bent neither one way or another, and *yong* represents unchanging.³ In James Legge’s translation of the text, the goal of the mean is to maintain balance and harmony from directing the mind to a state of constant equilibrium. The person who follows the mean is on a path of duty and must never leave it. A superior person is cautious, a gentle teacher and shows no contempt for his or her inferiors. S/he always does what is natural according to her or his status in the world. Even common men and women can carry the mean into their practices, as long as they do not exceed their natural order.⁴

Doctrine of the Mean proposed three guidelines: self-watchfulness, leniency and sincerity—for how to pursue the Doctrine of the Mean, and one who follows these guidelines can be called a respectable person:⁵

Zhong-ni said, “he respectable person embodies the course of the Mean; the average person acts contrary to the course of the Mean.”⁶

Cultivated in the context of the Doctrine of the Mean and collectivism, Chinese are usually not accustomed to impressing others in public, but try treating everything moderately. Impacted by individualism, American are more liable to express themselves and not afraid to be different and enjoying becoming a special person from others.

3.2 Different Education Philosophy

Besides social impact, schools also have a great influence in the character cultivation. Most Chinese receive a relatively serious education from an early age, with teachers in a dominant and controlling position. Children are taught to listen to their parents, their elders, and their teachers. But in the Western People's growth experience has stronger independent initiative, receive less control and restraint from relatives and teachers. At the same time, Western culture pays great attention to sports education and eloquence education, both of which have a great role in fostering self-confidence.

3.2 Different Expression of Showing Modest

Both modesty and confidence are truly respectable and appreciated characteristics in China and the United States, people are just behaving differently in terms of them. For instance, Chinese usually show their modesty through deny themselves, they usually say they are still not good enough after hearing appraisal. While Americans usually show they are modest through praising others. On the other hand, social skills are generally used to measure one’s confidence, which is a genially critical capability for them, which is not the very same case in China, where one’s inner power are more valuable. Perhaps it is not that objective to simply say American are more confident, maybe their confidence is just of different kind.

4. Conclusion

It is never the case that some nations' culture enjoy more priority than others, yet it is true that each and every nation has their own advantages and disadvantages. It is true that superior culture must be a modest one and love to learn from others, as well as respect each other to better foster strengths and circumvent weaknesses. Thereafter exchanges is of vital importance, it is never not objective to simply belittle and exclude the culture we know little about or to praise the culture of a strong country. To learn more effectively and be more objective, deeper understanding is a favorable solution.

References

- [1] Homayun Sidky (2004). Perspectives on culture: a critical introduction to theory in cultural anthropology. Upper Saddle River, NJ: Pearson Prentice Hall. pp. 174–8.
- [2] De L'estoile, Benoit; Neiburg, Federico; Sigaud, Lygia (2005). Empires, Nations, and Natives: Anthropology and State-Making. Durham: Duke University Press. p. 108.
- [3] The Great Digest and Unwobbling Pivot, 1951.
- [4] Internet Sacred Text Archive, 2008.
- [5] Deng QB (2006). "On Doctrine of the Mean". Journal of Capital Normal University (Social Sciences Edition): 43. Retrieved 16 November 2014.
- [6] Legge, James. "The doctrine of the mean". sacred-texts.com. Retrieved 21 June 2015.