

Language Comparison between China and Iran

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Abstract: Cultural values hold great control on people's social behaviors. It is important to understand primary values in every culture and to behave in accordance with those values. According to the different documents, the people of Iran and China has had long relation from ancient times, so being acquaintance with the different cultures of the two countries can help the people know more about the differences and similarities of the two cultures, and as a result help the people of these two countries to have closer communication to each other as two important countries in Asia. Language as the major part of the culture has an important role in bringing people together.

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1. Introduction

“Human beings draw close to one another by their common nature, but habits and Customs keep them apart.” (CONFUCIUS)

If we pay attention to Confucius quote, we can understand that, what he called “habits and customs”, today is called a part of “Culture”. But what does it mean?

Culture is a term which is increasingly overused in contemporary societies. Due to the complexity and extensiveness of culture, there is no consensus on the definition of culture. The word “culture” has been the subject of extremely and often complex, abstract definitions, but the earliest and easily understandable definition of culture was written in 1877 by British anthropologist Sir Edward Burnett Tylor, who believed culture is “that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”, so we can say that definitions of culture which is a dynamic process commonly mention shared values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, norms, material objects, and symbolic resources (Samovar, Porter and McDaniel, 2006: 10).

It is a set of shared and enduring meaning, values, and beliefs that characterize national, ethnic, or other groups and orient their behavior. It affects everything people do in their society because of their ideas, values, attitudes, and normative or expected patterns of behavior. Culture always shared by members of a society and is passed from generation to generation. It is changing all the time because each generation adds something of its own before passing it on.

Some scholars compared “Culture” to an iceberg aptly. Just as an iceberg has a visible section above the waterline, and a larger, invisible section below the water line, so culture has some aspects that are observable and

others that can only be suspected, imagined, or intuited. Also like an iceberg, that part of culture that is visible (observable behavior) is only a small part of a much bigger whole (Peterson, 2004: 19)

Simply stated culture is the way of living and the rules for functioning in society. Since the rules differ from culture to culture, in order to function and be effective in a particular culture, people need to know how to use the rules. We learn the rules of our own culture as a matter of course, beginning at birth and continuing throughout life.

As a result, own culture rules are ingrained in the subconscious, enabling us to react to familiar situations without thinking. It is when you enter another culture, with different rules, the problems are encountered. Multicultural and intercultural communication cannot be learned without intercultural understanding, which is based on the knowledge of culture.

It is important to understand that what people do and say in a particular culture, whether it is yours or that of your host country, are not arbitrary and spontaneous, but are consistent with what people in that culture value and believe in. By knowing people's values and beliefs, you can come to expect and predict their behaviors. Once host country people are no longer catching you off guard with their actions and once you are no longer simply reacting to their actions, you are well on your way to successful cultural adjustment.

Moreover, once you accept that people behave the way they do for a reason, whatever you may think of that reason, you can go beyond simply reacting to that behavior and figure out how to work with it. Knowing where host country behavior is coming from doesn't mean that you have to like or accept it, but it should mean that you're no longer surprised by it—and that is a considerable step toward successful interaction.

1.1. Relation between China and Iran

China-Iran relations date back to over many centuries. Both have emerged from a long history of empire. And both are important players in Asia—China in the East and Iran in the West. Their geographical linkages with significant regions of Asia are a source of much of their geo-political potential. China is the largest entity in the region and its vast territory joins it with East Asia, Central Asia and South Asia. Likewise, Iran is the second largest country in the Middle East and the largest geo-political entity in the Gulf.

These highly strategic locations increase the economic, trade and political potential of both states and enable them to exercise considerable influence on neighboring regions in particular and the world in general. Historically, people-to-people contact between the two civilizations was marginal; however, instances of religious affiliation between the two can be found, chiefly, in the visits of Buddhist monks from Parthia (today's Iran) to China for missionary activities and there were also military contacts between the two nations. Since ancient times, the Parthians and Sassanid shah had various contacts with China, and the two lands were further connected via the Silk Road (Pynt and Higg, 2008: 88). These early links set the stage for the ties between Beijing and Tehran which we see today.

The Chinese explorer Zhang Qian, who visited the west neighboring countries of the Han Dynasty in 126 B.C., made the first known Chinese report on Parthia (Brosius, 2006: 90). In his accounts Parthia is named “Ānxī” (安息), a transliteration of “Arsacid”, the name of the Parthian dynasty. Following Zhang Qian's embassy and report, commercial relations between China, Central Asia, and Parthia flourished, as many Chinese missions were sent via the Silk Road throughout the 1st century BC (Cano, P E, 2010: 20-21). The Parthians were very intent on maintaining good relations with China and also sent their own embassies; starting around 110 B.C. Parthians also played a role in the Silk Road transmission of Buddhism from Central Asia to China.

A Shih Kao (安世高), a Parthian nobleman and Buddhist missionary, went to the Chinese capital Loyang in 148 AD where he established temples and became the first man to translate Buddhist scriptures into Chinese (Zürcher, 1972: 33). Like their predecessors the Parthians, the Sassanid Empire maintained active foreign relations with China, and ambassadors from Persia frequently traveled to China. Commercially, land and maritime trade with China was important to both the Sassanid and the Chinese empires. A large number of Sassanid coins have been found in southern China, confirming maritime trade (Lockard, 2008: 223). On various occasions, Sassanid kings sent their most talented Persian musicians and dancers to the Chinese imperial court (Shiloah, 1995: 8). Both empires

benefited from trade along the Silk Road, and shared a common interest in preserving and protecting trade. They cooperated in guarding the trade routes through central Asia, and both built outposts in border areas to keep caravans safe from nomadic tribes and bandits. Following encroachments by the nomadic Turkic on states in Central Asia, we also see what looks like a collaboration between Chinese and Sassanid forces to repel the Turkic advances (Asadulla, 2008: 50). Following the invasion of Iran by Muslim Arabs, Sassanid nobles took refuge in China and were given high titles at the Chinese court (Urubshurow, 2006: 79). After the Islamic conquest of Persia, Persia continued to flourish during the Islamic Golden Age and its relations with China continued. During the Tang Dynasty, communities of Persian-speaking merchants, known as Hūrén (胡人), formed in northwestern China's major trade centers (Lewis, 2009: 161). A large number of Central Asian and Persian soldiers, experts, and artisans were recruited by the Yuan Dynasty of China. Some of them, known as Sèmù rén (色目人) occupied important official posts in the Yuan Dynasty administration (Dillon, 1999:19-21). One of the most famous settlers from Persia was al-Sayyid Shams al-Din'Umar, who is identified as an ancestor of many Chinese Hui and that of Yunnan's Hui population. His most famous descendant was Zheng He, who became the Ming dynasty's most famous explorer and visited Iran several times. Shah Abbas the Great had hundreds of Chinese artisans in his capital Esfahan and Safavid Iranian art was also influenced by Chinese art to some extent.

In an overview of the diplomatic history between China and Iran, we find that frequent exchanges of culture, religion, trade, art, science and technology are the distinctive features of their bilateral relations. (Wood, 2004: 8-9). In fact, this is also the contemporary history of friendly relations between accumulation and foundation. Since establishing diplomatic relations in 1971, the relationship between China and Iran has significantly deepened, especially in the economy, energy, security and politics sphere (LIU Jun & WU Lei 2010: 42).

[Bilateral relations of China and Iran, after having witnessed many ups and downs in the past, have been growing steadily in the recent years.

Today, China and Iran continue to have strong interests in developing mutual cooperation in many fields.

2.1. Language

Perhaps the single most powerful and enabling assumption in the various developments that make up the field of Cultural Studies is its redefinition of 'language', making it an object so comprehensive that it comes to cover almost the same ground as culture itself. Language of course has always been recognized as

important in understanding different cultures, but in the 'linguistic turn' that Cultural Studies has taken, it becomes possible to say that culture itself is a language or set of languages, made up of different kinds of text, circulating under various constraints.

Semiotics itself is basically a simple concept. It refers to the study of all sign systems, all the media and means by which humans and other animals communicate or have communicated with each other. Verbal languages like English or Chinese are semiotic systems that have been extensively studied.

Other sign systems that are crucial in social life have not been so systematically studied, although members of a culture need to acquire the full range of sign systems in order to cope with the various demands made on them by others. All these systems are called 'languages', which together make up the repertoire of ways by which people make sense of themselves and the actions and objects they are immersed in: their culture (Hodge and Louie, 2005: 7-8).

2.2. Chinese Language

Spoken form, there is no such language as "Chinese"; there are hundreds of Chinese languages and dialects, i.e., tongues belonging to the Sinitic branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. Some dialects are limited to small regions of a province or even single towns. The most important languages/dialects are Mandarin (often called "*Putonghua*", which is basically the Beijing dialect), Cantonese (Yuehwa, the language of the southern province of Guangdong, used in Hong Kong, in Macau and by many overseas Chinese communities), Shanghainese (Shanghaihua), and Fujianese (Minnanhua). Though all the Sinitic languages are related, the differences between them are very considerable. For example, Mandarin is as different from Cantonese as French is different from German.

As well, several non-Sinitic tongues are used by significant minorities within China. Two of the most important of these are Tibetan (a member of the Tibeto-Burman branch of Sino-Tibetan) and Uighur, which is a Turkic language.

In terms of diversity and linguistic relationships, the analogy of Han Chinese dialects to European languages is fairly close, but there is one key difference: unlike European languages, where the same statement would appear drastically different if written in different tongues, the same statement in, say, Cantonese and Mandarin would appear very similar when written in Chinese characters, with just small differences.

In reality, this understates the degree of similarity. Partly because of government policy (both mainland China and Taiwan promote Mandarin as the official language), and partly because there has never been much of a tradition of writing down Chinese languages

other than Mandarin (Cantonese is an arguable exception), over time, the written language has come to be synonymous with Mandarin alone.

Clearly, Mandarin is the one that rules them all, and it is certainly the only Chinese language that most foreigners will ever need to use. Chinese culture is strongly visual and promiscuous, and the study of Chinese needs to be semiotically broader than the study of European languages has been.

Language and power have always had a problematic relationship in the understanding of China. For most of the last 2000 years China has been a major power, an empire, and this fact has had a pervasive effect on its forms of language and culture. During the past century China has undergone a revolutionary process, and that is another important fact. The revolution has been a complex process, incorporating numerous counter-revolutions, and the process is still not over. Both the exercise of empire and the struggles for and against wholesale revolution have had to take place in terms of the givens of language and culture, which have made their own contribution to how power has been practiced or challenged (Hodge and Louie, 2005: 8-9).

Sinologism is based on a number of premises. Primary among them is the belief in the necessary and inherent difficulty of the Chinese language, as the sole route into any worthwhile understanding of China. The spoken Chinese language here is understood to be putonghua, Mandarin, the standard language which is in practice a second language for many Chinese even within the People's Republic of China (PRC). It is a foreign language for many others, with a written form that has been simplified in the PRC but without approaching the goal of universal literacy amongst mainland Chinese.

It is undoubtedly the case that the Chinese language is difficult to learn; or more precisely, that its written form is difficult to master. This is true for Chinese people, too. This difficulty of the written script is a primary fact about Chinese, one of the keys to its ideological function, within China as well as for overseas Chinese and foreigners. But it is not a simple fact, to be accepted without question.

Throughout this century there have been concerted efforts to reform the language and simplify its written form, but these have all failed. We can see something of the deeper causes of this failure in contradictions that exist in the two main justifications used to resist reforms: that the traditional script represents the Cheesiness of Chinese, and that it is efficient in representing the difficult spoken language. In fact, as we will argue, it does effectively transmit a cohesive ideology of Cheesiness, but it does so at a huge cost in practical efficiency. Far from disambiguating Chinese, it allows ambiguity as an endemic and highly functional aspect of

written discourse. The Chinese language, especially the Chinese written code, is indeed one of the most fascinating constructions of the human mind, as Sinologism claims, but we can only appreciate the nature of its achievement through a socially and politically informed understanding of how it works (Hodge and Louie, 2005: 8-9).

The Chinese system of writing often seems like a dragon guarding the gates that lead into the Chinese mind and the texts that communicate it, dividing the world into two categories: those who can read characters, and can read what they want to and understand it in its original Chinese form, and those who can't, who are forever outsiders, dependent on translators to select and give the sense of the meanings that they need. Unlike learning a European language with its alphabetic script, the task facing those who want to learn the Chinese language in its written form is hugely difficult. They have to memorize the thousands of characters which make up the Chinese script. For people who have never learnt to read or write Chinese, the Chinese script seems fantastically difficult. In fact, the characters range from having only one stroke to some sixty-five strokes. Most characters can be broken up into two parts consisting of a radical, usually giving the semantic significance of the character, and another component which often indicates the phonetic element.

In its surveys of literacy, the government in the People's Republic of China takes 800 characters as the minimum before one is considered literate. To be considered educated, it is estimated that one has to know about 6000 characters (out of a total of some 60,000 found in dictionaries). The amount of time and effort invested in learning so many different symbols is tremendous. The characters themselves, once they are learnt, do not automatically fall into easily identifiable patterns. As any beginning student of Chinese knows, even using a dictionary can be a daunting process. Although most dictionaries use the 'radical method', where characters are classified according to the radicals, there are also dictionaries which are organized differently.

The arguments for simplification and alphabetization of Chinese characters have been debated most vociferously in this century. The establishment of the PRC brought in a government which was ostensibly more prepared to change for the sake of making the written language more accessible. Barely nine days after the new Republic was proclaimed, the Chinese Language Reform Association was formed.

By 1955, the 'Draft of the Chinese Character Simplification Scheme' was announced. The Draft has three sections: a list of 798 characters where the number of strokes have been reduced; a list of 400 variant characters which are to be abolished; and a list of 251 radicals with two standardized versions of their

handwritten forms. Over 200,000 people took part in discussing the Draft Outline, and 5167 submissions were received. In 1956, the 'Chinese Characters Simplification Scheme' was announced. This was the scheme which formed the basis of the 1964 'Comprehensive List of Simplified Characters' of 2238 entries which is still current today.

The creators of the new simplified forms tried where possible to retain the semantic component, thus leaving the ideological trace as well as creating characters which had a phonetic clue. The semantic component is crucial to their decision making on reforming the characters. For example, the character for 'brilliant, bright' with a fire radical and a phonetic mentioned above was simplified in 1955 by simply dropping the fire radical and keeping the phonetic part unchanged. However, it was obviously felt that this was not as good an abbreviation as keeping the fire radical and substituting the more complex phonetic 'can' (fresh, smiling) with 'shan' (mountain) (Hodge and Louie, 2005: 8-9).

In contrast to the case with writing, the grammar of Chinese is often represented as not much of a problem for language learners (here understood primarily as students, native speakers or not, devoting most of their efforts to learning the written code). The difficulty of the language is seen to reside mainly in learning characters and associated vocabulary. The grammar is something that can be taken for granted while characters are being learned. In the official curricula for primary and secondary schools in China, for example, there is no work on grammar as such throughout the syllabuses. The emphasis is placed instead on the learning of characters

2.3. Iranian Language

Parsi or Persian was the language of the Parsa people who ruled Iran between 550 - 330 BCE. It belongs to what scholars call the Indo-Iranian group of languages. It became the language of the Persian Empire and was widely spoken in the ancient days ranging from the borders of India in the east, Russian in the north, the southern shores of the Persian Gulf to Egypt and the Mediterranean in the west. The Iranian languages are known from three chronological stages, commonly referred to as Old, Middle, and New. The only language of which all three stages are known is "Persian", the language originally spoken in the province of *Fārs*, which is descended from Old Persian, the language of the *Achaemenid* empire (6th-4th centuries B.C.E.), and Middle Persian, the language of the *Sasanian* empire (3rd-7th centuries C.E.). The other known Old Iranian languages are Old and Young *Avestan* the languages of the *Avesta* which were probably spoken in Central Asia and the area of modern Afghanistan between the mid-2nd and mid-1st millennia

B.C.E.

Other Old Iranian languages from which no texts survive, but which were the ancestors of known Middle Iranian and New Iranian languages, include Median, the language of the Median state, known chiefly from loanwords in Old Persian, and several Scythian or *Saka* languages spoken north of the Black Sea.

The known Middle Iranian languages, spoken from about the 3rd century C.E. to about 1000 (some even later) include the following (from east to west): *Khotanese*, spoken in the Buddhist kingdom of Khotan located along the western part of the Southern Silk Road in Chinese Turkestan; *Sogdian*, the language of the kingdom of Sogdiana (approximately modern Uzbekistan); and the *Chorasmian* language of the Chorasmian state located along the upper course of the Oxus river (Amu Daryā). In the Kushan empire, or Bactria (approximately northern Afghanistan), *Bactrian* was spoken, which had inherited the Greek script of the settlers Alexander had left behind. In Parthia, east of the Caspian Sea, *Parthian* was spoken, the language of the Parthian, or Arsacid (q.v.), empire; and in Pārs, under the pre-Sasanian dynasties, Middle Persian, also called *Pahlavi*, was spoken, which became the official language of the Sasanian state and was the language of the Zoroastrian “Pahlavi” literature. In the area of the Caucasus, *Alanic* languages, descendants of *Scythian*, were spoken, of which little is known.

Today, Iranian languages are spoken from Turkey, Iraq, and the Caucasus in the west to Chinese Turkestan and Pakistan in the east, as well as widely in the diaspora, especially in Europe and America. There are several literary languages, among them the following: *Persian (Fārsi)*, spoken throughout Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan, and in adjacent areas; *Ossetic*, spoken in Ossetia in the southern Caucasus in two main variants, Digoron and Iron; *Kurdish*, spoken in three principal variants in eastern Turkey and Syria, northern Iraq, and western Iran, as well as in surrounding areas; *Baluchi* (several dialects), spoken in eastern Iran and western Pakistan, but also in southern Afghanistan and Central Asia; and *Pashto* (several dialects), spoken mainly in Afghanistan and Pakistan.

Speakers of North-Eastern Aramaic have been in contact with Iranian languages in the western regions of the plateau and on the western side of the Zagros for some 3,000 years -- with Jewish settlement from Mesopotamia documented since the eighth century BCE, Christian emigration begun during the Parthian period, and the Mandaeans, settled in southeastern Mesopotamia and adjacent Khuzestan by the 3rd century CE.

The three closely related languages—Modern Persian, Dari (Farsi-Kabuli) and Tajiki—form a vast continuum of dialects, stretching from western Iran to Afghanistan and Central Asia. Linguistically it is very

hard to draw a geographical line or define a geographical border between the dialects of Persian proper, those of the Dari language and those of Tajiki, a line or border based on purely linguistic factors, as these dialects overlap and merge into one another. It is therefore more reasonable to conceive of these dialects as a single linguistic continuum within which groups can be defined. In R. Farhadi’s book on Persian as spoken in Afghanistan, a rough classification of the whole mass of the dialects of Persian, Dari and Tajiki is suggested. According to this classification, the Persian continuum can be divided into two major groups: Western and Eastern. The former includes the Persian dialects of western and central Iran, while the latter includes the remaining dialects, namely those of eastern Iran (Khorasan and Sistan), all the Dari dialects of Afghanistan, and the Tajiki of the former Soviet Central Asia. A brief look at this classification is enough to reveal an unequal distribution of dialects between the two groups, as the Eastern group covers a geographically much vaster area than the Western (Lewis and Sharma, 2010: 267)

Over the centuries Parsi has changed to its modern form and today Persian is spoken primarily in Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and parts of Uzbekistan. It was the language of the court of many of the Indian kings till the British banned its use, after occupying India in the 18 century. The Mogul kings of India had made Persian their court language. Although the name of the language has been maintained as Persian or Parsi or its Arabic form Farsi (because in Arabic they do not have the letter P) the language has undergone great changes. First Aramaic and then Arabic had considerable contact with Iranian languages. Their impact differs.

It is noteworthy that every country that the Arabs conquered lost its civilization, culture and language and adopted the Arabic language and way of life. For example Egypt whose people could build Pyramids, were good astronomers and possessed the art of mummification lost their culture and language to the Arabs and started living like them. It was only Iran that broke the trend and preserved its culture and language and even adopted their own version of Islam.

Modern Persian language or Farsi (Arabic pronunciation of Parsi) as spoken today consists of a lot of words of non-Iranian origin. Some modern technical terms, understandably, have been incorporated from English, French and German and are recognizable, but Arabic has corrupted a major part of the language by replacing original Parsi words. What Ferdowsi worked so hard to preserve is finally being lost.

The European words have usually come into use because there was no existing Persian word to describe the situation or product. Instead of coining a word the foreign word was imported with the product. For example with the imported car came the French form of

its name 'Automobile'. It took some time and effort and support from the government to coin a Parsi word 'Khodrow' and replace the foreign word.

Persian is a language with a very simple grammatical structure and a rich set of stylistic variables that help individuals to convey accounts of their feelings. An individual has many choices in speaking that must be determined on "pragmatic" grounds. It is a function of all parties in interaction to come up with the correct interpretations for what is said (Beeman, 1986: 10). Writing systems for Iranian languages include cuneiform (Old Persian); scripts descended from "imperial" Aramaic, two Syriac scripts, Hebrew, Arabic, Greek, Cyrillic, Georgian, and Latin.

It is also a language of extraordinary grace and flexibility. Over many centuries, it absorbed Arabic vocabulary and many Turkish elements, swelling its vocabulary to well over 100,000 commonly used words. At the same time, over the many centuries when Arabic was dominant, Persian lost much of its grammatical complexity. The resulting language is mellifluous, easy to learn, and ideally suited for the unsurpassed poetry and literature Iranians have produced over the ages. The language is remarkably stable; Iranians can read twelfth century literature with relative ease.

The majority of Iranian residents whose first language is not Persian are bilingual in Persian and their primary language. Persons whose first language is Persian are usually monolingual. It is important to note that, with some minor exceptions, all ethnic groups living in Iran, whatever their background or primary language identify strongly with the major features of Iranian culture and civilization. This also applies to many non-Iranians living in Afghanistan, Central Asia, northern India, and parts of Iraq and the Persian Gulf region

4. Discussion

Culture is the way of living and the rules for functioning in society. Since the rules differ from culture to culture, in order to function and be effective in a particular culture, people need to know how to use the rules. We learn the rules of our own culture as a matter of course, beginning at birth and continuing throughout life. As a result, own culture rules are ingrained in the subconscious, enabling us to react to familiar situations without thinking. It is when people enter another culture, with different rules, the problems are encountered. Multicultural and intercultural communication cannot be learned without intercultural understanding, which is based on the knowledge of culture. So, understanding the similarities and differences between two countries, can help people have closer relation together.

Historically, people-to-people contact between Iran and China was marginal; since ancient times, the

Iranians had had various contacts with China, and the two lands were further connected via the Silk Road. Commercially, land and maritime trade with China was important to both the Sassanid and the Chinese empires. A large number of Sassanid coins have been found in southern China, confirming maritime trade. These early links set the stage for the ties between Beijing and Tehran which we see today.

In an overview of the diplomatic history between China and Iran, we find that frequent exchanges of culture, religion, trade, art, science and technology are the distinctive features of their bilateral relations. Also, instances of religious affiliation between the two can be found, chiefly, in the visits of Buddhist monks from Parthia (today's Iran) to China for missionary activities. For example An Shih Kao (安世高), a Parthian nobleman and Buddhist missionary, went to the Chinese capital Loyang in 148 AD where he established temples and became the first man to translate Buddhist scriptures into Chinese. And there were also military contacts between the two nations.

To compare the two cultures of Iran & China, in this research "Language" was chosen. As it shown in this paper the Ancient Iranian languages was extended till Great China. The known Middle Iranian languages, spoken from about the 3rd century C.E. to about 1000 (some even later) include (from east to west): Khotanese, spoken in the Buddhist kingdom of Khotan located along the western part of the Southern Silk Road in Chinese Turkestan. Today, Iranian languages are spoken from Turkey, Iraq, and the Caucasus in the west to Chinese Turkestan and Pakistan in the east, as well as widely in the diaspora, especially in Europe and America.

As it shown in this paper, the differences between two languages are significant, but the people of the two countries try to learn the other language because the importance of Sino-Iran relations is acknowledged by the leaders of both countries and today, China and Iran continue to have strong interests in developing mutual cooperation in many fields. Bilateral relations of China and Iran, after having witnessed many ups and downs in the past, have been growing steadily in the recent years and it needs that the people of these two countries be familiar with different aspects of other culture.

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