

Social Etiquette and Intercultural Communication: A Case Study of the Chinese Famous Actor and Director Xu Zheng's Dress Controversy when Meeting Thai PM

By

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Abstract

Nowadays, people of different cultures are more interdependent and more frequent intercourse in intercultural communication than any before. And social etiquette, such as meeting, dressing, hand shaking and body posture gives structure to that practical process of intercultural communication. First of all, the author elaborates on social etiquette which plays an important role in intercultural communicating with people from other culture, or will hinder people from further developing their friendship and cooperation in future. And then the author takes Chinese famous actor and director Xu Zheng's dress controversy when meeting Prime Minister as a typical example and recalls the vivid case in detail. Also, the author discusses the definitions of social etiquette and its function and analyzes the influence of social etiquette on intercultural communication. At the same time, the author puts forward his own opinions about how to promote people's social etiquette awareness and strengthen their etiquette education. In this way, it will be helpful to enhance intercultural intercourse and communication with different people from different cultures.

Keywords: *social etiquette, intercultural communication, intercultural intercourse, Xu Zheng, actor, director, Thai Prime Minister*

1. Introduction

“The world is shrinking. People of different cultural backgrounds are more interdependent than ever. The 21st century will confront the ever-shifting social, cultural, and technological challenges. The rapid development in every aspect of the 21st century demands us to see things through the others' eyes and to develop a new way of living together.”(Chen, 2010) In today's “shrinking” world, our communication behavior is extended from that within our own communication to that among and between others. As a result, “intercultural communication occurs when a member of one culture produce a message for consumption by a member of another culture. To put it simply, intercultural communication means the communication between people from different cultural backgrounds”. (Zhang, 2008)

However, intercultural communication causes one to focus more on the intricate details of personal interactions. Effective personal interaction becomes a major factor in accomplishing objective. To some extend, social etiquette, such as meeting, greeting, dressing, hand shaking and body posture gives structure to that practical process of intercultural communication. Thus, social etiquette plays an important role in intercultural communicating with people from other culture. It is necessary to pay attention to the code that governs the expectations of social behavior, or the conventional norm. These codes required by good breeding and expected to be obeyed are called etiquette. Social etiquette is equivalent to protocol, decorum, courtesy, etc. Social etiquette today is based on treating everyone with the same degree of kindness and consideration, and it consists mostly of common sense.

Moreover, anyone who lacks of social etiquette will give bad first impression on others from another culture in intercultural communication and hinder people from further developing their friendship and cooperation in future. Now, the author only takes Chinese famous actor and director Xu Zheng's dress

controversy when meeting Thai Prime Minister as a typical example. First of all, we should know some details about Xu's dress controversy. And then it is worthy analyzing and discussing about the typical case. In this way, people may know more about social etiquette and its impact on intercultural communication.

A Case

Xu Zheng is one of the famous comedians in China and also a director of the Chinese comedy "Lost in Thailand".

"Lost in Thailand" only spent a budget of 30 million yuan, but a powerful cast including Wang Baoqiang, Huang Bo and Xu Zheng (three of them are all Chinese famous comedians.) had been a huge box office success to the tune of 100 million yuan within three days of the release in December, 2012. The film was well on track to becoming the first Chinese film ever to pass the 1-billion-yuan threshold which was predicted by film industrial experts. "Chinese cinema has witnessed a miracle: low-budget film 'Lost in Thailand' has just become the most bankable Chinese film of all time."(People's Daily Online, 2012)

Though "Lost in Thailand" gives very simple plot to a large audience, it tells a story about a smart looking businessman and a simple-minded companion on a journey of frustration and absurdity, and introduces three Chinese men who meet on their trips to Thailand. And a state of great amusement causes loud laughter from the movie viewers. Meanwhile, "Lost in Thailand" offers a taste of the Thai exotic scenery and culture to the movie viewers, minus the surprise ending. Therefore, the movie "Lost in Thailand" was being shown in the last month at all major movie theatres in China, and had even attracted tens of thousands of Chinese tourists to Thailand.

As a result, on March 15th, 2013, Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra met Xu Zheng and other Chinese actors and film producers. "In the photos, Xu was seen wearing casual pants and a white shirt with both sleeves rolled up and the top buttons undone. Standing next to him was a formally dressed elegant-looking Yingluck Shinawatra". (Zhang, 2013)

After meeting, several social media published harsh criticism and different comments about Xu Zheng's dress when meeting Thai Prime Minister. Some said that Xu Zheng did not know how to meet another country's top leader while showing respect and not losing his own dignity and status. Others said that Xu Zheng was apparently wearing simple and comfortable clothes, and there was nothing wrong with him just being himself. Whoever is right or wrong? Now, we have no definite answer, so that the author thinks it is necessary for us to discuss and analyze social etiquette's impact on intercultural communication about Xu Zheng's dress controversy when meeting Thai Prime Minister from a perspective of intercultural communication. Finally, we will receive an answer and then will give some suggestions how to improve social etiquette in intercultural communication.

2. Discussion and Analysis

Everyone should really know "each society has a particular set of social norms consisting of more or less explicit rules that prescribe a certain behavior, a state of affairs, or a way of thinking in a context. A positive evaluation (politeness) arises when an action is in congruence with the norm, a negative evaluation (impoliteness-rudeness) when action is to the contrary (Fraser, 1990)." Thus, people should know some meanings about "etiquette" and "intercultural communication", and their functions and impact.

Definitions of Etiquette and its functions

Webster's Third New International Dictionary defines etiquette as "the forms required by good breeding or prescribed by authority to be observed in social or official life: observance of the proprieties of rank and occasion.

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The New Encyclopedia Britannica (2005) defines etiquette as “system of rules and conventions that regulate social and professional behavior. In any social unit there are accepted rules of behavior upheld and enforced by legal codes; there are also norms of behavior mandated by custom and enforced by group pressure. An offender faces no formal trial or sentence for breach of etiquette, the penalty lies in the disapproval of other members of the group.”(The New Encyclopedia Britannica,2005)

Generally speaking, social etiquette is very important part of culture. No communication is done without involving some social etiquette rules explicit or implicit. Social etiquettes vary of course from culture to culture. The above Xu Zheng's dress controversy when meeting Thai Prime Minister, illustrate how differences in their opinions toward Xu's dress controversy may lead to difficulties in the communication between people with different cultural backgrounds. Such differences can cause misunderstanding, unsatisfactory interaction and even unpleasant physical reactions. To some extent, Xu Zheng made 1.2 billion Yuan box office by his “Lost in Thailand”, but he met with Thai Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra while wearing rolled up shirt sleeves, unbuttoned chest regardless of basic social etiquette especially on a formal event. Xu Zheng should know that “ Successful dressing doesn't necessarily mean wearing something expensive and splendid, but following the TPO norm, which is the initials of time, place and occasion respectively. It means having you dressed fit to different time, place and occasion.”(Ou, 2008)

Therefore, the way Xu Zheng dressed himself on a formal event can not only reveal a lot about his attitude toward social etiquette, but it also may contribute a lot to how others think him. It is just like Jackie Chan's saying:”Xu was just not representing himself. On such a formal occasion, he was representing all Chinese artists and Chinese men.”(Zhang, 2013)

In our daily intercultural communication, it is necessary for any person to pay attention to the social etiquette that governs the expectations of social behavior, or the conventional norm. Social etiquette today is based on treating everyone with the same degree of kindness and consideration and it consists mostly of daily common sense. It will be helpful for people to know some rules about how to behave in certain situation because this makes life more comfortable for them and makes them more self-confident in any social situation.

No doubt we should know common sense of formal wear when attending some formal or special events have specific dress codes, each of which calls for particular kinds of dress for both women and men. Formal wear is a general term used to describe clothing suitable for formal events. The standard formal dress around the globe is the suit, shirt, and tie for men and some sort of suit or dress for women. That sounds easy enough; yet there are enough variations indicating degrees of authority that people must be aware of local customs and traditions.

“The etiquette used to achieve the purpose of the protocol may differ from culture to culture, but the goal is the same, to acknowledge and respect the values of people from different cultures.”(Tou, 2011)

The Influence of Social Etiquette on Intercultural Communication

A British Professor Gillian Brown said, “Communication is a risky business,” which means the process of communication is the process of complete interaction. Yet it's not an easy thing to fully communicate because of different histories, cultures, social habits in different people (Samover, 2001).

“Intercultural communication can be simply defined as communication between people of different cultures. The need for intercultural understanding does not begin or end with national boundaries. One does not necessarily need to cross an ocean to have a cross-cultural experience, for virtually every country around the world is undergoing increased diversity with its own borders.”(Xu, 2012)

Intercultural communication comes primarily out of an interpersonal orientation and addresses the mutual negotiation of social reality among participants. Because of the necessity and reality of interpersonal aspects of our globalization, we can no longer neglect these aspects of any communication among peoples around the world, whatever problems we may be addressing. However, no intercultural communication is done without involving some etiquette rules. Social etiquettes vary of course from culture to culture and from nation and nation. Differences in cultural conventions can lead to difficulties in the communication between peoples with different cultural backgrounds. Such difference can cause misunderstanding, unsatisfactory interaction and even unpleasant physical reactions. Etiquettes are closely related to the deep structure of a culture that determines how a person responds to events and people. Even though what member of particular culture value and how they perceive the universe explain a lot why people behave the way they do, we should not try to connect every human behavior with a certain value. (Zhang, 2010)

No any doubt, social etiquette is related to communication issues to keep good relationship between different peoples. To some extent, social etiquette is usually more important in cultures where preservation of harmony in good friendship and relationship is critical. Behavior with etiquette means behaving correctly. Cultures that make etiquette important ensure that everyone can operate by the same knowable rules, which reduces the risk of losing face through some unintentional mistake. Everyone is more comfortable because the rules are well established and comprehensive.

In all cultures, and especially in high-context cultures, some behavior is codified. When a person knows the code and behaves according to the code, he is behaving properly or grammatically. Others who know the code will be able to interpret the meaning and respond appropriately. A common problem in cross-cultural communication is that people from different cultures do not know each other's codes and therefore do not know how to behave properly. (Davis, 2010)

Moreover, "you show respect and sincerity by the way you dress and by respecting certain rules of appearance in the host culture. That does not mean you have to adopt the local dress, but it does mean you should adapt your clothes to the customs of the host culture."(Varner and Beamer, 1995)

Therefore, people should be aware of the social etiquette differences, show understanding and respect to different etiquettes and most importantly, build bridges across misunderstanding among different etiquette cultures. Overall, social etiquette makes an important impact on people that they may carry those knowledge codes with them into intercultural communication.

If not, people's behavior may lead to misunderstandings. The intercultural nonverbal communicative signals of respect can be obvious or more subtle. From the above case, Mr. Xu Zheng wore casual dress when meeting Thai Prime Minister, maybe, he did not really know how important impact on intercultural communication etiquette had. He made a big mistake. But, at the same time, one fan still wrote:" Director Xu was apparently wearing simple and comfortable clothes. There was nothing wrong with him just being himself." (Zhang, 2013)

Needless to say, some people especially in China have still difficulties and obstacles in knowing some fundamental knowledge of and important influence on intercultural communication and correctly communicating with other people from different culture. Thus, it is necessary for people to accept etiquette education, so as not only to learn some basic common senses about social etiquette, but also to promote their self-esteem and character with emphasis on socially acceptable behavior in communicating with others from different culture. At the same time, the importance of self-respect and respect for others is taught to give the confidence that is necessary for each person to become self-reliant as he or she communicates with other foreigners.

It is undoubtedly that social etiquette will play an important role in intercultural communication from the above discussion and analysis about the case. People from different cultures should seriously learn and know some social etiquettes. In this way, people will be able to show their respect for other people in the formal or informal events, or in other intercultural communication, and decrease misunderstanding and conflict in the these intercultural exchanges. And then, people from different cultures will respect each other and understand each other, and friendly intercourse.

4. Conclusion

“As the world populace grows more aware of its interdependence, it confronts ever-shifting cultural, ecological, economic, and technological realities that define the shrinking world of the 21st century” (Chen, 2010) Intercultural communication causes one to focus more on the intricate details of personal interactions. Effective personal intercourse becomes a major factor in finishing intercultural communication objective.

Meanwhile, social etiquette, such as meeting, dressing, hand shaking and body posture gives structure to that practical process of intercultural communication. Whoever is in low or high social position, he or she should learn and know some fundamental social etiquette knowledge about intercultural intercourse or communication because social etiquette such as meeting, dressing and et al, involves intercultural nonverbal communication. Only does she or he know how to behave in intercultural nonverbal communication. Maybe, she or he could effectively and successfully communicate with other people from different cultural backgrounds and establish or keep a good friendship with other people from different cultural backgrounds.

Furthermore, people should learn and know some fundamental knowledge of social etiquette and the importance of self-respect and respect for other people from different cultures. In this way, people with social etiquette will be able to show their self-esteem and respect for other people both in the formal or informal intercultural events and get rid of any misunderstanding in intercultural communication due to lack of any social etiquette. As a result, people with social etiquette and from different cultural backgrounds will understand each others, respect each other and friendly intercourse.

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