Different language mirrors different cultural information. While “a nation’s cultural features and its national psychology, aesthetic perspectives and values are certainly reflected in its language. The national cultural features of a language refer to not only the connotations of ‘culture’ but also the extension of the concept of ‘culture’—the nation’s history, geographical conditions, economy, social system, religion and customs reflected and recorded in its language”.

Therefore, a nation’s cultural elements can be definitely found in idioms since idioms are of great importance in a language. The following aspects are some of the cultural differences between English and Chinese idioms.

1. Differences of geographical conditions

Geographical environment plays an important role in shaping one nation’s culture and human beings have no choices to change the geographical conditions. Geographic characteristics not only influence the material life of a nation but also the culture and language.

Britain is an island country located in west Europe, which does not share land border with any other countries except the Republic of Ireland, with Atlantic Ocean to the west and north, the English Channel to the south and the North Sea to the east. The special location of Britain poses a great impact on the formation of idioms, which the ones relating to
navigation and fishing account for a large proportion.

e.g. (1) tower one’s sail—be willing to be inferior to 甘拜下风
(2) plain sailing—a course of action that is free from difficulties一帆风顺
(3) a big fish—an important and influential person大亨
(4) a fresh fish—a new prisoner新囚犯

On the other hand, China, since time immemorial, has been a large continental country, and the most part of China are inland place where people cannot live without earth, only with seas to its east coast.

So Chinese culture is chiefly based on agriculture, which means that we belong to agrarian society that places agricultural production at the top of the national agenda, regarding industry and commerce as the non-essentials. During the long farming culture, the Chinese language has accumulated large numbers of farmers’ idioms which derived from agriculture production.

Read Also: Cultural Differences and Translation of English idioms

e.g. (1) 白米饭好吃田难种
(2) 三年学成个匠人, 十年难学个农民
(3) 瑞雪兆丰年

Different geographical conditions cause different living environment. China is rich in mountain and forest, so bamboo is wide grown there. In Chinese people say雨后春笋(spring up like bamboo shoot after a spring rain),
but in English, people often say “spring up like mushrooms” to express the same meaning. The reason of the difference is British people are much familiar with mushroom instead of bamboo. And that is because it often rains in England and the wet condition is suitable for the growth of mushrooms.

It is easy to find the influence of geographic conditions in language, which reflects on the pronunciation, vocabulary, grammar and so on. It has all important function on playing up the nation’s language and culture when we want to translate the sense of reality in those geographic characteristics.

2. Differences of customs

One nation’s custom is formed through a long history and firmly rooted in people’s mind. In different countries and nations customs drastically differ in various aspects. Due to that, a lot of idioms turn out with varied dresses. Certain general knowledge of the customs of the original culture will be good for our translation undertaking.

Take food habit for example, cake has been a common food in English for a long history, so it is understandable that they use “a piece of cake” denoting an easy—done task. However, in China, cake cannot be seen until the last one hundred years. So it is impossible for the same idiom to appear in Chinese. On the other hand, dishes are common in China. Therefore a similar idiom“小菜一碟”tams out in Chinese to express the same meaning. Another example is related to the habitual way of working in the field. Chinese people were habituated to use the bull to plough the field before modernized agriculture was developed, while English did with a horse. Consequently, Chinese say“力大如牛”to describe someone with
great strength while English do “as strong as a horse” in alternation

Due to different living customs, different nations have distinctive cultural differences in the concept of value and aesthetic criteria. For instance, in Chinese, the word “old” is the honorific title to the experienced. For long history, family always plays an important and stable part in our life. Whether the old is in family or in society, they are always revered and respected.

In Chinese culture, “老” was the symbol of wisdom. So it is not surprising that in Chinese there exist such idioms as “姜还是老的辣”. But American culture, “old” means the end of youth, the decline of vigor. Therefore, most Americans mentally resist the idea of becoming old and try to remain young. And the idiomatic expression such as “you don’t look your age” is welcomed in western society.

A typical example is dragon. Chinese people admire and worship this imagined animal very much, and it is even the symbol of the nation. Therefore, there are a lot of idioms such as “望子成龙” “龙飞凤舞” “龙子龙孙” “龙风呈祥” “龙眼” “龙蟠凤逸”. While in English, though it can bring the association of “strength” and “power”, dragon gives such derogatory associations as evil, Satan, devil and disgusting woman. Obviously, Chinese and English express differently their likings and disliking.

Another example is the lion. To most westerners, lion is “the king of the beats”. Collins COBUILD English Language Dictionary defines “lion” as “a person or a country that is considered to be strong and peaceful, and which other people respect or fear”. The lion enjoys high prestige, as can be seen from such expressions as “regal as a lion, majestic as a lion”. King Richard, king of England in the late 12th century, was known as
lion—hearted for his courage and chivalry That’s why English have chosen the lion as their symbol, while the case is not the same in Chinese culture. The lion is regarded commonly as being fierce and powerful but not necessarily majestic or regal”

“The living custom is the way of life for people living in a special region, including a variety of things that related to all aspects of social life. It is restricted to the nation’s politics, economy, religion, literature and arts and which in rum affect it. Language, as a special part of the nation’s culture, definitely reflects the living customs of the nation, and idioms are even greatly related to the living customs. ”

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3. Differences of religions

“Religion is all important part of culture and has greatly influenced all the human languages and imposed great impact on all aspect of our society.”Numerous idioms were generated from the fountain of religion. Religion has greatly influenced idioms and become a rich source for the generation of idioms. Some differences of idioms between Chinese and English can be traced back to the origin of religion. They are represented by their different scriptures, and follow a certain kind of doctrine and thinking pattern. The following part is to explain the influence of religions on idioms.

The origin of religion can be traced to primitive society. It was a kind of super—nature power that people believed in. As time flied, religions such as Christianity, Buddhism, Taoism and Islam came into being. A religion together with its own doctrine stands for a culture. Chinese and western people have different religious beliefs. Most western people believe in
God while more Chinese people believe in Buddha. As a result, it will be naturally reflected in the two languages. The main cultural factors in the English belong to the Christian culture. The Bible has greatly influenced the establishment and development of western civilization. In China, Buddhism and Taoism cultures are the most influential.

Religion has played an important role in western society especially before capitalization. The majority of the western people believe in Christianity and regard the Bible as one of the most important classical orks in their life. Countless idioms are originated from the Bible, for example, “to put new wine in old bottles” referring to the unwise act of forcing the extremely conservative person to accept new conceptions; “to make one’s hair stand on end” describing thrilling horror caused by something, etc.

Different from Britain, there are a lot of scriptures of Buddhist and Taoist religion in ancient China. “We can safely say that Chinese culture evolved from Confucian School, Taoist School.” There are traces of Taoist principles and Confucian principles in Buddhist doctrines. Although Buddhist culture originated from ancient India, it has been assimilated in Chinese culture through almost a thousand years of spreading and accepting Chinese feathers at the same time. It has been an important part of Chinese culture and exerted enormous influence on Chinese culture and language. For example, “佛”(Buddha), “庙”(temple) and “和尚”(monk) are the Buddhism words.

4. Differences of history

History is the intellectual form in which a civilization renders account of itself about its past. It is the continuum of events occurring in succession leading from the past to the present and even into the future. History of a
country may last for thousands of years. Even a native do not know all the past events of their nation, not to mention the foreigners. History plays an indispensable role in the development of a country. It also promotes the evolution of a language and affects its idioms. Idioms from history culture are the gems of human cultural heritage. Translators should have extensive knowledge of history to fulfill the obligation of translation as a cross-cultural communication. History culture mainly include allusion, poems, myths, ancient books and records, etc.

There is an English idiom: “Greek gift” (希腊人的礼物——可怕之物) is related to the ancient myth of Roman “Aeneid”. Other English idioms like “Achilles’ heel” (阿克琉斯的脚跟——唯一致命的弱点); “Arrow of Cupid” (丘比特之箭——爱神的到来); “Pandora’s box” (潘多拉的盒子——祸害之源). In ancient China, many idioms were created because of years of war. For example, “破釜沉舟”, “纸上谈兵”. Some others come from ancient myth, like “夸父追日”, “精卫填海”. People are the host and creator of human history. Events about heroes in history are often orally passed down from generation to generation. In the following idioms, it is evident that historical figures contribute much to their distinctive national features.

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