

Study on Differences of Chinese and American Friendship Concepts from the Perspective of Friendship Dictums

Huang Zixun

Nanning College of Technology, Guilin, Guangxi 541006, China.

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Abstract: Friendship is an indispensable part of our life. The friendship assumes a social responsibility, and also reflects the culture of a nation. People who live in different countries and study in different cultures have dissimilar definitions and understanding of friendship. The background of Chinese and American culture is different, so the understanding of concepts and the orientations of values in dealing with friendship are also different, and there are still lots of conflicts in some aspects between these two countries. This text analyzes and compares to the Chinese-American friendship dictums, and expounds the different friendship concepts between China and America from the differences of maintaining friendship, the differences of distances between friends, the differences of purposes of making friends, the differences of the ways to establish and hold friendship together, and the differences of responsibilities between friends. It also analyzes the dissimilar points of view of people in two countries and the reasons that create these viewpoints through the cross-culture. This text would be a reference for Chinese who are communicating with American, and also deepen the comprehension of each other's culture, and improve the level of cross-cultural social intercourse and the ability of communication.

Keywords: friendship dictums; differences of friendship concepts; the reasons of differences; cross-cultural communication

0. Introduction

Friendship means deep emotions and intimate relationship between friends. The concept of friendship is a kind of viewpoints and an attitude of understanding of friendship. Friendship dictums are some opinions about how to make friends which could also reveal some principles. Without friendship, life is hostile and unfortunate. There is a definition of "friend" in the new edition of *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English*, "A person who shares the same feelings of natural liking and understanding, the same interests, etc., but is not a member of the same family." Besides, a friend can also explain as an assistant, a supporter, a sponsor, a counselor, a sympathizer, and even can be used as an application. The explanation of a friend in *Modern Chinese Dictionary* is "the person who has relation to another one or a lover." So a friend plays a decisive role in everybody's daily life. Just as a Chinese dictum says, "The person who lives without any true friend is the real lonely one (没有真挚朋友的人, 是真正孤独的人)." And there is also a dictum about the similar view in American, "Without a friend, the world is a wilderness (没有朋友, 世界成了荒野)." Thus, it can be seen friends are so important to all people. Relevantly, there are some dictums or proverbs which express friendship for both Chinese and American cultures. The connotation and the comprehension of friend and friendship are definitely different in Chinese culture and American culture.

Because of the influence of the differences of language and cultural background, the Chinese and the Americans express the similarities and differences behaviors in the same context when they consider friendship. Most of Chinese who are influenced by Chinese culture cannot comprehend the American friendship concept deeply enough, which leads to some misunderstandings, and even might cause cultural conflicts. Therefore, to do researches on different Chinese and American friendship dictums can help both Chinese and Americans to know the attitudes and ways of making friends with the other side. With the increasing communication between China and the

USA, the researches of friendship concept cannot only promote the acquaintance between China and America, but also improve the levels of people's cross-cultural communication. The purpose of the paper is to distinguish the different friendship concepts between China and the USA from the differences of values, the differences of economy concepts and the differences of politics, and help both Chinese and Americans to avoid some unnecessary misunderstandings and disputes.

In order to keep this relationship, friends should keep contacting with others and visit others. The dictum like this, "Friendship cannot always stand on one side (礼尚往来, 友谊常在)". A research which was written by Lu Xin and Wang Xiaofang said that, an American just wanted to show his or her politeness when he or she calls somebody "friend", it does not mean he or she really wants to establish friendship to that person. Lou Xianyan points out in *The Contrast of Friendship Concept Between China and the USA* that Chinese usually make friends with those people who have the similar characteristics and habits with them. In *Case Studies of the Collision of Culture*, Wang Fuxiang and Ma Dengge said that the ideal state of Americans' friendship, which contains deep personal emotion should be established naturally. People choose their friends, meanwhile, they separate their friends from society and responsibilities.

The research of Steward Edward & Bennet Milton discusses the friendship of Americans like this: even though the Americans keep much informal friendship with others, the Americans rarely have deep and long-term relationship. Steward Edward & Bennet Milton made a study about "You scratch my back, I scratch yours (我们各得所需)". They said that the Americans prefer individual friendship, they do not like to rely on others especially stay for a long time with others. In *Cross-Cultural Communication in Action*, Davis Linell said that the Americans might change their friends for many times in a year. Changes become one part of their life. In the book which was written by Linda Schuele and He Zhen showed some examples about the Americans who felt that they were used by the Chinese because of different friendship concepts. In *Of Friendship*, Ralph said that a friend is a person who is worth staying with sincerely. Before the friend he may think aloud. The research from Stewart demonstrates that there were rarely Americans who could establish deep and long friendship with others even though they were surrounded by all kinds of free relationships. Larry Samovar points out that the USA is a country which has a strong liquidity in the book *Communication Between Cultures*. It is really easy for Americans to make friends. However, their friendship might change with the circumstance.

1. Differences of Friendship Concepts from Chinese and American

Friendship Dictums

1.1 Time of Maintaining Friendship

The Chinese are expecting some permanent friends more than any other peoples. Friends might be friends forever. In Chinese culture, people have an attitude like "If love between both sides can last for age, why need they stay together night and day? (两情若是久长时, 又岂在朝朝暮暮)", so that friendship would never disappear in pace with the change of environment. Nevertheless, the friendship in Western people might establish contact with special conditions and situations. Friends will change as there are some situations change. Most of the time, there are some friends who just give blessing or greeting by phones in festivals, or send a greeting card, or even send an e-mail card. In their opinions, friends do not mean stay together all the time. Their enthusiasm may move rapidly from one to the other.

Actually, the Chinese people will not make friends as they meet each other at the beginning. The time is the best way to test friends and friendship. For Chinese, they have recognized whether they are friends or not after they contacting with each other for a really long time, understanding the habits between them, discovering that they are kindred spirit or experiencing the suffering together. After that, they will cherish their friendship enough. And their friendship will accompany them for a whole life and doesn't change easily if it is ensured. In the ancient period, both the

stories of “Taking an oath in the peach garden by Liu, Guan and Zhang (刘、关、张的桃园三结义)” and “Mountain torrent of Yu Boya and Zhong Ziqi (俞伯牙和钟子期的高山流水)” are representing the importance of friendship.

In the book Cross-Cultural Communication in Action, Davis Linell said that American probably change friends several times in a year even if they are good friends. What is more, there are some evidences from the arrangement of dormitory in universities of the two countries. The roommates in China will live together until they graduate from school. It looks stable relatively, and most of them will continue to keep track of others after graduating. But there comes big mobility in American dormitory. American maybe get a large number of friends at a period of time, it is not unchangeable for a long time.

In addition, American sociolinguistics Schueeler Linda and He Zhen used to describe this kind of friendship is “Klenex friendship” (手绢纸友谊) in the book *A Introduction to Intercultural Communication* for they throw it away when they used up as Klenex. Foreigners do not care about forever too much on friendship. An old saying like this, “Friends must part (送君千里, 终须一别).” In America, friendship will fade even die swiftly if they do not contact or meet each other during a period of time. But comparing with Americans, Chinese friendship looks firmer and more stable.

1.2 Distance Between Friends

In China, the two people must know each other well if they are good friends. They know the family background, educational background and habits between them, and they even know the private life of each other. Between friends, their relationship must be illustrated closer if they know much more private businesses of the other side. Yet in America, this phenomenon can not be inconceivable. They think this kind of behavior is impolite to others. It seems that they keep a certain distance between friends intentionally. They do not inquire about others private things even they are the best friends, and do not make it to be a prerequisite for becoming good friends.

Americans keep the different viewpoints. American poet Frost Robert wrote a poem named *Mending Wall* which used a wall as a barrier between two people. The poet did not like the wall, which separated his neighbor from him, and he did not find the function of that wall. When he repaired the hole on the wall with his neighbor, he tried to discuss the necessity of this action. However, the neighbor just said one sentence repeatedly, “Good fences make good neighbors (有好围墙才有好邻居).” This simple sentence demonstrates the principles of getting along with others. The vast majority of Americans think friendship needs distances, and this idea also reflects their strong individual consciousness.

There is a feeling like “A hedge between keeps friendship green (君子之交淡如水)” while Chinese are making friends with foreigners. In China, friends will take shape in mutual dependence of cooperative relationship for they have a high intimacy. Friends will give a specific help. For example in China, people will use their private relationship or resources to help friends to find a job, or find a good doctor, or look for a good school. And they even pay by themselves for friends in order to help friends during this period. These make Americans feel really unbelievable. In their country, it is too hard to finish all these things even for relatives, of course, it is harder for friends. In their opinions, it is easy for them to generate dependence. Furthermore, it is going against the principle of equality. So the American people pay attention to money even among friends. They often give their friends a book or a CD as a gift when their friends have a birthday party or move to a new house. They rarely send too expensive presents. Besides money, there are also some differences on dealing with emotional problems between Chinese and American people. In China, Chinese will spend more time on staying with friends, what is more, they will comfort them and show some ideas when their friends meet with some problems on emotion. For example, a Chinese married lady disputed with her husband intensely one day. Her female friends would persuade her to make peace with her husband, or choose to give up this marriage. These are the concrete proposals. It sounds like a Chinese old saying, “To bear him and to help him are good for interpersonal

relationship(容他、助他，是人际相处之良津).”While when it comes to an American friend, she would like to ask the lady about her plan, and makes her understand clearly the different consequences of her different methods by questions.They refuse to make a decision for the lady. From the example above, it can be seen that the American people are taking more care about individualism, equality and independence, but rarely care about personal loyalty.

1.3 Purposes of Making Friends

In China, to make friends is a kind of joy. People make friends for they have the same habits and the common language. The aim of making friends is relatively pure, and seldom people want to receive the benefit from others initially. There is a dictum from *The Analects of Confucius*, “Those whose courses are different cannot lay plans for one another(道不同，不相为谋).” And in *Ode to the Roc* (鹏鸟赋) by Jia Yi, there is also a sentence talking about this, “The man died of greediness, and the martyr died of reputation; the praised person died of rights, and the public are surviving with this(夫殉财兮，烈士殉名；夸者死权兮，众庶凭生).”

But for the American people, pragmatism is one of their unique faith. In their minds, useful things are good for them and useless things are bad for them. This pragmatism indicates on American's friendship concepts automatically. There is a dictum, which is used for finding a job in America, “It's not important what you know, but who you know(重要的不是你什么，而是你认识谁).” It shows that American people who make friends just want to expand their friend groups, and reserve opportunities and space for their development. It is also a great method for them to increase their income. An example can prove that opinion. A book named *How to Win Friends and Influence People* that wrote by Carnegie Dale shows a sentence on its title page, “After reading this book, you can improve your individual personality, obtain your own happiness, widen your future and increase your income.” That means people could get benefits after learning how to make friends. Obviously, the benefits become the purpose of making friends.

Though the communication style with American is amiable, it does not mean that it is easy to make friends with them. When their simple friendship begin to develop, and they decide to establish a real friendship, the wall in their heart will also build higher and higher for people pay more attention to secrets and independence in American culture. However, with the Chinese it is the other way around for making friends. The first wall in their hearts might be the highest one, so that they are as cautious as possible when they meet strangers. After contacting a few times and staying with trust, the Chinese will unburden themselves to others, and the wall becomes. There is an example in *American Cultural Patterns*. Malita and Paul were Chinese emigrants to America. They really wanted to make some foreign friends. Their guarantor Jan decided to hold a party and invited her friends. It must be a good way for Malita and Paul to make friends at that time. Some people communicated with them and even showed their curiosity about Chinese culture. At the end of the party, most of guest told them that they were so happy to meet them and would like to meet them again. This couple felt pleased after the party. There were even 3 people asking for phone numbers. Malita and Paul felt that it is easy for them to make friends with the American. But several weeks passed, nobody called them except Jan. They really wanted to know that why those friendly American people didn't call them. Nevertheless, the broken heart and their dignity made them difficult to speak out their mind. This example proves that Chinese just want to make friends with American purely for knowing more about people around them. While the American do not think so. They think that these kind of people cannot help them on business in the future, so that they don't need to fraternize deeply.

1.4 Ways of Making Friends

In his opinion, the Chinese interpersonal relationship is the typical ascribed type. The starting point is family or relatively relationship. In order to maintain this relationship, friends need to contact with each other constantly and to communicate their emotion. It sounds like, “Friendship cannot always stand on one side(礼尚往来，友谊常在).” The interpersonal relationship for the American

people is acquired type. Their logics start at self. In this kind of relationship, an individual can choose the people he wants to know and express his emotion. Compared with the friendship concept of the Chinese, the Americans' might be more distant.

The Chinese usually talk in a roundabout way, and are good at guessing the meaning between the lines. They believe that "The existence of morality and justice represents in the dark place (义之所在，在于潜)" and "The existence of morality and justice is more than I can say (义之所在，难以言表)". Intimate friends cherish their tacit understanding. As some old sayings "Unnecessary to express any thing (心照不宣)", "Hearts and feelings find a perfect response (心心相印)" and "Hearts which beat in unison are linked (心有灵犀一点通)". The American people are taught to express everything clearly from their childhood. Such as, the Chinese would say, "Your grammar……em……". Actually, he just wants to say that your grammar is terrible, and the punctuation and the "Em" instead of what he really wants to say. Another example, a professor will say "Well done" when he praises his students. The American students might feel very excited and they firmly believe that the professor feels quite satisfied with him. However, the Chinese students think that it was just an encouragement and he cannot do as great as what the professor said before. After knowing that, Chinese should become more directly while talking to Americans, and the American people can consider carefully while communicating with Chinese. Then, both Chinese and Americans can deepen their friendship in a short time.

The Chinese tell others unhappy information in an indirect way, while the American prefer the direct ways. Their attitudes on making negative evaluation and considering problems are more direct and open. It is easy to make misunderstanding between both sides. There is an example. An American student wanted to borrow a book from a Chinese student. The Chinese student rejected euphemistically, "Sorry, I left it in my aunt's home." However, the American saw that book on the bookshelf when he visited the Chinese the next day. He felt so unsatisfied, and he thought that his friend told him a lie. In fact, this Chinese student wasn't doing without faith. It is a tactful expression. At the same time, the Chinese who keen on face-saving should know that the direction of American doesn't mean losing their face. After mutual understanding, the friendship between them can get a further development.

The Chinese are the representative of collectivism, and the American stands for individualism. Individualist believes that all the people have the equal rights and everyone can control his destiny. Thus, each person should be independent. The individualists usually expect to be noticed by others. They often express their opinions and feeling in public. They protect their secrets, cherish the opportunities of thinking and do right choices for what they want. In fact, almost all of them would range themselves on the front when they stay with their friends. On the contrary, collectivist sees the group as a purpose instead of individual aims, and they rarely care about the value of status. They sometimes think that "Friends should care about mutual individual troubles because individual businesses also belong to collective businesses." A person who lives with too many individual behaviors which makes him embarrassed and bad to keep peaceful in a group.

1.5 Responsibilities of Friends

Chinese think that to help friends is as a matter of course. As a Chinese dictum like this, "At home one can rely on one's parents, and outside on one's friends (在家靠父母，出门靠朋友)." The word "rely" means that the responsibility of Chinese friendship is not only a part of social relationship, but also an important duty of principle. If a Chinese said that someone is really a "good friend", that must be great praise for that person. It means that he is a man who has personal loyalty and can be trusted. In order to help friends, Chinese even "Going through the fire and water without hesitation (赴汤蹈火，在所不辞)" and "Putting his ass on the line (为朋友两肋插刀)". Chinese usually determine a person whether he is a true friend or not when they need help. As a dictum like this, "A friend in need is a friend indeed (患难见真情)".

A part of Chinese take the view that it is natural for friends to shoulder the responsibilities and

obligations, while many Americans disagree on that view. As what they think is that friends are the people who exchange interests, habits and thoughts. And friendship means the pleasure and right between two parts, but not the responsibilities and the obligations. They would not take the responsibility for others, even if they are the best friends. When the American encounter difficulties, they rarely ask for help, but rely on themselves. They often rely on rationality but not friendship during working, as they say "Business is business (公事公办)". The Americans do not like to make friends with others in a deep level. They go on their life under the circumstance that assume the social responsibility. The Chinese will ask for help, support and comfort in some special occasions. When the American want to overcome their melancholy or anxiety, the experts will give them suggestions like going out to meet others or making new friends.

2. Reasons of Different Friendship Concepts

2.1 Differences of Values

The most essential factor of creating different friendship concepts is the culture. In common parlance, the values are the standards for people to determine whether a person's words and deeds are important, beautiful, virtuous and appropriate. Chinese attach importance to concentrating cooperation and interpersonal relationships during working for thousands of years. Friends show the importance of maintaining hierarchy in feudal society. The cooperations in labors provide many opportunities for people to make friends, and the long-term friendship has continued into the present day. Friendship is a main type of these relationships, and fidelity is extremely important. But the American culture pays more attention to individualism, and they advocate personal freedom. Friendship is just one part of their social relationships. For Chinese, collectivism takes on added importance. On some occasions, the Chinese might give up the careers or even die for their friends because of the importance of friendship. In the traditional Chinese culture, personal interests are not as important as the interests of the country, the groups and friends. In this atmosphere, it is generally acknowledged that friendship is more important than personal interests. Nevertheless, the Chinese usually say "A good man is seldom uneasy, an ill one never easy (君子坦荡荡，小人常戚戚)" and "Nothing should be kept under wraps (事无不可与人言)". Some Chinese deem that friends should value justice above material gains.

The American could not comprehend this method of Chinese concept. When their friends have any beneficial conflicts with them, they usually say "Love your friend, but look after yourself (爱朋友，但要照顾自己)". The culture in the USA is due to the culture of commercial society in Western countries. They care individualism, and advocate freedom. They think highly of independent characters and their benefits. They also embrace that "God helps those who help themselves (自助者天助)". These kinds of credos and values explain their friendship concept well. Some complaints from the foreigners who lived in China are mentioned in Schueler Linda and He Zhen's book *How to Communicate With Foreigners*. An American complained that he was exploited to learn oral English when he communicate with a Chinese. That behavior produces pressure and passivity to the American. The communicating barrier caused by different basis of cultures.

2.2 Differences of Economic Concepts

China is a developing country which underwent the slave society, the feudal society and finally enter into the socialist society. The Chinese keeps a long time in a very poor period. In that period, China received some help from other countries which promoted the economy of China. So, the Chinese attacks importance and appreciates to the people who helped them in difficult periods. However, the USA insists on capitalist society, and the well development of capital society makes the Americans pay more attention personal income and pay.

To a certain degree, to make friends with the American people is easy enough because of their amiability. It has a direct relationship with its various cultures and developed economy. It is also noteworthy that the Americans care too much about money. If only they consult something about

labor, nobody will become vague in payment. They would pay by themselves when they go out and have meals with friends. They don't think that they should shoulder economic responsibilities or obligations although they have good relationships. It is very common to them. Furthermore, in daily life or some festivals, the most common gifts for the Americans are cards or a bunch of flowers. These aspects demonstrate that the Americans might not increase the investment in economy for enhancing relations. Chinese usually send expensive and different styles of gifts on New Year's Day or other festivals. The quality of gifts which send to others by Chinese might relate to the time that they know each other.

2.3 Differences of Politics

The differences of friendship concepts between the Chinese and the Americans can be expressed by the news. The president Mr. Obama appointed his rival—the former first lady Hillary Clinton as Secretary of State. And Hillary accepted the invitation to control the foreign affairs of the USA in the future.

In American political history, it is common that the rival says "Congratulations" to the winner. It is also very common that people in different political parties could hold offices in rival parties. The political culture in America demonstrates the spirit of toleration, opening and rationality. It is also an important indemnification which achieves peace and rational democracy, and a kind of culture that observance of human rights and fair opportunities.

But there are some differences between China and the USA. Over the past thousands of years, the rivals of supreme commander usually had bad ending. Some of them might be killed by the winner, and others might be given titles. The titles just some names without any rights and backgrounds. China still has separatism which threaten ideas of unity and it activates deep sufferer consciousness. What is more, the combination of politics and ethics produces and politics science.

3. Conclusion

Friendship is one of the indispensable parts of interpersonal relationships. Some experts who distinguished the differences of Chinese and Americans friendship concepts by researching the differences of values and economic concepts of Chinese and Americans. The paper proves the arguments by Chinese and American friendship dictums from the perspective of cross-culture which obtains differences of time of maintaining friendship, distances between friends, and purposes of making friends, ways of making friends and responsibilities of friends after contrasting Chinese differences of values, economic concepts and politics with those of Americans.

The aim of this paper is to display the culture and friendship concept of the American. It is a reference for the Chinese to make friends. It can avoid some unnecessary misunderstandings and disputes. What is more, this paper can improve the level of the cross-culture of both Chinese and Americans, which deepen the understanding of the American. The Chinese and the American could adjust the ways that they make friends after they know more about the other side. Even though there are so many differences about making friends in two countries above, they still have the same point—all people cherish the friendship that they have established. As Helen Keller, the American writer and educator said, "Walking with a friend in the dark is better than walking alone in the light (和朋友走在黑暗中要好过一个人独自在光明中行走)". The conflict that discussed in this writing is not for distinguishing, but analyzing the differences telling readers one part of American culture, and providing some valuable reference for the Chinese students who decided to go on further education in America. So the students can prevent the unpleasant during chatting. This paper helps them to get deeper understanding and smoothly communicating to the American.

To sum up, there are so many differences between Chinese and American friendship concepts. The investigation in this paper could only reflect an overall situation. It helps the Chinese to make friends with the American more successfully and avoid some misunderstanding. But the specific

situation might change so that the reader should not stick to the suggestions and differences in this paper.

Author Biography

Huang Zixun, female (July 27, 1991–), Guilin, Guangxi, Han Chinese, master's degree, none, research focus: employment education in institution of higher education.

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