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Culture:
Conversational Openers & Key Differences

文化：中国式开场白及行为差异



Margrith A. Lin-Huber has done comparative research on the acquisition of language in different cultural environments. Some of her main findings and other useful stories and explanations about Western contact with the Chinese culture can be found in her book "Chinesen verstehen lernen", which is published in German by Verlag Hans Huber, Bern.

Margrith A. Lin-Huber对不同文化背景下的语言习惯做了大量的研究和比较。在她的著作《学会了解中国人》(由德国Verlag Hans Huber, Bern.出版发行)中可以了解到她关于西方人接触中国文化的一些研究成果和实例说明。

Maybe you have had this kind of experience: You meet a Chinese business partner for the first time face to face. Previously, you knew each other only through mail, faxes or phone calls. However, at this first meeting he has a lot of questions to ask you. After a while, there are some questions that are not only about business and some of these questions are completely unexpected. For you, some of these are too intimate and definitely do not belong in the first encounter. Following are some explanations about Chinese Conversational Openers that may help you put these questions in the right context.

In early 1901, the editor of a Western business newspaper advised foreigners regarding contacts with Chinese: "It is not at all impolite to ask questions about the personal situation of strangers. On the contrary, it is seen as a sign of politeness towards the foreign guests if you are asked, 'Are you married?'"

This is still true today, and if your business partner knows that you are married, the initial question may be about your family life, and especially about your children. Family is the center of a Chinese person's life. The Chinese feel warmer toward other people when family information is swapped. It's a good way to show mutual understanding. The Chinese think it is easier to create a friendly feeling in this way. Only once each one knows more about the other should business matters be dealt with, as this is considered the basis of trust.

In the Western world, opening conversational topics tend to be impersonal during the initial stages of contact. Therefore, Westerners are not used to these personal conversational styles when opening a conversation. In particular, there is one form of typical Chinese greeting which may be difficult for Westerners to recognize as a conversational opener. The Chinese often make casual comments about whatever another person is doing at the moment, formed as polite questions. They ask, "Are you going to work?" when you are leaving your apartment in the morning. Shang na er qu?» (Where are you going?) is a typical greeting which occurs when passing another person in a building or meeting on street. If you meet an acquaintance on the street, and you are dressed up, he may ask you: «Are you going to a party?» If you are

cleaning your desk, and someone passes and see you, they say: «You are cleaning your desk. Are you leaving for a journey?» If you are holding an envelope in your hand, a Chinese workmate will say: "Oh, did you get a letter?" Perhaps he will add: "Is it from home?".

Westerners find such questions worrying or disturbing. They find them a nuisance or importunate, in any case, impolite. They often don't understand that these are not intended as questions requiring answers. They are part of the ritual of making an acquaintance. With this type of casual comment the Chinese person only wants to show acknowledgment and solidarity.

I was once confused by the fact that every evening when I came home from work, my neighbour would ask me: "Mr. Lin, is he at

home?" This question always left me wondering. I thought that maybe my neighbour wanted to ask my husband for a favour and so I replied that I would go and see if he was at home or not. Now I am used to this friendly kind of greeting.

Questions like "Where are you from?" or "Where are you going?" are common conversational openers in polite Chinese communication. Westerners are not used to these kinds of greetings and often respond by giving detailed explanations. These statements will, in turn, confuse the Chinese partners, who never really expected a true answer. It is important to understand that these are not genuine questions and you should respond to these kinds of greetings in vague terms. You needn't indicate your destination when you are asked about it. Also, you need give no precise information when greeted with the formulation "zai na-er fa-cai?" (Where do you get your riches at this moment?) - a greeting which is being used by

younger people in modern times. Another common form of greeting that may cause misunderstanding is "chi le ma?" (Have you eaten?). This saying normally occurs around mealtimes. It is neither a curious question about your eating habits nor an invitation for lunch. The meaning of this greeting goes back to the time of the famines. It carries a special kind of sympathy because it was not obvious that people HAD eaten. To the ears of native English speakers it sounds like the opening phrase of an invitation. A British lady working as an English teacher in China reported her first encounter with this greeting. Shortly after arriving in China, without any idea about the language and culture, she was very confused when a bank clerk asked her if she had had her lunch. Educated in the British culture, she regarded this question as an indirect invitation to lunch, and between unmarried young people it indicated the young man's interest in dating the girl, whereas the young man was merely being polite.

也许你会有这样的经历：你初次与一位中国商业伙伴会面，虽然之前你们只是在电邮、传真或电话中有过接触，但就在这第一次的会面中他就问了你许多的问题。没过多久，这些问题就开始不着边际，谈话已超出业务范畴。一些你认为绝对不该在首次会面中就涉及的问题更令你始料未及。下文所谈到的内容也许可以帮助你更好的理解中国式的开场白。

早在1901年，“西方商报”的一位编辑就曾提醒那些与中国人打交道的外国人：“在中国，询问陌生人个人状况并不是件不礼貌的事情。相反，如果外国人被问及是否已经结婚，那是一种礼貌的表示。”如今在中国，如果对方知道你已经结婚了，那么第一个问题就可能是关于你的家庭生活，特别是孩子。这是由于家庭是中国生活的核心，若话题涉及到家庭情况，他们会感到很温暖。这也是表达同情心的一种方式，同时也是增进与中国人的友谊的途径。只有将信任建立在对彼此更多的了解上，才能更好地促进商贸往来。

西方人在早期接触时，初次谈话的话题一般不会涉及私人生活。因此，西方人不习惯开场白就谈及私人问题。作为谈话的开头，有一种典型的中国式问候实在难以被西方人接受。作为一种礼节性的问候方式，中国人经常对于他人正在做的某件事情添加一些随意的说明。当你早上出门时，他们会问“去上班啊？”当在楼里或街上与认识的人擦肩而过时，通常会问候一声“上哪儿去？”如果你在路遇见一位熟人，而你当时穿得十分讲究，他就会问：“你是去参加聚会吗？”如果你在擦桌子，此时有人经过看到了，他们会问：“擦桌子啊，你要去旅行吗？”如果你拿着一个信封，你的中国同事会说：“噢，你收到一封信？”可能他还会加一句：“是从家里寄来的吗？”

西方人对这些询问感到很困扰，认为这些问题是令人厌烦的，也是不礼貌的。他们并不了解其实根本不需要回答这些所谓的询问，这只是一种约定俗成的习惯性问候。中国人在提问里添加的这些随意的说明仅仅是要表示相互间的亲近和对彼此关系的肯定。

以前每次我傍晚下班回家，邻居总要问我：“你先生在家吗？”我对这个问题感到很奇怪，一直以为邻居是要找我丈夫帮忙，于是我回答说让我去看看他是否在家。但现在我已经习惯了这种善意的问候方式。

在中国式的交谈中，一些类似于“你从哪儿来啊？”“你要去哪儿啊？”的问题是司空见惯的开场白。西方人不习惯这种问候，更不习惯一开始就详尽地解释他们要去干什么。而这又让中国人感到困惑，他们并不期待对方回答这些问题，实际上这根本不是真正的提问。你含糊的应答就已经足够了！当被问及去向时，你无需指明目的地。同样地，在被问到“在哪儿发财？”这类在当代年轻人中流行的问候语时，你也不必给出精确的回答。另外一种经常被误解的问候语是“吃了没？”。这句话通常出现在用餐时间，它并不是要打听你的用餐习惯也不是向你发出共进午餐的邀请。这个问候的含义可以追溯到饥荒时代，它包含了特别的同情之情，因为并不清楚对方是否吃过了。而在那些以英语为母语的人听来，这象是邀请的前奏。一位在中国执教的英国女教师谈到了她第一次遇到这个问候时的情形。刚到中国时，因为对中国语言和文化一窍不通，所以当一位银行职员询问她是否吃过午餐时，她觉得非常诧异。根据英国的文化习惯，这是间接地邀请她共进午餐，而如果这个提问发生在两个单身的年轻人之间，那就表明那位男士有意约会那个女孩。

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The Chinese feel warmer, when family information is swapped 有关家庭的话题会使中国人感到亲切温暖



Some questions leave Westerners wondering 有些话题让西方人感到困扰