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"Hen you-qu, hen xi hua" - Very Interesting, Very Western



Chinese often do not like to give their personal opinion. Margrith A. Lin-Huber has done comparative research on the acquisition of language in different cultural environments. She explains why Chinese do not like to bring in their own judgment and which strategies they employ to prevent such situations.

At the International Gardening Exposition in Kuming in 1999 the Chinese experts commented that the first draft of the Swiss project was "very interesting and very European." The Swiss understood the Chinese comment to be a polite way of saying „boring“ and they then went on looking for ways to make the project more attractive. The Swiss Pavillion later became a great success.

At a meeting of German, Swiss and Chinese authors in Shanghai, a Chinese writer commented that the German poems were: "Hen you-qu, hen xi-hua" („very interesting, very Western). What was the meaning or intention of this statement? Did the Chinese author mean that the German poems were boring?

„Hen you-qu, hen xi-hua“ could mean many things: "It's a new style. It's strange. It's exotic. That's new for me." "Hen you-qu, hen xi-hua" means many things, but it actually means nothing. It is used as a polite expression for not saying anything certainly. The Chinese always use this expression when they are in situations where they feel obligated to say something but where they do not wish to offer a personal opinion.

Strategies to save face

The Chinese are not used to making personal statements or offering their own opinions in public. If it is too embarrassing to answer a question or to talk about a particular subject, the Chinese remain silent. But most of Western people do not realize this. They are not culturally sensitive enough to understand that asking a Chinese person about his or her opinion about something is, for the Chinese, an uncomfortable situation which could cause him or her to lose face. Unfortunately, however, a Westerner may persist in questioning a Chinese person in order to elicit an opinion. For Chinese people it is very impolite when someone persists in asking for an answer to a personal question which requires offering an opinion and, in any event, it will be a fruitless task for the Westerner. For example, if a person from the West asks a Chinese person directly: "What do you think about this?", the Chinese will find it very difficult to answer. "We only tell our very close friends what we really think," they say.

To avoid offering a personal opinion, the Chinese employ a number of strategies:

- They love to quote proverbs or the sayings of famous people or heroes in order to hint at their personal views.
- They do not speak to the point in order to turn their guest away from his topic and thus avoid offering an opinion.
- They commonly use understatement. The Chinese love understatement! They underplay their own abilities and they feign uncertainty and doubt in situations which they could easily master.
- They often feign inexperience in a matter in order to not criticize another person. Specialists rarely talk about their field unless they are explicitly asked for their views.
- They adapt their opinion to reflect the majority's outlook to prevent discord or disagreement within the group.
- They often use flowery language or fixed expressions rather than answering directly.

By being deliberately vague, the Chinese avoid indicating their own viewpoint. An example of this tactics is the answer I received when I requested a scholarship for a research project: "However, due to our limited funds, we are unable to offer financial support for your project. Please kindly understand our situation."

Understanding polite expressions

To avoid a direct confrontation, the Chinese like to use "softening" words like ke-neng (maybe), da-gai (perhaps), yi-dian-dian (a little bit) and ye-xu (eventually). Such words are used to spare another's feelings. "Give him hope for tomorrow and then for another tomorrow and you will console his heart," is a Chinese saying.

In negotiations, the Chinese often put off their partners with kao-lü, kao-lü or in English: "We must give it more thought", "Let's think about it" or "We'll think this over again." These are polite expressions used by Chinese for not immediately or directly refusing or denying something. It is a pitfall for Western people to take these expressions literally.

The saying "hen you-qu, hen xi-hua" belongs to the Chinese concept of ying -fu which means "to do something perfunctorily". There are politeness rituals which appear to be almost meaningless but which are used by the Chinese whenever they don't want to become further involved in something. If a Chinese official says wo hui liu-yi ("I will attend to your affair. I will pay attention at it") it means, in Chinese bureaucratic slang, that he will table your affair or ignore it until the problem resolves itself. He might even say sympathetically, "Please don't be afraid to come again if you have any problems." "If there is anyway we can be of service in the future, please feel free to let us know", was added to the reply of my above mentioned request of a scholarship.

"The Chinese always communicate on two levels. One is what we say and the other is what we really think," is what Chinese say about their communication behavior. As Westerners are not accustomed to "reading between the lines" in verbal exchanges, they find such communication strategies difficult to understand. Their then reinforces their stereotypes of the "inscrutable" Chinese. The Chinese comment "Hen you-qu, hen xi-hua" (for our Western understanding) it's typically or "very" Chinese.

The second version of Margrith A. Lin-Huber's book „Chinesen verstehen lernen“ will be published in November 2005 by Verlag Hans Huber, Bern, Switzerland.

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“很有趣，很西化”

中国人通常都不喜欢表达个人意见。Margrith A. Lin-Huber女士一直以来致力于在不同文化背景下语言习得的比较研究。她解释了为什么中国人不喜欢提出自己对于事物的判断以及为避免此类情况发生所采用的策略。

在1999年的昆明世界园艺博览会上，中方专家在评价瑞士参展方案的初稿时说到：“非常有趣，非常欧化。”瑞士人明白这一评价其实是一种委婉地表达“枯燥乏味”的方式，于是他们重新想办法使这一方案变得更具吸引力。瑞士的亭阁在之后的展览中获得了巨大的成功。

一次在上海举办的德国、瑞士与中国作家的会议上，一位中国作家评价德国诗“很有趣，很西化”。这句话有什么涵义或是意图呢？那位中国作家是想表达德国诗很枯燥吗？

“很有趣，很西化”有多种涵义：“新的风格；奇怪的东西；具有异国风情的玩意儿；令我耳目一新。”“很有趣，很西化”有多种涵义，但事实上什么也不能说明。人们为了不把一件事说得太绝对，就用此句来委婉地表达想法。当觉得有必要说些什么但又不想流露个人意见时，中国人经常会这样说。

避免丢脸的策略

中国人不习惯在公众场合发表个人意见。遇上特别尴尬的问题或特殊话题时，中国人会保持沉默。但大多数西方人并不了解这一点。他们在文化上还不够敏感以至于不了解追问中国人关于某事的看法会导致不愉快甚至可能使他们感到丢脸。然而不幸的是，西方人面对中国人可能会打破沙锅问到底。对于中国人来说，不断追问一个个人问题以获取对其的看法是极不礼貌的，因此这样的追问无一例外地只能是无果而终。例如，当一个西方人单刀直入地问一个中国人：“你对此有何看法？”，那个中国人会觉得难以回答。中国人表示：“我们只对非常亲密的朋友直言不讳。”

中国人采取以下一些策略来避免提供个人意见：

- 引用名人名言或谚语来暗示自己的观点。
- 岔开话题以避免提供意见。
- 表现低调。中国人喜欢低调行事！他们刻意贬低自己的能力，并在一些自身能轻易驾驭的状况中假装犹豫和疑惑。
- 假装并不在行以避免批评其他人。专家们很少谈及自己研究的领域除非被确切地问到他们的看法。

- 随大流以避免与他人的意见相左。
- 用空洞华丽的语言代替正面的回答。

闪烁其词是避免提及个人观点的另一种方法。正如我为我得研究课题申请奖学金而得到的回答：“然而，由于经费有限，我们无力资助您的项目。请体谅我们的处境。”

理解“客套话”

为避免直接冲突，中国人爱用较为“温和”的字眼，例如“可能”、“大概”、“一点点”以及“也许”。此类字眼可避免伤及别人的感情。中国有句谚语：“给人以希望可安抚其心灵。”

在谈判桌上，中国人经常会使用诸如“考虑，考虑”等说法将谈判对手搪塞过去。这些委婉的说法被用来间接地拒绝或否定某件事。西方人若仅从字面上来理解这类说法，就落入了圈套。

“很有趣，很西化”这一说法源于中国式的概念“应付”，即“将某事敷衍过去”。每当中国人想要摆脱某件事，他们就会说一些其实毫无意义的客套话。如果一名中国官员说“我会留意”，那就意味着他会对你的事进行冷处理直到问题不了了之。他甚至会有同情心地说道：“以后有问题尽管来找我。”我那时申请奖学金时所得到的回答中也有这么一句：“如果以后有什么地方帮的上忙的，请尽管告诉我们。”

“中国人交际通常建筑在两个层面上。一是我们对外所说的，另一个是我们真实的想法。”中国人如此评价他们的交际方式。由于西方人不习惯在口头交谈中发掘“潜台词”，这样的交际策略对于他们来说很难理解。于是这更加深了他们对于“捉摸不透”的中国人的成见。中国式的评价“很有趣，很西化”（按照我们西方人理解）是极具中国特色的。

Margrith A. Lin-Huber的著作
“Chinesen verstehen lernen”的第
二版将于2005年11月在瑞士Verlag
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