

# The Difference Between Chinese and German Perspectives on Time in the Perspective of Intercultural Communication

WU Yumeng

University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China

In the context of cross-cultural communication, understanding the differences between Chinese and German views of time can try to avoid misunderstandings and conflicts: There are significant differences in the concept of time between China and Germany. Germans attach great importance to time, and they consider punctuality as a basic etiquette and respect. In China, on the other hand, although people also value time, there may be some flexibility in practice. Failure to understand this difference may lead to misunderstanding and conflict. Understanding the difference between Chinese and German views on time can help us better adjust our behaviour and language, and better understand and accept each other when communicating with each other, thus improving communication efficiency and building good interpersonal relationships. In general, understanding the differences in time perception between China and Germany is of great significance in improving the effectiveness of cross-cultural communication, establishing and maintaining good interpersonal relationships, and promoting business co-operation.

*Keywords:* Chinese-German comparison, time perspective, intercultural communication

## Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is to explore the differences in the view of time between China and Germany in the context of intercultural communication. Through an in-depth study of Chinese and German cultural backgrounds, historical traditions, and social values, we find that there are significant differences in attitudes and behaviors towards time between China and Germany. Such differences may lead to misunderstandings and conflicts in cross-cultural communication scenarios such as business negotiations and daily life communication. Therefore, it is crucial for people engaged in cross-cultural communication to understand and adapt to each other's time and rhythm. Through comparative analyses, this paper proposes some strategies and methods to help cross-cultural communicators better understand and cope with the differences between Chinese and German views of time, so as to improve the effectiveness and efficiency of cross-cultural communication.

## Definition of Time Perspective

About 6,000 years ago, the sundial was born in the Babylonian Kingdom; people according to the length of the sun's shadow and orientation changes on the time make a rough judgement; since then, as time goes by, timekeeping instruments continue to evolve, from the first prototype to today's common with the standardized

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WU Yumeng, undergraduate student, College of Foreign Languages, University of Shanghai for Science and Technology, Shanghai, China.

scale of the clock, time from the fuzzy and varied guide to the precise clues that people have to frequently get every day, and eventually time becomes a dominant force in life (Garfield, 2019).

In terms of the type of view of time, the two basic human views of time are categorized as: circular and linear. The cyclical view of time, although it has its strengths and weaknesses, can be summarized as a view of time as a circle, where everything develops in a circle and returns in a circle. The linear view of time is the view of time as a never-ending, one-way movement in a straight line that passes (Yan, 2010).

### **The Necessity of Understanding Conflicting Conceptions of Time for Intercultural Communication**

The term “intercultural communication” was first coined by Edward Hall in 1959 and is simply defined as interpersonal interaction between people from different cultural backgrounds. It often occurs when members of one culture generate messages for use by members of another culture, and includes international, inter-ethnic, inter-racial, and inter-regional exchanges (Zu, 2015). Intercultural communication is subdivided into verbal and non-verbal communication, and time perspective, as a part of non-verbal communication, has a great degree of covertness compared to verbal communication, as it does not have a concrete form, but rather relies on the behavioural characteristics reflected in thinking (Xiao, 2013). As Edward Hall (1959) said, “Our formal system of time is part of a whole system which we are not willing to change nor allow others to tamper with”. Therefore, the view of time plays an inescapable role in the achievement of non-verbal communication effectiveness (Wu, 2019).

With the integrated development of the world economy, exchanges between different countries or regions have become gradually closer, and under the increasingly frequent communication, due to cultural differences, the collision of different concepts is inevitable. As time is one of the most basic organisational systems in life, the impact of differences in time perception will inevitably be reflected in communication, and an understanding of time perception in different cultures can avoid communication barriers or even conflicts that may be caused (Pan, 2013).

### **Overview of the Differences Between Chinese and German Views of Time**

There is a German proverb “Pünktlichkeit ist die Höflichkeit der Könige” (Punctuality is an imperial rite) (Duden, 2008). It can be seen from this that punctuality is a German concept of time. Germans believe that being on time not only means respecting others, but also ensuring the proper functioning of the social order. From boiled eggs to serious business talks, Germans always adhere to the concept of punctuality. In their view, punctuality is a very important thing, unless it is a special thing, or being late is intolerable, and arriving early will also be regarded as encroachment on the other side of the time. German business relations guidelines on punctuality as a concept of time have a high demand. The boss of a German company proposed a task that must be completed by nine o’clock the next day, that is to say, if it is not completed after nine o’clock the next day, it is a failure, because nine o’clock is already a big limit (Gao, 2007). It is usually very difficult to do so if one is only meeting a businessman at very short notice, because the businessman is on a tight schedule and the Germans usually do not use the telephone to arrange meetings; they want to have a full grasp of what is going to happen, so that they can organise their work programme in an orderly way. Germans believe that being on time also means being trustworthy and reliable. Work has to be done within a set time limit, and once a deadline is set, unless for some reason it is not done on time, it has to be done within the set time limit. In China, on the

other hand, if a meeting has reached its allotted time but something important has not been said yet, it usually takes a few minutes to bring the meeting to a complete conclusion before ending the meeting. Although Chinese business communication norms also follow a punctual view of time, they are not as strict as in Germany, and are more flexible, especially due to the humane society in China. If you do not understand the differences between the Chinese and German view of time, it may lead to misunderstandings or conflicts in cross-cultural communication.

### **The Formation of the German View of Time**

The two main sources of modern European culture are divided into Greek and Christian cultures, and in order to fully understand the formation of the German view of time as well as the cultural view of time in modern Europe, one should first understand the concepts of time held by each of the Greek and Christian cultures.

One of the major features of Greek thought was the lack of a sense of history, which was part of the cultural background that formed the Greek view of time. The Greeks' weak sense of history was due to their belief that social life was unchanging and repetitive, that there was no difference among past, present, and future, and that, as such, the record of history was meaningless. Against this cultural background of lack of historical awareness, the cyclical view of time naturally became the more prominent view of time in Greek thought.

Under the cyclical view of time, time is considered to be a circle that goes round and round. There are strong and weak cyclical views of time; the cycle of sunrise and sunset is a weak cycle of time, and weak cyclical views of time exist in almost every culture. And there is much uncertainty as to whether the Greeks held a strong circular view of time. However, in terms of Greek philosophical thinking, the Greeks' preference for circular motion corroborates that their view of time was indeed influenced by a circular view.

In the Greek view of cyclical time, Greek thinkers believed that countless reincarnations do not lead to liberation and consolation, and that the true quest for the immortality of the soul does not depend on the future, but on the other side, on the other place; in other words, not temporality, but spatiality. Christianity carries with it the strong sense of history found in Jewish thought. The Christian view of time is different from the circular view of time found in Greek thought; the Christian view of time is essentially linear time with a direction. In the linear view of time, the future is not closed, but dynamic and creative.

As the agricultural economy still dominated society in the Middle Ages, the farmers' view of time was still inevitably constrained by natural cyclical rhythms, and so the cyclical view of time was widely spread among the people throughout the Middle Ages. During the Renaissance, the linear view of time and the cyclical view of time clashed fiercely, but it is not possible to categorize one side as advanced and the other side as old-fashioned. In the 18th century, under the impetus of the Enlightenment, the linear view of time was deeply rooted in people's hearts, and in the 19th century, the theory of evolution was put forward, so that the linear view of time completely replaced the cyclic view of time in European society (Wu, 2019). The linear view of time became the traditional view of time in Western societies, and the German view of time, based on the linear view of time plus the characteristics formed under the influence of the technological age, formed the modern view of time.

When industrial civilization replaced agricultural civilization and our living environment changed from natural to artificial, "punctuality" permeated everything in life and time was given value. In the age of technology, any creation is to save time, improve efficiency, be punctual, and make the unit of time play the greatest benefit. Punctuality has become a virtue in the age of technology. Under the linear and unidirectional view of time, which is "irreversible once it is gone", the technological age has enhanced its irreversibility, and the linear view of time

has become indifferent under the time system of the technological age. In the West, a precise and orderly view of time with a future time orientation has developed (Wu, 2019).

### **The Formation of the Chinese View of Time**

The fact that Chinese civilization can continue for 5,000 years is a reflection of the Chinese people's strong historical consciousness, so there is a place for the linear view of time in the Chinese concept of time, but based on the agrarian culture and the Taoist thought of Laozi, the cyclical view of time occupies a dominant position in the Chinese concept of time.

According to Xunzi, farmers engaged in agricultural production in accordance with the time of the year by ploughing in the spring, hoeing in the summer, harvesting in the autumn, and storing in the winter, and none of these four things lost their timing and were in line with the times, so that the grains continued to grow, and the common people had an abundance of surplus food, and there was an abundance of all the grains.

When the time of day was divided into units of time measurement for ease of living, such as the division of a year into 12 months, the division of the 24 seasons, etc., this let the time and day carry a specific meaning behind it. "Spring means birth, summer means growth, autumn means harvest, and winter means hiding" (Lv Shi Chun Qiu—Twelve Periods); from the ancient text we can see that in the concept of time of the ancient Chinese, the time of the day was divided into specific contextual significance, and to take away this layer of significance for the pure measurement of the time system, it can be seen that the Chinese ancient people did not set up a pure measurement of the time system, so the sense of the passage of time is not completely dominated by the linear view of time.

China is a large agricultural country, in order to arrange agricultural production, the importance of agricultural time is self-evident; in the year, month, day unified calendar system has not yet been established (Zhao, 1965), conformity to the time of the day has become a must comply with the guidelines of life, according to the cycle of the time of the day to arrange for the cycle of agricultural production, reflecting the Chinese thought emphasized the unity of man and nature, heaven and man, and the Chinese people in conformity with the time of the day of the self-consciousness of the formation of the establishment of a culture based on the agrarian. The concept of the unity of heaven and man in the cycle of time was formed on the basis of the farming culture (Wu, 2019).

Lao Zi's Taoist doctrine is that the development and change process of all things is: All things originate from the Tao, and all things have their own growth and change, growth and change, and then return to the Tao, such a process, called the Tao of a "circumference"; Lao Zi believes that "circumference but not peril", and this "circumference" does not stop at any time, that is to say, in Lao Zi's Taoist thought all things are circular. Lao Zi believes that "circumference is not dangerous", and this "circumference" does not stop, that is to say, in Lao Zi's Taoist thought, the development and change of all things are cyclic (Feng, 1964, p. 49).

The concept of cyclic time is also reflected in the Taoist concept of life and death. In Taoist thought, life is also a developing and changing thing, death is not the end of life, death is not absolute, it is only a link in the process of life, from the individual point of view, death is to return to the original Tao, and from the overall point of view, death is only to return to the universe in the great cycle of life as a whole. The flow of the universe is the flow of life. The Taoist attitude towards life and death has had a structural influence on the formation of the Chinese view of cyclical time (Wu, 2019, pp. 47-50).

### **Case Study on the Differences Between Chinese and German Perspectives on Time**

Case 1: Once, the BBC did a survey on how people in different countries viewed time, and Germans thought that being on time was the most important thing Germans valued. For example, you invite someone to dinner at eight o'clock in the evening. At eight o'clock, the guest will ring the bell. If the guest arrives five minutes late, the host is informed that they will be late. If they arrive five minutes early, they walk around the neighbourhood and ring the doorbell at the allotted time. In China, the idea of time is very liberal. If you arrive early and offer to help, they will consider you a polite person, and arriving 15 bells to half an hour late is acceptable.

A survey by Apotheken Umschau also shows that about 84.4 per cent of Germans take their appointments seriously and expect the same from others. 63.6 per cent of Germans are punctual at private parties. About a quarter of Germans (23.7 percent) choose to arrive as early as possible in order to avoid unforeseen circumstances (Wang, 2020).

But arriving early can also cause trouble and embarrassment, especially at family gatherings when the host is not ready. So, it's best if we do not stay more than 10 minutes past the allotted time. This coincides with a BBC survey, which found that most Germans arrive on time. However, there are exceptions, such as the unwritten tradition of "das akademische viertel" (the academic quarter hour) in German universities, which means that each class is delayed by 15 minutes, so that students can review the previous class. Chinese students studying in Germany who do not understand this will question the German concept of punctuality.

The Chinese do not stick to deadlines like the Germans do; they think that as long as it's done, it's done and a few days later is no big deal to them. In a TV interview with a Chinese businesswoman who often accompanies her customers to the Canton Fair, she often reminds her customers that the Chinese take 25 days to deliver, so you will have to wait an extra 10 days. It is customary in China to give the customer a 10% discount in the expectation that the customer will accept their extended delivery period. Even the delivery time listed on the contract may not be met by the Chinese. The Chinese have a great deal of time flexibility and they generally do not want deadlines to interfere with their work. The Chinese attach great importance to interpersonal relationships in their business activities. As a result, Germans think that dealing with the Chinese is a lengthy affair and that the Chinese generally start doing business only after they have socialized and established good interpersonal relationships (Wang, 2020).

From the above cases, we can analyse that the Germans have a strong sense of punctuality in their life. Pressing the doorbell at 8 o'clock on the dot and most Germans arrive at the party at the right time can show that under the influence of the linear unidirectional time concept of "once it is gone, it can't be recovered", the Germans abide by the concept of punctuality and always hold the attitude of cherishing time and their attitude towards life.

Case 2: In Company A, the conflict between German and German employees is mainly characterized by the fact that employees in Western countries such as Germany have a more rigorous concept of time, whereas Chinese employees are more inclined to ambiguous time management, especially postponing their work under the influence of factors such as work schedules.

During meetings, Germans usually have a clear process, clear topics, and can directly communicate and discuss the topics with the direct communication problems of solving problems, with high efficiency and effectiveness as the priority. Therefore, they need to set up schedules and goals in advance and follow the

procedures. Chinese employees, on the other hand, are accustomed to exchanging pleasantries before the start of a meeting, which in their minds is a way to pull both parties together. This reduces the efficiency of the meeting (Yang, 2021).

This case shows the strong flexibility of time, the ambiguous attitude towards time, and the reflection of the characteristics of a humane society in China.

In Sino-German joint ventures, Chinese and German representatives often have disputes or disagreements about the implementation of projects, the production of products, the determination of delivery dates, etc., because the Chinese side prefers to use vague terms, such as “probably”, “maybe”, “three or two months”, “four or five weeks”, “seven or eight days”, and other vague words. For example, the following is a dialogue between a German (A) and a Chinese (B) project manager (Hu & Ye, 2012):

A: Herr Wang, können Sie heute mal genau sagen, wie lange braucht die Demontage der Maschine noch? (Mr. Wang, can you confirm today, how many more days will it take for the machine to be dismantled?)

B: Ich glaube, vielleicht noch einige Woche. (It's going to be a few more weeks, I think.)

A: (Bisschen nervös) Wie viele denn? ((With a pouty face) How many weeks exactly?)

B: Vier bis fünf. (Four to five weeks, I think.)

A: (Nicht mehr geduldig) Oh, mein Gott! Sagen Sie bitte genau, vier oder fünf? ((Enduring) Geez! Could you please clarify whether it's four weeks or five weeks?)

B: Etwa vier. (About four weeks.)

From the above case, it can be analyzed that the Chinese side is affected by the cyclic view of time and tends to be fuzzy in time management. Although the Chinese side seems to leave the delivery date with a grace period, there is no precise time point in reality, and the fuzzy time reflects the strong flexibility of time expressed by the Chinese under the cyclic view of time, while the German side produces a clear time concept based on the linear view of time, and two different time concepts collide, and a conflict occurs between the Chinese and German communication. The two different concepts of time collide, and the communication between the Chinese and the Germans are in conflict.

## **How to Deal With the Conflict Between Chinese and German Views of Time Under Intercultural Communication**

### **Establish a Correct Cross-Cultural Concept**

It is necessary to be consciously aware of the temporal conflict under cross-cultural communication, to abandon prejudice when the conflict occurs, and to refrain from shaping the stereotype of labelling the object of the conflict. By cultivating the consciousness of cross-cultural conflict awareness, we can learn to respect and tolerate other cultures and lay the foundation for the smooth development of cross-cultural communication (Wang, 2020).

### **Fully Understand German Culture**

In the context of cross-cultural communication, if you do not have a full understanding of German culture, then conflicts over the concept of time are inevitable, so before communicating, you should have an all-round in-depth understanding of German culture, open up German cultural horizons, and enhance your understanding of the different concepts of time in different cultures.

### Timely Explanation and Communication

When conflict inevitably occurs, it is necessary to increase sensitivity and, based on the reaction of the other party, to achieve timely explanation and communication, so as to avoid further deepening of the conflict.

### Conclusions

Under the background of global integration, there are close exchanges between countries, not only between China and Germany, and if you do not know the Western culture when conducting intercultural communication, intercultural communication conflicts are bound to occur. In order to avoid ineffective intercultural communication, the use of non-verbal communication in intercultural communication is particularly important. In this regard, we should raise our own awareness of conflict in intercultural communication and fully understand Western culture, so as to avoid the occurrence of intercultural communication conflict and lay a solid foundation for the successful completion of intercultural communication.

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