

When Starbucks Meet with Summer Palaces

—the Roles of Cultural Signs in Intercultural Communication

Sun Le

School of Foreign Studies, Weinan Normal University, Weinan City, Shaanxi Province, China

Keywords: Starbucks, Forbidden City, Cultural Signs, Intercultural Communication

Abstract: an Anchorman of Cctv Wrote in His Blog an Article to Show His Disapproval of the Existence of the Shop of Starbucks Coffee -One of the American Cultural Signs in the Forbidden City. he Suggested That Starbucks Should Be Evicted from Forbidden City. Thus Coming a Hot Debate: Someone Thinks That the Existence of Starbucks' Store Not Only Breaks the Harmony of Forbidden City,the Cultural Signs of Chinese Civilization, But Also an Indignity to the Latter; the Others Argue That it's Nothing But an Normal Action That Can Make Good Use of the Room of the Forbidden City. Cultural Signs Play Important Roles in Intercultural Communication. as the Representative Cultural Signs of China and the U.s Respectively, the Collision between the Forbidden City and Starbucks is, in a Deeper Sense, a Reflection of the Collision between Chinese Culture and American Culture. by Analyzing the Roles of Cultural Signs, We Can Come to Know the Cultural Settings, Cultural Customs and Cultural Environments, Etc. They Are Cultural Connotations Contained in Similar Events and Thus We Can Have a Better Intercultural Communication with Others.

1. Introduction

With the rapid development of Chinese economy, more and more American fast-food brands come to seek business opportunities in Chinese market, among which are Kentucky Fried Chicken, McDonalds' and Starbucks. All of those successful brands grows with and benefit from the quick development of American economy in the early time and have become part of American culture. The quick, convenient and sanitary fast-food chain stores cater for the needs of the time-cherishing modern people and thus become popular all over the world with no exception of China. You can see not only in major cities, but also even in the quick-developing villages stores of the famous fast food chains. Actually, in the world famous ancient city Xian, there is also one McDonalds' store located 5 metres away from the Drum Tower- an ancient building built more than 600 years ago in Ming dynasty. However, though stores like Starbucks are very popular among Chinese people, especially among younger people, when the above mentioned debate was stirred up, most Chinese people choose to stand in the side to their culture heritage, as we can see in the above comments made by some of the netizens. In fact, not only Chinese people, some foreigners also show their surprise about this event, as Rui said in his blog: "every time when I went to the Forbidden City with my foreign friends, I will feel ashamed when they show interest to the very place of the coffee shop."

2. Analysis to the Event in Terms of Cultural Signs.

The past thirty years witnessed the quick development of global economy and the propelling momentum of globalization. In such a period when opportunities coexist with challenges, every country has to take good advantages of the chance of globalization to promote their economic development with no exception of China, since the reformation and openness policy was implemented in 1978, China has been on a way of quick development. However, everything is a sword with two blades, when we introduce the foreign capitals to make investments in our country, we introduce their culture, too. Cultural anthropologists define culture as something that everyone has and uses. Spradley and Mccurdy (1997:3) provide us with the view that culture stands for the

system of learned beliefs and customs that characterizes the total way of life of a particular society^[1] the conflicts between cultures are inevitable. Cultural conflicts may occur where people from two cultures meet with each other, or when two cultural sign from different culture meet with each other. As a country with five thousand years' history, China has as many cultural signs as stars, most of which, however, originated from ancient Chinese cultures. Only a few of them came about in modern times. Compared with Chinese cultural signs, those of western countries are more accustomed to the contemporary time.

2.1 What is Cultural Sign?

Culturally speaking, we can see Forbidden City and Starbucks as the culture sign of China and the U.S. respectively. Signs are the core of semiotics and signs analysis. From the point of view of semiotist, the whole world is a huge sign system. Signs can be known as marks or as things representing the other things.^[2] C.S. Peirce says: The word Sign will be used to denote an Object perceptible.^[3] Yuri Lotman, the founder of Tartu-Moscow semiotic school, studies signs together with human beings' cultural activities. He considers culture as a sign system with the function of being communicative, grouping and memorable.^[4] Signs, as one of the most important means for communication, are closely connected with culture. Cultural signs are formed in the long evolution of a nation's history. They are symbols that can reflect the overall aspects of a nation's cultural connotations, i.e. a nation's cultural custom, cultural background, cultural achievements, etc. Different cultural signs contain different implications. By analyzing them we can learn more about cultural signs and the implications hidden behind them. Below are the analysis to the implication of Forbidden City and Starbucks:

2.2 The Cultural Implications of Starbucks.

Starbucks Corporation is an international coffee and coffeehouse chain based in Seattle, Washington, USA. Starbucks is the largest coffeehouse company in the world, with 15,012 stores in 44 countries.^[5] As a cultural sign of the U.S, what Starbucks symbolizes is a typical American way of life. Starbucks envisions local outlets as third place (beside workplace and home) to spend time and it sells not only coffee, but also atmosphere. The success of Starbucks can be attributed to the following reasons, all of which can find their way in American culture.

Firstly, Starbucks attaches great importance to the arrangement and decoration of their stores in order to provide customers with relaxing and free talking environment. Free spirit has been emphasized ever since the first immigrants coming to the land to seek religious freedom, besides, most American people are so independent that they are inclined to keep distance with others. Starbucks know this very well, the tables in each of its store are put in a proper distance so that people who sit in the close two tables cannot affect each other. This consideration is highly appreciated by the customers.

Secondly, Starbucks has strong consciousness of innovation. There are countless coffee shops in the U.S. As is known, America is called "melting stove" in that multi-cultures coexist in the land. In view of this, Starbucks keeps on searching for and introducing new flavors to satisfy customers from different cultures. Its success is based on the multi-culture environment of the U.S. American enterprises like Starbucks tend to utilize the good resources of the other cultures. They spend lots of money and time making innovations to adapt to the changing market and make themselves more competitive both at home and abroad.

2.3 The Implication of the Forbidden City.

With its splendid performance in the international market, Starbucks came to Chinese market and opened a coffee shop in 2000 in Forbidden City. However, seven years later, the store was evicted from the location. Why can this event happen? It will be clarified having known the cultural implications of Forbidden City.

The Forbidden City was the Chinese imperial palace from the mid-Ming Dynasty to the end of the Qing Dynasty. It is located in the middle of Beijing, China, and now houses the Palace Museum. For almost five centuries, it served as the home of the Emperor and his household, as well as the

ceremonial and political centre of Chinese government. The palace complex exemplifies traditional Chinese palatial architecture, and has influenced cultural and architectural developments in East Asia and elsewhere. The Forbidden City was declared a World Heritage Site in 1987.^[6] As one of the most famous cultural signs of China, Forbidden City reflects Chinese culture in many aspects.

Firstly, the Forbidden City,” is a translation of the Chinese name *Zijin Cheng*. The color purple refers to the North Star, which, in ancient China, is called Ziwei Star. Purple also stand for dignity in ancient Chinese culture, common people are forbidden to wear clothes in purple; “*Forbidden*”, referred to the fact that no-one could enter or leave the palace without the emperor's permission. *Cheng* means a walled city. In a word, the Forbidden City stands for authority, dignity, mystery and majesty of Imperial power.

Secondly, the design of the Forbidden City, from its overall layout to the smallest detail, was meticulously planned to reflect philosophical and religious principles, and above all to symbolize the majesty of Imperial power. Some noted examples of symbolic designs include:

Thirdly, architecturally speaking, The Forbidden City is the world's largest surviving palace complex and covers 72 ha. It is a rectangle 961 metres from north to south and 753 metres from east to west. It consists of 980 surviving buildings with 8,707 bays of rooms.^[7] Artistically speaking, the collections of the Palace Museum are based on the Qing imperial collection. According to the results of a 1925 audit, some 1.17 million items were stored in the Forbidden City. In addition, the imperial libraries housed one of the country's largest collections of ancient books and various documents.^[8] Forbidden City, with its huge square, meticulously planned layout, grand palace complex, delicate and luxurious decorations as well as abundant collections, exhibits the piths of Chinese culture in many aspects and represents the prime of ancient Chinese civilization and the symbol of Chinese nation.

2.4 What Can We Learn from This Event?

Up to today, the debate over the event has come to the end and as most people wished, Starbucks yielded and withdrew its coffee shop from Forbidden City in July, 2007. By analyzing this event, we can learn a lot of things:

First, implications of cultural sign may vary in different regions, e.g. Starbucks is considered as common coffee shop which people from all class can afford to buy in the U.S and Europe. While in China, Starbucks is always connected with high consumption, white collar and middle class.

Second, the quick expanding of Starbuck in Chinese market prove that people with high income is becoming a larger and larger group in China. Those who belong to this group are mainly elites from all callings. With the increase of population of this group, their values are having a larger influence on current Chinese society. They also play a role as the intermediary between Chinese culture and foreign culture by introducing reciprocally foreign cultures and Chinese culture. They are becoming the backbone of Sino-foreign communication.

Third, network has become an important channel for the grass-root people to express their viewpoints. In Starbucks event, it is the netizens who force the authority to pay attention to the event and eventually, Starbucks had to leave the Forbidden City. This, together with other similar events, shows that grass-root people has become an influential group that can contribute to the social progress. Beside, network also helps people to know about the outside world, they can learn online more about foreign cultures. It's a good way to avoid culture shock in intercultural communication.

Fourth, we are still on a long way to protect and conserve our cultural heritages and resources. Over-commercialization has been an all-pervading phenomenon in domestic museums, which, if we continue to neglect, will play down the importance of cultural resources.

3. Conclusion

The Starbucks event is just the tip of the iceberg in the cultural conflicts. Different cultural signs are windows of different cultures, through which we can get to know a certain culture and learn more about it henceforth. The link between culture and communication is crucial to the

understanding of cross-cultural communication because it is through the influence of culture that people learn to communicate. In intercultural communication, it's likely for us to be confronted with cultural signs here and there. To avoid cultural misunderstandings, we should try to learn more about the implications hidden behind those cultural signs instead of neglecting them. Only by doing so can we have a better understanding of a certain culture and do a good job in intercultural communication.

References

- [1] Chen Zhengan, et al. Theory and practice of Intercultural Communication [M]. Chongqing University Press, 2005.
- [2] Jia Yuxin, intercultural communication [M]. Shanghai Foreign Language Education Press, 1997.
- [3] Arthur Asa Berger, Signs in Contemporary Culture [M], Long-man, 1984.
- [4] Li Xiaohua, Yan Hui, translation of cultural symbols in cross culture [J]. Journal of Qingdao University of science and Technology (SOCIAL SCIENCE EDITION) VOL23, NO3. Sept. 2007.
- [5] [www.wikipedia.org http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starbucks](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Starbucks)
- [6] [www.wikipedia.org http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forbidden_City](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Forbidden_City)