Deep Comparison between Chinese and English Idioms from Cultural Differences Perspective

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Abstract: As the reflection of culture and the special part of language, idioms are daily expressions which are shaped by people’s long-term using and generalization of language and are used frequently in daily conversations and written forms. With the development of cross-cultural communication, researching idiom meanings of different nations plays a more important role in cultural communication and integration. Idiom has its own abundant cultural connotation, so Chinese and English idioms have kinds of differences because of the cultural differences. To research the origins of the differences between Chinese and English idioms, the thesis analyzes differences in diet, animal, numeral and color-related idioms with dozens of examples, and further discusses cultural differences of different nations from four aspects: geographical features, religious beliefs, cultural origins, traditions and customs. The results may further expand English learners’ knowledge, so they could adopt the deep approach to stimulate their interests of study and improve their learning skills, so as to learn language more accurately and effectively.

Keywords: Chinese and English idioms; Comparison and analysis; Cultural differences; Deep approach

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1. Introduction

Language, as a tool of communicating and expressing, undoubtedly is the storage and integration of a nation’s culture. Therefore as a significant part of language, idiom reflects national culture connotation in many aspects. With the spread of the influence of globalization, idiom becomes more important in cross-
cultural communication because of its frequent appearance in ordinary life. In daily communications and written words, people often use idioms to make expressions vivid and clear, so it is urgent and important to use them correctly with thorough understanding. People know that idiom improves with the development of national culture. Sometimes several Chinese idioms are corresponding to English idioms because there are always some habits and concepts in common among different nations; but in most cases, Chinese idioms are different from English idioms in forms, use, expressions and meanings. The thesis focuses on researching differences between Chinese and English idioms with the analysis of different features in two nations’ culture including different geographical features and living circumstances, different religious beliefs, different cultural origins and different traditions and customs. Ultimately, people may have a clear outlook of how to use idioms appropriately through the result of research. Language teachers may also adopt the deep approach (Long, 2019a; Long &Ju,2020) to apply the result in their daily language and culture teaching.

There are five chapters in the thesis. The first chapter is introduction. The second chapter is literature review which is about definitions of the “idiom” in both Chinese culture and English culture. The third chapter compares similarities and differences of the two countries’ idioms. The fourth chapter discusses cultural differences which influence the formation and evolution of idioms from four aspects: geographical features and living circumstances, religious beliefs, cultural origins and traditions and customs. The fifth chapter is the conclusion of the thesis.

2. Literature Review

It is important for language learners to learn more about idioms during their study of cultural differences between foreign language and first language. But for some students, they do not know what is idiom exactly. So the first thing to learn idioms is to clarify the definitions of idioms.

(1) Definitions of Chinese Idioms

Tao claimed that idiom is frequently-used set phrase. It has its special meaning and the meaning is not equivalent to the combined meaning of every word of the phrase. Idiom is an important element of language and culture of a society and the central reflection of language’s national form and rhetoric. It is also a phrase or short sentence with fixed form, conciseness and profound message made by long-term and repeated using and natural deposits of some parts of language (2012).

Definition of “Chengyu” is described as invariable phrases and four or eight-character sentences with incisive meanings. Chengyu is usually originated from those ancient classics, historical events and folk stories and is used frequently for a
Ping and Zhang believe that idiom, as the significant part of vocabulary, includes metaphorical phrases, slang, colloquialism, proverb and so on (2000). “Idiom is the result of long-term using of language, most kinds of language with long history have a great abundance of idioms” (Ping & Zhang, 2000, p.13).

(2) Definitions of English Idioms

The word “idiom” is from the ancient Greek word “idioma”, meaning “peculiarity” or “specialty”. In lexicology, an idiom is a fixed group of words or a single word or even a sentence with a special meaning that cannot be guessed from its structure. In a broad sense, idioms may include colloquialisms, catchphrases, slang expressions, proverbs, etc. Professor Koonin defined idiom as “a stable combination of words with fully or partially figurative meaning (Shi & Jiang, 2015, p. 102).

The above-mentioned statement describes idiom from its origin and analyzes the structure of idioms to make a clear cognition of English idiom’s definition. Meanwhile, it discusses the elements of composition of idioms.

The word “idiom” in Oxford Advanced Learner’s English-Chinese Dictionary has three definitions, I think two of them are appropriate and pertinent to use in the thesis: “(1) a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words; (2) the kind of language and grammar used by particular people at a particular time or place” (Hornby, 2011, p.1012).

3. Comparison between Chinese and English Idioms

Language is the carrier of culture, so a nation’s language is the reflection of its unique culture (Long, 2019b, p.137). With the more frequent global intercultural communication, studying on the characteristics of idioms is conducive to the inheritance and export of Chinese culture.

In public opinion, most people believe that there are only differences between Chinese and English idioms. But on the contrary, there are also similarities in different nations’ idioms because of some coincidentally similar experiences and living customs. Therefore both similarities and differences between Chinese and English idioms should be discussed from the perspective of the cross-cultural pragmatics in the sections below. The cross-cultural pragmatics researchers focus on studying cross-cultural characteristics of speech acts to summarize the pragmatic phenomena and laws of people from different cultural backgrounds in communications (Long, 2019b, p.137).
(1) Similarities between Chinese and English Idioms

Although the cultural backgrounds of Chinese and English people are different, there are also some coincidentally similar experiences and living habits of them. So with the trend of language development, there are always some kinds of similar idioms of two countries with analogous meanings and forms. The similarities between the two nations’ idioms have three typical features: mass, ideological and artistic.

First of all, “mass” means that a number of existent idioms are created by the people of the country from their life experience and are passed down from one generation to another. For example, from the process of forging irons, blacksmiths summarized “strike while the iron is hot”, the corresponding translation in Chinese is “打铁趁热”. This idiom reminds people to cherish the time and grab the advantageous opportunities at any time. There are some other examples: farmers realized an obvious natural phenomenon at the time of tillage: “as a man sows, so he shall reap”, the corresponding Chinese meaning is “种瓜得瓜，种豆得豆” (melon seeds will grow into melons, bean seeds will grow into leguminous crops); “nothing venture, nothing have” means people with spirit of adventure could achieve their goals (the idiom is similar to Chinese chengyu “不入虎穴，焉得虎子”—people who dare to enter a tiger’s cave can get a tigerling).

Second, “ideological” refers to the abundant cultural connotation of idioms, that is to say, idioms from different nations may have common warning effect and philosophy. Here are a few examples: (1) “no pains no gains” means people cannot get anything without any working （不劳则无获）; (2) “a good beginning is half the battle” emphasizes the importance of having a good start (it is equivalent to Chinese saying “良好的开端是成功的一半”); (3) “more haste, less speed” expresses that excessive pursuit of rapidity will lead us far away from original purpose （欲速则不达）; (4) “a friend in need is a friend indeed” means real friends will help you when you are in trouble （患难见真情）; (5) “man proposes, god disposes” tells people should do their best to achieve their goals, but sometimes they will not be successful with hard works because they are not fortunate enough （谋事在人，成事在天）; (6) “where there is smoke, there is fire” embodies synchronous appearance of cuase and effect （事出有因）.

Last, “artistic” conveys that idioms have beauty of rhythm and form, in other words, a great quility of idioms are in neat format with elegant rhetoric. For instance, “be on pins and needles” expresses the tension and anxiety of people (the Chinese meaning is “如坐针毡”); “如履薄冰” means that someone is in a dangerous condition which he is afraid of (the homologous English idiom is “to be on thin ice”); “fair and square” refers to describe decent and honest people with no ingratiatory behavior （刚正不阿）; “social butterfly” uses the beautiful image of
butterfly to describe women who are famous and attractive in social occasions （交际花）; “like a piece of cake” is basically equivalent to tasks with no difficulty (the Chinese expression is “小菜一碟”); “walls have ear” uses personification to exhort people to be careful when talking about something serious and confidential （隔墙有耳）. Those ingenious figures of speech such as simile and metaphor, personification, synesthesia and so on make idioms catchy and comprehensible in our daily communication.

The above overlap meanings of idioms show that people of different nations with different cultures also have experience and cognition in common. What should people do is to realize the deep culture connotation through the course of development of diversiform civilizations.

**2) Differences between Chinese and English Idioms**

Most Chinese and English idioms are different in many aspects because of different civilizations. The following chapters will research differences between idioms of two nations in four aspects: diet, animal, numeral and color idioms.

1) Differences in diet idioms.

From ancient times, food has always been an indispensable part of human’s daily life. Diet is the most original and fundamental need of people, so there are plenty of idioms which are related to food, and most of diet idioms from diverse nations are often with apparent differences because of the dissimilar dietary habits.

On the one hand, Chinese people usually take rice and noodles as staple, so Chinese diet idioms are often connected with rice and wheat products. For example, “巧妇难为无米之炊” means that even the best materfamilias cannot cook without any rice, but the corresponding English description is “one cannot make bricks without straw”; “五谷丰登” describes the abundant harvest of the year (“五谷” indicates five particular kinds of rice in China); “长寿面” (noodles of longevity) is a special kind of noodle, Chinese people always eat noodles of longevity when they celebrate their birthdays, the implied meaning of the noodles is living a long life; “不当家不知柴米贵” (its surface meaning is men who keep the whole family know the high prices of daily necessities, while its deep meaning is man will assume responsibility after he is in charge of the whole family). Moreover, in some periods of ancient China, the first element of living is diet, some common sayings are the embodiments of this point: “衣食足而知荣辱，仓廪实而知礼节” (people will know the honour, disgrace and etiquette only if they are affluent in food and clothes), “民以食为天” (people consider food as the foudation of life), “丰衣足食” (the rich and satisfactory life with abundant clothes and ample food).

On the other hand, British people like to have fermented wheat products like breads and cakes with halfcooked meat, milk or wine as their dinners. Therefore,
there are many idioms about those food materials: (1) “a piece of cake” points to an insignificant task with no difficulty (小菜一碟); (2) “bread and butter” means the necessary things of someone’s life or someone’s means of seeking a livelihood; (3) “milk and water” contains boring things without passion and energy; (4) English people always say “not my glass of wine” to describe the food or beverage which are not to their taste; (5) “on the beer” exposes a person who are squiffed because of excessive alcohol ingestion.

Sometimes idioms from different countries with different forms have the same connotation, for example, Chinese idiom “雨后春笋” is equal to the English expression “to spring up like mushrooms”, the bamboo shoots are mainly growing in China, but when describe the flourish of new things, English people always replace “bamboo shoots” of “mushrooms” which are common in Britain.

2) Differences in animal idioms.

It is hard to fully understand the animal idioms of various countries because of different national features and public cognition.

Sometimes an identical animal image represents different significations in Chinese and English idioms. In most Chinese idioms, dogs have terrible images, such as “狗仗人势” (indicates the image of contemptible people who always bully the weak and the small with the dependence of bigwigs), “蝇营狗苟” (describes those who are chasing fame and fortune with no moral and integrity), “丧家之犬” (people who are flustered and dazed because of the loss of his dependence). On the contrary, dogs represent loyalty, kindness and some positive images in English idioms, such as “dog does not eat dog” (people will not fight with family members or intimate friends), “every dog has his day” (everyone will gain his own fortune someday), “a lucky dog” (refers to someone with good fortune), “give a dog a bad name and hang him” (the backbiting and calumny will be terrible and hurt others). There is another typical animal image in Chinese idioms—turtle. Turtle is the symbol of longevity in Chinese civilization, for example, “千年的王八万年的龟” (turtles can live thousands of years), “龟年鹤寿” is the saying to celebrate an elderly person on his or her birthday. But in British culture, turtle only indicates slowness.

And sometimes an animal image in Chinese idioms is replaced with another image of animal in English idioms but in same signification. “Black sheep” is homologues with the person who is harmful for the whole group (害群之马); “goose pimples” means the small lumps on skin because of unexpected fright or chill (the homologous Chinese idiom is “鸡皮疙瘩”); in “as mute as fish”, “fish” is substituted for “winter cicada” who does not chirp because of coldness (噤若寒蝉); “猫哭耗子假慈悲” (cats are acting mendacious sorrow while they
are crying for the deaths of rats) is the Chinese translation of “shed crocodile tears”; “better be the head of a dog than the tail of a lion” means people prefer to be a leader in an ordinary environment rather than become to be common in predominant and complicated environment of competition (the idiom is equivalent to “宁做鸡头，不做凤尾”). In addition, cattles usually work for tillage in China, so people believe they are hard-working, cautious and conscientious, however, in British people’s mind, horse is necessary in many events because of its strength and speediness, so the Chinese expression of “as strong as a horse” is equivalent to “as energetic as a cattle” (“力大如牛”) and “talk horse” means “吹牛” in Chinese.

3) Differences in numeral idioms.

First of all, a substantial part of Chinese idioms with numbers contain good wishes and auspiciousness. The examples are as follows: “一帆风顺” (everything goes well); “两全其美” (give consideration to both sides when doing sth.); “四角俱全” (perfection); “五福临门” (luck, felicity, longevity, wealth and happiness all come to you); “六六六六” (“six” represents favoring development and propitious things, so the meaning is similar to “一帆风顺”); “七窍玲珑” (clever and smart); “八方支持” (one is supported by every side); “九天揽月” (one is ambitious); “十全十美” (perfection, with no defects). But many English numeral idioms do not have such specific connotations, they are just considering something as it stands, such as “first and foremost” (the greatest importance), “nine to five” (the standardized working time of most enterprises), “on all fours” (the gesture of putting the four limbs on the floor or totally the same).

Furthermore, most Chinese numeral idioms have regular forms with four or six words, the author will cite some examples here: “三三两两” (a small group of people); “千千万万” (a large quantity of something); “九流三教” (people of all trades and professions); “百闻不如一见” (seeing is more reliable than hearing many times); “万变不离其宗” (remain essentially the same despite all apparent changes). In contrast, English numeral idioms are not in fixed and orderly structure. The examples are as follows: “four-letter-word” means vulgar words, “talk nineteen to the dozen” implies that someone talks with no stops, “lesser of the two evils” tells people to choose the lesser harm when confront the dilemma, “two is company, three is a crowd” expresses that small group with two people is more appropriate than three, “behind the eight ball” means someone is in dangerous situation, “a nine days’ wonder” tells us the beautiful things are usually short-lived.

Both Chinese and English idioms of number have their own characteristics, people can summarize the primary rules of differences by researching them carefully.

4) Differences in color idioms.

People often firstly use the color to describe something’s first feature because
color is one of the most direct mental response of people’s mind. Different colors have dissimilar connotations, so researching color’s significance helps people know better about the meanings of color-related idioms.

Red has always been the representation of happiness, health and auspiciousness in Chinese idioms. The examples are as follows: (1) in “红白喜事” (the weddings and the funerals of longevous people are both happy events), red represents the happy wedding; (2) “红光满面” refers to people who are in good health; (3) to celebrate the Spring Festival, there is a traditional custom—“大红灯笼高高挂” (to hang red lanterns, the idiom describes festive and active atmosphere in the Spring Festival). But in British culture, red sometimes means indignation, violence and danger, like “see the red light” (knowing the coming of danger), “see red” (extremely angry), “red in tooth and claw” (corresponds with law of the jungle).

In Chinese culture, black specifically symbolizes malfeasance and breaking the law. For example, “黑手党” (Mafia—underhand criminal organization), “黑社会” (is similar to “黑手党”), “黑店” (inns or stores with swindle and unscrupulous trade). Nevertheless in English idioms, black is used to exposit ominousness, sadness and oppression. “Black Friday” (Jesus was executed on the Friday) means the most unlucky day. “Black sheep” is the person who harms group interests. “A black letter day” means an ominous day with no joy. Black also represents something good, “in the black” means making profits in business.

The last involved color is white. White in English idioms is the expression of purity, gentleness and elegance, for example, “a white lie” means telling a lie for a kind reason, “white war” (war with no blood) usually indicates economic competition, “white market” refers to legitimate market, “white hat” is equivalent to good person (in American Westerns, good people always wear white hat while bad guys always wear black hats). Brides often wear white wedding dresses at their ceremonies. However, white conveys to death, pennilessness and bad things in Chinese people’s minds. “白事” is funeral, “白色恐慌” describes some periods of dictatorship with fear and terror. White sometimes is also approximate to inexperience and ignorance—“白面书生” refers to those archaian intellectuals who are young and with scant experience; “白手起家” talks about successful businessmen who start the business with self-dependence and no financial support but finally become successful.

4. Cultural Differences Reflected by Chinese and English Idioms

In short, language is formed during the course of human evolution, and idiom is an extraordinary element of linguistic system in the process of language development, which means idiom reflects the unique fascination of language.
Although there are numerous Chinese and English idioms with similar structures and meanings, most Chinese idioms are inconsistent with English idioms due to different geographical features and living circumstances, cultural origins, religious beliefs, traditions and customs.

(1) Different Geographical Features and Living Circumstances

“Different people have established their specific cultural systems in their living circumstances” (Yuan, 2014, p.447). In Ping and Zhang’s opinion, culture is not depended on natural and geographical environment but exists with it, every kind of culture has its own characteristic owing to variant areas, climates and environments (2000).

As for the United Kingdom, it is an island country which is encircled by the North Sea, the English Channel, the Celtic Sea, the Irish Sea and the Atlantic Ocean. Britain was the past overlord of the sea with its exceptionally geographical environment, the sea is an important support of British people’s life, so people can find numerous idioms relate to sea or water or life of seafaring. The examples are as follows: (1) “a drop in the ocean” is the exiguity of an enormous thing (a small millet in the vast sea—沧海一粟); (2) “all at sea” means that someone is in a confused condition and does not know what to do; (3) “whistle for it” has an allusion—sailors will whistle to impetrate the coming of wind when they encounter conditions of no wind in the sea (the equivalent Chinese idiom is “痴心妄想”—one always thinks about something that will never come true); (4) “a sea change” means a total and exhaustive change; (5) “between the devil and sea” describes a rough condition of being stuck in a dilemma (进退维谷). Furthermore, with the development of navigation, fishery had emerged, fish became an important food in British people’s life, so in English idioms, there are some fish-related idioms. Here are the examples: “a fishy stare” describes glassy-eyed image, “April fish” is the man who is joked on April Fool’s Day, “the great fish eat up the small” is equivalent to “survival of the fittest”. In addition, the climate of Britain is the temperate marine climate whose typical weather phenomenon is raining a lot. Rain-related idioms are common in English idiomatic expressions: “small rain lays great dust” means that even small things have great use; “when it rains, it pours” means that disasters always appear simultaneously (the Chinese translation is “祸不单行”); “it comes fair weather after rains” tells people there will always be success after difficulties and hardships if they try hard to strive for the goal.

On the contrary, China is located on Asian continent with one side coastal. Land means a lot to Chinese people: “顶天立地” describes someone with indomitable spirit; “根生土长” means living in here from generation to generation; “皇天后土” symbolizes the universe who is in charge; “风土人情” is the summation of special local tradition, etiquette and custom; In English idiom
“spend money like water”, “water” is substituted for “soil”, so it is translated as “挥金如土” in Chinese. What is more, sea represents remoteness and mystery to Chinese people, for example, “海水不可斗量” preaches people not to measure someone’s character and future with his appearance and present status; “天涯海角” (the edge of the sky and the end of the sea) describes the extraordinarily remote place. Moreover, agriculture is the basic industry of ancient China because of the vast land of the country. During the long history of agriculture, Chinese people created a lot farming experience-related idioms which include experiences of sowing, irrigating, harvesting and something admonitory, such as “冬雪年丰，春雪无用” (snow in winter is helpful to emblements, snow in spring is useless), “节令不等人” (there are only few days left for sowing in a year), “十年树木，百年树人” (describes the difficulty of rearing talents), “四体不勤，五谷不分” (some ancient scholars did not do farm works so they were lack of the knowledge of agriculture), “春不种秋不收” (there is no harvest in autumn if you did not sow in spring) and so on. All of those idioms express the wisdom of farmers and manifest the most essential and typical experience of Chinese agricultural civilization.

**2) Different Religious Beliefs**

Religious belief, as a common feature of culture, points out the respect and fear of nature from people, and also can influence the believers’ life style, standard of behavior and moral to some extent. So different nations’ religious beliefs may have affected the way of some idioms emerging.

First, the main religion in China is Taoism and Buddhism. As the religion which originated from foreign country, Buddhism had developed very well in China with the fusion of some Chinese elements. Taoism is the original religion of China whose basic tenet is seeking for immortal through some exceptional methods. Therefore many Chinese idioms are relating to the heaven, the Buddha, temples, monks and something about religious stories: (1) “不二法门” (the only way to do something, from Buddhism); (2) “平时不烧香，临时抱佛脚” means someone is hurry-scurry when things coming because of no ferial preparation; “跑得了和尚跑不了庙” (the monks cannot run away with the temple); (4) “放下屠刀，立地成佛” tells people even you are doing something evil, when you stop it you can also be a good person; (5) “八仙过海，各显神通” (“八仙” is eight immortals in Taoist legend, the proverb means that every person has his own method to do something, from Taoism); (6) “谋事在人，成事在天” (man may plan, but heaven executes).

Britain is different from China, Christianity is widespread in this country. Most British people believe in God and they regard Jesus as the Saviour. Christians believe everything of the world is created by god and developed by god’s will. Plenty of English idioms are affected by the faith: when people are in great astonishment they say “oh my god”; “god is above all” expresses the staunch belief
to God; “the seventh son of a seventh son” indicates the very important offspring; “truth is the daughter of God” indicates the importance of the truth; “old Adam” expresses the inherent evil of people; 13 represents evil and misfortune to British people (Judas, the betrayer of Jesus, is the thirteenth disciple of Jesus).

(3) Different Cultural Origins

First, umpteen major historical events may have largely influenced the development process of history, people’s life also was impacted by those events. The Chinese and English idioms which relate to history are different because of different historical backgrounds. In Chinese idioms, people often have positive or negative comments of some certain people, here are some examples: “卧薪尝胆” (from the story of the king of Yue—Goujian) tells people to work hard and never give up, “暗度陈仓” (from the story of Liu Bang) describes doing something surreptitiously to confuse the enemy, “四面楚歌” (from the story of Xiang Yu) describes the desperate condition of being besieged and with no help. However, many English idioms originated from historical celebrities or politicians: “meet one’s Waterloo” (Napoleon was defeated in Battle of Waterloo) means someone is in big failure after a series of success; “appeal to Caesar” (the Rome occupied Britain for more than four hundred years, Julius Caesar meant the sovereign to temporal people) is to resort to the supreme organ of state power.

What is more, because of the religious belief of the Christianity, a large number of English idioms relate to allusions from the Bible. The examples are as follows: (1) “as proud as Lucifer” is used to describe someone’s personality with arrogance; (2) “forbidden fruit” (the fruit by tree of knowledge of good and evil) indicates things that are not allowed to do; (3) “stumbling block” (from The Old Testament, Isaiah) means the hindrance of going forward; (4) “hide one’s light under the bushel” is to hide one’s talent to confuse the opponent. There are also many English idioms involve Greek mythologies: “the heel of Achilles” means the only shortage of a person; “Promethean fire” is the fire of life; “Pile Pelion on Ossa” means being more difficult than before; “gain laurels” signifes victory or success; “Damon and Pythias” means real friends until death. However, Chinese people were influenced deeply by Confucian classics and The Book of Songs, so a great number of Chinese idioms came from those works. Here are some examples: (1) “己所不欲，勿施于人” (what you do not like and do not want cannot be given to others, originated from The Analects); (2) “生于忧患死于安乐” (sorrow and misery make people work hard, degeneracy and failure come from coziness and comfort, from The Mencius); (3) “天行有常，不为尧存，不为桀亡” (from The Xunzi) insists that everything of the world has its own rule of development and will not change because of one certain person; (4) “投桃报李” (from the Book of Songs) means getting along with each other friendly; (5) “高山仰止” (from The Book of Songs) describes the high admiration to someone.
Furthermore, there are also some idioms which originated from kinds of fables. English idioms are always from the Aesop’s Fables, such as “a fly on the wheel” means that someone loses his normality due to excessive satisfaction, “sour grape” represents self-consolation, “an ass in lion’s skin” indicates those cowards with overstatement. As for Chinese idioms, they are always from folk fables: “鹬蚌相争，渔翁得利” (the fisherman benefits from the fight between snipe and clam) indicates the truth of being cautious to real enemy in intricate duel, “愚公移山” (Yugong wanted to move the mountain in front of his house) means doing something with patience and perseverance and it has the same moral with “铁杵磨成针”, “画蛇添足” represents superfluous things, “井底之蛙” describes shortsighted and imprudent people, “此地无银三百两” tells people a clumsy lie may reveal the truth.

(4) Different Traditions and Customs

Customs and traditions, as the significant features of national culture, are long-term formative reflection and manifestation of cultural awareness and involve every field of social life (Wang, 2009). Customs may be influenced by politics, economy, religion and literature of a nation and influence those factors in reverse. So different traditions and customs of China and Britain bring differences of idioms of two nations.

Talking about the festival, the most important and traditional festival in western countries is Christmas while in China is the Spring Festival. There are some Christmas-related idioms: “Christmas comes but once a year” reminds people to go home and accompany their parents; “white Christmas” means the snowy Christmas day; “meet me under the mistletoe” (garlands made by mistletoe are important decorations of Christmas trees, in British custom, young men have rights to kiss girls with no refusal under the mistletoe, and then pluck a berry from the bush). Most of Chinese idioms about the Spring Festival are blessing words like “恭喜发财” (wish you prosperous), “万事如意” (wish you propitious), “财源广进” (with adequate and plentiful money), “心想事成” (your every wish will finally come true) and so on.

Eating habits also influenced a lot to the formation and development of idioms. Chinese food is famous for its exquisiteness, well-cooked, beautiful arrangement and deliciousness. There are many idioms expressing those merits: “山珍海味”, “美味佳肴”, “琼浆玉液” and so on. As an agricultural society, ancient Chinese created some idioms relate to farming and grain, for example, “鱼米之乡” (an area with adequate rice and fish), “天上掉馅饼” means that someone achieves the aim with no effort, “百样米养百样人” (different kinds of rice raise different people). Chinese people also like to generalize the experience of eating: “冬吃萝卜夏吃姜” (eat radish in winter and ginger in summer), “千滚豆腐万滚鱼” (
both tofu and fish will be delicious if they are cooked sufficiently), “春菜，夏瓜，秋萝卜” (vegetable in winter, melon in summer and radish in autumn are delicious and perfect for eating), “莲子心中苦，梨儿腹内酸” (do not eat the central part of lotus seed and pear). As for Britain, people prefer to eat bread, pasta or pie as staple food with salad, half-cooked meat, some milk or wine. By the way, potato is an important kind of food material for British people. The examples are as follows: “hope is poor man’s bread” means that poor man will survive if he has hope in his mind; “bread and butter” means simple diet (the idiom’s derivative meaning is the way of making a living); “pie in the sky” refers to those unpractical things and slim possibilities; “a landing flowing with milk and honey” describes prosperous and vibrant place; “cry over spilt milk” describes remorse but unchangeable result; “salad days” expresses the period of immaturity; “a big potato” refers to someone important while “a small potato” means inappreciable person; “hot potato” means thorny problems; “red meat” generally refers to beef, mutton, pork and so on.

In some other small points, there are also some differences between Chinese and English idioms. Ancient Chinese people used lunar calendar to keep time while British people uses the Gregorian calendar, therefore many Chinese idioms relate to the Twenty-Four Solar System like “清明时节雨纷纷” (it always rains around the Tomb-sweeping Day), “谷雨前后，种瓜点豆” (days around the Grain Rain are the best opportunities for sowing seeds). In addition, British people prefer to live in separate houses with fences to keep personal privacy, “an English man’s home is his castle” and “good fences make good neighbors” express this point. But some Chinese people like to live close and some big families prefer to live in a big house with relatives and keep the whole family secret, there are some examples: “远亲不如近邻” expresses the importance of close neighbors, “家丑不可外扬” (keep the family secret). Furthermore, British people tend to use a great deal of normal names to represent certain meanings: Jack and Jill are common names in Britain, so the idiom “Jack and Jill” is similar to Chinese “男男女女”, “Darby and Joan”(originated from English epidemic ballad) describes old and happy couples, “John Bull” is the nick name of English people, “Peter Pan” refers to boys who would never grow up physically or mentally, “Uncle Sam” is the nick name of American people. But in Chinese culture, there is only few idioms about names, such as “张三李四” (refers to every ordinary people) and “阿Q精神” (spirit of self-delusion).

5. Conclusion

Idiom, as the core of language, reflects a nation’s attitude of geography, history, social system and so on. It has been impacted profoundly by a nation’s culture including geographical features and living circumstances, religious beliefs, cultural origins and traditions and customs. Fully understanding of those cultural differences
helps people use idioms from different nations correctly and appropriately to follow the trend of development of globalization and cross-cultural communication. The chapter three emphatically introduces the Chinese and English idioms’ similarities and differences which involve diet, animal, number and color-related idioms to make clear cognition of these two countries’ idioms. By comparing cultural differences from four aspects in chapter four, people can find Chinese and English people’s different perspectives and methods of observing and apperceiving the world. Chinese and English idioms’ meanings are always not the combination of every words’ meaning, they have their own culture connotation. What students can do is to thoroughly comprehend cultural differences and language environment where the idioms created and developed. And with the increase of idiom quantities, language learners need to further research the modern civilization of different nations to make idiom study more comprehensively and deeply.

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