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Cross-Cultural Differences and Communication Research of International Human Rights Discourse

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Abstract: Human rights are a universal norm, but for a long time, there have been cross-cultural conflicts and different interpretations in the world's communication. The two sides of universalism and cultural relativism are in conflict at the core of international human rights discourse, and thus various countries have held different views on the contents, emphasis and implementation of human rights. With the deepening of globalisation and an increase in cross-border flows of information, human rights are no longer just legal norms in international documents; rather, they have become powerful symbols of public opinion that spread across the globe through various channels of communication. Every society interprets human rights according to its own historical memory, cultural ethos, economic foundation and institutional structure, so semantic deviation and value misalignment will inevitably occur in cross-border dissemination. Culturally, this paper will first introduce some general differences in the cross-cultural discourse of international human rights, then analyse the actual obstacles to their spread around the world, and finally put forward effective communication strategies for inclusive dialogue. Research shows that the West has focused on individual civil and political rights according to liberalism, while most countries in the Global South give more weight to collective rights, development rights and all-encompassing social justice influenced by their own history and culture. Other reasons for the lack of cross-cultural communication on human rights are differences in cultural context, application of political tools and discursive power. To address the problem of communication bottlenecks, the world's human rights stories should be moved away from a "confrontation" model and, out of respect for cultural differences, interactive dialogue platforms based on the common value of human dignity should be created. Some practical suggestions are put forward in this paper to promote fair and inclusive global human rights governance, reduce unnecessary ideological conflicts, and provide a basis for communication in the coordinated development of human rights initiatives around the world.

Keywords: Human rights discourse; Cross-cultural difference; Global communication; Cultural relativism; Universal human rights

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1. Introduction

After the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) in 1948, the ideal of human rights has been spread around the world and is now an indispensable part of international rules. Nevertheless, the spread of human rights norms globally has not been uniformly welcomed and implemented by different cultures. The idea of universal human rights is in conflict with various local cultural traditions and thus shows considerable differences in rhetorical representation, value orientation and implementation paths.

In contemporary international relations, the concept of human rights is no longer purely normative but has become a focus of cultural and political competition [1]. Western developed countries and developing countries in the Global South have different priorities, implementation logics and evaluation standards for human rights. These are not only abstract problems of universalism and cultural relativism but also actual issues in cross-cultural communication and international dialogue. Most of the previous studies have focused on the theoretical discussion of human rights norms and have not examined the communication mechanisms and practical problems of cross-cultural human rights discourse. Therefore, we need to organise the cross-cultural differences in the discourse of human rights systematically, analyze the communication barriers, and explore inclusive dissemination channels to promote friendly global dialogue on human rights.

2. Core cross-cultural differences in international human rights discourse

The cross-cultural differences in international human rights discourse can be traced back to two basic values and logical systems that have developed differently in terms of history, culture and society [2]. These paradigms are not entirely exclusive in absolute terms, and they do not divide all countries into two fixed groups; many countries have hybrid views and continuously adjust their human rights positions in light of changes in domestic society and international interaction. However, general and recognizable trends can also be observed in the main discourse system to show how human rights demands are organised, justified and presented to the world.

The basis of Western human rights discourse is liberal individualism and Christian culture. Over the centuries, social contract theory, the Enlightenment and legal reforms have gradually made people the fundamental subjects of morality and law. At the core is individual freedom and autonomy; therefore, it prioritises civil and political rights, such as freedom of speech, freedom of religion and political participation, and believes that these rights are inherent and universal. Therefore, the line of reasoning is that human rights come first; the government should protect the rights people already have, and its power must be limited to prevent interference with freedom. The discourse system promotes the universality of a single human rights norm, points out that the state has a duty to protect the political rights of individuals, and generally applies uniform institutional norms to assess the human rights situation in all countries. Western discourse in cross-cultural communication often sets up its own system of values as the norm for everyone and thus forms a dominant discourse system in international public opinion. This tendency is not only the result of an abstract philosophical choice; it has also been carried forward by long-established media institutions, international advocacy networks and diplomatic language that regularly present individual civil and political freedoms as the main index of human rights performance.

On the other hand, the discourse on human rights in most non-Western countries, especially those in the Global South, has been influenced by collectivist culture and developmental pragmatism [3]. Many of these countries were once under colonial rule, and together they have experienced dispossession, exploitation,

disruption of social order and chronic poverty. Given the above historical circumstances, the continuity of the community and the will to live in freedom are urgent matters of human rights. These countries stress the interdependence of individual and collective rights, giving more weight to economic, social and cultural rights and development rights. They believe that the protection of human rights should consider the historical context, culture and economy of a country, and do not accept the absolute universality of the Western human rights system. The first goals of human rights protection for developing countries are to reduce poverty, improve living standards for all, and promote national development. Without basic food security, affordable healthcare, clean drinking water and education, formal political rights will be unable to provide real benefits to the people. This speech advocates for contextualised and localised implementation of human rights and opposes the imposition of Western norms and the politicalisation of human rights issues. It does not reject the idea of universal human rights in principle, but requires that the sequence, allocation of resources and institutional path to achieve these ideals consider local circumstances.

Moreover, the two discourses have different logics for judging human rights. Western discourse is generally in opposition to the other views, lacks many other attributes, and only considers whether there are formal legal guarantees and punishments for rights violations. It often takes a snapshot of the human rights situation in a particular year and gives less weight to historical starting points or available fiscal and administrative resources. Non-Western discourse is in the same vein; that is, it assesses the current state of human rights development and progress in specific countries. Therefore, the realisation of human rights is a slow and prolonged process. Over the past few decades, there have been many other changes in society, such as lower poverty rates, more school enrollment, longer lifespans, expanded public health services and so on. The two are based on different values, and thus cannot be easily communicated. Both sides claim to protect the rights of the people, but use different sets of evidence and standards to assess this, so they cannot be directly compared.

In addition to different weights and assessments of rights, people's perceptions of the government's responsibilities also differ [4]. Liberal-oriented discourse generally believes that the state should be a weak one that does not restrict people's freedom of choice. Developmental collectivist discourse generally assumes that the state should play an active and leading role; therefore, it is expected that the government will allocate public funds, coordinate various sectors of society and guide economic reform to provide a favorable environment for people's lives. Different interpretations of the functions of the state in official statements, news reports and foreign-ministerial meetings have widened the interpretive gap in cross-border communication.

3. Cross-cultural communication dilemmas of human rights discourse

Due to inherent cross-cultural differences in the concept of human rights, many communication problems have arisen in their dissemination around the world, and global consensus has not been reached. These problems are not only due to cultural ignorance; they are also structurally reproduced by an unequal world communication order, power politics and instrumentalisation of the language of human rights. Even the well-meaning people who want to promote the cause of human rights may be led astray by these traps because of unexamined cultural schemas and asymmetrical discourse power.

First, cultural cognition barriers cause misinterpretation of discourse. The two sets of human rights logics based on individualism and collectivism have different values, so there is a cognitive asymmetry

in cross-cultural communication. Cognitive schemas that have formed in the process of extended cultural assimilation filter in-group knowledge; thus, when faced with unfamiliar stories of human rights, people tend to interpret them according to their previous beliefs and fail to learn about the reasons for foreign advocacy. Many Western countries believe that the emphasis on collective and developmental rights in non-Western countries does not respect individual human rights, and they are suspicious that "collective priority" is merely a way to delay civil and political reform. Meanwhile, non-Western countries criticize Western discourse for being divorced from practical development reality and ignoring the survival and development rights of vulnerable groups in developing regions. They may think that the call for political freedom is far removed from the everyday life of the people, such as hunger and sickness. There will be no communication among them. Each side may only hear a simplified version of the other's reasons, strengthen its own stereotypes, and be more divided than before after the talk.

Second, Western discursive hegemony pushes all other human rights views to the periphery. Given the long-standing advantages of traditional mass media and high public prestige around the world, Western countries promote an individualised human rights system internationally. The local implementation of human rights in non-Western communities is often considered irregular or insufficient, so it is not frequently mentioned in cross-cultural human rights discussions. The main international news organisations and well-known non-governmental organisations based in Western cities, along with English-language policy papers, have significantly set the agenda for global human rights discussions. Language differences are also a problem. The views presented by participants from the Global South are mostly in their native languages and have received little translation or dissemination in mainstream global media. Therefore, the discourse on human rights around the world has become more uniform and less varied. Interpretive frameworks from non-Western countries are often regarded as peripheral views or defensive expressions and are not recognised as legitimate ideas for the world of human rights. Under such hegemonic conditions, cross-cultural exchange can no longer be about mutual communication; rather, it will be one-way dissemination of information.

Third, politicised human rights language is causing more conflict in international communication. Themes of human rights have long been used in geopolitical competition. Some countries have included human rights declarations in their foreign policy talks, failed to meet the norm of equal cross-cultural consultation, and applied a double standard to assess the human rights situations of other countries. It is quite typical that some parties will publicly criticize the human rights violations committed by their geopolitical rivals but ignore similar problems at home or among their diplomatic allies. Exploitation is not in line with the goals of protecting human rights and does not promote cross-cultural interaction. When human rights talks become about politics, they lose their original purpose. Participants aim to gain diplomatic advantages but do not learn about the background in the partner countries. All references to human rights are given the interpretation of strategic mistrust. Good faith efforts to promote the improvement of human rights may be mistaken for propaganda, and similarly, well-intentioned foreign criticism may be regarded as improper interference in the country's internal affairs. Digital social platforms have also spread this conflict; short, emotional stories of human rights have gone viral around the world, but in-depth, context-aware analysis has not received much attention.

The fourth reason is also relatively unknown; the constraints of cross-linguistic translation cannot be ignored. Concepts of human rights have cultural connotations and are difficult to be fully expressed in another language. Literal, word-for-word translation may lose the cultural connotations of the original work

and therefore fail to convey its full meaning. Although formal legal translation can provide the definitions set out in the international instruments, it is not feasible to transmit the whole cultural context, collective historical trauma and societal demands for human rights terminology in the original cultural environment. Even for the parties in good faith, this translation friction may still reduce the efficiency of cross-cultural communication of information.

4. Optimization strategies for cross-cultural communication of human rights discourse

To reduce the problems of cross-cultural communication and promote the inclusive progress of the global human rights discourse, we need to move away from the strict dichotomy of universalism and cultural relativism and build a pluralistic and interactive communication system [5]. At the same time, it does not violate the universal value of human dignity by promoting cultural relativism that is harmful to this end. Instead, it puts forward a moderate communication mode: the essential universal values should be recognised, and the specific ways in which to implement them, their order of priority and institutional arrangements, need to be reasonably adjusted according to local conditions. To improve the quality of communication, one needs to address both cognitive errors and fundamental problems in power structure through conceptual reconstruction, institutional reform, etc.

First, in line with the "overlapping consensus" for human dignity, we will conduct communication. All cultures know that the root of human dignity is the basic level for all people around the world. Different civilizations, religions and schools of thought have developed their own expressions for the inalienable dignity of the human person, though they may use different words and logical systems. Cross-cultural communication should avoid the clash of norms, take the protection of human dignity as its basic principle, seek common ground and leave differences in specific expressions and paths for practice. Dialogue can start with this common foundation and not immediately argue about which category of rights should be prioritised. Communicators should be aware of the basic and necessary demands for human dignity in context, and therefore, differences in sequence and institution should not result in a complete denial of each other's rights to human dignity.

Second, respect cultural differences and promote localised expression of human rights. Universality of human rights does not mean uniform institutionalisation. Good human rights communication should be rooted in local culture, integrate universal norms of human rights with Chinese historical inheritance and development conditions, and support all kinds of models for exercising human rights. Localisation is not relative exemption; it refers to expressing the universal idea of human rights in a way that is culturally acceptable and practical for the people at home. Local cultural figures, community leaders, scholars and civil society organizations need to be empowered to speak out about human rights in the language of their own communities, rather than simply repeating foreign frameworks. The international community should move away from discourse hegemony and recognise the rationality of developmental and collective human rights concepts in developing countries. The world should be able to learn more about the reality of human rights in developing countries from rich stories and not just lists of violations. Diversify the channels for publication and translation, promote cross-cultural exchange of scholars, and spread these local stories around the world.

Thirdly, build a good and open cross-cultural communication system. We need to eliminate the double standard in the dissemination of human rights information, prevent the politicization of human rights

issues, and build an all-weather platform for public participation. The platform should have state delegates, independent scholars, grassroots civil society actors, and voices from marginalized groups, and must not be controlled by the powerful government or large international organisations. Formal rules of discourse should encourage listening before refuting, require evidence-based reasoning, and avoid speaking for geopolitical reasons. Enhance cultural and academic exchanges among all areas to spread various ideas on human rights and promote mutual understanding and respect for different cultural systems. Joint research projects, cross-border case study workshops and long-term scholar exchange programs will gradually accumulate common interpretation materials. In the era of digital communication, we need to address the problem of algorithmic polarisation and echo chambers by promoting a balanced flow of multilingual human rights information and reducing one-sided framing and stereotyping.

Fourth, strengthen the cross-cultural communication literacy of human rights practitioners. Diplomats, NGO workers, journalists and human rights researchers need to be trained in cross-cultural communication. The contents of the training should cover schemas of cultural values, implicit cognitive biases, translation risks, media framing strategies and the identification of political instrumentalisation. Better literacy can help people avoid misunderstandings, select language that fits the culture, separate facts from opinions, and not cause hurt feelings unintentionally. Although better communication literacy cannot prevent all disagreements, it can reduce the problems of poor framing and cultural insensitivity.

5. Conclusion

Cross-cultural differences are an inevitable feature of the discourse on human rights around the world, and at the base of the opposition between Western individual-oriented and non-Western collective-development-oriented discourses lies the entire pattern of global human rights talks. Cultural cognitive asymmetry, Western discourse hegemony and political instrumentalisation have all caused serious problems in cross-cultural communication and hindered the good development of global human rights governance. The above obstacles are all kinds of barriers; thus, their solutions need to be coordinated at the level of concepts, institutions and communication, rather than relying solely on adjusting rhetoric.

In light of cultural diversity, the future communication of international human rights discourse should move away from the dichotomy of confrontation, be centered on the consensus of human dignity, respect localized human rights practices rooted in different cultures, and build an equal, inclusive and interactive global communication system. The new form of communication does not require all countries to have the same human rights goals or institutions. All participants need to give up the idea that their own cultural model is the only universal standard, reject double standards, and stop using the language of human rights as a tool for geopolitical competition. Only by integrating universal norms with cultural particularities can the international community avoid discourse misunderstandings, resolve conflicts and promote the all-round development of the cause of human rights.

Human rights talks will never reach full agreement among all countries. With improved cross-cultural communication, we can reduce harmful misunderstandings and increase the extent of common ground for human dignity; thus, we can create a more cooperative environment to tackle the joint problems of extreme poverty, public health crises, displacement and environmental damage. The value of cross-cultural human rights communication is not to eliminate all differences, but to enable all societies to advance the cause of human rights together despite having different priorities and approaches.

Disclosure statement

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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