

The Stereotype and the Nationality

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Preface

Mr. Julio Camba, a Spanish writer and journalist, writes in his humorous book about six men drinking in a café. The six men are English, French, Spanish, German, Russian, and Chinese. There are six glasses of beer in front of them. In the same café, there are also six mosquitoes. Since it is very hot, everyone and every mosquito are thirsty. Soon, one mosquito falls into the glass of beer of the English man. Another mosquito falls into the French man's. And another. . . . One by one, six mosquitoes fall into the beers of the six men.

The reactions of the men differ. When the English man is about to drink his beer, he sees a mosquito. So surprised, he shouts, "a mosquito!" and he calls a waiter to change his beer to a new one. The French man also sees a mosquito in his beer, swimming in it. So furious, he shouts and curses. When the Spanish man sees a mosquito in his beer, he makes a disgusting, scornful gesture, and then just leaves the café. The German removes the mosquito from the glass and drinks his beer. The Russian also drinks his beer, but with the mosquito. The Chinese first picks the mosquito out of his glass, contemplates the mosquito for a while, thinking "poor mosquito," then eats the mosquito and drinks the beer.

We have ethnic stereotypes. Believe it or not, we cannot get rid of them easily. What makes this story funny is that some gentlemen in the above story betray those stereotypes. This paper deals with ethnic stereotypes and how the stereotypes are built. In the conclusion, we will see whether the stereotypes find room in the modern society, where people mingle world-wide.

I

First is the English man. In the story, he shouts and demands of the waiter to change his beer to a new one. Then, he drinks his beer. Considering hygienic British people and pub culture in Britain, his attitude will be quite understandable. In the hot afternoon, naturally, he wants a cold glass of beer, a clean one, to quench his thirst. How he behaves in the story does not betray us in terms of the stereotype.

Second is the French. He too shouts like the English man. Further, he yells and curses his bad luck. A mosquito in his beer apparently hurts his pride as a customer, accelerating his anger. The text does not say whether he drinks a new beer or not, yet seeing his anger, we assume that the waiter in the café will probably bring another one to soothe him. His attitude shows a gourmet character, which is the stereotypical preference of the French people. Yet, his attitude betrays a bit of our notion of the norm. He is rather childish to get angry for such a little thing, we may think.

Then there is the Spanish gentleman. He apparently does not want to make a scene, thus, he just leaves the café without saying anything. His scornful gesture, however, indicates his pride that he is not a small man to make fuss for such trivial things. "Orgullosamente," which in Spanish means boastfully, is exactly the way he leaves the café. Is it natural for Spanish people to behave like this? His attitude sounds a bit snobbish in terms of stereotype of Spaniards. It contradicts our image of macho men from the bullfighting country.

Next is the German. He takes away the mosquito and drinks his beer. What he does is maybe the most common thing to do when something like that happens. Probably the average person would do the same. Thus, in a way, we could say that the German's thinking is the most reasonable and practical. Nobody is hurt. Reason and factuality are the stereotypes we may have for the German. From that point, the German gentleman in the above story does not betray our image.

The last two are the Russian and the Chinese. They are quite different from the other four gentlemen. They each drink their beers with the mosquitoes. They do not worry about the little mosquito. The Russian drinks his beer with the mosquito as if nothing matters. The Chinese even eats it after sympathizing for the poor insect falling into the beer and drowning to death. Does it come from the Buddhist teaching to not kill anything, even a little insect? Probably this Chinese attitude most betrays our stereotype of Chinese people. It is very funny and surprising to eat a mosquito.

II

How is a stereotype built? We will see the content of the ethnic stereotypes of the above six nationalities one by one, because national characteristics are closely related with forming stereotypes. The ethnic stereotype has formed itself through history. It helps to encourage people to hold their identity if it is used wisely. Once Japanese tourists in foreign countries were typified by wearing glasses and hanging cameras from their shoulders. In the process of developing into an economically powerful country, though sometimes sarcastically used in comic books, they are all in all a quite positive description for Japanese people. The hard working image of Japanese people and their curiosity to see the world are symbolized in the above stereotype. The images gradually create a certain

stereotype. The stereotype, however, has changed with time.

1) English people

We identify English people as ladies and gentlemen. Our ideas for English people are conservative and traditional. They love homes, as the cliché goes: "An Englishman's home is his castle." They love nature, too, thus the National Trust appreciates gardens dearly. Their characteristics such as chivalry and valor in the past are repeatedly told in their literary works. Their fashion, sports, or manners have led the world for a long time as well.

Bleak weather in winter contributes to making them conservative. If using the same cliché in the previous paragraph, "An Englishman's home is his castle," it also gives us an image of English people being protective. They are not always open to everybody, especially, to someone they do not know, they are careful. Since the weather is such, English people appreciate sunshine in early summer. They enjoy sun bathing in nearby parks or in their backyards. Wearing swimming suits, they lie down on a bath towel spread on the grass.

Their charitable spirit is also known to the world. They started Oxfam, Oxford Committee for Famine Relief, one of the leading charity shops, which you can see all through England. They raise money for people in poor countries. The shop attendants are volunteers. Most of them are senior citizens over seventy years old. They work there a few hours a day for free. They assort things, affix price tags, attend to customers, as well as attending to those people who bring their things for charity. By working there, they feel they can be of help for those who need it. Those old people look lively because their availability to society gives them confidence, and their existence surely makes them a part of the community.

English people are innovative, too. Mini skirts and the Beatles started in their culture. Both were phenomena of the 60's. Citizens of traditional countries are not satisfied with the status quo. When Little Twiggy appeared in fashion magazines, the world was shocked. We were charmed by her slender body. Instead of glamorous women, Twiggy's boyishness won popularity. Her fashion did not take long before it reached the corners of the world. The Beatles were more than that in terms of popularity. With the sound of electric guitars, their music charmed young people all over the world. The old traditional generation and the youth culture mixed and coexisted for a while.

2) French people

We identify French people with sophistication, and France as a country of adults. They are fashionable, gourmets, witty and enjoy the occasional satire. As far as the French language is concerned, French people are said to be stubborn. It is well known that they do not want to use a language other than their mother tongue, French. Even in big cities or at public places where many English speaking foreign tourists are, if asked information, they are reluctant to use English. Their great pride in their language sometimes makes

French people seem to be stubborn.

The delicacy in good food, wine, chanson, witty little talks—all the characteristics of the French people enhance the romantic image. Along with a highbrow image, they strictly maintain a style of sophistication. Breaking established conventions or behaving far from common sense disturbs French people. Thus, when their dignity is hurt as in a case such as the mosquito in their beer, they cannot but reject bitterly as the story goes above. In their minds, a mosquito in the beer is unimaginable. It is likely that to maintain their sophistication, or the highbrow image, French people are overly protective.

3) Spanish people

The image of Spanish people is not so strong as that of English or French people in terms of stereotype. However, due to their Latin ancestry, they seem to be easygoing people. They know how to enjoy life. Good wine, flamenco, bullfighting, . . . they are what Spanish people love. In order to lead a carefree life, those pastimes are indispensable and therefore, they are always at hand. As the phrase says, “Come mucho, bebe mucho, besa mucho,”¹ Spanish people try hard to make their life worthwhile.

As for image, Spanish people seem to have two extreme sides: cool and emotional. Spanish gentlemen like to look cool. Outwardly, they prefer to be hard-boiled, and poker-faced. Very smart and cool “caballero”² is the type of ideal man. In the story, when the Spanish gentleman leaves the café, making a disgusting gesture, apparently keeping up appearances is more important for him than drinking beer.

Spanish people are emotional too. Imagine when they dance flamenco. The facial expression of a woman is full of agony. On the other hand, the man’s flamenco is very sexy. The man’s hand movements are flirtatiously inviting. The accompanying music and the instruments of guitar or castanet are always heartbreakingly sad. On the contrary, the steps the dancer makes are excruciatingly powerful.

Bullfighting is another example. Some say it is cruel. True. Killing an animal in public is not a pleasant sight to see. Yet Spanish people are excited by it. They chant, cheer, yell enthusiastically. The bloodshed of the bull gradually excites the audience. Spanish people say that even those who abhor bullfighting, once they see it in the stadium, love it. After the bullfight, they eat the flesh of the bull. They applaud the matador and his performance.

4) German people

The image of German people is closely linked with the phrase “simple and sturdy.” Like their German bread, plain but solid, those characteristics are seen among people, food, clothes, and housing. They are not flashy, but substantial. The German gentleman in the story removes the mosquito from his glass and drinks his beer, which makes the man quite ordinary. Since it comes naturally from common sense, we are the most at ease with his behavior.

The famous beer and sausage of their diet also contributes to form the stereotype for German people. It is a picture of a party after working hard. It gives a very healthy, positive image of German people. During the time of "Oktoberfest"³ in Germany, waiters and waitresses meander among customers, carrying several beer mugs in each hand. How strong they are!

These simple and sturdy images are everywhere. They do not wear fashionable shoes on campus. They like to wear shirts and sweaters and walking shoes to walk long distances. They like to drive fast on the free way. Their life style is neat. They are ecology-minded people. They are keen to recycle things. They are frugal, they do not waste water. When they boil potatoes, they add very little water and simmer the potatoes. When it comes to Christmas cake, it is hard to imagine fragile, fluffy, creamy soft cake. Instead, stuffy, heavy pound cake with lots of nuts in it instantly comes to mind. Their image is down to earth.

5) Russian people

Likewise, the images of Russian people are also down to earth, yet, because of its harsh climate, in a little different way. Russian people are different from those in Europe, where most others enjoy benefits of the Mediterranean Sea. Russians, on the other hand, have to face harsh weather. The climate plays an important part in forming a stereotype of people. It contributes to making Russians stern. Fur hats and coats, luxuries in one country, are necessary in Russia in order to keep warm in winter.

Strong vodka and various types of stew are simple, but serve the image of strong Russian people. They say Russian people often cook their meals on "Russ pechka," a Russian stove, and enjoy the meal together around it. The hearth is the center of the home.

The physical bigness of Russian people is also one of the stereotypes we have for them. The Russian gentleman who drinks beer with a mosquito in the story does not contradict that image of Russian people. They do not worry a bit over the trifles. A little mosquito is nothing. A big man has a big heart and he is not perturbed easily.

6) Chinese people

Lastly, we will deal with the stereotype of Chinese people. They are merciful and energetic. First, the man in the story is merciful enough to contemplate a little mosquito, already dead, before he swallows it. He thinks of it as a poor insect. Does it have anything to do with the Buddhist precept against killing? The same teaching also tells us that when we eat fish or meat, we must eat them in full appreciation of their lives, otherwise, they will not die in peace. The food we take should not be a wasteful sacrifice of life.

However, another view arises: by nature, Chinese people love to eat. They are energetic because of their enormous interest in eating. They even eat many sorts of bizarre foods. To conjure up the image, it is unbelievably funny. As if an excuse, the same people will

eat voraciously almost everything, putting aside a proverb, "Even a worm will turn." What a paradox! Now the variety of Chinese cuisine is enjoyed not only by Chinese people but by people all over the world. The energetic Chinese make almost everything edible. Unlike the delicate French style restaurant, Chinese restaurants are noisy with people's shouting and laughing. Hot and spicy food they prepare are the essence of their energy. The mosquito as food completes the stereotype.

Conclusion

How does a stereotype differ from prejudice? The stereotype is a sort of established conceived norm which a lot of people take for granted. Because it has been transmitted over a long span of time, we accept it quite naturally. On the other hand, prejudice is biased thinking which some people hold, and oftentimes it is negative. Prejudice does not bring joy or meaning, but rather offense.

Since the stereotype is closely related with identifying people of a certain nation, it is not a matter of good or bad. We already admit and accept a uniqueness of a certain country, therefore, we do not have to be picky and critical. In short, it is unnecessary for us to evaluate, but just enjoy the uniqueness of the country. This process is somewhat similar to a witty joke. It serves as a social lubricant.

Prejudice, on the other hand, is quite different from stereotype. It does not bear anything fruitful in terms of relationship. It sometimes excludes the minority from majority, and often it leads to discrimination. Unlike the stereotype, prejudice narrows one's thinking.

Lastly, we have to foresee the future of stereotypes. In the modern era, where people mix, mingle, and assimilate, it is unlikely for the stereotypes to remain as they are. They will change. Just like brothers and sisters in a family have different dispositions—hot temper, unyielding spirit, snobbish, relaxed, serious—we could say the same thing of characteristics of many nationalities. The national characteristics which differentiate one country's people from another are doomed to change with the passage of time.

We have so far enjoyed the uniqueness of each country and have been surrounded by ethnic stereotypes. However, they will change. As ethnically rich America has changed from "melting pot" to "salad bowl," in the course of history, it will continue to change. Maintaining an identity and uniqueness of her own, a nation will emerge with new stereotypes.

Notes (Translation)

¹ "Eat well, drink well, love well."

² "gentleman"

³ "October festival"