

The Differences of Origin between Chinese and English Proverb

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ABSTRACT: *With the development of globalization, the cultural differences of different countries are outstanding. Proverb is one part of cultures, reflecting the difference between Chinese and western culture. The paper analyzes the differences of origin between Chinese and English proverbs, and describes the reasons of them, aiming to promote English learners' capability of cross-cultural communication by learning more about the differences between Chinese and western cultures.*

KEY WORDS: *origins; Chinese and English proverb; reasons*

Date of Submission: 07-06-2020

Date of Acceptance: 22-06-2020

I. INTRODUCTION

Proverb is one of the most original and valuable forms of expressions. They are the words and expressions of people's thoughts, experiences and elicitation during their working period and daily life. Simple and popular, concise and pithy, they are passed down from generation to generation in the readable oral form and have gradually become a component indispensable to the dominant culture of that nation. Human beings' common social activities are similar in many aspects, so Chinese and English proverbs have similarities. However, Chinese and English proverbs have differences because of the cultural differences: different geography; different history customs; different religions and different value concepts.

From the perspective of linguistics, although Chinese and English are two kinds of disparate language, there are some of the same language features between English and Chinese proverbs: both of them are concise, simple and vivid language; they are both using metaphor and most of the proverb has quite neat harmonious rhyme.

Although proverbs are short and simple, they are fixed and popular, concise and pithy and contain specific culture. It can enlighten the life, guiding the behavior of people. The functions of proverbs are that they express some rules of conduct and quite often convey some advice or counsel. In other words, most proverbs possess philosophic depth or instructive function. For thousands of years they have been instructing and inspiring people, so they have been regarded as the guideline of people's thoughts and deeds, which means people are thinking or doing things by following the direction of their proverbs either consciously or unconsciously. English and Chinese proverbs have become important sources of inspiration just because they contain truth, wisdom, counsel, rule of conduct, etc.

Many proverbs summarize knowledge of people's daily life such as The best wine comes out of an old vessel; Soft fire makes sweet malt. As people's daily life is complicated and extremely trifling, such proverbs are numerous. They summarize people's knowledge in their life and they tell people what to do and how to do it. They are just like an encyclopedia to guide people's daily life. From them, people may broaden their knowledge and outlook so as to avoid making mistakes. Some proverbs of this type are concerned with a particular field, like farmer proverbs and meteorological proverbs. Peasants of different ages, in their over years' work, practice and prove the farming experience and productive rules. From generation to generation, they sum up their experience and the farming rules into some vivid, concise and lively sentences.

II. THE ORIGINS OF CHINESE AND ENGLISH PROVERBS

As we know, Chinese and English proverbs have different origins. The following content is to describe the origins from folk life, mythology, literary works, and other languages.

2.1 Originating from folk life

Proverbs are the summary of people's daily life and experience, and closely related to the practice of people's life and work, revealing a universal truth from details so as to enlighten people. There are many proverbs originated from folk life. They are created by working people, such as farmers, workmen, hunters, businessmen, army-men and so on. They use familiar terms that were associated with their own fields. E.g.: Farmers created the following proverbs:

Make hay while the sun shines.

Workmen created the following proverbs:

A good anvil does not fear the hammer.

Hunters created the following proverbs:

He that is afraid of every bush will never prove a good huntsman.

Businessmen created the following proverbs:

You pay your money and take your choice.

Army-men created the following proverbs:

A good general make good men.

These were first used by a limited group of people in the same fields. Because they are philosophical colloquialism, later they gradually gained wide acceptance and partly became part of the common corn of language and are now used in many other situations.

2.2 The Origin of mythology

Each nation has its own mythology, fable and allusion. Chinese traditional culture, ancient Greek and Roman civilization bequeath many mythologies and allusions. They become one of the major sources of proverbs. The stories and heroes in Greek Mythology, The Fable of Aesop and The Homer left a lot of proverbs. E.g.:

I fear the Greeks, even when bringing gifts.

You cannot make a Mercury of every dog.

Chinese culture can trace back to ancient times. There were many natural phenomenon and our ancestor cannot explain these phenomenon. They created the mythology and fable to explain the phenomenon. So many Chinese proverbs come from mythology and fable. E.g.:

It's a eight wandering immortals who have different abilities.

2.3 The Origin of literary works

Many English and Chinese proverbs come from literary works. A nation's literary languages are its language's ginger. They promote the development of language. Some of brilliant sentences, plot and hero's name in literary works become proverbs.

There are many great writers in western society, such as Shakespeare, Francis Bacon, John Milton and so on. They had made distinctive contributions to the development of English literature. Their works were accepted and passed on by English people from generation to generation. Many sentences become the English proverbs.

Shakespeare's works are the most colorful literature origin of proverbs. Many English proverbs are from the works of Shakespeare. E.g.:

"All is not gold that glitters." is from Shakespeare's The Merchants of Venice. It means that those who have a good appearance are not necessarily profound or learned.

Some other writers, philosophers' words also become proverbs. E.g.: "Reading makes a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man" is from a distinguished English philosopher and writer Bacon's On Reading. It tells people that reading, conference and writing can make a person learned, sharp and precise. And "The childhood shows the man" is from Milton's Paradise Regained.

Many Chinese proverbs are from classic Chinese literary works. The four great works: The Pilgrimage to the West, The Three Kingdoms, A Dream of Red Mansions and The Marsh Rebellion are the most popular classics in China. Such as:

Three cobblers with their wits combined equal Zhuge Liang the master--the wisdom of the masses exceeds that of the wisest individual.

Literature, as a mirror of social life, is another source of proverbs. Many sentences in these literary works are full of wisdom and easy to be remembered, so people like them and use them again and again. At last, they become the proverbs and are widely used. We can say that proverbs are the cream of the literary works.

2.4 The Origin of Other Languages

With the communication of world, nation's boundary is being broken. More and more languages contacted with each other. Because of the geography and history, English was influenced and impacted by other languages in its development process. So English have absorbed a great number of expressions of other nation's culture. So do proverbs. Many English proverbs are from Latin, Greek, French and Chinese. As the reason of history, most of these loaned proverbs were transferred into English and some maintain the original languages.

Many English proverbs originate from Latin. E.g.:

Art is long, life is short.

Some Latin proverbs are transferred into English.

Soon ripe, soon rotten.

Many English proverbs come from French.
When the fox preaches, take care off your geese
English proverbs also come from foreign writers' works.
Constant dripping wears away the stone.
Chinese people have also got some proverbs from other languages. Such as
The grapes are sour.
He who laughs last laughs best.
These have been accepted by Chinese people and become Chinese proverbs.

From above we can find out that English and Chinese proverbs have similar origins from folk life, mythology, and literary works and from other languages. From these similar origins, we can see that English and Chinese people have similar social activities and emotional reflection and observation of the world.

Though English and Chinese proverbs enjoy the similar origins, they also have differences in their detailed contents. We will discuss their differences from the following aspects: different geography; different history customs; different religions and different value concepts.

III. THE REASONS OF DIFFERENCES BETWEEN CHINESE AND ENGLISH PROVERB ORIGIN

Language is strongly influenced and shaped by culture. Language is the mirror of culture. It can represent every aspect of culture. Proverb is an important part of a national language and they reflect the relation between culture and language. Different nations have different culture. Generally speaking, the major differences lie in geography; history customs; religions and value concepts. As a result, English and Chinese proverbs are different in the detailed contents.

3.1 The Different Geography

A nation's geographical environment is a framework in which a language and culture have been developing. The geographical features of a country are inevitably reflected in the national language in general and proverbs in particular.

England is an island country and located in the western seaside of Europe. English people live by seaside and their life cannot do without sailing and fishing. So many English proverbs are related to sea and sailing. E.g.:

The best fish smell when they are three days old.

All at sea.

Being on the sea, sail; being on the land, settle.

China is an agriculture country. Every feudal dynasty pays much attention to agriculture. Agriculture is the fundamental and crucial trade. So there are many farming proverbs about agriculture. Farming proverbs constitute a large part of Chinese proverbs. They are the crystal of agriculture experiences of Chinese people. It can be seen in the following examples:

Rain during spring time is precious as oil.

As a pan sows, so shall he reap.

From above, we can see that English and Chinese proverbs reflect their different geographical conditions. England is an island country; so many English proverbs are about "sea", "fish", and "ship" and so on. While many Chinese proverbs are about agriculture, such as "bean", "snow", "ware", "land", etc.

3.2 The History

Each nation has its own history. Since proverbs are historical products, they may reflect some aspects of the national history.

English proverbs are related to the history of England. E.g.: "It is as hard to please a knave as a knight." A knight refers to a man given the rank of knighthood by the British monarch. There are many legends about the English knights (e.g.: King Arthur and his green knights) in the ancient times; and "From whipping post to pillory." A whipping post is a post to which a person was tied for a public whipping and a pillory is a wooden framework with three holes into which the head and hands of an offender were locked, exposing him to public abuse and ridicule

China has a long history. There is thousands of years' feudal society in China. People were bonded by the rank of class. The rulers exploit and bully the people cruelty. There are many Chinese proverbs about feudal and gender discrimination. E.g.:

Behind the red doors meat and wine go to waste while out on the roads lie the bones of the frozen.

Marry a cock and follow the cock, marry a dog and follow the dog. —Follow the man you marry, be he fowl or cur.

From above we can see that English and Chinese proverbs reflect the different history. English proverbs are related to king and knight while Chinese proverbs reflect the Chinese people's grudge and

resistance to rulers.

3.3 The Religions

Religion is a very important part of culture. Different religions reflect different cultural characters, different cultural backgrounds and different cultural traditions. Religion is a cultural phenomenon. Proverbs are closely related to the culture, so proverbs can reflect the different religious faith.

English people believe in Christianity and it is the most influential religion in the west. Many English proverbs reflect English people's religious faith and many of them are about "God", "devil", "heaven", "church", "cross" and "hell". E.g.:

As poor as the church mouse.

God helps those who help themselves.

The proverbs above are apparently related to Christianity, because in them "God", "devil", "heaven", "church", "cross" and "hell" appear which are the embodiments of Christianity.

In contrast, Buddhism is the most popular religion in China. Many proverbs are about Buddhism such as:

Never burning incense when all is well, but clasping Buddha's feet in an emergency.

The monk may run away, but the temple can't run with him. —A fugitive must belong to some place that can provide clues

These proverbs are about. The doctrines of Buddhist admonish people to do good deeds and so they can go to the heaven after their death. Taoism comes next to Buddhism in China. There are proverbs about Taoism such as When one has power, the other families are powerful.

English and Chinese people have different religious faith. Different religions lead to the differences between English and Chinese proverbs. Christianity is the main religion in English-speaking countries; so many English proverbs are related to "God". While Chinese people believed in Buddhism and Taoism, so many Chinese proverbs are about "Buddhism" and "Taoism".

3.4 Reflecting different value concepts

The differences between Chinese and western value concepts mainly lie in individualism and collective.

Westerners believe that everyman is equal. They aspire to freedom and equality. Many English proverbs show American's advocating of freedom and individualism. E.g.:

God helps those who help themselves.

These two proverbs illustrate the individual role. The words "themselves" and "himself" show that independence plays an important role in their life.

Everyman is the architect of his own fortune.

These two proverbs attach importance to independence and self-reliance. Self-reliance impels people to create opportunities, seek competition and be ready for risks.

That it is the squeaky wheel that gets the oil gives prominence to the individualism.

On the contrary, Chinese people take modesty as virtue. They respect the old and take good care of the young. Their characteristics are "justice and humanity", "modesty" and "love". Chinese people pay much attention to collectivism and think highly of the role of groups. They lay stress on help each other and reliance each other. They also pay attention to the harmonious human relationship and they try to save the other side's face. Many Chinese proverbs reflect this trend. E.g.:

Being united can be windproof shows the strength of collective or union.

That every one is brothers reflects the importance of mutual help and reliance.

There are exceptions that are opposite to the mainstream. Some English proverbs also reflect the importance of collectivism. For example, "make yourself necessary to someone." Chinese traditional value concept has been greatly impacted with the input of individualism. That one monk carries water; two monks carry water; three monks have no water is contrary to Chinese collective tendency. In spite of these exceptions, their mainstreams are not changed.

English and Chinese proverbs have many similarities and differences. With the communication of world culture, proverbs will break the boundary of states and nations, promote the cultural convergence and achieve interfusion. English and Chinese proverbs are permeating and interfusing each other constantly.

IV. CONCLUSION

Some proverbs are intended to persuade and teach people. Some other proverbs reveal and criticize the dark side of the ages or society. Proverb diction is neat and simple. Proverbs use the fewest words to express the contents. They are concise, condensed and compact. Most of English and Chinese proverbs are simple sentences, so they can be remembered and handed down from generation to generation.

Proverbs use rhetorical devices to attract the readers deeply. Many Chinese and English proverbs use the same rhetorical devices such as simile, metaphor, repetition and hyperbole, etc. The use of rhetorical devices

makes proverbs fresh, humorous, implicit and full of wit.

Proverbs are the cream of a language, the wisdom of the public collection. They are closely related to a nation's culture and enjoy great cultural values. They reflect the relation between culture and language. Each nation has its own geography, history, religion and social attitude. Because of the cultural generalities and differences, English and Chinese proverbs have their similarities and differences. They are permeating and interfusing each other. Therefore, a comparative study of them can help us to learn a language well and understand the true meaning of other's word in cross-culture communication.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

This paper is funded by 11531 project of Nanchang Normal University

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Xiaoling Yang. "The Differences of Origin between Chinese and English Proverb." *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Invention (IJHSSI)*, vol. 09(6), 2020, pp 33-37. Journal DOI- 10.35629/7722