

Language as a Reflection of Culture: On the Cultural Characteristics of Chinese and English Proverbs

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Abstract: Language and culture are closely intertwined and shaped each other. Proverbs, gems of a language, are not only an important part of a language, but also a “window” through which one can observe the cultural facets of a nation. This paper attempts to compare and contrast Chinese and English proverbs in terms of their cultural sources and cultural implications so as to reveal their respective cultural characteristics, the causes of which are also touched upon. It is hoped that the discussion will not only facilitate deeper insights into Chinese and Western cultural differences that the proverbs manifest, but also better appreciation and use of proverbs as well as more effective intercultural interactions between Chinese and native English speakers.

Keywords: Chinese proverbs, English proverbs, language and culture, cultural characteristics

1. Introduction

“A proverb is a short, generally known sentence of the folk which contains wisdom, truth, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed and memorable form and which is handed down from generation to generation” (Mieder, 2004, p. 3). Because proverbs are often brief, pithy, and colorful sayings expressed succinctly and in a way that makes them easy to remember, they have long been in frequent and widespread use. As Lu (1989) notes, “One defining feature of proverbs is their popularity among people — it seems that everyone loves to utter them” (p. 2). “These proverbs may be repeated by a mother scolding her children, a father offering advice, or even by a person singing or praying” (Zormeier & Samovar, 2000, p. 229). Mieder (1986) also points out, “Proverbs can be used in everyday conversation, journalistic writing, advertising, speeches of all types, in sermons, literature, debates, slogans, songs, legal argumentation, humorous quips, and other forms of human communications” (p. vii). So they are used in formal as well as informal situations to illustrate a specific point effectively. And they are used for a variety of purposes: as a way of saying something gently, to carry more weight in speech or writing, or to simply make a conversation or discussion more humorous, lively and interesting. Proverbs have been approached from many different perspectives: linguistic, literary, religious, psychological, cognitive, social, anthropological, folkloric, and educational. The discipline devoted to the study of the proverb is called paremiology, which can be dated back as far as Aristotle.

Scholars have hitherto achieved much in the sphere of proverb studies. Mieder, a renowned American paremiologist, deserves special mention. He has published a series of books (e.g., 1986, 1990, 1993, 1994, 2004, 2009, 2014) as well as a large number of articles discussing

proverbs from a wide range of viewpoints: “The function of proverbs in literature, proverb illustrations from medieval woodcuts to modern cartoons, proverbs used in psychological testing, and innovative proverb manipulations in advertisements” (Mieder, 1986, p. iii). The book by Mieder and Dundes (1981) is a volume containing articles on a wide variety of topics touching on proverbs. Mieder, et al. (1992) is a treasury of more than 15,000 sayings, adages, and maxims commonly used in popular speech in the United States and Canada. Rohsenow (2002) is an English translation of some 4000 Chinese proverbs.

Chinese scholars have also made their contributions to the study of proverbs. Wen (2004) is a comprehensive two-volume collection of more than 100,000 Chinese proverbs. Zhang (1993) is a rich collection of English translation of approximately 8000 Chinese proverbs and common sayings from different periods in China’s history. Zhou (1987), Xu (2003) and Li (2009) are, among others, three relatively popular dictionaries of English proverbs. In addition to these reference works, monographs treating of proverbs have also been produced. Wu and Ma (1980) contains a detailed exploration of Chinese proverbs, covering the nature and scope, form and style, content and classification, national features, evolution and development, and the applications of Chinese proverbs. Cui (1997) studies Chinese sayings in conjunction with Chinese culture. Yang (2001) also approaches Chinese proverbs in the light of Chinese culture. Zeng’s (1983) pamphlet investigating English proverbs is the first of its kind, addressing such topics as definitions, origins, national traits, ideological content, artistic features, grammatical structures, applications, and translation of English proverbs. Guo (1992) is another study exclusively on English proverbs, including topics like grammatical and rhetorical features, sociolinguistic aspects, and interpretation and translation of English proverbs. Hou (1990) and Wang, et al. (2003) are devoted to comparative research of proverbs between Chinese and English, the former dwelling on structural and rhetorical aspects; while the latter looking at proverbs beyond the linguistic structure by examining their origins, cultural backgrounds, and social functions. Besides, there have been some journal articles published in this respect (e.g., Ma, 1986; Zhang, 1996; Zhang, 1999; Xu, 2003; Zhang, 2016).

In view of the above literature review and the fact that there have been increasingly more contacts between people from diverse cultures in the globalizing age, more research is necessary in terms of cultural comparison. Accordingly, this paper attempts to explore further the rich amount of cultural information proverbs possibly portray by comparing and contrasting Chinese and English proverbs.

2. Nexus between Proverbs and Culture

Culturally speaking, “proverbs may provide interesting little glimpses or clues to a people’s geography, history, social organizations, social views, attitudes. People who live along sea coasts and whose livelihood is dependent on the sea will have proverbs about sailing, about braving the weather, about fish and fishing...In cultures where old age is revered, there will be proverbs about the wisdom of the elders. And in societies where women’s status is low, there will be a number of sayings demeaning them” (Deng & Liu, 1989, pp. 47-48). Todd and Hancock (1986) also note, “Proverbs are the distilled wisdom of a group of people and their study can provide insights into the activities, interests and philosophy of the people who

created them” (p. 385). The above statements clearly point to the connection between proverbs and culture.

A theoretical probe into the relationship between language and culture may yield a better understanding of their closeness. The development of modern linguistics demonstrates that linguistic study should not be confined within the strict theoretical framework of Saussure (1983 [1916]), who envisioned language as a self-contained and self-sufficient abstract system. Rather, it should be combined with the user of the language and the specific culture in which it is used. Language is the carrier and container of culture, for all human knowledge and experience are described and stored in language; whereas it is in turn influenced and shaped by culture. They are inextricably intertwined. This belief of the close relationship between language and culture has actually long been held by anthropologists and linguists. For example, Sapir emphasized the interplay between language and the culture it reflects by making the following points:

“Language has a setting...Language does not exist apart from culture, that is, from the socially inherited assemblage of practices and beliefs that determines the texture of our lives.” (1921, p. 221).

“Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society....We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation” (1929, p. 209).

Owing to the close interrelatedness of language and culture, proverbs — distillations of widely accepted wisdom — are probably more comprehensively expressive of the culture of a nation than other aspects of a language (such as its sounds and grammar). As Zhang (1996) notes, “Proverbs, as they come into being through historical development of a nation and are handed down through the years, are closely linked to the living environments, customs and conventions, national psyche, values and beliefs, and religious and literary traditions of a nation” (p. 50). The proverb “A man’s home is his castle” indicates the American emphasis on privacy, while the saying “百善孝為先” [Of all virtues filial piety comes first] explicates the Chinese attitude toward filial piety. Obviously succinct verbal messages in the form of proverbs may serve as an important vehicle to transmit culture and experiences.

The following part mainly examines Chinese and English proverbs in the light of cultural sources and cultural implications, in the hope that some discrepancies between them can be discovered. Most of the proverbs utilized in this paper are from Wen’s (2004), Rohsenow’s (2002) and Manser’s (2002) works.

3. Cultural Characteristics of Chinese and English Proverbs

3.1. Cultural Sources Revealed in Proverbs

Drawn from the sources of living environments, literary traditions, religious beliefs, and

customs and habits, proverbs and sayings offer a fascinating insight into the distinctive qualities and national attributes of the two cultures.

3.1.1. Living Environment

China, since time immemorial, has been an agricultural country. As Hu and Grove (1991) note, “Generations of peasants were tied to the land on which they lived and worked. Except in times of war and famine, there was little mobility, either socially or geographically” (p. 1). In ancient China, there existed the division of agriculture and commerce, with more emphasis on the former. This idea of “valuing the agriculture but suppressing the commerce” is deeply rooted in people’s minds (Wu & Yan, 2009, p. 44). Even today agriculture remains the main pillar of China’s national economy; hence, proverbs abound concerning agriculture. For example:

瑞雪兆豐年。A timely heavy snow promises/omens a good harvest.
 人勤地不懶。If the tiller is industrious, the farmland is fertile.
 撿了芝麻，丟了西瓜。[lit.] Pick up the sesame seeds but overlook the water melons.
 [fig.] Mindful of small matters to the neglect of large ones./ “Penny wise and pound foolish”.
 種田不離田頭，讀書不離案頭。[lit.] A farmer never leaves his fields, nor a scholar his desk. [fig.] One has to be diligent and persistent in one’s work.

On the other hand, Britain is geographically an island country, with no place more than 110 miles away from the coast; thus its people are fond of the sea, and their life is closely related to the sea, producing numerous proverbs pertaining to navigation and life on the sea (Zeng, 1983, p. 15). For example:

The sea refuses no river.
 A smooth sea never makes a skilful mariner.
 He who would catch fish must not mind getting wet.
 The sea has fish for every man.
 Living without an aim is like sailing without a compass.
 Hoist sail when the wind is fair.

3.1.2. Cultural Heritage

China has a tremendous number of literary classics, such as masterpieces of the literary works, fables and fairy tales, and legends, which may find their way into the proverbs. For example, from the Chinese classic novel *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*, one can find proverbs as follows:

三个臭皮匠，頂個諸葛亮。[lit.] Three smelly cobblers with their wits combined equal Zhuge liang, the master mind. [fig.] Three fools are the equal of one wise man. / “Two heads are better than one.” [Note: “諸葛亮” was the archetypal master strategist in *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*].

賠了夫人又折兵。[lit.] To lose one's wife as well as one's soldiers. [fig.] To pay a double penalty / To lose the bait along with the fish
 司馬昭之心，路人皆知。[lit.] Every person on the street knows what is in Sima Zhao's mind (that he wanted to usurp the throne. [fig.] It is a situation where a person's intention or ambition is rather obvious. [Note: “司馬昭” was a prime minister of Wei (220-265) who nursed a secret ambition to usurp the throne. The emperor once remarked: Sima Zhao's intention is obvious to every man in the street.]

There are also numerous proverbs from the Chinese classic Confucian *Analects*. For example:

四海之內皆兄弟。Within the four seas all men are brothers.
 己所不欲，勿施于人。Do not do to others what you would not want others do to you. / Do as you would be done by.
 君子坦蕩蕩，小人常戚戚。A gentleman is always calm and at ease, while an inferior man is always worried and full of distress.

Moreover, quotations from philosophers, thinkers, and poets are also frequently used as proverbs. For example, Chinese poetry witnessed its prosperity in the Tang dynasty, during which a whole array of famous poems had been produced. These poems have become a rich source for proverbs. The saying “熟讀唐詩三百首，不會做詩也會吟” [If one has learned three hundred poems of the Tang dynasty by heart, one is sure to be able to write poetry] is itself a popular one among the Chinese. The followings are more proverbs from poems in the Tang dynasty.

欲窮千里目，更上一層樓。[lit.] If one wants to see as far as one's eye can for a thousand leagues, one must ascend even another storey higher. [fig.] If one wants to know more, one must exert more effort. (A line from a poem by Wang Zhihuan)
 野火燒不盡，春風吹又生。[lit.] Even a prairie fire cannot completely destroy the grass; when the spring breeze blows, it grows again. [fig.] Something has great vitality. (A line from a poem by Bai Juyi)
 讀書破萬卷，下筆如有神。[lit.] If one has read more than ten thousand books, one will be able to write miraculously. [fig.] Ample reading produces fluent writing. (A line from a poem by Du Fu)

Among English-speaking people, ancient Greek myths and legends, and folktales are well-known, which provide material for English proverbs. Besides, Shakespeare's plays and Aesop's fables are all well-known, which are often credited as the cultural sources of many English proverbs. The proverbs below are related to these literary classics.

Proverbs from Greek legends (Proverbs with allusions to Greek and Roman Mythology):

I fear the Greeks, even when bringing gifts.
 When Greek meets Greek, then comes the tug of war.

Homer sometimes nods. (Homer, the poet in ancient Greece, is regarded by Greeks as the author of the *Illiad* and *Odssey*.)

Proverbs from Shakespeare's plays:

All that glitters is not gold.
Brevity is the soul of wit.
A rose by any other name would smell as sweet.

Proverbs from Aesop's Fables:

One swallow does not make a summer.
Slow but sure wins the race.
Kill not the goose that lays the golden eggs.

In addition, quotations from other men of letters and philosophers have been adopted as proverbs. For example:

Knowledge is power. (from Francis Bacon)
To err is human, to forgive divine. (from Alexander Pope)

3.1.3. Religious Traditions

In China, Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism have not only exerted profound influence upon the thinking of the Chinese, but also served as a rich source for Chinese proverbs. Many Chinese proverbs originating in the three religions contain such words as "Tao", "Buddha" and "monk". Proverbs relating to Taoism and Buddhism are particularly abundant. For example, the followings are from Taoism:

一人得道，雞犬升天。[lit.] When a person attains the Tao [i.e., enlightenment and immortality], even his pets ascend to heaven. [fig.] When one man is promoted, all those connected with him benefit.

八仙過海，各顯神通。[lit.] When the Eight Taoist Immortals cross the ocean, each one displays his or her own special ability. [fig.] Each individual in a group has his or her own special talent or way of dealing with things. (Based on a famous Taoist folktale in which each of the Immortals used his or her own special skill in crossing the sea.)

真人不露相，露相不真人。[lit.] One who has attained the Way doesn't show it; one who makes a show of it has not attained the Way. [fig.] One who is really capable doesn't show off, and those who show off aren't really capable. (Note: "真人" is a Taoist term referring to one who has attained enlightenment.)

And the followings are from Buddhism:

佛要金裝，人要衣裳。 [lit.] Just as Buddha images need to be covered with gold, so people need to be covered with fine clothes. [fig.] Fine clothes make the man.
 平時不燒香，臨時抱佛腳。 [lit.] When times are easy, we do not burn incense; but when trouble comes, we embrace the feet of Buddha. [fig.] Make preparations well in advance and don't put things off until it's too late.
 泥菩薩過河，自身難保。 [lit.] When a clay Buddha crosses a river, it could hardly be able to save itself, let alone anyone else. [fig.] One cannot save himself let alone others.

In English-speaking countries, however, Christianity is the dominant religion, and one naturally expects to find a number of references to characters or events in Christianity's sacred book the Bible, which is a rich source of English proverbs. Wang et al. (1992) note, "The Bible is the most popular book in the culture of mankind. It is the essential of Western civilization, having shaped the Western civilization more decisively than anything else ever written" (p. 77). Mieder (1990) concludes that cultures that treat the Bible as their "major spiritual book contain between three hundred and five hundred proverbs that stem from the Bible" (p. 12). It is no exaggeration to say that the Bible properly gives rise to countless English proverbs, in which such words as "heaven", "hell", "God", "devil", and "cross" (a reference to the cross that Jesus Christ had to carry to the place of his death, thus meaning a cause of sorrow or suffering) frequently appear. Below are proverbs of Biblical origin (some are simply quotations from the Bible):

All are not saints that go to church.
 Every man must bear his own cross.
 Every man has his cross to bear.
 The leopard can't change its spots.
 Forbidden fruit is sweetest.

3.1.4. Customs and Habits

As regards eating habits, the Chinese preference of food and vegetables such as rice, tofu, and radish, is distinctly manifested in proverbs. Chinese people also have their own unique and special traditional hobbies such as playing Chinese chess, practicing martial arts, and singing Beijing opera, which can also be seen in Chinese proverbs. Below are the proverbs from food and vegetables:

巧婦難為無米之炊。 [lit.] Even the cleverest housewife is hard to cook a meal without rice. [fig.] You can't make something out of nothing./ One can't make bricks without straw.
 不當家，不知柴米貴。 [lit.] If one is not the household head, one cannot know how expensive rice and firewood are. [fig.] Only the one who takes responsibility knows how difficult to get anything done.
 豆腐好吃，磨難推。 [lit.] Bean curd is tasty, but pushing the millstone to grind it is hard. [fig.] Anything good comes as the result of hard effort.

蘿蔔青菜，各有所愛。 [lit.]Some like radish and some prefer cabbage. [fig.] It is hard to suit all tastes. /Tastes differ. /One man's meat is another man's poison. /Every man to his taste. /There is no accounting for tastes. /There is no disputing about tastes. (Note: “蘿蔔” and “青菜” are two very common vegetables in China.)

Numerous proverbs are also embedded in recreation and entertainment. For example:

馬換炮，兩公道。 [lit.] In Chinese chess, it is fair to change a horse for a cannon. [fig.] It is fair for both sides.

當局者迷，旁觀者清。 [lit.] Those engaged in playing chess are confused while the onlookers see more clearly. [fig.] Outsiders can often see things more clearly and objectively than those involved.

台上三分鐘，台下三年功。 [lit.] Three-minute-performance on stage takes three years of practice behind the scenes. [fig.] Every technical skill lies with long-term practice.

一個唱紅臉，一個唱白臉。 [lit.] One wears the red makeup of the stage hero, the other the white of the stage villain. [fig.] One coerces and the other induces.

In contrast, such food as bread, butter, cake, milk, sandwich, salad and pudding are the most popular food and fruits like apples are much favored in the West, which is reflected in the proverbs below:

His bread is buttered on both sides.

Bread is the staff of life.

Hope is the poor man's bread.

Praise is not pudding.

You can't have your cake and eat it too. / You can't eat your cake and have it too.

An apple a day keeps the doctor away.

British people also have their traditional preference for recreations like hunting and fishing, which provides materials for their proverbs:

Go hunting where the ducks are.

You can't run with the hare and hunt with the hounds.

One beats the bush, and another catches the bird.

It is a silly fish that is caught twice with the same bait.

All is fish that comes to the net.

The best fish swim near the bottom.

Fish where the fish are.

3.2. Cultural Implications Manifested in Proverbs

3.2.1. Modes of Expression in Proverbs

Languages do not differ essentially in what they can say, but in how they say it. Though some proverbs express similar messages, they have different modes of expression (such as different images or metaphors), which reflects cultural content or implications. Look at the following pairs of proverbs:

Chinese: 生米煮成熟飯。 English: It is no use crying over spilt milk.

The Chinese saying may be literally rendered into “The raw rice has already been cooked”. So it is interesting to note the occurrence of “rice” in the Chinese proverb and “milk” in the English saying connotes different importance of each item in their respective cultures.

Chinese: 親身下河知深淺，親口嘗梨知酸甜。 English: The proof of the pudding is in the eating.

Similarly, in the above two proverbs, different metaphors or imagery are used, though both have similar content and usage. The literal rendition of the Chinese proverb can be “By going down into the river, you will know its depth; by taking a bite of a pear, you will know whether it’s sour or sweet”. The Chinese proverb contains the imagery of “river” and “pear”, whereas English uses “pudding”.

Chinese: 一箭雙雕。 English: Kill two birds with one stone.

The Chinese saying refers to “shooting two birds with one arrow”. Thus the sentiments in the two proverbs are similar, but the manner of achieving the purpose is different. The English version suggests the use of a slingshot, a weapon widely used in Western cultures and notable for its use by David to kill Goliath in the Old Testament of the Bible story.

There are also occasions when the same images or metaphors in Chinese and English generate different psychological associations. In other words, Chinese and English speakers have different attitudes, emotions and perceptions toward certain imagery. The image of a dog is a case in point. In Chinese culture, though dogs have traditionally been used for keeping guard and hunting, and they are faithful and loyal to their masters, yet the word “狗” (dog) seldom carries appreciative meaning in the use of the Chinese language. The following two proverbs seem to be the rare exceptions in which “dog” is used positively, indicating its loyalty to its master.

兒不嫌母醜，狗不嫌家貧。 [lit.] A son doesn’t care if his mother is ugly, just as a dog doesn’t complain if his master is poor. [fig.] People who are related have deep feelings for each other./ “Blood is thicker than water.”

好狗護三村，好漢護三村。 [lit.] Just as a good dog protects its three neighbors, so a hero protects his three neighboring villages. [fig.] A good man should protect his neighbors from danger.

In other cases, however, dogs in general are associated with unpleasantness. The metaphors of “dog” are almost entirely used in a deprecating sense. The “dogs” in the proverbs below are

all used derogatorily without exception.

狗嘴裏吐不出象牙。 [lit.] Out of a dog's mouth will never come ivory tusks. [fig.] A filthy mouth cannot utter decent language.

狗眼看人低。 [lit.] From the lowly perspective of a dog's eyes, everyone looks short. [fig.] A snobbish person looks down on those poorer or weaker than himself.

狗改不了吃屎。 [lit.] Dogs cannot change eating excrement. [fig.] Bad people cannot change their bad natures.

救了落水狗，回頭咬一口。 [lit.] If you save a drowning dog, you'll be bitten by it later. [fig.] If you help bad people, you'll be harmed by them later.

好狗不擋路。 [lit.] A good dog does not block the road. [fig.] A good person should not act as an obstacle to others progress. / One should not be a "dog in the manger."

掛羊頭，賣狗肉。 [lit.] To hang out a sheep's head when what one is selling is dog's flesh. [fig.] To try to palm off something inferior to what it purports to be.

Quite the contrary, a dog is regarded as a symbol of loyalty and vigilance in the West. It is man's protector and best friend. Therefore, the word "dog" as an animal is normally regarded in a neutral manner in its emotional connotation in the English language. Proverbs below demonstrate the positive or neutral sense of dog by referring it to man's behavior and life.

A dog is man's best friend.

A good dog deserves a good bone.

Every dog has his day.

You cannot teach old dogs to learn new tricks.

Love me, love my dog.

A barking dog never bites. / Barking dogs seldom bite.

Hungry dogs will eat dirty puddings.

3.2.2. Fundamental Values in Proverbs

As Chen and Starosta (1998) note, "Proverbs demonstrate how verbal expressions are used to underscore values" (p. 43). Chen (2009) also points out, "Common sayings and proverbs are the best verbal examples to articulate values of a particular culture" (p. 66). Besides, the values of a culture are linked to its religion, serving as a rich source of values throughout history. Confucianism, Taoism, and Buddhism are in general regarded as the three roots of Chinese culture. These traditions present the Chinese with advice on how to think and live life. Strictly speaking, Confucianism is a firmly entrenched philosophy rather than a religion. Its essence is "benevolence" and "righteousness", which shows primary concern with maintaining proper human relationships. As Yum (2000) notes, "Confucianism is a philosophy of human nature that considers proper human relationships as the basis of society" (p. 64). In addition, China is traditionally a hierarchical society, as a saying of Confucius goes, "Let the emperor be an emperor, the subject a subject, the father a father, and the son a son". Ordering relationships by status and observing this order reflect a deep sense for harmony. So group orientations are

ingrained values, as are contentment, prudence, modesty, restraint, protection of “face”, self-respect, and honor, etc. Taoism, according to Lin (2000), accounts for a side of the Chinese character which Confucianism cannot satisfy (p. 114). Chan (1963) writes, “In its doctrines of government, on cultivating and preserving life, and on handling things, Taoism is fully the equal of Confucianism” (p. 136). The book *Tao Te Ching* (also known as *Lao Tzu*), a Taoist classic, is thought of to be “the most brilliantly wicked philosophy of self-protection in the world literature” (Lin, 2000, p. 116). It advocates nature, non-action, void, tranquility, softness, and weakness, and so on. Regarding the influence of *Lao Tzu*, Chan (1963) remarks that “Chinese civilization and the Chinese character would have been utterly different if the book *Lao Tzu* had never been written” (p. 136) and “No other Chinese classic of such small size has exercised so much influence” (p. 137). Some basic Chinese values enumerated by Chinese Culture Connection (1987) such as filial piety, tolerance of others, humility, kindness/compassion/forgiveness, moderation, patience, contentedness, harmony with others, solidarity with others, and protecting face indicate the huge effects of a holistic system of thought, largely comprised of Confucianism, Taoism, as well as Buddhism. The following proverbs exemplify some of the core Chinese values:

Filial Piety

天下沒有不是的父母。 [lit.] There are no incorrect parents in the world. [fig.] Parents are always right. Obedience to one’s parents should be absolute.

養兒方知父母恩。 Not until one raises one’s own children, does one appreciate one’s parents’ kindness.

家嚴兒學好，子孝父心寬。 When the family is strict, the children learn from good example; when the sons are filial, the father’s heart is carefree.

Tolerance /Patience

忍氣饒人禍自消。 If one can bear one’s indignation and forgive others, one’s misfortune will naturally disappear.

小不忍則亂大謀。 [lit.] If one does not forbear little matters, one will create havoc in greater plans. [fig.] Sometimes it is wiser to put up with small insults, inconveniences, etc. for a greater good or to achieve greater benefits later on.

退一步海闊天空。 [lit.] Take a step backwards, and you will have a broad expanse of sky and sea. [fig.] In doing things allow for unforeseen circumstances, and in dealing with people, make concessions.

Humility/Modesty

三人行，必有我師。 [lit.] If we three people are walking together, at least one of the other two will be my teacher. [fig.] One can always learn something from others.

滿招損，謙受益。 Self satisfaction summons losses, while modesty receives benefits. [fig.] One loses by pride and gains by modesty.

人貴有自知之明。 It is important to know one’s own limitations.

人外有人，天外有天。 There are always more talented people who can be found, just as there are even higher heavens beyond the sky, so don’t be conceited.

Contentedness/Moderation

比上不足，比下有餘。One is better than some, though not as good as others — formula for contentment.

錢財不可用罄，福分不可享盡。When fortune comes, do not enjoy all of it; when advantage comes, do not take all of it.

人心不足，蛇吞象。A man whose heart is not content is like a snake that tries to swallow an elephant.

槍打出頭鳥。[lit.] The leading bird is the first to be shot. [fig.] Those who stand out are usually the first to be shot.

Kindness/Compassion/Forgiveness

行善得善，行惡得惡。[lit.] Do good, receive good; do evil, receive evil. [fig.] Charity will have a good recompense and vice an evil recompense.

行善獲福，行惡得殃。Do good, reap good; do evil, reap evil.

勿以惡小而為之，勿以善小而不為。We must do good rather than evil, on however humble a scale.

得饒人處且饒人。[lit.] Where you should forgive people, then do so. [fig.] Be lenient wherever you can. / Forgive others wherever you can.

饒人是福，欺人是禍。To forgive others is a blessing; to bully others is a misfortune.

Harmony

萬事和為貴。In all things, nothing is more precious than harmony.

家和日子旺，國和萬事興。Peace in the family will bring prosperous days, and harmony in the country will make everything thrive.

天時不如地利，地利不如人和。The time isn't as important as terrain, but the terrain isn't as important as unity with the people.

和氣修條路，惹人築堵牆。[lit.] Amiability builds roads, while offending people builds walls. [fig.] Amiability makes friends, while hurting people makes enemies.

Solidarity

獨木不成林。[lit.] One single tree does not make a forest. [fig.] Only in unity is there strength./ One alone cannot accomplish much./ Cooperation is necessary for success.

眾人拾柴火焰高。[lit.] When there are many people to gather firewood, the fire burns high. [fig.] Many hands make light work.

一個籬笆三個樁，一個好漢三個幫。Just as a fence needs the support of three stakes, so one able fellow needs the help of three others.

荷花（牡丹）雖好，也要綠葉扶持。[lit.] Although the lotus (peony) is beautiful, it completely depends on the support of its green leaves. [fig.] Everyone needs the support and help of others.

Face

人要臉，樹要皮。A person needs face just as a tree needs bark.

打狗還要看主人。[lit.] Before you beat a dog, you'd better think about its master's

face. [fig.] Before you attack someone, better first find out who else you are likely to offend.

打腫臉充胖子。 [lit.] One slaps his face until it is swollen in an effort to pretend that one is a fat man. [fig.] One tries to satisfy his vanity when he cannot really afford to do so.

死要面子活受罪。 One has to suffer for face's sake.

In contrast, the values of Westerners, Americans in particular, are attributed partially to the impact of Christianity, because it is believed to be “the dominant worldview found in North America” (Samovar et al., 2007, p. 82). Individualism, “doing” orientation, and future-time orientation are all linked to Christianity. The power of self can be seen in the view of salvation, which is achieved by one’s own efforts alone. Western “doing” orientation can be discovered in the way in which Jesus lived his life. And one of the “lessons” of Christianity is that the future is important. For Christians, “no matter what happened in the past, it is the future that holds the greatest promise” (p. 85). Individualism is probably the most basic of all the American values, but many Americans use the word freedom, by which they mean the desire and the right of all the individuals to control their own destiny without any outside interference. As the proverb goes, “stand on your own two feet”. Moreover, the idea of self-reliance is a cultural norm strongly associated with individualism. Americans talk fondly of “pulling themselves up by their bootstraps” to become “self-made men” (and women) (Stewart & Bennett, 1991, p. 136). And “Americans think of time as a road of a ribbon stretching into the future, along which one progresses” (Hall, 1959, p. 19). This concept makes Americans adopt a precious view of time. So there is a dominant value of keeping busy: “Idle hands are the devil’s workshop” and “Time is money” are common sayings that help to keep Americans on their toes (Irving, 1986, p. 117). In summary, people in the United States place great importance on such core values in individualism as individuality, independence, self-reliance, self-fulfillment, competition, equality, and change. These basic values are exemplified in more proverbs below.

Individuality / Independence / Self-reliance / Self-fulfillment

God helps those who help themselves.

Look out for number one. / Take care of number one.

Every man is the architect of his own fortune.

He who runs alone will win the race.

If you want something done well, then do it yourself.

I am the captain of my soul.

Poverty is not a sufficient cause for disgrace, but poverty without resolution to help oneself, is a disgrace.

A heavy purse makes a light heart.

Competition / Equality

Competition is the life of trade.

Men live like fish; the great ones devour the small.

A horse never runs so fast as when he has other horses to catch up and outpace.

All men are created equal.
 Jack is as good as his master.
 Every man should take his own.
 Remember the roots of your family tree, but you are known by your fruit, not by your root.

Action

Actions speak louder than words.
 No sooner said than done.
 Well done is better than well said.
 He who hesitates is lost.

Cherishing Time

Time lost cannot be won again.
 Time and tide wait for no man.
 Take care of today, and tomorrow will take care of itself.
 Procrastination is the thief of time.
 Punctuality is the soul of business.

Change

Variety is charming.
 Variety is the spice of life.
 Change of pasture makes fat calves.
 Discontent is the first step in progress.

As Western individualism stresses personal freedom, it has a much greater privacy requirement than that seen in Chinese culture. Actually, individualism is in large measure strengthened through an emphasis on privacy. Americans value privacy so greatly that even a good relationship between neighbors, colleagues, and friends depends on each respecting the other's privacy and not encroaching upon their personal space. There are many proverbs that advise people to respect each other's privacy to maintain a good relationship. For example:

Mind your own business.
 Put not your hand between the bark and the tree.
 Scald not your lips in another man's porridge./ Don't scald your lips in another man's pottage.
 Good fences make good neighbors.
 A hedge between keeps friendship green.

4. Conclusion

Throughout this paper, a host of Chinese and English proverbs are examined in the light of their respective cultural characteristics. It is hoped that through this careful scrutiny one's cultural

awareness may well be enhanced for more effective and successful intercultural encounters. The Chinese and English languages have countless proverbs and sayings that are different in cultural content, and it is this content that one must be acquainted with to make the best use of them in communicating ideas in the language.

Finally it should be noted that a dynamic view needs to be held to look at the culture transmitted in proverbs, because as a medium of culture proverbs mainly convey traditional culture and are considered to be folklore fossils of a language. Old proverbs in circulation might reflect past values of a culture more than its current values. As Mieder (1993) observes, proverbs come and go, that is, antiquated proverbs with messages and images we no longer relate to are dropped from our proverb repertoire, while new proverbs are created to reflect the mores and values of our time.

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