

Cause Analysis of Different Culture Image in English and Chinese

Animal Idiom

Ma Tiechuan

English Department 87#

North China Electric Power University

No.2 Beinong Road Changping District, Beijing P.R. China

Matiechuan[at]aliyun.com

ABSTRACT

On the basis of exploring previous studies of animal idioms and cultural images, this paper, by means of classification, discusses the contrast of animal images in English and Chinese animal idioms, which are the common barriers for people's comprehension and translation activities in cross-cultural communication. And then, this paper, in three aspects (duality of human evolution, aesthetic perspectives and living environment), analyzes the cultural elements influencing similarities and dissimilarities of animal images in English and Chinese in detail on the purpose of helping people remove the confusion and miscomprehension in their reading or translating English or Chinese works.

Key words: *animal idiom; cultural image; duality; aesthetics*

1. INTRODUCTION

Idiom is an important component of language, playing an essential role in language and functioning as a tool to make expressions concise and vivid. It embodies “a concentrated reflection of rhetorical methods, especially simile and metaphor” (Luo,2006;34). English is world-known for its enrichment in idioms, so is Chinese. Anyhow, in the two languages animal idioms could reasonably be regarded as the essence of idioms for their quantity and popularity. These animal idioms, no matter in their origins, or connotative expression, have much close relation to the culture which nourishes them. Thus, the cultural differences in English and Chinese animal idioms often form the main difficulties for people who translate them and those who read and try to understand them. If English learners do not have basic knowledge about the cultural differences of English and Chinese animal idioms, or if the translator cannot handle the distinctions properly, the real meanings of animal idioms will not be understood well, neither is their cultural glamour.

Based on linguists' researches of idioms and cultural image, first, this paper illustrates the results of contrast of animal images in English and Chinese animal idioms with three currently used types; and then, cultural elements which cause similarities and dissimilarities of animal image are discussed in detail. The significance of analyzing cultural elements of animal idioms lies in two. First, it can help learners, especially the beginners to establish right

mode of thing when they run across to idiom confusion, and accordingly settle the question through analogy. Second it can also help people who dealing with bilateral communication affairs, because everyone knows how important it is to be familiar to the culture of the other side, once be aware to the context of culture and the connotative meanings of idioms, there will be far less misunderstanding.

2. PREVIOUS RESEARCH OF ANIMAL IDIOM AND CULTURAL IMAGE

Both in English and Chinese idioms, there are a lot of idioms referring to animals. For example, Comprehensive Dictionary of English idioms (Xiamen University,1985) recorded 90 items of dogs' idioms, 80 items of horses' idioms, and 60 items of cats' idioms. According to the statics made by Liao Guangrong (Liao,2000) there are totally 649 common animal words in English and Chinese. Among these animal words, about 164 animal words own cultural connotations in English, but miss cultural connotations in Chinese, and 21 animal words own cultural connotations in Chinese, but miss cultural connotations in English.

Linguists have long before made their research of idioms beyond the literal meanings. Richard A. Spears, in his most practical publication *NTC's American Idioms Dictionary*, argues that "all languages have phrases or sentences that cannot be understood literally. Even if you know all the grammar of the words in a phrase completely, the meaning of the phrase may still be confusing" (Spears,2000;12). Influenced by system-functional linguistics, researches of animal idioms have been focused on the communicative functions, for example, the book of *Language and Culture* published by Kramersch(1995).With regard to the associative meanings of idioms, Wang Hongyan (Wang H.,2012) summarizes that the common animals in idioms as much as 60 kinds, which mainly includes 5 types: (1) more than 30 kinds of animals in idioms own the similarly cultural connotations; (2) about 10 own differently cultural connotations; (3) more than 10 own the changeable cultural connotations; (4) 8 kinds of distinctive animals in English; (5) 8 kinds of distinctive animals in Chinese.

In China, the research on cultural image and its translation starts with Xie Tianzhen in his book *Medio-translatology* (Xie,2007). In this book Xie defines cultural image and puts emphasis on the inseparable relationship between cultural and culture image. He claims (Xie,2007) that a person living in a certain cultural system would instantly grasp the same associations after a cultural image in his language is mentioned. Cultural images have an inseparable relationship with the history and culture of the society, many of which even originated from totems and folklores. Cultural images can be animals, plants, famous persons, and even numbers. Definitely, in animal idioms the cultural images refer to animals. In the process of human development, people's life and production have never been separated from animal. People formed a kind of delicate and complicated feeling towards animal, therefore, certain animal names are employed in daily communication, and in the course of time, those certain animal names have become animal images which have distinctive cultural connotations in that nation's language. As a matter of fact, animal images serve as the essence of animal idioms, pointing to the central meaning.

3. CONTRAST OF ANIMAL IMAGES IN ENGLISH AND CHINESE ANIMAL IDIOMS

Because some kinds of animals show universe and obvious characteristics, many animal images have same references in English and Chinese language systems. In this case, animal idioms are easy to be translated and understood. However, when contrasting English and Chinese animal idioms, more often animal images with different references have been found. From the perspective of culture, due to the existence of differences in living environment, religion, custom and sense of value, people living in English culture and Chinese culture systems plant separate cultural connotations in animal images. In addition, cultural connotation absence is also frequently existed in dealing with English and Chinese animal images. For instance, turtles have rich cultural connotations in Chinese society, either commendatory or derogatory. But in English speaking countries turtle means nothing more than the animal with hard shell.

In the comparative studies of English and Chinese animal idioms in the relationship of culture, scholars are preferred to use three kinds to classify the results of their discussion in animal images, which are same animal image and same cultural connotation; same animal image and different connotation; same animal name and cultural absence. In the following discussion of contrast of animal images in English and Chinese, the three classified kinds will be used.

3.1 Same animal image and same cultural connotation

Because English and Chinese belong to different language families great differences are found in terms of grammar, pronunciation, spelling, etc.. Nevertheless, the conceptual meanings which the basic words refer to are generally the same, and sometimes, so are the cultural connotations, such as fox, wolf, lamb, dove and pig. e.g.

A fox may grow grey, but never good. 狐狸的颜色会变，但本性不会变（江山易改，本性难移）

He that makes himself a sheep a sheep shall be eaten by the wolf. 甘心做绵羊，早晚喂豺狼

Wolf down one's food 狼吞虎咽

Raising goats for their hair 羊毛出在羊身上

3.2 Same animal image and different cultural connotations

For different nations, living in their own geographic area, usually have different relationships with the animal around, and have developed distinct culture as well as moral values in production and life. That can explain why same animal images in English and Chinese language may have different cultural connotations. In other words, people in English or Chinese society will think of the same specific animal when speaking of a certain animal name, but will associate dissimilar cultural connotations, which are far beyond the literal meaning.

Take “peacock” as an example. No matter in English or Chinese, peacock has an identical conceptual meaning. It refers to a kind of bird which spreads its tail to attract the opposite sex. But “peacock” suggests different associations to English and Chinese people respectively. In Chinese culture, peacock is an auspicious animal, for the extremely bright feathers they have. However, in English society, peacock refers to people who love to make a display of his or

her abilities. Here, the same animal image has caused totally different cultural associations for English and Chinese people. In some cases, one animal image may show commendatory sense in one kind of language, but show derogatory sense in another. More examples are illustrated:

luck dog 幸运儿

as merry as a cricket 快活得像蚰蚰一样 (in Chinese cricket is a symbolic of dreariness)

a cornered cat may be as fierce as a lion. 兔子急了也咬人 (in English hare means craziness)

3.3 Same animal name and cultural absence

This comparison result obviously differs from the above two. If the same animal name in English and Chinese has different meaning, it is just because the certain animal name only has cultural connotation in one of the two languages, or the cultural meaning of that animal is absent. For people from a language family which lacks certain animal's cultural connotation, name of that animal would not suggest any meaning more than the animal itself. If no additional annotation is offered, people is likely to get puzzled and cannot understand the translated animal idiom correctly, let alone realizing the inner sense of culture like users of the original language.

Some examples will help to comprehend the definition of cultural absence. It is widely known in Chinese society that cranes signify longevity because cranes can live for several decades, which is a really long lifespan to birds. Thus in Chinese there are idioms like “鹤发童颜” (have grey hairs but a youthful complexion). “闲云野鹤” (the solitary cloud and the wild crane –refers to the recluses who have no fixed place of abode). Ostrich do not mean anything special in Chinese, but in English it is the metaphor for human who is overcautious, or who want to escape from reality. One example is “play ostrich” (自欺欺人). Other animal images, such as turkey and eel, are also animal images merely having cultural connotations in English. Their cultural meanings in Chinese are absent.

When the animal images contrasted are different, there appear two possible results of comparison: different animal images and same cultural connotation; different images and different connotations (which has been given enough examples above).

In discussion of the first kind result, one factor should be mentioned here is that different animal images sometimes have the same cultural connotations in English and Chinese, in other words, different animal images in respective cultural system may convey identical information and have similar figurative meaning. For example, if Chinese people want to describe “timidity”, they often use mouse as an animal image to add vividness to their address. But in English-speaking countries, people are conditioned to make analogy between coward and animal images like rabbit, chicken, even pigeon, “as timid as a rabbit” (胆小如鼠), “chicken-hearted/pigeon-hearted” (畏首畏尾). More examples:

Bring up a raven and he will pick out your eyes. 养虎遗患

You may take a horse to the water, but you cannot make him drink. 牛不喝水强按头

As strong as a horse 力大如牛

4. ANALYSIS OF CULTURAL ELEMENTS OF SIMILARITIES AND DISSIMILARITIES IN ANIMAL IMAGES

The above discussion has illustrated the phenomenon of cultural images of animal idioms. A further question is what are the causes which lead to the similarities and dissimilarities of these cultural images. To probe this question in detail, the analysis will be distributed into three parts: duality of human evolution, aesthetic perspectives and living environment.

4.1 Duality of human evolution

The Origin of Species by Charles Darwin reveals the myth of evolution, in which a dual conception is presented that all creatures have two forms of evolution: one is universal evolution and the other is particular evolution. We human beings are no exception. And compared with other creatures' revolution, man's revolution involves social and cultural property, thus far more complicated. One salient exhibition is the development of language, which perfectly reflects the duality of the evolution of human being.

At one hand, common evolution of human beings leads to the similarities of cultural images in English and Chinese animal idioms. At the other hand, special evolution brings about the differences.

The universal evolution, when integrated into various kinds of civilizations, means the universality existing in life experience and ideological understanding. For example, people of all races know that sheep are gentle and easy to be reared, while dogs are aggressive and suitable for security.

“The universality directly influences the languages so that those communication media, though implemented by distinct kinds of cultures, have similar characteristics” (Yu,2000;65) . Therefore it is out of question that the animal idioms in English and Chinese do have something in common. And this phenomenon of similarity is, sometime, astonishing. e.g.

Her daughter is just as gentle as a lamb. 她的女儿简直像绵羊一样乖巧

The traffic was moving at a snail's pace. 车辆像蜗牛般缓慢爬行

Result from the similarities in terms of experience and perspectives, English animal idiom and its Chinese counterpart at times happen to have the same form, which however, as we know now, is not a coincidence as a matter of fact.

It is worth notice that some idioms are produced by cultural communication. “Every culture has an instinct appetite for excellent cultural production, thus different cultures enjoy sharing with each other”(Wang N.,2005;51). This kind of exchange often leads to duplicate animal idioms in English and Chinese. For a large portion of them it is hard to define which side of culture that idiom originates from, but they can be referred to the term “foreign word”, or “loan word”. e.g.

A toad lusting after a swan's flesh 癞蛤蟆想吃天鹅肉

That politician cries wolf in every speech he makes. 那个政客在每篇演说中都大叫“狼来了”。

Particular evolution, as the term suggests, points to the distinct features generated by different period of time, by the same human constitution. The particular evolution seems to be more prevalent when compared with the universal evolution.

These examples are just as tips of the iceberg, for the reason that the distinct animal idioms in the two language system are too numerous to list. Thanks to the effect of particular evolution on culture, animal idioms are greatly enriched to decorate different languages.

4.2 Aesthetic perspectives

Aesthetic perspective is a philosophical concept concerned with the idea of beauty. It is all-pervading in human society. According to philosophical view, no subject exists, either concrete or abstract, without a given aesthetic meaning, though this process is artificial and sometimes does not have anything to do with the subject itself. People tend to response towards a subject according to their aesthetic perspectives. e.g. because the crow always appears when it smells decaying, people subjectively treat it as a symbolic of death.

In centuries-long history, English culture and Chinese culture has developed aesthetic perspectives by no means alike. Based on the subjectivity of the aesthetic perspectives, animal idioms of each culture reflect the influences of religion, conception of the world and fixed cognition.

First, there are aesthetic perspectives shaped by religion. Religion has been deeply impacting people's spiritual world in the long river of human being's history, and cultural images, to a great extent, are also tied to local religion. In general, people in different cultural systems believe in different religions. English and Chinese users have distinct religious background, and as a matter of course, the aesthetic perspective shaped by respective religions can be widely divergent, sometime even entirely contrary.

Ever since Buddhism was immigrated into ancient China, more than a thousand years ago, it has always been one of the prevalent religions in Chinese society. Chinese culture is tightly related to Buddhism, and the effect of Buddhism reflected in animal idioms is that many animal names chosen to be the subjects of idioms have the correspondent figures, positive or negative, as is implicated by Buddhism doctrines.

The crane is a kind of animal which implying loftiness, besides, it also has a meaning of the immorality of the lofty. The crane is an animal image full of positive meaning in Chinese culture. In Chinese there are a lot of idioms about cranes that conveying such kind of information. e.g.

焚琴煮鹤 (burn famous string instrument for fuel and cook crane for meat)do things that spoiling the beauty

闲云野鹤(floating clouds and wild crane) to be as unworldly as clouds and cranes

鹤立鸡群(like a crane standing among chickens) to be a giant among dwarfs

In most western societies, the religion that influences society most deeply is Christianity.

“Christian doctrines extend intensively through the dissemination of the Bible, which has a force so unprecedented that lifts itself to the dominate position in the spiritual world of most westerners”(Collins,1999;66). The Bible describes many stories about animals, with strong implied meaning. Based on the popularity of the Bible, substantial animal idioms have been derived from those stories:

Separate the sheep from the goats 区分好坏

Lion in the way 拦路虎

A living dog is better than a dead lion 好死不如赖活着

Second, there are aesthetic perspectives shaped by ancient conception of the world.

In this case, the dragon can be taken as a good example as a special subject of animal idioms. As is well known, the dragon is an imagination both in English and Chinese culture. But it has different background from which it comes into being, even different figuration.

The universe, seen from the ancient westerners, is the aggregation of substantiality. The regeneration of society could only be achieved through the reconstruct to the world. The dragon is regarded as the symbol of severe environment which people should conquer. In *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable*, a dragon is described as a fabulous winged crocodile, usually represented as of large size, with a serpent's tail. Especially in the middle ages, dragon is the symbolic of pagan and devil. What the Anglo-Saxon epic, *Beowulf*, describes is the fight between the brave king and the evil dragon. More instances:

Her mother is a real dragon. 她妈妈是个狠角色

The woman in charge of the accounts department is an absolute dragon. 会计科的女科长是个名符其实的母夜叉

However, Chinese traditional culture, contrarily, believed that the world is made up of Xu---a kind of air, and mankind can hardly reconstruct the world. Ancient Chinese people had to make up a divine animal image, which was the “almighty” dragon, so that they could pin their hope on it when the cruelty of nature comes. It is not able to verify at what time dragon first appeared as a sacred figure in China. But it is assured that ancient Chinese believe firmly that this “animal” is in charge of the supernatural power to control the world. People adored dragon, praised dragon, and impetrated it for safety and harvest. Even the emperors called themselves “descendants of the dragon” to dominate their nations. Thereby dragon has a very propitious meaning in Chinese idioms.

龙腾虎跃(dragons riding and tigers leaping) a scene of bustling activity

画龙点睛(bring the painted dragon to life by painting out the pupils of its eyes) add the touch that brings a work of art to life

龙生龙，凤生凤(dragon's offspring is still dragon, while phoenix's offspring is still phoenix) Noble family has equally excellent offspring.

Third, there are aesthetic perspectives shaped by fixed cognition.

Cognition here points to the general perception existing in a certain culture. Due to

complicated reasons, every culture has fixed opinions towards nearly everything. People born in a cultural system gain a certain degree of indigenous cognition without specialized learning. The cognition is objective but related to people's substantial and spiritual life.

Once people's cognition towards an animal are fixed, they will see the animal from a fixed perception, then produce different response. In this sense, dog is taken as an example to illustrate how fixed cognition affects animal idioms. In Chinese idioms dogs are often mentioned as degrading and despicable:

狗拿耗子多管闲事(Dogs try to catch mice) Poke one's nose into other people's business.

狗急跳墙(a dog will leap over a wall in desperation) A cornered beast will do something desperate.

狗眼看人低(an expression of criticism) judge people by wealth and power

However, in English idioms, the dog enjoys great praise for its loyalty and intellect.

Dog one's steps 跟某人走

Love me, love my dog 爱屋及乌

Every dog has his day 凡人皆有得意的日

4.3 Living environment

In ancient time, human beings have no capacities to change the geographic living environment, and little even today. What they can do is to acclimating. Geographic environment plays a significant role in shaping regional culture.

The diversity of the living environment, together with the adaptation made by human beings accordingly, result in particular culture patterns. What's more, most of the customs are shaped by geographical environmental factors. People may have a clearer comprehension by comparing cuisine of various regions around the world due to climatic difference, e.g. people in China, Japan and Vietnam prefer rice to be their stable food, anyhow, when it comes to Britain, French and Germany, people prefer wheat instead of rice as the climate there is more feasible to plant wheat.

The most part of China is inland place where people basically depend on earth for survival. Nevertheless, Britain, as the headstream of English language, is an island country. For a long time, Britain's typical marine climate has led to the highly dependency of the sea in British habitants. Fishing and navigation industry have become domestic pillar industries, particularly before the First Industrial Revolution, and that can explain why British people have a special passion for aquatics.

In respect that livestock plays a significant role in Chinese agriculture, there are plentiful

Chinese animal idioms involve cattle, house, chicken, etc..

对牛弹琴(play the lute to a cow) to have the wrong audience

牛头不对马嘴(horses' jaws do not match cows' head) as incongruous as the mouth of a horse on the head of an ox

In English traditional fish culture penetrates into people's life. Fish and other animals related to the sea can be found in many idioms:

I prefer staying in my own bookstore in the town, because here I am a big fish in a small pond.我宁可守着我在镇上的书店，店虽小，但这里我说了算。

Do not invite Rose to the party, she is such a cold fish. 别邀请罗斯来派对，她对人总是冷冰冰的。

Have other fish to fry 另有要事

Neither fish nor fowl 非驴非马

The causes of similarities and dissimilarities of cultural images in English and Chinese animal idioms is due much to the three cultural elements discussed above, the analysis of which can help people, in the processes of translating or understanding animal idioms in English or in Chinese, make out the figurative meanings of animal idioms and choose suitable words to express them in their mother language system.

5. CONCLUSION

No matter in English or in Chinese, animal idioms are a kind of idioms used most frequently in people's communication. Animal idioms, though being numerous and full of metaphorical meanings, are likely to cause confusion and even misapprehension between English and Chinese in talking, reading or translating. Therefore, the relationship between animal idioms and the cultural image underneath them should be given enough attention in expression and translation. Only by combining animal idioms with the cultural element together, can people convey information effectively and accurately.

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