

A Treasury of Wit and Wisdom Through the Ages

—A Contrastive Study of English and Chinese Proverbs and the
Translation between Them

厦门大学博硕士学位论文摘要库

SYNOPSIS

Proverbs are succinct and pithy sayings of general use, expressing commonly held beliefs and ideas. Proverbs are part of every spoken language and are related to such other forms of folk literature as fables and riddles that have originated in oral tradition. Anyone interested in language will, of course, recognize the value in knowing the proverbs of another language. And in fact, nobody really masters a foreign language without being able to understand its proverbs and communicate through them. The basic thoughts and opinions of another culture are expressed in them. And only by being able to use them can one hope to gain true fluency and be accepted by native speakers.

Proverbs are found in all languages, and their comparison provides insight into the effects of cultural conditions, language, and local variations on expression. Originated in oral tradition and as a form of folk literature, proverbs play an important role in reflection of a culture. Comparisons of proverbs found in various parts of the world show that the same kernel of wisdom may be gleaned under different cultural conditions and languages. The biblical proverb, *Do not throw pearls to swine*, (*Matthew 7, 6)(Var. *To cast pearls before swine*.) for example, has an equivalent among the proverbs in Dutch: 'To strew roses before pigs'. In Chinese, we have *To play the lute to a cow* (对牛弹琴) and we also have the equivalent Japanese proverb, *Giving gold coins to a cat* (*Neko ni koban*). All of these refer to giving important advice to someone who is not paying attention and all of them form part of the codes of behavior and exemplify the proverb's use for transmission of folk wisdom and rules of conducts.

Therefore, this thesis mainly deals with the characteristics of English and Chinese proverbs and their translation in cross-cultural communication. Based on the great achievement in paremiology — a scientific discipline whose main interest is proverbs — as well as a great number of proverbs, the author specifies and analyzes the different definitions given of a proverb, especially English and Chinese proverbs — the difference and similarity of their origins, their stylistic attributes, their contents, and their developing processes. Meanwhile, considering the large amount of proverbs

employed in the literary works, the author suggests some strategies in dealing with the translation between English and Chinese proverbs. In the end, the author reiterates the importance of this study.

The author accomplished this plan in six major chapters, of which the first Chapter is about what a proverb is and its functions, the second to the fifth chapter are devoted to the comparative and contrastive studies of English and Chinese proverbs, namely, the stylistic attributes, the various origins, contents and variants respectively and the sixth chapter deals with the translation between these two proverbs.

Chapter one is divided into two sections, of which the first considers the various functions of proverbs and the second considers the definitions given from different angles. The study of proverbs is necessary because they are extensively used in many fields. Therefore, in the first section, the author specifies the functions of proverbs in the modern society. The problem of defining a proverb appears as old as people's interest in it and hence in the second section, the author makes three points, of which the first is devoted to the folk definitions of proverbs, the second definitions given in dictionaries and encyclopedias and the third the definitions given by paremiologists.

Proverbs are of course distinguished by special stylistic traits, which are the markers of proverb in some way. English and Chinese people, in their long run of literary development, have found different ways to realize the special forms of their proverbs, some of which are the same for both English and Chinese proverbs and some are not. Therefore, the second chapter is devoted to the comparative and contrastive study of the stylistic attributes of English and Chinese proverbs, which are discussed from three aspects. The first is about the structural traits, which is subdivided into: the general traits of proverbs, some structural traits of Chinese proverbs and unique structures of English proverbs. The second is about the imaginary figures, which comprises of metaphor, personification, hyperbole and metonymy. The third is about the phonological figures, which include rhyme, alliteration and assonance.

The origins, contents and changes of a proverb are important factors in reflecting a certain culture. Therefore, in chapter three, four and five, the author mainly talks

about the origins, the contents and the developing of English and Chinese proverbs respectively.

Chapter three deals with the comparisons and contrasts of the origins of the two proverbs, which include proverbs that originated from the folk, proverbs based on narratives etc. Part four considers the differences and sameness of the contents of English and Chinese proverbs, which is subdivided into eight parts dealing with historical proverbs, weather proverbs, agricultural proverbs etc. respectively. Among these, some can be found in both languages and others are unique to a language, depending on the different contents and the cultures of the two nations.

Chapter five is another branch of the comparison and contrast. Like other forms of literature, proverbs do evolve with the time. This is shown in the emergence of new proverbs and disappearance of old proverbs. Therefore, the author divides this part into two parts, one is about the emergence of new sayings and the variants of proverbs, and the other is about the disappearance of some old proverbs. Considering the limit of space and also those that have already been discussed in the previous chapters, the author attaches emphasis, in the first section, on the anti-proverb phenomenon in English and the emergence of eulogistic proverbs in Chinese. The second section is devoted to the disappearance of some old proverbs, which exists in both English and Chinese languages.

Proverbs are extensively employed in literary works, in persuasive speech and other areas, so people have more chances to come across them either in interpreting or literary translation. Therefore, how to handle the proverb translation has become a task of top priority in cross-cultural communications. So chapter six mainly deals with the translation between English and Chinese proverbs. And this chapter is subdivided into four sections. The first section, the author analyses the necessity of proverb translation between English and Chinese by showing that proverbs are frequently used in literary works. In the second section, the author analyses the issue of translatability or untranslatability of proverbs, which has been in controversy ever since the study of it began. In the third section, a couple of theories concerning the translation of proverbs in the history of translation study have been listed. The fourth

section is devoted to the author's strategies in dealing with the proverb translation, in which the classification of proverbs is the basis.

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CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION

1. 1 Functions of Proverbs

Proverbs are small pieces of human wisdom that have been handed down from generation to generation and that continue to be applicable and valid even in our modern technological age. In nearly every language with a long history in the world, there are a large number of proverbs existing. They are the seeds of human wisdom and experience and also the cream of the language. Some proverbs, like *Everything comes to him who waits*; *Steady and slow go far in a day*; *Set a thief to catch a thief*; *If you can't be good, be careful*; 一寸光阴一寸金, 寸金难买寸光阴; 良药苦口利于病, 忠言逆耳利于行, have provided many with standards of conduct and guiding principles for life. From an early age, we know such famous proverbs as *Genius is fostered by industry* by Cicero and *Labor conquers everything* by Virgil. Now we know *A true friend is one who knows all your faults and loves you still* and the proverbial pronouncement of *Flowers of true friendship never fade*.

As we know, proverbs do not function as mere poetic adornments of speech; neither are they used, normally, to meet man's needs for philosophical phrasemongering. As a rule, they are used for some practical, pragmatical purposes in various circumstances of everyday communication. With the aid of a proverb one can aim to provide an endorsement to his statements and opinions, forecast something, express doubts, reproach someone with something, accuse someone of something, justify or excuse somebody, mock somebody, comfort somebody, jeer at somebody's misfortune, repent something, warn against something, advise something or interdict somebody from doing something, and so on, and so forth. It is unthinkable to consider the proverb apart from such pragmatic functions.

In nonliterate societies, anthropologists have found that studying the proverbs of a native tribe gives clues to the worldviews of its members regarding such matters as education, law, business, and marriage. There is no aspect of life that proverbs do not comment on, and in nonliterate societies they serve as rules of conduct and basic wisdom to be adhered to by subsequent generations.

Proverbs survive in more advanced societies where communication is based on various modes of writing and speaking. A cultural or literary historian, for example, can learn a great deal about the age of Shakespeare by studying the use of proverbs in his many plays. A careful reading of *Hamlet*, for example, will show that proverbs are useful as a ready-made linguistic tool in argumentation and persuasion, the effectiveness of which is further increased by creating linguistic puns in the actual proverb application. A few centuries later, one finds Charles Dickens using proverbs with a high frequency to depict the social ills of his time. And Carl Sandburg used proverbs in his poems concerning the American melting pot of various national and immigrant groups. For him the proverbs of the various immigrant groups helped blend the world view of this new society: ‘ A code arrives; language; lingo; slang; behold the proverbs of a people, a nation.’ (Sandburg:

In modern business and politics the understanding of proverbs plays a major role, often being the key to the success or breakdown of communications. It is a known fact that interpreters at the United Nations prepare themselves for their extremely sensitive job by learning proverbs of the foreign languages, since politicians often argue or attempt to convince their opponents by the use of a native proverb. No matter how sophisticated the debate, eventually every heated exchange can be reduced to an emotional war of proverbs.

Even advertising agents have learned to appreciate the traditional value of using proverbs as advertising headlines. Take for instance, a bank ad’s *A penny saved is a penny earned*, or a health food store’s *An apple a day keeps the doctor away*. Often the traditional proverb text is varied to catch the reader’s attention and to create interest in reading the text of the ad. Similarly, effective use of the proverb, *Don’t ask a man for a favor before he has had his lunch*, was the basis of Time, Inc.’s Fortune Research Subscriber Census Card requesting information on readers’ business interests and responsibilities.

In like manner, a high school principal’s newsletter quoted the Chinese proverb “ *one kind word will warm three winter months*” in reporting the outpouring of support and love for the school after a field-house break-in and loss of expensive equipment

jeopardized the football team's schedule. Suffering and cruelty were mercifully replaced by hope and inspiration.

These are only a few examples of how proverbs continue to be of significance and practical use. In a world getting smaller through new technological advances almost every day, communication with new individuals and groups of people increases steadily. Each individual is, however, to a certain degree preprogrammed by the traditional proverb stock that continues to be handed down from generation to generation. At the same time, new proverbs are still being added to this repertoire. While new proverbs are added to the basic stock, older ones may drop out since they no longer reflect newer attitudes. But a basic stock of proverbs remains in any ethnic or national group, and they continue to be effective expressions of the varied experiences of mankind everywhere.

There is a proverb for any and every situation, occasion, or condition! They 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 human communications, because they can provide wit, colorful language, imagery and authority. They can strengthen an argument, help to disprove false statements, emotionalize a speech or an article, educate the young pupil or student about people and human nature, and provide a humorous, ironical or satirical mirror of the human condition everywhere. They are the true voice of all the people.

They contain wisdom for everyone for every possible situation, for proverbs reflect the joys and sorrows, the fortune and misfortune, and the good the bad of everyday life. The proverbs contain a basic philosophy of life or worldview, which, though expressed in different metaphors, shows that common people around the world believe in mankind's desire to live a good and decent life. And despite the pessimistic attitudes in some of them, there appears to be present a certain pragmatic optimism in the majority of proverbs. They seem to say that *There is nothing new under the sun* and that *Hope springs eternal*. By listening to and reading the proverbs of people of other nations, we might well come one step closer to understanding their frustrations, dreams, wishes and most of all, their cultures.

1.2 Definitions of A Proverb

1.2.1 Folk Definitions of Proverbs.

The problem of defining a proverb appears to be as old as man's interest in them. Not only did such great minds as Aristotle and Plato occupy themselves with the question of what constitutes a proverb, but early Greek paremiographers (the compilers of proverbs) in particular wrestled with this seemingly insurmountable task as well. Before giving a serious definition, it might be wise to mention here at least some of the proverbs which in themselves are folk definitions of a sort: "*A good maxim is never out of season*"; "*All the good sense of the world runs into proverb*"; "*Proverbs are the children of experience*"; "*Proverbs are the wisdom of the streets*"; "*Proverbs cannot be contradicted*"; "*Though the old proverb be given up, it is none the less true*"; "*The wisdom of the proverb cannot be surpassed*"; "*Common proverb seldom lies*"; "*The old saying, long proved true, shall never be belied*"; "*Every proverb is truth*"; "*A proverb can't be judged*"; etc.

It appears that to the mind of proverb users, i.e. the general population in all walks of life, the proverb contains a good dose of common sense, experience, wisdom and above all truth.

Wolfgang Mieder once collected from students, friends and acquaintances a sample of 55 proverb definitions, which may be able to give us a general idea what people today think a proverb to be. After analyzing these definitions from members of the sophisticated and highly educated society, he got such definitions like this, 'A proverb is a short, generally known sentence that expresses common, traditional and didactic views in a metaphorical and fixed form and which is easily remembered and repeated' (*Proverbium 2*, 1985), which will certainly help to come to terms with a general definition of the proverb as the "folk," and not the scholar, sees it.

1.2.2 Definitions given in Dictionaries and Encyclopedias

After taking a brief look at what common people think as a proverb, we had better

resort to more authoritative sources—dictionaries and encyclopedias for our answer.

<Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, 3rd edition>

A proverb is a short well-known statement that contains advice about life in general.

<Webster's Third New International Dictionary>

A proverb is a brief epigrammatic saying that is a popular byword: an oft-repeated pithy and ingeniously turned maxim, adage, saw. For instance, '*Marry in haste, repent at leisure.*'

<Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language (WE)>

A proverb is 1) a short popular saying, usually of unknown and ancient origin, that expresses effectively some commonplace truth or useful thought; adage; saw. 2) a wise saying or precept; a didactic sentence. 3) (Bible) a profound saying, maxim or oracular utterance requiring interpretation.

Therefore a proverb is such a saying popularly known and repeated, usually expressing simply and concretely, though often metaphorically, a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of mankind.

Let us then take a look at what the encyclopedias say. Microsoft Encarta explains:

Proverb is a concise statement, in general use, expressing a shrewd perception about everyday life or a universally recognized truth. Most proverbs are rooted in folklore and have been preserved by oral tradition. An example of such commonplace wisdom is "*A rolling stone gathers no moss.*" The Bible has provided a large number of proverbs, for example, "*An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.*" Some proverbs have literary origins, as in the case of Benjamin Franklin's adaptation of Aesop's proverb "*The gods help them that help themselves.*" Franklin himself originated the proverb "*Early to bed and early to rise, makes a man healthy, wealthy, and wise.*" Proverbs are appealing because they are succinct and because they use simple rhyme ("*A friend in need is a friend indeed*"), irony ("*Physician, heal thyself*"), metaphor ("*Still waters run deep*"), and comparison or contrast ("*Feed a cold and starve a fever*"). Encarta: "proverb")

According to *Encyclopedia Britannica*, proverbs are succinct and pithy saying in general use, expressing commonly held ideas or beliefs. They are part of every spoken language and are related to such other forms of folk literature as riddles and fables that originated in oral tradition. And generally, there are certain stylistic similarities among proverbs from the same part of the world. For example, many languages use rhyme, alliteration, parallelism and word play in their proverbs. And generally, folk proverbs are commonly illustrated with homely imagery —household objects, farm animals and pets and the events of daily life. (Britannica: “proverb”)

1.2.3 Definitions Given by Paremiologists

Paremiologists are those who are engaged in the study of proverbs. Bartlett Jere Whiting had already in 1932 assembled dozens of definitions from ancient times to the modern age in his remarkable essay on “The Nature of the Proverb.” (Harvard Studies, 1932) The last fifty years since Whiting’s detailed study have witnessed highly scholarly articles, monographs and even books which all seek to come to terms with a universal proverb definition. Scholars around the world continue to find their own so-called “working definitions,” of which some are, “a popular saying in a relatively fixed form which is, or has been, in oral circulation” by Brunvand, “the wisdom of many, the wit of one” by Lord John Russel in terms of their origin, “sum up a situation...characterize its essence” in terms of their nature and “...to provide an argument for a course of action which conforms to community values” in terms of their function.

Wolfgang Mieder, an authority in this field, says in the preface of *the Prentice-Hall Encyclopedia of World Proverbs*, ‘proverbs simply defined are concise statements of an apparent truth that have currency among the people because they contain a generally accepted insight, observation, and wisdom.’ But he has to admit, ‘Anyone who has worked with proverbs will recognize immediately the difficulties inherent in establishing a workable definition..’. ‘Of the three criteria contained in the above definition,’ he continues, ‘the first two—econcision and truth—work fairly well (although some of the texts, far from being genuinely concise, are surprisingly wordy); the third criterion is more problematical.’ He takes the entries collection of the

encyclopedia as an example. ‘Each entry was of course submitted by someone who considered it a “current” saying, but of what does “currency” really consist, and how is the degree of “currency” to be ascertained?’

A Nigeria Professor Yisa Kehinde Yusuf defines proverb as: a short, repeated and witty statement of experience which is used to further a social end. ‘Unlike previous adaptations’, he said, ‘the present one does not regard wisdom and truth as essential characteristics of the proverb. This position is motivated by the fact that, considering the overwhelming misogyny of proverbs relating to women in a range of remarkably distinct languages and nations or cultures, to associate proverbs with wisdom and truth would inadvertently be to believe that misogyny is wisdom and sexism is truth.’ (*De Proverbio*1, 1997)

And yet, despite paremiologists’ erudite and important new definitions based on structural, semiotic or linguistic insights, all must eventually agree with the contention of the old master proverb scholar Archer Taylor that ‘an incommunicable quality tells us this sentence is proverbial and that one is not.’ (Taylor: 3) The newer definitions might in fact fit those sentences which we know already to be proverbial, but, again in the words of the insightful Taylor, ‘no definition will enable us to identify positively a sentence as proverbial.’ A definition cannot deal with such aspects as currency, tradition and familiarity which certainly are necessary ingredients for a true proverb.

Skirting Archer Taylor's pessimism about accurately defining the proverb, Winton embraces functional and linguistic characteristics as noted by D. Zeller [Würzburg: Echter Verlag, 1977]): (1) “In both form and content the saying exhibits a generalizing character which allows it to be applied in similar situations” (p. 33); (2) “[T]he proverbial saying is seen to be independent of context; there is a sense in which it can 'stand on its own'” (p. 34); (3) “[B]inary form [is] a common feature of proverbial sayings” (p. 34); (4) “Certain stylistic features are common in proverbial sayings which help to distinguish them from ordinary speech,” (p. 35), such as terseness and elevated diction; biblical references and another of authors cited; and (5) “The proverb may be distinguished from the riddle on account of the lack of clarity in

the sense of the riddle” (p. 35).

B. J. Whiting’s statement: “Happily no definition (of the proverb) is necessary since we all know what a proverb is” may sound like an anecdote, but it is so usually quoted in texts that deal with paremiological problems that it may soon become a proverb by itself. Generally speaking, what is mutually accepted as well known and thus never defined, can either be extremely simple, or so complicated that it can not even be verbalized. In the case of the proverb, a phrase that is often heard is that as a genre it is characterized by a ‘relative simplicity’. However, as one goes through the actual paremiological material and research, it is exactly its relative simplicity that one becomes aware of.

Linguists, folklorists, psychologists, sociologists, they all seem to deal more with ‘operational’ definitions that serve the purposes of their own research in the frames of their disciplines. The most accurate definition seems to be the one that combines it all. By the term proverb, this dissertation refers to a short witty statement, rhymed or unrhymed, with or without a metaphor, which has currency among people in certain area or certain period of time due to its obvious wisdom, observation or insight and is used to further a social end.

1.2.4 Chinese Proverb Equals to *Yan- yu* (谚语)?

Before closing this part, we had better take a brief look at the definitions given of *yan- yu*(谚语), to see whether *yan- yu* equals to Chinese proverb.

Xiandai Hanyu Cidian (《现代汉语词典》) defines it as “set sentence popular among the masses, expressing incisive meanings in terse form and simple words.” The examples cited are: 三个臭皮匠, 赛过诸葛亮; 三百六十行, 行行出状元 and 天下无难事, 只怕有心人。

Cihai (《辞海》) regards it as “ a kind of folk adage, circulating among the folks, pithy and easy to understand, but quite meaningful. Most of them are reflections of people’s experiences in living and production activities. It is also a form of folk literature.” It

gives 人多力齐推山倒, 众人拾柴火焰高 as an example.

New English and Chinese Dictionary (《新英汉词典》) translates proverb as: *yan-yu* (谚语), *ge-yan* (格言) and *zhen-yan* (箴言), which is mainly used in the translation of the *Book of Proverbs*. Therefore, in definition, proverb and *yan-yu* are quite the same. Arthur H. Smith in his book *Proverbs and Common Sayings from the Chinese* also thinks that the English word 'proverb' is equivalent to Chinese 'su-yu' (俗语) or 'su-hua' (俗话), (陈文伯: 3) which is exactly what 'yan-yu' is in Chinese.

From the simple discussion above, and according to the convention of translation circles, the term "proverb" in English roughly equates with the Chinese 'yan-yu', which is also stated by Chen wen-bo in his *English and Chinese Idioms*. And they are usually used to represent each other in the corresponding languages. Therefore, in this dissertation, 'Chinese proverb' means Chinese *yan-yu* or *su-yu*.

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