

A Study of Idiomatic Phrase Culture in a Dream of Red Mansions

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Abstract: In Chinese culture and art, language can be regarded as the carrier of culture. The creation of literature needs the support of language to mold the situation, convey the emotion and inherit the culture. Among China's four great classic novels in our country, A Dream of Red Mansions is a classic work that suits both refined and popular tastes. For the creation of A Dream of Red Mansions, the role of language cannot be underestimated, and it can even be said that A dream of Red Mansions has reached the peak of the height in the use of language. The dramatic development of the plot and the vivid expression of the social conditions are inseparable from the author's profound language skills, and the application of idiomatic phrases in A Dream of Red Mansions also adds a different flavor to the novel. This paper mainly studies the use of idiomatic phrases in the novel A Dream of Red Mansions, first summarizes idiomatic phrases culture, and then deeply analyzes the idiomatic phrases, the rhetoric of idiomatic phrases and the culture reflected by idiomatic phrases in A Dream of Red Mansions.

A Dream of Red Mansions is one of the representative works of early modern writing in the vernacular, which is rich in lexical resources. Language itself is a kind of human resources, and has the characteristics of inexhaustible. In A Dream of Red Mansions, we can also see the spoken words and popular phrases in the society, and see that the idiomatic phrases in it still have vitality in today's society. On the basis of lexicology and sociolinguistics, a study of the idiom culture in A Dream of Red Mansions can achieve a more in-depth dialogue between contemporary people and the author as well as the protagonist, and can be carefully studied from the perspective of literary history, so as to explore richer and more profound literary value.

1. An overview of idiomatic phrases and their culture

According to the expressions of idiomatic phrases, Cihai specially interprets, it includes the following two kinds: one is a set phrase or a sentence, which can not be arbitrarily changed in the specific use, including the form, meaning and so on, such idiomatic phrases mainly include idioms, proverbs, allegorical sayings, etc. The other refers to the commonly used words in the daily life. In the application of idioms, the deep symbolic meaning of idioms is usually used to express semantics. Idioms usually have literal meaning, and when they are used, the figurative meaning under their literal meaning should be explored. Idioms are formed under a certain social and cultural background. From idioms, we can learn that the life habits of different nationalities are conditioned

by cultural phenomena, and can carry on the comprehensive understanding to the national traditional thought, the moral idea, the religious belief as well as the custom and so on. In the study of idiomatic phrases culture, we should be aware of the nationality of the language, and at the same time, we should translate idiomatic expressions in a specific context. The research of idiomatic phrases can be used as an important channel to acquire knowledge and broaden horizons, therefore, idiomatic phrase is also a language and culture with significant application value.

2. Idiomatic phrases in A Dream in Red Mansions

A study of the language in A Dream of Red Mansions shows that a large number of idiomatic phrases are also used, which can increase the expressive force of emotion and help to shape the situation. A thorough analysis of the idiomatic phrases culture in A Dream of Red Mansions shows that it can be divided into two types when used, i. e. single type and coupled type.

2.1. Single type

If the structures in idiomatic phrases are single, they are called single-type idiomatic phrases. Single-type idiomatic phrases are frequently used in A Dream of Red Mansions, and they are often used when the pragmatic subject quotes them secretly. Generally, as single-type idiomatic phrases appear, there will be certain discourse markers, "as the saying goes" this marker is common.

Have a windfall. Ping-erh promised and went out of the garden gate. When she came to the house, she found Hsi-feng was not in the room. Suddenly, I saw again Grandma Liu and Baner who had a windfall, sitting in the other room... (Chapter 39 of A Dream of Red Mansions). In this context, "have a windfall" is a idiomatic phrase, which can also mean seeking gratuitous financial help or obtaining gifts of money. "Have a windfall" comes out of "Where there is abundance, go to have a windfall". After a long period of use, the meaning of "have a windfall" has a corresponding general meaning. in this article, it can be interpreted as asking money and property for the rich through the use of various relationships and excuses.

A lean camel is bigger than a horse. Grandma Liu first heard about the hardship, but she thought nothing of it, and then she heard that she would be given two hundred pennyworth, so "I know how hard it is, " she said with a smile. "But as the saying goes, 'a lean camel is bigger than a horse'." (Chapter 6 of A Dream of Red Mansions). The reader is familiar with the saying "a lean camel is bigger than a horse" , which is full of life flavor. However, in A Dream of the Red Mansions, the character of Grandma Liu is full of common sayings and what Grandma Liu said always refreshed the people in the grand garden. Moreover, a thorough study of the single-type idiomatic phrases used in A Dream of Red Mansions, there are also "speak or act on hearsay" in Chapter 57, "don't talk short stature in front of the short" , "no one keeps him if he wants to go" and so on in Chapter 46.

2.2. Coupled type

Different from the single-type idiomatic phrase, the coupled-type one has two structures. By using coupled-type one, a comparison can be made. When the idiomatic phrase is used, there will be a longer pause and corresponding mark in its before and behind voice, which is the same as the single-type one, and the discourse mark of "as the saying goes" is more common.

2.2.1 A single thread can't make a cord nor a single tree a forest

"Don't worry, " said Shi Xiangyun, "'A single thread can't make a cord nor a single tree a forest.'

You've got a wife now. When you have harder words and fight harder, you can escape to Nanjing to find that wife. " (Chapter 56 in *A Dream of Red Mansions*). In the coupled-type idiomatic phrases, both idiomatic phrases themselves can be used alone, but when used together, they have similar structures and semantics. The origin of the idiomatic phrase "a single thread can't make a cord" is the second fold of the Yuan Dynasty's anonymous serial book *The Serial Meters*. This idiom means that a single thread can not be twisted to make a cord, implying the thinness of one's power. But "a single tree does not make a forest" is a idiomatic phrase of *Achieving the Gist* by Cui Yin in the Han Dynasty, the specific meaning of this idiomatic phrase also refers to the limits of individual power, and the two idioms used in combination can emphasize the limitation of one's power, and further foil the context.

2.2.2 If the King of Hell tells you to die, who dares to keep you here

But these ghosts refuse to practice favoritism, on the contrary, they shout or bawl Qin Zhongdao angrily," You are a scholar, don't you know the idiomatic phrase, 'If the King of Hell tells you to die, who dares to keep you here?'" (Chapter 16 in *A Dream of the Red Mansions*). This idiomatic phrase is a familiar one and has been passed down to this day. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, this kind of idiomatic phrases are widely used, thus embodying the characteristic of appreciating both refined and popular literature works.

3. The rhetoric of idiomatic phrases in *A Dream in Red Mansions*

Idiomatic phrases themselves are created by the people under certain social and cultural background, and in the process of creation, people adopt more rhetoric ways, which make idiomatic phrases culture more colorful. In the creation of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the author, Cao Xueqin, in terms of the social popular idiomatic phrases, made a careful choice of idiomatic phrases in the light of the development of the plot and the shaping of the characters and the expressions of idiomatic phrases are also processed and refined in the concrete application, so more idiomatic expressions are used in the concrete application, which mainly include the following:

3.1. Metaphor

The metaphor of idioms has its own characteristics, and idioms are usually short and concise, so it is necessary to go straight to the heart of the matter when we use metaphor, so as to improve the image of the metaphor. In the process of metaphor used in specific idiomatic phrases, we need more concrete, simple and popular things to show the profound and abstract truth more directly in front of readers. For example, Jia Zhen said with a smile: "So the honest people, the Zhuangs, 'the outside does not know what is inside' , 'yellow cypress wood for finishing the hammer of chime stone -- decent outside and bitter inside' "!(Chapter 53 in *A Dream of the Red Mansions*) In this idiomatic phrase, "yellow cypress wood" refers to a bitter and astringent taste, while "chime stone" is an ancient percussion instrument with a beautiful appearance. Therefore, the application of these two referents can be used to highlight the truth, that is, "decent outside and bitter inside". However, according to the context of the article, the deeper meaning of this sentence is that the Jias is experiencing an economic crisis in spite of its apparent splendor. As another example, Ping'erh whispered, pointing to every wife,"... he acts coquettishly, and his wife has to humor him a little, and his second concubine doesn't dare to do. You dare to underestimate him, just like the egg strikes the stone. " (Chapter 55 in *A Dream of the Red Mansions*) In the above idiomatic phrase, "the egg strikes the stone", the egg and the stone themselves are two completely different hardness of things, used to compare the strength of people or things, and the relatively weak side will certainly

encounter failure. According to the context, the metaphor here is that Tanchun was born out of a concubine in the Rong Mansion, but she had a strong character and was brave and capable, so she was not looked down upon by others.

3.2. Antithesis

Idiomatic phrases that can form antithesis generally have the same word number, structure and content. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, antithesis is widely used in the application of idiomatic phrases, which can be combined with coupled-type idiomatic phrases. The antithesis in idiomatic phrases includes two forms, one is right and flowing water pairs, including "clothing to hand, foot" , "nothing is difficult to a willing heart" and so on. Through the antithesis, semantics can be emphasized. The other is inverse pairs, such idiomatic phrases mainly include "What has been done cannot be undone" , "Distant water can not quench present thirst" and so on. The words "done" and "undone" are the opposite and the words of "distant" and "present" are the opposite. By the application of inverse pairs in idiomatic phrases, it can show a contradictory phenomenon. Taking the idiomatic phrase "It is a pot of fire in the light while it is a knife in the dark" as an example, its application expresses the contradiction in the feudal society and implies the inevitable decline of the landlord class.

3.3. Personification

In the idiomatic phrases of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the idiomatic phrases using personification are mainly allegorical sayings and related idioms. After personifying the objects, people's thoughts and feelings can be attached to the objects, thus more vividly showing the psychological characteristics of the characters. For example, Caixia bit her lip, pricked a finger at Jia Huan's head and said, "Conscienceless! Don't bite the hand that feeds you." (Chapter 25 in *A Dream of the Red Mansions*) In this idiomatic phrase, the animal, dog, already has the human attribute and the strong sense of humor satire. Through this idiomatic phrase, we can see the real feelings of Caixia to Jia Huan, at the same time, it can reflect the characteristics of Jia Huan, that is, mean and suspicious, not to know good from bad. Similarly, the use of personification in idiomatic phrases, such as "The birds are picking up the best places to fly" , "The rat borrow the grain of the crow" and so on. Personification is of great help to help readers understand the character and the content of the works.

3.4. Contrast

The contrast in idiomatic phrases refers to the opposite things are reflected and contrasted, and then compared, so as to highlight the essential features of things. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, idiomatic phrases with this rhetorical feature mainly include "reunion after a long separation is better than a wedding night" , "better keep still than move" and so on. Under the rhetorical device of contrast, the author affirms one thing by negating another, which can reflect the obvious commendatory and derogatory meanings. Through the application of idiomatic phrases under contrast, the author shows vividly the joys and sorrows, the beauty and ugliness, the good and the bad of the people between the Ning Mansion and the Rong Mansion.

3.5. Exaggeration

In the application of idiomatic phrases, we can also use the rhetorical device of exaggeration, which is quite common in *A Dream of Red Mansions*. It refers to the use of idiomatic phrases,

which do not seem to correspond with the facts, in order to deepen people's impression and stimulate people to make relevant associations. For example, Aunt Zhao scolded Jia Huan, "I told you to ask, not to go in. You deliberately go in and don't leave, and catch lice from the head of a tiger..." (Chapter 84 in *A Dream of Red Mansions*) In this sentence, "catch lice from the head of a tiger" is an exaggerated figure of speech, but it does not distort. Instead, it reveals the special features of things, that is, the relationship between Aunt Zhao, Jia Huan and Wang Xifeng is a more vivid and lifelike expression. In addition, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the use of exaggeration as a figure of speech also includes "plucking a hair from an ox" and "poking the tiger's nose with a straw stick", all of which improve the verisimilitude of the characterization and help to clarify the point.

4. A study of idiomatic phrases and their internal culture in *A Dream of Red Mansions*

4.1. Chinese idiomatic phrases and the material culture of the Han nationality

In the category of culture, material culture is in the surface layer of culture, which is mainly connected with people's material life, i.e. housing, clothing, transportation, food. In the idiomatic phrases culture of the Han nationality, the material culture of the Han nationality can be seen everywhere, so we can understand the changes of the way of life and the content of life in the Han nationality from the idiomatic phrases culture. Under the changing social background of history and culture, the expression of idiomatic phrases culture is different from each other, mainly embodied in "be draped with the imperial yellow robe by one's supporters", "a simple diet", "pavilions and attics", "large sedan chair carried by eight people", "endure the hardships of a long journey teeter", and so on.

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the concrete example that can embody the material culture of the Han nationality is:

All the people looked that, although Lin Daiyu was young, her behavior and conversation were good, and her physical appearance was frail, but she had a romantic attitude. (Chapter 3)

[Source]Xuncius· Feixiang : "Ye is short and thin, and if he walks, he will be overdressed. "

[Meaning]To describe the people who are too thin to bear the weight of one's clothes.

4.2. Chinese idiomatic phrases and the system culture of the Han nationality

In the process of continuous development, the nation will form a corresponding system, and thus thus forming a system culture. The system culture embodies the cultural contents of the social norms of the Han nationality, including the etiquette and custom system, the family patriarchal system, the marriage system, the education system, the funeral system, the astronomical calendar system and so on. In the Han nationality's system culture, it also includes some custom superstition and the taboo. Some idiomatic phrases including "bow and scrape", "courtesy demands reciprocity", "the three obediences and the four virtues", "be matched for marriage", "friendship between old and young people" and so on.

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the concrete example that can embody the system culture of the Han nationality is:

As the saying goes, "he dares to bring down the emperor with his whole body. " He who is poor and mad can not do anything. Besides, he's got it. You can't do it without telling me. (Chapter 68)

[Meaning] Even if the difficulties are great, we must work hard and stick to it.

4.3. Chinese idiomatic phrases and the spiritual culture of the Han nationality

In the culture of the Han nationality, the spiritual culture is also an important component, which mainly refers to a system of ideas, while the spiritual culture of the Han nationality is a unique mode of thinking and values formed in the course of long-term historical development. It can be subdivided into religious ideas, philosophical thoughts, political, moral and artistic thoughts. In the spiritual culture of the Han nationality, the most famous is Confucianism, of which "Benevolence, righteousness, propriety, wisdom and faith" is the essence.

In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the concrete example that can embody the spiritual culture of the Han nationality is:

"Life and death are decreed by fate, wealth and rank are matters of destiny, " Lin Daiyu sighed, " which is not strong by human force, this year feel heavier than in previous years. " (Chapter 45)

[Source]The Analects of Confucius·Chapter 6·Yan Yuan·Page 12:”Zi-xia said,’ I have heard that, Life and death are decreed by fate, wealth and rank are matters of destiny.””

[Meaning]It means that everything is predestined. Thus we can see the fatalism of Confucianism.

5. Conclusion

Idiomatic phrases culture is a kind of language culture, from which we can see the accumulation of language culture and the rich material, system and spiritual culture in our country. In *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the use of idiomatic phrases culture has reached a state of perfection, showing the literary attainments enjoyed by both refined and popular tastes. To study the idiomatic phrases used in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, it is necessary to excavate their cultural connotation in order to master the history of the national idioms, grasp the essence of the national language and culture, and realize the deep inheritance of the national language and culture.

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