

Reflection of Culture, Religion and Art in Proverbs About People's Appearance in the Russian and Chinese Languages

Wenrui Li*, N.E. Iakimenko

Language Department, St. Petersburg State University, St. Petersburg, Russia

**Corresponding Author*

Keywords: proverb, phytonym, ornithonym, somatism, the view of the world, Russian languages, Chinese languages.

Abstract: The article begins with the development of beauty stereotypes in the Russian and Western art, tries to explore man's insight into the internal and external beauty, and concludes that the national cultural differences in assessing one's appearance are associated with historically established standards and stereotypical ideas about beauty. Through the comparative analysis of proverbs about people's appearance in the Russian and Chinese languages, this paper further demonstrates axiological assessment is an important component of linguistic-culturological analysis, as it is a unique instrument reflecting the cultural/national values/anti-values in proverbs.

1. Introduction

Proverbs used in describing a person's appearance are met in any national language and represent one of the means to describe the national culture. Currently there are more questions than answers in studying the paremiological view of the world. The universal human values/anti-values reflected in the paroemias of the Russian and Chinese languages are especially difficult to explore in this respect, since their national-specific features are not on the surface; they need to be identified and explicated for every linguocultural community for further successful intercultural communication. This paper aims to analyze people's view of man, the insight into his external and internal beauty, verbalized in the proverbs and sayings of the Russian and Chinese languages. Man's appearance is described by various means and presents certain difficulties for a translator in terms of description of objects of culture, art and religion and for translating spoken language of native speakers.

The information about the culture, religion, national preferences of peoples can be obtained from various sources. Such sources can be found in literature, visual arts, and philosophy.

2. Development of Beauty Stereotypes in the Russian and Western Art

Let us turn to the development of beauty stereotypes in the Russian and Western art. The Slavonians in the epoch of old Russia (9-13 centuries) had a special attitude to beauty, which was perceived as a symbol of holiness, piety and spiritual values [7]. This attitude is reflected in the Russian pictorial art, in particular,

in the icons of Andrei Rublev (14-15 centuries), Theophanes the Greek (14-15 centuries), Simon Ushakov (17 century). The favourite image of the Russian icon painters was the Virgin Mary. Her face, eyes are carefully painted on the icons, her facial expression is reflecting the happiness of motherhood and the bitterness of the forthcoming loss of her beloved son. Her body on the icons is hidden under heavy clothes, i.e. spirituality comes to the fore. The epoch of Renaissance renewed the ancient traditions with their cultivation of beauty of the human body, glorification of freedom and harmony. The abstract spirituality is replaced by emphasized corporality, with rehabilitation of sensual beauty. The aesthetics of beauty is manifested in the images of a naked portly body. The paintings by P.P. Rubens are an example. The feminine beauty concept met entirely the spirit of the epoch: buxom forms were perceived as an evidence of physical health and inner dignity. B.M. Kustodiev's paintings can serve an example in the Russian art. Let us recall a series of paintings "Merchant's Wife at Tea": the merchant's wife's image presents a Russian woman with a round face and buxom figure in dressy-look garments. She is perceived as a stereotype of female beauty of that time. The foreground of the picture presents a samovar and plentiful food on the table. While the church is in the background, barely noticeable – but still it is depicted. Spirituality goes by the wayside. The form becomes more important than the content.

Later, the form itself gets destroyed. Let us look at the paintings by H. Bosch, Salvador Dali ("Constancy of Memory"). In general, any idea of a particular subject is destroyed. Not only the content, but also the form disappears. That was followed by Kazimierz Malewicz's "Black Square": he brought the development of art of beauty to a close. Everything in fact ended – no form, no content, only a black square, considering that the black colour and the square shape are the simplest images of the human mind, which also symbolizes an infinite sense: the world as such once appeared out of the black chaos. Everything depends on spirituality. The purport of beauty is in everyone's soul.

N.G. Chernyshevsky wrote about beauty in his philosophical work "Aesthetic Relationship of Art to Reality". This is how the Russian philosopher describes the ideal of beauty: "The consequence of life in contentment with quite a lot of work, though not exhausting – this is a young villager or a country girl having a truly fresh complexion – face all milk and roses – the first condition of beauty, as viewed by common folk. A country girl, working a lot and thus sturdy built, having nourishing food, will be quite thickset – this is a necessary condition for a country woman to be deemed beautiful; a high-society "half-airy" beauty will seem to be absolutely "uninviting" to a villager, he would even feel aversion because he normally considers "thinness" to be a result of morbidity or "rough luck" [10]. There exist two stereotypes of beauty at the same time in the same country: on the one hand – strong constitution of a peasant, on the other hand – thinness, "half-airiness" of a high-society lady. In the modern Russian language, beauty is defined as "something that gives aesthetic pleasure"; "beautiful, attractive appearance" [1].

The information about the culture, religion, national preferences of different peoples can be obtained in another way: one of the most reliable sources is the national language and, in the first place, its proverbs and sayings. Being an independent part of the national linguistic worldview, the paroemias, by virtue of their greater conservatism as compared with the lexical worldview, accumulate and retain the basic settled cultural attitudes peculiar to the speakers of a particular language.

The key to cultural codes is linguistic and culturological commentary on the earliest component words that make up proverbs. The authors believe that somatisms, zoonyms, phytonyms are such words – the notions penetrating a person's life from the moment of birth, since ancient times.

The subject of our research is man's appearance expressed by means of paroemias of the two languages. Following the analysis of practical material, we came to a conclusion that the human appearance expressed through paroemias is described primarily in terms of notions of *beauty and ugliness*, by contrasting the concepts of *beauty/ugliness – wit, beauty/ugliness, kindness, beauty/ugliness – character*. The national cultural differences in assessing one's appearance are associated with historically established standards and stereotypical ideas about beauty.

3. Contrastive Analysis of Proverbs about People's Appearance in the Russian and Chinese Languages

The proverbial dictionaries of the Russian and Chinese languages served as a source of materials used in the research. The selection of material based on the components: *somatism*, *ornithonym* and *phytonym* provided the main corpus of units for the analysis.

In total, 610 Russian proverbs and about 500 units of the Chinese language were selected for the work. These proverbs were verified by means of query and questioning. The proverbs selected for the work were divided into 25 thematic groups. Every group represents a certain mental/cultural niche expressing the attitude towards beauty or ugliness as matching a person's appearance and character. These include, for instance, such groups as: "One cannot judge a person by appearance", "Mental qualities are more important than beauty", "A thin woman is ugly", "Beauty is not the main thing in one's life (utilitarian attitude to beauty in the Russian language)", "Wit is appreciated more than beauty", "Kindness is more important than beauty", "Good, kind character is more important than beauty", "Love makes a woman beautiful", "Beauty is not important at all in a man, wit is what is important".

Following the thorough analysis, the authors singled out a number of components in every group which convey a "preset cultural meaning", as expressed by M.L. Kovshova [3].

The proverbs with a component somatism undoubtedly represent the greatest number of stereotypes of beauty and ugliness. However, of particular interest for us, from the point of view of history and national specificity, are paroemias with a component *beard*. This group of proverbs makes it possible to demonstrate the change in the axiological vector of paroemias. Axiology is based on the concept of *value*: the roots are *axia*, *axios* (from the Greek *axia* – value and *logos* – concept, doctrine), i.e. axiology is a doctrine about values [11].

It should be noted that the symbolics of this attribute of masculinity (beard) in the Russian and Chinese languages is partially the same: the beard is a symbol of wisdom, strength and courage, sovereignty, maturation and masculinity. At this point the similarity ends.

In the Russian language, the beard, on the one hand, was "an attribute of God and holy saints", a symbol of piety (*The beard is the image of – and likeness to God; You will not be let to paradise without the beard*); on the other hand, the beard is perceived as a sign of backwardness and is a subject of mockery (*The beard is not a sign of honour: even a goat has it*). This, in our opinion, is explained as follows: not only a group of proverbs, but also the same paroemic unit can acquire both a positive and a negative axiological vector at different periods of social development. In addition, the axiological vector of paroemia can be consistently positive and consistently negative, or it may change, thus verbalizing the description of historically formed axiological worldviews.

The change in collective views during the reign of Peter I was reflected in the Russian language paroemias with the component *beard*. The axiological vector of a number of paroemias changes from positive to negative. And this change should be reflected in educational dictionaries, since the improper understanding of this parameter may cause problems in a communication act. The axiological parameter should be considered for linguoculturological description of paremiological units for educational purposes. An article of the educational linguoculturological dictionary may contain a reference to the axiological component of paremiological nature, i.e. contain a cultural (historical) comment explaining why the change in collective beliefs took place and how this was reflected in the language, for instance:

"Having a beard was an extremely important issue for the medieval Russia. This was accounted for by the life tenor in which the beard was considered as a symbol of commitment to faith, an evidence of honour and a subject of pride. In X century Rus adopted Christianity. The Orthodox Church confirmed zealously the folk tradition of wearing a beard and consecrated this custom, this way the beard became a symbol of the Russian faith and the Russian identity. Man's face without the beard was perceived as a

symbol of sin. The disapproval of shaving beard and moustache, in addition to adherence to olden times, was caused as well by the fact that shaving beards and moustache was associated with the sin of sodomy, the desire to impart feminine look to the face. The tendency to shave beards in Russia began under the Tsar Peter I. The XVII-century Rus remained 'bearded', while its Tsar Peter I never wore a beard and considered the age-old Russian custom to be ridiculous" [5].

The language absorbed and preserved for many years to come the changes in the collective consciousness that took place in the history of the country, and reflected them in paroemias.

The Russian paroemias with components designating the attributes of the Christian religion are lacunary for the Chinese linguistic culture (since China has a different religion); the same concerns the proper names denoting some real people who played an important role in the Russian history, that are not relevant for the Chinese culture: *Shaving a beard is spoiling Christ 's image; Judging by the beard, he is Abraham, Judging by his deeds he is Ham (swine, devil); Judging by the beard, he is St. Nicolas, Judging by his teeth he is a dog; Although he has a beard and moustache, he is not Susanin; He has Minin's beard, but his conscience is that of a snake.*

The second group of paroemias, most interesting in terms of linguistic culturology, are proverbs with the component ornithonym. These proverbs reflect the zoomorphic cultural code and provide rich material for comparison. The cultural code is an important link in the linguoculturological analysis of paremiological units; it is based on man's ability to correlate phenomena from different areas of knowledge and to single out their main features. The ornithological binomials *eagle – blackcock; eagle – eagle-owl; falcon – crow; peahen – crow* reflect some stereotypes of beauty and ugliness in the Russian language, contain axiological evaluation, form the cultural connotation of the paroemias. When describing a person's appearance, the positive pole of axiological assessment in the Russian proverbs is formed by such ornithonyms as *eagle, falcon, peahen*; the negative pole – by *blackcock, owl, eagle-owl, horned owl and crow*.

In Chinese proverbs, the positive pole of axiological assessment, when describing a person's appearance, is formed by ornithonyms *phoenix, crane, swallow*, and the negative pole – by *hawk, crow*.

It is evident that the set of ornithonyms composing paroemias in the two languages does not coincide. In the Russian language, such units as *phoenix, crane (crane-like), hawk (hawk-like)* are not used as paroemias to describe the appearance of a person. In Russian, the ornithonyms *crane* and *hawk* are found as part of set units of comparison: long-legged like a *crane*, hawk's eyes; accordingly, they do not have the mythological implication inherent in the Chinese lexical units. The ornithonym *phoenix* is non-matched in the Russian linguistic culture.

The set of ornithonyms met as part of Russian paroemias is lacunary for the Chinese linguistic culture. These units are not used in Chinese proverbs for describing a person's appearance; these birds and their names evoke other associations than those appearing in the Russian language and have a different axiological value in the Chinese linguistic culture.

The ornithonym *swallow* demonstrates specific national/cultural characteristics of the Russian and Chinese outlook. In Russian, the ornithonym *swallow* is used only for describing women or for addressing females in the endearing manner, and has a positive connotation. The Chinese word *swallow* is similar in pronunciation to the word "well-being", therefore the ornithonym *swallow* is also endowed with a positive connotation, as treated by the Chinese. Owing to the fact that the swallow is slender, skilful, graceful, tiny, the word *swallow* in many Chinese literary works is used to describe a man who has nice appearance and high proficiency in Kung Fu [2].

The national/cultural originality manifests itself as well by example of an ornithonym *crane*. In Russian mentality, cranes are souls of soldiers who perished defending their homeland, while the Chinese believe that Dao-Zi turn into cranes after death [8].

The proverbs with the component phytonym also demonstrate the national distinctness of the two

cultures. In the Russian language, phytonyms are practically not found as paroemias, when describing a person's appearance. This function was assumed not by paroemias, but by idiomatic comparative expressions: *Blooms like an apple tree (cherry tree)*; *Slim like a birch*; *Strong (healthy, nice-looking) like an oak*; *Has grown up like a poplar*; *Is straight (upright) like a pine*.

The components – phytonyms designating the names of fruit or non-fruit trees are singular in the composition of paroemias of the Russian language (when describing a person's appearance). A subgroup *fruit trees, fruit of a plant* is characterized by a different set of components in the two languages. In Russian, *cherry* is included in this group; in Chinese this group includes *cherry, peach, plum, apricot*. In the Russian language, the phytonym *cherry* is used to describe the colour of man's eyes, in Chinese – to describe the colour of women's lips: eyes like *cherries*, eyes *black like cherries* – about large, black, shiny eyes; *Small lips like cherry* – about a woman who has small, fresh and red lips.

In the Russian language, the components *peach, plum, apricot* are not used within the paroemias characterizing a person's appearance. In the Chinese language, the above are widely-used components, when describing the appearance: *delicate peach tree and lush plum tree* – about a beautiful couple – a bride and a groom; *When a beautiful girl feels confused her face is like a peach flower, like a field poppy* – about a beautiful and modest girl; *delicate peach tree and lush plum tree* – about attractively looking bride and groom; *cheeks like peaches, eyes like apricots* – beautiful face, lovely appearance.

In the Chinese language, the phytonymic components *coral bean, pine, willow* are used within the subgroup '*non-fruit trees*'. These components are not used in the Russian language.

Coral bean symbolizes man's proud bearing and is also used relative to a smart-looking man having a talent: *He is standing like a nephrite tree (coral bean) in the wind* – about a handsome and talented young man.

The word *pine* is very popular in the Chinese paremiology in describing a person's appearance. This evergreen tree does not abscise its needles even in winter. The pine symbolizes spiritual strength, courage, vitality, restraint, consistency and longevity. Pine is the most popular word in describing the appearance of a strong, healthy elderly man: *crane's hair, pine's stature* – about a healthy, hale old man. In addition, the word *pine* in Chinese proverbs is also used to designate a portly tall man, which is a nice characteristics: *Man's height 8 feet, like a pine*.

Willow is one of the most frequent components in Chinese proverbs. Willow is “a shrub or a tree with flexible branches and narrow leaves” [4]. The willow is associated with a slender figure of a beautiful girl; its branch – with her beautiful posture; its leaf – with her curved, thin eyebrows: *Willow-like waist, lotus-like face* – “a beauty, a woman of amazing beauty: graceful and delicate beauty”; *Whisking off willow's flowers and branches* – about an entrancing female gait: *Curved eyebrows – willow's leaves* – about female's beautiful eyebrows”.

The phytonyms of this group are not presented in the Russian paroemias.

The rich set of phytonymic components forming the Chinese paroemias, as contrasted to the Russian-language means, is explained, in our opinion, by the difference in the geographical position of the two countries: China is located southwards and is characterized by rich vegetation. Russia is located in the north of China, therefore a set of flowering plants is more constrained. In addition, the axiological differences are produced by the specific origin of paroemias in the two linguistic cultures: the Chinese paroemias date back to the classical philosophy and literature, while the Russian paroemias for the most part descend from the folklore.

The paroemias with the components presented by names of flowers are singular in the Russian language. In the Russian phraseology, the component *poppy* is quite frequent: *She blossoms like a poppy: Brighter than scarlet, whiter than snow*; *A maiden is not a poppy: she will not shed leaves within one day*; *A fair maiden in a round dance is like a red poppy in the garden*. The phytonyms designating names of flowers (*rose, chamomile, lily*) are very rarely found as part of set comparison elements.

The following components are frequently met in the Chinese language: *lotus, peony, pear flowers, peach flowers, apricot flowers*. The Chinese believe that the lotus grows in heaven, in paradise, therefore it is revered as a sacred plant. The lotus personifies perfection, is a symbol of beautiful appearance, spiritual revelation, female purity: *A fresh-blown lotus – a beautiful young girl; Fresh lotus flowers sprouting from the water – a beautiful girl; A confused face like a blooming lotus, white skin like a congealed fat – about a beautiful girl.*

The peony is a flower of emperors. It is a symbol of wealth, prosperity, honour and career growth. In addition, the peony in the Chinese language is associated with female beauty and elegance: *The pride of China and the heavenly scent – a very beautiful girl, gorgeous like a peony; A girl aged eighteen or twenty three, more beautiful than a peony.*

Peach and apricot flowers can also be used as symbols of a beautiful woman: *When a beautiful girl feels confused her face is like a peach flower, like a field poppy; Red apricot flowers have sprouted through a wall (a pretty wife has a lover).*

A distinguishing and contrasting feature in the description of appearance with the help of phytonymic components in the Russian and Chinese languages is the usage of phytonyms – names of vegetables – in the Russian languages. The proverbs with phytonymic components designating vegetables or grains mock at poor appearance: *It looks like the devils have threshed peas upon him; The deuces seemed to have threshed peas upon his face* (about an ill-looking man, with all face covered with poles, pockmarks); *His mug is fit only for planting turnip; it is of use only for planting carrots* (about an unshapely, very large, broad face); *Picking millet is not for your nose* (the nose is very large, would not hold a small grain / it is not your business, keep your nose clean of this business). Consequently, the component designating a vegetable in the Russian language is an indicator of negative connotative assessment of a person's appearance.

The Russian paroemias with a phytonymic component (name of vegetable) may reflect the anti-value *ugliness* and, as a rule, have negative connotations. The Chinese paroemias with a phytonymic component (as a rule, names of flowers or trees) represent the value *beauty* and are positively tinged in fact always. The phytonymic component plays an important role in describing a person's appearance and carries specific, nationally tinged cultural information.

4. Conclusion

As a result of the implemented analysis, the authors came to a conclusion that axiological assessment is an important component of linguistic-culturological analysis, as it is a unique instrument reflecting the cultural/national values/anti-values in proverbs.

The axiological characterization should be provided in dictionaries of linguoculturological type because, firstly, this assessment does not always lie on the surface, it is often expressed implicitly; secondly, the axiological vector of assessing a paroemia may change from positive to negative (or neutral) following the change in collective beliefs, change in the historical situation in the country. This change may remain unnoticed for a foreign reader – and sometimes for a native speaker – and thus can lead to communicative failures.

References

- [1] Evgenieva, A.P. (1981-1984) Concise Academic Dictionary. P. 237.
- [2] Huang, Junfeng, Huang, Fang. (2001) Cultural Comparison of Animal Images in the Phraseology of the Chinese and English Languages. P. 54.
- [3] Kovshova, M.L. Linguoculturological (2013) Method in Phraseology: Culture Codes. P. 456.

- [4] Kuznetsov, S.A. (2004) Modern explanatory dictionary of the Russian language. P. 960.
- [5] Li, Wenrui. (2018) Linguoculturological Commentary as the Main Method of Interpreting Proverbs with a Component - Somatism in Describing One's Appearance. *Philological Sciences. Issues of Theory and Practice*, 2 (80), pp. 326-329.
- [6] Mokienko, V.M., Nikitina, T.G., Nikolaeva, E.K. (2010) Comprehensive Dictionary of Russian Proverbs: About 70,000 Proverbs. P. 1023.
- [7] Nemensky, B.M. (1987) The Wisdom of Beauty. On the Problems of Aesthetic Education. P. 85.
- [8] The Crane in the Japanese and Chinese Mythology (access date: 26.04.2019). Access mode: <http://www.liveinternet.ru/users/3469412/post196817523/>.
- [9] Wen, Duan Zheng. (2011) Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Proverbs. P. 1130.
- [10] Chernyshevsky, N.G. (1949) Aesthetic Relationship of Art to Reality. Complete Works: in 15, pp. 5-92.
- [11] Yandex (Access date: 23.04.2019). Access mode: <https://yandex.ru>.