

# Nominal Phrases with the Ethnonyms “Chinese” and “Russian” in the English Language: a Comparative Linguo-Cultural Study

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**Abstract:** Ethnonyms form a considerable part in the phraseology of a given language fixating contacts between countries as well as cultural attitudes, the latter forming ethnic stereotypes. This paper’s aim is to investigate semantic types of nominal phrases with the ethnonyms Chinese and Russian, based both on lexicographical data and literary texts in the English language and their cultural values. The study divides phrases with ethnonyms into two major groups: those with literal concrete denotative meaning and those with a metaphorical one. For the former, denotative meaning is the basic meaning of the phrases. And the latter are shown to be widely used in fiction, both with positive and negative connotations.

## 1. Introduction

At present, interrelation of languages and cultures has become one of the central subjects in linguistics. Names of nationalities, or ethnonyms, form a special class of lexical units standing between nouns and proper names. Usually, ethnonyms that find their way into the phraseological stock of a particular language are those that refer to neighbouring nations with which close cultural and economic contacts have been developing for many generations. As a result, expressions containing ethnonyms emerge to fix the nature of these cross-national links. They often become ethnic stereotypes [1]. An extensive study of the ethnonym “Dutch” in the English language has shown that it has quite a few negative connotations [2]. The same applies to other nationalities, such as French, Italian, etc. The ethnonyms “Chinese” and “Russian” refer to nations that are quite different from the mentioned above, both in terms of geographical, cultural and linguistic distances that separate them from the English-speaking nations. These ethnonyms are not so well studied from the point of view of their role in English idiomatic phrases. In this paper we focus our attention on noun phrases with the ethnonyms Chinese and Russian which are registered in the English language dictionaries. A contrastive linguo-cultural study of the two ethnonyms based on the analysis of semantic features inherent in these phrases is further verified using their realizations in today’s English fiction.

## 2. Nominal Phrases with the Ethnonym “Chinese”

In the English language there are two models of ethnonymic formations based on the name of the country

in question: using various suffixes (adjectival or nominal) or the lexeme – man/woman. Names of nationalities are always capitalized. Morphologically, suffixed ethnonyms can be divided into adjectives and nouns, the latter coming in the same category with nominal ethnonyms. Due to their nature, adjectival ethnonyms are used attributively in nominal phrases which are either fixed, set expressions, called idioms, or free contextual combinations. A collection of nominal phrases containing the ethnonym “Chinese” was obtained from a number of English dictionaries, including Concise Oxford English Dictionary [3], Oxford Dictionary of Phrase and Fable [4] and the International Webster’s Dictionary [5]. In total, there have been found 39 phrases, all of which were defined in the Concise Oxford English Dictionary as nouns. In Russian linguistic tradition, which we follow here, they are treated as fixed word combinations differing in the degree of semantic fusion of the two components. Thus, we group the ethnonymic phrases with the ethnonyms “Chinese” and “Russian” into the following categories: 1. set phrases with forming “divisible” semantic structures and 2. set phrases forming “indivisible” semantic entities (idioms). Let us look at each category in detail.

### **2.1 Set Phrases with the Ethnonym “Chinese” with “Divisible” Semantic Structures**

In this group we found word combinations denoting the following semantic features: 1) names of plants and substances obtained from them: Chinese leaves (also Chinese cabbage) – pl.n. an oriental variety of cabbage which does not form a firm heart [*Brassica chinensis* (pak choi)] and *B. pekinensis* (pe tsai)]; Chinese cabbage - n. another term for Chinese leaves; Chinese gooseberry – n. former term for kiwi fruit; Chinese lantern – n. a plant with globular orange fruits enclosed in an orange-red papery calyx [*Physalis alkekengi*]; Chinese wood oil; Chinese paper; 2) names of dyes and colours: Chinese white - n, white pigment consisting of zinc oxide; Chinese red – n. a vivid orange-red; 3) names of games and toys: Chinese chequers (US – Chinese checkers) – pl.n. a board game for two to six players who attempt to move marbles or counters from one corner to the opposite one on a star-shaped board; Chinese puzzle – n. an intricate puzzle consisting of many interlocking pieces; Chinese tumbler; 4) names of household objects: Chinese box – n. each of a nest of boxes; Chinese lantern –n. a collapsible paper lantern; 5) names of social institutions: Chinese empire; Chinese revolution; 6) historical terms: Chinese water torture – a form of torture whereby a constant drop of water is caused to fall on to the victim’s head; 7) names of inventions: Chinese calendar.

Each of these complex words, or word combinations, denotes a concrete object whose origin is shown by the ethnonymic attribute. The general meaning can be understood from the definition. It is worth mentioning that nouns in these phrases refer to objects of the European nature and culture, e.g. gooseberry is an English plant, so kiwi, an exotic fruit, gets a name combining a familiar berry with an attribute specifying its (exotic) origin.

### **2.2 Set Phrases with the Ethnonym “Chinese” Representing “Indivisible” Semantic Entities**

Phrases in this group have double meaning, namely, the first, denotative, meaning which is etymologically transparent, and the second, metaphorical meaning. We shall classify the phrases in question on the basis of the semantics of the first, original, meaning, highlighting the resulting metaphorical one with the sign of arrow. In our material we have the following categories: 1) a (fortified) building to protect a territory → an insurmountable barrier: Chinese wall – n. an insurmountable barrier, especially to the passage of information (an insurmountable barrier to understanding alluding to the Great Wall of China); (on the Stock Exchange) a prohibition against the passing of confidential information from one department of a financial structure to another; 2) a game based of transfer of information → spreading of incorrect (false) information – gossip, slander: Chinese whispers - pl.n. *Brit* a game in which a message is distorted by passing around in a whisper; 3) military actions → a state of confusion: Chinese fire drill –n. a certain kind of military training → a state of disorder or confusion (N American military slang); → false attack: (military slang) Chinese attack; → narrow escape (pilot slang): Chinese landing (a

landing on one chassis); torture → skin reaction: Chinese burn – n. *informal*- a burning sensation inflicted on a person by placing both hands on their arm and then twisting it. This definition refers to a kind of (hypothetical) torture originating in China and consisting in setting fire on a person's arm, sort of branding; 4) polite behavior → pretended (affected, insincere) politeness: Chinese compliment. From the example given, one can see that the metaphorical meanings are often hyperbolic, containing negative connotations.

### 2.3 Nominal Phrases with the Ethnonym “China”

First, we would like to mention that names of countries can also function in phrases in a similar way to ethnonyms proper. Let us take a look at word combinations with the word “China”. First, semantically, there are categories similar to those for “Chinese”: 1) names of plants: China rose – n. A Chinese rose from which various garden rose varieties have been derived (*Rosa chinensis*), a shrubby tropical hibiscus cultivated for its large showy flowers (*Hibiscus rosa-sinensis*); China aster –n. a Chinese plant of the daisy family, cultivated for its bright showy flowers (*Callistephus chinensis*); chinaberry - n. a tall tree bearing fragrant lilac flowers and yellow berries, native to Asia and Australasia (*Melia azedarach*.); the fruit of the chinaberry; China-orange – n.(*Dianthus chinensis*); China-root - n. (*Smilax* gen.); 2) names of drinks made from plants: China tea – n. tea made from a small-leaved type of tea plant grown in China, typically flavoured by smoke curing or the addition of flower petals; 3) names of colours: china blue –n. a pale grayish blue; 4) names of substances and minerals: china clay –n. another name for kaolin; china stone –n. partly kaolinized granite containing plagioclase feldspar, which is ground and mixed with kaolin to make porcelain; China ink; 5) names of fabrics: China-crape - fine silk material.

There are also complex words and phrases that have some connotations which are not found in the previous group: 6) Chinaman – n. 1. chiefly archaic or derogatory: a native of China; 2. (cricket) a ball that spins from off to leg, bowled by a left-handed bowler to a right-handed batsman; Chinaman's chance – slim chance; 7) toponym: Chinatown – n. a district of a non-Chinese town in which the population is predominantly of Chinese origin; 8) euphemism used to avoid mentioning the real threat: China syndrome – “n. a hypothetical sequence of events following the meltdown of a nuclear reactor, in which the core melts through its containment structure and sinks deep into the earth. – Origin 1970s: so named because China is on the opposite side of the earth from a reactor in the USA”. The word combination was coined as a euphemism for a world-wide catastrophe involving faulty use of an American nuclear reactor based on the substitution of “Chinese” for “American”.

### 3. Nominal Phrases with the Ethnonym “Russian”

First of all, it should be pointed out that there fewer phrases with the ethnonym “Russian” than there are phrases with the “Chinese” (10 to 39), although they fall into the same or almost the same semantic categories, namely: 1) names of plants: Russian olive - n. North American term for oleaster; Russian vine – n. a fast-growing Asian climbing plant of the dock family, with long clusters of white or pink flowers [*Fallopia baldschuanica*]; 2) names of drinks made of plants: Russian tea – n. tea laced with rum and typically served with lemon; 3) names of food: Russian salad – n. Brit. A salad of mixed diced vegetables with mayonnaise; Russian egg –n.egg with mayonnaise; 4) names of social and religious institutions: Russian empire; Russian revolution, Russian Orthodox Church - n. the national church of Russia.

It is obvious, from the classification given above, that the ethnonym “Russian” has its direct meaning “originating from or associated with Russia”. We found a single phrase with “Russia” in the meaning “the country of origin”: Russia leather – n. a durable leather made from calfskin and impregnated with birch bark oil, used for bookbinding. Only one example of nominal phrase with the ethnonym “Russian” was obtained which can be metaphorically used: 5) names of games: “Russian roulette – n. a dangerous game of chance in which one loads a bullet into one chamber of a revolver, spins the cylinder, and then pulls the trigger while pointing the gun at one's own head”. It may mean anything that is dangerous.

## 4. Contextual Realizations of Ethnonymic Phrases in English Fiction

Our initial hypothesis was that literary discourse would be using phrases with ethnonyms predominantly which have undergone some metaphorical “reinvention”. In this section we are going to explore how metaphorical phrases with ethnonyms “Chinese” and “Russian” are used by writers of fiction.

### 4.1 Phrases with the Ethnonym “Chinese”

Example 1: “After the erection of the Chinese Wall of Milton, blank verse has suffered not only arrest but retrogression” [6].

Example 1 illustrates the use of the phrase “the Chinese Wall” in an extended form “the Chinese Wall of Milton” in critical discourse, combining the Chinese ethnonym with the purely English name of one of the most influential poets John Milton. Such an unusual metaphor helps the author, a famous poet himself, to convey a hyperbolic meaning of a powerful barrier created by Miltonic tradition of rhymed poem which became an obstacle in the development of blank verse.

Example 2: “Try and envisage a time not so long ago without electricity, when the only form of sport was to gather together to drink, play music and swap stories, true or otherwise. News has always been like Chinese whispers in Ireland, each man vying with the other to make his story bigger and better” [7].

In example 2, the phrase “Chinese whispers” is used both in its original meaning, namely, a kind of party game, and in the later interpretation, gossip, to describe the way people in rural Ireland exchanged pieces of information in the pre-television world where news was passed from mouth to mouth and had an element of gossip.

Example 3: “...he should not shut up my path if he were fifty baronets melted into one, and living in a hundred Chesney Wolds, one within another, like the ivory balls in a Chinese carving” [8].

In example 3, we can see an extract from the novel “Bleak House” by Charles Dickens which uses a hyperbolic simile based on the principle of the Chinese carving – a set of beautifully carved concentric ivory balls nesting one into another. The expression “Chinese carving” denotes a concrete object of artistic value, with the ethnonym showing its origin. Specimens of such carved ivory balls were brought to England and in Dickens’s time exhibited in the British Museum where the famous author must have seen them.

Example 4: “He walked down to Holyrood Palace, bought a poke of chips and walked back up the Royal Mile. Another day where nothing had happened, he thought. That was a good thing, he reminded himself – what was the Chinese curse? May you live in interesting times” [9].

In example 4, we come across another phrase with the ethnonym “Chinese curse” which comes from a popular saying “May you live in interesting times”. The author of the novel, Kate Atkinson, puts the whole saying in her text, in order that a less knowledgeable reader might understand the meaning of the expression. Here, again, the ethnonymic expression is closely connected with a particular text, a Chinese aphorism, and should be described as a set expression employed in the function of allusion.

### 4.2 Phrases with the Ethnonym “Russian”

In the following extract from the novel “One Good Turn” by a contemporary Scottish writer, Kate Atkinson, we can see several instances of word combinations with the ethnonyms we are researching: first, “Russian circus”, then “Russian dolls” (“Matryoshka”), “Chinese boxes”, “Chinese whispers”, and, finally, “Russian whispers”. It is worth mentioning that the name of the game “Chinese whispers” had an earlier name “Russian gossip, scandal” which later ceased to be used. All these ethnonymic phrases are closely connected to concrete objects having a concentric structure, but their figurative meaning is also present: the idea of hidden secrets within secrets.

Example 5: “The circus on the Meadows didn’t hold the same promises and terrors as the circus of long ago. It was a Russian circus, although there was nothing particularly Russian about spinning plates, trapezes and high-wire work. Only the clowns acknowledged their national origins in an act based on Russian dolls – ‘Matryoshka’, it declared in the programme. The word of the day. He thought of the boxes that had been stacked in the hall of the Favours office, stenciled with ‘Matryoshka’. He felt the peanut-baby doll in his jacket pocket. The layers of the onion. Chinese boxes. Chinese whispers. Russian whispers. Secrets within secrets. Dolls within dolls” [9].

Example 6: “That was that then, he had seen inside the bag and there was nothing that revealed anything about Paul Bradley, just a black plastic box, a mystery within a mystery. Perhaps the box would contain another box, and inside that box another box, and so on, like the Russian dolls. Like his own Russian dolls, the prelude to his brief courtship and consummation with the girl from the Matryoshka stall. Wasn’t that a lesson? A lesson not to go somewhere that you shouldn’t” [9].

In example 6, the author further developed “the mystery-within-mystery” concept, verbalizing a certain episode in Paul Bradley’s life connected with a Russian girl, a Matryoshka vendor.

Example 7: “He had a set of Russian dolls, Matryoshka, the expensive kind. The tourist shops in Prague were full of Russian dolls these days. The writer’s dolls were lined up on the windowsill, she dusted them every week. Sometimes she put them inside each other, playing with them like she had done with her own set when she was a child. She used to think they were eating each other. Her matryoshka had been cheap, crudely painted in primary colours, but the dolls that belonged to the writer were beautiful, painted by a real artist with scenes from Pushkin – so many artists in Russia with no jobs now, painting boxes and dolls and eggs, anything for tourists. The writer had a fifteen-doll set! How she would have loved that when she was a girl” [9].

Example 7 presents an artistic view of Russian dolls from another perspective: a Russian girl working as a cleaner in the house of an Edinburgh writer. Her associations are of the Matryoshka of her childhood in Russia, the cheap ones in contrast to those owned by her employer. The author of the book gives a detailed description of the beautiful artefacts. The British author gave an unusual interpretation of dolls devouring each other – in Russian cultural tradition it is more likely to be interpreted as a doll being born from a bigger one. Sometimes the Matryoshka doll is seen by foreigners as a symbol of Russia.

Example 8: “The last day, their guide, Mariya, had let them loose in a market somewhere behind Nevsky Prospect where there were stall after stall displaying tourist wares – nesting Russian dolls, lacquered boxes, painted eggs, communist memorabilia and fur hats decorated with Red Army badges. But mostly there were dolls, thousands of dolls, legion upon legion of Matryoshka, not just the ones you could see but also the ones you couldn’t – dolls within dolls, endlessly replicating and diminishing, like an infinite series of mirrors. Martin imagined writing a story, a Borges-like construction where each story contained the kernel of the next and so on” [9].

In example 8 one can see a further step in the treatment of the “Russian doll” concept: the idea of endlessness of the world in general and that of story-telling as a process that relies on a number of interweaving plots. The writer makes use of some repetitive expressions (stall after stall, legion upon legion, dolls within dolls) along with other hyperbolic lexemes (thousands, infinite) to create an exaggerated image of Russian reality.

To sum up, set expressions with ethnonyms “Chinese” and “Russian” are both used in modern British fiction to creatively describe the cultural and personal connections of these countries with the English-speaking world. It is worth mentioning that both of them appear together, thus demonstrating similar features, namely, remoteness, unfamiliarity, and mysteriousness.

## 5. Conclusion

Comparing the semantic types of nominal phrases containing the two ethnonyms we can see that from the

English linguo-cultural perspective they have much in common, namely, in denoting exotic plants, beverages, food, exported goods, materials obtained from natural resources, historical terms (from empire to revolution). Specifically Chinese are names of dyes and minerals involved in the production of porcelain, which is called “China” after the country of its invention. It is not surprising that phrases with “Chinese” are more numerous in the English language dictionaries than those with “Russian” as a result of longer and closer contacts throughout history. These phrases have a concrete meaning denoting certain objects related to basic human activities. In the other type of phrase, which is characterized by metaphorisation, we can also state the quantitative prevalence of phrases with the “Chinese” component over the “Russian”, the vast majority of phrases having a negative shade, which confirms the results of the research conducted by P.V. Pantyukhova [10].

Analysis of British fiction has shown, first, the use of word combinations that are not registered in the dictionaries, for example, “Chinese curse”; second, some of the phrases mentioned by the dictionaries demonstrate an extremely high level of contextual assimilation, e.g. “Chinese wall”; third, certain parallels between cultures Chinese and Russian seem to exist in the eye of the English beholder, namely, their remoteness from the English civilization and, probably, great spaces of the countries in question and great numbers of the migrating population which are revealed by enigmatic symbols (infinite images concealed within each other like Russian dolls and Chinese carved balls). Finally, we would like to say that the task for the future is to obtain more data on the use of the ethnonyms in literature as well as in mass media in order to get a deeper view of the interrelationship between cultures as reflected in language.

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