

# A Comparative Study of the World Environment Day Theme Slogans and Chinese Environmental Protection Slogans

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## Abstract

Slogans have a long history. They not only affect people's daily language, but also influence people's consciousness and behavior. Slogans are said to be the strongest voices of the time and represent an important communication phenomenon. Therefore, a study on slogans is of great significance. Since the 1970s, the environmental problem has become the focus of the world, and the environmental protection slogans have played an important role not only in stimulating people's awareness of the environment but also in enhancing political attention and public action. The authors in this paper first briefly introduce the definitions, structures and functions of slogans and then point out the similarities and differences between the World Environment Day theme slogans and Chinese environmental protection slogans in order to help people understand the meaning of environmental protection slogans, thus awakening people to the protection of the environment and promoting the communication among countries.

**Keywords:** Theme slogans, Environmental protection slogans, Comparative study

With the further growth of population, there has been an enormous increase in the demand for food and in the wood consumption for fuel and building. To make matters worse, the global industrialization, urbanization, modernization as well as China's economic reform have put greater pressure on public facilities and natural resources. For example, about a third of natural world has been destroyed by human activities in the last 30 years, and the rate of loss is accelerating; devastating natural disasters like earthquakes, hurricanes and typhoons are very common now. To prevent the environment from worsening, a variety of strategies have been implemented by the Chinese government and the world Environmental Protection Agency and among these strategies, the environmental protection slogans deserve much attention and intensive researches. However, researches into slogans in China were mainly limited to the communication and introduction of slogans, teaching of slogan writing skills, criticism and correction of slogans and etc. Among the relevant academic publications and literature are "Research on Slogans in the View of Public Evaluation" (Nie, 2008), "Preliminary Discussion on Standardized Management of Governments' Propaganda Slogans" (Liu, 2009), "Critical Discourse Analysis of Thematic Slogan of Beijing Olympic Games" (Lin, 2008), *Posters and Slogans in China* (Wang, 2010) and *Culture Revealed by Posters and Slogans* (Han, 2010). As for researches on posters and slogans launched globally, few research results are introduced into China. A few of papers were completed based on the research results from abroad, such as "Comparisons of Use Characteristics, Structural Features and Functions of Posters and Slogans between the Soviet Union and Early in Russian Federation" (Zhao, 1996), "The DPRK under Posters and Slogans" (Li, 2003). *Slogans* by Urdang & Robbins (1984) and *A Century of Posters* by Alston W Purvis and Le Coulter (2002) are two representative works of the original English works imported. Therefore,

the authors think that it is of great necessity to study environmental protection slogans, especially a comparison between the World Environment Day theme slogans and Chinese environmental protection slogans.

### 1. Brief Introduction of Slogans

Slogan came from battlefields in ancient Scotland and Ireland, where the officials in Gaelic army used some simple but powerful words, phrases or sentences to gather up their soldiers and encourage them to fight bravely. Later these words and battle cries are called “slogans”. According to *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* (Zhou, 2004), slogan is a short phrase expressing a political or advertising message. In the Dictionary of Modern Chinese, slogan is defined as “用简单文字写出的有宣传鼓动作用的口号 (a written short phrase used for propaganda and encouragement).” From the definitions, it can be seen that slogans are some simple and explicit words, phrases or sentences designed to draw people's attention to something or advise people not to do something. Slogans in Chinese can be called “标语” in written form and “口号” in oral form. Although they have different names in Chinese character, there is no difference in their meaning. Here are examples: “和谐, 温馨, 真诚, 友谊” in word form; “当好东道主, 热情迎嘉宾” in phrase form; “维护城市卫生是每个公民的义务” in sentence form; “团结就是力量”, “谦虚使人进步, 骄傲使人落后” in epigrams and proverbs and etc. And the words, phrases or sentences in slogans can also have free structures and forms. A good case in point is “微笑北京 志愿奥运”, in which “笑” and “愿” are printed in different sizes from the other words; “更高, 更快, 更强(Faster, Higher, Stronger)” are all in the form of the comparative degree.

Slogans, in whatever form or structure, may help provide certain information, spread the policies and principles of a city or a country or even help promote the development of public services. For example, the slogan “新北京 新奥运(New Beijing, New Olympics)” indicates that Beijing Olympics is quite different from the previous ones. The World Environment Day theme slogan in 2007 “Melting Ice—A Hot Topic” gives a note that the ice is melting and now it is beginning to draw much attention from people. At the same time, slogans can also help people establish and maintain their relationship in a society. “热烈欢迎北京志愿者入住奥运村 (Welcome Beijing Volunteers to Stay in Olympic Village)” and “Welcome to Flanders, Belgium” express the warmth of the host or the organizer, thus indicating the relationship between the host/organizer and the guests/customers as well as their attitudes toward each other. In addition, slogans are also crucial in helping change the target reader's attitude to a certain topic. For example: “坚定不移抓发展 (Firmly Grasping the Development)” calls people not only to take actions for economic development but also to stick to it until final success is achieved; “旗帜分明反分裂 (Clear-Cut Anti-secession)” tries to persuade people, on one hand, to be united, and on the other hand, to be wary of the secession of any kind while “Let us give thanks to God” urges people to be faithful and grateful to God.

### 2. Similarities between the World Environment Day Theme Slogans and Chinese Environmental Protection Slogans

At the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment held in Stockholm of Sweden on June 5, 1972, the United Nations identified June 5 as “World Environment Day” and in October of the same year, this proposal was adopted at the 27<sup>th</sup> General Assembly of the United Nations. The establishment of World Environment Day reflects the awareness and standpoint of the various countries in the world on environmental issues and expresses the yearning and pursuit of mankind for a better environment. And Chinese environmental slogans are also intended to arouse people's awareness of environmental protection. So there are similarities between the World Environment Day theme slogans and Chinese environmental protection slogans.

#### 2.1 In Terms of Structure

As a special branch of language, slogans tend to be concise and short. That's because people may have no time to stop to read them or may have difficulty interpreting them. Namely, slogans are usually effective with their short sentences or elliptical sentences, which are not necessarily accompanied by a longer informative text or made up of a subject, a verb and an object, just as Leech noted, “slogans have been very successful due to the use of structure”(Zhao, 2005). For example, in the World Environment Day theme slogan “Only One Earth” in 1974, and the Chinese slogan “爱无限, 绿无边”, there are no more than six simple words or Chinese characters in each of them, but they both advocate people to protect the environment, for the first one gives a note of warning that the only one earth will disappear and human beings will have no place to live on any more if they do not protect the environment, and the second one indicates that we can never plant enough trees, thus encouraging us to be committed to the planting of more trees and grasses. In the World Environment Day theme slogan “For Life on Earth” in 1997, the subject and the object besides the verb are also omitted and in the Chinese slogan “我的母亲河”, the verb and the object are left out. From these examples, it is quite clear that “slogan does employ the short sentence...this makes the slogan catchy, forceful and mind-grabbing (Zhao, 2005).”

## 2.2 In Terms of Goals

The earth is the only home to human beings. But the environment is becoming worse and worse. For example, of all the species that have ever lived on the planet, 98% have died out and the world's forest cover has decreased by 13% between 1960 and 2000 from 37 million km<sup>2</sup> to 32 million km<sup>2</sup>. So the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP) and all the governments of the world are making their efforts to change this through a series of activities, during which the World Environment Day theme slogans and Chinese environmental protection slogans have been playing greater roles. "Modern slogan is not only to awaken people, but also to help organize them. It is always the principle of people's action (Zhu, 1984)." It is clear that the World Environment Day theme slogans and Chinese environmental protection slogans share the same goals---- mobilization, warning and advocacy.

Mobilization means that environmental protection slogans are to mobilize people and their resources in the drive for environmental protection. For example, the theme slogan for the year 1988's World Environment Day is "When People Put the Environment First, Development Will Last"; for 1995, "We, the Peoples, United for the Global Environment"; for 1997, "For Life on Earth"; for 1998, "For Life on Earth— Save Our Seas"; for 1999, "Our Earth— Our Future— Just Save It!"; for 2000, "2000 the Environment Millennium—Time to Act"; for 2004, "Wanted! Seas and Oceans— Dead or Alive". At the same time, there are similar environmental slogans in China: "人人为环保, 环保为人人", "环境保护从我身边做起", "保护环境, 人人有责", "只有一个地球, 人类应该同舟共济" and so on. All these slogans are meant to galvanize people into action to protect the environment.

Warning means that environmental protection slogans are to warn people to fully understand the great danger from environmental pollution, taking the initiative in protecting the environment. Examples are the theme slogans "Ozone Layer Environmental Concern; Lands Loss and Soil Degradation; Firewood" in 1977; "Desertification" in 1984; "Global Warming, Global Warning" in 1989; "Water— Two Billion People Are Dying for It" in 2003; "Melting Ice— A Hot Topic" in 2007. Similar environmental protection slogans in China are "别让可爱的生灵在我们这一代人手中消失", "再不爱惜水, 人类最后的一滴水, 将是自己的眼泪", "水是生命之源, 不合理利用水资源就是毁坏生命" and so on. All these slogans warn us that the world is in great hazard because of sewage disposal, emission of carbon dioxide, global deforestation and a decline in biodiversity.

Advocacy means that environmental slogans are used to advocate a new life style which is helpful for the environment and environmental protection. This new life style is involved in the new way of production and development as well as in the new conception of living and consumption. For example, the theme slogans "Green Cities— Plan for the Planet" in 2005, "Kick the Habit! Towards a Low Carbon Economy" in 2008, and "Biodiversity— Ecosystems Management and the Green Economy" in 2010 advocate a green life. And the concept of sustainable development is embodied in the theme slogans of the year 1978 "Development Without Destruction", 1979 "Only One Future for Our Children---- Development Without Destruction", 1980 "A New Challenge for the New Decade: Development Without Destruction"; 1988 "When People Put the Environment First, Development Will Last". In China, there are slogans like "节约用水, 从我做起", "合理利用资源, 保护生态平衡", "依靠科技进步, 促进环境保护"; "提高环境意识, 保护美好家园", "合理利用自然资源, 防止环境污染和生态破坏", "追求绿色时尚, 走向绿色文明" and so on. It can be seen that the new life style advocated by these slogans is to emphasize that protection is at least as important as development, if not more important, and that we should develop the economy and protect the environment at the same time.

### 3. Differences between the World Environment Day Theme Slogans and Chinese Environmental Protection Slogans

Slogan, as a special form of language, is a reflection of a society. Because there exist differences between China and other countries whether in their languages or in their customs, habits and traditions, naturally, there are great differences between World Environment Day theme slogans and Chinese environmental protection slogans (Gao, 2009).

Firstly, the World Environment Day theme slogan was produced earlier than the Chinese environmental slogan. As is known, the first World Environment Day theme slogan was created in 1974. It is "Only One Earth", which reminds people to care for the environment and protect the only planet— the earth. The World Environment Day theme slogans like this reflect not only the serious environmental problems caused by industrialization, urbanization and modernization, but also the great achievements in the practice of people's making a green world and the sustainable development after their rethinking of industrial civilization since the 1960s. But in China, no environmental protection slogans appeared until the 1980s due to inadequate attention to the environmental protection. The earliest slogan on the environmental protection in China was presented in the service

advertisement “请君注意, 节约用水” in Guiyang’s TV in 1986. Later there are more and more environmental protection slogans because of the development of the world environmental protection movement and the increasingly prominent environmental pollution problem in the country. And China’s environmental protection slogans sprang up like mushrooms after the meeting of Environment and Development in 1992, at which Chinese government proposed “ten measures” to deal with environment and development.

Secondly, there are some differences in their means of expression. The World Environment Day theme slogans focus more on specific issues while the Chinese environmental protection slogans focus on abstract issues. For example, the Environment Day Theme slogan “Desertification” in 1984 is aimed at desertification; “Global Warming; Global Warning” in 1989, “Melting Ice— A Hot Topic” in 2007 both at global warming and “Kick the Habit! Towards a Low Carbon Economy” in 2008 at a low carbon economy. Whether they are about desertification, global warming or a low carbon economy, slogans are directed against the serious and specific global environmental issues. But for Chinese environmental protection slogans, they are more like policies or guidelines and usually have not been updated on the walls for 10 or 20 years. Slogans like “环境保护是我国的基本国策”; “保护环境就是保护生产力”; “保护环境山河美, 持续发展事业兴” are so abstract, vague, and indirect that they seem to be acceptable at any time. So people may wonder if these slogans are created simply because the Chinese leaders at all levels have to make some slogans simply for their own interests.

Thirdly, the World Environment Day theme slogan is consistent with the rule or the law. That is to say what slogans advocate is what the human laws require people to do. It is clear that the law is to guide rather than punish people. But in some places of China, some slogans are inconsistent with the spirit of the rules or the law. Take “放火烧山, 牢底坐穿” as an example. According to this slogan, one will be sentenced to prison for the rest of his/her life if he/she lights a fire in the forest. But according to the law, only those who set the fire on purpose can be imprisoned for a fixed period of time. So when somebody is not put in jail if he/she lights the fire in the forest, the authority of the department concerned and the efficiency of the slogan may be under suspicion.

Fourthly, the World Environment Day theme slogans seem to be imaginative and cohesive. Typical examples are the World Environmental Day Theme slogan “Youth: Population and the Environment” in 1985, “Children and the Environment” in 1990, “One Earth, One Family” in 1994, “Give Earth a Chance” in 2002 and “Green Cities— Plan for the Planet” in 2005. In these slogans not only children are put together with the environment, but the youth and the whole population are put with the environment, and most important of all, these slogans can capture the imagination of all the generations. However, when Chinese are making their environmental protection slogans, they are mainly concerned about whether their slogans are readable, so they pay more attention to rhythm. For example, in slogans like “地球是我家, 绿化靠大家”; “一花一草皆生命, 一枝一叶总关情”; “来时给你一阵芳香, 走时还我一身洁净”; “小草有生命, 足下多留青”; “小草对您微微笑, 请您把路绕一绕”; “欲揽春色入自家, 无可奈何成落花”, they each are in pairs with the same structure, the same number of words and the same sound at the end of the sentences. Therefore, they sound fluent and are easy to be remembered.

In addition, the World Environment Day theme slogans tend to be practical, trying to link the fate of the people, the future of the family life and their happiness index with the protection of the Earth and the environment, thus deeply arousing people’s strong sense of social responsibility for the protection of the environment. Typical examples are “Only One Earth, Care and Share” in 1992; “One Earth, One Family” in 1994; “Our Earth, Our Habitat, Our Home” in 1996; “Connect with the World Wide Web of Life” in 2001. On the contrary, large numbers of environmental protection slogans in China put more emphasis on moralizing about people’s behavior. Slogans like “环境保护, 人人有责”; “珍惜土地, 人人有责”; “爱护花草, 人人有责”; “植树造林, 人人有责”; “护林防火, 人人有责” can be found everywhere and they do emphasize the great importance of the environment protection, but they can never arouse people’s enthusiasm and commitment. After all, what is preached in the slogans is not always closely related to every individual and cannot necessarily invite their participation, and therefore makes no sense.

#### 4. Conclusion

As the environmental situation is getting more and more serious, much more attention has been paid to it. The establishment of World Environment Day is good evidence. On the World Environment Day each year, there is a theme slogan to stimulate worldwide awareness of the environmental protection. Meanwhile, many environmental protection slogans can be seen here and there in China. For these two kinds of slogans, there are many similarities in terms of structure and goals, but there also exist many differences in their birth of time, means of expression and other aspects.

This comparison is very effective because it not only helps to raise people's awareness of protecting the environment, but also initiates the understanding of slogans, thus stimulating the cross-cultural communication. It is generally believed that only when we, peoples from all the countries, realize the seriousness of the environmental pollution and the goals of environmental protection slogans, can we take more effective actions to protect the environment. Only if we protect the environment day by day, will the world become more and more beautiful, and could our descendents enjoy a pleasant environment and a better life.

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