

A Contrastive Analysis of English and Chinese Proverbs

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Abstract

This paper will analyze the similarities and differences between English and Chinese proverbs, which have the same origin and linguistic characteristics, both of which come from civil life, myths and legends, literature and foreign languages, with conciseness and vivid image of their characters. But, due to their performances in different geographical, historical, religious and cultural values, they have their own characteristics. However, as the world's cultural exchanges, the boundaries of countries and nationalities gradually break, English and Chinese proverbs have mutual penetrated and melted with each other. It is based on the full understanding of the importance of proverbs that the paper makes the contrastive analysis of English and Chinese proverbs, through which we can not only understand them better but also get to know them deeper of their differences and similarities.

Keywords: English proverbs, Chinese proverbs, contrastive analysis

1. Introduction

Language belongs to culture and acts a very critical role in it, which is the symbolic representation of culture, reflecting the history and cultural background of human beings. In other words, language and culture are closely mingled with each other.

Proverbs are a part of language, furthermore, the creams of language, which are closely connected with culture and society, providing clues to people's geography, history, social values, religious beliefs, native conventions and so on. By summing up the folk wisdom and experience and reflecting the essence and core of a language, proverbs have been described as the crystallization of a language, which undertake a living color of a national culture, not only concise and implicit, but also full of humor and wit, regarded as a mirror of a nation and a living fossil of language, and always expressing the profound meanings with short and recognizable sentences, lovely existing in daily life.

At the beginning of the 20th century, a linguistic revolution emerge in Continental Europe, which marked the birth of modern linguistic theory. In the late 20th century, the rise of a cognitive linguistics changed the way of proverb study in the past. People began to study proverbs from the perspective of the relationship between language and mind. Honeck R.P, one of the representatives during this period of time, wrote a book entitled *A Proverb in Mind: A Cognitive Science of Proverbial Wit and Wisdom*. In the book, he mentions that history of proverbs use is cloudy because we are not sure where the first proverb was and when it was first used. At the same time, he summarizes seven reasonably distinguishable views regarding proverbs: (1) personal; (2) formal; (3) religious; (4) literary; (5) practical; (6) cultural; (7) cognitive. He holds that each of these views has something unique and positive to contribute to our knowledge of proverbs, but they do not contribute equally to our understanding of proverb cognition. For the personal, religious, literary and practical views rarely have scientific goals. The formal, cultural, and cognitive views do, although they vary in goals, assumption, methods and theoretical products (Honeck, 1997).

Researches on proverbs have come a long way. In China, a great number of scholars devoted themselves to doing researches on English proverbs, Zeng Zili is one of the outstanding scholars. He wrote a book named *A General Introduction to English Proverbs*, which is a comprehensive textbook for people who are eager to know English proverbs. From this book, readers can learn the origin, the national specialty, philosophy and so on of English proverbs. He also analyzes the artistry and the sentence patterns of English proverbs from the rhetorical

angle. In the end of the book, the author puts forward the specific situations where particular English proverbs should be used and several feasible methods employed in English proverb translation. From the numerous examples given by the author, one can know the distinctive feature of English proverbs and the differences between English and Chinese proverbs. Another scholar, Hu Wenzhong also makes a great contribution in introducing English idioms (including proverbs) in the field of cross-cultural communication. In the book *English Idioms and English Culture*, published in 2000, to begin with the relationship between language and culture, the author analyzes the relationship between English idioms and several cultural aspects, such as the historical development of the English nation, geographical environments, customs, religious beliefs, mythologies and literature. Mainly from the perspective of culture, the author explores the origins and development of English idioms and classifies various English idioms into many classes. By reading this book, readers know more about English culture when learning the English language at the same time. It is proved to be an effective reference book in improving the ability of cross-cultural communication at present day.

The paper attempts to study English and Chinese proverbs from cultural perspective in order to present the similarities and differences between the two nations with different cultural background. Since proverbs are the summary of the common people's experiences, they play a decisive role in promoting different cultural exchange and cultural transmission.

2. The Similarities between English and Chinese Proverbs

2.1 Similar Sources

Since human beings living on the same earth, experiencing the roughly similar evolutionary development, people will have world attitudes and emotional reflections nearly alike in many ways. Although Chinese and English are two different nations, they still enjoy the cultural generality besides different cultural backgrounds. Both English proverbs and Chinese proverbs are stemmed from people's daily life and experience, reflecting people's wit and wisdom, both of them come from folk life, mythology, literature and religious documents and so on particularly.

2.1.1 Originating from Folk Life

Proverbs are originated from the average people's daily life and work. They are the summary of people's simple but thoughtful ideas, feelings and sentiments.

Most of the proverbs were made by laborers, from whom limited group but engaged in the same business or activity. For instance, seamen on seas, farmers in fields, workers in factories, housewives and cooks in kitchens and so on. For the same attribute of occupation, they usually come from similar feelings about it and finally sum up the descriptive words about it. Gradually, it becomes popular and is used in different situations with a rhetorical feature. The following are some examples from folk life.

- (1) As a man sows, so he shall reap. (种瓜得瓜, 种豆得豆)
- (2) Strike while the iron is hot. (趁热打铁)
- (3) A timely snow promises a good harvest. (瑞雪兆丰年)
- (4) A watched pot never boils. (心急水不开)

Thus, we can arrive at a conclusion that the proverbs are mostly created by ordinary people. And with the broad folk foundation, they can be easily found in reading materials and textbooks. Some English proverbs are so similar with Chinese proverbs. They are exposed in the same theoretical opinion due to the same folklore.

2.1.2 Originating from Mythology, Fairy Tales and Religious Record

Each country has its own mythology and fairy tales, while people from different regions have different religious beliefs. Chinese culture is much influenced by Buddhism and there are a lot of proverbs about "Buddhism", like "不修今世修来世" (To do the spiritual practices not for this world but for the next.), "善有善报恶有恶报" (Virtue is rewarded and vice punished). But in western countries, people believe in "God", and Bible is one of the major sources of their religious beliefs. Englishmen often quote the classical expressions from Bible which has deeply rooted in western culture and influenced every aspect of people's disciple life.

2.1.3 Originating from Literary Words

A large portion of English and Chinese proverbs are derived from literary works. As for English proverbs, they mainly originate from the literary works like *The Aesop's Fables*, Shakespeare's works, Francis Bacon's articles and so on.

The Aesop's Fables involves many profound, but terse and humorous proverbs. It is convenient for people to accept them and take advantage of them into practice. Some are even popular and passed down till today.

Shakespeare is one of the most famous writers and his works have exerted a tremendous influence into literature and people's thinking. Many proverbs are from Shakespeare's works. For instance, *all is not gold that glitters* is from *The Merchants of Venice*. It cultivates us the appearance is not really necessary and people should be prudent to be deceived by those who own superficial beauty but ugly inside. Another, to be or not to be, this is a question from *Hamlet*.

Francis Bacon, as a celebrated English essayist and philosopher, is well-known for a style of penetrating exposition language. Quite a few of sentences from his works written in short but vivid and thoughtful, like reading makes a full man, knowledge is power, which notes the significance of knowledge and inspires people to keep learning and there's a long way to go before reaching the knowledge shore.

Many Chinese proverbs are from four great Chinese classical works: *Pilgrimage to the West*, *The Three Kingdoms*, *A Dream of Red Mansions* and *The Marsh Rebellion*. They are the representatives of Chinese classics. The books not only expose the historic accidents episodically, but collect many proverbs which even do not fade till today and are accepted by common people. Here are some examples from the four works.

半路杀出个程咬金 (《水浒传》)

Somebody pops in and tries to poke his nose into the matter. (*The Marsh Rebellion*)

笑里藏刀 (《三国演义》)

Velvet paws hide sharp claws. (*The Three Kingdoms*)

万事俱备，只欠东风 (《三国演义》)

All we need is the east wind. (*The Three Kingdoms*)

事后诸葛亮 (《红楼梦》)

It's easy to be wise after the event. (*A Dream of Red Mansions*)

机关算尽太聪明，反误了卿卿性命 (《红楼梦》)

孙悟空跳不出如来佛的手心 (《西游记》)

The Monkey King cannot jump out of the palm of the Tathagata Buddha. (*Pilgrimage to the West*)

2.1.4 Originating from Other Languages

As the society develops, inevitably a language is for sure to contact with other languages. In the intercourse, mother language surely absorbs some elements from others, therefore, the exotic words melt with the original ones and gradually enlarge the previous proverbs' pool.

Greece is an aged civilized nation and quite a few English proverbs come from Greek. Latin is another source which lots of English proverbs coming from. Due to the above two factors, English has assimilated a lot from Latin, like, blind men can judge no colors, do in Rome as the Romans do.

Like English, Chinese are also influenced by the outside world, some proverbs are from other languages, especially English. For examples, "The grapes are sour." and "Eye for eye, tooth for tooth", which are translated into "吃不到葡萄说葡萄酸", "以眼还眼，以牙还牙".

2.2 Similar Rhetorical Characteristics

There are common features in English proverbs and Chinese proverbs, and they are mainly laid on the function of the rhetoric. Figure of speech in proverbs have played an irreplaceable role which makes the language full of vividness and expressiveness. The following are the most commonly used ones to help readers to study proverbs effectively.

2.2.1 Proverbs and Rhetoric

Proverbs are the carriers of people's life experience, not only to describe objects or illustrate truths, but also to deliver the author's subjective assessment and sentiment. So, besides lexical meaning, proverbs also express the rhetoric meaning about the subject. Rhetoric is the most important feature to be used in proverbs since the purpose of proverbs' origin is to present the experience and truth in a sentimental and evaluated way.

Rhetoric is the basic tactics to modify the world, which is a kind of abstract form and enriches the manifestation ways. Every language is using rhetoric as a kind of art to improve the expressiveness and vividness. Either from the aesthetic or utilized angle, rhetoric can't diverge from the language, which is commonly used in English and Chinese proverbs and exerts a positive effect to shape a lively image.

Proverbs are formed in graceful rhyme, proper words, balanced grammar structure and coordinated semantic,

which are made by simple words and eventually present in short sentence. With all these features, proverbs can be classic and impressive without the role of rhetoric. Figure of speech can increase its glamour and the application of rhetoric is the most outstanding method to be carried in proverbs, whose phenomenon exists both in English and Chinese proverbs.

2.2.2 Rhetoric in English and Chinese proverbs

2.2.2.1 Semantic Figure of Speech

Semantic figures of speech refer to the rhetorical devices which are chiefly created in terms of such characteristics as semantic associations and linguistic changes, etc. (Hua, 2000).

(1) Simile

It's a comparison between two totally different things, which put one word or couple to connect the two languages elements. In Chinese, they usually are “像、好像、好比、如、比如、犹如、如同、似、似的、仿佛”, while in English, they are “like, as, as...so, seem, as if”. These words indicate the sentence use the figure of speech: simile. The word as or like can indicate comparison and the basic formula is “A is like B”. For example:

A bad custom is like a good cake, better broken than kept.

Books, like friends, should be few and well chosen.

人生在世无朋友，犹如生活无太阳 (A life without a friend is a life without a sun.)

人无钱，犹如弓无箭 (A man without money is like a bow without an arrow.)

(2) Metaphor

It also uses words of figure of speech to connect the phrases which originally indicates one thing to refer to another with a similar quality, but the word involves the meaning of judgment and equality which is implied to make a figure of speech. In Chinese, the words are often like: 是、成了、成为、变成、当作、相当于、等于 etc., While in English they are mostly “to be”. The basic formula is “A is B”. For example:

A good book is a light to the soul.

A life without a friend is a life without a sun.

Above all, we can see that simile and metaphor are commonly used both in English and Chinese proverbs, and can correspond to each one, which makes the proverbs full of sentimental color and thought-provoking.

(3) Metonymy

Metonymy is to substitute a thing with its feature or to replace a behaviour with a tool. Thus, the crown can stand for a king, the head for body, the white House for the American government. With its appropriate application, brevity and vividness can be achieved. For example:

情人眼里出西施 (Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder.)

同室不操戈 (Crows do not pick crows' eyes.)

Two heads are better than one.

A good heart cannot lie.

(4) Synecdoche

When a part is substituted for the whole or the whole is substituted for a part, synecdoche is applied. For example:

Napoleon was a great soldier. (拿破仑是将军)

Friendship never forgets. (朋友决不会忘记)

All the father rises in my breast. (舐犊之情我心中油然而生)

Metonymy and synecdoche are similar as both involve substitution. They can grasp the obvious characteristics to represent things, ingeniously transferring the object and make the proverbs full of conciseness and humor.

(5) Personification

It treats a thing or an idea as if it were human or had human qualities. e.g:

忧郁杀死猫 Care killed the cat.

隔墙有耳 Walls have ears.

Fact speaks louder than words.

Misfortunes come on wings and depart on foot.

Truth speaks in a language that is simple and direct.

(6) Paradox

When a statement is of this figure of speech, it seems self-contradictory and runs counter to the common sense and reason, but after considering carefully one can find there is some philosophy in this obvious contradiction. This kind of rhetorical device makes the language more implicit and offers the readers much space for thinking. e.g.:

The more we learn, the less we know.

以毒攻毒 (Devil must be driven out with devils.)

2.2.2.2 Syntactic Figure of Speech

Syntactic figure of speech chiefly indicates the ones formed through the balanced arrangement of the sentence structures or the stress on the key points (Hua, 2000). This kind of rhetorical device chiefly includes repetition, antithesis, parallelism and the like.

(1) Repetition

It repeats the same word or sentence for emphasizing certain things or expressing certain thoughts and feelings. e.g.:

Many dishes make many diseases.

Money lost, little lost; time lost, everything lost.

国家、国家，没有国哪有家 (It is without the country that there is no home.)

吃不穷，穿不穷，算计不到一世穷 (It is not to eat or to wear, but not to budget makes one poor in life.)

(2) Antithesis

It is often the way by contrasting words or ideas in balanced structural forms to get emphasis. And, it is usually in parallel structure, creating a definite and systematic relationship between ideas. eg:

Speech is silver; silence is golden.

The smaller the mind is, the greater the conceit is.

良药苦口利于病，忠言逆耳利于行 (A good medicine tastes bitter.)

(3) Parallelism

Parallelism requires three items or more than three ideas which phrased in the same grammatical form with the same subject or verb. For instance:

No bees, no honey; no work, no money.

有贤不知，一不祥；知而不用，二不祥；用而不信，三不祥 (It is ominous not to know someone is a talent, more ominous not to appoint him for an important post though he has been known and the most ominous not to believe in him though he has been appointed.)

2.2.2.3 Phonetic Figure of Speech

Phonetic figure of speech are made according to the pronunciation characteristics of words (Hua, 2000). This kind of figure of speech relatively lacks and chiefly includes onomatopoeia, alliteration, rhyme, etc. Some proverbs with alliteration exist in English, and rhyme in both English and Chinese proverbs.

(1) Alliteration

It refers to the appearance of the same initial consonant sound in two or more words, like “proud as a peacock”.

(2) Rhyme

Rhyme refers to the identity of sound including a vowel between words or their endings. For example:

Early wed, early dead.

嘴上没毛，办事不牢 (Downy lips make thoughtless slips.)

2.3 Similar Practical Functions

As proverbs reflecting the natural features of daily life, they sum up the wisdom and experience of people's. A large part of them are aiming at persuading people and guiding people's life to avoid detours. They exist till today by full of philosophy and instructive meanings. For example, a leopard cannot change its spots (江山易改本性难移) tells people the instinct character cannot be changed easily. "An apple a day, keeps the doctor away", which advises people to keep eating fresh fruit than to see a doctor. 学而不思则罔, 思而不学则殆 (Learning without thought is labor lost; thought without learning is perilous).

In short, from generation to generation, proverbs have summed up the people's experience and wisdom, they are a precious and valuable part of cultural data. Most of them are full of philosophical and profound meanings, which can cultivate people and have constructive suggestions to their life.

3. Differences between English and Chinese Proverbs

3.1 Different Geographical Features

Language is based on the natural environment and every country is situated in various surroundings, thus all kinds of languages have been endowed with special circumstance features.

English and Chinese proverbs, originating in particular geographical regions and under special geographical contexts, respectively reflect different geographical conditions of the two nations.

England is an island country, surrounded by seas, people who live along seacoasts and whose livelihood is dependent upon sea will have proverbs about sailing and braving the weather on the sea. British enjoys a typical marine climate, thus, there are a couple of words such as (sea, fish, water) and (ship), or even words related to them, for example, (all at sea) (不知所措), "spend money like water" (挥金如土), "to rest on one's oars" (暂时歇一歇), "keep one's head above water" (奋发图强), "ride out of the storm of" (战胜风暴, 战胜困难), "learn the rope" (熟悉内幕), and many proverbs related to the ocean. For instance:

- (1) Rats desert a sinking ship. (树倒猢猻散)
- (2) A small leak will sink a great ship. (小漏沉大船)
- (3) Let others' shipwreck be your seamark. (前车之覆, 后车之鉴)
- (4) Being on sea, sail; being on land, settle. (临渊羡鱼, 临草而牧)

The above proverbs are about sailing. England, an island country, is in the western seaside of Europe, whose particular location determines their special way of life and climate. People live by seaside and their life can't do without sailing and fishing. As a matter of fact, navigation and fishing are vital to them in this insular nation, whose proverbs are certainly concerned with voyage, fishing and their courage against thunders and storms.

While China is a continental country, which situated in Asian continent, whose terrain is mainly mountains, hills and plains. When expressing the similar ideas, English speakers turn to their experiences in the sea for witty wisdom, while Chinese speakers turn to their experiences on land, like "山" (mountains), "虎" (tiger), "草" (grass), "树" (tree). Take climate for example, which shapes the differences of English and Chinese proverbs. High mountains in the west and vast sea in the east are the feature of the Chinese mainland. So many Chinese proverbs bear regional flavor. For example:

- (1) 留得青山在, 不愁没柴烧 (As long as green hills remains, there will be a shortage of firewood.)
- (2) 城门失火, 殃及池鱼 (A fire on city wall will bring disaster to the fish in the moat.)
- (3) 路遥知马力, 日久见人心 (As distance tests a horse's strength, so time reveals a person's heart.)
- (4) 天涯何处无芳草 (There are other fish in the sea.)

For the above several pairs of proverbs, they each in pair have different specific level schemas which have their root in the different living environments. What is more, as for some pairs of proverbs, there may be just one of them consists of such elements including the effect of different living environments, say, "Don't go near the water until you learn how to swim", while the Chinese proverb is "没有金刚钻, 别揽瓷器活。", "Until all is over one's ambition never dies" (不到黄河心不死). "It is a small world" (山与山不碰头, 人与人常相见). "Paddle your own canoe" (自己的路自己走), all have only one of each pair that consists of words indicating their root in different living environments.

3.2 Different Customs and Living Ways

The proverbs in this group have various motivations on different living ways and customs in the two cultures, like different foods, pets, units of measurement, etc.

Conspicuously, English and Chinese speakers have different living styles. Westerners have bread and milk for breakfast, while Chinese have traditional food like “饺子” (dumpling), “豆腐” (bean curd), and most commonly foods among Chinese people are “萝卜” (radish) and “白菜” (cabbage). Therefore, different expressions are used in correspondent proverbs. Some of the typical examples are “bread is the staff of life” and “民以食为天”, “every one to his taste” and “萝卜青菜, 各有所爱”, “a watched pot never boils” and (心急水不开) and “his bark is worse than his bite (刀子嘴豆腐心)”, “it is no use crying over spilt milk” and, “牛奶洒了, 哭也无用”.

There is a well-known custom of the native English speakers, i.e. they talk about the weather a lot. This is a common motivation for several English proverbs, like “it never rains but it pours”, “lightning never strikes twice in the same place”, “many drops make a shower”, while the correspondent Chinese ones have different motivations.

Both English and Chinese people have the proverbs for getting preparation ahead with rain. However, in order to prepare for a coming rain, people do different things, which results in the different literal meanings for the two correspondent proverbs. To be exact, the English speakers bring their cloak to prepare a rain, while the Chinese people tie up the windows in their houses. Therefore, this pair of proverbs are “Repair the house before it rains” and “未雨绸缪”. In China, “锣” and “鼓” are popular instruments among people which resulted in “当面锣, 对面鼓, 事情才能说清楚”. This phenomenon does not exist in English speaking countries, so the correspondent one is “face to face the truth comes out”. “Melons” and “beans” are the most common produce in China, so they are used as “种瓜得瓜, 种豆得豆”, while in English it is “whatsoever a man sows, that shall he also reap”. Rice to Chinese housewives is just as tool to a workman, so there is “巧妇难为无米之炊” and “what is a workman without his tool”.

3.3 Different Conventional Cultures

Since both Chinese and English nations have long history and rich cultural legacy, there are a large amount of proverbs that reflect their different customs and conventions. Chinese traditionally use 12 animals, representing the 12 Earthly Branches, to symbolize the year in which a person is born. Spring Festival 2021, for example, is the year of OX. It seems that the Westerners don't like “dull or ox” as much as Chinese do. When one often makes troubles, they say “he is a bull in a china shop”; when one does something that can't be brought about, they say “he milks the bull”; when one likes talking big without action, they say “he shoots the bull”.

But Chinese people like to use the word ox to describe as the one with strong body, great strength, especially people use it to speak highly of those who are as busy as bees, serve the people heart and soul, immerse themselves in and devote themselves to their work selflessly. We still remember Lu Xun, a great Chinese writer, once said, that is “横眉冷对千夫指, 俯首甘为孺子牛”, and the version is “Fierce-browed, I coolly defy a thousand pointing fingers, head bowed, like a willing ox, I serve the children”. When the tiny things are referred to, the Chinese people say “九牛一毛”; when one has made tremendous efforts to do something, they say “他用了九牛二虎之力”; when one is skilled in his trade, they say “庖丁解牛”; when all sorts of bad characters are mentioned, they say “牛鬼蛇神”; when one makes a fuss over a trifle, they say “杀鸡用牛刀”. The different associations with ox belong to differences having creatures with certain associated qualities in both English and Chinese cultures but with different qualities.

British people like to raise dogs as their pets. To them dogs are human's best friends and partners, which is an indication of good qualities. In their opinion, dogs are faithful, reliable, brave and smart. There are a lot of proverbs concerned with the images of dogs but showing human's behaviors of their daily life. For instance, love me, love my dog; every dog has its day.

Chinese people enjoy raising dogs, just as Englishmen. So lots of Chinese proverbs are also about dogs like “狗嘴里吐不出象牙; 狗仗人势, 雪仗风势; 狗眼看人低”. From the above proverbs, we can see that Chinese people don't have the same views towards dogs. Quite different from English people, Chinese people's aims of raising dogs are much different from that of Englishmen. In the countryside of China, dogs are kept chiefly to guard door entrance, especially. Chinese people tend to dislike and look down upon dogs psychologically. The images of dogs often remind them of a bad person or something bad. So they often have the tendency of cursing someone they hate or despise as a dog. And the one who is cursed always considers it a big shame and insult. He will become angry and can never forget the shame. More examples are to illustrate the proverbs reflecting conventions with different creatures in both Chinese and English:

- (1) 人有失手, 马有失蹄。(It is a good horse that never stumbles.)
- (2) 狼走千里吃肉, 狗走千里吃屎。(The leopard can't change its spots.)
- (3) 狗嘴里吐不出象牙。(What can you expect from a dog but a grunt?)

The above examples have evidently showed the conventional cultural differences.

Not only animals, but also colors have cultural differences. We Chinese usually use seven kinds of color words “赤橙黄绿青蓝紫”, while English people use the color words are red, orange, yellow, green, black, blue, gray, brown, pink and purple. All the words expressing colors have the same literal meanings both in Chinese and English, but when they are used as metaphors, they mean quite different things. To Chinese, blue means fine vision, and it stands for clarification and generosity. For Englishmen, blue indicates loser, depression, terror and sadness. For instance: “she looks blue today.” means “she is sad.”, “in the blues” means “in low spirits”. “Blue Monday” means “the depressed Monday after the rest of the weekends”. “Blue murder” means “horrified screech”. To some degree, color words, very small in number, but show the cultural, ethical and artistic values of different races and people at different times.

3.4 Different Religious Faith

Religion is an important source of proverbs, religious cultures, formed by religious beliefs and consciousness of different nations constitute the main component of human culture. It reflects different attitudes towards admiration and taboo of each nation.

Many people in the west believe in Christianity, so there are a large number of related idioms in their language, like, “Those whom the God love die young” and “天妒英才”, “Go to hell” (下地狱去). The authorized version of the 1661’s Holy Bible has become the mental food of the English people. All of them had their roots in Bible. Here are more examples:

- (1) Each cross has its own inscription.
- (2) God sends meat and the devil sends cooks.

The above proverbs are closely related to Christianity, so it is only natural that many proverbs are related to Christianity in one way or another. While the Chinese believe in Buddhism and Taoism introduced into China more than one thousand years ago. People believe that it is Buddha who controls everything in the world. Therefore, there are a lot of idiom, bywords, literary reference concerned with religion like: “借花献佛”, “临时抱佛脚”, “放下屠刀,立地成佛”, “盗亦有道”, and “君子爱财,取之有道”, “泥菩萨过河,自身难保”. For more examples:

- (1) 善有善报, 恶有恶报。(Goodness will meet good recompense and evil with evil recompense.)
- (2) 八仙过海, 各显神通。(Like the eight immortals soaring over the ocean, each of you show your true worth.)
- (3) 学而不厌, 诲人不倦。(Studying tirelessly and enlightening others indefatigably.)

3.5 Different Values

The differences in value also lead many proverbs. For example, English speakers attach great importance to braveness, while Chinese speakers use the concept “hero” to express similar meanings like “none but the brave deserves the fair” and “英雄难过美人关”. The concept “hero” means much more than just “braveness”.

Similarly, English speakers value “wisdom” and “good character”, while Chinese people value “genuine ability and learning” and “morality”, as can be found in “a flow of words is no proof of wisdom” and “口若悬河不一定有真才实学”, “a good character is better than a good fortune” and “品德良好生活过家财万贯”.

In addition, English speakers believe “self-preservation is the first law of nature”, while Chinese culture always encourage people to help others, even if they have to lose their own lives. Among the westerners, individualism has been always attached great value, so they think if some people find something that is lost by others; it surely belongs to the finder. However, Chinese people emphasize collectivism. They think all the people are a whole family. Everyone is a member of such a big family, so they should care about others. If they find something that is lost by others, they should put themselves in other people’s shoes. Although many people do not actually “拾金不昧” nowadays in the money oriented society, but the value still is a prevalent idea. Such cultural differences are probably the fundamental motivation for the existence of proverbs which have completely opposite meanings.

4. Conclusion

As proverbs are an indispensable part of a language and they contain the golden information of a nation’s culture, its analysis presents the importance with the necessity of communication. The paper has put the symbolic English proverbs and found the correspondent Chinese ones, combining with the explanations, it best gives the understanding of the two kinds of proverbs.

By giving a contrastive analysis on the proverbs and exploring motivations for them, the authors hope this paper may help both peoples to have a contribution to the translation and pedagogy as well, and more detailed and profound researches are to be expected.

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Authors' contributions

Prof. Zhi-liang Liu was responsible for study design and revising. Ms. Gui-yu Lin drafted the manuscript. Both of the authors read and approved the final manuscript, and they contributed equally to the study.

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