

Cultural Differences between China and the Western Countries from the Translation of Chinese Zodiac Animals

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Abstract: Chinese traditional zodiac culture boasts a long history. With the improvement of China's international status and the vigorous promotion of Chinese national culture, zodiac culture has spread worldwide and become the common cultural wealth of all mankind. However, due to different cultural differences, part of the zodiac has not formed a unified translation. By analyzing the different English translations of partial animal zodiac words, this paper compares the different symbolic meanings of these animal words in the two languages, showing the cultural differences between Chinese and English and analyzing the causes of the differences, trying to shorten the gap between cultures and enable the world to have a deeper understanding of Chinese folk culture.

Keywords: Twelve Chinese zodiac culture, Translation, Cultural difference.

1. Preface

Twelve Chinese zodiac signs are used to remember the year, including eleven real animals, namely Shu(rat), Niu(ox), Hu(tiger), Tu(rabbit), She(snake), Ma(horse), Yang(sheep), Hou(monkey), Ji(chicken), Gou(dog), Zhu(pig), and a mythological creature Long(Chinese dragon) in Chinese tale. With the improvement of China's international status and the promotion of its national culture, Zodiac culture enjoys great popularity in the world and has become the common cultural wealth of all mankind. However, due to cultural differences caused by history, customs, religious beliefs, thinking patterns and other reasons, people in English-speaking countries have different understandings of these twelve animals, which can be seen in the translation of twelve Chinese zodiac signs. It can be seen from statistics that there is only one English name for the zodiac Hu(tiger), She(snake), Ma(horse), Hou(monkey) and Gou(dog), two English names for the zodiac Shu(rat/mouse), Niu(ox/bull), Tu(rabbit/hare) and Yang(sheep/goat), three English names for the zodiac Long(dragon/Long/loong) and Zhu(pig/boar/hog), and four names for the zodiac Ji(cock/fowl/rooster/chicken) (Jia Yuting, 2011). How to correctly translate Chinese zodiac animals and accurately promote cultural connotation of Chinese zodiac to the world is also a problem that we need to pay attention to in cross-cultural communication.

2. Translation and Cultural Connotation of Chinese Zodiac Words

Due to reasons of history, customs, religious beliefs, thinking patterns, etc., the animal vocabulary between China and English-speaking countries are not completely equivalent. Therefore, some Chinese zodiac words have not yet formed a universal translation between Chinese and English, and the different translations also reflect the differences between Chinese and Western cultures. When translating Chinese zodiac words, we should consider cultural differences, and analyze the cultural significance of the translated Chinese

zodiac words in English, paying attention to the feelings of the target readers. In this chapter, the author selects three zodiac animal words, Shu, Niu, and Long, which are controversial in English translation, and analyzes the connotations of different translation in different cultures between China and the western countries.

2.1. Shu

The definition of Shu in Xinhua Chinese Dictionary is "Shu, is a kind of small mammal with long tail". Shu ranks first in Chinese zodiac. However, the ancients had a bad impression of it, and most of the idioms and sayings about Shu expresses negative meanings. There are two translations of Shu in English, namely "mouse" and "rat". Mouse refers to "a small animal that is covered in fur and has a long thin tail", and rat is "a small animal with a long tail, that looks like a large mouse" with a metaphor meaning of "an unpleasant person, especially one who is not loyal or tricks somebody". It can be seen that "rat" is more consistent with Chinese meaning in zodiac culture than "mouse". Therefore, when translating the zodiac year of Shu, "the year of rat" is more suitable than "the year of mouse".

2.2. Niu

China is an agricultural country, and Niu is the treasure of Chinese farmers since ancient times. In Chinese zodiac, Niu is the most industrious animal. Legends and idioms about Niu are widely praised, showcasing people's affection for it. In English, there are three translations of Niu, namely "cow", "bull" and "ox". A cow is "a large female animal that is kept on farms and used to produce milk or meat". A bull refers to "the male of any animal in the cow family", and an ox means "a bull whose sex organs have been removed, often used for working on farms". By comparison, the English word "ox" is more in line with the image of Niu in Chinese zodiac culture. Therefore, when translating the zodiac year of Niu, "the year of ox" is more proper.

2.3. Long

In the Chinese zodiac, Long is the only illusory and

mythological creature. In Chinese culture, Long is an image deeply admired by people, which contains authority, strength and auspiciousness. In ancient China, Long was also regarded as the symbol of emperors and kingship, and Chinese people also regarded themselves as “descendants of Long”. For a long time, Long has been translated as “dragon”. However, western dragon and Chinese dragon have almost opposite images. In Western culture, dragon is a huge and horrible monster and a symbol of evil. The Bible refers to Satan as “the great dragon”. Although they are both creatures in myths and legends, the noble Long in Chinese culture is in sharp contrast with the evil dragon in English culture. If Chinese zodiac Long is translated as “dragon”, the target reader will have a bad impression on it. The translation of Chinese zodiac Long is also the controversial among scholars. Some of them contend that the conventional translation as “dragon” should be retained, such as Wu Weixiong’s *Why Translate “Dragon” Into “Tiger”* (Wu Weixiong, 2000). Some scholars suggest that Long should be translated as “Chinese dragon”. The author thinks that translating “Long” into “Chinese dragon” is more suitable. In this way, it not only retains the translated name commonly known in China for hundreds of years, but also does not conflict with the western dragon, thus achieving the purpose of “harmony” between the East and the West.

3. The Cause of Different English Translations of Chinese Zodiac Words

Language reflects culture, and culture is the sum of thought, language, behavior and feeling of a nation. Under different ecological and natural environments, different nations have created their unique cultures and also have been deeply influenced by their own cultures (Jia Yuxin, 1997). In addition, different nations have different understandings of the same or similar things due to their differences in thinking in the process of human evolution. Some Chinese zodiac words can find a corresponding word in English, while others may correspond to multiple different translations. In this chapter, the author analyzes the reasons of different English translations of Chinese zodiac words from the perspective of natural environment and thinking.

3.1. Different English Translations of Chinese Zodiac Words Caused by Natural Environment

China is located on the east of Asia-Europe continent with a vast territory. In the long feudal period, many rulers advocated the idea of “agriculture first”, which made agriculture boast a very important position in ancient China. Therefore, ox, chicken and other animals were given special cultural meanings. For example, ox is an indispensable and important labor “tool” in agricultural society, which is closely related to and praised by ancient Chinese people. Therefore, the words and idioms about “ox” are mostly commendatory. Rooster is also closely related to Chinese agricultural society. In the ancient agricultural society without time-telling tools, rooster herald the break of day for human beings, and was called “rooster the deity” by Chinese people.

However, unlike ancient China, Western countries are generally small in territory and face the vast Atlantic Ocean. Westerners did not pay much attention to agriculture, and they have pioneering spirit. Western culture was deeply affected

by ancient Greek, Roman and Hebrew culture, and gradually formed an “expansive marine culture” through historical development (Zhang Xuan, 2015). Therefore, most of animal words related to agriculture does not boast extra cultural connotations in western countries.

3.2. Different English Translations of Chinese Zodiac Words Caused by Thinking

Most of the animals in Chinese zodiac are common animals shared by China and the Western countries. Because of the similarity of human thinking, these animals have similar cultural meanings. However, these “corresponding words” are not completely corresponding. The main reasons are as follows:

First, differences in thinking modes and perspectives between the Chinese and Westerners. Chinese people advocate the idea of “putting people in the first”, connecting the habits and qualities of animals with people. The Chinese zodiac animals are deified and endowed with the auspicious meaning, which is not only related to China’s profound agricultural culture, but also mainly related to the “putting people in the first” thinking mode of Chinese people. However, these twelve animals in western countries rarely have the cultural meaning of being embodied and extended, and the meaning of them in western culture is obtained from the objective analysis of animals themselves.

Second, the differences of cultural psychology between the Chinese and westerners. Cultural psychology of a nation refers to the psychological patterns and characteristics of a nation in the long process of evolution and development, such as national personalities, sentiments, values and religious beliefs, which are formed under the national culture. These differences of national cultural psychology between the Chinese and westerners exerts a subtle influence on their languages. For example, Chinese people use “dragon” as a metaphor for “the emperor”, while westerners use “the old dragon” to refer to “devil”; when expressing “bragging”, Chinese people use “ox” as a metaphor, while westerners use “talk horse” to express same meaning; westerners use “black sheep” to describe someone that they are considered bad or worthless by other people in a group, while Chinese people use “horse” as a metaphor to express same meaning.

Third, the differences of semantic association between the Chinese and the westerners. Semantic association is a common thinking feature shared by all human beings, which refers to they tend to connect immediate scene with their own emotions. Due to the differences in history and culture between the Chinese and the westerners, different emotions have emerged, resulting in different semantic associations. For example, “horse”, as one of the most important animals for transportation and combat in ancient China, has been given the meaning of “being friendly and fighting hard” by the Chinese. However, as the mount of the westerners, especially for the aristocrats, “horse” has been endowed with the meaning of “elegance and nobility” under the background of western aristocratic culture.

4. Conclusion

Because of different natural environment, history and culture background, different countries and nationalities have produced different ways of thinking, different national cultural psychology and different semantic association of language, and their languages embody different cultural

meanings. The differences between Chinese and English in Chinese zodiac words are only a microcosm of these cultural differences, from which we can realize the cultural differences between the China and the west. Therefore, we should pay attention to these differences when translating and promoting Chinese culture, realizing effective cross-cultural communication.

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