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## TOWARD A NEW ORIENTATION OF CHINESE PROVERB STUDIES

**Abstract:** Proverbs have been widely used as a formalized genre in the literature since the eighth century BCE in China, and there has appeared a great number of proverb collections in the past centuries. However, the proverb studies in China have not been given relevant attention, and the deficiency of focusing only on the proverb texts out of context in those existing studies is obvious. Proverbs are a form of literature as well as a comprehensive practice of life and culture, whose integrity of meaning and function can only be presented and realized in context. Therefore, a better collection or investigation of proverbs must be combined with the perspective of context. The ongoing national project the “Treasury of Chinese Folk Literature: Proverbs” is expected to not only make up for the deficiency of previous investigations of proverbs in China, providing a more comprehensive and integrated collection of Chinese proverbs, but also further advance proverb studies in China.

**Keywords:** proverbs, context, Treasury of Chinese Folk Literature: Proverbs

As a folklore genre with extensive impact in social life, proverbs have been constantly concerned by scholars and intellectuals since very early time in China. The proverb texts have not only been widely quoted by various books and documents since at least the 8<sup>th</sup> BCE, but also been collected and compiled more and more into different collections since the early 13<sup>th</sup> century, which show the multiple nature and value of this genre from different perspectives. Nevertheless, Chinese folklorists have paid less attention to the study of proverbs, compared with that of other genres such as myths, folktales, and ballads. Even the small amount of existing proverb studies has shown obvious deficiencies, particularly in the inquiry of the nature, function, and definition, as well as research method. With this awareness, this paper discusses the characteristics of Chinese proverbs and key issues in the related research, as well as introducing a brief history of proverbs collecting and study

in China, with particular attention to the ongoing national project of “Chinese Proverb Collection” and the “Treasury of Chinese Folk Literature: Proverbs.”

***The definition, classification and characteristics of Chinese proverbs***

There are more than ten different words referring to proverbs in classic literature and oral speech in Chinese, such as "*li yan*" (country saying), "*bi yan*" (small town saying), "*su yan*" (popular saying), "*ye yu*" (wild words), "*chang yan*" (common saying), and "*lao hua*" (old saying). And the concept of "*yan*" (saying/proverb) was popularly used to specifically indicate the genre of proverb as early as in the 8<sup>th</sup> century BCE, which is the form most equivalent to “proverb” in Chinese.

It should be noted that the word “*yan*” is polysemous in classic Chinese literature, with multiple meanings in different context. On the one hand, it is used as an adjective to describe someone who is impolite or rude. On the other hand, as a noun, it signifies three verbal genres. The first and the most common one equals to proverb; the second refers to idiom; and the third means ballad. Those multiple meanings of “*yan*,” according to different understandings of people in different contexts, embody the high similarity between proverbs and other genres alike, as well as the easy confusion among them. This makes it particularly vital to well define the genre of proverb.

The definitions of a proverb are various and numerous, and they have “caused scholars from many disciplines much chagrin over the centuries” (Mieder 2007: 394). In Chinese academic circles, there are two influential views as the following:

Proverbs are the summary of people's practical experience, and they are expressed with artistic words and may be publicly used in daily conversation. They are speeches to regulate people's behavior (Guo 1924: 6).

Proverbs are concise and relatively formalized artistic speeches that are collectively created by the folk and widely orally spread among people. They are the regular summary of people's rich wisdom and common experience. (National Editorial Board of Chinese Folk Literature Collections 1990: 20)

Definitions of proverbs in the Western countries are also more diverse. Despite concerning expressions such as “Proverbs are the

children of experience,” “Proverbs are the wisdom of the streets,” and “Proverbs are true words,” which are quite popular, proverb scholars have “not been satisfied with the vagaries of this type of definitions” (Mieder 2007: 395).

Referring to those existing views, I attempt to define “proverb” as such:

A proverb is a genre of verbal art with short and easy-to-remember words and relatively formalized structure that is passed down from generation to generation to summarize collective experience, to transmit general knowledge, to demonstrate basic principles, and to guide or regularize people's social practice. It is characterized by outstanding orality, conciseness and clear rhythm. Being in the form of a complete sentence other than sentence element, it often states a definite conclusion, and has the nature and function of "axiom" in daily application.

Generally speaking, Chinese proverbs not only have obvious regional or ethnic characteristics in presenting unique experience and knowledge, but also embody the consistency in line with the traditional world outlook and values of Chinese culture in general, which makes them mostly understandable and acceptable to most people. Such understandability and acceptability enable us to classify proverbs according to the texts, with the perspective of intertextuality. Chinese proverbs may generally be classified into two types: proverbs of natural environment and modes of production, and proverbs of social life. More specifically, they can be divided into the following eight categories: natural proverbs, agricultural proverbs, professional proverbs, proverbs of social manner, cultivation proverbs, social contact proverbs, everyday life proverbs, and political proverbs. This classification as a basic framework and reference to the current project of the “Treasury of Chinese Folk Literature: Proverbs” in China, is just a static division of proverbs from the synchronic point of view. However, from the diachronic and dynamic perspectives, the main contents, types and applications of proverbs in each period are varying due to the differences of social life norms in different historical stages and the different motivation and interests of each document or collection in which proverbs are recorded. The proverbs in each historical stage, therefore, do not necessarily appear in the above classi-

fication completely. It should be noted that the emergence and application of agricultural proverbs usually corresponds to special regional adaptability (see Juanjuan Chen's article in this volume). At the same time, a considerable part of social proverbs superficially express a specific historical person or event, but these people or events have become symbols after a certain period of time, which might be generally used in other contexts without the specific person or event involved.

***The development, collection, and investigation of Chinese proverbs***

As mentioned above, proverbs were popularly spread as a formalized artistic genre of speech as early as the 8<sup>th</sup> BCE in China. The rhetorical devices of antithesis, metaphor or direct statement, which are commonly used in modern proverbs, have been widely used in this period. At the same time, many proverb texts well known in later times have also appeared, which were widely involved in ethics, self-cultivation, social norm of conduct and general principles, such as "A good neighbor is better than a brother far off," "Better be a chicken's head than a cow's tail," "Gems unwrought can do nothing useful," "A thousand-mile journey begins with the first step," "Good fortune lies within the bad; bad fortune lurks within the good." The principles and rules emphasized in those texts not only established the basic norms for the social life at that time, but also constituted the core content of the spiritual and cultural tradition of the Chinese culture

Thus it can be seen that proverbs shaped a special expression of national spirit and "keywords" in Chinese traditional expressive culture in early times when the language originated and formed. They are not only the summary and embodiment of the national spirit, but also play a strengthening role in this spirit. As a mature genre, such proverbs in the development in later times, although they might change constantly in content based on the increasingly rich social life, have gained little increase in artistic means and structural forms

Many proverbs about natural knowledge and agricultural production experience also appeared in the early times. With the continuous progress of agricultural technology and the increasing diversity of production activities, the content of these proverbs are

constantly accumulated and increased, which forms a large part of the treasury of Chinese proverbs.

The earliest collection of proverbs in China appeared in the Song Dynasty, which is *Proverbs from the Past through Present* compiled by Zhou Shouzhong in the early 13<sup>th</sup> century. Although its original version is no longer handed down, this book started a trend for the later scholars to compile proverbs. During the Ming and Qing Dynasties (14<sup>th</sup> - 20<sup>th</sup> century), there appeared a number of collections on old and contemporary proverbs, such as *Old and Contemporary Proverbs* by Yang Shen (1488-1559), *Six Speeches* by Guo Zizhang (1543-1618), *On Old Sayings* by Zeng Tingmei (1734-1816), *The Old Sayings* by Du Wenlan (1815-1881), and *Yue Proverbs* by Fan Yin (1827-1897). They all collected and preserved a great deal of old proverbs in China. Among them, *The Old Sayings* compiled by Du Wenlan is a great success. (For the history of Chinese proverbs development and collection, see Juwen Zhang's article in this volume.

Since the late 1910s, with the rise and continuous advancement of folklore studies in China, the collection and compilation of proverbs have been booming, and a large number of proverb collections reflecting the life experience of different regions and fields have emerged. Some of those books are compiled on the basis of old literature, which continue the traditional way of proverb collection. There are also many new collections through field-work, which reflecting new perspectives and methods developed in the discipline of folklore studies. Those new perspectives and methods have been widely used in the proverb collections after 1949, and especially applied and greatly developed in the national project "Chinese Proverb Collections" (1984-2009) started in the early 1980s, which not only collected and recorded the vast amount of proverbs widely spread throughout China, but also vividly showed the vitality of proverbs

Academic studies of proverbs in China started in the late 1910s. Since then, Chinese proverb scholars have made progress in the following aspects: First, they have formed a rigorous and clear definition of proverb, and thus distinguished proverbs from several other genres that are easily confused with each other, such as idioms, ballads, two-part allegorical sayings, and adages. Second, they have discussed and summarized the artistic features and syntactic structure of proverbs, laying a solid foundation for

further understanding of the formal characteristics of proverbs. Thirdly, and most importantly, they have studied the Chinese people's thoughts, conceptions and nationality embodied in proverbs, for instance, by analyzing the educational significance and cognitive value contained in proverbs of a certain ethnic group, or the values and living and cultural conditions reflected in a certain type of proverbs. These studies account for the largest proportion in Chinese proverb studies, and the achievements concerned are encouraging. In addition, there are also some studies on proverbs in literatures from different historical periods, which provide important clues to understanding the records and use of proverbs in specific times.

*The importance of context in the proverb studies*

However, compared with the studies of other folklore genres such as myths, legends and tales, proverb studies in China is quite underdeveloped, which is also inconsistent with the fact that there are a large amount of proverbs both in literature and real life. Moreover, with increasing acceptance of the concept to understand and interpret folklore from the perspective of "performance," the deficiency of focusing only on the proverb text out of context in those existing studies has become increasingly striking. This is especially reflected in research on the cognitive value and educational function of proverbs, as well as on people's worldview, ideological history, and national character involved in proverbs, which occupy the main proportion of proverb studies.

A typical example of the new and progressive approach is *A New Study of Chinese: People's Mind Seen through Proverbs* (Li 1996). In this book, the author classifies proverbs from the perspective of the study of national character, and focuses on different aspects of national mentality with the supports from different types of proverbs. As a study on national spirit based on folklore materials, this book brings fresh air into the concerning field, and also has a positive significance for understanding the value of proverbs. Nevertheless, since the proverbs cited in the book are all mere text out of context, its viewpoints, based on the choice of materials, are obviously preconceived. For instance, when discussing the process of socialization of Chinese people, the author concludes that this process is "growing up from integrity to tact," by analyzing proverbs related to personal cultivation and social

experience. That is, people are often determined to be upright in their early stage of socialization, but they tend to be tactful in real social life (Li 1996: 121-133). Such kind of analysis is reasonable to some extent. However, due to the lack of information about the transmission and impact of different proverb texts, especially the lack of discussion on proverbs expressing completely opposite ideas from those selected in the book, its conclusion is far less persuasive

One of the main reasons for this problem is that researchers regard proverb text as self-sufficient and independent super organism, and ignore the importance of context. Proverbs, of course, have strong textual self-sufficiency. However, if we want to understand people's thoughts and ideas through proverbs, and to ensure that this understanding is as close as possible to the facts, that is, to understand people's thoughts more comprehensively rather than partially, we must pay attention to the issues related to context. These issues include but are not limited to: How popular are the proverbs collected or grasped by the researchers? Who are using those proverbs? For whom are those proverbs used? When do people use proverbs? What are the effects of using those proverbs on the social relations, psychology, behavior, production, and life practice of the proverb users and listeners? For a same issue or phenomenon, there are often two proverbs with different or opposite ideas and interests. Such kind of "contradictory proverbs" (Litovkina and Mieder 2006: 1-2) widely spread in many places has already drawn the attention of paremiologists, which is conceptualized as "counter-proverbs" by Wolfgang Mieder (2014: 40). In that case, whose concept or value and in what situation do such kind of opposite proverbs respectively represent? It would be impossible to answer the above questions and make right conclusion if we analyze people's thoughts embodied in proverbs without context. For example, some opposite expression conveyed in proverbs might be representation of the different ideas of people from different social classes, or just a temporary expression of the experience or interest from the same group of people in different situations. If we see only texts of the following two proverbs that are expressions of marriage attitude: "Change your friends as you are elevated and change your wife as you become wealthy," and "Never forget your poor and humble friends, nor abandon your wife who shared your hard lot," it would be very difficult to

conclude which one is more popular or serious, representing the attitude more concerned among Chinese people.

In combining with the context of proverbs to explore the history of thought, Wang Kaixuan and Li Yang (2012) have made better achievements in the book of *A History of Chinese Ballads and Proverbs*. It is an in-depth analysis of the social, cultural and historical connotations of proverbs. Despite its juxtaposition of the ballad and proverb without distinction, and the view that ballads and proverbs are counterparts of folklore rather than being self-sufficiency as agency of proverbs on its own, which is far from the common understanding of current folklore scholarship, this book investigates proverbs in old and present times by focusing on the situational, social, and historical contexts in which specific proverbs are used. This study not only helps with a deep understanding of the meaning of different proverbs and the function of this genre, but also provides an example for studying historical and contemporary proverbs in consultation with the perspective of “performance.”

As Bartlett Whiting points out, “The fact that proverbs are of value only to those who understand them, is hinted in the Ashanti proverb ‘When the fool is told a proverb, the meaning of it has to be explained to him’” (Whiting 1994: 35). Furthermore, to understand the meaning of a proverb, as Wolfgang Mieder emphasizes, it should “be analyzed in its unique context, be it social, literary, rhetorical, journalistic, or whatever” (Mieder 2007: 395). In his book on fieldwork, Bruce Jackson also argues:

It might be interesting to compile lists of proverbs known by members of one ethnic group or another, but meanings of those lists are very different if the proverbs of one group are only bits of words remembered from youth and the proverbs of some other groups are rhetorical devices still used regularly. If the latter, the folklorist wants to know how and when they are used, who uses them, and why. How are they embedded in conversation.....The real folklore fact, to quote Bronislaw Malinowski on linguistic facts, “is the full utterance within its context of situation” (Jackson 1987, 29-30).

It must be pointed out that in addition to situational context in which a conversation takes place, the context should also contain

the background knowledge closely related to social and cultural factors embodied in and conveyed by the specific concepts in the text of proverbs, that is, intertextuality or discursive context (Bauman 2004: 4-8). It enables people in the same social and cultural tradition to understand some individual proverb texts without extra situational context. For example, some figurative proverbs, like "The sun declines at the highest position; the moon starts to wane as being full," use metonymy without the essence of the figurative words and metaphors (Wu 2000: 60-61). But it is understandable through a certain perception and understanding of its rhetorical devices. In detail, this proverb literally expresses an understanding of specific natural phenomena, and has the attribute of natural proverb. The metaphorical meaning contained in it can also be accurately and properly understood on the premise that we have a better understanding of the relevant rhetorical devices, especially other applications of proverbs composed of relevant rhetorical devices in specific contexts.

In a word, proverbs are not only a form of literature, but also a comprehensive practice of life and culture. Their integrity of meaning and function can only be presented and realized in context. Therefore, a better collection or investigation of proverbs must be combined with the perspective of context.

***The compilation of the "Treasury of Treasury of Chinese Folk Literature: Proverbs" and its significance***

In China, especially since the 1980s, with the accelerating process of modernization and globalization, the traditional style of production and life has changed dramatically. This has also brought great impact to folklore/folk literature that is based on the traditional agricultural civilization. Many folklore items were facing the danger of declining or even dying out. Proverbs are no exception. Compared with the past, the number of people who bear rich knowledge of proverbs or quote proverbs frequently either in verbal communication or writing has decreased significantly. This situation has prompted many intellectuals, especially folklorists, to initiate and join in several large projects to salvage traditional culture, including proverbs and other folklore genres. The project of "Three Collections of Chinese Folk Literature" (including that of Folktales, Ballads, and Proverbs, hereinafter referred to as "Three Collections") (1984-2009) carried out by folklorists

nationwide since the 1980s is a prominent example of such large-scale investigation and compilation. This project has not only recorded and preserved in time a large number of folklore items, but also accumulated new experience for the further development of Chinese folklore studies.

However, in the past 40 years, with the continuous advancement of theories and perspectives in folklore scholar, the deficiencies embodied in the project of “Three Collections” has been more and more revealed (see the articles by Chen and Zhang in this volume). It is right on the basis of the reflection of those deficiencies that the new project of the “Treasury of Chinese Folk Literature,” in which the proverbs is one of the important categories, was launched by the Chinese Folk Literature and Arts Association in 2017

The Treasury of Chinese Folk Literature project aims to compile new collections of folklore according to more detailed genres, which include myths, legends, folktales, ballads, proverbs, epics, long poems, folk dramas, riddles, idioms, and professional storytelling and singing. In accordance with the work concerning the other genres in the same project, the category of proverbs will compile new collections of proverbs from each province, with reference to the latest theories and perspectives in folklore studies, and to the basic data accumulated during the investigation of the Collection of Chinese Proverbs. With the effort to rectify the lack of context perspective in the previous project of the Chinese Proverb Collections, this new project emphasizes the nature of proverbs as an “equipment for living” (Burke 1941) and promotes field investigation in the places involved. At the same time, it also requires the investigators and compilers to collect and record the contextual information related to the application of specific proverbs, and make comment and annotation on the natural and cultural background, using situation, the way of using, the users and the expression effects of each text in order to draw the broad picture of proverbs as much as possible. The development of this ongoing national project will hopefully not only make up for the deficiency of the previous project, and provide a more comprehensive and integrated collection of Chinese proverbs, but also further advance proverb studies in China.

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