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DISTINCTIVE FEATURES OF CHINESE PROVERBS:
A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF *SUYU* AND *YANYU*
AND OTHER TYPES OF *SHUYU*

Abstract. This paper is an attempt to lay out the distinctive features of Chinese proverbs. Because of the frequent inconsistency of applying Chinese terms that could stand for ‘proverbs’ (i.e. *suyu* and *yanyu*), it seems necessary to define them by juxtaposing them with other, apparently similar types of fixed expressions. The typological analysis in this paper shows that there are no particular valid reasons not to treat *suyu* as proverbs, and thus as synonymous to *yanyu*. Further, the paper outlines the variety of content of Chinese proverbs and provides some of their structural patterns, with special attention to the variation phenomenon. Finally, it centers upon the metaphoricity of proverbs, which is a crucial means, especially in studies of linguistic worldview.

The body of work concerning Chinese phraseology is quite extensive. It involves numerous dictionaries of idiomatic phrases, papers on acquisition of Chinese as a second language, works in the field of metaphor study, in corpus linguistics, and such. However, attempts to focus on discerning the idiomatic phrases specific to Chinese language are not widespread.

This paper is an attempt to point out the characteristics of Chinese proverbs by, firstly, discriminating them from among other idiomatic expressions present in Chinese language, and, secondly, by determining their characteristic features. In investigations on the matter there is an inconsistency in applying the Chinese terms for fixed expressions, and thereby those for proverbs, what causes that the scope of Chinese *suyu* proverbs in particular is defined incoherently, and, in consequence, there appears to be a blur between *suyu* and other similar Chinese expressions. In view of different

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opinions regarding what may be a translational counterpart for ‘proverbs,’ while there is less question for *yanyu*, the term *suyu* is more troublesome.

1. THE SCOPE AND TYPES OF *SHUYU*

Besides single words, the Chinese lexicon encompasses fixed expressions, of which the general term, with proper nouns and jargon terms excluded, is called *shuyu* (*shúyǔ* 熟語) (lit. ‘familiar expressions’). The scope of *shuyu* is determined variously. The entry in *Cihai* dictionary (Third edition) lists *chengyu* (*chéngyǔ* 成語), *yanyu* (*yànyǔ* 諺語), *geyan* (*géyán* 格言), *xiehouyu* (*xiēhòuyǔ* 歇後語) as examples of *shuyu*, thus not entirely exhausting them. Wang (2006, 9) claims that *shuyu* consist of five types of fixed expressions: *chengyu*, *yanyu*, *xiehouyu*, *guanyongyu* (*guànyòngyǔ* 慣用語) and *suyu* (*súyǔ* 俗語). According to Xiao (2010, 4), what falls within their scope are semi-fixed formulaic expressions such as *chengyu*, *xiyu* (*xíyǔ* 習語)¹, *guanyongyu* and *suyu*. Rohsenow (2001, 150–151) affirms that the given terms are problematic to define. However, *yanyu* ‘proverbs,’ *suyu* ‘proverbial expressions,’ *geyan* ‘maxims,’ *xiehouyu* ‘enigmatic folk similes’ or ‘truncated witticisms’ and *chengyu* ‘fused-phrase idioms’—all of which may be taken for *shuyu*—should not be mistaken.

Cihai (Third edition) defines *shuyu* as compounds or sentences with fixed structure that do not transform in use, and suggests a division between those that content-wise express some ideas or concepts, but do not serve as sentences in a grammatical sense, and those that express a complete thought and have a form of a full sentence. Thus, the first group comprises *chengyu*, *guanyongyu*, and *xiehouyu*, because they merely constitute a phrase, and the other—*yanyu* and *geyan*, because they stand as independent sentences themselves. Similarly, what He (2005, 134–141) puts in category of fixed clauses, i.e. not full sentences, are proper nouns, *chengyu*, *guanyongyu*, and *xiehouyu*. What sets the first apart from the other three is that proper nouns do not belong to the formulaic language. Zhang and Ji (2008) worked out four features common for all types of *shuyu*: fixed structure (a compound in a fixed collocation), non-compositionality (meaning is not the sum of the meaning of its constituent parts), two-level meaning (figurative and literal meaning) and abundant content expressed more lively and bluntly than

¹ *Xiyu* in *Zhōngguó Yǔyánxué Dàcídiǎn* 中国语言学大辞典 *Chinese Dictionary of Linguistics* is considered simply an other name for *shuyu* (Wang 2006, 13, 16).

normally, at the literal level. However, as it will turn out in the course of this paper, the first feature does not apply to all types of *shuyu*, and inferring the meaning of some of them does rely upon their composite constituents exclusively. Regardless, in addition, many of all the types of *shuyu* are habitually used by language users.

In discussions, the set of *shuyu* is not presented consistently. It is due to the vague explications of its members that differ throughout literature associated with the topic. Thus, contrasting them may help recognize similarities, which blur the demarcation lines and the differences, which set them.

2. PROVERBS AND OTHER TYPES OF *SHUYU*

Suyu and *suhua* (*súhuà* 俗話) are treated as synonymous (WEN 1989, 1; XU & YING 1998, 4). According to Lu (1989, 1), an exemplary *suyu* is *yanyu* and may be translated as a ‘proverb.’ Xu and Ying (1998, 4) present two concepts of *suyu*—one in a ‘wider sense,’ that includes *yanyu*, *xiehouyu*, *guanyongyu* and dialectal sayings (*fāngyán lǐyǔ* 方言俚語), and the other in a ‘narrow sense,’ that concerns any fixed sentence which is prevalent and vivid. They claim that *suyu*, *yanyu* and *xiehouyu* should be set apart, for they are not the same. Eventually, since the three somewhat overlap, *suyu* are to include a large part of *yanyu* and a small part of *xiehouyu*. In Wen’s (1989, 5) opinion, *suyu* should include *yanyu*, *xiehouyu*,² *guanyongyu* and *chengyu* used in colloquial speech, but should not include dialectal expressions (*fāngyáncí* 方言詞), *chengyu* of formal style and aphorisms which have their origin in classics (*míngyán jǐngjù* 名言警句).

2.1. *SUYU*—*YANYU*

It appears that the most frequent interchange is between the terms *suyu* and *yanyu*. Rohsenow (2001, 151) attributes the English counterpart ‘proverb’ to *yanyu*, and defines it as a grammatically full sentence expressing an observation, opinion or wisdom heard by word of mouth pertaining to common experiences of a given group of people sharing the same language. *Suyu* likewise are prevalent formulaic expressions, however, at the structural level, they do not form a full sentence. Moreover, they merely serve as a description, as opposed to *yanyu*. This concurs with Tao’s (1988, 62–63)

² Or *yinzhuyu* (*yǐnzhùyǔ* 引注語), to be specific (cf. 2.4).

opinion – *yanyu* form a full sentence, while *suyu* do not; *yanyu* transfer wisdom of life experience, while *suyu* merely describe states of affairs. An example of *suyu* given by Tao is *hē xīběifēng* 喝西北風 ‘to drink northwest wind’ which is supposed to show that *suyu* do not form a full sentence. The expression above is a *guanyongyu* according to Li (2005), and, partially mistakenly (as shall be seen below), a *guanyongyu* belonging to the scope of *suyu*, according to Wen (1989, 4). Thus, Tao’s argument does not seem plausible. Nevertheless, in sum, regarding the relation between *suyu* and *yanyu*, there are two differences pointed out – structural and functional ones.

Wang (2006, 417–419) claims that structurally it may be difficult to determine whether a given formulaic expressions is a *yanyu* or a *suyu*, since both are fixed sentences (*gùdìng yǔjù* 固定語句). However, Wang accompanies Rohsenow and Tao in the second matter—that the difference may be clearer in regard to their content. *Yanyu* speak genuine sagacity, they instruct and inspire, are full of wisdom and practical advice. They enable better understanding of certain phenomena in society and nature, encourage good and warn against bad. *Suyu* lack these features, as they merely bear linguistically aesthetical functions. For example, instead of saying that someone is ‘unhappy’ or ‘angry,’ one may express the same by simply uttering:

1. 鼻子不是鼻子，臉不是臉。
Bízi búshì bízi, liǎn búshì liǎn.
‘Nose is not a nose, face is not a face.’

The style of both *yanyu* and *suyu* is vivid, but in the case of the former it is to propagate and memorize its content, not just to embellish an utterance.

Nevertheless, regarding the examples of *suyu* and *yanyu* given by Wang (2006, 420), which are to juxtapose their differences in function, it may be seen that the criterion does not stack up. The proverb, labeled as *suyu*:

2. 牆頭草，隨風倒；
Qiángtóu cǎo, suí fēng dǎo;
‘The grass on the top of the wall will bend with the wind’;

describing someone who changes his position according to circumstances, like when one leans on someone with power, when his position is unstable, is said to be scarcely a stylistic device. On the other hand, it does, in parallel, provide an observation on moral character and explanation of human behavior. Thus, even though the attempts to provide a criterion for

discrimination between *yanyu* and *suyu* seem valid, in practical terms, both are still difficult to separate. At first glance, Tao's (1988: 64) example:

3. 兔子不吃窩邊草;

Tùzǐ bùchī wōbiān cǎo;

'A rabbit doesn't eat grass next to its own burrow';

is claimed to be a *suyu* as well as *yanyu*, because it serves, simultaneously, a descriptive and moral function, explaining that one does not do crimes within one's own territory. Nevertheless, Tao also gives a few examples of *chengyu* that are *yanyu*, just because they hold a moral function. This explanation does not suffice to describe a *chengyu* as a *yanyu*, given the significant differences between them. For this reason it should not be recognized as valid for the aforementioned proverb. The above leads to the conclusion, that even content-wise it is difficult to distinguish *suyu* and *yanyu*.

Another standpoint is as follows: *suyu* include, if not the entirety, then at least a part of *yanyu* (LU 1989: 1; WEN 1989, 3, 5; XU & YING 1998, 4; YHYC, 3). Many quotes from the classics are in favor of the above, e.g. from the *Book of Rites*³: “*Yàn, súyǔ yě*” “諺, 俗語也” “*Yan* are *suyu*”. In addition, in ancient times, sayings generally were called *suyan* (*súyàn* 俗諺), because both terms were considered synonymous back then (WEN 1989, 3).

2.2. PROVERBS—GEYAN

Guóyǔ Huóyòng Cídiǎn 國語活用辭典⁴ presents an entry for *geyan* ‘maxim’ as follows: ‘A sentence of fixed structure, linguistically sophisticated with educational content. Many act as an encouragement to develop one's moral nature,’⁵ thus making it no different than a proverb. A difference which is indicated is that a great number of *yanyu* rose in oral tradition, and their content is a matter of collective life experience, while *geyan* merely expound certain moral values by shaping ethical behavior as their focal point (YHYC, 4-5). This distinction should be seen as apparent, since in the end both *geyan* and *suyu* express life experience, pass down wisdom and have an advisory function (LU 1989, 2; TAO 1988, 63).

³ *Book of Rites* (*lǐjì* 禮記) is a collection of texts describing social norms and rites of the Zhou dynasty. The *Book of Rites* is a part of the Confucian *Five Classics*.

⁴ *Guóyǔ Huóyòng Cídiǎn* 「國語活用辭典」, (2004), ZHOU HE 周何 (ed.), Wu-Nan Book Inc. (五南圖書出版公司), Republic of China.

⁵ 『文字精煉又含有教育意義的定型語句。多指砥礪品德鼓勵上進的言詞』。

The crucial differentiating point is that *geyan* did not come ‘from the mouth of the people,’ unlike *yanyu*, which were verbally transmitted. *Geyan* came from works of influential authors and by reason of their elegant style, they are used mostly in writing (YHYC, 4-5). As the main difference between proverbs and *geyan*, Rohsenow (2001, 151) regards the fact that the latter are quotations (i.e. have a specific author). Moreover, due to their origin from famous literary works, they are not associated with colloquial register, unlike *yanyu*.

It is possible, that a maxim may become a proverb—it happens so when an aphorism concerning life experiences or wisdom gets more vernacular by virtue of common use in everyday language. A maxim might ‘lose’ its author when circulated orally among language users who begin to hold a belief that it is an adage, ‘a common saying.’ This phenomenon may be instanced by ‘what doesn’t kill you makes you stronger’ from Nietzsche, or *sān rén xíng bìyǒu wǒshī yān* 三人行必有我師焉 ‘when three are walking together, one must be my teacher,’ a commonplace passage of a fixed structure hailing from the *Analects* of Confucius⁶.

2.3. PROVERBS—CHENGYU

Both *chengyu* and *yanyu* are prevalent fixed expressions. *Yanyu* reflect life experiences and social standards, they serve as an adjuration or a word of caution of a didactic function, and *chengyu* merely express a thought, but not a belief, do not hold an explanation, thus are never a moral (WANG 2006, 261-263; YHYC, 2). Another important distinction is pointed out by Wang (2006, 263): “[...] since *chengyu* express a general idea, their structure and components are fixed, in view of their construction, they serve only as a constituent of a sentence, and rarely as a complete sentence; unlike *yanyu*, which are independent, complete sentences, and express a judgement or a line of reasoning.”⁷ Therefore, structure-wise, *yanyu* are independent sentences, *chengyu*, on the other hand, are solely a constituent of a sentence.

Rohsenow (2001, 151) stresses that the style of *chengyu* has been affected by classical Chinese language of pre-modern texts, hence their formal register. Wu (1995: 65) suggests that *chengyu* originate mainly from classics,

⁶ The *Analects* (*lúnyǔ* 論語) are a collection of sayings of Confucius written by his followers during the early Warring States period (480–350).

⁷ 『(...) 由於成語是表達一般的概念，結構、成分又固定，所以在造句功能上只充當句子的成分，少見成句；諺語則不然，它能獨立成句，表示一個判斷或推理』。

but also indicates their source in *suyu*. Wen (1989, 4) differentiates two types of *chengyu*: first, those that belong to the formal written language, and second, those that belong to everyday spoken language, which on grounds of frequent usage may be classified as *suyu*. This happens to be one of the cases where the term *suyu* has been misused—here it has been taken for a term meaning simply a colloquial set phrase that is used on a daily basis. In Chinese, the style of proverbs is generally more vernacular than that of idioms.

Distinctive of *chengyu* is mainly their brevity, formed predominantly in four-character structure⁸. So it becomes a problem to differentiate proverbs that comprise four characters from *chengyu*. Wang (2006, 423), like Rohsenow, suggests that it is the contrast between *yǎ* 雅 ‘elegant’ and *sú* 俗 ‘vulgar’ styles that separates *chengyu* and *suyu*, respectively. Four-character *suyu* are sometimes called *suchengyu* (*súchéngyǔ* 俗成語). Nevertheless, owing to their *su* manner, they should remain as *suyu*. However, beside the origin and formal style of *chengyu*—as being a ‘descriptive literary phrases alluding to an ancient fable’ (ROHSENOW 2001, 158)—it is the succinct and fixed form which separates them from proverbs, since these may undergo variations (WANG 2006, 262).

2.4. PROVERBS—*XIEHOUYU*

Because *xiehouyu* are a phenomenon peculiar to Chinese language,⁹ it is difficult to find an English translational counterpart. Yet, Rohsenow’s suggestion is to translate *xiehouyu* as ‘enigmatic folk similes’ or ‘truncated witticisms.’¹⁰ They are generally defined as a two-part allegorical saying, the first of which is descriptive, usually preceded by a verb embodying a comparison, followed in turn by the subsequent clause resolving the metaphor’s meaning (HE 2005, 141; ROHSENOW 2001, 151–152; WANG 2001, 1). Usually, only the first part is uttered as an introduction to the second, hence the name *xiehouyu*, literally ‘a phrase with the latter part suspended.’ However, Wen (2002) claims that it is not of *xiehouyu*’s essence for its second clause to be suspended. Let us consider the following:

⁸ Reportedly, merely 6% of entries in a *chengyu* dictionary consisted of more than four characters (LU 1989, 2).

⁹ Jin Bing-zhe’s work ‘Xiehouyu and Quasi-Xiehouyu in some Languages of Central Asia’ (1989) has shown that linguistic phenomena similar to *xiehouyu* may exist in languages other than Han.

¹⁰ Because *xiehouyu* are often humorous, they are also called *qiaopihua* (*qiàopihuà* 俏皮話), which is considered controversial (WANG 2001, 1–5) or even incorrect (ROHSENOW 2001, 152).

4. 屬鴨子的——就剩兩片嘴。
Shǔ yāzi de—jiù shèng liǎngpiànzuǐ.
 ‘Ducks have two beaks.’
 Indicates a loquacious and eloquent person.
5. 屬鴨子的——渾身肉煮爛了，嘴還煮不爛。
Shǔ yāzi de—húnshēnròu zhǔlànle, zuǐ hái zhǔbùlàn.
 ‘[When cooking] a duck, while its meat is thoroughly cooked, its beak is still uncooked.’
 A person who has already lost, but does not concede.
6. 屬鴨子的——兩片嘴愛怎麼扁就怎麼扁。
Shǔ yāzi de—liǎngpiànzuǐ ài zěnmepiǎn jiù zěnmepiǎn.
 ‘Ducks with two beaks make up stories as they wish.’
 The expression refers to a person whose words are not credible, because they lack accuracy.

This shows that without the second clause one is not able to determine which meaning was intended. However, in the case of *xiehouyu* that are used more frequently, one may utter the first clause solely, and maintain that the meaning is inferable. Nonetheless, there are reversed cases:

7. 癩驢配破磨——天生的一對;
Quélú pèi pòmó—tiānshēngde yīduì;
 ‘A lame donkey and a broken grindstone are a couple made for each other’;
8. 綉球配了個牡丹——天生的一對;
Xiùqiú pèile gè mǔdān—tiānshēngde yīduì;
 ‘Hydrangea and peony are a couple made for each other’;

where it is the first part that differs. Both are used to refer to a couple of people that have similar properties, but the first in a negative sense, and the second in a positive sense. In view of the structure of *xiehouyu*, one might suspect its meaning to be a sum of the meanings of its compounds, but it is not, since the two clauses have different priority. Indeed, it is usually the second part that serves as a focal point, while the first solely supports it. However, in view of the example, it can be deduced that sometimes it is the first part of *xiehouyu* that makes the difference in meaning (WEN 2002, 5-8).

Xiehouyu are divided into two types (JIN 1989, 68; WANG 2001, 5; WEN 1989, 3). The first are founded on *chengyu* by leaving out one or two final syllables, and substituting them with the previous ones. Just as *qīdàbā* (七大八) meaning ‘small’ is a *xiehouyu* derived from the *chengyu* *qīdà-*

bāxiǎo (七犬八小) (seven-big-eight-small), and with the last syllable ‘small’ suspended, the *xiehouyu* means just that (WEN 2002, 6). Similarly, *xiāmǎwēi* (下馬威), referring to severity shown initially on assuming office, is the *xiehouyu* derived from *xiāmǎwēifēng* (下馬威風).¹¹ The literati made them up as linguistic games, and so, as Wen (1989, 3) concludes, they do not belong to the *suyu* category. The definition of *xiehouyu* presented earlier does not apply to this type.

Wen Duanzheng (1989, 3–4; 2002, 6) suggests that due to its form,¹² the second type of *xiehouyu* should be renamed *yinzhu* (*yīnzhùyǔ* 引注語), because they consist of the first, introductory part, and the second, explanatory part. Examples 4–8 would be representative ones, as well as the following:

9. 泥菩薩過河——自身難保。

Nípúsà guò hé——zìshēn nánbǎo.

‘A Bodhisattva statue made of clay cannot save itself when it fords a river.’

Even one who usually saves others is not able to save himself when his weakest point is exposed.

Wen (1989, 3–4) classifies those as *suyu* on grounds of their incisive *su* manner.

There is a big structural difference between proverbs and *xiehouyu* because of the latter’s distinctive form. Moreover, the rhetoric of *xiehouyu* is based on humorous stylistics (TAO 1988, 64).

2.5. PROVERBS – GUANYONGYU

He (2005, 138) gave another name for *guanyongyu*, namely *xiguanyu* (*xíguànyǔ* 習慣語), and defined them as idiomatic expressions consisting mostly of three, sometimes four characters. The difference between *guanyongyu* and *suyu* (of which *yanyu* is epitome) is that the latter provides a reason or explanation, while the former solely makes an analogy of a situation, and it is a necessary condition to be expressed by a metaphor if it was to be a *guanyongyu* (LI 2005, 138). If one would recall the difference in function between *yanyu* and *suyu* presented earlier, one may see that it debunks this remark.

¹¹ According to Wen (1989, 3) *xiamawei* is supposed to substitute *feng* ‘wind.’ *Xiamawei* is used in everyday speech in a sense indicated by Jin (1989, 68).

¹² Namely, that between the first and second clause there is a *yinzhū* relationship (TAO 1988, 64).

In terms of structure, *guanyongyu* may be divided into two types (WEN 1989, 4): first are full sentences expressing a complete thought, thus structure-wise, they are the same as *yanyu*. Function-wise, *guanyongyu* serve solely descriptively, yet still are often counted as *yanyu* or *suyu*. Examples of such *guanyongyu* are as follows:

10. 生米煮成熟飯。
Shēngmǐ zhǔchéng shóufàn.
'To cook uncooked rice.'
What is done is done.
11. 哪一壺不開提哪一壺。
Nǎyīhú bùkāi tí nǎyīhú.
'Take the kettle in which the water has not boiled.'
To blurt out somebody's weakness.

The other type of *guanyongyu* concerns phrases mostly consisting of seven or eight characters that do not express an opinion. Those do not belong neither to *yanyu* nor *xiehouyu*, but with their register taken into account, apparently they should be counted as *suyu*. Examples of such *guanyongyu* are as follows:

12. 碰釘子。
Pèng dīngzi.
'To bump a nail.'
To meet with a rebuff.
13. 喝西北風。
Hē xīběifēng.
'To drink northwest wind.'
To be cold and hungry, to live by air.
14. 不管三七二十一。
Bùguǎn sān qī èrshíyī.
'It doesn't matter that three times seven is twenty-one.'
In any case.
15. 不知葫蘆裡賣的什麼藥。
Bùzhī húlúli màide shénme yào.
'One doesn't know what drug is sold in the bottle gourd.'
One suspects trickery planned by others.

The given approach is untenable – it presumes the wrong meaning of *suyu* (the wide-sense), and as a consequence, wrongly classes all four of the above as *guanyongyu* belonging to *suyu*.

The above is an individual case where any expression consisting of more than three (four at most) characters are considered a *guanyongyu*. He (2005, 138), Li (2005, 138) and Wang (2006, 424) state that *guanyongyu* rather consist of three characters.¹³ It may be then posited that structurally *guanyongyu* and *suyu* are distinctive.

As mentioned before, *shuyu* are defined by their fixity. However, while it is true for, say, *chengyu*, the elements of which indeed remain in fixed collocation, *guanyongyu* may transform,¹⁴ e.g. instead of *pèng dīngzi* 碰釘子 ‘to bump a nail,’ one may say *pèng le yīge dàdīngzi* 碰了一個大釘子 ‘bumped a big nail’ or *pèng yìngdīngzi* 碰硬釘子 ‘to bump a hard nail’ (HE 2005, 138). Thus, *guanyongyu* may appear in their basic form, or in one of many modified forms as a result of inserting additional morphemes into their basic structure (WANG 2006, 424).

3. CONTENT AND FEATURES OF PROVERBS

Proverbs are an excellent study material for the linguistic worldview, since, being culture-specific, they display the outlook of a given society, reveal the morals, stereotypes, axiology, etc. Their subject is vast, concerns daily life, social norms, experiences, knowledge on the environment, emotions, and so on. Proverbs mainly have a social function; they act as advice, warnings, descriptions, moral orders and prohibitions, give examples to explain perplexing ethical rules—in other words, one may draw on experiences gained through generations expressed in proverbs.

‘It is by now proverbial that every proverb has its opposite. For every <*Time is money*> there is a <*Stop and smell the roses*>. When someone says <*You never stand in the same river twice*> someone else has already replied <*There is nothing new under the sun*>. In the mind’s arithmetic, 1 plus 1

¹³ For *guanyongyu* compound analysis see WEN XIAOHONG, “Bridging language and culture: a study of Chinese *guanyongyu* compounds,” *Journal of Chinese Linguistics*, 36, 2 (June 2008): 249–273.

¹⁴ Three differences between *chengyu* and *guanyongyu* have been indicated: that most of them consist of, respectively, four and three characters, the former cannot be scattered in a sentence, while the latter may be modified in use, and are respectively of formal (elegant) and vernacular styles (HE 2005, 139). The first two differentia are also pointed out by Li (2005, 138).

equals 2. Truths are not quantities but scripts: ‘Become for a moment the mind in which this is true’ (RICHARDSON 2001: 8). In Chinese, proverbs may contradict each other as well, still, it is not problematic—in life different circumstances are encountered and it is natural to be reluctant to treat any principal as universal. Incoherent content of proverbs arose from their provenance from different societies and periods, hence their topic is immeasurably vast.

However, *nongyan* (*nóngyàn* 農諺) ‘agricultural proverbs’ may be extracted from the group of *yanyu* because of their distinctive subject. These are proverbs concerning atmospheric phenomena and advices for peasants. Some lack scientific basis and may even be superstitious (WEN 1989, 6). Rohsenow lists two types of *yanyu* that concern the subject, and those are *qixiang yanyu* (*qìxiàng yànyǔ* 氣象諺語) ‘weather proverbs’¹⁵ and *nongyan*.¹⁶ They seem to be the oldest types of proverbs found in writing, such as in ‘Monthly Guidance for the Four Classes of People’ (*Sì mǐn Yuè lìng* 四民月令) from the Eastern Han (2001, 152, 158). Concerning the discreteness of *suyu* and *yanyu*, *nongyan* are a type of *yanyu* that are most easily separable from *suyu*.¹⁷

Some *suyu* are vulgar. Xu and Ying (1989, 6), in the preface of the dictionary, give notice that those containing vulgarisms or other inappropriate content are not included in the glossary. There are also, as Wen (1989, 6) calls them, ‘negative’ ones (i.e. encouraging immoral behavior). Moreover, some *suyu* advocate certain ideologies, such as feudalism, fatalism, materialism or a ‘carpe diem’ attitude.

The comparison of English and Chinese proverbs may reveal how extralinguistic factors alter their subject. Chinese culture is strongly associated with agriculture, thus there are many *yanyu* on farming: e.g. *zhòngtián wú dìngzhì, quán kào kàn jiéqì* 種田無定制，全靠看節氣 ‘Farming is not custom-made, because it is entirely dependent on the solar term.’ Because England is an island country, many proverbs are related to the sea and sailing, e.g. ‘The good seaman is known in bad weather.’ Both cultures have a custom to keep dogs as pets, so the animal occurs in the topic of both Chinese and English proverbs. But in English it is often used as a metaphor

¹⁵ *Qixiangyan* are also called *tianqiyan* (天氣諺) ‘weather proverbs’ (WANG 2006, 313).

¹⁶ Also called ‘peasant proverbs’ or ‘farming proverbs.’ R. DAVID ARKUSH, 1984 “If Man Works Hard the Land Will Not Be Lazy,” in *Enterpreneurial Values in North Chinese Peasant Proverbs, Modern China*, vol. 10, no. 4, 461–479).

¹⁷ Even if some *suyu* refer to weather phenomena, it is most likely used metaphorically, and not to be seen as an instruction on farming.

of a person dealing with daily struggles, e.g. ‘Old dogs will learn no new tricks.’ In Chinese, though, ‘dog’ often has a pejorative connotation, and it serves as an image of a bad person, e.g. *jiùle luòshuǐ gǒu, huítóu yǎo yīkǒu* 救了落水狗，回頭咬一口 ‘Get bitten by a dog after having saved him from drowning’ meaning that one should not help bad people, because they will hurt him instead of being thankful. On religion, English proverbs appeal to Christianity, like ‘God helps those who help themselves,’ and Chinese to Buddhism, Buddhist temples and monks, e.g. *pǎole héshàng pǎobùliǎo miào* 跑了和尚跑不了廟 ‘the monk may run away, but the temple will remain’ meaning that responsibilities and debts are inevitable, and will eventually catch up. Proverbs also allude to national literati output, hence the references in *yanyu* to *Romance of the Three Kingdoms*,¹⁸ e.g. *sānge chòu píjiàng, dǐngge Zhūgé Liàng* 三個臭皮匠，頂個諸葛亮 ‘Three ignorant cobblers add up to a genius,’ which is close in meaning to ‘two heads are better than one,’ and English proverbs derived from the Western literature canon, like the Bible or Shakespeare. The foundation of European culture is set in ancient Greece, which is embodied in English proverbs, e.g. ‘Even Homer sometimes nods.’ Proverbs reflect many facets of a given culture, and are relative to a community of people using the same language (YHYC, 10–13).

The vast majority of proverbs is a collective work, with no specific author behind them. Some are clearly philosophical, like *geyan* and *jingju* (*jǐngjù* 警句). However, unlike the latter two, for the most part, they do not come from classics. Proverbs played an important role in illiterate rural cultures where knowledge was based on oral tradition. What follows is the vernacular style of *suyu* that allows recreating the linguistic worldview held by an average language user. By their immeasurably diverse subjects they have a vast application, since they were on everyone’s lips, from the emperor to artisans and merchants, to peasants.

The Chinese literati made a distinction between written language considered *yǎ* 雅 ‘elegant’ and colloquial, spoken language, that is *sú* 俗 ‘vulgar.’ This division remains to this day, when works written in classical Chinese are different from those written in colloquial style (ROHSENOW 2001, 149). *Suyu* spread through the word of mouth of many generations, hence the overt vernacular style. They maintained *sú* 俗, (i.e. mediocre, common). And what is *sú* 俗, cannot be lofty and literary, contrary to the style of the classics. What seems to be a paradox is when the classical

¹⁸ *Romance of the Three Kingdoms* (*Sānguóyǎnyì* 三國演義) is a historical novel written by Luo Guanzhong in the 14th century.

becomes popular: to some extent it is not *sú* 俗, because it is classical, and to some extent it is *sú* 俗, because it is popular (SMITH 1965, 3). Only after a diachronic perspective is taken, one realizes that proverbs that currently seem archaic, once were expressed in colloquial language (WEN 1989, 3).

4. LEXICAL AND FORMAL VARIATION

The above comparisons with other types of *shuyu* may have already implied some aspects of the structure of proverbs—like that they are phrases or sentences (simple, complex or compound) of relative fixity, comprised of at least four characters. They surely cannot be too long, they should be brief and concise. They are a composition formed by frequent uttering while expressing a thought generally accepted by a community. A given proverb may occur in different forms—some containing different vocabulary, some expressing the same concept by other means. Sometimes the correspondent is a cut off version that may have an additional phrase, sometimes the syntax is switched while the whole sense remains. This phenomenon, specific to proverbs, is called variation.

Variation is a subtype of synonymy. As Kłosińska (2004, 9) indicates, the criterion of being a variant of a given proverb is that it must express the same content whilst an equivalent metaphorical image is employed, and the remaining differences must not be too discrepant. Proverb variations occur in different ways, and just some of them shall be presented.

One type, that may be called qualitative, is when a word is substituted by another in a variation, while the meaning of the whole remains unaffected. Two cases fulfill this kind of variation, and the first is when the word which is substituted is a synonym. The proverb:

16. 沒吃過豬肉，也見過豬走；

Méichīguò zhūròu, yě jiànguò zhū zǒu;

‘Although one has never eaten pork, one has seen a pig move’;

is a phrase describing someone who has knowledge gained through vicarious experience. The above occurs in a variation where instead of *zǒu* 走 ‘to walk’ the lexeme *pǎo* 跑 ‘to run’ is used. “In a district where local usage has adopted the character which signifies <to run> as the equivalent of any kind of process, that word is substituted in place of *zǒu* 走 at the end of the proverb just quoted, spoiling the rhyme and adding nothing to the meaning” (SMITH 1965, 30).

The second case is when a word and its counterpart in a variation of a proverb belong to the same cognitive domain. The following show versions of the same proverb:

17. 一枝動，百枝搖。
Yīzhī dòng, bǎizhī yáo.
 ‘When one branch moves, a hundred branches shake.’
18. 一葉動，百枝搖。
Yīyè dòng, bǎizhī yáo.
 ‘When one leaf moves, a hundred branches shake.’
19. 一枝不動，百枝不搖。
Yīzhī bú dòng, bǎizhī bù yáo.
 ‘If one branch does not move, a hundred branches do not shake.’

Despite the slight changes of lexemes, the sense of the whole stays—a change that occurs in part affects the whole (and *vice versa*: it is unlikely for anything to change if its essentials, even partially, have not changed) (SMITH 1965, 31–32).

Some quantitative variations involve slight lexeme changes that modify their meaning (SMITH 1965, 32):

20. 最妒不過的是婦人心。
Zuìdù búguò de shì fùrén xīn.
 ‘There is nothing more envious than a woman’s heart.’
21. 最毒不過的是婦人心。
Zuìdú búguò de shì fùrén xīn.
 ‘There is nothing more poisonous than a woman’s heart.’

In another set of examples, a slight change may even reverse the meaning:

22. 人無害虎心，虎有傷人意。
Rén wú hài hǔ xīn, hǔ yǒu shāng rén yì.
 ‘People do not have the intention to harm tigers, but tigers have the intention to harm people.’
 Although one might not have bad intentions, bad people may still harm him.

23. 人無害虎心，虎無傷人意。

Rén wú hài hǔ xīn, hǔ wú shāng rén yì.

‘If people do not have the intention to harm tigers, then tigers will not have the intention to harm people.’

If one does not harm others, one will not be hurt.

The second, quantitative kind of proverb variations involves getting one of the clauses suspended (apocopes). When both parts of the couplet are analogous, thus it is unnecessary to repeat both. One may just utter the first clause of the proverb:

24. 狗改不了吃屎，狼改不了吃人。

Gǒu gǎi bù liǎo chī shǐ, láng gǎi bù liǎo chī rén.

‘Dogs cannot help eating feces, wolves cannot help eating people.’

Villains cannot change their evil nature.

Below is a case when in a proverb, both clauses use redundancy to illustrate the same idea, and its variation comprises of one of the clause and another analogous clause:

25. 遠水救不了近火，遠親不如近鄰。

Yuǎnshuǐ jiù bù liǎo jìn huǒ, yuǎnqīn bù rú jìn lín.

‘Distant water won’t put out a fire nearby; a distant relative is not as good as a close neighbor.’

26. 遠親不如近鄰，近鄰不如對門。

Yuǎnqīn bù rú jìn lín, jìn lín bù rú duì mén.

‘A distant relative is not as good as a close neighbor; a close neighbor is not as good as one living across.’

Chinese proverbs take different forms and employ many literary devices. Usually as sentences with at least two clauses, they form all kinds of sentences: compound, conditional, and so on. However, in order to keep their succinctness, the conjunctions may be omitted. For the same reason, many words in proverbs take a monosyllabic form. Sometimes they are marked with irregularity, but a distinctive form among the remaining is parallelism. “Formal grammatical parallelism usually occurs when the same structure is repeated for contrast or comparison [...],” as in the passage from *Discourses of the States*¹⁹ (ROHSENOW 2001, 159):

¹⁹ *Discourses of the States* (*guóyǔ* 國語) is a collection of texts regarding the history of Zhou Dynasty states.

27. 從善如登，從惡如崩。

Cóng shàn rú dēng, cóng è rú bēng.

‘To follow goodness is to ascend; to follow evil is to plummet.’

Wang gives examples of antithetical parallelisms created by means of antonyms in both *yanyu* (2006, 304) and *suyu* (2006, 432–433). However, let us consider the following, excerpted from Scarborough (1875, x–xii):

28. 天上眾星皆拱北，世間無水不朝東。

Tiān shàng zhòngxīng jiē gōng běi, shìjiān wú shuǐ bùcháo dōng.

‘All the stars of heaven salute the Plough; every stream flows towards the East Sea.’

Everything is determined.²⁰

Antithesis in Chinese proverbs is exposed rather on a lexical level – parts of speech of words correspond in both clauses, and their meanings are antonymous. Moreover, the parallel clause may have analogous tones, which engages the subject of rhymes, and that, in turn, eases memorization.

Many proverbs have simile forms, therefore, different comparative expressions *bǐyùcí* 比喻詞 may be encountered, like *bùyú* 不於, *rú* 如, *yóu* 猶, *pìrú* 譬如, *sì* 似, etc. Proverbs, both *yanyu* and *suyu*, certainly involve other figures of speech: hyperbole, metonymy, personification, anaphora, and metaphor.

5. MOTIVATION AND METAPHOR

Most often the meaning of an idiomatic expression is not determined by the sum of its components’ meaning. A formulaic expression is a lexicalized whole. Noncompositionality also applies to *shuyu*, the meaning of which is based on the form as a whole, and may be rarely deciphered literally, because usually it is expressed by an allegory (ZHANG & JI 2008, 1). It is also worth noting that whatever is conveyed by uttering an idiomatic expression, its meaning is arbitrary. Understanding them is a matter of convention (and not a matter of say, pragmatic inferences).

Most formulaic expressions are motivated units, which are metaphors or metonymies. Similarly, most figurative expressions have risen as a consequence of recognizing some sort of similarity between objects by language

²⁰ The given proverb has several interpretations, but the one proposed by Scarborough (1875, xi) (the emperor is the center of attraction) is certainly doubtful.

users. According to Liu An,²¹ what is required while creating a metaphor is the recognition of the common point between two different phenomena, with an emphasis that they must be of a different nature (HU 2004, 212). The similarity relationship is crucial to any icons, the type of which, besides images and diagrams, are metaphors.

Metaphor's composition has been already analyzed by Mozi.²² He pointed out two constituents: what is indicated, and that what is used to indicate (HU 2004, 210). Contemporary Chinese terminology refers to them as *běntǐ* 本體 and *yùtǐ* 喻體, accordingly. Some proverbs consist of two parts, of which the first is *yùtǐ*, which metaphorically introduces the idea, and the second is *běntǐ* 本體, which resolves it (WANG 2006, 296):

29. 西瓜要吃瓢，看人看肚腸。

Xīguā yào chī róng, kàn rén kàn dùcháng.

‘When one wants to eat a watermelon, it’s better to eat the pulp, when one wants to know another, it’s better to look at his intestines.’

Even the *benti* of the proverb consists of a metaphor, where ‘intestines’ stand for character or one’s conduct.

Metaphor has become a phenomenon particularly attractive in the field of cognitive studies. “Metaphor not only reflects but also shapes our conceptual system. It is often through metaphorical process that human beings conceptualize the world and construct reality” (LIU 2002, 3–4). “[...] We do not only see the reality as described by metaphors, but we think and act as expressed by metaphors” (HIRAGA 1991, 150). Metaphors play a great role in acquiring knowledge about the world through the categorization of objects. Metaphors’ meaning is presupposed or implied, understanding it requires some commonsense knowledge and is dependent on a caught on interpretation. What best reflects the metaphoricity of human reasoning is language. Language is a cultural product, and communication is based on a conceptual system mutual to the speaker and hearer. Metaphors employed in one generation may become a conventionalized phrase in the next (HU 2004, 5).

While using metaphors is universal, the selection of metaphors in interpreting the world is culturally conditioned. Thus, in many works concerning intercultural communication studies a metaphor analysis is provided, and its conclusions reveal cultural differences. Liu (2002) compares English and

²¹ Liu An 劉安 (179–122)—Han Dynasty prince, editor of several philosophical works.

²² Mozi 墨子 (470–390)—philosopher of the early Warring States Period, founder of the school of Mohism.

Chinese metaphors and explains them by other, extra-linguistic cultural factors. For example, American English is apt to use metaphors concerning sports, and those reflect how Americans view life as a competitive game. In contrast, the Chinese frequently refer to family and eating events metaphorically, revealing what an important part it is in Chinese culture and language. Hiraga (1991) makes a similar comparison between English and Japanese, showing, by juxtaposing metaphors in both languages, the influence of tradition and culture on language.

Connotation is remarkably significant regarding cultural studies, since often they serve as a basis (or result from reiteration) on which given cultures create metaphors and similes. A necessary condition for determining proverbs' meaning is recognizing the components' meaning; precisely their connotation that is not necessarily related to objects of the physical world. As metaphors convey connotative meaning, and those are a common figure in proverbs, they serve as an excellent insight onto the outlook of a community.

6. CONCLUSION

Studies concerning Chinese phraseology turned out to have barely reconcilable approaches in determining the scope of *shuyu* and defining its members. The misclassification of types of *shuyu* leads to unnecessary confusion, because, in the end, there appear to be unequivocal determinants for identifying *chengyu*, *geyan*, *xiehouyu* and *guanyongyu*, and those may be easily discerned from one another and from *suyu* and *yanyu*, that may be regarded as 'proverbs.' On the other hand, the latter ones are subtly differentiable, and that is for two reasons.

First reason is that the term *suyu* is used ambiguously. It sometimes stands for *shuyu*, which have a colloquial register (in other words, any prevalent fixed expression with a *su* manner), hence the cases where informal *chengyu* or *yinzhuyu*, as well as a part of *yanyu* are allocated to the scope of *suyu*. The given usage of the term is unmaintainable with the differentia of the types of *shuyu* taken into account.

The second factor regards the simple fact that the proposed criteria for identifying *suyu* and *yanyu* are not entirely plausible. Structurally, they both form independent phrases, possibly a sentence, simple, compound or complex. In terms of their content, it is difficult to definitely determine which of the two functions preponderates in a given proverb: the descriptive function,

attributed to *suyu*, or the pedagogical one, attributed to *yanyu*. Therefore, even if this determinant seems valid, it may not suffice in practice. After all, *suyu* and *yanyu* have much in common—both have a similar structure that may undergo variations, sometimes they serve as a moral, while sometimes as an instruction, but they always stylistically embellish everyday speech. What is more, they use the same figures of speech as metaphors, have a colloquial register, and are an effect of oral folk tradition.

Therefore, there are no particular contraindications not to perceive *yanyu* and *suyu* as synonymous. However, it does not follow that the awareness of the discriminating criteria is not worthwhile. Labelling a phenomenon does not necessarily seize it, but introduction of a notion can be useful as long as it enables avoiding potential misuse. The conclusive relationship between *suyu* and *yanyu* is as follows: Chinese proverbs are subtly set apart between merely descriptive function (*suyu*), proverbs of merely instructing function (*yanyu*), proverbs that provide farming advices (*nongyan* that are a part of *yanyu*). At the same time, *suyu* and *yanyu* partially overlap, where their intersection includes proverbs that are indifferentiable between *suyu* and *yanyu*, for it may be a matter of irresolvable interpretation to which group they belong to.

Considering that proverbs are an essence of collective wisdom moulded over a long period of time, they unveil the worldview of a given linguistic community. Proverbs tell us about customs, beliefs and general mindset by touching on a variety of subjects, they use rhetorical figures that provide an insight into the way the world is perceived. That is why they are worth consideration when studying a culture, especially the linguistic worldview.

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CECHY WYRÓZNIAJĄCE CHIŃSKICH PRZYSŁÓW:
STUDIUM PORÓWNAWCZE *SUYU* I *YANYU*
ORAZ INNYCH TYPÓW *SHUYU*

Streszczenie

Praca ta stanowi próbę określenia charakterystycznych cech chińskich przysłów. Z powodu częstej niespójności w użyciu chińskich terminów, które mogłyby oznaczać „przysłowia” (tj. *suyu* i *yanyu*), wydaje się konieczne zdefiniowanie ich poprzez zestawienie ich z innymi, pozornie podobnymi typami stałych wyrażen. Przeprowadzona w tym artykule analiza typologiczna pokazuje, że nie ma uzasadnionego powodu, aby nie traktować *suyu* jako przysłówia, a zatem jako synonim *yanyu*. Ponadto artykuł nakreśla różnorodność treści chińskich przysłów i podaje niektóre ich wzory strukturalne ze szczególnym uwzględnieniem zjawiska wariantywności. W końcu skupia się na metaforyczności przysłów, która jest kluczowym środkiem, zwłaszcza w badaniach językowego obrazu świata.

Słowa kluczowe: chińskie stałe wyrażenia – *shuyu*; chińskie przysłowia: *suyu*, *yanyu*.

Key words: Chinese fixed expressions – *shuyu*; Chinese proverbs: *suyu*, *yanyu*.