

# Chinese Proverbs in Chinese Media in English

## Intercultural Communication Perspective

*Olga V. Nikolaeva, Chen Shumei & Maria Panina*

Far Eastern Federal University, Russia - Ludong University, China

### Abstract

The study of ethnic proverbs in intercultural communication in English has recently become a promising research perspective. Chinese media in English, which communicate China's message to the world, abound in native proverbs. In media coverage of international issues Chinese proverbs present an effective tool of China's interaction with other countries. Proverbs convey China's standpoint indirectly but firmly and may be viewed as China's discursive strategy in media-based international discourse. The research deals with the questions of intercultural and international pragmatics of Chinese proverb quotations in Chinese media in English. The analysis was done on China's intentions with native proverb quotations and other countries' reactions to the proverb utterances.

**Keywords:** *proverb dissemination, Chinese proverb, intercultural pragmatics, intercultural communication, Chinese media in English*

---

### Introduction

China's five thousand year civilization treasures a great number of proverbs, which can draw a clear bottom line to almost every situation. The research on Chinese proverb quotations in Chinese media in English proved that in contemporary China proverbs are employed in both inter-personal and international communication. Native Chinese proverbs have become conspicuous in Chinese media in English where they are quoted in their English translation, their close English match, through a statement of their meaning, or an interpretation of the meaning reformulated in other words, or through a description of a fable behind the proverb. Chinese media in English are a form of intercultural and international communication, in which China addresses a global English-speaking community. Proverbs in such media may present a powerful device of rhetorical interaction with other countries by demonstrating China's standpoint in either a mild roundabout way, or a firm and rigorous manner.

A lot of Chinese native proverbs are used in media coverage of international issues. Chinese media in English readily quote predecessors' wisdom which is encapsulated in proverbs to reveal China's attitude to international events described to the rest of the world. Proverb quotations on international relations may be viewed as cross-culturally transmitted pragmatic hints: first, at the nationwide people's support of the expressed position, and second, at China's long-standing, traditional course of politics. Proverbs may help convey China's habitual attitudes in international discourse and sustain its interests in dealing with international issues.

Intercultural pragmatics of proverb quotations poses the questions, which are of crucial importance for effective cross-cultural interaction: why and how an addresser-culture quotes native proverbs, and what reaction they may evoke with other culture(s), addressee(s). The combination of these factors in each particular case determines whether the proverbs quoted provide pragmatic success or lead to a communication failure.

The objective of the present paper is to investigate intercultural pragmatics of Chinese proverbs quoted on the topic of China's international relations in Chinese media in English. The English language through which China speaks to the rest of the world in its media may present some problematic issues. Global communication in English is the realm where many different types of cultures meet and interact. Quotations of Chinese proverbs may be regarded by other cultures as either appropriate or inappropriate to the situation. The proverb message may be either properly perceived or misunderstood. In the latter case a possible outcome may be a wrong reference inferred from the proverb quotation.

It should be noted that for the purpose of intelligibility the term *Chinese proverb* is habitually used in English in reference to many different types of Chinese idiomatic and set expressions[1]. More specifically the word *proverb* refers only to Chinese *súyǔ* known as “phrases or sentences that are widely employed by the general population in colloquial discourse, whose actual meanings are more than the sum of their parts, are mainly employed in expressing ridicule or criticism, and whose structure is relatively fixed” (Jiao & Stone 2014: viii). The other terms occasionally used in Chinese media in English are *Chinese idiom* which denotes a four-character literary idiom and *Chinese saying* which refers to a literary quotation, or an aphorism.

In this research we employ the concept *Chinese proverb* as a generic one, and we use other terms to specify the type of a proverbial expression, if needed.

## 1. Area Description

### 1.1. Global Extension of Proverbial Knowledge

Communication as a research priority of the modern era generated a genuine interest of scholars for proverbs in speech, their pragmatic functions, and spheres of circulation. Since the late 20th century W. Mieder has done considerable research on proverbs cited by well-known politicians (Mieder 1997, 2005, 2010), and showed the significant role of proverbs in the political and international life of the twentieth century. The scholar points out that proverbs as “a powerful verbal tool in the hands of politicians” become “a two-edged sword, employed both as a positive and negative device to influence, if not manipulate, citizens” (Mieder 1997, p. 4). L. Jiao and B. Stone (2014) gave an example of the pragmatic power of proverbs in China. The proverb uttered by Deng Xiaoping, the leader of China in 1978–1989, became a prescription to the nation: “Using *súyǔ* in certain special situations can work wonders. For decades, countless politicians and economists argued over a still-socialist China's adoption of a capitalist path and were unable to resolve certain resulting theoretical questions. However, with one *súyǔ*, 不管黑猫白猫，能捉老鼠就是好猫 (it does not matter whether a cat is black or white so long as it catches mice), Deng Xiaoping promptly settled the dispute” (Jiao & Stone 2014, p. X).

Proverbs quoted by politicians due to their quick dissemination through media and translation into different languages enable them to address people not only in their home countries but also abroad in a colloquial and appealing to a common sense way. The sphere of international politics proposes a challenging topic for studies on proverbs as tools of intercultural communication in international rhetoric.

The study of diverse ethnic proverbs has proved its importance for both practical application and theory of intercultural communication. Much attention has recently been drawn to the role of African proverbs as a conflict resolution mechanism in ethnic and interethnic relations (Adegoju 2009; Makamani 2013; Ademowo & Balogun 2014; Almajir). Arabic proverbs presenting a great deal of knowledge about peoples' traditions, values, and beliefs are studied in their cultural, social, political and religious aspects (Kassis 1999; Brosh 2013). The efforts of scholars have also been drawn to cultural and cognitive interplay in studies on worldview reflection in proverbs (Honeck 2013; Ma 2011; Wen 2012). This kind of research contributes to developing intercultural awareness of people belonging to different cultures.

Proverbial knowledge has developed into an extensive, empirically diverse field associated with a broad range of social sciences and humanities. Intercultural communication scholars have become stakeholders in the study of proverbs due to recent conspicuous dissemination of proverbs of different nations beyond

their native languages and cultures (Piiirainen 2005). The traditional ethnographic position would have been to ignore the issues of ethnic proverbs quoted in other (non-native) languages. As Nancy Bradbury (2002) states, “ethnographic researchers believe that proverbs must be studied in the context of the cultural practices of the group that uses them” (p. 272). But the “context of the cultural practices of the group” currently extends far beyond communication in native languages. This situation is becoming quite common in the contemporary globalized world, when countries are trying to promote their cultures by means of internationally spoken languages.

Global languages serving as a means of intercultural contacts are currently targeted by a notable variety of ethnic proverbs. Contemporary communication in English on an international scale (internet, international media, etc.) employs ethnically diverse proverbs in remarkably large numbers either for single use or for multiuse purposes.

How all these proverbs are used in a globalized world dominated by English and how they should be used to sustain conflict-free communication avoiding misunderstanding, not bringing about unwelcome analogies, and not inflicting undesired affects are some questions that may be posed as contemporary grave concerns to intercultural communication researchers and experts.

## **1.2. Chinese Proverbs in Intercultural Communication**

Intercultural communication is extremely sensitive to unsuccessful proverb quotations and their inadequate perception, and each case definitely calls for in-depth scrutiny. Pragmatics deals with the ‘addresser – addressee’ interaction, as well as a distinction in semantics of the utterance, which this interaction entails. Intercultural pragmatics suggests that the addresser and the addressee belong to different cultures, and this will frequently result in a much wider gap between the addresser’s intentions and the addressee’s perception, than if they both belonged to the same culture. Proverbs, if misused or misunderstood in intercultural communication, intensify the problems and failures of interaction. Although the basic human experience imprinted in proverbs is channeled along the same lines and the generic truth of culturally diverse proverbs is clichéd and globally comprehensible, the proper use of ethnic proverbs as well as adequate decoding of their meaning in intercultural communication remains a problem, which sometimes discourages both users and researchers.

In this paper the study of Chinese proverbs is based on the assumption that they are intentionally and purposefully quoted in Chinese media in English, the target audience of which is not only, but mainly foreign (non-Chinese) English-speakers.

Why do Chinese media in English readily quote native Chinese proverbs? There may be quite a number of different factors involved. Proverbs pragmatically serve as messages of China’s judgments and vehicles of Chinese values to the rest of the world. They are based on many generations’ experience. China’s cultural identity may be expressed through national proverbs. They draw a clear top or bottom line in media coverage.

One of the reasons why proverbs are much favored in Chinese media is probably because these expressions of people’s wisdom belong to the most indirect strategies of reasoning and persuasion, and they perfectly suit China’s high-context communication in Edward Hall’s (1989) dichotomy of high-context and low-context cultures.

On the other hand, a huge pragmatic dilemma arises here, since in such media China’s high-context mode of communication encounters the lower-context communication of the English-speaking world. So, the addresser and the addressee belong to drastically different types of cultures.

How this works with proverbs was investigated in a case-study in the article of O. Nikolaeva and E. Yakovleva (2015). One of the results achieved was that Chinese media in other languages should carefully consider the appropriateness of proverb quotations and should thoroughly estimate the degree of indirect culture-based information, which is transmitted by proverbs and which the target audience is capable or incapable of grasping, sharing, and abiding by. However, the question still needs thorough investigation based on much broader empirical data.

## 2. Material

Chinese proverb quotations on China's international relations were studied in the material of China's mass media in English (2011–2015): *The Xinhua*, *The China Daily*, *The Global Times*, *The People's Daily*. From media coverage of international events which concerned China's relations with other countries we selected quotations marked as a Chinese proverb, a Chinese idiom, or a Chinese saying.

We selected only those proverb quotations which expressed China's view on a topic. The number of *different* Chinese proverbs analyzed for this research was sixty two items. The *total* number of media proverb quotations including all cases of repeatedly used proverbs in different articles was more than four hundred.

Verification of proverb origin and meaning was based on ten dictionary collections of Chinese proverbs: A Big Dictionary of Chengyu (1985); Chinese Idioms (Guanyongyu) Dictionary (ed. Wen 2004); Chinese Proverbs (Yanyu) Dictionary (1981); Chinese Proverbs (Suyu) Dictionary (ed. Wen 1986); Chinese-Russian Phraseological Dictionary (ed. Gotlib & Mu 2007); Dictionary of Ancient Sayings (ed. He 1988); Dictionary of Famous Sayings (ed. Zhou 1989); Encyclopedia of Ancient Literary Quotation, (ed. Zhao 1984); Chengyu and Shuyu Dictionary (ed. Liu 1992); ABC Dictionary of Chinese Proverbs (Yanyu) (ed. Rohsenow 2003).

We also analyzed non-Chinese mass and social media (2013): *The New York Times*, *The Indian Broadcasting Network*, *The New Delhi Television Ltd*, independent and foreign policy blogs, to see the reaction to Chinese proverb quotation.

## 3. Procedure and Techniques

The intercultural pragmatics analysis of Chinese proverbial quotations in Chinese media in English involved the following procedures which highlighted the role of China as the addressor and the roles of other cultures as the addressees:

- displaying the ways in which Chinese native proverbs were cited in English to secure their intelligibility;
- studying the appropriateness of proverb quoting in Chinese media in English;
- 'a case study' analysis of different perceptions of a Chinese proverb in the USA and India;
- an analysis of Chinese intentions in proverb quotations in the media coverage of international events.

The techniques by which we analyzed the proverb quotations were of different types. We used a dictionary of Chinese proverbs to determine exactly what Chinese proverb corresponded to a quotation in English. Then we stated the dictionary meaning of the Chinese prototype and the contextual meaning of its media quotation in English.

For example, the Chinese prototype for the quotation "*one hand alone can't clap*" cited in *The Global Times* (Chinese spokeswoman blames Japan for tension 2013) was identified as 一个巴掌拍不响, whose dictionary meaning was *the responsibility lies with both parties*. The contextual meaning of the quotation in *The Global Times* was stated as "Japan has failed to engage in negotiations", inferred from the article: "However, '*one hand alone can't clap*,' Fu said, quoting a *Chinese proverb to indicate that Japan has failed to engage in negotiations*" (Chinese spokeswoman blames Japan for tension 2013).

From the article we also inferred the key concept actualized by the proverb quotation. In the example above it was proposed as *relationship rifts*, judging by the logic of the article, its headline and semantics of phrases, for example, "*current tensions in bilateral relations*", or "*breaking the two nations*'

*consensus*”, etc. (Chinese spokeswoman blames Japan for tension 2013). A key concept was always context-dependent and not inherent in a proverb.

After stating the key concept highlighted by a proverb quotation we considered values expressed by proverbs in media context. We classified them into positive values and anti-values, fraught with an undesired effect. The proverb quotation “one hand alone can't clap”, which actualized the key concept *relationship rifts*, represented the anti-value group.

We also tried to show pragmatic function, which Chinese proverbs performed in media regarding inter-state and international communication. For instance, anti-values, as in the case above, serve in media as a *warning of undesired outcome*.

## 4. Results and Discussion

### 4.1. Intelligibility as a Pragmatic Imperative of Quoting Chinese Proverbs in English

As stated in the prior sections Chinese proverbs are usually transmitted in English in the following ways: an English equivalent of a Chinese proverb, a close English match, a literal translation, a statement of the meaning, a roundabout description of the meaning, or the fable, an original quotation in Chinese (never solely). The choice is determined by intercultural pragmatics, and intelligibility, in the first place. A Chinese proverb should sound intelligible so as not to be lost on the target audience. The English language and the worldview it conveys impose their limitations and require transformations of proverb structure, imagery, message, etc.

To exemplify the intercultural requirement of intelligibility, context-conditioned concerns, and the author's pragmatic intentions accompanying quotations of Chinese proverbs in Chinese media in English, let us consider the idiom *Wu and Yue in the same boat* (吴越同舟) cited in *The China Daily* on the China-Japan relationship (Hong 2014).

To describe China-Japan relations by this Chinese proverb, the author introduced it gradually in several steps. First, in the headline, the author cited its close English match *being in / sharing the same boat* and set the generic frame of the narrative – “Japan, China can share the same boat.”

Second, the author referred to Japanese media, which had earlier described “the China-Russia relationship as a kind of“吴越同舟”, or being in the same boat” (Hong 2014). Later in the text the idiom was explained: “the proverb alludes to an episode in ancient China in which combatants from the warring states of Wu and Yue found themselves in the same boat on a river in a storm. Despite their hatred for each other, they agreed to lay down their weapons for common passage” (Hong 2014).

When readers were sufficiently prepared to perceive the proverb adequately, the author employed images of the warring states of Wu and Yue in a description of Sino-Japanese relations: “The people of Wu and Yue states offer a lesson for us in modern times: When they bent their energies in a single direction, they weathered the storm. This is the approach China and Japan should take today” (Hong 2014). To top it off the idiom characters 吴越同舟 cited twice in the English text can be recognizable by the Japanese.

The proverb *Wu and Yue in the same boat* was the author's good pragmatic choice, because it conveyed historical hints not inherent in the English idiom *being in / sharing the same boat*. So, the English counterpart (given as a topline) helped secure intelligibility, while the Chinese proverb realized culture-biased intentions, i.e. pragmatic hints of *former warring states*.

In *The Global Times* the same idiom was quoted in a form of the fable interpretation: “Vice Premier Wang Qishan, noted the need for the United States and China to act together amid the global economic crisis by citing in Chinese a Chinese idiom ‘Taking the same boat through rain and wind’” (Language, cultural

exchange warm up China-US strategic, economic dialogue 2009). The author pragmatically stressed the aspect of *survival* through *joint efforts* in *overcoming difficulties*. The pragmatic implication was two-fold: firstly, it was an allusion to Chinese wisdom, and secondly, it resonated with a proverb familiar to the English speakers *being in / sharing the same boat*.

The intelligibility of the proverb quotation as a keystone to pragmatic success was achieved by accurate presentation of the proverb, by adequate recognizable analogy, and by appropriateness to the situation.

#### **4.2. Pragmatic Appropriateness of Proverb Quoting: a Case Study**

Official mass media coverage of international relations is a very delicate field of communication where everything is important. This holds particularly true for the media in a non-native language which target a primarily foreign audience. The appropriateness of quoting a native proverb in such media is a tool of the addresser's pragmatic strategy aimed at bettering interaction for the addresser's benefit.

The analysis of Chinese media in English on international events proved China's balanced approach to proverb quotations in press, which in some cases results in omitting them intentionally. If proverbs convey harmful or undesired attitudes for international interaction they may be excluded from press releases, may be reduced, or may be substituted with a non-proverbial description in media coverage. In such cases the contextual message of the proverb quotation does not correspond to China's intentions and prognostic estimation of addressees' reaction. This is where the high-context communication of China encounters the low-context communication of the English-speaking world.

This may not seem an outstanding revelation, except for the admission by this simple fact of the power of proverbial judgment for sensitive international sphere, and hence the potential conflictogenic role of proverbs. Although conflict resolution and conflict management functions of proverb have recently become an urgent research topic (Adegoju, 2009; Almajir, 2014; Ademowo & Balogun, 2014), the conflictogenic potential threat of proverbs has yet to be estimated in a special study. When misused or abused, proverbs are capable of inflicting damage to international communication. Equally damaging is inadequate perception, i.e. the misunderstanding of the ethnic proverb's message, an incorrect reference, or ideologically-biased implications, etc.

The difference between the effects produced by a Chinese proverb in India and the USA was selected for a case study, or instance investigation. The case concerns the proverb *a distant relative may not be as useful as a near neighbor*, which was quoted by the Prime Minister of China Li Keqiang about India-China relations at the gathering of business leaders in New Delhi in India in May of 2013.

India was a direct addressee of Li Keqiang's speech, and the proverb quotation primarily referred to the shared border of India and China. *The Indian Broadcasting Network* (CNN-IBN) cited the proverb used by Li Keqiang in the context of partnership and cooperation between neighboring India and China: "He [Li Keqiang] also quoted a Chinese proverb – a distant relative may not be useful as a near neighbour – to emphasize on the relations between the two neighbours" (India, China have far more common interests: Li Keqiang 2013).

In the United States, judging by the commentaries from the social media devoted to political issues, the effect produced by the proverb was quite different. *A distant relative* was perceived as an unwelcome analogical hint: "And Li topped off the wooing by recalling a Chinese proverb about how a distant relative may not be as useful as a near neighbor, a reminder of the attractions Beijing holds out compared to what Washington is offering" (Karl 2013).

The similar attitude was expressed in the following social media fragment: "Li today quoted a Chinese proverb that "a distant relative may not be as useful as a near neighbour," clearly trying (no doubt fruitlessly) to wean India away from the US" (Elliott 2013).

Viewing the proverb quotation as a hint concerning Washington (as a distant relative) could also be traced in *The New York Times* commentary: "In a veiled reference to efforts by the United States to strengthen ties with India, in part to serve as a check on China, Mr. Li said that a country can "choose its friends but

not its neighbors.” “There is a proverb in Chinese that a distant relative may not be as useful as a near neighbor,” Mr. Li said” (Gardiner 2013).

The official Chinese media in English (*The Global Times*, *The China Daily*, *The Xinhua*) issued an extensive account of the Prime Minister’s visit to India but the proverb was never cited in the event coverage, most probably because of the undesired perception of the proverb in the United States. The contextual effect produced by the proverb quotation through international media in English caused misunderstanding, which required some explicit explanations. The social media wrote: “The People’s Daily underscored the point by editorializing that the United States should not be jealous of a China-India combination” (Karl, 2013), “because the two countries did not want to be America’s “enemy” – they just hoped for cooperation” (Elliott, 2013).

So, the difference in the perception of the same proverb quotation by different countries resulted primarily from international relations, both global and bilateral interactions (China – India, or China – the USA).

The other factor which should not be underestimated in proverb quoting is difference in the modes of perception which different cultures display. The high-context mode of communication assumed as appropriate in relation to one country-addressee may lead to a communication failure on the part of other countries-addressees. Correspondingly, the allusions brought about by the proverb quotation may also be perceived differently by the potential addressees.

Pragmatic appropriateness adds to the overall complexity of proverb quoting in intercultural context, and as the example showed, should not be ignored, especially in the field of international relations.

### **4.3. Chinese Proverb Quotations on China’s International Relations**

In the material studied, Chinese proverbs were used as comments on Sino-American and Sino-Japanese relations, China diplomacy in Asia and China interactions with each of the neighboring Asian countries, international situation in the Middle East, Europe, Latin America, the Caribbean, Chinese contacts with various international institutions and organizations (WTO, EU, UN, ASEAN). Sino-Japanese relations were characterized with the highest frequency and largest diversity of Chinese proverb citations, followed by Sino-American interactions.

Some media quotations of Chinese proverbs conspicuously demonstrated the significance of cooperation and conflict-free state-to-state relations. Other proverb quotations were allegoric disapproval of some countries’ actions. China’s pragmatic intentions were actualized through proverbs focused on either positive-value concepts or contrastingly anti-value concepts depending on the international event and China’s attitude to the event. Positive-value concepts directly identified China’s position towards the desired global and bilateral relations, while anti-value concepts served as proxy concepts, which by predicting bad outcome contributed to managing the conflict situation. Let us consider both groups in detail.

#### **4.3.1. Positive-value Concepts Actualized by Chinese Proverbial Quotations**

China as the second largest economy plays an influential role in various parts of the world. Native proverbs quoted in mass-media on China’s attitude to global international situation and various local events declare China as being a stakeholder of peace and stability in the world on the one hand, and of win-to-win partnership with other countries on the other. This follows from the fact that 62% of the selected Chinese proverbial quotations on international affairs (categorized in six groups as in Table 1) accentuated positive values in inter-state relationships.

**Table 1:** *Positive-value Concepts Actualized by Chinese Proverbial Quotations on International Affairs*

Concept	Example of proverb quotation in English	Chinese proverb prototype	Proverb type
---------	---	---------------------------	--------------

<i>neighborhood, friendship, family-like relations</i>	A good neighbor is not to be traded for gold	好邻居金不换	súyǔ
	A friend in need is a friend indeed	患难见朋友	chéngyǔ
<i>harmony and partnership</i>	Seek harmony without uniformity	和而不同	géyán
<i>security, peace</i>	Peace is of paramount importance	天下太平	chéngyǔ
<i>unity</i>	Unity is Strength	众志成城	chéngyǔ
	If two people unite as one, their strength is powerful enough to cut metal	二人同心,其利断金	géyán
<i>patience, modesty</i>	One loses by pride and gains by modesty	满招损, 谦受益	géyán
<i>success, prosperity</i>	Bring prosperity to the nation and bring the security to the people	国泰民安	chéngyǔ

The core message which such proverbs communicated in mass media focused mostly on common human values as shown in the example below, where two Chinese proverbs – Xinjiang yànyǔ 事成于睦 (harmony holds the key to success) and yànyǔ 朋友好, 无价宝 (a good friend is an invaluable asset) – were used about China-Eurasia economic development:

*Chinese Vice President Li Yuanchao on Monday delivered a speech at the third China-Eurasia Economic Development and Cooperation ... “Harmony holds the key to success.” Over the years, Eurasian countries have been committed to fostering a stable and secure environment for development ... China is committed to common development through mutually beneficial cooperation. The Chinese people often say that, “A good friend is an invaluable asset.” (Li 2013).*

The proverbial imagery which helped convey universal human values was based on emotionally positive action (*wish well, get rich, prosper, foster, gain, not to be traded for gold, etc.*). An agent in such proverbs was associated in people’s minds with kind and respectful relationships (*neighbor, friend, family (member), a wise man, great souls, etc.*). The proverbs abounded in complimentary characteristics of the agent, of the action, and of the key concept (*precious, peaceful, near, invaluable, powerful, paramount, important, true, better, etc.*).

To illustrate the point let us present the quotation by the Chinese President Xi Jinping on the concept of China-Asia security, in which the yànyǔ 亲望亲好, 邻望邻好 (neighbors wish each other well, just like family members do) was used:

*He meanwhile vowed China's firm commitment to the path of peaceful development and the win-win strategy of opening up, and expressed China's willingness to develop friendly ties and cooperation with other countries on the basis of the Five Principles of Peaceful Co-existence ... Quoting a Chinese proverb, Xi said, ‘Neighbors wish each other well, just like family members do’ (Sun & Yao 2014).*

The quoted proverbs were either allegoric or non-allegoric, but in both cases highly intelligible to the cultures-addressees. In the following fragment on China’s attitude to the economic relations between

Greece and Europe, Europe was allegorically presented as *a family* (yànyǔ 家和万事兴), which China wanted to see *united, peaceful and prosperous*: “There is an ancient Chinese proverb saying ‘*a peaceful family will prosper*.’ Chinese Premier Li Keqiang said to EU leaders that China would like to see Greece stay in the eurozone and would be willing to play a constructive role in efforts toward that end.” (‘Vital Greek Solution Can Only Be Found through European Compromise’ 2015).

The *family* frame was actualized by the Chinese expressions 打断骨头连着筋 (even if bones are broken, something is still connected by flesh) and 血浓于水 (blood is thicker than water) in comments regarding the relations across the Taiwan Straits: “Compatriots across the Straits are ‘*brothers who are still connected by our flesh even if their bones are broken*’ as a Chinese saying goes. They are a family, because blood is thicker than water.” (‘Cartoon commentary Xi-Ma meeting: New chapter in history of Cross-Straits relations’ 2015).

Both non-allegoric and allegoric frames were combined in the Vice President Li Yuanchao’s speech about China-South Asia relations: “...in China, proverbs such as ‘*peace is most precious*’ and ‘*beat swords into ploughshares*’ reflect the philosophy of peace cherished by the Chinese nation” (‘Li Yuanchao’s speech at the Commemoration of the International Day of Peace 2013 & China-South Asia Peace and Development Forum’ 2013).

Both quotations, the non-allegoric aphorism géyán attributed to Confucius 以和为贵 (harmony is most precious), and the allegoric chéngyǔ 铸剑为犁 (beat swords into ploughshares), communicated the message that harmony and peace in the region were of great value.

In mass media discourse some allegoric proverbs developed into a scenario as in the fragment from “Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament” (2013) which contains the quotation 合抱之木，生于毫末；九层之台，起于垒土 (a big tree grows from a small seedling; and a nine-storeyed tower is built out of soil):

... as a Chinese saying goes, “*A big tree grows from a small seedling; and a nine-storeyed tower is built out of soil.*” To ensure that *the tree of China-ASEAN friendship remains evergreen, the soil of social support for our relations should be compacted.*

The example above is a scene-sequence in which China-ASEAN friendship was explicitly presented as, first, *the tree which should remain evergreen*, and, second, implicitly as a *nine-storeyed tower* built out of *the soil of social support*.

The important result was that proverbs revealing positive values were of rather low diversity but of high frequency, and the same habitual proverbs (twenty three items out of sixty two in total) with slight variations were recurrently quoted in comments on bilateral relations of China with different countries. The function of such proverbs from the perspective of intercultural pragmatics was a positive confirmatory one, i.e. declaring China’s positive intentions to pursue a stable and peaceful cooperation.

#### **4.3.2. Anti-value Concepts Actualized by Chinese Proverbial Quotations**

On the other hand the complexity of international situations in different parts of the world bestowed on proverbs a conflict-managing function through actualizing anti-value (i.e. conflict-related) concepts. They were found in 38% of the analyzed Chinese proverbs quoted in media as in Table 2.

**Table 2:** *Anti-value Concepts Actualized by Chinese Proverbial Quotations on International Affairs*

Concept	Example of proverb quotation in English	Chinese proverb prototype	Proverb type
<i>rivalry</i>	No two rival tigers can exist in the same	一山不容二虎	súyǔ

	mountain		
<i>domineering</i>	Letting state officials set fire only while not allowing common people to light a single lamp	只许州官放火,不许百姓点灯	súyǔ
<i>fragility of peace, threat, war</i>	An ant hole causing the collapse of a great dike	千里之堤,溃于蚁穴	géyán
	The war-like state, however big it may be, will eventually perish	国虽大,好战必亡	géyán
<i>relationship rifts</i>	While the tree craves calm, the wind will not subside	树欲静而风不止	géyán
<i>distortion</i>	Lose an axe, and blame the neighbor	失斧疑邻	chéngyǔ
<i>impatience</i>	Those who lack patience will not get the hot tofu	心急吃不了热豆腐	súyǔ

The proverbs focusing on conflict-related concepts may be viewed in intercultural pragmatics as admonition, remarks of caution, or advice which are the tools of conflict-managing strategy. The example below, which contains the géyán 千里之堤, 溃于蚁穴 ‘an ant hole causing the collapse of a great dike’, meaning ‘huge damage from a moment's negligence’ (caution remark), proved that the concept of *fragility of peace* was one of the great concerns:

*An injured person is evacuated to Rambam hospital in the northern city of Haifa, Israel, May 31, 2010. Clash happened on Monday morning between an international Gaza aid flotilla and Israeli navy, causing at least 19 casualties, Israeli military confirmed. ... History, especially that of the Middle East, has repeatedly proved one ancient Chinese proverb: one ant-hole may cause the collapse of a thousand-kilometer-long dike (Deng 2010).*

The research provided evidence that proverbial quotations, which actualized the conflict-related concepts, were of higher diversity (thirty nine items out of sixty two in total) but of lower frequency, and this makes a difference in comparison with proverbs focused on positive-value concepts. Conflict situations on an international scale are of wide topical and referential diversity and multiple are the causes leading up to them. This may be the reason why a greater variety was found among proverbs that actualized conflict-related concepts.

The proverbial imagery and frames of such proverbs could not be reduced to certain types, and instead of visible uniformity of the positive-value proverbs, they demonstrated heterogeneity of prototypical situations, which proved more frequently allegoric and culturally-specific. Let us illustrate the point with a quote from the article entitled “China and the U.S.: Who threatens whom after all?” (Yang 2011)

At present, US aircraft carriers are plying far and wide across the world, including those swaying at China’s main “entrance gate” but the growth of the Chinese nation’s corresponding defense power has been treated with an overbearing logic of “*letting state officials set fire only while not allowing common people to light a single lamp,*” as another popular Chinese proverb goes.

China’s attitude to increasing global influence by the USA was allegorically presented by the súyǔ 只许州官放火,不许百姓点灯 (only officials are allowed to light the fire, and common people are not), which proved that one country *domineering* was viewed as an anti-value concept. The proverbial analogy served

as a sign of the addressor's awareness of perceived inadequacy of the situation and the addressor's intention to admonish the addressees.

The imagery and the allegoric frame of the proverb are unique to China's culture, for the saying goes back to a historical episode during the reign of the southern Song dynasty.

By the following proverb quotation about Sino-Japan relations the anti-value concept of *rivalry* was actualized:

*An old Chinese proverb goes that no two rival tigers can exist in the same mountain. However, China's rapid growth in economic, political and military terms has made it such a tiger. This tiger will have to co-exist with an existing tiger for quite a long time to come. Japan will have to accept this reality and learn to co-exist in a peaceful manner with China. (Chen 2015).*

Culturally-specific were the images of two strong tigers associated with the mighty states of China and Japan. The allegoric situation expressed by the Chinese *súyǔ* 一山不容二虎 (no two rival tigers can exist in the same mountain), continued beyond the proverb, and developed into a scenario. Imagine one strong tiger on a mountain, then another strong tiger coming along. The two rival tigers were seemingly unable to exist on the same mountain, but the final scene of the scenario demonstrated the urgent need for co-existence. The proverbial quotation expresses an admonition which is a strategic tool of preventing conflict situations.

The cognitive structure of conflict-related proverbial quotations proved to be dichotomous, which makes the difference with positive-value proverbs. In many cases the dichotomy based on cognitive oppositions, which were universally intelligible, such as *set fire - not allow to light a single lamp; big war-like state - perish; tree craves calm - the wind will not subside; or two rival tigers*. In other cases dichotomy involved 'cause and effect' culturally-specific experience: *lack patience - not get the hot tofu, lose an axe - blame the neighbor*.

Dichotomy-based structure served as a strategy of reasoning in conflict managing, which reflected undesired consequences and displayed negative oppositions.

## Conclusion

When studying Chinese proverbs in an intercultural communication perspective, scholars have traditionally been engaged in cross-cultural comparison of proverbial images (Liu 2013), conceptual in/comparability of Chinese proverbs with their counterparts in other languages (mainly English or American) (Li 2000; Yu & Guo 1999), and investigation of the national worldview, values, and stereotypes reflected in proverbs (Lee 2015; Weng 2008). Such works may become a solid base for research on the use of Chinese proverbs in an intercultural context. However, this kind of analysis is still rare in Chinese proverb studies.

Extensive citation of Chinese proverbs in English media has inspired new research ideas. One of the challenging issues concerns the intercultural pragmatics of proverb quotation. Since Chinese media in English are a form of intercultural communication and media coverage of international events is a means of international communication and both are extremely sensitive to discursive failures, the use of ethnic proverbs in such media should be appropriate to the situation and their meaning - intelligible to the addressee-cultures or nations. Ethnic proverbs quoted in English may become the keystone of pragmatic success in intercultural communication but they may also provoke an undesired effect if they are misused or abused.

Chinese native proverb quotations in English media have also posed the general question of the compatibility of different cultures' communication patterns when communicating in English. On the one

hand, the English language per se imposes a certain mode of thought expression. On the other, Chinese media transmit China's views, Chinese cultural values, and Chinese national identity in English using Chinese traditional discursive norms, lavish proverb quotation being among them. When different types of cultures (low context or high context) interact in English, the mode of communication should be finely tuned to reach understanding. People belonging to different cultures should be aware of each other's discursive patterns.

Global communication in English as a lingua franca facilitates a dialogue across cultures and countries but the concrete outcome of any interaction is in no small measure determined by the competence in intercultural pragmatics.

## References

*A Big Dictionary of Chengyu* (1985). Zhengzhou: Henan renmin Press. (in Chinese)

Adegoju, A. (2009). Rhetoric in conflict-related Yoruba proverbs: Guide to constructive conflict resolution in Africa. *African Study Monographs*, 30(2), 55–69.

Ademowo, A. J. & Balogun, N. (2014). Proverbs and conflict management in Africa: A study of selected Yoruba proverbs and proverbial expressions. *International Journal of Literature, Language and Linguistics*, 1(1), 039–044.

Almajir, T. *Karin Magana Proverb as a Conflict Resolution Mechanism in Hausa Society*. Available at: <http://www.academia.edu/7782441/> Accessed December 30, 2014.

Brosh, H. (2013). Proverbs in the Arabic language classroom. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*, 3(5), 19–29.

Bradbury, N. M. (2002). Transforming experience into tradition: two theories of proverb use and Chaucer's practice. *Oral Tradition*, 17(2), 261–289.

Cartoon commentary Xi-Ma meeting: New chapter in history of Cross-Straits relations. (2015). *China Daily*, November 8. [http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-11/08/content\\_22402508.htm](http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/china/2015-11/08/content_22402508.htm) Accessed December 5, 2015.

Chen, P. (2015). Tensions with Japan unlikely to ease further. *TheGlobal Times*, May 4. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/920056.shtml> Accessed May 10, 2015.

Chinese spokeswoman blames Japan for tension. (2013). *TheGlobal Times*, March 04. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/765667.shtml> Accessed May 11, 2015.

*Chinese proverbs (Yanyu) dictionary*. (1981). Nanjing: Jiangsu Renmin Press. (in Chinese)

Deng, Y. (2010). A wrong hit at a wrong beat. *Xinhuanet*, June 2. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/indepth/2010-06/02/c\\_13329462.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/indepth/2010-06/02/c_13329462.htm) Accessed September 5, 2015.

Elliott, J. (2013). China turns friendly with India but why. *The Foreign Desk: blog independent* <http://blogs.independent.co.uk/2013/05/21/china-turns-friendly-with-india-but-why> Accessed September 14, 2015.

Gardiner, H. (2013). In New Delhi, Chinese Prime Minister promotes trade ties. *New York Times*, May 21, 2013. <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/22/world/asia/in-new-delhi-chinese-leader-promotes-trade-ties.html> Accessed September 14, 2015.

- Gotlib, O. M., Mu Huangying (Ed.). (2007). *Chinese-Russian Phraseological dictionary*. Moskow: East-West. (in Russian)
- Guthrie, G. P. (2003). *1,600 Quotes & Pieces of Wisdom That Just Might Help You Out When You're Stuck in a Moment (and Can't Get Out of It!)*. iUniverse.
- Hall, E. (1989). *Beyond culture*. New York: Anchor Books.
- He, Ch. (Ed.). (1988). *Dictionary of Ancient Sayings*. Guiyang: Guizhou renmin Press. (in Chinese)
- Honeck, R.P. (2013). *A Proverb in Mind: The Cognitive Science of Proverbial Wit and Wisdom*. Psychology Press.
- Hong, C. (2014). Japan, China can share the same boat. *The China Daily*, October 21. [http://africa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-10/21/content\\_18774650\\_2.htm](http://africa.chinadaily.com.cn/opinion/2014-10/21/content_18774650_2.htm) Accessed December 15, 2015.
- India, China have far more common interests: Li Keqiang. (2013). *Indian Broadcasting Network (CNN-IBN)*. May 21. <http://www.ibnlive.com/news/india/china-li-in-mumbai-610557.html> Accessed September 12, 2015.
- Jiao, L., Stone, B. (2014). *500 Common Chinese Proverbs and Colloquial Expressions: An Annotated Frequency Dictionary*. Routledge.
- Karl, D.J. (2013). India: Asia's Geopolitical Sweetheart. *Foreign policy blog*. June 17, 2013. <http://foreignpolicyblogs.com/2013/06/17/india-asias-geopolitical-sweetheart> Accessed September 12, 2015.
- Kassis, R.A. (1999). *The Book of Proverbs and Arabic Proverbial Works*. Brill: Leiden-Boston Koln.
- Language, Cultural Exchange Warm up China-US Strategic, Economic Dialogue (2009). *The Global Times*, July 28, 2009. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/451813.shtml> Accessed September 10, 2015.
- Lee, J. F. K. (2015). Chinese Proverbs: How are Women and Men Represented? *OS –Multidisciplinary Journal of Gender Studies*, 4(1), 559–585.
- Li, L. (2000). Intercultural comparison of English and Chinese proverbs (suyu). *Lianyungang Technical College Journal*, 1, 73–76. (in Chinese)
- Li, Y. (2013). Promote common development through greater openness and cooperation: speech at the third China-Eurasia economic development and cooperation forum, Urumqi, September 2, 2013. *Xinhuanet*, September 3, 2013. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-09/03/c\\_132688515.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-09/03/c_132688515.htm) Accessed September 10, 2015.
- Liu, J. (2013). A comparative study of English and Chinese animal proverbs – from the perspective of metaphors. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 3(10), 1844–1849.
- Liu, Y. (1992). *Chengyu and Shuyu Dictionary*. Taipei: Shangwu. (in Chinese)
- Li Yuanchao's speech at the Commemoration of the International Day of Peace 2013 & China-South Asia Peace and Development Forum. (2013). *Xinhuanet*, September 21, 2013. [http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-09/21/c\\_132738196.htm](http://news.xinhuanet.com/english/china/2013-09/21/c_132738196.htm) Accessed September 12, 2015.
- Ma, L. (2011). *The Word and the World: Exploring World Views of Monolingual and Bilingual Chinese Through the Use of Proverbs*. Available at: *Open Access Dissertations*

[http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1561&context=oa\\_dissertations](http://scholarlyrepository.miami.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1561&context=oa_dissertations)  
Accessed December 15, 2015.

Makamani, R. (2013). African proverbs and conflict management: a study of selected Shona, Oshivambo, Yoruba and Swahili proverbial expressions. *African Journal of Rhetoric*, 4, 122–149.

Mieder, W. (1997). *The Politics of Proverbs: From Traditional Wisdom to Proverbial Stereotypes*. Univ of Wisconsin Press.

Mieder, W. (2005). *Proverbs are the Best Policy: Folk Wisdom and American Politics*. Utah State University Press: Logan, Utah.

Mieder, W. (2010). The Golden Rule as a political imperative for the world. President Barack Obama's proverbial messages abroad. *Millî Folklor*, 22(85), 26–35. <http://www.millifolklor.com> Accessed January 20, 2015.

Nikolaeva, O., Yakovleva, E. (2015). The pragmatics of Chinese proverb quoting in the English- and the Russian-language mass media of PRC. *Asian Social Science*, 11 (15), 211–220.

Piirainen, E. (2005). Europeanism, internationalism or something else? Proposal for a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural research project on widespread idioms in Europe and beyond. *Journal of Linguistics*, 35, 45–75.

Rohsenow, J. (2003). *ABC Dictionary of Chinese Proverbs (Yanyu)*. University of Hawaii Press.

*Speech by Chinese President Xi Jinping to Indonesian Parliament(2 October 2013, Jakarta, Indonesia)*. (2013). Available at: [http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c\\_133062675.htm](http://www.asean-china-center.org/english/2013-10/03/c_133062675.htm) Accessed October 9, 2015.

Sun, Zh, Yao Ch. (2014) China champions new Asian security concept: Xi. *Peoples' Daily*, May 21, 2014. <http://en.people.cn/n/2014/0521/c90883-8730684.html> Accessed September 21, 2015.

Weng, L. (2008). Revisiting Chinese values through self-generated proverbs and sayings. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 17(2), 107–121.

Vital Greek solution can only be found through European compromise: commentary of the Xinhua News Agency. (2015). *TheGlobal Times*, June 9. <http://www.globaltimes.cn/content/931304.shtml> Accessed September 21, 2015.

Wen, D. (Ed.). (2004). *Chinese Idioms (Guanyongyu) Dictionary*. Shanghai: Cishu Press. (in Chinese)

Wen, D. (Ed.). (1986). *Chinese Proverbs (Suyu) Dictionary*. Shanghai: Cishu Press. (in Chinese)

Wen, Zh. (2012). An analysis of social proverbs from the perspective of cultural semiotics. *Theory and Practice in Language Studies*, 2(10), 2073–2080.

Xia, Zh. & Chen, Zh (Ed.). (2009). *Cihai dictionary*. Shanghai: Cishu. (in Chinese)

Yang, Y. (2011) China and the U.S.: Who threatens whom after all. *ThePeople's Daily*, February 21. <http://english.people.com.cn/90001/90780/91343/7294701.html> Accessed May 1, 2011.

Yu, F., Guo, Sh. (1999). *The Comparison of English and Chinese Idioms*. Shanghai Jiao Tong University Press. (in Chinese)

Zhao, Z. (Ed.). (1984). *Encyclopedia of Ancient Literary Quotation*. Nanchang: Jiangxi renmin Press. (in Chinese)

Zhou, H. (Ed.). (1989). *Dictionary of Famous Sayings*. Shanghai: Shanghai guji Press. (in Chinese)

## About the Authors

Dr. Olga V. Nikolaeva is a professor of cognitive linguistics at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Far Eastern Federal University, Vladivostok, Russia. Her doctoral thesis was devoted to the interaction of ethnic worldviews in multilingual and multicultural communities. Dr. Nikolaeva is the author of four books and a series of publications on the theoretical and practical aspects of inter-cognitive, inter-cultural, and inter-linguistic contacts.

Dr. Chen Shumei is a professor at Ludong University, Shandong province, China. She was conferred her doctoral degree from Beijing Normal University. Dr. Chen Shumei specializes in Chinese characters and lexicology of the Chinese language.

Maria Panina is a PhD candidate and a lecturer at the Institute of Oriental Studies, Far Eastern Federal University. She majors in Chinese and studies Chinese modern literature and mass media in the perspective of intercultural communication.

## Authors' Address

Olga V. Nikolaeva  
Far Eastern Federal University  
Vladivostok, Office D 720, bld. 20  
Campus FEFU, Russky Island  
Russia  
E-mail: [nikolaeva.ov@dvfu.ru](mailto:nikolaeva.ov@dvfu.ru)

---

[1] shúyǔ - idioms with fixed structure (Xia & Chen 2009); chéngyǔ - four syllable literary idioms, which have morale behind the fable (Liu 1992); guànyòngyǔ - idiomatic expressions; géyán - literary quotation, aphorisms, maxims; yànyǔ - proverbs based on oral culture (Rohsenow 2003).

---

Journal of Intercultural Communication, ISSN 1404-1634, issue 45, November 2017.

URL: <http://immi.se/intercultural>