

A Comparative Study of the Cultural Connotation of Expressions on Rabbit in Chinese and English

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Abstract:

The rabbit is a common animal. In the process of domesticating and raising rabbits, human beings inevitably project various emotions onto rabbits, which contributes to the further understanding and recognition of the external character and cultural connotations of rabbits and contribute to the formation of a distinctive rabbit culture. As a cultural symbol, the rabbit is often endowed with different cultural connotations and meanings. In Chinese, many expressions in the Chinese language use rabbit to refer to the moon. In addition, the rabbit also has the connotation of auspiciousness, which is related to the rarity of the white hare and the red hare in ancient times. Some myths and legends, such as the Jade Rabbit pounding medicine, associate the rabbit with immortality. In English, rabbit has the meaning of new life and good luck, which is closely related to Christianity. This paper analyzes the reasons for the differences in the cultural connotations of rabbit in Chinese and English, in order to better understand the differences between the two cultures, which is conducive to improving the cross-cultural communication ability and level, and promoting the deep-level communication between the two cultures.

Keywords:

Rabbit, Cultural Connotations, Cultural Comparisons

1. Introduction

Language is an important tool for human communication, a bearer of culture, and an important factor in promoting cultural exchanges. To a certain extent, the language of a country can reflect its corresponding culture. In the course of long-term development of human history, human beings have had very close contact with animals since ancient times, and a large number of animal-related expressions have been formed in language expressions, which contain rich cultural connotations and symbolic meanings. As a common animal, the rabbit has undergone a long evolution. According to historical records, hares first appeared about 60 million years ago. [1] Fossils of rabbits were found 30 million years ago. More than a hundred fossilized rabbit bones have been found in the remains of the Shanding Caveman in China,

which is 27,000 to 34,000 years old. *The Collection of Oracle Bones* contains several recognizable references to rabbit hunting, clearly recording the time, place and quantity of the hunt. Rabbits are closely related to people's production and life, and many expressions about rabbits have been produced in the language. The Chinese and English peoples have rich linguistic expressions and cultural connotations, but due to the differences in religious beliefs, philosophical ideas, and ways of thinking, the linguistic expressions related to rabbit in Chinese and English have similar semantics as well as their unique national cultural connotations.

2. Linguistic Expressions and Cultural Connotations on Rabbit in Chinese and English

There are many expressions related to the word “rabbit” in Chinese. Chinese characters derived from “rabbit” include “逸”, “冤”, and “菟”, etc. Words related to it include “玉兔”, “兔轮”, “兔阙”, “兔魄”, “兔影”, etc. Idioms related to the word “rabbit” include “狡兔三窟”, “兔死狗烹”, “守株待兔”, etc. Posthumous sayings about “兔” include “兔子不吃窝边草——留青(情)”, “兔子尾巴——长不了”, “老虎皮兔子胆——色厉内荏” and so on. There are also some sayings related to this word, such as “兔子逼急了还咬人”, “怀里揣着兔子”, “兔崽子”. In addition, it also appeared in poems, such as “In the moon, the Jade Rabbit has been pounding herbs for decades, while Chang'e lives alone in the Moon Palace, with whom? (白兔捣药秋复春, 嫦娥孤栖与谁邻?)”, “Both the rabbit and the toad felt very cold, and the osmanthus flowers were as white as snow. On such a night, Chang'e should also be heartbroken by the pain of lovesickness. (兔寒蟾冷桂花白, 此夜嫦娥应断肠。)” “According to the legend, the rabbit in the Moon Palace has been pounding medicine, but for whom the medicine is made? (白兔捣药成, 问言与谁餐。)” and so on.

In the Chinese expressions related to rabbit, it can be seen that this word has the connotation of moon, which is reflected by some words and idioms, such as “玉兔”, “兔轮”, “兔阙”, “白兔赤乌”, “兔起乌沉”, “兔走乌飞”, etc., as well as poems such as “I raise my glass to invite the moon, will you go with me to Cangzhou? (酬酒问蟾兔, 肯去伴沧洲。)”, “The moon has shone on a lot of people who have suffered a lot of grief, which the distant moon doesn't know. (照他几许人肠断, 玉兔银蟾远不知。)”, etc. These poems also show that the poets used the rabbit to refer to the moon. Rabbits also have the cultural connotation of auspiciousness. In the *Yuefu Song* of Han Dynasty, there is a poem that reads “The white rabbit gathers herbs at the end of the mountain, pounds these herbs into pills and presents to His Majesty, and this pill can be taken to attain immortality. (采取神药山之端, 白兔捣成蛤蟆丸, 奉上陛下一玉杵, 服此药可得神仙。)” In many portraits of the Han Dynasty, the Jade Hare appears alone or in pairs at the side of the Queen Mother of the West, which shows that the Jade Rabbit is regarded as an auspicious animal. In addition, in ancient China, the appearance of the red rabbit and the white rabbit was regarded as an omen of good fortune. In the book *The Intrinsic Aspects of Baopuzi* (《抱朴子内篇》), it is written: “The tiger, the deer and the rabbit all live to be a thousand years old. Those who have reached 500 years of age have white fur. (虎及鹿、兔皆寿千岁。满五百岁者, 其毛色白。)” The author believed that rabbits live long lives, and that the white hare was the result of the hare's long life of 500 years. Compared to the white hare, the red hare is rarer, and thus the auspicious nature it possesses is stronger. For example, in the *Illustrations of Auspicious Omens* (《瑞应图》) of Southern Song Dynasty, there is the phrase “Red hare is more auspicious than the white hare. (赤兔大瑞, 白兔中瑞)”. In

the late Ming Dynasty, during the Mid-Autumn Festival, people in Beijing would worship a Lord Rabbit made of loess to pray for peace and good luck. The worship of the rabbit also reflects its auspicious connotation. In addition to the above meanings of moon and auspiciousness, rabbit also has a derogatory meaning in some Chinese language expressions. For example, the phrase “撑目兔” is used as a metaphor for a woman who is unmarried but pregnant, “兔崽子” is often used as a curse in modern Chinese, meaning an obnoxious child who lacks manners. “兔客” is a metaphor for a male favorite.

There are three common words for this animal in English: rabbit, bunny and hare. The first one refers to domesticated rabbits or all burrowing animal of the family Leporidae having long ears and short tails. Expressions related to “rabbit” include rabbit on (meaning nagging, chattering), rabbit ears (meaning indoor antennae or being curious about something), rabbit food (meaning vegetable salad, healthy food), as timid as a rabbit, rabbit warren (meaning a narrow residential area), rabbit foot (meaning good luck). “Bunny” is a nickname, usually used in children's language, and related expressions include bunny slope or hill (a gently sloping slope for novice skiers), dust bunny (a cloud of dust), Easter bunny, etc. “Hare” refers to wild rabbit. Expressions related to “hare” include start a hare (to raise a side issue in a discussion), as mad as a March hare (to act madly), etc.

Due to the rabbit's strong reproductive ability, the word “rabbit” has a cultural connotation of new life in Western culture, symbolizing the revival of spring and the birth of new life. There is an important holiday in the West – Easter. It commemorates the resurrection of Jesus on the third day after his crucifixion. As Easter symbolizes rebirth and hope, the rabbit has gradually evolved into the symbol of Easter. On that day, the Easter bunny delivers eggs to people. The egg symbolizes the revival of everything in the early spring, and the rabbit symbolizes the revival of spring and the birth of new life. [2] However, the rabbit's ability to reproduce can be both a connotation of the new life and a symbol of lust. In medieval Europe, where asceticism was widely promoted, the rabbit was seen as a symbol of lust because of its ability to reproduce, and thus became one of the symbols of the Seven Deadly Sins of Christianity, which is reflected in some Renaissance paintings. For example, in Titian's *Madonna and the Rabbit*, you can see the Madonna holding a white rabbit in her hand, which is interpreted as an expression of restraining desire. In William Strong's painting *Temptation*, the rabbit also appears as an image of lust, lying quietly at the feet of Adam and Eve, who have stolen the forbidden fruit. However, the word “rabbit” also means luck in Western culture. An important cultural image in Western culture is the “rabbit foot” which is a symbol of good luck. It is believed that the rabbit's foot can ward off evil spirits and transfer its good fortune to the bearer. They make it an amulet that brings good luck. [3]

3. An Analysis of the Reasons for the Differences in the Cultural Connotation of Rabbit in Chinese and English

Although there are some expressions with similar meanings in both languages, most of these expressions are related to the rabbit's own characteristics or habits, such as “动如脱兔” in Chinese and “as fast as a hare” in English, due to the different geographic environments of the Chinese and English peoples, their life experiences and production and labor are naturally different, and different ways of living will inevitably derive different concepts, beliefs and legends. In addition, people associate

the same thing with different meanings, or focus on the different aspects of the same thing, reflecting the personality of the national culture. Language is the carrier of culture, and it is bound to be influenced accordingly. Differences in religious beliefs, philosophical ideas and ways of thinking are the reasons for the differences in the cultural connotations of Chinese and English expressions related to rabbits.

3.1. Religious Beliefs

The differences in religious beliefs among ethnic groups has led to differences in the cultural connotations of rabbits. The Chinese believe in Taoism, Buddhism and so on, while the main religion believed in English-speaking countries is Christianity. Different religions embody different relationships between God and man. Chinese religions place great emphasis on man's own efforts, believing that man's own efforts are the fundamental prerequisite for man's liberation, and that divine assistance is only an auxiliary force for man's liberation. [4] China's native religion, Taoism, believes that to achieve the mystical realm of the unity of form and spirit relies mainly on one's self-cultivation. If a person honors the Taoist deities and practices hard so as to understand the Tao, stay close to the Tao, and pursue the Tao, he will be able to attain the Way. After attaining the Way, he will be able to help people and the world, and accumulate merits and virtues. At last, he will be able to attain immortality and longevity. [5] From the middle and late Warring States period to the period of Emperor Wu of Han Dynasty, the rise of early Taoism such as Fang Xian Dao (方仙道), it directly affects the ruling class, emperors are keen to pursue immortality, which cause a craze in Chinese history to cross the sea in search of life-prolonging herbs. During the Western Han Dynasty, the Jade Rabbit in the Moon, which is not often seen in cultural relics, appeared in a large number of portrait stones and bricks, and its image was elevated to an extremely important position. It can be seen that its prosperity and the rise of Taoism were basically synchronized. In addition, the connotation of immortality that the moon had developed before the Han Dynasty is precisely what Taoism seeks. The rabbit is the representative image of the myth related to the moon. Under the influence of Taoism, the primitive myth of the Jade Rabbit in the moon and the myth of the Jade Rabbit pounding herbs beside the Queen Mother of the West in the mythological system of Kunlun permeated and fused with each other. In Taoist culture, the rabbit has become a symbol of longevity. The Taoists regarded the rabbit as a mythological animal that could make the elixir. The Jade Rabbit used a mortar and pestle under the laurel tree in the moon to make the elixir which can be taken to become immortal. Therefore, in Chinese culture, the rabbit has connotations of auspiciousness and longevity.

In the Christian relationship between God and man, God is the center of all man's life and has absolute dominion, while man is nothing but a submissive of God's will, and all he can do is to pray and obey. Man is born sinful and in need of salvation. God sent Jesus into the world to spread the gospel, to save the sinful world, and to atone for the sins of mankind by his death on the cross. One of the most important holidays in the West, Easter, is a Christian holiday commemorating the resurrection of Jesus on the third day after His crucifixion and death. The English word "Easter Bunny" is also derived from this festival. People celebrate Easter not only to celebrate and commemorate the resurrection of Jesus, but also to praise and respect to the new life and hope. Because of its strong reproductive ability, rabbits symbolize the recovery of spring and the birth of new life, so they become an important cultural element of Easter. The Easter Bunny will be dressed in clothes with baskets to give colored eggs,

candies, and toys to the children on the night before Easter, which is very popular among the people. [6]

In addition to religious beliefs, folk beliefs also occupy an important place in the worship of national deities. In ancient China, due to the lack of medical knowledge, when faced with the serious consequences caused by the plague, people often developed a fearful and helpless mentality toward the plague, which prompts the emergence of the psychology of praying to the gods. They attempted to gain spiritual solace by worshipping the gods. Among the many deities, the Medicine King often became the psychological support of the people, and people hoped that by worshipping the Medicine King, they could drive away the plague and help their family members or themselves to be healthy again. [7] This, to a certain extent, led to the birth of the Lord Rabbit. During the Mid-Autumn Festival, people have made clay statues of the Lord Rabbit and worshiped them to plead the Lord Rabbit to get rid of diseases and to bless their families with peace and health and to protect them from plagues and epidemics. In Western culture, Greek mythology has a long history of influence on European thought and culture. The mythological system, which is different from that of China, makes people's folk beliefs different and has significant national characteristics.

3.2. Philosophy

Different philosophies in China and the West have their own value systems for the judgment of death, [8] which is also the reason for the difference in the cultural connotation of rabbit between Chinese and English. China has always had a tradition of emphasizing life and sorrowing death. In ancient times, due to the limitations of productivity, science and technology, medicine was extremely backward, and people's knowledge of life was extremely limited, therefore, people in ancient times were afraid of old age, sickness and death, and "death" meant a complete denial of life. Therefore, people in ancient times feared old age, sickness and death. Death meant the complete denial of life and the complete destruction of the joy of secular life, which was undoubtedly a heavy blow to the reality-oriented Chinese people. However, at the same time, they are also constantly exploring the mystery of their own life and death, with a view to obtaining spiritual and physical immortality. For example, Emperor Qin Shi Huang had repeatedly sent a large number of alchemists to the sea to search for immortals and seek the elixir for longevity. Alchemy and the taking of stone medicines became popular during the Wei, Jin, and Northern and Southern Dynasties. This shows that a long time ago, people had pinned their hope for immortality on the elixir, hoping that human life could be extended as far as possible. Immortality became the ultimate goal of many Chinese people, and thus formed a cognitive system centered on the belief in immortality. [9] The medicine made by the Jade Rabbit next to the Queen Mother of the West is the elixir, which demonstrates people's desire to pursue longevity, and what is implied in *Chang'e Flies to the Moon* is that human beings need to rely on elixir to obtain immortality. [10] At the same time, the moon can become round from waning. In people's eyes, this phenomenon is equivalent to the resurrection from the dead, and rabbits in the moon naturally have the vitality and fertility as strong as the moon. [11] Behind all this is the ancient Chinese concept of life and death in pursuit of immortality. Therefore, the rabbit, which is associated with the moon, the Queen Mother of the West, and the medicine for immortality, was given the connotation of auspiciousness and longevity, and was revered by the people.

The Western concept of life and death is the process of viewing life from perspective of death, they can correctly recognize death and face it directly. The original Western concept of death was born in Ancient Greece, when people advocated individual democracy and freedom. In Ancient Greece, death was considered an irreplaceable event for an individual, and people did not avoid discussing death in their daily lives, but also sublimated it to the height of philosophy. Socrates, the famous ancient Greek philosopher, once said, "Death is nothing but the separation of the body and soul of man, and the soul is eternal." In the Middle Ages, Western culture was closely linked to Christianity, which believed that death was only a process of life, not the end of life, and that people could reach the other world after death by doing good deeds and atoning for their sins, thus achieving transcendence of life. [12] The question of the universality and inevitability of human death is raised in the Bible's *Genesis*. Individuals are universally and necessarily subject to the penalty of death due to the original sin committed by their ancestors, and human death has excluded the element of individuality. The only significance of the initial life of all men is death, and the only true significance is rebirth. Since death is merely a lifestyle transition that culminates in the resurrection, every person should have a fearless, universal attitude toward death. *The New Testament* recognizes that death is not merely the end of life, but that through the resurrection man will once again receive immortal life. They continue the present life of man into the afterlife, believing in salvation and the immortality of the soul, and thus that death is not the end of man's life, but the transcendence of man's being. It is this Christian view of life and death that allows Westerners to discuss death more openly. Therefore, compared to the Chinese who hold an evasive attitude in front of individual death, the Westerners show more of the courage to face death directly. They seek happiness in the afterlife more than in the present. Thus, in the Western tradition, death is elevated as a way to achieve new life rather than the pursuit of immortality, and accordingly, animal worship in the pursuit of immortality rarely occurs.

3.3. Ways of Thinking

Words are the basic elements of language, and from the structure of words to the composition of words, they can reflect the thinking mode of a nation. [13] The linguistic expression and cultural connotation of rabbit have their own characteristics in Chinese and English, which is also caused by the difference in thinking mode. The Chinese and English peoples belong to the East and West, with different historical origins and cultural backgrounds, and their language structures and ways of thinking have their own characteristics.

The traditional philosophy of the Chinese people promotes the idea of the harmony between humanity and nature. So Chinese people is accustomed to figurative thinking and focus on intuitive experience. Chinese characters are hieroglyphics, and their origins were influenced to some extent by the figurative and intuitive thinking of the Chinese people. [14] The Chinese language is a figurative language, mainly based on images, which are imitations of natural things. In the beginning, the Chinese characters were unified with the objects they depicted in terms of form, and were characterized by their intuitive nature. For example, the ancient character for "rabbit" looks like a seated rabbit with its head facing upwards, long drooping ears, front and back legs, and a short curved tail. From the physiological habits of the rabbit, characters such as "逸" and "冤" were derived. The character "逸" reflects the characteristics of rabbit that are good at running. The Chinese character "冤" means

that a weak rabbit is kept in a cage and is unable to escape, so it has to submit. On the contrary, Western philosophy advocates the separation of heaven and man. It is an abstract, logical and analytical way of thinking, which makes English abstract and analytical. English is an acoustic language that uses epigraphic characters, which were developed by the English-speaking people through the fusion of Latin. This kind of language is not intuitive, and there is no connection between it and the objective things it refers to. It can only reflect things in the abstract. Therefore, in English, the three common words “rabbit”, “hare” and “bunny” have no similar morphological connection with the objects they refer to as in Chinese.

In addition, the Chinese people are keen on image thinking. Chinese words tend to be concrete, often use concrete images to describe abstract concepts, and use objects to express feelings and aspirations, which is also the result of intuitive and perceptual thinking. [15] For example, the expression “兔死狐悲” is used to describe the sadness caused by the death or failure of the same kind of person, and the expression “兔死狗烹” is used to describe the killing of a meritorious official after his services are no longer needed. There is no equivalent expression in English, so if we want to translate it, we have to find out the real meaning behind it in order to make the target group understand it. Another example is that the ancients liked to express their profound meaning by describing specific scenes in their poems. For example, “I made a point of climbing the stairs to look at the moon, but tonight it was dark and cloudy, as if someone had covered the moon with a large curtain. (著意登楼瞻玉兔，何人张幕遮银阙。)” The Mid-autumn Festival is supposed to be a good day to enjoy the moon, but it is covered by clouds, which is a disappointment. Although the poet can deal with it with an open attitude, but he can not be calm in his heart. This poem is about enjoying the moon in the Mid-Autumn Festival on the surface, but it is actually a work of worrying about the country and expressing emotions. The spirit of the Chinese language, in essence, is not the spirit of the Western language, which is obsessed with intellectuality and rationality, but the spirit of full of feelings and experiences.

In addition, the observation of the same thing by the Chinese and English peoples focuses on their different characteristics making the related expressions in the two languages different. For example, rabbit ears are used in English to refer to indoor antennas, or to refer to people's sensitivity to something. In Chinese, there is no such associative meaning. In English, there is the expression “as timid as a rabbit”, which describes a person who is cowardly, but in Chinese, the corresponding expression is “as timid as a mouse (胆小如鼠)”. And the ancient Chinese believed that rabbits reproduced by looking at the moon, which set the stage for the derogatory connotations of the rabbit in later times.

4. Conclusions

The word “rabbit” has rich cultural connotations in Chinese and English language expressions. Due to religious beliefs, philosophical ideas, ways of thinking and other factors, the cultural connotation of “rabbit” has its own unique cultural meaning in Chinese and English languages, showing obvious national colors and containing cultural differences. In cross-cultural communication, it is necessary to deeply understand Chinese and Western cultural traditions, the cultural connotations behind the language expressions, and understand and respect the differences between different cultures in order to carry out cross-cultural communication smoothly and promote cultural exchange and understanding.

Conflicts of Interest

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