

OKSANA KHARLAY

Macau University of Science and Technology, China

# Representation of Female Attributes in Chinese Proverbs

## 1. Introduction

Proverbs are generally known as part of the cultural knowledge and discourse and are employed as shortcuts to express ‘pearls of wisdom’, or just a relevant commentary drawn from an elusive ‘common knowledge’, often expressed through a rhymed and humorous play on words. A proverb follows Darwinian laws and survives in the spoken and written form within a linguistic unit on the strength of its cultural and temporal relevance, sometimes wrapped in a timeless comedic envelope.

In the literature, proverbs are taken as ‘culturally confirmed frozen texts of a prototypical practice used as an illocution over a categorical action in a setting for a projected view of life’ (Bhuvanewar 2015). They function as a means of transfer of indigenous knowledge and wisdom from generation to generation and ‘connect the human and the world and they are the way language gives the opportunity to the human to impact the world’ (Shedrovitsky/Rozin 1967:12). Dominguez (2010:50) claims that ‘values and beliefs are codified and manifested in all aspect of linguistic communication, such as proverbs, popular expressions, shared vocabulary, oral traditions, conversational rules and modes of interaction, and even linguistic modes of creativity.’ Taylor (1996:1–2) states that ‘a proverb is wise, it belongs to many people; it is ingenious in form and idea.’

Proverbs have been analysed by many linguists and scholars spanning a range of topics and research foci. For instance, Mieder (2004, 2008) looked into the nature of proverbs; Goodwin and Wenzel (1981), Honeck and Kibler (1984), Kemper (1981), and Pasamanick (1985) studied proverbs in relation to their cognitive aspect; Lieber (1984) and Yankah (1994) focused on the pragmatics of

proverbs; Paltridge (1994) and Tyler (1994) analysed the historical and cultural contexts within which proverbs are structured.

The representation of females in proverbs has been investigated both within individual languages, for instance, in Igbo (Oha 1998) and Kurdish (Rasul 2015), and cross-culturally, in order to highlight differences in perception; for instance, Rasul (2015) compared portrayal of women in English and Urdu proverbs from a socio-linguistic and critical discourse analysis perspective. Nabifar (2013) instead investigated the differences between English and Persian proverbs in relation to human cognitive system. Despite being unrelated, the scholar found common elements in both languages, suggesting similar mental mechanisms resting on a shared deeper structure. Chinese proverbs stereotypically depicting men and women were researched by Lee (2015) who discovered gender discrimination and male-‘firstness’ represented in them. However, the scholar also reported biased subjective approach of some linguists who mainly ‘focused on the portrayal of women rather than men’ (Lee 2015:562) in Chinese proverbs analysis.

## 2. Functions of Proverbs

This section will focus on the functions of proverbs, in particular on their nature and core aims of their use. Although there is no uniformity on the number of functions of proverbs, as well as their priority, scholars generally distinguish and agree on the following key functions: communicative, nominative, cognitive, cumulative, and modelling. A proverb is typically characterised by more than one function: however, and depending on the context in which it is used, there is always one that dominates. *Communicative* function of proverbs consists in message transmission in the communication process. That is, proverbs enclose information that is used if it fits the main communicative aim of the conversation.

The *cognitive* function of proverbs is a hotly debated subject. The question is whether ‘proverbs should be accounted for by mental theories of proverbs comprehension or they should be considered a social phenomenon that can only be studied within its cultural matrix’ (Buljan et al. 2013:63). Being wrapped in the ‘cultural envelope’ (Ibidem.), proverbs generate social meanings and regulate social behaviour of an individual in the society and on a large scale determine social consciousness of the nation that uses them. As Saussure observed, ‘the culture of a nation exerts an influence on its language, and the language, on the other hand, is largely responsible for the nation’ (Saussure 1959:20). Proverbs embrace cultural information, the spiritual world of a nation, its wisdom and world perception. They retain those social beliefs and values that have already disappeared with time and are carriers of social attitudes. This is the *cumulative* function of proverbs.

Further, among different functions of proverbs, the *regulative* one is essential – it supervises people’s daily actions and it evaluated them either positively

or negatively. Proverbs comprise social and cultural collective beliefs about the norms of gender qualities, attributes, roles, behaviour and their deviations. They vividly express the implications of gender stereotypes encrypted in languages and intended to directly influenced interlocutors. In other words, proverbs involve ‘coordinating language with ways of acting, interacting, valuing, believing, feeling, and with bodies, clothes, non-linguistic symbols, objects, tools, etc.’ (Gee 2000:25).

### 3. Objective of the Study

Based on the premise that proverbs describe and regulate roles of women in the community during their socialisation process, this paper focuses on the female positive and negative attributes reflected in Chinese proverbs and their implications on women’s behaviour within the social settings.

### 4. Research Questions

- a. what inner and outer attributes of women are reflected through the Chinese proverbs and their positive/negative connotations
- b. what images and symbols are used in the Chinese proverbs to express female inner and outer attributes

### 5. Data

In pursuing the objective of the study, data comprising Chinese proverbs relating to female inner and outer attributes were collected from a range of dictionaries, published books and online sources (see: Literature Sources). They are presented thematically based on their meanings. By the end, over 1,000 Chinese proverbs were examined and 58 selected as pertinent for the analysis of female attributes within the Chinese cultural context.

### 6. Theoretical Framework

In this study, the Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a theoretical framework is considered to be of particular significance. The choice of the approach is based on several factors. For a start, CDA conducts ‘discourse analysis with attitude’ (van Dijk 2001:96) that is, it allows ‘better understanding and critique of social

inequality, based on gender, ethnicity, class, origin, religion, language, sexual orientation and other criteria that define differences between people' (van Dijk 1997:22–23). Thus, applied to proverbs that express female attributes, CDA may uncover specificities and inequalities peculiar for social relationships, especially towards women in such gendered society as Chinese.

Next, the hallmark of CDA is that it can be combined with other approaches and disciplines related both to linguistics and social studies (van Dijk 2001). Thus, due to its multidisciplinary nature, CDA exploits three fundamental stages in this framework: description, interpretation, and explanation (Fairclough 2010:10–11).

In order to ascertain social beliefs, knowledge, and ethnic and gender prejudices towards women and womanhood in Chinese society represented in proverbs, CDA is combined with a *socio-cognitive approach*: this allows the analysis of proverbs in a broader, social framework and explore 'the relationship between discourse and the cognition of individuals' (van Dijk 1998). Further, group cognition serves as a 'collective memory bank' (Sharifian 2015:476), as if its members thought within a single consensual framework. Proverbs are believed to express the deeper meaning of life, a repository of ethno-cultural information expressing everything that belongs to the people as a kind of historical and anthropological record. Thus, in order to decode cultural elements within discourse referred to a network of shared values, norms, and beliefs within a given community (Bartal 2000; Gavriely-Nuri 2010 cited in Waugh et al. 2016:108), Gavriely-Nuri (2010) developed a *cultural approach to critical discourse analysis* (CCDA). This approach is sensitive to the uniqueness of proverbs in terms of the cultural information they contain. As Nida concurs, 'every language form we use has meanings, carries meanings that are not in the same sense because it is associated with culture and culture is more extensive than language' (Nida 1998). Furthermore, Brown states that 'a language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of either language or culture' (Brown 1994).

## 7. Description of Findings

All the proverbs that express female attributes are divided into two main groups – inner and outer attributes which are further subdivided into smaller groups that present proverbs thematically based on their meaning. The group of inner attributes comprises Chinese proverbs that express *obedience/submission*, *chastity*, *ignorance*, *modesty*, *industriousness*, *easy disposition*, *idleness*, *jealousy*, *talkativeness* and *anger* whilst the group of outer attributes includes *beauty*. At the same time, the attributes can be positively and/or negatively marked and mirror the attitude of the Chinese society towards the mentioned female characteristics.

In order to gain a better understanding of the meanings and origin of the selected proverbs, and if necessary decode hidden information, it is essential to employ cultural, ethnographical, and historical sources of the Chinese language. Given that the focus of this work is not making general comments on proverbs but seeking to understand how they shape social gender models, this source-analysis approach may provide valuable clues to better address the key questions of this research.

## 7.1. Positive Inner Attributes

### 7.1.1. Obedience / Submission

In the Chinese culture, obedience is considered a positively-marked attribute of a woman and the selected proverbs in this sub-group elaborate the idea of model behaviour a Chinese woman has to follow:

- (1) 嫁雞隨雞 嫁狗隨狗 (*jià jī suí jī, jià gǒu suí gǒu*) ‘Married to chicken follow chicken, married to dog follow dog’ (Jiao et al. 2014:148);
- (2) 夫以義為良 婦以順為正 (*fū zhǐ yǐ wéi liáng; fù yǐ shùn wéi zhèng*) ‘In the husband fidelity is the thing that’s good; in the wife obedience is the thing that’s proper’ (Scar. 1875:372);
- (3) 夫唱婦隨 (*fū chàng fū suí*) ‘Husband sings and wife follows / accompanies’ (Scar. 1875:373);
- (4) 在家由父 出嫁從夫 (*tsài chiā yú fù; chū chià tsung fū*) ‘Unmarried, a woman obeys her father; married, her husband’ (Scar. 1875:242);
- (5) 夫妻無隔夜之仇 (*fū nǚ fù chīn tiēn; chī nǚ fū chīn nǚ*) ‘Husbands are as Heaven to their wives; wives are the slaves of their husbands’ (Scar. 1875:377).

Historically, Chinese society has been strongly influenced by beliefs and values drawn from Confucianism. It became the official government’s state philosophy during the Han dynasty (206 BCE – 220 CE), and in particular during the time of Emperor Wu (141 – 87 BCE). Confucianism is based on the concept of relationship – 禮 as an ethical system rather than a religion (*lǐ*). *Lǐ* were rules and norms of social behaviour that dictate the manner in which Chinese people position themselves within a hierarchical society and perform their roles accordingly. As stated in the philosophical tradition of Confucianism, there are ‘five human relationships’: sovereign and subject, father and son, elder and younger brother, friend and friend, and husband and wife. The last one is the first in origin and is of crucial importance, especially for a woman: 人倫有五夫婦為先。大禮三千婚姻最重 (*jén lún yǔ wǔ fū fù wéi hsien; tà lǐsān chīen hūn yīn tsuì chùng*) ‘There are

Five Relations, but that of husband and wife stands first; there are three thousand great Rites, but that of marriage is most important' (Scar. 1875:372).

According to Confucius teaching, in order to maintain a strict social order, women should be subordinate to men at every level of social and family hierarchy: '*It is the law of nature that woman should be held under the dominance of man.*' Typically, the latter can be described as 'patriarchal, patrilineal and patrilocal,' that is officially dominated by men (Stacey 1983:31).

Being a good woman in the Chinese feudal society could be hard given the strict standards of being 'good'. One of the basic moral principles for women in a family life in Confucianism is called 三从 (*sān cóng*) and rendered as 'three obediences'. The concept of the three obligations states that 'The woman follows (and obeys) the man; in her youth, she follows her father and elder brother; when married, she follows her husband; when her husband is dead, she follows her son (在家從父母 出嫁從丈夫 夫亡從子 (*zài jiā cóng fù mǔ chū jià cóng zhàng fū fū wáng cóng zǐ*)) (Adler 2006). Even the Chinese character 女 (*nǚ* 'woman') traditionally depicts an outline of a woman kneeling on the floor, showing her obedience to a man (ShaoLan 2014:46). The ideal relationship between husband and wife is based on the instant respect represented in the proverb 舉案齊眉 (*jǔ àn qí méi*) 'holding the tray up to the eyebrows.' The proverb originated in the belief that in order to demonstrate appreciation for husband, a wife should serve him food with her head bowed and holding the tray up to her eyebrows. With such gender-based inequality, Chinese mirror the inferiority of women in their marriage life in the proverbial wisdom (1), (2), (3).

During their lifetime, Chinese women were always economically dependent on two families – the natal one and marital home although they never completely belonged to either of them. As a result, female submissive behaviour was cultivated in the Chinese families since childhood and girls were prepared for such long-adopted social norm of transferring to the husband's family. It is proverbially represented in (4).

Some proverbs portray men as owners of their wives and the right to display brutal attitude towards them – (5). In the light of this, gender inequality became a customary part of a family daily life. Domestic violence was considered necessary to forestall problems and ensure tranquillity. It was a means to ensure a woman's subordination and obedience to her husband:

強婆娘只怕打 (*chiàng pó niáng zhǐ pà dǎ*) 'nothing will brighten a wilful wife but a beating' (Scar. 1875:377);

女人如手推車 若三日不打 則不能用 (*nǚ rén rú shǒu tuī chē, ruò sān rì bù dǎ zé bù néng yòng*) 'Women are like wheelbarrows; if not beaten for three days they cannot be used' (Scar. 1875:377).

## 7.1.2. Vertude - General

This group embraces the following proverbs that describe Chinese society's attitude to female and her general virtuosity:

- (8) 女德無極.婦怨無終 (*nǚ dé wú jí; fù yuàn wú zhōng*) 'A maid's virtue is unlimited; a wife's resentment without end' (Scar. 1875:378);
- (9) 忠臣不事二君.貞婦不事二夫 (*chūng chén pù shì èrh chūn; chēn fù pù shì èrh fū*) 'A loyal minister will serve but one Prince; a virtuous woman but one husband' (Scar. 1875:378);
- (10) 家有賢妻.男人不遭橫事 (*chīa yǔ hsiēn chī, nán jén pù tsāo hùn shìh*) 'A virtuous wife saves her husband from evil ways' (Scar. 1875:377);
- (11) 娶媳求淑女.勿討厚奩 (*chǔ hsi chíu shú nǚ, wù tǎo hòu lián*) 'In marrying a son seek a virtuous maiden, and scheme not for a rich dowry' (Scar. 1875:370);
- (12) 賢婦令夫貴.惡婦令夫賤 (*hsiēn fū ling fū kuài, ò fū ling fū chièn*) 'A virtuous wife causes her husband to be honoured; a bad one brings him to shame' (Scar. 1875:377);
- (13) 癡漢怕老婆.賢女敬丈夫 (*chīh hàn pà lǎo pó; hsiēn nǚ ching chàng fū*) 'The fool fears his old woman; but the virtuous wife reverences her husband' (Scar. 1875:374);
- (14) 娶妻不在美貌.賢德便好 (*chǔ chī pù tsài yén sè, hsiēn té pièn hǎo*) 'The excellence of a wife consists not in her beauty, but in her virtue' (Scar. 1875:63).

According to Confucian beliefs, it is essential for a girl to be virtuous and enjoy a good reputation: failing would lead to 'shame' and social disgrace. Chinese proverbially praise virtuous women stating they are a serious moral support to husbands – (8), (9), (10), (11), (12), (13), (14). Chastity is one of the main criterions in choosing a bride. That is, initially, a man should care about his bride's and/or wife's virtue instead of her appearance. It is noteworthy that in Chinese culture the emphasis on pre-marital abstinence and virginity also results in a continuous sex segregation, which is one of the characteristics of traditional Chinese gender culture rooted in the concept of chastity. Proverbially it is expressed in

- (15) 冰清玉潔 (*bīng qīng yù jié*) 'As clean as ice and as pure as jade' meaning 'pure and noble, being a virgin' (DOCCIE 2010:159).

By comparing a girl's chastity to jade, the proverb stresses its preciousness since in Chinese culture jade is a highly treasured gem. It represents goodness and physical attractiveness and is another symbol of beauty.



If a girl violated the rule and lost her virginity before marriage she was strongly condemned by the society and given offensive, pejorative names (e.g. 破鞋 (*pò xié*) ‘broken shoe,’ that is a ‘loose woman’) (Mair 2012).

### 7.1.3. Vertude – Aspirational

This sub-group incorporates proverbs expressing female positive attributes that women in Chinese society should aspire to and model their lives accordingly. Moreover, as it is clearly depicted in the enduring proverbial wisdom, Chinese set certain standards as guidance for a man and his family in choosing suitable brides. These criteria are known as 四德 (*sì dé*) or ‘Four Virtues’ that consist of 婦德 (*fū dé*) ‘morality’, 婦言 (*fū yán*) ‘proper speech’, 婦容 (*fū róng*) ‘modest manner/appearance’, and 婦功 (*fū gōng*) ‘diligent work.’ It is a formed moral code of great value which is significant and widely recognised even nowadays:

- (16) 婦德者 不必才名絕異 (*fū dé zhě pù pì cái míng chuēh ì*)  
 婦容者 不必顏色美麗 (*fū yóng zhě pù pì yán sè měi lì*)  
 婦言者 不必利口辨詞 (*fū yán zhě pù pì lì kǒu biàn cí*)  
 婦工者 不必技巧過人 (*fū kōng zhě pù pì qì jiǎo guò rén*)

‘A woman’s virtues need not to be of the famous or uncommon kind; her face need not very beautiful; her conversation need not be very eloquent; and her work need not be very exquisite or surpassing’ (Scar. 1875:244).

Modesty and easy-going personality were highly prioritised among attributes young ladies should be equipped as in:

- (17) 窈窕淑女君子好逑 (*yǎo tiǎo shū nǚ, jūn zǐ hào qiú*) ‘Modest, retiring young ladies are sorted by gentlemen’ (Chen 1981:520);  
 (18) 下氣小心纔是婦女 (*xià qì xiǎo xīn cái shì fù nǚ*) ‘Good tempered and careful – she’s a good wife indeed’ (Scar. 1875:378).

In the patriarchal Chinese society, for centuries ignorance was considered a woman’s virtue and was a positive attribute:

- (19) 女子無才便是德 (*nǚ zǐ wú cái biàn shì dé*) ‘Ignorance is a woman’s virtue’ (DOCCIE 2010:66).

Such positive public perception of ignorant females is explained by different societal expectations and family roles of husband and a wife. As confirmation to this, ‘men outside, women inside’ 男主外.女內 (*nán zhǔ wài nǚ rǔ nèi*) is a relationship model generally widely accepted in China which resulted in gender stereotypes. The deep-seated belief persisted that the proper place for a woman was at home, where she was largely responsible for the upbringing and education



of children and doing household chores: 侍奉箕帚 (*shì fèng jī zhǒu*) ‘to perform wifely duties (cooking and cleaning)’. According to Yu and Xie (2012) report, family labour division is based on gender stereotyping with the lion’s share falling on the shoulders of the wife rather than a husband (Xie 2013).

## 7.2. Negative Inner Attributes

This sub-group includes proverbs that describe negative female attributes according to the Chinese societal and cultural convictions. Generally, a woman’s greatest challenge is an elementary one: surviving in a family. In her struggle for survival and achieving dominance in a hierarchical Chinese family, a woman used available feminine negative ‘attributes’ such as jealousy and anger, to assert her authority. However, a woman had to be careful in using these so-called ‘weapons’ giving that socially inappropriate behaviour might be interpreted as possessing evil powers and bringing bad luck to the family. The unwanted result could be divorce and utter shame for the woman. Proverbially, it is stated that negative features are peculiar for most women:

- (20) 十個婦人九個妒 (*shí kè fù rén chǔ kè tū*) ‘Nine women in ten are jealous’ (Scar. 1875:241).

There is a unique proverb in Cantonese to express the utmost level of jealousy experienced by a woman:

- (21) 呷醋 (*haap3 cou3*) ‘Sip vinegar’ (DOCCIE 2010:116).

It is said that in the Tang Dynasty, the emperor sent his powerful prime minister a beautiful girl to be his concubine. Although polygyny was an accepted practice in ancient China, his jealous wife would rather drink poison than accept another woman in her marriage. The emperor, touched by her courage and love, secretly filled a vial with vinegar and bade her to drink. After gulping down the liquid and surviving, the story spread and people began using the term 吃醋 (*chī cù*) to refer to someone jealous of their lover.

In Chinese proverbs, laziness, talkativeness and anger are other clichéd negative attributes of femininity, which are strongly disliked:

- (22) 懶婆娘做事一担挑 (*lǎn pó niàng zǎo shì yī dān tiāo*) ‘Lazy women will try to carry everything at once’ (Scar. 1875:242)  
 (23) 懶女人盼新年 (*lǎn nǚ rén pàn xīn nián*) ‘Lazy woman looks forward to the New Year’ (DOCCIE 2010:153)

Violent-tempered, angry women were represented through the animalistic code and associated with venomous, vicious, and carnivorous creatures (snake, tigress, fighting cock):

- (24) 青竹蛇兒口 黃蜂尾上針.兩般不算毒 最毒婦人心 (*chīng chú shé ér kǒu, huáng fēng wěi shàng chēn. liǎng pān pù suàn dú, zuì dú fù rén xīn*)  
‘There is no such poison in the green snake’s mouth or the hornet’s sting, as in a woman’s heart’ (Scar. 1875:243);
- (25) 老虎𧈧 (*lou5 fu2 naa2*) lit. ‘A tigress; one’s shrewish wife’ (Cantonese) (DOCCIE 2010:67);
- (26) 𧈧/撐雞 (*caang4 gail*) lit. ‘Be like a fighting cock; be shrewish’ (Cantonese) (DOCCIE 2010:159);
- (27) 𧈧/撐雞妹 (*caang4 gail mui1*) lit. ‘A girl like a fighting cock; a girl of passionate disposition and violent temper’ (Cantonese) (DOCCIE 2010:159);
- (28) 惡掙掙 (*ok3 tan4 tan4*) ‘Look ferocious’ (Cantonese) (DOCCIE 2010:194).

### 7.3. Outer attributes

As for the group of female outer attributes expressed in Chinese proverbs, there is just *beauty* that is prioritised for a woman, although declined only through a few specific details, such as complexion and poise (grace). It signifies that inner qualities are of higher importance for a woman in the Chinese society.

#### 7.3.1. Beauty

As it was mentioned earlier, marriages in Chinese families were always organised by parents based on the social status and prosperity of the candidates and, obviously, no feelings of love or sympathy were taken into consideration. Nevertheless, if the girl was physically attractive she had a chance to marry into money, get status in the social hierarchy and lead a relatively ‘easier’ life. Thus, beautiful girls were mostly preferred by the potential ‘wealthy’ husbands.

Taking into consideration the concept of beauty and its criteria that exists in the social consciousness of the Chinese proverbs analysed in this work, we conclude that beauty is one of the fundamental characteristics of a woman, her key outer attribute. It takes her life to a new level and sometimes assigns a new meaning. Beauty is considered to be generally acceptable and it can be equally appreciated by the representatives of various age categories as well as national, racial and ideological groups. One of the main features of beauty is that it can be detected in any of the temporal and spatial dimensions, in different historical and social conditions.

In ancient China, there were four women who left a large footprint in the long course of history. One of them was Xi Shi 西施 (497 BC) – a legendary beauty of ancient China whose attractiveness was said to be so outstanding that when she leaned over a balcony to look at the fish in the pond – ... the fish would be so dazzled that they forgot to swim and sank away from the surface, thus winning her the title of ‘the one who sinks the fishes’: 沉魚 (*chén yú*), means ‘sank fish’.<sup>1</sup> It is exemplified by a Chinese proverb used to compliment someone’s beauty:

- (29) 沉魚落雁 (*chén yú luò yàn*), which literally means ‘fish sink and goose alights’ (TDPC 2014).

It is indeed noteworthy that feminine beauty in the Chinese linguistic community is portrayed as a powerful and mighty attribute. Proverbially, the stunning beauty of a woman is endowed with a destructive force that is capable of capturing cities and states:

- (30) 一笑傾人城.再笑傾人國 (*yī hsiào chūn zhén chéng; tsài hsiào chūn zhén kóu*) ‘With one smile she overthrows a city; with another, a kingdom’ (Scar. 1875:244–245);  
 (31) 傾國傾城 (*qīng guó qīng chéng*) (about an exceedingly beautiful woman) ‘Lovely enough to cause the fall of a state and the collapse of a city’ (Jiao et al. 2011:104).

However, it is interesting to note that the Chinese judged a girl’s physical attributes using very stringent parameters before calling her a beauty:

- (32) 品頭論足 (*pǐn tóu lùn zú*) ‘Criticise head and feet’ means ‘make critical remarks about a woman’ physical appearance trying to find fault’ (Jiao et al. 2011:97).

Eventually, feminine beauty is fleeting and short-lived, as evidenced by the following proverbs – peculiar warnings for young beauties that are verbalised in the Chinese language:

- (33) 紅顏易老 (*hóng yán yì lǎo*) ‘Pretty face easily turns old’ (Chen 1981:160).

Indeed, a proverb reveals a negative attitude towards women who are no longer young, but who are still trying to attract the opposite sex by comparing them to Lady Xu, a famous concubine of Emperor Yuan of the Liang Dynasty:

<sup>1</sup> 西施 (Xi Shi) – A Chinese beauty’s legend, 18 July 2012. Retrieved from: <http://lang-8.com/276806/journals/1584822>.

- (34) 半老徐娘 (*bàn lǎo xú niáng*) ‘Flirtations of a middle-aged woman who still remains traces of her erstwhile beauty’ (Jiao et al. 2011:130).

It is known that every culture defines physical attractiveness using specific aesthetic standards. Here we consider some of them in Chinese culture and highlight their language representations.

According to tradition, there are several types of beauty. The Chinese use the proverb 燕瘦環肥 (*yàn shòu huán féi*), which means ‘*Yáng Yùhuán* was plump while *Zhào Feiyàn* was skinny’, to describe the range in terms of physical size. The idiom mentions Empress Xiaocheng (孝成皇后), Emperor Cheng’s empress during the Han Dynasty who was often compared and contrasted with Yang Guifei, the beautiful concubine of Emperor Xuanzong of Tang and one of the four Chinese beauties, because she was known for her slender build while Yang was known for her full build. Despite the difference in their physique, they both were considered enticing. That is, the proverb means that every beautiful woman is attractive in her own way.<sup>2</sup>

It is worth mentioning that in ancient times, a woman’s stoutness showed the well-being and social status of her family. It meant she did not do any heavy manual job, could afford better and tastier food and, respectively, was considered attractive and was called

- (35) 秀色可餐 (*xiù sè kě cān*) ‘Beauty that is the feast of the eye’ (Jiao et al. 2011:130).

Indeed, two other Chinese beauties, namely Xi Shi 西施 and Yang Guifei 楊玉環, were both weighty and ample. However, slim and graceful women were also believed to be beautiful:

- (36) 婷婷玉立 (*tíng tíng yù lì*) ‘slim and graceful’ (Jiao et al. 2011:117).

Another Chinese proverb relates to different beauty criteria, so that a fair-complexioned, rich, and pretty single female in her twenties or thirties is extolled as

- (37) 白富美 (*bái fù měi*) lit. ‘white [not ethnically] – wealthy – beautiful’ (DOCCIE 2010:201).

Many Chinese people believe the white skin colour makes a woman look more attractive and beautiful. This idea is expressed in an ancient Chinese saying:

<sup>2</sup> English translation for “環肥燕瘦”. Retrieved from: <http://en.ichacha.net/chinese-english/%E7%8E%AF%E8%82%A5%E7%87%95%E7%98%A6>.

(38) 一白遮百醜 (*yī bái zhē bǎi chǒu*) which in the English equivalent is *A white complexion is powerful enough to hide seven faults* (faults in your body type, face, demeanour and many others).<sup>3</sup> It means no matter what flaws your appearance has, but if your skin is of white colour – you are a beauty.

Delineating attractive woman's appearance Chinese tend to appeal to the auspicious symbols in their culture. For instance, Chinese often compare physically attractive and elegantly dressed women to flowers and actualise the phytonimic images of hibiscus and lotus:

- (39) 芙蓉(蓮花)出水 (*fú róng (lián huā) chū shuǐ*) 'Hibiscus (lotus) rises out of water' (Jiao et al. 2011:47);  
 (40) 出水芙蓉 (*chū shuǐ fú róng*) 'As a lotus flower breaking the surface' talking about a young lady's face that is surpassingly beautiful (TDPC 2014).

In Chinese culture the hibiscus symbolises glory, fame, splendour and lotus-flower is a sacred Buddhist symbol of the evolution. In Chinese culture, lotus symbolises ultimate purity and perfection because it rises untainted and beautiful from the mud (Doré 1918).

Traditionally, the Chinese have often associated the Moon with female beauty deriving their inspiration from the lunar natural cycle. It is till today one of the most prominent and potent symbols amongst the huge body of Chinese characters. The Moon is associated thus with gentleness and brightness:

- (41) 纖纖月 (*qiān qiān yuè*) 'as graceful as the new moon' (Jiao et al. 2011:231);  
 (42) 花容月貌 (*huā róng yuè mào*) lit. 'Countenance of a flower, face like the moon' (TDPC 2014).

In some Chinese proverbs, the semantics of beauty is greatly hyperbolised to show its exclusivity, mighty impact and impossibility to resist:

- (43) 閉月羞花 (*bì yuè xiū huā*) lit. 'Hiding the moon, shaming the flowers' meaning fig. 'female beauty exceeding even that of the natural world' (TDPC 2014);  
 (44) 國色天香 (*guó sè tiān xiāng*) lit. 'National grace, divine fragrance' (TDPC 2014);

<sup>3</sup> Cultural Semantic and "Illusory Correspondence", 2014, Donghua University. Retrieved from: [http://www.zhuanjilunwen.com/pass/ywxz\\_1324\\_5453.html](http://www.zhuanjilunwen.com/pass/ywxz_1324_5453.html).

- (45) 絕代佳人 (*jué dài jiā rén*) lit. 'Beauty unmatched in her generation' (TDPC 2014);
- (46) 絕世佳人 (*jué shì jiā rén*) lit. 'A woman of unmatched beauty.' (TDPC 2014);
- (47) 暈得一陣 (*wan4 dak1 jat1 zan6*) lit. 'Faint away for a while' and 'be intoxicated by one's beauty' (Cantonese) (DOCCIE 2010:218);
- (48) 英雄難過美人關 (*yīngxióng nán guò měirén guān*) lit. 'Hero-difficult-go through-beautiful-person-pass' meaning that no man can resist the charms of a beautiful woman (Jiao et al. 2014:51).

In the analysed Chinese proverbs beauty is not only positively but also negatively marked. It is interesting to note that being beautiful does not necessarily lead to a happy and easy life:

- (49) 紅顏薄命 (*hóng yán bó mìng*) lit. 'beautiful women suffer unhappy fates' (TDPC 2014);
- (50) 紅顏女子多薄命. 聰明子弟少容顏 (*hóng yán nǚ zǐ tō pó mìng, tsūng míng zǐ tì shǎo yúng yén*) 'Fair ladies are very unlucky, and clever young men have little beauty' (Scar. 1875:242).

Indeed, a beautiful woman in the house may be a source of problems (according to proverbs, of course) for her husband and other family members, generating negative feelings such as jealousy and envy:

- (51) 好女于室. 醜女之仇 (*hǎo nǚ yú shì, chǒu nǚ chīh chóu*) 'A good-looking woman in a house, is the foe of all the plain ones' (Scar. 1875:244).

Moreover, there is an additional 'danger' that she could be associated with misfortune and evil. Proverbs strongly warn men against marrying attractive girls:

- (52) 醜婦拙奴無價之寶 (*chǒu fū chùeh nǚ wú chīa chīh pǎo*) 'Ugly wives and stupid maids are priceless treasures' (Scar. 1875:377);
- (53) 妻妾切忌豔妝 (*chī chīeh chīeh chī yèn chuāng*) 'Do not marry wives or concubines who are gorgeously fine' (Scar. 1875:377);
- (54) 不要觀音面. 只要夫星現 (*pù yào guān yīn miàn; chīh yào fū hsiēng*) 'Long not for the goddess' beauty divine; long that the star of your husband may shine' (Scar. 1875:370);
- (55) 娶妻娶德. 娶妾娶色 (*chǔ chī chǔ dé; chǔ chīeh chǔ sè*) 'For virtue a woman our wife we make; for her beauty we a concubine take' (Scar. 1875:370).

At the same time, clearly depicted in the proverbial wisdom, if a man is in love the appearance of his beloved appears flawless, the most attractive and elegant to him. Such is claimed in these Cantonese proverbs:

- (56) 各花入各眼 (*gok3 faa1 lok6 gok3 ngaan5*) ‘Every flower falls to every man’s eye’ (DOCCIE 2010:85);  
 (57) 冤豬頭都有盟鼻菩薩 (*jyyn1 zyul tau4 dou1 jau5 mang4 bei6 pou4 saat3*) ‘A foul pig’s head would be appreciated by the god with bad nose’ (DOCCIE 2010:168).

In some cases, a lover would compare his woman to the apex of beauty herself, Xi Shi:

- (58) 情人眼裏出西施 (*qíng rén yǎn lǐ chū xī shī*) lit. ‘In the lover’s eye, there is Xi Shi’ (Chen 1981:327; Jiao et al. 2014:16).

## 8. Discussion

Female attributes expressed in the Chinese proverbs are classified in Table 1. They are divided into two groups – *inner* attributes and *outer* attributes. We find that the number of the inner female attributes represented in proverbs greatly outweigh those based on outer attributes. Further, inner female attributes are clearly either positively or negatively marked, offering a clear moral and behavioural guide for women within the Chinese society. The positive ‘inner attributes’ include *obedience/submission*, *virtuousness*, *chastity*, *ignorance*, *modesty*, *industriousness* and *easy disposition* whilst negative female attributes are *jealousy*, *envy*, *anger*, *talkativeness* and *idleness*.

It was observed that in the Chinese proverbs, negative female attributes like anger and hot temper are represented through animalistic images where women, for instance, are compared to venomous, vicious and carnivorous creatures (snake, tigress, fighting cock, etc.).

In regards to the ‘outer attributes’ group, it is important for a woman to possess an attractive physical appearance, although the detailed attributes are rarely mentioned, for instance the relative size of her feet (relevant in ancient Japanese culture for instance). Indeed, ‘beauty’ is a concept seldomly addressed in detail but often elevated to an idealistic perfection and compared to beautiful inanimate objects (flowers, jade, the Moon, etc.). Body size does not appear to characterise the aesthetic rating of a woman (both ‘thin’ and ‘large’ are regarded as attractive), except for the more common association of ‘grace’ and elegance with a slender figure.

An unblemished skin of pale complexion is highly regarded since it both embodies ‘purity’ and chastity (as per inner attributes) but it also implies limited



time exposure to the elements, to general manual work carried out outdoors, in particular farming (thus, an indicator of higher society status).

However, unlike much of the European Romantic tradition, beauty is considered as a potential obstacle towards a blessed marital life, generating envy in the household from other female members and potentially attracting unwelcome attention from other males outside. Further, a beautiful wife would not probably be as industrious and submissive as a less self-assured female. Therefore, some proverbs, with more than a hint of malice and humour, 'advise' men to seek beauty and grace outside the wedlock, from concubines and lovers.

## 9. Conclusions

Proverbs are known to carry a cultural and social legacy which is handed down from generation to generation in virtue to the useful function they perform in encapsulating complex concepts relating to everyday life concisely and, often, humorously. They also give even obnoxious or controversial ideas an aura of ancient wisdom and authority.

An investigation of proverbs that express female attributes in the Chinese society revealing social beliefs, ethnic and gender prejudice towards women, as well as accumulated ethno-cultural information, was carried out through a combination of critical discourse analysis and socio-cognitive approaches.

The picture that emerges from the analysis of these traditional Chinese proverbs is symptomatic of strict patriarchal civilisations common all over the world, but with an 'aesthetic twist' (e.g., skin tone, body size). A woman is either 1) an idealised object of beauty, akin to natural wonders, and so powerful and dangerous with her beauty to bring down whole kingdoms on her wake, or 2) a humble (wedded) and unintelligent servant who should be seen but not heard whilst carrying out loyal duties towards her (male) master and his direct family.

Further studies should look at the evolution and relevance of some of these proverbs in modern Chinese culture, and if they still apply to a modern society where women are quickly catching up with gender equality, both politically (21.3% of the National People's Congress of China, although still only 16.6% in the Standing Committee – NPCC, Zheng, Guo & Zhao 2009:10) and in the society at large (55% of all entrepreneurs in China are female,<sup>4</sup> though no CEOs of the largest companies).<sup>5</sup>

<sup>4</sup> Retrieved from: [http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/special/Beijing\\_world\\_conference\\_on\\_women/1509/2321-1.htm](http://www.womenofchina.cn/womenofchina/html1/special/Beijing_world_conference_on_women/1509/2321-1.htm).

<sup>5</sup> <http://fortune.com/2015/07/22/china-global-500-government-owned/>.

Table 1: Female attributes as expressed in Chinese proverbs

Woman			
inner attributes		outer attributes	
positive	negative	positive	negative
obedience/submission	jealousy	body size	
virtuousness	envy	grace	
chastity	anger	pale completion	
ignorance	talkativeness		‘too attractive’
modesty	idleness		
industriousness	hot temper		
easy disposition			

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