

## Chinese immigrants and their host cultures through idiomatic perspective

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**Abstract.** It has become axiomatic today that the growth of Chinese population presents both: hopes for a better future with an unprecedented workforce supply and a number of new challenges for the countries, where Chinese immigrants are more and more frequent. In my research I make an attempt to demonstrate possible direction to identify points of similarities between Chinese culture and the rest of the world. Through the analysis of Chinese idioms and communicative formulae I specify common areas, which may be useful in intercultural translation between Chinese immigrants and reception countries. With the help of Leeds University Chinese language on-line corpus I calculated idiom indexes, which are suggestive of Chinese cultural variables. The research results have been processed into a database, marked with the Rospatent Certificate № 2013620397, dated March, 13 2013.

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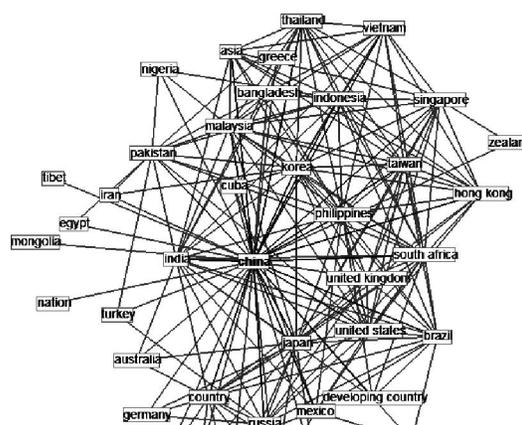
### Introduction

Modern world community is going through the stage of exponential growth of global mobility, economic growth and scientific progress, as well as international knowledge transfer. This unprecedented universal process produces challenging socio-cultural effects of migration and dictates an urgent need to develop efficient techniques of intercultural translation.

Chinese immigrants are abundant almost everywhere in the world. Very often host countries' residents react negatively or specifically one-sided to immigrants from China. Though prominent scholars of today suggest alternatives to such biased reactions: 'In the dynamic process of exchange between migrants and their host cultures, both parties are affected, as migrants do not simply assimilate (or fail to assimilate) into their new surroundings but also bring their cultural backgrounds as active contributions to the life of the host community. This process can be fruitful for both sides, but it is a complex and sensitive one in relation to communication and collective identification' [1].

Fig. 1 effectively demonstrates the intricate web of Chinese connections throughout the world. Though this is the result of top 20 retrievals of Serelex [2]; the list is incomplete and limitless.

The idea of my research is to introduce Chinese culture through idioms, which can prove that the world has more in common with China, than it is universally accepted. The results of the attempted analysis can increase the degree of Chinese immigrants' integration in host cultures.



**Figure 1. Serelex semantic proximity graph for the lexeme "China" [3]**

### Material and Methods

Many prominent Chinese scholars of today stress the importance of idioms in day-to-day socio-cultural interaction. "In Chinese lexical system Chinese idioms are a typical unit. As an individual type in the domain of idioms, most Chinese idioms have some unique qualities. One of the design features of most Chinese idioms on the dimension of form characteristics is the four-character form the Chinese lexicon provides an exact number of the characters in such a unit. According to the statistics given in Zhou [4], up to 95.57% entries in Dictionary of Chinese Idioms are four characters. The uniformity in form regulates to a large extent some other linguistic characteristics of Chinese idioms, specifically phonological and semantic distribution. Compatible with the rhythmical arrangement and prosodic features represented by the two-plus-two syllables, a great number of Chinese idioms consist

of double substructures, mostly parallel with each other [5]. Branded with a distinct national style, Chinese idioms mirror the esthetic pursuit of symmetry deeply embedded in oriental thinking” [6]. My primary concern is the idioms with ‘body’ components. Other idiom groups have been discussed in my previous research [7], [8].

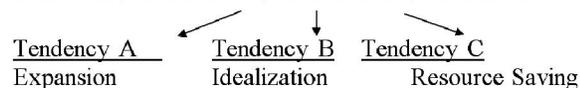
Now I proceed to the analyses of systematic features of idioms. As any information system the system of language can be described in terms of mathematical laws. I argue the axiom, supported by many scholars, that the system of language must be analyzed exclusively in linguistic terms. My central idea is that idioms, as part of psycholinguistic system as such, should be analyzed within the framework of the principle of information maximum. This idea firstly appeared in the works by Shannon [9] and later it was developed by Soviet and Russian scholars [10]: “the system tries to find such response  $y$ , which enables the maximum of useful information about the given stimuli  $x$ ”.

$$L(X, Y) = H(Y) - H(Y/X) - \beta R(X, Y) \rightarrow \max,$$

where  $H(Y)$  – the entropy of the system’s conditions,  $H(Y/X)$  – the entropy of the system’s mistakes and its reactions to outer stimuli,  $R(X, Y)$  – the average consumption of the system’s resource in  $Y$  condition within all  $X$  environmental conditions, and  $\beta$  – the indicator of the system’s deficit ( $\beta=0$ , when the system has an unlimited energy resource, and  $\beta=1$  when the system has a very big energy deficit)” [Ibid.].

According to the described above principle, all informational systems develop within 2 main strategies:

#### THE PRINCIPLE OF INFORMATION MAXIMUM



Expansion is realized through new varieties and numbers of environmental conditions, in which the analyzed system can exist. This tendency is sometimes called ‘searching behavior’ tendency  $H(Y)$ . While idealization is concentrated on the tendency to minimize the system’s mistakes entropy, idealization is sometimes known as the ‘conservative behavior’ tendency  $H(Y/X)$ . It is achieved mainly through the repetition of the best variants. Why certain idioms are more frequent than others? Due to idealization strategy some idioms are selected by native speakers and repeated more frequently. I consider idiom frequencies as indicators of idealization strategy. Corpus analysis provides reliable data to analyze these indicators. Resource

saving is realized in 2 possible ways: 1) minimizing the resource spent  $R(X, Y)$ ; 2) minimizing the indicator of the system’s deficit  $\beta$  by means of resource growth.

For the analysis of Chinese idioms’ frequencies I used Chinese corpus at Leeds University, designed by Sergei Sharov [11]. The Chinese corpus provides an opportunity to trace back two types of usage in modern Chinese: the Internet frequency and business Chinese frequency. Thus, each item is given with a double frequency index. The most frequent idioms are viewed as the best examples of culturally bound strategies, common to Chinese. The most frequent idioms are as perceived as the best examples of action strategies, which represent the action ‘self’ of the nation. I single out action stereotypes, which I view as a core component of social national standards. Operating with huge masses of information, stored in corporuses, provides a researcher with a reliable ground for making conclusions. The most frequent idioms are the ones, preferred by national society representatives.

#### Results and discussion

I proceed to the analysis of Chinese idioms, starting from a general overview and finishing with the idioms with the highest indexes. “Body” components are ubiquitous in Chinese idiomatic system. *Hún2 bù4 fù4 tǐ3* – ‘the body got far from the soul’ – to be scared to death [the Internet – 127; business – 18]. *Shēn1 jiào* – ‘to teach with one’s body’ – to show one’s personal example [the Internet – 142; business – 139]. *Shēn1 bài4 míng2 liè4* – ‘to throw down one’s body’ – to suffer a terrible downturn, misfortune [the Internet – 181; business – 157].

Idioms with the highest frequencies. *Tǐ3 wú2 wán2 fū1* – ‘the body all in hard bruises’ – to be severely bitten [the Internet – 249; business – 38]. *Fēn3 shēn1 suì4 gǔ3* – ‘to make the body a powder after hard work’ – 1) to die a terrible death; 2) to work hard [the Internet – 258; business – 94]. *Biàn4 tǐ3 lín2 shāng1* – ‘the whole body is in wounds, like fish’s body is in scales’ – [the Internet – 344; business – 101]. *Shēn1 shǒu3* – ‘the body and the hand’ – talents, skills [the Internet – 574; business – 509]. *Shēn1 bù4 yóu2 jǐ3* – ‘the body does not have any freedom’ – to act against one’s will [the Internet – 576; business – 218]. *Tǐ3 huì4* – ‘the body can’ – to understand, to comprehend [the Internet – 585; business – 530]. *Shēn1 xīn1* – ‘the body, the heart’ – materially and spiritually [the Internet – 587; business – 580]. *Tǐ3 yàn4* – ‘to study one’s body’ – to learn something from one’s experience [the Internet – 589; business – 579].

The scenario of suffering body, tormented by hard labor and work, is evident in Chinese idioms. Chinese are inclined to associate general well-being with the body well-being. On the contrary, bodies covered with wounds, are viewed as tragedy and bad luck. They use 'bodies' as cognitive mechanisms to get experience. On top of that bodies are perceived as material objects and are often opposed to spiritual world and values. Generally speaking, Chinese tend to exaggerate body manifestations. This mechanism of hyperbole is typical of Chinese cultural heritage.

Chinese 'body' idioms manifest religious backgrounds, which root from the philosophy of Confucius. Consider the following example. *Ān shēn lì míng* – 'a calm body, a stable life' – to be well-off [the Internet – 207; business – 41]. The concept of wealth and wealth distribution as a norm of general well-being shapes cultural existence of Chinese. Moreover, the energy of well-off people should be shared for the general benefit of the public. *Shēn1 tǐ3 lì4 xíng2* – 'the body moves, the energy moves' – to act with energy for the mutual benefit and delight [the Internet – 446; business – 591]. *Shēn1 qíáng2 lì4 zhuàng4* – 'the body is strong and the energy is abundant' – to be full of vigor and energy [the Internet – 258; business – 93]. 'In China, some scholars have argued that luxury spending is socially beneficial to equalise wealth, under the assumption that the total endowment of resources is a fixed amount. This argument is not only consistent with Confucianism but also might point to another lesser known side of Confucianism that the luxury spending of the rich can be regarded as a wealth-transferring mechanism. Furthermore, luxury spending was encouraged for purposes of enjoyment; it did not involve the consideration of power and protection. This is in sharp contrast to the extravagance of the European nobility; their intention was to maintain a hierarchical structure ... 'the rich's luxury spending is regarded as a wealth-transferring mechanism, which is 'just like gambling in a room, the money does not flow out but circulates among the players' [12].

Now I proceed to the analysis of information theory strategies. Expansion strategy of Chinese idioms is realized by involving in idiomatic coding more and more objects from day-to-day environment. 'Body' components are combined with 'heart', 'soul', 'wounds', 'fish'. Idealization of Chinese idioms is analyzed through frequency indexes, which I obtained using corpus data. As idealization is achieved through repetition of the most successful variants, which represent 'conservative behavior', I consider the most frequent idioms to be the performers of systematic growth stage of idiomatic system. Here I need to highlight the same strategies of expansion and idealization, common to other

languages, which include new objects of reality and tend to be subdivided into more frequent and less frequent. These common cognitive strategies stress similarities of different cultural backgrounds, both immigrant and host.

Resource saving strategy of Chinese idioms is achieved through a number of linguistic techniques: 1) the polyfunctional nature of Chinese characters; 2) frequent usage of 2-character idioms; 3) onomatopoeia; 4) parallel constructions; 5) repetitions; 6) borrowings from English, which enrich Chinese idiomatic system with new terms; 7) borrowings from the speeches and treatises of Chinese philosophers and politicians, which enable the enrichment of Chinese idiomatic system with new concepts. At this stage I need to point out that idioms from other languages follow the same resource saving strategy: they tend to borrow new concepts from other languages, namely English, and use public addresses of politicians and other people of international renown for quotations and set phrases.

The analysis has demonstrated that Chinese idioms are culturally readable and comprehensible for analysis. Moreover, they are similar to many idioms in host cultures, receiving Chinese immigrants. On top of that, Chinese idioms follow the same strategic patterns of expansion, idealization and resource saving, as well as other languages.

## Conclusion

My research has successfully demonstrated that in modern global community we have to develop our ability to recognize, reflect on, use and potentially modify other cultures, enriching our own at the same time. I proceed from the idea that idioms are social in nature. Thus, their careful analysis adds to the profound understanding of social life and economic environment, as A. Samuels rightfully put it 'disputes concerning human nature underlie many debates on economic theory' [13].

'The basis for all stereotyping is the differential perception of groups. Without such differentiation between groups, stereotyping cannot occur' [14]. J. Wilson stresses that stereotypes '... have been shown to be remarkably resilient to change' [15]. It takes quite an effort to see that despite all deeply embedded stereotypes of cultural divide, we have a lot to share and increase social engagement of immigrants to host cultures. Migrants' cultures have a strong potential to boost culture capital of reception countries. The heterogeneity of global society has a chance to be productive in case we offer all cultures to realize their best ideas, expressed in their idioms.

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