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Verbal Representation of Chinese Symbols in the Trilogy “The House of Earth” by Pearl Buck

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Abstract. This article dwells upon cultural peculiarities of Chinese symbols and their functioning in the trilogy “The House of Earth” by Pearl Buck. An attempt has been made to consider the reasons for specific cultural load of symbols. Cultural symbols have been divided into three main types: sense-forming, pervasive and limited situational symbols. Verbal representation of Chinese symbols has revealed wide network of all their types, they convey the main idea of the trilogy and constitute the most essential element of the trilogy’s architectonics.

Keywords: symbol, cultural symbol, sense-forming, pervasive, Chinese, cross-cultural.

Findings in psycholinguistics, sociolinguistics, ethno-linguistics, philosophy of the language and cognitive linguistics all contribute to the research of symbols. This paper aims at highlighting the role of Chinese cultural symbols as elements of the text that render cross-cultural idea in the novels by Pearl Buck.

Pearl Buck, a bilingual and bicultural American author, was brought up to know and understand two languages and two cultures – Chinese and American. The Nobel Prize winner in literature in 1938, she was marked for the unique nature of her fiction, which familiarized Western English-speaking world with the distant and unknown culture [5]. Her novels are of cross-cultural nature as they communicate the vision of Chinese, their culture, life and way of thinking to Western civilization through the English text. The addressee of Pearl Buck’s Chinese novels is the American reader.

Structurally the symbol is a multi-notional complex sign. The symbol is an important element of Pearl Buck’s fiction with the help of which she communicates her culture as well as the individual perception of Chinese world. Her trilogy is saturated with symbols, it provokes reader’s imagination and calls for special attention to symbolic image and the interpretation of its deep sense.

American scholars K. Burke and E. Cassirer claim that symbol-making is human natural activity and our condition, both describe a human being as an animal symbolicum defined by the ability to create and use symbols [4; 18]. The notion of symbol refers to the idea of putting things together in order to contrast them [6]. Another interpretation of a symbol runs that this is “something that represents something else by association, resemblance, or convention, especially a material object used to represent something invisible” [10].

The symbol consists of two “halves” which can be relatively divided into a symbolized and symbolizing. The symbolized is something concrete, which can be perceived. The symbolizing is an abstract idea, emotion, association, which is provoked by the

symbolized in the recipient’s mind. The symbol exists when these two halves meet in the consciousness. According to W. Y. Tindall a symbol is “something which stands for or suggests something else by reason of relationship, association, convention or accident but not by intentional resemblance” [17, 5].

In fiction symbols can be cultural, contextual, or personal. In the literary sense, a symbol, according to C. H. Holman “is a trope which combines a literal and sensuous quality with an abstract or suggestive aspect.” [9, 436]. The symbol is a word, place, character or object that means much more beyond its literal level [10].

Y. Lotman considers symbols to be culturally determined and the role of a symbol is that one of a so-called semiotic ‘condenser’ capable of keeping in a condensed form some extremely extensive and important texts [12, 249]. Symbols belong to nationally biased components of cultures that function in synchrony and diachrony, transmit condensed cultural experience of the nation through generations.

M. Eliade assigns “the mission of going beyond the limitations to the symbol and the role of integrating people into society, culture and the universe” [8, 21]. The symbol, according to D. Rasmussen, is somewhere in the center of any culture and “testifies to human imagination in its poetic, psychic, religious, social and political forms” [16, 1].

There are several classifications of symbols. C. Jung divides symbols into “natural” and “cultural” [11], whereas P. Newmark classifies them into universal, cultural and individual [14]. In both classifications symbols appear to be culturally determined notions. Culturally-based meaning of symbols becomes especially evident in cross-cultural communication when the addressee may face various problems with interpreting symbols of a different culture. Therefore, analysis of Chinese symbols as they appear in the novels written in English calls for ethnolinguistic approach to their nature.

W. Eberhard, an expert in the Chinese language and culture, states that mental processes and cognition of Chinese and people of Western civilization differ [7, 7]. Chinese words cannot be 'spelled'. All signs or characters of the Chinese language are essentially pictures, and 'appeal to the eye' whereas Westerners are 'people of the ear'. Until quite recently, Chinese had no separate word for a 'symbol', for which they used the word *xiang*, meaning 'picture' [7, 8]. According to C. Jung "a word or a picture is symbolic if it contains more than can be grasped at first glance" [11]. F. Lessing believes that the language of symbols is the second language of Chinese and it penetrates all spheres of communication. It possesses great potential in comparison with the ordinary language it is richer in nuances and shades of meaning [7].

Chinese are characterised in their speech and behaviour by extreme reticence which in Eberhard's view is explained by the way Chinese lived through centuries. European travellers and missionaries who visited China in the 16th-18th centuries described Chinese as 'old' people – tranquil and serene in their wisdom but 'lifeless' [7, 10]. What European travellers saw as 'lifelessness' was, in fact, extreme reticence as Chinese had always to bear in mind how others would react to any of their attitude, opinion or utterance. Therefore, Chinese formed the society which used symbolic forms and modes in communication to integrate the individual with public order and morality.

W. Eberhard has classified Chinese symbols into various thematic groups. The most important, central one in the whole taxonomy is the human being, the man in his bodily existence, social settings, with his artefacts, things that he makes. The human being is the cardinal being in this world for the Chinese. Animals, plants, even the heaven and the earth are subordinated to the man [7, 11].

In the realm of animate nature, animals are more important than plants. Domestic animals, however, do not figure so often as wild animals. Such natural phenomena as clouds, rain, dew, thunder are also in the symbolic system. Animals are seen in an ambivalent light, many of them threaten the man physically or have properties which he admires or envies.

Most of the symbols beloved of Chinese relate to things that can be observed with the eye, and these we may denote as 'formal symbols'. However, quite often, the Chinese word which stands for the concept it symbolizes is phonetically equivalent or, at least, close to the symbol itself (e.g. *fu* means good luck, and *fu* means the bat: so the bat symbolizes good fortune). In such cases we can speak of 'phonetic' or 'aural' symbols [13].

However, objects which are not symbols in themselves but which appear in symbolic metaphors should be taken into consideration while reading fiction, e.g. *the eye*. Chinese are fond of describing the eye in symbolic terms, and here are some examples from the novel "Sons" by Pearl Buck:

"You and I, after all, are nearer to each other than to these others, for the eyes of our hearts are finer and more delicate" [2, 156];

"And the man did indeed look like a leopard, for his eyes were not black as are the eyes of common mortals, but they were pale and yellow as amber" [2, 276];

"She has a fox's face and fox eyes and women like this are only half human and the other half fox, and they have a very magic wickedness" [2, 291];

"... with his inward eye he saw his son's son" [2, 291];

"He could scarcely keep his eyes from Sheng's golden, oval face and from his eyes, as apricot in shape as any maid's, and soft and black and dreaming" [1, 53].

Though there is no unified typology of symbols in linguistics, symbols in this paper are studied according to the following distinctions: 1) archetypal, 2) cultural stereotype and 3) author's individual symbols. Considering the role of symbols in the architectonics of prose texts we distinguish sense-forming symbols (the ones that bear condensed senses and tend to build up meanings and reveal the hidden senses of the text), pervasive symbols (used more than once and bearing vivid cultural loads) and limited situational symbols (illustrative cultural symbolic images appearing in the text only once).

In terms of representation we distinguish cultural symbols of such types: 1) symbols of nature; 2) symbols of the human being (parts of body, artefacts, food) and 3) color symbols. All these types of symbols may also be sense-forming, pervasive and limited situational ones. Verification of Chinese symbols was carried out by the following sources "Chinese Symbols and Superstitions" by H. Morgan and "A dictionary of Chinese Symbols" by W. Eberhard [7; 13].

The most significant sense-forming symbol in the novel "The Good Earth" as well as in the whole trilogy is the symbol *earth*. It is actualized through the title of the first novel, designated by the qualifier "good", thus preparing readers for the certain unfolding of the idea in the book. The symbol *earth* is verbalized also through *land, field* and *soil*. Symbols of the *earth* and the *heaven* are seen by Chinese as a generative pair, and those are two main symbols that convey the main idea throughout the trilogy.

“Each had his turn on this **earth**. They worked on, moving together – together – producing the fruit of this **earth**... When the sun had set he straightened his back slowly and looked at the woman. Her face was wet and streaked with the **earth**. She was as brown as the very **soil** itself. ... She smoothed the last furrow slowly. Then in her usual plain way she said? Straight out, “I am with child”. ... His heart swelled and stopped. ... Well, it was their turn at this **earth!**” [3, 30].

For Chinese the female principle “yin” is associated with the earth, thus the above-mentioned example receives additional connotations in describing the pregnant wife of the protagonist.

In the second novel of the trilogy the symbolism of the **earth** weakens. The intensive cultural symbol **tiger** develops into the sense-forming element in “Sons”. Tiger is the king of wild animals and a bearer of the male element. **Tiger** is also the symbol of courage and bravery [7, 290]. The protagonist Wang the Third is given the name **Tiger** by his followers, and this symbol activates and reveals the dominant traits of the protagonist’s character, as well as his actions.

“I say he looks like a black-browed **tiger**, I say! And so Wang the **Tiger** did look ... When he lifted his brows up his eyes seemed to spring out from under them and his whole face opened suddenly as though a **tiger** sprang forth” [2, 177];

“Now Wang the **Tiger** had all a tiger's caution” [2, 178];

“They did not dare to fire upon Wang the **Tiger** lest it be nothing but twisting a tiger's whiskers and he come rushing back upon them, and destroy them all” [2, 178].

Another Chinese symbol of bravery, a **sword**, unfolds in the architectonics through the hypertext of the two novels in the trilogy “Sons” and “A House Divided”. For Chinese a **sword** has magic properties of repelling demons, and it is often represented by the snake. Furthermore, in Pearl Buck’s fiction it acquires the sense of independent life of the warrior.

“Now he came back a man, the tallest of the three brothers ... and he had a **sword** girdled to his leather belt” [2, 23];

“Wang the Tiger drew out his **sword** as swiftly as a flash of lightning plays across a cloud” [2, 185];

“... indeed Wang the Tiger took great care never to appear before his own men unless ... he had his sharp **sword** he had used in such a way that now he loved and hated it too” [2, 446];

“Thus they led him to where Wang the Tiger sat in the great hall waiting, his **sword** drawn

and shining like a narrow silver **serpent** stretched across his knees” [2, 591].

In the third novel Wang the Tiger is an old man and a **sword** is the symbol of his past victories and the reminder of his long-gone strength.

“The old man struggled to his feet ... and he fumbled for the narrow keen **sword** he kept always beside him” [1, 1];

“There the Tiger stood, clinging to the door post of his hall ... and his **sword** was not in his hand” [1, 253];

“The old Tiger sat nodding, his warm wine drunk ... Above him on a nail his **sword** hung in its scabbard. It was still beautiful, though sheathed” [1, 258].

The cultural symbol **rice** is a pervasive symbol, used mostly in “The Good Earth”, and appearing as a limited situational symbol in the last two novels of the trilogy. Rice is staple food of Chinese people, its status as a useful plant goes back to the dawn of Chinese history. Moreover, rice saves from hunger.

“There was the good white **rice** bubbling and boiling, and clouds of fragrant steam rose up. Now when the people smelled this **fragrance of rice** it was the sweetest in the world to their nostrils” [3, 98].

In the context of this novel the symbol **rice** implies primarily happiness, wealth, but first and foremost, fertility. The fields for growing rice are the best and symbolize abundance:

“He owned a piece of land that for generations had made the House of Hwang great... and she said, “Let it be bought. After all, **rice land** is good” [3, 53].

Rice in the text of the novel often appears not in the meaning of food, but of the plant to be grown. In this sense it is frequently used in similes, e.g. “green as **jade**”, which adds to the ethno-cultural perception of the symbol. **Jade**, which occurs in several shades ranging from white to dark green, has always been the favourite gemstone in China. It symbolizes purity.

“In his fields the young rice sprouted as green as **jade** and more beautiful” [3, 146].

In times of drought the protagonist of the novel Wang Lung cares of his rice fields as if they were his children.

“The young **rice beds** which Wang Lung sowed at first were squares of jade upon the brown earth. He carried water to them day after day after he had given up the wheat... O-lan said to him, “If the children must drink and the old man has his hot water the plants must go dry.” Wang Lung answered with anger that broke into the sob, “Well, and they must all starve if the plants starve” [3, 68].

To sum up the study of verbal representation of Chinese symbols in Pearl Buck's trilogy "The House of Earth" has revealed their close connection to culture, history, and age-long traditions. Chinese symbols as they appear in the novels by Pearl Buck disclose the idea of the trilogy. They are part of the architectonics of the trilogy. Symbols are of three types in the trilogy – sense-forming (*earth, tiger*), pervasive (*rice*) and situational (*jade*). The most important sense-forming symbol in the whole trilogy is

the one of *earth* which is also verbalized through *land, field* and *soil*. Symbols in the trilogy are not frozen, they may acquire new colourings and connotations. In most situations they enter as components of stylistic tropes and devices (metaphor, simile).

Further analysis of Chinese symbols in terms of cross-cultural studies is necessary. The heritage of Pearl Buck calls for additional investigation of symbolism in her works as this cultural sphere is extremely important for deeper mutual understanding.

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Ивасюта О. Вербальная репрезентация китайских символов в трилогии Перл Бак «Дом земли»

Аннотация: Статья посвящена изучению культурных особенностей китайских символов и их функционированию в трилогии "Дом Земли" американской писательницы, лауреата Нобелевской премии в области литературы Перл Бак. Символы являются важнейшими языковыми источниками информации о духовной культуре, обладают большим культурно-историческим потенциалом. Таким образом, они представляют собой огромный интерес с позиций лингвокультурологического и антропологического подходов. В исследовании проанализировано влияние культурной символики на формирование смысла исследуемых романов и на создание кросс-культурных текстов. Выделенные символы анализировались по нескольким типологиям. В художественном тексте функционируют культурные, контекстуальные и персональные символы. По роли, которую культурные символы играют в тексте, выделено следующие типы: смыслогенерирующие, сквозные и ситуативные. В статье внимание фокусируется на таких основных смыслогенерирующих символических образах, как «земля», «тигр», «сабля», «рис». Наиболее важным смыслогенерирующим символом в трилогии является символ «земли». Актуализируясь в заглавии первого романа «Добрая земля», символ «earth» репрезентируется через сеть синонимических образов «land», «field», «soil» и постепенно разворачивает идею в тексте романа, утрачивая значимость в последующих частях трилогии. Во втором романе «Сыновья» символ «tiger» определяет характер и действия главного героя, его усиливает культурный символ «sword». Сквозной символ «rice» приобретает дополнительные коннотации, соединяясь с этнически-специфическим символом «jade». Интерпретация и верификация символов проведена при помощи словарей символов В. Эбергарда и Г. Моргана. Сделано попытку изучить символику в диахронии, раскрывая динамику наращивания смыслов символических элементов в мегатексте трилогии. Были рассмотрены причины специфической культурной нагрузки китайских символов при кросс-культурном переносе и возможные проблемы их прочтения носителями Западной цивилизации. Вербальная репрезентация китайской символики выявила широкую сеть всех типов выделенных символов в архитектонике

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трилогии. Художественное наследие Перл Бак требует дальнейшего исследования репрезентации символов в плане лингвокультурологии и лингвистической антропологии.

Ключевые слова: культурный символ, смыслогенерирующий, сквозной, китайский, кросс-культурный.