

Chinese Allegorical Sayings as Mirrors of Human Behaviour

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Keywords: Chinese allegorical, Mirror, Human behaviour

Chinese allegorical sayings, known as *Xiehouyu* (歇后语), are short and humorous two-part expressions that use metaphorical images to convey profound messages about real-life human issues. These sayings often contain hidden meanings expressed through symbolic figures or actions. They are not abstract linguistic concepts but vivid reflections of the wisdom accumulated through the lived experiences of ordinary people. Emerging from daily communication, allegorical sayings allow speakers to express thoughts and emotions with subtle sarcasm or humour, thereby enriching both spoken and literary Chinese. They appear not only in everyday conversations but also in classical and modern literary works. Their indirect mode of expression, which requires listeners to infer the underlying meaning is one of their most distinctive and appealing features.

The structure of an allegorical saying consists of two segments: the first part functions as a descriptive metaphor or riddle-like clue, while the second part provides the explanation or conveys the intended meaning. Often, only the first segment is spoken, while the listener is expected to infer the intended meaning in the second part from context. Allegorical sayings can be broadly categorized into two main types¹.

Metaphoric Allegorical Sayings (比喻式歇后语):

The first segment presents the metaphor, and the second explains the intended message. There is a clear logical connection between the two. For example: “老鼠过街—人人喊打”: (A rat crossing the street —

everyone shouts to kill it). Here, the rat symbolizes a universally unwanted creature, and the expression is used to mock or condemn someone hated by all.

Homophonic Pun Allegorical Sayings (谐音双关式歇后语):

These expressions rely on homophones to create double meanings. For example: “老蜘蛛—满肚子都是丝” is a homophone of “满肚子都是私”. Changing one character alters the meaning from “full of cobwebs” to “full of selfishness,” allowing the expression “an old spider” to metaphorically refer to a selfish or malicious person. This clever use of sound and meaning extends the expressive capacity of Chinese sayings.

Allegorical sayings often employ humour and satire to portray human behaviour. Comedy within these sayings includes elements of mockery, irony, and even contempt. Many of them ridicule individuals by constructing absurd or exaggerated images. For instance, “牛鼻子穿环—让人家牵着走” (An ox with a nose ring — led by others). As nose rings are used to control livestock, this expression satirizes people who lack independent thinking and blindly follow others. Another example is “猫哭老鼠—假慈悲” (A cat weeping over a dead mouse — false compassion). Since a cat’s nature is to catch mice, crying over a mouse suggests hypocrisy or fake sympathy.

In many cases, satirical allegorical sayings intentionally exaggerate malice or absurdity to create

1. 储丽莎, “歇后语研究述评”, cited in 《宁夏大学学报》(人文社会科学版) 2014, Vol.36, No.1

strong rebukes. Their humorous effects arise from contradictions between the surface description and the deeper implied meaning. They often follow a specific pattern “say one thing while implying another,” creating a tension between the literal and figurative meaning that enhances humour.

As a unique linguistic creation, allegorical sayings are a significant part of the Chinese cultural and linguistic heritage. They emerged collectively from the wisdom and creativity of working-class and peasant communities. The peasant society, known for its sincerity, simplicity, optimism, and humour, did not rely on abstract theories but instead used concrete images and everyday experiences to form expressive sayings. Their rustic origins and oral transmission allowed allegorical sayings to spread widely, functioning as a form of oral folklore similar to folktales².

Animals play essentially a prominent role in allegorical sayings. Since animals are closely integrated with human society, their natural instincts and symbolic meanings have become important elements in these expressions. Each animal carries cultural symbolism, and therefore animals became natural protagonists in sayings used across rural China. For example:

“猴戴帽子—也想充个好人” (A monkey wearing a hat — pretending to be a good person). This mocks individuals who disguise themselves as morally upright. Monkeys, being intelligent, emotionally expressive, mischievous, and behaviourally similar to humans, easily lend themselves to symbolic meanings related to human conduct.

Although animal symbolism varies across religious traditions and folk narratives, this discussion focuses specifically on the symbolism found in allegorical sayings, which reflect the experiences, observations, and wisdom of peasant communities. Yet, these sayings arise from everyday life, they capture the behavioural patterns of animals as mirror reflections of human social behaviour. As rural society observed animals closely, humorous and metaphorical comparisons naturally emerged to express deeper social and moral issues.

Animal protagonists often play complex and even contradictory roles. For example, while pigs in Chinese zodiac represents personality traits like loving, tolerant, honest, sociable, optimistic, sincere and appreciative of luxury³, allegorical sayings may deconstruct these conventional meanings. For example: “老母猪上树—大有进步” (An old sow climbing a tree — tremendous progress). Pigs cannot climb trees; therefore, portraying such an impossible action is a humorous way of praising someone’s unexpected improvement. Similarly, “老鼠尾巴—打一百棒槌也不变样” (A mouse’s tail — unchanged even after a hundred blows) describes someone or something that remains stubborn and difficult to change. According to Chinese zodiac signs rat comes first in the cycle. Personality traits represented by rat are: intelligent, adaptable, quick-witted, smart, charming, persuasive, artistic and sociable⁴, but allegorical sayings often depict them as timid, destructive, rigid, or troublesome—qualities drawn from everyday observation rather than zodiac tradition.

Overall, allegorical sayings constitute a rich corpus of metaphorical expressions in which animals both domesticated and wild serve as symbolic tools to analyse human society. These expressions use the natural behaviour of animals to highlight human flaws, societal contradictions, and moral lessons. By personifying animals, allegorical sayings create vivid scenarios that reflect human actions, thereby allowing criticism to be delivered indirectly without offending individuals. While many of these sayings carry satirical or derogatory messages, others praise positive qualities or remarkable achievements.

Ultimately, allegorical sayings employ creativity, humour, and metaphor to construct ethically meaningful messages. Through observing animals closely and comparing their behaviour with human social life, these expressions aim to identify and correct social errors, criticize undesirable conduct, and refine moral understanding. Their indirect yet insightful nature allows listeners to contemplate the implied meaning, making allegorical sayings an enduring and valuable component

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2. 宗武, “浅谈歇后语的特点、分类及其发展, cited in 《内蒙古民族师院学报》 (哲学社会科学, 汉文版), 1990, DOI:10.14045/j.cnki.nmsx.1990.04.010.
 3. Merritt, Christine, “The Animal World in China: A Cross Cultural Perspective”, [<https://www.gcasa.com/conferences/singapore12/papers/Merritt.pdf>].
 4. Ibid.

of Chinese cultural expression.

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