

# A Contrastive Analysis of Connotations of “蛇 (*she*)” and “Snake”

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**Abstract**—A certain group of cultural-loaded words in the same language can form a vocabulary category. In order to facilitate systematic and refined research work, language researchers tend to classify the vocabulary which belongs to the same category systematically that provides possibility for cross-cultural research of language. Regardless of different points of view, it has been widely recognized that culture has taken an important place in foreign language teaching and learning studies. As an important category of the vocabulary of a language, animal expression is not only an indispensable part of human language, but also conveys cultural messages to people from different cultures. Words evolve over time, semantic shifting, generalizing, progressing, drifting. Although *snake* falls in the commendatory, neutral and derogatory category in English as well as in Chinese, its derogatory connotation has been highly stressed both in English and Chinese with the rapid process of globalization and human cognitive development. In an attempt to enhance cross-cultural awareness of L2/FL instructors and learners and improve their foreign language proficiency, this paper presents an exclusive study of different cultural connotations between “Snake” and “蛇” by virtue of contrastive analysis, corpora collecting and Associative Group Analysis.

**Index Terms**—snake, “蛇”, connotation, Chinese, English

## I. INTRODUCTION

It is well understood that language is a social and cultural phenomenon and language learning and teaching involve not only knowledge of grammar, phonology and lexis but also a certain features and characteristics of the culture. Every language has its cultural norms, and the use of language in general is related to social and cultural values. The second language learners would become confused and lost when coming across some new phrases and expressions with every word they know. Their connotations thereof are beyond the definitions in dictionaries and requires. To deal with communication problems in the L2/FL acquisition, the learners and teachers need to learn the target culture within the syllabus, and should be sensitive to cultural differences while practical application.

A certain group of cultural-loaded words in the same language can form a vocabulary category. However, the fact is that each word has multiple definitions and connotations in dictionaries with confusing cultural backgrounds, which often makes language learners feel frustrated. Therefore, it is necessary and urgent for teachers to strengthen learners' cross-cultural awareness and guide them to acquire both linguistic and cultural meanings of words. The most effective way is to contrast the native culture with the target culture in SLT so that students can be equipped with the knowledge of cultural characteristics of L2 as well as of the native language.

The concept of cross-cultural awareness is put forward by Hanvey (1979) and he formulates four levels of cross-cultural awareness:

the first level is awareness of superficial or very visible cultural traits, such as tourism; the second level is awareness of significant and subtle cultural traits that contrast markedly with one's own; the third level is theoretical understanding of the cultural differences; the fourth level is awareness of how another culture feels from the standpoint of the insider (p.13)

In terms of the relationship between three language elements and culture, vocabulary is the one with which the closest and can most directly reflect it compared to pronunciation and grammar (Hu, 1991). That is to say, among all linguistic structural levels vocabulary contains the largest amount of cultural information, such as history, geography, religion, customs, and thought patterns. As an integral part of vocabulary, animal words also convey a large amount of cultural information. In ancient times, people maintained frequent contact with animals and recognized their different attributes such as instinct, habit, brainpower, and function in their long-term living and production practice. With all these attributes having similarities or relevance with other objects and conceptions, animal words have become the embodiment of some people, lifeless things or phenomena and evolved over time metaphorically in terms of feelings, emotions, personalities, appearances and so on. Generally there are two types of cultural metaphors: animal word individually and animal word as a morpheme in idioms and expressions.

While seeking an overall perspective into the related research on animal words, the author finds out that many language researchers and scholars take a certain kind of animal as a study subject, although they are aware of the research value of different connotations of animal words and published piles of works and papers. In addition, the conclusions they come up with are usually regarded synchronic rather than diachronic. These studies are focused on the most familiar animals like *dog*, *horse*, *pig* and so on while there are few systematic and elaborate researches about *snake* which is frequently used in English and Chinese language. When it comes to *snake*, people may immediately think of several images or expressions in history, myths, legends, books and movies. In the process of exploring different connotations of “snake” and “蛇”, this paper presents a contrastive study and associative group analysis with an aim to facilitate foreign language learning and teaching.

## II. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND THEORY

### A. Contrastive Analysis

Contrastive analysis is the systematic study of a pair of languages with a view to identifying their structural differences and similarities, and came into fashion in the 1960s starting with describing comparable features of the native language and target language (e.g. tense, words, or expressions etc.). Contrastive linguistics is the systematic comparison of two or more languages, with the aim of describing their similarities and differences expressed in terms of correspondence and equivalence between the elements of those languages. The publication of Lado's book *Linguistics Across Culture* (1957) marks the real beginning of the application of contrastive analysis. In this book, Lado argues that “we can predict and describe the patterns that will cause difficulty in learning, and those that will not cause difficulty, by comparing systematically the language and culture to be learned with the native language and culture of the student”. (Dai & He, 2002, p.132)

Contrastive analysis compares the forms and meanings across the two languages to spot the mismatches or differences so that people could predict learner's difficulty. In the second language learning and teaching, the basis of language instruction is the difference between native language and target language (Liu et al., 1992). That is to say, contrastive analysis is an important method to learn foreign language and it has profound influence on second language acquisition and language research study.

In a word, contrastive analysis is a main language research method to probe into similarities and differences between different languages. “snake” and “蛇” refer to the same animal in two different languages, English and Chinese respectively. In this paper the author proposes a boosting application of contrastive analysis on connotations of “snake” and “蛇” from a cross-cultural perspective.

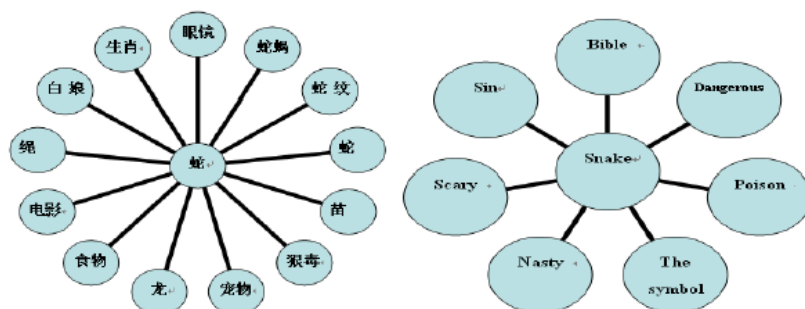
### B. Associative Group Analysis

Associative Group Analysis (AGA) is an inferential approach to analyze people's mental representations, focusing on subjective meanings and images to assess similarities and differences across cultures and belief systems.<sup>1</sup> Culture can be regarded as “a group-specific cognitive organization or world view composed of the mosaic elements of meanings” (Salay, 1973, p.33).

Lorand B. Szalay and Glen H. Fisher (1979) hold that the meaning of the word, to a large extent, is decided by the unique “frame of reference” of each person (p.57). To understand the meaning of a word accurately, we need to catch the “frame of reference”, which means subjective meaning or psychological meaning. Namely that the subjective and psychological reactions stimulated by the language user according to their life experience. Everyone in the different countries of the world has their own interests, concepts, attitudes and faiths, which is the “frame of reference” of their unique life experience. The words people use reflect not only their cognitions, but also their affections and behavioral intentions. Therefore, Szalay and Fisher put forward the AGA to contrastively analyze the cultural meaning of a word given by people from different backgrounds. AGA is an analytical approach aided by a word association technique which produces semantographs, and then people proceed to contractively analyze the connotative meanings of a word in cross-cultural communication (Bi, 2011).

In virtue of AGA theory, the author interviewed twenty Chinese college students, and five foreign students and two foreign teachers in China Women's University about their free associations of “蛇(*she*)” in Chinese and “snake” in English. The findings are organized and presented in the following Fig. 1.

<sup>1</sup> Associative Group Analysis (no date). [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Associative\\_group\\_analysis#cite\\_ref-1](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Associative_group_analysis#cite_ref-1) (accessed 19/3/2014).



There are both similarities and differences between the Chinese and English associations of *snake*, which are based on the interviewees' personal experiences, emotions, education, well-developed beliefs and so on. On the one hand, all interviewees are familiar with this word or character and associate “蛇” or “snake” with some derogatory meanings like scary, poisonous and dangerous. On the other hand, Chinese students have more neutral associations with “蛇”. There is a famous dish in Guangdong Province, called “the Fight between the Dragon and the Tiger”, which is actually braised snake and leopard cat. The image of “蛇” is literally associated with slim figure of women and zigzag movements, and even a household snake-woman in a Chinese legend. Some traditional Chinese medicine is extracted from the gallbladder of snakes. “蛇” ranks among the twelve Chinese zodiac animals. Owing to religious records or literature, “snake” in English is always associated with derogatory meanings. When it comes to snake, some foreign students even say “Oh. I don't like snake!” in a direct way and are loath to talk about “蛇”.

### C. Corpora Collection

Corpus is a collection of linguistic data, either compiled as written texts or as a transcription of recorded speech. The main purpose of a corpus is to verify a hypothesis about language - for example, to determine how the usage of a particular sound, word, or syntactic construction varies. Corpus linguistics deals with the principles and practice of using corpora in language study. Corpora collection is a method to present (list) all the collection of all the writing of a particular kind that is used for studying the language (Crystal, 1992).

In order to ensure the research reliability and comprehensiveness, this paper proposes the related corpora collection in an exhaustive way to contrastively analyze the connotations of “snake” and “蛇” from a cross-cultural perspective. Therefore, the author collected all the phrases and expressions containing “snake” or “蛇” through the nine most authoritative dictionaries: *the English-Chinese dictionary (second edition)*, *A new English-Chinese dictionary (enlarged and updated)*, *Oxford advanced learner's dictionary of current English with Chinese translation (the commercial press & oxford university press)*, *A complete dictionary of English-Chinese idiomatic phrases*, *the Chinese-English dictionary (third edition)*, *Longman dictionary of English language and culture*, “汉英语林”, “现代汉语巨典”, and “汉语大词典”.

## III. SIMILARITIES AND DIFFERENCES BETWEEN “蛇(SHE)” AND “SNAKE”

Connotation means “the implication of a word, apart from its primary meaning”, according to *Longman Modern English Dictionary*, or “an idea suggested by a word in addition to its main meaning” according to *Oxford Advanced Learner's English-Chinese Dictionary*. The same word or character may be entailed with different connotations in different languages. In term of “connotation”, it has the following interpretation:

“Any language sign may be simultaneously of a denotative, connotative, or iconic kind of meanings. All these types of meanings are bound with cultural encodings or associations, for the meanings of words cannot be separated from their associations. Each language has its own metaphors that provide semantic cohesion within its boundaries. Motivated by the need and desire to influence others, people choose to use words which emphasize denotative meaning, connotative meaning or iconic meanings or all of them, during the same process its cultural meanings are created.” (Witherspoon, 1980, p.175)

Language is instinctively influenced and shaped by culture. English and Chinese expressions in dictionaries are abstracted from people's long-term practice and throw great light on the different cultural connotations of “snake” and “蛇”.

### A. An Analysis of Chinese Expressions

Chinese idioms, proverbs, colloquialisms, allegorical sayings and slang are considered concisely organized, vividly expressed, culturally featured, and chronologically evolved. In other words, they embody Chinese history, religion, literature, customs and life style of human beings (Yang, 2008). The different connotations of “蛇” are collected in the commendatory, neutral and derogatory category.

- Commendatory Category

Among all the 35 dictionary entries, there're 11 commendatory expressions:

1. 笔走龙蛇: 形容书法生动而有气势。Dragons and snakes follow one's writing brush—an expression used to show good penmanship with a vigorous calligraphic style. The strokes are forceful and characters full of vitality—superb handwriting.

2. 虺蛇螫手, 壮士解腕: 手腕被腹蛇咬伤, 便立即截断, 以免毒液延及全身, 危及生命。比喻事到紧要关头, 必须下决心当机立断。也比喻牺牲局部, 照顾全局。 This means to make a prompt decision in urgent situation and preserve the whole situation at the expense of partial interest.

3. 駉龙走蛇: 龙蛇被掠走, 形容声势浩大。 The expression means great in strength and impetus, and influential and large-scale.

4. 灵蛇之珠: 即隋珠。原比喻无价之宝, 后也比喻非凡的才能。The pearl spat out by the Scared Serpent—a certain duke of Sui once saw a wounded serpent and kindly healed the wound with some ointment. He was rewarded with a pearl which the serpent subsequently fished out from the “Great Yangtze River”. This means something that is priceless and precious or means remarkable capability.

5. 蛇无头不行: A snake without a head cannot go forward which lay emphasis on the leader.

6. 龙蛇飞动: 仿佛龙飞腾, 蛇游动。形容书法气势奔放, 笔力劲健。The expression used to show swift movement of calligraphy and the free, fluid, vivid, vigorous, crisp, graceful and elegant style of calligraphy.

7. 打蛇随棍上: “打蛇随棍上”其实是“木棍打蛇, 蛇随棍上”这句话的简略说法。它寓意人能瞅准机会, 顺势而为, 争取更大的利益或好处。以“打蛇随棍上”比喻人间争斗, 指的是: 被攻击者善于利用对方手段中的破绽, 灵敏地反击, 使对方大感棘手。

This means depending on the beneficial opportunities to achieve the biggest advantages or seize the chance to strike back at adversary.

8. 打蛇打七寸: 比喻说话做事必须抓住主要环节。 To touch somebody's tender spot or to hit somebody where it hurts, which means we must seize the main point when we do something.

9. 蛇灰蚓线: 比喻有相应的线索可循。The expression used to show that there're some relevant clues to seek.

10. 蝉蜕蛇解: ①如蝉脱壳, 如龙蛇换皮。比喻解脱而进入更高境界。②后世道教多以指羽化成仙。 Extricate oneself and enter a higher realm.

11. 蛇雀之报: 指大蛇衔明珠、黄雀衔白环报恩的故事。隋侯出行见大蛇被伤中断, 以药封之, 蛇乃能行, 岁余, 蛇衔明珠以报之, 谓之隋侯珠、明月珠。杨宝幼时见一黄雀为鸱枭所搏, 坠于树下, 为蝼蚁所困, 宝救之养百余日飞去, 其夜有黄衣童子以白环四枚相报, 并云当使其子孙洁白, 位登三事, 有如此环。后以“蛇雀之报”为报恩的典故。An allusion which means repay an obligation to show one's gratefulness.

From the enumeration of Chinese expressions, we can draw the conclusion that “蛇” in Chinese has 31% commendatory connotations, which accounts for a considerable portion of all Chinese expressions with “蛇”.

#### • Neutral Category

There're only three entries in neutral sense:

1. 打蛇不死, 转背咬人: Insidious intentions must be thwarted before they can inflict harm.

2. 斗折蛇行: 斗折: 像北斗星的排列一样曲折。像北斗星一样弯曲, 像蛇一样曲折行进。形容道路曲折蜿蜒 The road is winding

3. 一朝被蛇咬, 三年怕草绳: 比喻在某事上吃了苦头, 以后碰到类似的情况也会害怕。When a man is bitten by a snake, he starts with fright at the sight of a grass rope for the next three years.

Chinese expressions of “蛇” with neutral connotations take up only 9%, most of which are literally based on physical features of snake.

#### • Derogatory Category

There're 21 items which can be regarded as derogatory:

1. 蛇入竹筒, 曲性不失(犹在): 比喻本性难改 Even though a snake enters a bamboo tubes, it still inclines to wriggle. This means inherent quality is hard to change.

2. 蛇鼠横行: 比喻恶人得势, 胡作非为。 Wicked people run rampant.

3. 蛇头鼠尾: An expression to show the person who have a sneaky and crafty look

4. 蛇头鼠眼: 形容人的面相丑恶, 心术不正。亦作“蛇眉鼠眼”。 The expression means wily and cunning.

5. 蛇蝎心肠: Have a heart as malicious as snakes and scorpions. Cruel, merciless

6. 蛇口蜂针: 比喻恶毒的言词和手段。 Refer to malicious words and means.

7. 蛇影杯弓: 将映在酒杯里的弓影误认为蛇。比喻因疑神疑鬼而引起恐惧。 Mistake the reflection of a bow in the cup for a snake; take alarm at the shadow of a bow in the cup, extremely suspicious, illusion caused by suspicion.

8. 画蛇添足: 用来形容做多余的事, 不能锦上添花反而弄巧成拙。 Carry water to rive or painting legs on a snake which means ruining the overall effect by doing something superfluous.

9. 打草惊蛇: 比喻做法不谨慎, 反使对方有所戒备。 Beat the grass and the snake will be startled. Frighten away someone by raising a scare. Act rashly and alert the enemy.

10. 拨草寻蛇: 比喻招惹恶人, 自找麻烦。Provoke villain and then make oneself in trouble.
11. 封豕长蛇: 封: 大; 封豕: 大猪; 长蛇: 大蛇。贪婪如大猪, 残暴如大蛇。比喻贪暴者、侵略者。The giant boar and huge python—covetousness of corrupted officials
12. 佛口蛇心: 比喻话虽说得好看, 心肠却极狠毒。Buddha's words and a serpent's heart which means malicious and a villainous hypocrite.
13. 虎头蛇尾: 头大如虎, 尾细如蛇。比喻开始时声势很大, 到后来劲头很小, 有始无终。To begin with tigerish energy but peter out towards the end. Fine start and poor finish. Eg: No matter what we do, we should not let the work tail off once it gets started (Bernard, 2005).
14. 贪蛇忘尾: 比喻只图眼前利益而不考虑后果。Only emphasize short-term interest and overlook consequence.
15. 龙头蛇尾: A beginning with no end
16. 龙蛇混杂: There were snakes and vipers creeping around among the dragons. The good and the evil were mixed together.
17. 牛鬼蛇神: 牛头的鬼, 蛇身的神。形容作品虚幻怪诞。比喻形形色色的坏人。牛鬼蛇神原是佛教用语, 说的是阴间鬼卒、神人等, 后成为固定成语, 比喻邪恶丑陋之物。在文化大革命中, 牛鬼蛇神成了所被打倒、“横扫”的无辜受害者的统称。The expression means monsters, freaks (demons) and all sorts of bad characters.
18. 蛇食鲸吞: 蛇食: 像蛇一样吞食。鲸吞: 像鲸一样吞咽。比喻强者逐步并吞弱者。The strong overwhelm the weak gradually.
19. 强龙不压地头蛇(强龙难斗地头蛇): A mighty dragon is no match for the native serpents. Even a mighty dragon should not attack a serpent in its haunt (lair). This expression means even a capable and powerful person cannot contend with vicious power in that area. 比喻有能耐的人也难对付盘踞当地的恶势力。In this term, “地头蛇” literally means snake in its local haunt and it's connotation meaning is local bully or local villain.
20. 人心不足蛇吞象: dissatisfied or discontent as a snake trying to swallow an elephant.
21. 虚与委蛇(yi): 虚: 假; 委蛇: 随便应顺。指对人虚情假意, 敷衍应酬。Pretend to have interest and sympathy, courteously but without sincerity.

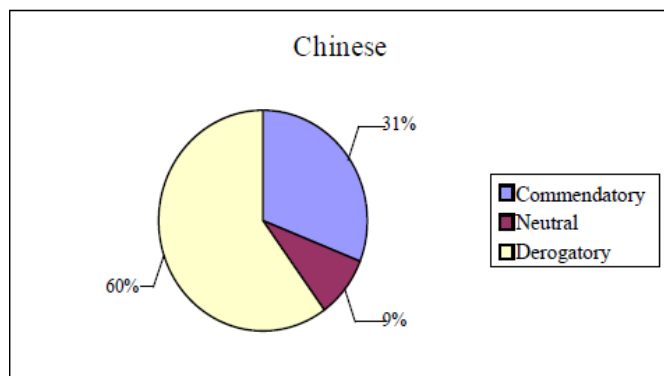


Figure 2. “蛇(she) in Chinese Expressions”

Obviously, “蛇” has more derogatory connotations in Chinese expressions, amounting to 60%, which originate from Chinese history, literature, folklores or legends and are frequently applied in Chinese written and oral communication. Therefore, getting familiar with these expressions and connotations is an inevitable part of Chinese language acquisition.

### B. An Analysis of English Expressions

Snake itself has abundant meanings in English expressions. For example, an individual word of “snake” means wicked, crafty, despicable, worthless or treacherous fellow. In American slang, it refers to whisky of inferior quality, or man (usually young man) who chases after and cheats girls. As a verb, to snake implies “to move like a snake, in long twisting curves, to go in a particular direction in long twisting curves”. E.g. *The road snakes its way up and down hill.* In addition, “move in twists and glides”. E.g. *The centipede snaked swiftly away.* Besides, snake has a hint of fudge. E.g. *I can get along and snake through.*

#### • Commendatory Category

Among all the 18 dictionary entries about “snake”, there're only three commendatory expressions:

1. raise snakes =wake snakes—cheer up
2. snake the pool, to—obtain all the wagers
3. scotch a \the snake—restrain harmful act

#### • Neutral Category

There're nine items classified as the neutral category, and they're used as nouns and verbs all based on snake's physical features.

1. the snake—a kind of floating exchange rate system that used in European countries.
2. plumber’s snake—a long thin tool that is used to clear out blocked pipes.
3. snakes in Iceland—something that not existed.
4. snake charmer—an entertainer who seems to be able to control snakes and make them move by playing music to them.
5. a black snake—a long whip; the train carrying coal.
6. snakes and ladders—a children’s game played on a special board with pictures of snakes and ladders on it; a succession of success and frustration.
7. see snakes—have hallucinations; equal to have snakes in one’s boots; get wildly drunk.
8. snake in, to—run into or slip into a place silently.
9. snake out, to—haul\drag out e.g. The trees were cut down in the woods, trimmed close, and snake out.

• Derogatory Category

There’re six entries in derogatory sense:

1. (Cherish )a snake in the bosom—the people who are ingrate and treacherous.
2. a snake in the grass—An offensive term for somebody perceived as betraying or deceiving others. Refer to the person who are sly, sneaky and cannot be trusted.
3. snake out, to— chase, persecute eg. The present is a fair opportunity to snake him out.
4. wake snakes—alarm sb; make trouble; arouse turmoil and furious quarrel.
5. snake eyes—misfortune, failure.
6. snake pit—a hospital for mental diseases; a place or situation of aggression and destruction.

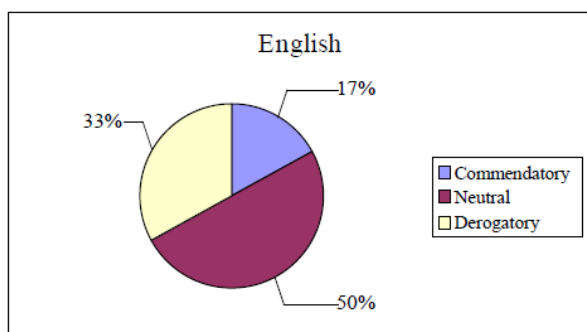


Figure 3. "Snake" in English Expressions

TABLE I  
CONTRASTIVE ANALYSIS OF “蛇” AND “SNAKE”

	Chinese		English	
Commendatory	11	31%	3	17%
Neutral	3	9%	9	50%
Derogatory	21	60%	6	33%

According to English expressions with “snake” listed above, the commendatory, neutral and derogatory connotations take up 17%, 50% and 33%, respectively. While reading through the dictionaries, we find out that there are not so many expressions with snake in English-speaking countries as dog or horse. However, snake is culturally featured to a great extent with a stereotyped image of evil, wicked or malicious. In some religious records snake is thought of as very dishonest and likely to trick people, among which the most famous one is the serpent that seduces Eve to eat a forbidden fruit in the Bible. In the *Harry Potter* series, the leading evil character is described as having eyes like a snake. Snakes also frequently appear in a lot of scary movies or fictions because many people are afraid of them. What’s more, nouns or verbs with snake are often used to resemble the shape or movement of snake.

The findings of corpora study on “snake” and “蛇” can be presented in the following Table 1.

IV. EXPLANATIONS FOR CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

The whole culture, to some extent, is expressed through language. Therefore, to achieve an interpretation of language as a whole, we should summarize our diverse experiences of language and place it in its cultural context.

In ancient times, due to difficulties in understanding nature in a scientific sense, human beings inclined to worship creatures or images like Flora, Fauna, and Gods. Snake, as a kind of primeval reptiles, is among animals people worship. There’re many myths, legends, religious literature, and totems related to snake all over the world. Snakes have been evolving gradually since the Early Cretaceous period. However, they are not extinct like dinosaurs, and survive into the current period by virtue of strong vitality. Snake is regarded as a magical creature, and the very first ancestor of human—Ntiwa and Nvwa having a combination of human’s head and snake’s body. The god in ancient Egypt is also epitomized by cobra. Egyptian, African and Malaysian people all have traditions of snake worship. Nevertheless, snake has played an important role in both English and Chinese culture.

### A. 蛇(*she*) in Chinese Culture

In China, twelve earthly branches correlate with twelve zodiac signs, that is, rat, ox, tiger, hare, dragon, snake, horse, sheep, monkey, cock, dog and boar in turn based on a 12-year circle. In the zodiac sequence, snake runs after dragon, which is the reason why snake is also called “little dragon”. Therefore, snake enjoys long-term fame next to dragon in China. The people of China have a long held belief that they are descendants of the dragon, a tradition that is firmly embedded in their culture and one that is encountered across all aspects of Chinese society and in the minds of its people (Yuan, 2010). Dragon: a large serpent, a fabulous animal usually represented as a huge winged scaly serpent with a crested head and large claws. Sometimes our ancients didn't make a distinction between snake and dragon.

In totemic cultures, snake is respected as a symbol Chinese forefather, who is a combination of Ntiwa and Nvwa, as recorded in “*Lu Ling Guang Dian Fu*” (鲁灵光殿赋 Wang Yanshou) “上纪开辟，遂古之初……伏羲鳞身，女娲蛇躯。”According to some research, Xia Yu(夏禹)’s surname is “姒”, “姒” equal to “巳” which means “snake”. In addition, “禹” is the same as “巳” in Oracle(甲骨文), so “禹” is a name of snake itself. Some people hold a point of view that “snake totem is the predecessor of dragon totem because snake totem is a part of dragon totem(dragon totem consist of horse’s head, antler, tiger’s paw, eagle’s claw, fish’s scale and beard, snake’s body, turtle’s abdomen and bovine ears)<sup>[错误! 未定义书签.]</sup>, which can be traced in “*Shan Hai Jing*” (山海经):“有神，人面蛇身而赤...是谓罔龙。(Luo, 1998)” Moreover, in ancient Chinese history, “蛇” is the symbol of genitals. Another reason that explains why Chinese people established strong snake worship is that snake’s ecdysis is regarded as rebirth and eternal life (Xu, 2009).

All of these evidences witness that snake is most respected and worshipped by Chinese clans in ancient myths and legends. What’s more, snake is described as a good-image portfolio and kind-hearted character in Chinese culture. For example, “The Legend of the White Snake” is one of the most famous Chinese tales, in which a 1000-year-old snake-woman pursues true love courageously and helps poor and sick people. In addition, snake stands for luck and holiness. Another positive connotation of snake is wealth, so people who want to be rich are apt to pray piously at snake temple. In China, people also believe snake has precious medicinal values. There are at least three features of snakes that capture the attention of traditional healers: they have an incredible flexibility and speed, they shed their skin, and certain snakes are extremely poisonous when they bite. Among the earliest recorded use of snakes in Chinese medicine was the application of sloughed snake skin, described in the *Shen Nong Ben Cao Jing* (神农本草经). The use of snake gallbladder is first recorded in *Ming Yi Bie Lu* (名医别录) (Dharmananda, 1997).

### B. Snake in English Culture

When we shift our focus from the east to west, it can be noticed that snake which enjoys high status in Chinese culture always symbolizes evil and cursed object in the west. Snake frequently plays an inglorious role in the Bible, myths, legends of ancient Greek and Rome. In ancient Greek mythology, Typhoeus is a monster with mass of snakes moving below the waist, opposing Zeus and chasing the other gods away. Zeus's wife, Hera sent avenging angel—a pair of highly toxic python to kill Zeus’s illegitimate son Heracles. The tragic fate of Laocoon and his sons is also closely related with snake. In addition, Medusa’s hair is composed of snakes. Anyone who sees her head will be turned into stone right away (Powell, 1995).



Figure 4. Medusa

Source:<http://www.allartnews.com/united-states-exclusive-berninis-medusa-at-the-legion-of-honor-in-san-francisco/>

In addition, there are many mythological creatures mentioned in the Bible, the dove holding olive branch in the mouth, the camel threading the eye of a needle, the pig wallowing in the mud, the brave lion, greedy leech and crow providing for Elijah, among which the most noticeable one is the serpent who seduced Eve to eat the forbidden fruit in Eden. Hence, human violated god’s prohibition, and was expelled from paradise, and never got rid of curse. Snakes were punished accordingly, without legs forever (Edmond, 2004). The ancient serpent, who is the devil and Satan<sup>2</sup>, rules over mankind as the "prince of the power of the air, the spirit who now works in the sons of disobedience"<sup>3</sup>. Satan is the instigator of much of humanity's misery.

Another case in point can be found in *Aesop's fables*. There’re many stories about snake, among which the story of the farmer and the snake indicates that snake is ingrate and treacherous. Not only did not that snake be grateful to the

<sup>2</sup> The ESV Bible. “Ephesians 2” < <http://biblehub.com/esv/ephesians/2.htm>> (accessed 20/4/2014).

<sup>3</sup> The ESV Bible. “Ephesians 2:2” < <http://biblehub.com/esv/ephesians/2-2.htm>> (accessed 20/4/2014).

farmer, who saved its life by holding the snake that stiff and frozen with cold in bosom, if anything, when it revived by warmth and then bit the farmer—its benefactor, inflicting on him a mortal wound conversely (Grant, 2010). This story also preaches to us that the greatest kindness will not bind the ungrateful.

In addition, in *The interpretation of dreams* written by Freud snake signifies sex. There is a statement that snake is the symbol of penis and it often stands for undesirable sexual behavior. This explains the reason why snake is not desirable and popular to some extent.

Despite of a large number of derogatory connotations of snake, it is worth pointing out that snake appears in the emblem of World Health Organization (WHO) and some other western countries' medical logos, such as the Star of Life which is originally designed and governed by the U.S. National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA). The logo is used as a stamp of authentication or certification for ambulances, paramedics or other EMS (emergency medical services) personnel. The snake and staff in the symbol portray the staff of Aesculapius, son of Apollo according to the *Greek Mythology*, and the staff represents medicine and healing<sup>4</sup>.



Figure 5. Emblem of WHO  
Source: [http://www.japanfocus.org/-g\\_de-wildt/2476](http://www.japanfocus.org/-g_de-wildt/2476)

## V. CONCLUSION

The contrastive analysis of “蛇” and “snake” in dictionaries presents that “蛇” in Chinese culture enjoys higher status and more frequent use in commendatory sense than “snake” in English culture. Meanwhile, connotations evolve gradually over time.

A British scholar named Geoffrey Leech in his book *Semantics* come up with that semantic meaning can be divided into seven types which are the conceptual meaning, connotative meaning, social meaning, affective meaning, reflected meaning, collective meaning, and thematic meaning (Leech, 1990). The connotative meaning is based on conceptual meaning. It differs in different societies, ages and so on. Hence, the connotative meaning is unstable (Wu, 1980).

New connotative meaning may emerge and old one may die. Therefore, although Chinese and English cultures have different attitudes toward “蛇” and “snake”, economic and cultural globalization blur the distinction, with more commendatory and neutral meanings in English “snake” and more derogatory meanings in Chinese “蛇”. People will gradually pay more attention to the physical features of “蛇” and “snake” rather than myths or worship of ancient records.

However quickened the pace of globalization is, there are always culturally loaded elements in any human language's vocabulary.

Culture and language are intertwined and shape each other. It is impossible to separate two. Language is not a matter of neutral codes and grammatical rules. Each time we select words, form sentences, and send a message, either oral or written, we also make cultural choices. Language helps in communicating with people from different backgrounds. However, we may be less aware that cultural literacy is necessary to understand the language being used. If we select language without being aware of the cultural implications, we may at best not communicate well and at worst send the wrong message (Xu, 2009, p.58).

This paper proposes a contrastive analysis of “蛇” and “snake” to gain an insight into cross-cultural differences between Chinese and English language. Language is a main media for intercultural communication. L2/ FL learners may have different expectations and understandings of the same word in their native language due to lack of knowledge of the target culture. To cultivate learners' language proficiency and achieve successful communication, instructors shall arouse learners' cross-cultural awareness and integrate language acquisition with cultural background.

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