

The Inheritance and Protection of Taizhou Dialect Proverbs from the Perspective of Cultural Ecology*

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Dialect contains rich cultural connotation, represents valuable regional cultural spirit, and therefore has strong living fossil value. In terms of how to protect and inherit dialect proverbs, cultural ecology is undoubtedly a valuable research perspective, whose theory focuses on the three-fold relationships between man and nature, man and society, and man and man. Based on the principles of cultural ecology, this paper probes into the potential threats to Taizhou dialect proverbs, explores the reasons for their decline, and highlights the need for an ecological protection approach.

Keywords: dialect, dialect proverb, cultural ecology

Proverbs are concise and thought-provoking stereotypical phrases, radiating with folk wisdom. Various scholars have pointed to their ubiquity and salience in social discourses and cultural situations (e.g., Honeck, 1997; Cui, 2008; Musolff, 2020). The regional disparities of proverbs are also well acknowledged (e.g., Gu, 2006; Yan, 2009; Zhou, 2016). In informative discourses, dialect proverbs are used to serve various cognitive and socio-cultural functions such as moral teaching (e.g., giving advice, persuading, rebuking, ridiculing) and cultural enlightenment.

Cultural ecology is a cross-discipline developed on the basis of ecology, cultural anthropology, cultural geography, urban sociology, etc., which “sheds some light on the internal relationship between natural environment and human culture” (Yang, 1993, p. 93), injecting new vitality into social science research. Since culture ecology is a more macroscopic concept than language ontology, it may be of great significance to study dialect proverbs from a cultural ecological perspective.

Dialectal Faults: The Potential Threat to Taizhou Dialect Proverbs

Taizhou is a modern port city of coastal Zhejiang province, China, whose history can be traced back to the Pre-Qin Dynasty. Historically, all the 6 counties and 3 municipal districts in the region have formed several isolated dialectal islands due to the traffic blockage. Without exaggerating, various dialects once have flourished in the lives of Taizhou people over the past 2,000 years.

Unfortunately, according to a recent survey conducted by the author, about 97% of the senior citizens between 50 and 70 years of age can speak one or more Taizhou dialects with high frequency in their daily lives;

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the proportion drops sharply to around 56% among people in their 30s and 40s; young people under 13, with some new and half-baked exceptions learned from their elder grandparents, can hardly speak any dialects. Among all the interviewees, the higher the level of education, the lower the frequency of dialect preference. These findings unsurprisingly confirm a prediction made by a newspaper journalist a decade ago that “dialect speakers would face a fault line”(Xiang, 2012, p. 07).

The development of society inevitably interferes the exchanges of different cultures. With the fast spread of convenient transportation and communication, a regional culture is no longer isolated from the outside world, and will naturally face the impact, collision, influence and even integration of other cultures. Meanwhile, under the influence of market economy, mass domestic migration, compulsory education, and inter-regional marriage, speaking Mandarin throughout the region for an easy talk is not only the best choice, but more appealing. In other words,

Affected by the dual factors of globalization and the urgent need for the practical utility of verbal communication, those rich and colorful languages deposited in the long history of mankind are becoming assimilative. (Mai, 2007, p. A3)

It's the way of nature that Taizhou dialects, similar as most ones in the other regions of China, are doomed to wither unless getting consistent supports from the authorities and commercial institutions.

Dialect proverbs, including slang, allegorical sayings, catchphrases, idioms, etc., are fixed, popular and concise statements created by and widely spread among the regional people, which are the acme and refinement of a dialect. Due to the irreversible changes of language environments and the decreasing use of dialects, they are gradually fading out of people's daily talks. Therefore, it's more urgent to protect them rather than to preserve a dialect itself.

Vitality: The Cultural Ecological Value of Taizhou Dialect Proverbs

Since the Pre-Qin Dynasty, many Chinese classic works began to record the widespread “folk proverbs” and “foul language”. Lu Xun, the famous litterateur in Chinese modern history, included a lot of Shaoxing slang in his works; *Furong Town*, the first Mao Dun Literature Prize winner fiction, also recorded a large number of “regional proverbs” in southern Hunan province to construct a charming folk language world for readers. In a word, dialect proverbs not only embody the excellent achievements of regional culture, preserve unique cultural exquisiteness, but encapsulate regional people's rich life experience, and in turn, condition the perceptions and attitudes of regional people.

The Cultural Value of Taizhou Dialect Proverbs Is Alive

Set against the dramatic background of, on the three sides, Tiantai, Kuocang, and Yandang mountains, and on the other, by the abundant resources of the East China Sea, Taizhou has a long tradition of fishing. Gradually, a lot of vocabulary in Taizhou dialects, relating to crab, shrimp, fish and other aquatic animals, emerged in the form of dialect proverbs. They contain the conception of moral conducts, collectivism values, doctrines of life, child-bearing biases, etc. For an illustration, see examples below.

[1] 沙蟹两头爬 (Sand crabs crawl at both ends).

[2] 黄婆鳢捉日头 (Ricefield eels like feigning death in the sun).

[3] 一目当俩, 虾皮当鲞 (Think of a pair of shrimp's eyes as two shrimps, a dried shrimp may be attributed to a large yellow croaker).

[4] 太阳底下晒鲞 (Make yellow croakers while the sun shines).

[5] 泥鳅拔直天 (The mood in the morning is as agitated as what a loach behaves).

[6] 独个儿, 餐餐过黄鱼; 独个囡, 餐餐过肉圆 (If you have a son, cook him yellow croaker for every meal, but make meatballs for a daughter).

Sand crabs breed on the mudflats, and crawl horizontally on their eight legs. Metaphorically, in example [1], they are often compared to the unfocused, and the dual-minded. A ricefield eel, as long as its skin is kept moist, does not die for several days, even when exposed to the sun. Therefore, in example [2], people satirize its habit of basking in the sun as an delicate posturing. A dried shrimp and a large yellow croaker are different in size and quality, so example [3] is a metaphor for going to great lengths to finish a task. Centuries ago, fishermen in Taizhou discovered that exposing their food to the sun and wind was an easy way to preserve it. So, laying the dried fish in the sun, as what illustrated in example [4], is full of the joy of harvest. When oxygen is scarce in the water, loaches would like to jump to the surface and swallow air. If a loach acts agitatedly from the early morning, there is nothing else it can do for the day. Therefore, the moral in example [5] is to educate people to be prudent in doing things. In the old days, boys were preferred over girls. Example [6] reflects a clear difference in diet between boys and girls.

A close examination of these metaphorical dialect proverbs, derived from Taizhou people's life experience and wisdom, reveals that a regional culture exerts a profound influence on people's thinking models, even though they might have been passed down from generations as a legacy and dogma of their ancestors.

The Linguistic Value of Taizhou Dialect Proverbs Is Inheritable

The evolvement of Chinese pronunciation, vocabulary, and grammar did not happen overnight. Since most dialects formed under the condition of traffic occlusion, relatively stagnant in time and space, lyrics, folktales and proverbs spoken in regional dialects necessarily provide vivid materials for the contemporary linguistic study. For an grammatical illustration, see examples below.

[7] 鼻头红血出 (A nose has bled a lot).

[8] 上床夫妻, 床下君子 (Couples in bed, gentlemen out of bed).

[9a] 人勿告用, 黄金山啊吃崩 (Useless people eat gold mountains through).

[9b] 路上只可栽花勿告栽刺 (Plant not thorns but flowers in the road).

[10] 苍蝇脚骨蛤蟆眼, 又格贪吃又格懒 (Fly and toad, gluttonous and lazy).

In daily communication, people in Taizhou like to put the object before the predicate, which is similar to the perfect tense in English. In example [7], “出” is a predicate, while “红血” is the object. The whole proverb actually conveys an inverted order meaning. The word “是”, as a predicate in English, is the most commonly used word in Mandarin, but it is always omitted in the declarative sentences of Taizhou dialect. Grammatically, “夫妻” and “君子” in example [8] are predicative, “上床” and “床下” are the omission of the adverbial clause of time. “勿告” is a predicate in Taizhou dialect, which not only represents the absence of a value, as shown in example [9a], but means to forbid doing something, as shown in example [9b]. As a modifier, “的” in Chinese (“of” in English) is usually omitted. So, “苍蝇脚骨” and “蛤蟆眼” in example [10] are the metonymy-style words, which literally refer to “a fly's feet” and “a toad's eyes”. It's clear that Taizhou dialects, compared with Mandarin, follow the characteristics of mediaeval Chinese. Although their tones are less in number and monotonous (almost 10 more initials and finals than Mandarin), it is more flexible and rich in grammatical expression of dialect proverbs.

Enlightenment: Ways to Protect the Cultural Ecology of Taizhou Dialect Proverbs

Since the root cause of the threat to Taizhou dialects and dialect proverbs lies in the crisis of language and cultural ecology, the most fundamental way out is to strike an optimal and harmonious coexistence.

Regression to Ecological Ontology

Ecological ontology is a narrative ontology based on the sense of ecology, which is both a dialectical negation of the “denaturalization” of traditional anthropocentrism, and a critical refutation of the “dehumanization” of eco-centrism (J. Zhang & F. D. Zhang, 2016, p. 66). According to the modernist view, human desires and their fulfillment are the only things worth considering in determining the way to treat nature. However, this may always lead to delusions of victimization due to constant disillusionment. In contrast to anthropocentrist ethics, postmodern ecologism argues that

By emphasizing a relational and ecological understanding of substance, especially human existence, postmodern thought will help us to realize that the otherness is partly a function of its environment, and that we are part of that environment. (Griffin, 1998, pp. 219-220)

Under this ontology view, ecology has become the product of the organic integration of man and nature, which is no longer the living relation of “subject and object”, but of “here and the world” (J. Zhang & F. D. Zhang, 2016, p. 66). Therefore, the common use of various proverbs in Taizhou people’s daily life reveals that nature world, the main source of most proverbs, is regarded as an equal partner for communication and dialogue, rather than an objective and passive substance. Dialect proverbs, like the fish metaphorical proverbs, demonstrate the existence of a harmonious interdependent relationship between people and their ecological environment, and the people who use these proverbs are no longer just individuals or specific communities, but an ecological unity. Their thinking models and cultural experience delivered over generations not only follow the macro law of nature but serve the whole regional ecological cycle.

Reconstruction of Ecological Prototype

In ancient Greece, Aristotle argued that

Nature is not a blind force. On the contrary, it seems to be conscious; it has a set direction of development and a mode of operation and procedure governed by inner laws. Nature seems to know its own desires and to be familiar with its own motives and purposes of production. (Chen, 1996, p. 46)

Proverbs that draw analogies between human beings and the state of their natural existence actually link human fate to the entire ecosystem. This simple view of ecological connection embodies the traditional Chinese philosophy of “Heaven and Man in One”. Dialect proverbs, therefore, are conceived of the raw voice of nature containing the light of human ecological consciousness. Take Taizhou dialect proverbs for example, the frequent references to fish, insects and mammals are symbols of universal significance, representing a shared cultural psychology and tendency of the regional people. So, the identification with these ecological symbols spontaneously brings together the regional people’s emotional orientation, that is, all the creatures in nature, as sustenance for human survival and partners to rely on, have been successfully integrated into their collective consciousness of ecology.

Under this awareness, the prototypes of the metaphorical creatures in Taizhou dialect proverbs are no longer primitively anthropomorphic. Their natural qualities have not been fundamentally eliminated, but have

achieved a harmonious coexistence with the regional people. Only by reconstructing their ecological prototypes can they better participate in and witness the life and production practices of Taizhou people.

Reorientation of Ecological Expansion

In retrospect, many Taizhou dialect proverbs are combinations of man and nature closely linked to each other in a metaphorical axes of time and space, constituting a complete cultural ecosystem. The temporality, to be more specific, means that the contents of dialect proverbs span a long period of history without any dramatic changes, while the spatiality relates to the widely shared great concerns among regional people.

However, in an era of diminishing dialects and increasingly frequent cultural exchanges, the ecological temporality has been greatly squeezed, and the boundaries of ecological spatiality are gradually blurred, which has already exerted certain negative effects. When people in Taizhou endeavor to pass on all of the dialect proverbs as undifferentiated and eternal discourses from generations, they may have to find a more concise, efficient and easy-to-transmit memorization way, adapting to the changing society and cultural environment. The refined condensation of their life experiences and conceptions in the proverb discourses thus considerably expresses a more sophisticated ecological view of culture.

Conclusions

In conclusion, the dilemma of Taizhou dialects and dialect proverbs deserves growing attention, and the research on how to protect and inherit them should be deepened by adopting a more scientific perspective, and cultural ecology is an effective way to study this issue. By studying dialect proverbs from the perspective of cultural ecology, one can not only accurately understand their survival status, but also deeply comprehend their cultural value and rationally explore their protection strategies.

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