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**RUSSIAN BIBLICAL IDIOM ЗМИЙ-ИСКУСИТЕЛЬ (TEMPTING  
SERPENT) FROM VIEWPOINT OF CHINESE CULTURE**

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*Abstract*

The paper considers national and cultural specifics of a biblical idiom *змий-искуситель* (Old Serpent, lit. tempting serpent) that reflects the concept of snake characteristic of the Russian people in the context of Chinese linguistic culture. After analyzing the symbolic meanings of the zoonym *snake* in Chinese context, the authors revealed that this idiom is absent in Chinese, as the concept of tempter that the snake has in the Russian linguistic culture is absent in Chinese linguistic and cultural tradition. Meanwhile, temptation is one of the dominating anti-values of the Russian linguistic culture. The obtained results showed difference in semantics of the *snake* zoonym and idioms including this component between the representatives of Russian and Chinese culture due to an active influence that the culture exerts onto the national language. In Chinese tradition, the image of the snake has both positive and negative connotations. It is defined by symbolism of the totem animal that is genetically related to a dragon, which is reflected in many Chinese chengyu. Often, the attributes of insidious, cruel, evil and greedy animal are highlighted in the image of a snake. However, connotations of a tempter are absent in the Chinese phraseology. The materials of the paper may find practical application in teaching the Russian phraseology to foreign audiences, including the Chinese one.

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## 1. Introduction

Languages are abound with reproducible chunks of language that are used by speakers as ready-for-use linguistic units with integral meaning (Owens, & Dodsworth, 2017; Rose, 2009; Rubio, 2018). Such units are called idioms. As “phraseology of a language [...] is inextricably connected with history, culture and traditions of the nation that speaks the language” (Kovalenko, 2010), it is fair to say that it is one of the most important sources of information on the culture of this nation (Bagautdinov, Minkin, Ivanov & Nizameeva, 2018; Ivanishcheva, 2016; Velasco, 2016).

V.A. Mendelson notes that «influence of Bible and its translations onto formation, development and preservation of languages is difficult to overestimate» (Mendelson, 2002). “The process, in which Biblical expressions get into the language and then fix their position there was related to a deep religiosity of population and a strong role that the Church played in the state. It lasted for centuries and the mindset itself became permeated with Christian thought, morals and images» (Zhukovskaya, 2006). Many of them, especially animal-related components are often used as symbolic words that reflect human observations over the external attributes of various animals and ideas of their internal qualities. Biblical images of animals, such as serpent, dove, sheep, ass, lamb and others, motivated by biblical mythological context became universal symbols in the Christian culture.

Recently, a number of works were dedicated to studying national and cultural specifics of idioms related to animal images (Yakovleva, 2016; Bagana & Yakovleva, 2016). For example, Puchkov (2015) studied idiomatic units with animal nominations in Russian and French in the context of eliciting characteristics of human appearance. Sakayeva (2008) conducted a comparative analysis of idioms with animal components that reflect human qualities in Russian and English, explaining the causes of similarity and difference in the context of symbolic semantics. Seraskhova (2013) had analyzed some features of idioms with animal component in Khanty language and noted that they partially reflect the mindset of the Khanty people. Besides, there are a multitude of studies analyzing idioms with concrete animal-designating component in the cultural linguistics context. For example, the paper by Yermakova, and Fayzullina (2016) studied idioms with a horse component in Russian and Tatar languages; the work by Kudryavtseva (2015) considered the idioms with a dog component in Russian; the paper by Golubenko (2016) analyzed cat-related idioms in Russian and Lithuanian; the study by Tretyakova (2014) is dedicated to idioms with bear and wolf components in Russian, etc. Taking into account that idioms pose a problem in foreign language learning, some papers consider state-of-the-art methods in idiom teaching (Yang & Xie, 2013; Suvorova & Polyakova, 2018) and methods of representation for their meanings in dictionaries (Vrbinc & Vrbinc, 2016).

## 2. Problem Statement

Following these researchers, the authors are trying to make a contribution to studies of Biblical idioms with animal nominative components in the context of the Chinese linguistic culture. According to the statistics, the dictionary of Biblical idioms compiled by Dubrovina (2010) includes 19 idiomatic units with animal nominations, including 4 idioms with complete equivalents in Chinese, such as, a wolf in sheep's clothing, the dove of peace, stray sheep, scapegoat. However, other Biblical idioms that include animal nomination either do not exist in Chinese, or are not used idiomatically. For example, let us take a

look at a well-known Russian Biblical idiom змий-искуситель (Old Serpent, lit. Tempter Serpent). The image of the snake in this idiom is a symbol of the devil, tempter, seducer.

In Christianity, temptation, according to Vtorushina, and Bashkeyeva (2015) (making this note while analyzing values reflected in plays of Stepan Lobozerov) is “one of the essential anti-values”. The prototypes of temptation plots in the analyzed plays come from the Biblical stories of temptation, one of which is a story of the Old Serpent. Thus, a Christian anti-value of temptation is concealed in the змий-искуситель idiom. Buyanova (2012) identified a Humanistic Qualities category within the ideographic field of Moral Qualities of a Person, which comprises idioms with a negative assessment of personal qualities. The Biblical idiom змий-искуситель is included in the list under a subcategory of “Idioms with a negative assessment of quality”.

### 3. Research Questions

This paper is dealing with the following research questions:

- Which Russian Biblical idioms with zoonym components have their equivalents in the Chinese linguistic culture?
- How the value of the Russian Biblical idiom змий-искуситель may be translated into Chinese?
- What are negative and positive connotation of the snake zoonym in the Chinese linguistic culture?

### 4. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to reveal the national cultural specifics of the Russian Biblical idiom in question in the context of the Chinese linguistic culture. To reach this goal, it is necessary to attain a number of objectives related to analysis of the image of snake in the Chinese traditional culture and its manifestation in Chinese idioms that include *snake* as a component, search for similarities and differences in the image of snake between the Russian and the Chinese cultures.

### 5. Research Methods

A comparative method and a method of linguocultural analysis were applied to the research material in question.

### 6. Findings

As noted above, temptation is one of the major Christian anti-values that is reflected in both the Biblical story about the Old Serpent and in the Biblical idiom змий-искуситель. In China, the image of snake also involves reach and ancient layer of cultural information. A number of Chinese idioms formed on the basis of various images of snake. As the image of snake is significant in both cultures, this research topic is of considerable interest.

The Biblical idiom змий-искуситель is used to denote a tempter, an instigator. The искуситель (tempter) component dominates in the meaning of this construction. At the same time, the idiom reflects the concept that the Russian people has of the image of snake, which is informed by Biblical Old Testament legend of a lapse from virtue on behalf of the first-created humans, Adam and Eve, which happened because they ate forbidden fruit, surrendering to a temptation of the serpent as an embodiment of Satan.

From the point of view of this construction's dominant meaning, it may be expressed with a Chinese collocation «蛊惑人心者» (gu huo ren xin zhe) including the idiomatic construction «蛊惑人心» (gu huo ren xin), which in the modern Chinese language means: “to use deception and temptation to entrap a person”. In this chengyu (chengyu is one of classical Chinese idiomatic models, usually consisting of four syllables) «蛊» (gu) denotes a venomous insect used in a magic ritual that according to the legend proceeds like this: a person puts many venomous insects into a jar and waits while they are devouring each other. The last insect alive is called «蛊» (gu). So, «蛊惑人心» (gu huo ren xin) literally means “to deceive human soul using a gu”. For example, «“你想发财吗？你想成为百万富翁吗？”这是彩票商蛊惑人心的宣传» / «Do you want to get rich? Do you want to become a millionaire?» - it is an advertisement of lottery ticket salesmen that deceives people (gu huo ren xin). Another example: «对传销怎么看？工商局的官员认为是一种“蛊惑人心、欺骗消费者”的不正当竞争». As for multi-level marketing, in the opinion of trade and industry authority officials, it is an unfair competition practice that may misinform a person (gu huo ren xin), deceive consumers.

Chinese people are imaging the serpent (蛇 she) with many characteristic attributes, including both positive and negative sides. In the Chinese traditional culture, the cult of serpent has a long history and harkens back to extreme antiquity. One of the foundational ancient Chinese books, The Classic of Mountains and Seas (Shan Hai Jing) contains the stories about the first gods and ancient legends about ancestors of humanity, Fuxi (伏羲) and Nüwa (女娲), who had human heads but bodies of serpent, showing that the snakes played relatively important role for the forefathers of the Chinese people. The serpent was the original totem of the early Chinese civilization, representing the power of birth and procreation. Until now there is an ancient custom of seeing a snake as an ancestor: for example, in some back-country or mountainous regions, when elderly people see snakes in their home, they bow to them, believing that the snake is an embodiment of their ancestors.

The snake is also the main prototype of a dragon («龙» (lung)), a unique mythological animal of the Chinese people. The dragon is a sacred animal and the main totem of the Chinese nation. The image of the Chinese dragon is a combination of many animal images, while its main part, that is, neck and body, are taken from a snake. Thus, in primeval religious tradition, there was the snake cult that transformed into a dragon cult. However, while the dragon was ascending to the highest position, the serpent descended into shadows. Thus, Chinese often call the serpent a small dragon. It is no mere chance, that among the Chinese zodiac signs the serpent follows the dragon and takes the sixth place. There is a Chinese idiom 蛇化为龙 · 不变其文 (she hua wei lung, bu bian qi wen), which may be literally translated into Russian as “the serpent turned into dragon, but the essence is the same”, meaning: there may be various forms, but the essence is unchangeable. There are other chengyu that include dragon and snake as components 龙蛇飞动 (lung she fei dung) and 笔走龙蛇 (bi zou lung she). The former literally means “flight of a dragon and

movement of a snake”. The latter literally means: “to act with a brush the same way dragon flies and snake moves”. In the modern Chinese, both constructions are used to compare a lively and energetic hieroglyphic handwriting to the flight of a dragon and movements of a snake.

In ancient China, depictions of dragon and serpent often appeared on parade dress of emperors and officials. The image of the dragon was intended only for imperial families, while that of a python – for ministers, subordinate to the emperor. Python was a protector of ministers, thus their parade garments often had embroidered images of pythons. It implies, that both dragon and serpent symbolized power. For example, there is a Chinese proverb: «蛇龙失势 · 比于蝗蚓» (she lung shi shi, bi yu huan yin), which when literally translated into Russian means: “Dragon and serpent devoid of power are like locust and earth worm”. This construction means: if characters lose their power and end up in a difficult situation, they will cover themselves with shame. Beside, in the modern Chinese language, a local tyrant that oppresses people or a local influential person is denoted with a fixed expression «地头蛇» (di tou she), which literally means “a local snake”. There is also a Chinese idiom 强龙不压地头蛇 (qiang lung bu ya di tou she), which literally means: “Even the mighty dragon cannot get an upper hand against the local snake”, with a metaphorical meaning that outsiders, even very powerful ones, may not win over the local sinister forces.

The image of serpent is also a major source of folklore tales. The legend of White Serpent is wide spread; it tells about a romantic love between a man and a white shape-shifting serpent that after a thousand years of hermitage returned in the image of a beautiful woman named Bai Suzhen. She met a hero, Xu Xian on a bridge near the West Lake in Hangzhou, they fell in love and later married. Together they opened pharmacies, treated and saved many people. Bai Suzhen appeared as a delicate, generous, beautiful and kind woman that earned respect and recognition from people. The Legend of the White Snake is showing a beautiful and romantic love story.

It should be noted, that while the serpent in ancient legends is intimately related to Chinese ancestors, the main totem of China, wealth, happiness, luck, power, beautiful love that all people want, these positive properties rarely found their way into Chinese phraseology. The Chinese linguistic culture is more reflective of more negative connotations of the snake, quite likely due to the fact that many people see snakes as ugly and terrifying animals, besides, poisonous snakes are lethally dangerous, so humans hate them and are afraid of them. Thus, the serpent became a symbol of craftiness, cruelty and evil. A Chinese proverb says «一朝被蛇咬, 十年怕井绳» (yi zhao bei she yao, shi nian pa jing sheng), literally: “a person once bitten by a snake is afraid of well rope for ten years”, that is, a person who suffered from something is still in fear of repeating the situation. Another similar Chinese proverb is «蛇咬一口, 见了黄鳝都怕» (she yao yi kou, jian le huang shan dou pa), which literally says about a person who after being bitten by a snake is afraid of an eel.

There is also a proverb «蛇咬一口, 入骨三分» (she yao yi kou, ru gu san fen) with the literal meaning: “After snake's bite the poison penetrates the bones to a depth of three fen” (fen is a Chinese measure, equal to 0.33 cm.). This construction is used with the meaning: a bespoken person suffers much and cannot easily escape the suffering.

To denote a person with ugly appearance and black soul, the following chengyu is used 蛇头鼠眼 (she tou shu yan), literally meaning “head of a serpent, eyes of a mouse”.

To designate poisonous, cruel, evil soul, the chengyu 蛇蝎心肠 (she se xin chang) is used, literally meaning “heart and guts of snake and scorpion”.

About a person who is kind in his words, but insidious in his soul, Chinese shay 佛口蛇心 (fo kou she xin), literally meaning “mouth of Buddha, heart of a snake”.

There are also idioms that include both snake and dragon as opposed components. For example, the 龙蛇混杂 changyu (lung she hun za) literally speaks about mixing dragons and snakes and is used to denote a mixed company of good and bad people.

Besides, to denote immeasurable greed of a person, an idiom 人心不足蛇吞象 (ren xin bu zu she tun xiang) is used, with the literal meaning of “a person with a greedy heart without pleasure, like a snake that is trying to swallow an elephant”.

## 7. Conclusion

From the given Chinese idioms with the snake component, we may conclude that the snake in the Chinese culture has various symbolic meanings related to mythology and Chinese concepts of the image of snake. Nevertheless, the tempter motif that is present in the Russian linguistic culture is absent in Chinese phraseology. The Biblical idiom змий-искуситель has no equivalent in Chinese, and Christianity-related characteristics of snake depiction are not fixed in Chinese language nor culture. It illustrates differences between the cultures.

Snake in Chinese popular mythology is an embodiment of justice, courage and kindness, however these attributes rarely find expression in Chinese phraseology. In Biblical mythology, however, snake is a symbol of evil, insidious, cruel, unworthy people.

On the other hand, chengyu and proverbs that include the word snake (蛇she) as a component reflect a negative attitude: snake bites, venomous nature, ugliness, terror, greed – thus, the image of snake usually correlates with cruel, vicious, ugly and greedy people. The positive understanding of snake lays in the fact that dragon and snake pertain to the same family, thus they often appear in the same idioms as the elements of comparison. Nevertheless, perception of the image of snake by the Russian people is mainly related to Christian concepts that dominate in the national spiritual culture.

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