

Russian Biblical Phraseological Units with the Component “God” in the Aspect of Chinese Linguistic Tradition

Yuxia Lu

*Department of Russian Language
and Teaching Methods*

*Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
(RUDN University)
Moscow, Russia*

Viktor M. Shaklein

*Department of Russian Language
and Teaching Methods*

*Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
(RUDN University)
Moscow, Russia*

Svetlana S. Mikova

*Department of Russian Language
and Teaching Methods*

*Peoples' Friendship University of Russia
(RUDN University)
Moscow, Russia*

Abstract—Orthodox Christian norms, their important role in traditional and modern Russian linguistic culture are reflected in phraseological units containing the lexeme “God (Divine)”. These units are of a great interest in the aspect of other linguistic tradition, especially if the latter is very different from Russian, e.g. Chinese. Russian phraseological units with the lexeme “God (Divine)” can be translated into Chinese with the help of Chinese words or phraseological units with the component Tian (“Sky”).

Keywords—*phraseological unit, Biblical phraseological unit, God, Shangdi, Tian, linguistic culture, the Chinese language, the Russian language*

I. INTRODUCTION

National languages reflect national cultural heritage: language is understood as “a system of signs that is seen as having itself a cultural value” [1]. Foreign and Russian scientists point out the ability of a language to fix and keep cultural information [2-5]. Cultural information in a language is kept in so called cultural codes forming linguistic world picture of a certain nation and structuring cultural knowledge [6].

Language reflects different aspects of human life including religious life. Language and religion as two cultural phenomena are closely connected. According to Gao Chiang-Jiang, “language creates religion, religion also creates language. Language as a means of communication and sign system is a base for constructing spiritual world. Religion as a spiritual system with its own unique cultural function creates language.” [5]. It is religious meaning that presents challenges in inter-language and intercultural communication, e.g. in translation [7], especially if it comes to the central concepts of religious world picture such as

Corresponding Author: Svetlana S. Mikova, Department of Russian Language and Teaching Methods, Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University), Moscow, Russia.

Fund Project: this paper was financially supported by the Ministry of Education and Science of the Russian Federation on the program to improve the competitiveness of Peoples' Friendship University of Russia (RUDN University) among the world's leading research and education centers in 2016-2020.

“spirit”, “soul” [8].

Language is a sort of a container for religious culture. Phraseological units (PU) reflect national specifics more vividly than separate words. That is why “it is necessary to take into account cultural information of phraseological units” [9].

Orthodox culture in Russian linguistic culture is kept and reported in biblical PU which attracts scientists' attention. Recently in Russia there have appeared several vocabularies of biblical PU, one of the first being the dictionary by K.N. Dubrovina [10]. The dictionary contains a special group of PE with the component “God”: *царствие Божие* (the kingdom of God), *служить Богу и маммоне* (to serve God and mammon), *Кесарево кесарю, а Божие Богу* (to give to Caesar what is Caesar's, and give to God what is God's), etc. These PU are presented in almost 40 dictionary entries. According to Ya.S. Zaytseva, “Russian word *God* in most PU reflect monotheistic Christian concept of God as the sole and almighty Father of the Universe.” [11]

Biblical PU have already been studied in the aspect of their semantics, structure and functioning in the Russian language [12-14]. These language units have not been studied in the aspect of the Chinese language. Nevertheless, these units can be rendered by original Chinese words or idioms, which we are going to prove in our research.

II. THE AIM OF THE ARTICLE

The article is aimed at finding common and national-specific cultural meaning of biblical PU with the component “God” and relevant Chinese expressions with the component “Tian”. The authors show the importance of Chinese concept “Shangdi” in rendering the Orthodox concept “God”, analyse the evolution of the concepts “Shangdi”, “Di”, “Tian” in Chinese traditional culture, disclose the semantics of the word “Tian” in modern Chinese language, prove that biblical PU with the word “God” can be expressed by Chinese phrases with the word “Tian”. The analysis can help to fully understand both languages and cultures, translate from one language into the other and take part in effective intercultural communication.

III. METHODS AND MATERIALS

The article analyses language material taken from phraseological dictionary of the Chinese language [15], corpus of modern Chinese language [16-17], national corpus of the Russian language [18].

The authors used the following methods: comparative method, linguistic and cultural analysis, contrastive analysis.

IV. RESULTS

Interpreting Russian biblical PU in the aspect of Chinese language and cultural tradition mainly refer to the values of Christianity, where the God is in the centre. Chinese civilization is based on an ancient and actual nowadays concept of Tian. Through Chinese expressions with this component we can understand Chinese mentality and culture. Tian in Chinese culture is as powerful as God in Orthodox Christianity of Russia. That is why expressions with the word “God” and hieroglyph “Tian” can be used as synonyms in similar situations. However, they represent different cultural concepts.

V. DISCUSSION

Nowadays, there exist two translations of the Bible into modern Chinese language. They have different variants of translation of the word “God”. One of the variants is 上帝 (Shangdi). According to Li Shen, “Shangdi among religious people in China is the name of God, which was translated in this way by western missionaries in the last years of the Ming dynasty. Shangdi is the supreme god in Chinese traditional culture.” [19]. Shangdi literally means “the supreme emperor” and was also named as Di. Belief in Shangdi (Di) started in the Shang dynasty. When the Shang dynasty changed into the Zhou dynasty, the concept of Shangdi gradually changed into the concept of Tian. In the beginning of the Zhou dynasty Di and Tian were used together. Usually the first meant He, who exists, while the latter – the place where He exists.

Tian “is the supreme virtuous God of the Zhou dynasty. Fen Zan Zhang pointed out that Tian differed from Di in three specific features: ambiguity, natural character, and moral [20]. This meaning is represented in Chinese chengyu 朝天子一朝臣 “when the emperor is changed the ministers are changed”. In the expression 天子 “the son of Tian” denotes the emperor which reflects the idea of divine origin of the emperor power.

The word “Tian” is widely used in modern Chinese language in the following meanings “sky”, “God”, “the place where the God lives”, “inborn”, “nature”, “time period”, “weather”, “the greatest”, etc. In 59% set expressions with the word “Tian” the latter means “sky”, in 25 % - “God, or the place where the God lives” [21].

Studying Russian biblical PU with the word “God” from the aspect of Chinese culture we found that the semantics of these expressions can be rendered by Chinese expressions

with the word “Tian”.

Let us look at the expression *Царствие Божие* (the Kingdom of God) which denotes Paradise in Christianity. In Chinese, the expression can be understood as 天国 (Tian guo), 天堂 (Tian tang), 天界 (Tian jie), containing the component “Tian”, which denote the place parallel to the world on the earth. There gods with the supreme Tian di live. So the Russian expression *рай земной* (earthly paradise) corresponds to the Chinese expression 人间天堂 (ren jiang tian tang).

Russian set expression *слово Божие* (the word of God) is often used in the Holy Scripture. In Chinese translation of the Bible this expression is translated as 神的道 (“dao of God”). It is known that dao in traditional Chinese philosophy means the essence of all living things, the law of nature. In modern Chinese language one of the meanings of dao is ideological system of science or religion [22]. That is why it is possible to translate *слово Божие* as dao of God. In modern Russian language the expression is used in the meaning “Christian doctrine” [10], for example “One of the legends says that in XIII century an English knight St. Winifred left his native country, came to wild woody Germany to preach to German people the word of God” [18]. Tian dao is considered as demonstration of Tian power: “Only if the man sincerely believes in “honesty” of Tian and understands it, everything takes its place” [16].

The expression *дар Божий* (the gift of God) originates from the Bible is used in modern Russian language in the meaning “inborn talent” [23]. To render the meaning in Chinese we can use the metaphor “gift of Tian” - 天赋: “She didn’t expect to become a singer in spite of the fact that everybody saw her gift of Tian in the sphere and recommended to enter the musical institute” [16].

The biblical PU *Божьей милостью* (dei gratia), according to L.G. Kochedykin, means “having inborn original talent in a certain sphere” [23]: “Tatiana Alekseevna Okoneshnikova can be briefly characterised as a designer dei gratia” [18]. In Chinese, the meaning can be rendered by a complex word 天才, containing “Tian” and “cai – ‘talent’”: “Every child is a musician having Tian cai with rare natural talent, excellent ear for music and rhythm” [16]. Tian cai reflects the idea that a person has abilities exceeding abilities of common people.

PU *перст Божий* (the finger of God) has the meaning “something mysterious, mystic; fate, fatality, providence” [10]. Chinese linguistic culture expresses these concepts by the word “Tian”. People should follow the power of Tian, obey the fate: “She only sighs of ill-being and indeterminism of fate considering next loss of possibilities the power of Tian (Tian yi)” [16]. In this sense, Tian yi can be the synonym of the PU *перст Божий*. This can be proved in the following example: “Daria Terentyevna, Dashenka, it is great that it came to my mind, it is really the finger of God” [18]. In other contexts, biblical PU *перст Божий* can be a synonym of 天命 (Tian ming, “the fate

given by Tian”) or 天数 (Tian Shu “the fate created by Tian”): “There exists an expression “surgeon with a God-given talent”. What does it mean, in your opinion? – May be, it means that he has the finger of God on him” [18]; “Failure in Leningrad was the finger of God” [18].

Biblical PU *Все в руке Божией* (everything is in the hands of God) is usually used in the meaning “strange situation when you should depend only on God, fate” [10]: “I do not have any plan. Everything is in the hands of God”, Catherine whispered” [18]. This PU can be associated with Chinese chengyu 听天由命. The first pair of hieroglyphs literally means “obey the power of Tian”, the second pair means “accept their own fate”. The expression keeps the idea that the events should happen naturally and there is no use to make efforts and try to change anything: “Finally he decided to obey the power of Tian and accept his fate. If he comes to the place of their date, he will be with her for the whole life.” [16].

The saying of biblical origin *Бог дал, Бог и взял* (the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away) is used when somebody tries to show humility or console somebody in case of somebody’s death or loss [10]. In such situation Chinese people remember the phrase from *The Analects* 生死有命, 富贵在天 “life and death by the life, wealth in the Tian”. The expression is used to describe a very tricky situation that it cannot be solved by people: “She felt sick... Speaking literary words, life, death, wealth, noble rank depend on the fate given by Tian, so what is the need of sighing?” [17].

The meaning of the biblical expression *Бог даст день, даст и пищу* (God will give the day, God will give us food) is that there is no need to worry about the future: “Speaking about money, God will give the day, God will give us food, my friend” [18]. From the point of view of Chinese linguistic tradition this meaning can be rendered by the expression 天无绝人之路 “Tian will not leave a person with no place to go”.

In oral speech in order to make an oath in somebody’s honesty Russian speakers use the biblical PU *Убей меня Бог!* (Let God kill me (if I am lying)): “What do they need you for? Where is the diamond? – It is the main question. Let God kill me, they think that you keep the diamond.” [18]. When Chinese people make an oath, they use the chengyu 对天发誓 “swear to Tian”: “Yin Er stood near her, bent a little and said stumbling: “You, don’t cry! I will be kind to you. If you don’t believe me, I can swear to Tian.” [15]. Besides this, to express their determination and sincerity Chinese people use the chengyu 天地良心, containing three components: Tian “sky”, Di “earth”, liang xing “conscience”. This chengyu is said before making an oath. Chinese tradition points out the unity of Tian and people, their interrelation. The theory of three components – sky, earth, man – is one of the main parts of Chinese culture. Nevertheless, sky and earth in this expression are not parts of objective reality, because if they were absolutely material, did not have consciousness, they could not act as

witnesses. So here Tian can stand for Tian dao as the law of nature and Tian di having will. Earth can denote the great power of earth carrying all the living beings or gods of earth, gods of mountains, etc. Only a person with a kind or a sympathetic soul can have conscience. In Chinese tradition Tian, earth and conscience are very important, that is why people swear to them. This gave birth to the chengyu 天地良心: “He groans plaintively: “I swear to Tian, earth and conscience! There is no such affair.” [15].

We can conclude that the semantics of biblical expressions with the component “God” can be rendered by Chinese expressions with the component “Tian”:

- 1) Царствие Божие (the kingdom of God) - 天堂 (Tian tang);
- 2) Слово Божие (the word of God) - 天道 (Tian dao);
- 3) Дар Божий (the gift of God) - 天赋 (Tian fu);
- 4) Божьей милостью (dei gratia) - 天才 (Tian cai);
- 5) Перст Божий (the finger of God) - 天意 (Tian yi), 天命 (Tian ming), 天数 (Tian Shu);
- 6) Все в руке Божией (everything is in the hands of God) - 听天由命 (ting tian you ming);
- 7) Бог дал, Бог и взял (the Lord gave, and the Lord hath taken away) - 生死有命, 富贵在天 (sheng si you ming, fu gui zai tian);
- 8) Бог даст день, даст и пищу (God will give the day, God will give us food) - 天无绝人之路 (Tian wu jue ren zhi lu);
- 9) Убей меня Бог (Let God kill me (if I am lying) - 对天发誓 (Dui Tian fa shi), 天地良心 (Tian di liang xin).

VI. CONCLUSION

Biblical PU with the component “God” are central in the micro-system of Russian biblical phraseology. They reflect the fundamental concept of Orthodox Christianity of God’s power in the world. The concept “Tian” in Chinese traditional culture is also very important. Tian is the unity of natural sky and supranatural divine being. In Chinese language consciousness, Tian rules everything in the world, including the mankind. So, concepts “Tian” and “God” relating to different cultures can be to a great extent similar to each other.

Russian biblical PU with the component “God” and Chinese expressions with the component “Tian” are widely used in both languages. But compared with their original meanings, modern semantics of these expressions are usually diluted.

The comparison of cultural context of the concepts “God” and “Tian / Shangdi” and interpreting Russian biblical PU from the point of view of Chinese linguistic culture show the similarity of the languages, cultures and

consciousness. Further research in the sphere can contribute into more profound understanding of the cultures and improve cultural dialogue of the representatives of different linguistic cultures.

REFERENCES

- [1] C. Kramsch. *Language and Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000.
- [2] E.M. Vereschagin, V.G. Kostomarov. *Language and Culture: Cultural Studies in Teaching Russian as a Foreign Language*. Moscow: Russkiy yazyk, 1990 (In Russian).
- [3] Lo Chang Pei. *The Chinese and Chinese language*. Shanghai: Bookshop "Kaimin", 1947 (In Chinese).
- [4] A. Assemi, S.z. Saleh, M.A. Ebadi, G. Abbasi *Culture within language*. International Conference on Language, Medias and Culture IPEDR. Vol.33. Singapore: IACSIT Press. 2012, pp.78–82.
- [5] Gao Chang Jiang. Preliminary discussion of the relation between language and religion. *The Bulletin of phylosophy and social sciences*. Kunmin: Yunnan Normal University. V. 24. № 5. 1992. pp.86-91.
- [6] V.A. Maslova *The Russian Language through the Codes of Cultural Linguistics*. *Bulletin of Peoples' Friendship University of Russia*. Series "Russian and foreign languages, methods of its teaching". 2016. № 3. pp. 27-34.
- [7] B.L. Reynolds, C.-C. Liao. *Translating Religion in The Dream of the Red Chamber*. 3L: *The Southeast Asian Journal of English Language Studies*. Vol 20 (2). pp. 101–116. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.17576/3L-2014-2002-09>.
- [8] C. H.-y. Chan. The translation of 'spirit' and 'soul' in the Mandarin Bible Union Version. *The International Journal for Translation & Interpreting Research*. Vol. 9. No 2 (2017). pp. 87-99. DOI: 10.12807/ti.109202.2017.a06.
- [9] A. Cowie *Phraseology: Theory, Analysis and Applications*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001.
- [10] K.N. Dubrovina. *Encyclopedic Dictionary of Biblical Phraseologisms*. Moscow: Flinta: Nauka, 2010 (In Russian).
- [11] Ya.S. Zaytseva. *Structural, Semantic, and Stylistic Peculiarities of Phraseologisms of Biblical Origin*. *Doct. Dissertation*. Moscow, 2010 (In Russian).
- [12] Pak Son Gu. *Phraseo-reflex expressions with the component God in the Russian language*. *Language, Consciousness, Communication: collection of articles*. Ed. by V.V. Krasnykh, A.I. Izotov. Moscow: Dialogue-MGU, 1999, issue 10, pp. 35-40 (In Russian).
- [13] P.A. Zagorskina. *Biblical phraseologisms with the components "God" and "Devil" in Russian and French*. *International Scientific Journal "Innovative Science"*. 2016, № 11-2, pp. 101-106 (In Russian).
- [14] Zh.A. Zubova, M.A. Anzina. *Biblical phraseology in M.M. Prishvin's stories*. *The Bulletin of N.A. Nekrasov KGU*, 2015, № 4, pp. 137-140 (In Russian).
- [15] *Big Phraseological Dictionary Xinhua*. Beijing: Commercial Publishing House, 2013 (In Chinese).
- [16] *The Corpus of modern Chinese Language*. <http://www.aihanyu.org/cncorpus/CnCindex.aspx>
- [17] Xun Endun, Rao Gaoqi, Xiao Xiaoue, Sang Jiaojiao. *Working out the BBC on base of big data*. *Corpus Linguistics*, 2016 (1).
- [18] *National Corpus of the Russian Language*. <http://www.ruscorpora.ru>
- [19] Li Shen. *Confucian Philosophy and Confucianism*. Chengdu: The Publishing House of Sichuan University, 2005 (In Chinese).
- [20] Feng Jian Zhang. *Religion and Beliefs on the Background of Chinese Culture: around the concepts "Di", "Tian" and "Dao"*. *Doct. diss*. Beijing, 2010 (In Chinese).
- [21] Wang Jing. *Semantic analysis and cultural contents of the hieroglyph "Tian" in phraseologisms*. *Modern Philology: Studies of Language Ontology*, 2016, pp. 35-37.
- [22] *Modern Chinese Dictionary*. Beijing: Commercial Publishing House, 2012.
- [23] L.G. Kochedykov. *Concise Dictionary of Biblical Phraseologisms*. Samara: Publishing House "Bahrah-M", 2006.