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CULTURAL EXPRESSIONS THROUGH SNAKE IMAGERY IN IDIOMS: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH, CHINESE AND VIETNAMESE

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Abstract: Snakes are considered to be a culturally significant species worldwide and have deep cultural significance across various societies. Snakes have been appearing in folklore, mythologies and languages with fascinating and symbolism images for centuries. While there have been numerous studies exploring snake symbolisms, a comparative analysis across different cultures has been still limited. This study aims to analyze and compare the cultural meanings and idiomatic expressions related to snakes in English, Chinese and Vietnamese. The study also identifies the linguistic features, semantic structures, and cultural implications embedded in snake-related idioms in these languages. The data for the research have been extracted from idiom dictionaries, books, literary works, and research journals, which then would be analyzed to determine both the similarities and differences in how cultural features interpret snake images. The findings will reveal how cultural identity and language shape the meanings of snake-related idioms across nations, highlighting inter-cultural connections. The paper is expected to provide valuable references for multilingual learners, language teachers as well as researchers keen on linguistics, culture and symbolism.

Keywords: snake imagery, cultural expressions, idioms, language teaching

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BIỂU ĐẠT VĂN HÓA QUA HÌNH TƯỢNG CON RẮN TRONG THÀNH NGỮ: NGHIÊN CỨU SO SÁNH GIỮA TIẾNG ANH, TIẾNG TRUNG VÀ TIẾNG VIỆT

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Tóm tắt: Rắn là loài động vật phổ biến trên toàn thế giới, có ý nghĩa văn hóa sâu sắc ở nhiều quốc gia. Hình tượng rắn đã xuất hiện trong văn hóa dân gian, thần thoại và ngôn ngữ qua nhiều thế kỷ với những biểu tượng phong phú và đa dạng. Dù đã có nhiều nghiên cứu về biểu tượng rắn, các phân tích so sánh giữa các nền văn hóa vẫn còn hạn chế. Nghiên cứu này nhằm phân tích và so sánh ý nghĩa văn hóa cũng như các thành ngữ liên quan đến hình tượng rắn trong ba ngôn ngữ: tiếng Anh, tiếng Trung và tiếng Việt. Mục tiêu của nghiên cứu là làm rõ các đặc điểm ngôn ngữ, cấu trúc ngữ nghĩa và hàm ý văn hóa thể hiện trong các thành ngữ về rắn. Ngữ liệu cho nghiên cứu được trích từ từ điển thành ngữ, sách, tài liệu văn học và tạp chí nghiên cứu, sau đó được phân tích để xác định những điểm tương đồng và khác biệt trong cách mỗi nền văn hóa diễn giải hình tượng con rắn. Kết quả nghiên cứu cho thấy bản sắc văn hóa và ngôn ngữ ảnh hưởng như thế nào đến việc hình thành ý nghĩa của các thành ngữ liên quan đến rắn, đồng thời làm nổi bật những kết nối liên văn hóa. Bài viết có thể là một tài liệu tham khảo hữu ích cho những người học đa ngôn ngữ, giáo viên ngôn ngữ và các nhà nghiên cứu quan tâm đến ngôn ngữ học, văn hóa và biểu tượng học.

Từ khóa: hình ảnh con rắn, biểu hiện văn hóa, thành ngữ, giảng dạy ngôn ngữ

1. Introduction

Snake images have been considered the most symbolic in human history, which represents fear, respect and fascination. The ancient Egyptians had the custom of snake worship and they considered snakes as the symbol of prophecy, knowledge, and protection. Additionally, they were respected as the god with both human and snake features as well as were closely connected with royal power, so to Egyptian rulers, they often symbolized political authority and served as a spiritual guardian of the pharaoh. Similarly, snakes were also vital in ancient Greece society but their images might be different with the symbolisms of both dangers, threats as well as healing and cycles of life. This reflected the Greeks' perspective of snakes as power and unpredictability but their importance to human survival.

In Eastern traditions, snake-related symbolisms may be relatively various. For example, in Chinese mythology, the snake images appear to be divine or semi-divine beings with both human and animal traits. The renowned Chinese legend *Legend of the White Snake* echoes broader Chinese mythological traditions, including Fuxi and Nüwa, divine figures with human heads and serpent bodies. Rather than being feared, these figures symbolized creators and protectors who contributed to shape the world, restore order, and support agriculture. Therefore, in this culture, the snakes symbolized harmony, care for humanity, not just negative features.

In Japan and Southeast Asia, snakes are closely connected with religions and sacred spaces. For example, in Japanese mythology, the giant snake Yamata no Orochi symbolizes overwhelming supernatural power. Simultaneously, in Thailand and Khmer cultures, snakes are supposed to be sacred guardians bringing protection and prosperity, which leads to the custom of worshiping snake statues in temples as protectors. However, in these cultures, the snakes are also seen to be unpredictable and potentially harmful, so there are ritual performances with the aim at appeasing them and preventing misfortunes caused by them.

As a result, there are snake-related idioms in daily language that reflect the various meanings of the snakes. For example, in Vietnamese, idioms about snakes tend to be closely associated with the features of cleverness, danger, or betrayal such as “*rắn mắt*” or “*nuôi ong tay áo, nuôi rắn trong nhà*”. Similarly, Chinese snake-related idioms including “画蛇添足” (*huà shé tiān zú*, “drawing legs on a snake”), which signifies an unnecessary and redundant action, and “蛇鼠一窟” (*shé shǔ yī wō*, “snakes and rats in one nest”), describing a group of deceitful individuals in collusion. These idioms symbolize the snake imagery as disorder, concealment and ethical deviation and thus used in the circumstances of criticism and moral judgement. This reflects shared cultural values that emphasize moderation, proper behavior, and social responsibility. Like Chinese, English idioms such as “a snake in the grass” or “venomous tongue” represent the association between the snake images and the features of deception and harm. In addition, the idiom “to shed one’s skin like a snake” indicates transformation or renewal, or hold some potential negative connotation, depending on context.

With various meanings in a wide range of cultures, the study of the snake imagery in idioms is essential to reflect how cultures are reflected in daily language. By comparing the snake images reflected in idioms in England, China, and Vietnam, the study is expected to highlight both shared and culture specific features of snake symbolisms. By applying a contrastive approach, the paper demonstrates that the snake-related idioms represent not only linguistic expression but also cultural values, reflecting human attitudes about the natural world. The comparison of idioms about snakes in three languages and cultures may contribute to the deep understanding of how language functions as a medium to express and transmit cultural values.

2. Research Methodology

The multi-method approach has been employed in this research to investigate similarities and differences in the meanings of idiomatic expressions about snakes in English, Chinese, and Vietnamese.

In terms of data, the study collected English, Chinese, and Vietnamese idioms about snakes from various sources, including dictionaries, books, academic journals and folklore. The data were collected based on three main criteria including: (1) The presence of snake imagery or terminology in the idiom; (2) The existence of symbolic or metaphoric meanings; (3) Reliability and recognition within the linguistic and cultural sources cited. Based on these criteria, a total of approximately 120 idioms were collected, consisting of roughly 30 English idioms, 50 Chinese idioms, and 40 Vietnamese idioms. All the specific content used in this article is distributed in Appendix Table 1, while Table 2 contains all the idioms that have been collected and processed. The collected data later have been analyzed using the qualitative approach to categorize and determine their symbolic meanings based on historical background as well as cultural context. The idioms were first groups based on their shared meanings such as danger, deception, wisdom, then they were interpreted according to historical narratives, cultural beliefs, and discourse functions. After that cross-linguistic contrastive analysis was

used to identify both similarities and differences in three languages. This research follows the methodology employed by Poluzhyn (2020) in a study about English animalistic idioms, which explored idiomatic symbolisms based on historical background (Poluzhyn, 2020). However, this methodology is extended by adding a cross-linguistic and cross-cultural framework to the research. In addition, the research also incorporates cultural-historical sources specific to each linguistic tradition to interpret symbolic meanings. More importantly, to make a broader understanding of idiomatic symbolism in three languages, the contrastive approach was predominantly applied to investigate how snake-related idioms have different meanings in different cultures.

After data were collected, the contrastive analysis has been applied as a primary method for the research in order to investigate symbolic meanings of idioms about snakes in English, Chinese, and Vietnamese. In other words, the study explores similarities and differences in idiomatic expressions about snakes and the way in which linguistic and cultural context shape the meanings of these idioms in each language and culture. Specifically, the contrastive analysis has been employed to explore universal and culture-specific meanings of snake-related idioms. The method also explains how linguistic and cultural contexts shape the different meanings of these idioms. This method has been applied in the studies by previous authors in order to explore cultural connotations in idioms (Duan et al., 2014) or compare idiomatic expressions across cultures (Liu, 2019; Wang, 2022).

In addition, cultural comparison has been employed in this research in order to examine how the snake's images have been portrayed differently in various societies and cultures. This method was applied in the study by Vo and Vo (2016) to compare proverbs and idioms in different cultures and languages (Vo & Vo, 2016). By applying the cultural comparison, this study analyzes not only the meanings of snake-related idioms but also the ideological symbolisms presented in English, Chinese, and Vietnamese cultures.

Besides, to some extent, the study also used the semiotic analysis in order to have a deeper understanding of how the snake imagery has been portrayed in idiomatic expressions across three languages and cultures. This approach explores how the snake imagery in idioms are associated with the hidden cultural meanings as mentioned by (Nguyen & Vu, 2019).

Furthermore, cognitive linguistics has been utilized in the study to explore metaphoric meanings of snake-related idioms. As mentioned by Kövecses (2010), the meanings of idiomatic expressions have been formed by linking practical experience with abstract perceptions (Kovecses, 2010). This method was used in the research with the aim of investigating how snake-related idioms reflect cognitive processes across cultures.

In conclusion, contrastive analysis, cultural comparison, semiotic and cognitive linguistics have been combined in this study to compare similarities and differences in the meanings of idiomatic expressions about snakes. Specifically, in terms of meaning, the contrastive analysis has been used to compare snake-related idioms in three languages. As for the interpretation, the cultural comparison referring to historical background, social values, and belief systems has been applied to explain these similarities and differences. Additionally, semiotic analysis examines the snake as a cultural symbol and analyzes how its symbolic meanings are encoded in idiomatic expressions. Finally, cognitive linguistics has been employed to interpret these meanings as conceptual metaphors grounded in human experience and cultural cognition. The study used these methods together to explain how linguistic features and cultural identities impact on the meanings of idioms using snake imagery in Vietnamese, Chinese and English.

3. The Snake Imagery in Three Cultures

3.1. The Snake Imagery in Vietnamese Culture

The snake is not only a popular creature but also a symbol rich in cultural and spiritual significance within Vietnamese life. Its images appear in legends, folktales, proverbs, idioms, and traditional sayings, assuming various roles and integrating deeply into folk rituals and belief systems, particularly the worship of Mother Goddesses. This presence has contributed to the formation of a diverse and abundant body of Vietnamese folk culture. Specifically, in ancient Vietnamese culture, the snake was considered to be the oldest symbolic images, prominently presented with the Giao Long - a mythical serpent-like dragon. This image is significantly distinctive in legends such as that of Lạc Long Quân and Âu Cơ, which recounts the ancestral origins of the Vietnamese people.

Within the realm of folktales, the snake takes on multiple forms, including the *trăn tinh* (mystical python) and *chằn tinh* (demonic ogre). One of the most well-known stories, Thạch Sanh, portrays *chằn tinh* as a long-cultivated supernatural being that terrorizes villagers, demanding an annual human sacrifice. Ultimately, it is vanquished by the courageous and righteous Thạch Sanh, a heroic figure symbolizing justice and virtue. Nguyễn Đồng Chi's *The Treasury of Vietnamese Folktales* catalogs over a dozen stories related to the snake, presenting variations such as the *giao long*, *thường luồng* (water dragon), *chằn tinh*, *mãng xà* (giant snake), and *xà tinh* (serpent spirit). Some narratives depict the snake as benevolent, aiding villagers and earning reverence and worship, while others portray it as malevolent, bringing harm and earning the disdain of the people. This dual symbolism provides an integral part in understanding idioms about snakes in Vietnam. These idioms are closely associated with the snake with features of danger, deception, and cruelty coming from folkloric images of malevolent serpent spirits. In contrast, the features of protection, power, or sacredness tend to have origin from narrative in which the snake is described as guardians or benefactors. Therefore, the folklore not only serves as a narrative purpose but also shapes the evaluative meanings of snake imagery in daily language.

Beyond mythology and folktales, the snake's image is also embedded in Vietnamese proverbs, idioms, folk songs, and children's rhymes. These linguistic expressions present the snake from various perspectives, ranging from subtle metaphorical references to explicit descriptions that reflect societal attitudes and emotions. Even in contemporary Vietnamese society, snake-related proverbs and idioms remain commonly used to interpret human nature, life experiences, and social affairs. The snake symbolisms associated with danger, cunning, and moral ambiguity are more likely to serve as an effective metaphor for deceit, hidden threats, and untrustworthy individuals. Conversely, the images related to natural features of snakes tend to express caution, adaptability and life experience. These symbolic meanings remain relatively relevant to social interactions in the contemporary society, so they continue to be commonly used in everyday language.

The cultural significance of the snake extends across religious beliefs, language, and artistic expression (Eliade, 1958). However, snake worship in Vietnam is primarily limited to specific regions, often manifesting as the veneration of water deities (Thủy Thần) or river spirits, and does not constitute a major, centralized religious tradition comparable to the cult of Uraeus in Ancient Egypt or Asclepius in Greek mythology (Wilkinson, 2003). While Chinese culture has profoundly influenced Vietnam, snake worship-rooted in ancient animistic beliefs- does not hold the same prominent status in Vietnamese traditions as it does in Chinese spirituality, where the snake is often intertwined with the primordial ancestors Nüwa and Fuxi

(Eberhard, 2006; Sterckx, 2002). In the Vietnamese collective consciousness, the snake imagery is frequently internalized and transformed into the Giao Long (water dragon) figure, reflecting a shift from pure animal worship to a symbol of water-spirit protection (Ngo, 2001).

3.2. *The Snake Imagery in Chinese Culture*

In Chinese history, especially the pre-Qin period, snakes were symbols of rulers. For example, Zuo Zhuan, Duke Wen, Year 16 records: “A snake emerged from the spring palace and entered the state, just like the fate of the previous ruler.” Snakes were also seen as auspicious omens. During the Spring and Autumn period, the ruler of Sui once encountered an injured snake on the road. He treated its wounds, and later, the snake repaid him by bringing a precious pearl. This mystical snake pearl was as famous as the He Shi Bi, both being rare treasures of ancient China. Though snakes exist in the real world, they evoke a sense of mystery, making them revered symbols in ancient times.

In Chinese literature, specifically Shuowen Jiezi by Xu Shen (Eastern Han Dynasty), the character “蛇” (snake) was not originally included; instead, its older form, “它” was recorded. The later form “蛇” with the “虫” radical, developed later, whereas “它” was the original character for snake. In Shuowen, the small seal script of “它” is a pictograph, emphasizing its snake-like appearance: the small dot above the radical represents the snake’s tongue, the main radical resembles an enlarged snake head, and the lower part represents the coiled body and tail. Tracing back to oracle bone script, various versions of “它” closely resemble miniature snakes.

In Chinese culture, the image of the snake is complex, possessing both divine and demonic qualities. Snake totems and serpent patterns on bronze artifacts represented auspicious symbols that early people worshipped¹. However, in nature, snakes were threats, instilling fear and anxiety. Over time, they became associated with demons and spirits, as seen in Shan Hai Jing, Legend of the White Snake, and Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio, which all recount stories of snake spirits. In addition, snakes held a significant place in traditional Chinese culture and were closely tied to daily life, reflecting various attitudes toward them. People viewed snakes with a mix of reverence and fear, leading to both coexistence and conflict. In their struggle against snakes, people hunted, repelled, and avoided them while also utilizing their resources. Since humans and snakes could sometimes coexist, people found ways to use them without harm — raising snakes to control rodents, using them for entertainment, extracting their slough for medicine, adopting snake patterns for decoration, and incorporating them into art².

During times of snake worship, those who revered snake deities avoided harming wild snakes, reducing snake hunting and killing. This led to a more harmonious relationship between humans and snakes. While the nature of snakes did not change, human behavior shifted from extermination to protection and avoidance. This change has a significant influence on the meanings of the idioms about snakes from a literal animal to a moral symbolism. Specifically, the idioms with the snake imagery have a tendency of expressing warning, caution, or danger, which gives them a

¹ Bai, J. (2013). Wandering in the Year of the Snake – The snake totem and the ancient human mother goddess. *Western China*, 5, 20–31. <https://www.xhby.net/content/s6794d14ae4b02fce41ed1daf.html>

² Lu, X. (2013). The artistic style and cultural characteristics of the snake totem symbol [蛇图腾符号的艺术风貌与文化特征]. *Journal of Nantong University (Social Sciences Edition)* [南通大学学报 (社会科学版)], 29(1), 78–82. <https://ntsx.chinajournal.net.cn/WKH/WebPublication/wkTextContent.aspx?colType=4&yt=2013&st=01>

clear moral and didactic tone. Simultaneously, with the symbolisms of both threat and power, the idioms employed snake imagery are more likely to underlie the moral judgments.

Ancient Chinese people deeply understood snakes' characteristics and habits, leading to both admiration and reverence. As a result, snakes frequently appeared in spiritual and cultural contexts, where they were abstracted, artistically depicted, deified, or even humanized. Additionally, the dragon, which evolved from the snake, became a revered symbol among Chinese ethnic groups. China is often called the "*Land of the Dragon*", and today, we refer to the country as the "*Eastern Giant Dragon*". Economic growth is described as "*the dragon's rise*," and the Chinese people call themselves the "*descendants of the dragon*." Though the snake, as the dragon's predecessor, took a secondary role after their separation in ancient times - ranking below the dragon in both paired phrases and the zodiac - it retained its mystical essence through the dragon.³

Dongfang Shuo of the Western Han Dynasty once told his son: "*The way of the sages is like a dragon and a snake - its form is visible, but its spirit is hidden; it adapts and transforms according to circumstances, without a fixed path*"⁴. Using the dragon and snake to symbolize the way of sages reflects Daoist and Huang-Lao philosophical thought. Historical records, military texts, and artistic works all contain references to snakes, highlighting their deep connection to Chinese spiritual life and their impact on history, politics, warfare, and literature. The snake's role in traditional Chinese culture has shaped a unique cultural feature. Although superstitions surrounding snakes have largely faded, the material and spiritual artifacts created throughout history remain an integral part of China's rich heritage.

3.3. *The Snake Imagery in Western Culture*

In Western culture, the image of the snake carries strong symbolic significance, appearing in mythology, religion, philosophy, art, and medicine. Depending on the context, snakes can be perceived as representations of temptation, sin, and danger, yet they are also linked to wisdom, protection, and regeneration. This duality is reflected in various Western myths and religious scriptures, particularly in Christianity, Greco-Roman mythology, and ancient European traditions.

Historically, Western societies have often viewed snakes as embodiments of evil, deceit, and malevolence. This perception is evident in literary and religious narratives, where the snake is frequently depicted as a treacherous and harmful creature.

One notable example is found in Aesop's Fables, specifically in *The Farmer and the Snake*. In this Greek fable, a farmer discovers a frozen snake during the winter. Moved by compassion, he picks up the snake and places it in his bosom to warm it. Once revived, the snake bites him. As he dies, the farmer laments, "*I deserve this for showing mercy to a wicked creature*". This story conveys the moral lesson that one should not show pity to the inherently wicked, as their nature remains unchanged.

³ Li, J. (2016). An analysis of Chinese dragon totem culture [探析中国龙图腾文化]. *Modern Decoration (Theory)* [现代装饰(理论)], 6, 220. <https://s.wanfangdata.com.cn/recommends/>

⁴ During the Western Han period, Dongfang Shuo once said to his son: "...The way of the sage is like a dragon and a snake—its form is visible but its spirit is hidden. It changes with things, adapts to the times, and does not adhere to any fixed norm." (西汉时期的东方朔曾对他的儿子说: ".....圣人之道, 一龙一蛇, 形见神藏, 与物变化, 随时之宜, 无有常家。")

Similarly, in the Old Testament, the snake plays a pivotal role in the narrative of Adam and Eve. The serpent tempts them to eat the forbidden fruit, leading to their expulsion from the Garden of Eden. As punishment, the snake is condemned to “*crawl on its belly and eat dust all its life*”. The association of snakes with deception and punishment reinforces their negative symbolism in Christian tradition. Moreover, venomous snakes, capable of sudden and lethal attacks, have further contributed to the perception of snakes as dangerous and treacherous beings.

Despite these predominantly negative connotations, Western philosophy also attributes positive meanings to the snake. In some traditions, it symbolizes rebirth, the cyclical nature of life, and wisdom. A prime example of this is the Ouroboros, the ancient symbol depicting a snake biting its own tail. This image represents the concepts of eternity, continuous renewal, and the unending cycle of the universe. Ouroboros appears in Greek philosophy, alchemy, mysticism, and even modern cultural interpretations. In Western alchemy, the snake further symbolizes primal energy, transformation, and the balance between natural elements.

The diverse interpretations of the snake in Western culture illustrate its multifaceted symbolism, ranging from deceit and peril in religious and mythological contexts to wisdom and regeneration in philosophical and scientific discourses. This complexity reflects varying human perspectives on the world, emphasizing the duality between good and evil, destruction and renewal.

3.4. The Comparison of Snake Imagery in Three Cultures

Snake images have been commonly used in a wide range of cultures, but their meanings in idioms seem to be relatively different, depending on historical, religious and social contexts. Specifically, in ancient Chinese mythology, *Fuxi* and *Nüwa* - the legendary ancestors of humanity - were depicted as half-human, half-snake. This depiction suggests that snakes were once an important object of worship among certain clans and tribes. Due to the widespread reverence for snakes, the imagery of this creature is also reflected in the depictions of other deities, such as *Pangu*, the *Yellow Emperor*, and the *Flame Emperor*. In contrast, Western mythology also features deities with serpent-like characteristics, but they are usually minor figures with little significance. For example, in Greek mythology, a half-human, half-snake *Titan* briefly held power before being defeated and replaced by the third generation of gods, who became the dominant figures in the pantheon.

As for snake worship, the ancient Egyptians worshiped serpent deities for an extended period, but overall, this did not gain widespread acceptance in Western culture. Conversely, in Western mythology, snakes rarely appear with favorable figures. Instead, they are often associated with evil, deceit, aggression, and trickery. This suggests that, in traditional Western culture, snakes are viewed negatively, and Western societies generally exhibit a stronger aversion to them compared to Eastern cultures.

In Eastern mythology, snakes are more likely to be portrayed positively, embodying beauty and kindness. Chinese folklore features the legendary White Snake, a beautiful and benevolent serpent spirit, as well as various folk tales about snakes expressing gratitude and helping the poor. Some snake deities with human-like forms continue to be worshiped in certain regions. In contrast, Western mythology lacks such narratives. After the decline of polytheistic Greek traditions, snakes no longer held a significant place in Western religious and mythological beliefs. Even in Eastern cultures, the snake no longer retains its ancient divine and awe-inspiring status. However, its role remains more prominent in Eastern traditions than in the West, largely due to the practical and spiritual connections between Eastern societies and snakes.

When it comes to the role of the snakes in everyday life, the snake images also have

different significance. For example, in China and Vietnam, snakes have been integrated into both material and spiritual life. Snake meat is considered a delicacy and a nutritious food, an unfamiliar concept in most Western societies. The use of snakes in traditional medicine has a long history in China, whereas the West only began producing pharmaceuticals from snake venom much later. In another aspect of life, some people in countries such as China, India, Pakistan, and Indonesia even have the custom of keeping snakes in their homes to control rodent populations, as an alternative to chemical rodenticides. This method not only prevents property damage but also avoids pollution caused by chemical pest control. Snakes have also played a role in entertainment and performance arts. In China, snake-handling acts have long been part of traditional circus performances, with shows such as *snake battles* and *snake dances*. India is particularly famous for its *snake charmers*, who use flutes to control cobras in mesmerizing performances.

As for fashion and beauty, Ancient China even developed a hairstyle inspired by snakes, known as *Ling She Ji* (snake-shaped bun), based on the fluid motion of snakes. Modern variations, such as *She Zhuang* (snake-style hair), continue this aesthetic tradition, using the snake's grace as an inspiration for beauty. However, Western associations between snakes and hair tend to evoke fear. For example, in Greek mythology, the avenging goddess *Megaera* had a head full of snakes and was depicted as an old, terrifying figure symbolizing rage and vengeance. Similarly, the monstrous *Gorgon Medusa* had venomous snakes for hair, and anyone who gazed upon her face would be turned to stone. Unlike the Chinese representation of snakes as elegant and flexible, these Western figures evoke horror and dread.

In addition, regarding traditional customs, there have been distinctive differences among these cultures. For example, in Chinese folklore, many rituals and customs involve snakes. Festivals such as the *Lesser Dragon Festival* and the *Five Poisons Festival* highlight the snake's role in traditional beliefs. Millions of people consider the snake their zodiac animal, and countless artistic works draw inspiration from this creature. Some regions in China still preserve traditional snake worship ceremonies - practices that are rare or nonexistent in Western cultures. In this aspect, China and Vietnam also share many taboos and superstitions about snakes, particularly regarding the Year of the Snake in the zodiac system. These beliefs have influenced other Asian countries, whereas Western societies are largely unaware of such ideas.

One unique aspect of Chinese and Vietnamese snake worship is its connection to fertility beliefs. In contrast, Western societies often associate venomous snakes with danger rather than fertility. In Western thought, snakes have been symbolically linked to the male phallus, and venomous snakes, in particular, are seen as representations of undesirable or dangerous sexual behavior. This perspective may partly explain why snakes are viewed unfavorably in Western societies. Unlike Eastern traditions, Western culture has historically placed little emphasis on the reproductive capabilities of snakes.

In Eastern cultures, snakes have been deeply integrated into various aspects of human life, from mythology and religion to medicine and daily practices. In contrast, Western societies have had far fewer connections to snakes, and their cultural representations are largely harmful. This stark difference highlights how perceptions of the same creature can vary dramatically across civilizations, shaped by historical, religious, and practical influences.

In conclusion, firstly, the snake imagery has various symbolism in Eastern and Western cultures with both constructive and destructive connotations. The snake images also present the harmonious balance of good and evil. For example, snake venom can be lethal but it can serve as a remedy in medicine. However, in Chinese and Vietnamese cultures, the beneficial symbolism of snakes is more likely to be dominant and this is presented in various aspects of

life from cuisine to traditional medicine. In contrast, in Western cultures, the snake imagery with unfavorable symbolisms seems to be more prominent, particularly in ancient myths where snake-related images indicate negative qualities. Secondly, in Eastern context, particularly in Vietnam and China, snake imagery has various meanings in a variety of aspects of life. Snake-related cultural representations come from the human's direct encounters with this species, shaping unique symbolisms. Snake images with auspicious representations are more obvious in Chinese culture than in Vietnamese culture. Conversely, in Western cultures where there are fewer human direct interactions with snakes, cultural representations of snakes are more closely connected to abstract or figurative symbolisms rather than tangible experience. Thirdly, the snake is one of the twelve zodiac animals in both Vietnamese and Chinese traditions, so the snake imagery has been closely associated with legends shaping the calendar and numerous cultural frameworks. Therefore, as for cultural significance, snake-related symbolisms in Eastern cultures, particularly in Vietnamese and Chinese context, seem to be more various than in Western cultures.

4. The Snake-Related Idioms in Three Languages

4.1. The Snake-Related Idioms in Vietnamese

From the original view, it is evident that Vietnamese idioms are divided into two main categories. The first one is Sino-Vietnamese idioms and the second one is purely Vietnamese idioms. Sino-Vietnamese idioms originate from Chinese, often being formal, concise, and expressing profound meanings that cannot ordinarily be understood from the meanings of the words they contain. These idioms include phrases like “*Nhất cử lưỡng tiện*”, which means that with one action, two benefits can be gained, or “*Tứ hải giai huynh đệ*”, meaning everyone is a brother, or “*Dĩ hòa vi quý*”, which depicts that harmony is precious. Meanwhile, purely Vietnamese idioms originate from everyday life, reflecting practical experience and closely resembling folk language. Phrases like “*lên thác xuống ghềnh*”, which means going up and down rapids (a metaphorical meaning referring to facing many hardships), “*Ăn cháo đá bát*”, which means eating porridge and kicking the bowl, or “*Chó cắn áo rách*”, meaning “a dog biting a torn shirt”, all reflect the rich folk culture of Vietnam.

The usage of the idiom "snake" consists of two main semantic meanings from a figurative perspective in the Vietnamese language system. On the one hand, Sino-Vietnamese idioms often carry symbolic meaning, expressing philosophical or strategic thinking, such as “*vẽ rắn thêm chân*” (“adding legs to a snake”), implying something superfluous or unnecessary; “*khẩu Phật tâm xà*” (“a Buddha's mouth but a snake's heart”), implying someone who appears good on the outside but is evil on the inside; or “*đánh cỏ động rắn*” (“disturbing the grass to scare the snake”), implying “disturbing a small target to alert it or to reveal a larger target”. Additionally, a large number of purely Vietnamese idioms related to snakes are often linked to folk experience and observations in real life, such as “*Rắn mắt*” (“snake with eyes”), implying stubbornness or rebelliousness; “*Rắn bò ngang sân*” (“snake crawling across the yard”), implying an unlucky sign; or “*Rắn không đầu*” (“headless snake”), describing a chaotic situation or lack of leadership. Hence, Sino-Vietnamese idioms tend to describe general and philosophical concepts, while purely Vietnamese idioms directly reflect folk experience and understanding. However, both forms indicate a unified image of the snake used in many contexts of Vietnamese society.

It is proven that the image of the snake in Vietnamese idioms and proverbs often carries negative connotations, reflecting cunning, danger, or fear which stem from folk beliefs about snakes, often perceived as mysterious, unpredictable creatures with dangerous venom. These

idioms are formed based on real-life observations and the life experiences of Vietnamese ancestors, including profound lessons about humanity and society. The similarities in thinking between Chinese and Vietnamese people reveal the reasons why Sino-Vietnamese idioms can coexist harmoniously within the Vietnamese language system.

Idioms featuring the image of the snake often describe cunning and dangerous personalities, referring to those who are deceitful, cunning, or who conceal their evil nature. In this semantic sense, “*rắn khôn giấu đầu*” (“a clever snake hides its head”) refers to people who are shrewd in their behavior, symbolized by a snake in reality; “*Hùm thiêng rắn độc*” (“a mighty tiger and a venomous snake”) describes comprehensive danger – both openly powerful (like a tiger) and insidious and unpredictable (like a snake); and “*Chơi với rắn*” (“playing with snakes”) implies associating with dangerous people, which easily leads to misfortune. These idioms not only reflect perceptions of snakes but also serve as a reminder of vigilance in social relationships.

Furthermore, many idioms involving snake imagery also describe deceit and betrayal in the Vietnamese language system. For example, “*Nuôi ong tay áo, nuôi rắn trong nhà*” (“Keeping bees in your sleeves, keeping snakes in your house”) warns against helping evil people only to be betrayed; “*Công rắn cắn gà nhà*” (“leading a snake to bite your own chickens”) refers to harboring evil people who harm family and the community; and “*Đánh rắn phải đánh đập đầu*” (“To kill a snake, you must crush its head”) emphasizes dealing with enemies or problems thoroughly, leaving no lasting consequences. These idioms reflect folk beliefs about trust and the consequences of misplaced kindness, which constantly appear in real life.

Although the image of the snake in the Vietnamese idiom system primarily indicates negative meanings, it also represents resilience and adaptability. For example, the idiom “*Rắn không chân cũng bò, người không tiền cũng sống*” (“Even a legless snake can crawl, even a person without money can survive”) emphasizes the ability to survive despite difficulties; while the phrase “*Đường cong rắn lượn*” (“A winding, snake-like path”) may refer to winding, difficult roads, or imply a deceitful, dishonest person. The saying “*Rắn mai tại chỗ, rắn hổ về nhà*” (“A cobra stays in place, a viper returns home”) distinguishes the dangers of two common snake species in nature and how to deal with them. These idioms also embody folk experiences and reflect the realities of life, where people must adapt to survive.

In summary, idioms featuring the image of the snake in the Vietnamese language system mainly carry negative connotations, associated with cunning, malice, and betrayal. However, in some cases, these symbolic implications also represent perseverance, flexibility, and the ability to overcome adversity. Thus, such idioms not only embody folk beliefs about snakes but also convey profound insights into life and social conduct.

4.2. The Snake-Related Idioms in Chinese

This section primarily examines two aspects: the origin and expressive content of snake idioms in Chinese. Regarding their origins, idioms related to snakes, like Chinese idioms in general, mainly originate from fables, myths and legends, historical anecdotes, and real-life experiences. These diverse origins create the richness and variety of imagery within the Chinese language and culture.

A frequently cited example is the idiom “画蛇添足” (adding legs to a snake), which originated from a story recorded in the Warring States Period (Qi Ce II). This story tells of several people competing to draw snakes to win a pot of wine. One man finished first, but in an attempt to show off his skill, he added legs to his drawing, ultimately losing his chance to drink. This idiom is used to describe unnecessary actions that are not only unhelpful but also

counterproductive. Another very famous fable is "杯弓蛇影" (mistaking a bow's reflection for a snake), telling of a man at a banquet who mistook the reflection in his wine cup for a snake and became so frightened that he fell ill, only to later discover it was a misunderstanding. This idiom illustrates a paranoid mindset of scaring.

Chinese people believe that snakes are closely associated with dragons, which are often used to symbolize power or mystery. For example, the phrase "龙蛇混杂" (dragon and snake intermingling) refers to the mixing of good and evil, originating from the ancient perception of the resemblance between snakes and dragons. Another one, "蛇蝎心肠" (snake-like heart), reflects the negative image snakes are associated with in traditional culture and is also used to describe people with a wicked heart. From these idioms, it is evident that the image of a snake linked with a centipede further emphasizes the negative associations of the snake.

Many historical anecdotes which contain snake images have also been distilled into concise idioms widely used in the daily speech of the Chinese people. For example, the idiom "虚与委蛇" (Snake and Snake), originating from Zhuangzi, refers to feigning friendliness and superficially dealing with others, implying the complex communication skills in social relationships. On the other hand, the idiom "引蛇出洞" (to lure snakes out of their burrows) originates from Liang Shiqiu's work "Deaf." This story describes how a snake tamer can lure snakes out of their burrows by simply blowing a flute, leading the snakes to raise their heads and move in response to the sound. This idiom has since been cited and analyzed in literary studies and also used in many literary works.

Various snake idioms also include daily experiences. For instance, the one "一朝被蛇咬，十年怕井绳" (once bitten by a snake, ten years afraid of well ropes) depicts the psychological trauma caused by past experiences, emphasizing the persistence of traumatic memories. The phrase "蛇吞象" (snake swallowing an elephant) is used to represent insatiable greed, illustrating that excessive desire can ultimately lead to failure. These idioms, which are related to snakes, not only reflect the ancient Chinese observation of nature, but also emphasize human contemplation of social phenomena. It can be seen that these phrases play as expressive tools in language, helping people grasp profound moral principles through concise words.

About the meanings, idioms about snakes exhibit many features. Idioms containing "snakes" often carry certain symbolic interpretations, normally signifying characteristics such as cunning and viciousness, winding and convoluted, dangerous and frightening, flexible and mysterious, and elements of cultural legend. From these senses, some clear manifestations will be discussed further.

Firstly, in terms of scheming and wickedness, various snake idioms tend to describe people with evil-minded characteristics. For example, "蛇鼠一窝" (a nest of snakes and rats) represents wicked humans plotting with each other; and "蛇蝎心肠" (a snake-like heart) indicates a person with a cruel heart.

Secondly, the natural characteristics of snakes might be the primary reasons that make the related idioms carry complexity, unpredictability, or ambiguous traits. The idiom "蛇行鼠步" (moving like a snake, stepping like a mouse) describes stealthy, winding movements or an action lacking transparency and can be seen as a clear proof.

At the same time, snakes, as a complicated creature, also symbolize flexibility and mystery when their image is used in Chinese idioms. These features can be included as cunning, adaptability, or a role in military strategy and tactics. It is evident in the phrase "长蛇阵" (long

snake formation), which is a special military tactic. Similarly, as mentioned, “龙蛇混杂” (dragon and snake intermingling) can imply complex and ever-changing circumstances.

Furthermore, many idioms related to snakes are empirical, containing lessons about reactions. For example, “打草惊蛇” (smashing grass to scare the snake) illustrates a reckless action that leads to the premature exposure of one's goal. Similarly, “蛇吞象” (a snake swallowing an elephant), used to express “人心不足蛇吞象” (a person's heart is not satisfied, like a snake swallowing an elephant), intensifies unlimited greed, exceeding boundaries and thus often leading to failure.

In conclusion, as conveyed by these idioms, the image of the snake not only impresses observations of nature and culture but also includes many fundamental moral principles, forming a significant part of the Chinese language and, at the same time, helping people to understand and derive implied meanings in life.

4.3. *The Snake-Related Idioms in English*

The snake-related idioms in English reflect the association between cultural reception and symbolic features of this kind of species, such as deceit, danger, and cunning. Therefore, snake-related idioms frequently depict negative connotations because snakes are often perceived as venomous and deceitful animals. These idioms are reflected in various sources from mythology, literature, newspaper and history, presenting the symbolisms of threat, trickery, and moral corruption. This pattern may come from the Judeo-Christian moral tradition presented in the Bible in which the snake imagery is associated with temptation, deception and innocence.

For example, the idiom “*snake in the grass*” expresses people who are secretly treacherous but appear harmless. The idiom’s meaning comes from the sneaky nature of snakes, which can hide in the grass and then poison the victim unexpectedly. The metaphor highlights people with concealed and deceptive intentions but they tend to hide it. In terms of culture, this reflects a worldview shaped by moral suspicion in which the appearance may be considered to be unreliable and immoral intentions. For instance: “*But make no bones about it: Avery knew that the governor was a **snake in the grass** without a shred of experience serving king and country.*” (Kingsley, 2024). The author employed the image of a snake in the grass to express the governor’s characteristic of being deceitful or untrustworthy.

Another snake-related idiom with negative meanings is “*snake in the bosom*” or “*viper in one's bosom*” or “*nourish/nurse/nurture a snake/viper in one's bosom*”. This idiom also describes people who are traitorous, untrustworthy, deceitful and ungrateful. The snake imagery in this idiom symbolizes betrayal, underscores the danger of nurturing the enemy within one’s circle. This idiom also has symbolism of a sense of vulnerability where there is a hidden potential threat undermining the trust and safety. In western culture, this idiom conveys a popular moral lesson, trusting wrong people may cause harmful consequences. This also reminds people about the importance of caution, moral awareness, and clear boundaries in interpersonal relationships.

Similarly, the idiom “*snake oil*” refers to valueless or deceptive cure, remedy or solution. The idiom symbolizes fraudulent practices or worthless products and thus works as a reminder of the potential dangers of false advertising. This idiom is often used in the phrase “*snake oil salesman*” to depict people who promote or sell such products. For example, “*Gibson is still an imperfect, if attention-grabbing, vehicle into a wider survey of why people, especially women, are so drawn to **snake oil**.*” (Herman, 2025). This sentence expresses that Gibson is not ideal example but still a starting point for explaining why women are attracted by deceptive,

false promises or scams. From a cultural perspective, this idiom refers to the anxiety about deception in commerce and public discourse, reinforcing the hope of sincerity and authenticity in the society. Additionally, the snake metaphor conveys social criticism and warns against moral gullibility.

These above English idioms reflect the nature of the snake as well as cultural perception of snakes' symbolism of danger, deceit, and treachery. However, the snake images also represent resilience, adaptability, survival and cunning in some circumstances. For example, the idiom "*snake its way*" describes the way of moving smoothly and occasionally with a bit of cunning in order to avoid obstacles. This meaning comes from the snake's nature of moving flexibly, cleverly and windingly through a space. In addition, the idiom "*as slippery as a snake*" generally has negative meaning, referring to people with dishonesty or evading responsibility. However, it also conveys the auspicious meaning of being flexible and easily escaping a difficult situation. Similarly, the idiom "*like fighting snakes*" commonly conveys a tense, conflicting and complicated situation. However, in a positive context, this idiom also expresses a fierce struggle to achieve an important thing.

Therefore, most snake-related idioms tend to be associated with negative traits such as threat, trickery and deceit, but in some certain contexts, they also convey the positive values such as flexibility, cleverness, intelligence.

4.4. The Comparison of the Snake-Related Idioms in Three Languages

There are various similarities in snake-related idioms in both Chinese and Vietnamese, especially in the Sino-Vietnamese idioms in Vietnamese. The original meanings of idioms in Chinese are still retained in many Sino-Vietnamese idioms. In addition, there are various idioms with the same meanings in both languages such as "khẩu phật tâm xà" (a Buddha's mouth but a snake's heart – describing hypocritical kindness) or "vẽ rắn thêm chân" (drawing a snake and adding feet – referring to overdoing something unnecessarily). The findings indicate that there are both similarities and differences in the symbolic meanings of snake-related idioms in the three languages. The similarities often stem from universal human experiences with the biological nature of snakes, while the differences arise from culture-specific historical and linguistic features. Specifically, in each language, a certain symbolic layer dominates: Chinese is dominated by philosophical allusions, Vietnamese by practical life experiences, and English by Biblical moral warnings.

In terms of negative symbolisms, all three languages share the universal use of snake imagery to express deception and cunning. For example, in Vietnamese, the idiom "Khẩu Phật tâm xà" (a Buddha's mouth but a snake's heart) describes people who seem kind but hide evil intentions. Similarly, the Chinese idiom "Shé xiē xīn cháng" (蛇蝎心肠 – "a heart like a snake and scorpion") describes deceptive and cruel people. At the same time, the English idiom "a snake in the grass" (a hidden enemy who feigns friendship) also conveys the symbolism of deceitful and dangerous people who hide their true intentions.

The negative symbolisms of snake-related idioms also depict fear and danger, showcasing a strong parallel between Vietnamese and Chinese perspectives. As mentioned in previous sections, the Vietnamese idiom "Nuôi ong tay áo, nuôi rắn trong nhà" (keeping bees in your sleeve, keeping snakes in your house – meaning trusting someone who will eventually betray you) reflects the fear of being harmed by those close to you. This is closely mirrored in Chinese by the idiom "养蛇自噬 Yǎng shé zì shì means "raising a snake to be bitten/devoured by it", which conveys the exact same meaning, symbolizing the self-inflicted danger of nurturing an

ungrateful entity. In contrast to these Asian parallels, the English idiom “a snake oil salesman” (a person who promotes fraudulent cures or fake goods) expresses deceit specifically in a culture-specific commercial and fraudulent context. This comparison highlights that while Asian idioms often focus on betrayal within personal and social relationships, English idioms frequently warn against dishonesty in broader transactional contexts.

Regarding the symbolism of transformation and survival, there are parallel idioms in three languages describing similar meanings. For instance, the Vietnamese idiom “Rắn không chân cũng bò” (a snake without legs still crawls) reflects resilience, flexibility, and perseverance. Similarly, the Chinese idiom “Shé bìng xíng” (蛇病行 – “a snake’s disease still moves”) reflects endurance and survival in difficult situations. At the same time, the English idiom “to shed one’s skin” (the process of discarding the old for the new) symbolizes adaptability and renewal in adverse circumstances.

When it comes to the symbolism of chaos and confusion, Vietnamese and Chinese share idioms reflecting organizational disorder, while English focuses on movement patterns. The Vietnamese idiom “Rắn không đầu” (a headless snake) conveys a chaotic situation without leadership. In Chinese, the idiom “Lóng shé hùn zá” (龙蛇混杂 – “dragons and snakes mixed together”) expresses a situation where good and bad elements coexist in confusion. Conversely, the English idiom “to snake one’s way” describes a winding path and strategic navigation (moving subtly or windingly) through a difficult area, rather than representing chaos or lack of leadership.

As for the origin of formation, culture-specific factors explain why certain themes dominate each language. Chinese idioms and Sino-Vietnamese idioms are more likely to be associated with myths, fables, or ancient books, reflecting a dominance of literary and philosophical allusions. However, indigenous Vietnamese idioms about snakes tend to originate from practical experiences in the relationship between humans and nature. Therefore, Chinese learners should focus on the rich content of anecdotes, while Vietnamese learners should focus more on practical life experiences.

The cultural background has a profound influence on these idiomatic meanings. Chinese snake-related idioms are often associated with ancient books, such as “drawing a snake with legs” or “snake swallowing an elephant”. In contrast, Vietnamese tend to use snake imagery to reflect real-life social relationships, seen in idioms like “snake eyes” or “carrying a snake to bite the chicken at home”. Conversely, English idioms reflect symbolisms dominated by the Bible, where snakes are primarily related to deception and the “Original Sin”. Therefore, in English, snakes are most likely to signify dishonesty, while in Chinese and Vietnamese, there is a wider range of meanings, including resilience and traditional fables.

In summary, snake-related idioms across the three languages share universal meanings of hidden danger, cunning, and survival due to the snake's mysterious nature. However, the culture-specific differences remain clear: Vietnamese idioms dominate in expressing social resilience and deceit through daily experience; Chinese idioms are dominated by mythological allusions; and English idioms are dominated by moral warnings against fraud and betrayal, influenced by religious history.

5. Conclusion

The study investigated the impact of culture and language on the symbolism of snake-related idioms in Vietnamese, Chinese, and English. The findings demonstrate that while all

three languages share universal patterns-utilizing the snake's biological traits to express concepts such as deception, transformation, and hidden danger - typical differences emerge under the influence of distinct historical, religious, and cultural factors.

Instead of mere literal translation, the symbolic meanings across these languages follow unique cultural trajectories. Specifically, all three languages emphasize the snake as a signifier of treachery and cunning. In the Vietnamese and Chinese contexts, this symbolism often manifests as warnings against "internal" betrayal-such as the Vietnamese “*Công rắn cắn gà nhà*” (carrying a snake to bite the house chicken), which illustrates the danger of bringing ungrateful individuals into a domestic space. Conversely, the English moral-ethical pattern is heavily dominated by the Biblical tradition, where the snake serves as an archetype of moral corruption. This explains why English snake-related idioms, such as “a snake oil salesman”, focus more on fraudulent intent and deceit in a transactional or moral context, rather than just social betrayal or ancient fables.

Furthermore, the study identifies a distinction between philosophical allusions and empirical experiences. Chinese idioms are primarily dominated by mythological and philosophical patterns, rooted in fables and ancient literary texts. Vietnamese idioms, while sharing some Sino-Vietnamese roots, are characterized by a practical-relational pattern, deriving from agricultural life and direct interactions with nature. This is evident in the differing perceptions of chaos: whereas Vietnamese and Chinese view the "headless snake" through the lens of social hierarchy and leadership void, English focuses on the physical sinuosity of the snake to metaphorize complex and strategic navigation (to snake one's way). In terms of resilience and transformation, the resilient nature of the snake is universally used to convey perseverance, yet it is prioritized as a symbol of practical survival in Asian cultures versus a symbol of personal renewal in English.

Theoretically, this research contributes to the field of cultural linguistics by illustrating how a single biological entity is transformed into diverse symbolic codes based on a society's collective consciousness. By building on and extending prior research (e.g., Poluzhyn, 2020), this study moves from mono-cultural analysis to a tri-lingual comparative framework, highlighting how religious doctrines (the Bible), literary heritage (Chinese fables), and folk wisdom (Vietnamese experience) create distinct idiomatic landscapes.

In conclusion, these findings provide valuable references for multilingual learners, teachers, and scholars. Understanding these underlying patterns allows for a deeper grasp of how culture and language interweave to shape the meanings of idiomatic expressions. By recognizing these cultural identities, learners can more effectively navigate the complexities of cross-cultural communication.

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APPENDIX

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