

## Solutions to the Paradox of China's University Mottos

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### Abstract

On the basis of Memetics and 486<sup>1</sup> China's university mottos, this paper finds the paradox of Chinese mottos, i.e., the languages of the mottos are successful from the perspective of Memetics, but they are not successful mottos in use. Then, this paper holds that putting in full length of the meta-pragmatic awareness to put out appropriate meme complex is very important in solving the problem of China's university mottos. Finally, this paper comes up with maxims of making university mottos.

**Key words:** University mottos; Memetics; Paradox; Meme complex; Model

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### INTRODUCTION

According to Tolstoy "...social phenomena, like natural phenomena, have a life of their own" (as cited in Haiman, 1985, p.1). "Language has a life of its own." Even "the word has a life of its own" (as cited in Haiman, 1985, p.2). However, we know very little of them. University motto is an instance at hand. University mottos, as an important language phenomenon and carrier of culture, roots deep in the culture of a nation and has a prosperous life of its own. Like "The Wind of Freedom Blows" of Stanford

<sup>1</sup>The original data are omitted because of the space limitation. The interested reader can contact the author for it.

University a motto could enjoy high public reputation nationwide or throughout the world. In China, however, most of the mottos are so boring, dull, and very similar to each other that they are vulnerable to much criticism. The preceding researches mainly focused on the functions, language features and so on, and obviously, more researches should be done to improve china's university mottos as a whole. This paper, based on Memetics, analyzes 486 items of china's university mottos and finds out the paradox and finally proposes solutions to them.

### 1. BRIEF REVIEW OF MEMETICS

Meme is, besides gene, "a new replicator, a noun that conveys the idea of a unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation" (Dawkins, 1989, p.170). "Examples of memes are tunes, ideas, catch-phrases, clothes fashions, ways of making pots or of building arches" (Dawkins, 1989, p.171). Blackmore broadened the definition of meme into "As long as that information can be copied by a process we may broadly call 'imitation', then it counts as a meme" (1999, p.66). Up till now, "meme" is no longer difficult to understand. It is now a lexical item in dictionaries like *The Oxford English Dictionary* and *The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Unabridged English—Chinese Dictionary*. Meme, like gene, is essential selfish. It takes all possible ways to copy and transmit, and "acts in its own interests" (Blackmore, 1999, p.35). It goes through assimilation, retention, expression and transmission to self-copy and transmit (as cited in He, 2007, pp.133-134). Memes compete with each other since in meme pool they are too numerals. A (potential) successful meme should be longevity, fecundity and copying-fidelity (Dawkins, 1989, p.173).

Human brain is the vital important carrier and transmitting tool for meme. Human being has never been so helpless facing this replicator since human beings themselves are but meme complexes (Blackmore,

1999, p.231) and act like a von Neumann machine (Dennet, 1991, p.210). “The haven all memes depend on reaching is the human mind, but a human mind is itself an artifact created when memes restructure a human brain in order to make it a better habitat for memes” (as cited in Blackmore, 1999, p.22). However, at the meanwhile of serving as bases of memes, human beings are capable enough to use memes at their own will. On the one hand, the psychological foundation of the hosts, like conformity, prepares for the meme transmitting. The hosts will experience a scenario of compliance—obedience—acceptance. And higher self awareness of this scenario is the more reluctant of the hosts to accept (certain) memes. On the contrary, the lower awareness means the faster acceptance (Jiang, 2012). On the other hand, being transmitted by human brains means memes should be adapt to the brains. To this aspect, memes are selected by human brains, which indicate memes that are more adapted to human brains would get more chances to be transmitted. Then, well-designed memes will be more possible transmitted. It is beyond imagination that a good poem could come into shape without careful design. That’s why, more often than not, the simpler structure of a meme is, the less chances of it to be transmitted. That means the meme complexes will get more chances. However, it is by no means the longer the better. The length of a meme complex should not go beyond the memory limit. For instance, a full article is not a good meme to be (orally, especially) transmitted. No one can recite *The Origin of Species* without missing a word but “survival of the fittest” is familiar to most of us. Therefore, it is safe to claim that a successful meme on the one hand need to form meme complex, since memes inside meme complex “can replicate better as part of the group than they can on their own” (Blackmore, 1999, p.169). On the other hand, the power and characteristics of a meme is relevant to meme hosts’ meta-pragmatic awareness. Needless to say, the higher a host’s meta-linguistic competence involves, the more possible of the designed memes get copied.

## 2. CHINA’S UNIVERSITY MOTTOS AND ITS ANALYSIS

The Chinese “university motto<sup>2</sup>” counterpart was borrowed from Japanese (校訓) in the Qing dynasty (Wang, 2006). It refers to goal and behavior maxim of a university in terms of Liu (1997). According to Zhao (2003), the importance of a university motto are firstly, manifesto of the characteristics of this university; secondly, the soul of the school; and thirdly, the core

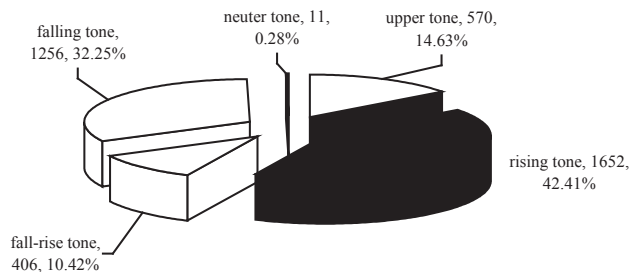
<sup>2</sup> University motto is a cover term. It not only includes mottos of universities but also mottos of colleges.

value of the university. Slightly different from the above mentioned, Hou and Zhou (2007) think that university motto functions as, on the one hand, the guideline of the general way of the school running and on the other hand behavior regulations of the members and their motivation to reach a higher level. The awareness of the importance of university mottos leads to a severe criticism from the scholars to the current situation of China’s university mottos. Their main accusations are: many of the mottos similar and even identical in forms and contents; blind quotations from the classics or celebrities; little innovation and so on. Consequently, the mottos haven’t functioned as they should have. This paper tries to analyze thoroughly the problems first and then propose tentative solutions to China’s university mottos from the perspective of Memetics.

Based on an appendix of an unpublished MA thesis, each item has been confirmed by means of visiting the website of the university or checking relevant materials to guarantee the liability of the data and finally, 486 pieces of China’s university mottos was collected in this paper for analysis.

The first aspect is about the tone of the characters. Firstly, every character of the mottos is marked with its Chinese *pinyin*. Then we mark every character as A, B, C, or D according to its intonation (upper, rising, fall-rise, or falling tone). The forms follow the original Chinese forms. More specifically, if the Chinese characters are combined as words, the marked letters are put together without

space among them. For example, the marks of 自 强  
bùxi hòudézǎiwù  
不息 厚德载物 are DBDA DBCD. However, it is believed that there are only four main tones in Chinese, and the distribution of them is totally random. So it seems irrational to study them in this way. However, in this way, Liu (2003 & 2005) concludes that the two main features of Chinese are fall pitch and alternative use of different contours. Wu (2007) studies the distribution of the tones of campus popular expressions. The figures he got are 26%, 21%, 22%, 29% and 2% for upper tone, rising tone, fall-rise tone, falling tone and neuter tone respectively. Careful readers can find that the four main tones distribute averagely in campus popular expressions. And the neuter tone takes up 2%. However, in the language of China’s university mottos, distribution of the four main tones is far from average (see the following chart). The dominant two are rising tone 42% and falling tone 32%. It proves that the tone analysis is rational and the tone distribution is not random. In different genre, the tone distribution may vary. It can be found that the alternation of even tones and oblique tones in China’s university mottos are obtained full consideration and balanced well.



**Figure 1**  
Distributions of the Five Tones of China's University Mottos

But to fall pitch, disagreement was found in the language of China's university mottos. The research was done in the two-character-word pattern. "x" is a unit represents the tones of two Chinese characters. The result is in Table 1.

**Table 2**  
Sentential Patterns of China's University Mottos

Patterns	One-character pattern	Two-character pattern		Four-character pattern			Others
		Four-word pattern	Others	One-phrase pattern	Two-phrase pattern	Others	
Frequency	14	165	26	38	202	25	16
%	2.88	33.95	5.35	7.81	41.56	5.14	3.29
		39.30		54.53			

Table 2 clearly presents that four-character pattern is very dominant in the data. Its sub-pattern is mainly two-phrase pattern, which counts for 42%. Typical ones are like "zhiqiang buxi, houde zaiwu" (strengthen self without stopping, and hold world with virtue). The next mainly type is four-word pattern, like "aiguo, jinbu, kexue, minzhu" (patriotic, progressive, scientific, democratic). In general, more than 90% of China's university mottos belong to two-word pattern or four-word pattern. These

**Table 3**  
Top Repeated Words Among China's University Mottos

Chinese	chuangxin	qiushi	boxue	tuanjie	houde
English	innovate	realistic	erudite	unitive	moral
Times	205	84	84	51	50
Chinese	qinfen	qiushi	yanjin	zhiqiang	xianshen
English	diligent	truth-seeking	rigorous	self-reliance	sacrifice
Times	42	40	33	27	16

The top 10 words repeated in the mottos are listed in Table 3. It is impressive to find that in 486 university mottos, 205 of them contain the word *chuangxin* (innovate). The other word deserves special note is *xianshen* (sacrifice). It is very commonly used in the military universities. It reflects the tradition and education ideas of the military universities. If put further the analysis, two-character words like above mentioned can be reduced to one character since one of the character is just modifier. For example, *houde* (rich in moral) and *zhongde* (attach importance to moral) have the same center, which is *de* (moral). So, the compound words can

**Table 1**  
Tone Patterns of China's University Mottos

Models items	ABx×DA	BBx×DA	DBx×DA	BDx×DA	x×xDA
Frequency	6	38	15	5	83
%	3.16	19.90	7.85	2.26	43.46

In terms of tone, the mottos are in general no very identical patterns. And what is impressive is "x×xDA". It counts for more than 43% in all the mottos. It indicates that the sharp contrast of the falling tone and raising tone in one combination is adapted to the feature of mottos since its Chinese counterpart *xun* means order or request.

The next aspect deserves note is the sentence pattern of the mottos. The result is in Table 2.

two patterns are very prevalent.

If the tone and sentence patterns of the mottos are blameless since they are in accordance with the language characteristics of mottos, the meaning identical is vulnerable to criticism. No complicated statistical means is need to identify the similarity of the meanings. By counting the words frequency in the mottos, the result obtained is in Table 3.

be reduced to center without modifiers. Table 4 represents the top 5 repetition words (characters, more exactly).

**Table 4**  
Top Repeated Characters Among China's University Mottos

Chinese	xue	de	xing	zhi	cheng
English	study	moral	practice	ambition	honesty
Times	198	162	102	46	43

Table 3 and Table 4 clearly indicate that the spirit of China's university mottos root deep in the traditional

culture. The words or characters in the above two tables are mainly from some classics.

The words *boxue* (learn extensively), *duxing*(work perseveringly) and so on seem to be commonly used words. However, they are cited from *The Doctrine of the Mean*, a great ancient Chinese classic. The original sentence is “Study extensively (*boxue zhi*); Enquire accurately (*shenwen zhi*); Reflect carefully (*shensi zhi*); Discriminate clearly (*mingbian zhi*); Practice earnestly (*duxing zhi*).” In this way, we check several key words and get Table 5 about the origins as following and find most of them root in the Four Books and the Five Classics.

**Table 5**  
**Some Spiritual Origins of China’s University Mottos**

Books	Frequency
<i>The Doctrine of the Mean</i>	105
<i>The Book of Changes</i>	73
<i>The Great Learning</i>	47
<i>The Analects</i>	26
<i>The Book of Rites</i>	14
<i>The History of Han Dynasty</i>	8
<i>The Book of History</i>	4
<i>The Lament</i>	1

The all above-mentioned data lead to a conclusion. That is the tone of the motto language is compatible to certain law, but that doesn’t come from intentional design. As for sentence pattern, the two-character type and the four-character type are successful memes in China’s university mottos owing to the characteristics of Chinese maxims. However, the application to the university mottos causes too much repetition and little innovation. In addition, the contents are also very similar.

### 3. PARADOX OF CHINA’S UNIVERSITY MOTTOS AND THE TENTATIVE SOLUTIONS

The repetitions, which have been criticized severely, are very successful memes from the standards of successful memes. What memes boost is large scale copy and transmission, the more the better. Following this line of thought, the words repeated in China’s university mottos are successful memes without doubt. However, according to a journalist Zhang Yanhong, neither the students nor their parents he interviewed could remember their school’s mottos. But they would come up with some identical lines since, in their memory, all the school mottos are in the same format and style. That proves the university mottos, as a whole, are far from successful. And it also indicates that the success of memes doesn’t always conform to the expectation of the creators. This is the very paradox in question.

What should be admitted is memes like *boxue*, *chuanxin* are, to some extent, successful. However, like

gene, a too short segment of meme is meaningless since it, take the letter *a* for example, can exist very long and spread wide without any change (Blackmore, 1999, p.93). Even though, strictly speaking, meme and gene is not analogy (Distin, 2005, p.12), it is widely accepted that they have much in common. Till now, a very natural conclusion is that, meme complex is more meaningful and easier to get succeeded. The evidence at hand is many people could blurt out mottos like “*tuanjie*, *qinfen*, *qiushi*, *chuangxin*”. But the paradox is still there. And the very matter is that the paradox rests on the foundation of treating memes as memes their own, rather than counting human values in. Put aside human values, blue films are considered more successful than films focusing on moral education since the former is easier, to some extent, to infect the hosts. The language of university mottos should uphold the moral. And high intelligence activity would be involved in deciding a university’s motto. What’s more, a plausible motto should go hand in hand with the characteristics of the school, not just some wide spread classic words or sentences. If this is true, then it can be understood why some famous words like, *tuanjie* (unity) is but like a stray dog without home because by reading it the readers would have no idea of which university it belongs to. This would shed light on making university mottos and provide tentative solutions to the paradox.

One constrain should be broke in making a motto is that every cherished value should be included into the motto. On the contrary, many long-cherished values, like honesty, can be excluded since it is already fused in our blood. The world famous mottos like “It’s up to you” and “Boys, be ambitious!” don’t include *honesty*. But it doesn’t mean honesty is not important to the students. Keep all these in mind, some principles of making mottos can be put as following:

- I Sounds: They should be pleasant to the ears.
  - i Rhyming is not indispensable.
  - ii Alternative use of even tones and oblique tones.
- II Meanings: They should highlight the specialties of the university.
  - i Embody the history of the university.
  - ii Embody the level, pursuit (according with social norms) of the university.
  - iii Arrange the words or phrases orderly.
- III Sentences: They should be concise.
  - i Follow the traditional Chinese motto patterns.
  - ii Combine long and short phrases properly.
  - iii Fill into the “you/we should...” sentence slot.
- IV Motto carriers: They should be various.
  - i Use board, stone etc. to present the motto in the university.
  - ii Use the homepage of the university to publicize it in both Chinese and English and give further detailed explanation on another page.
  - iii Organize activities to practice the spirits of the mottos.

Several points deserve clarification. The basic concern of “Rhyming is not indispensable” is that the forms are important but the meanings are more important in

university mottos because they have to represent the unique spirit of the universities in several limited words. Nevertheless, it is absolutely good if both sides can be met. In addition, rhyming could produce effects like humorous, wise etc. However, overuse of it may cause a sense of informal and flowery since university motto is a kind of formal text. In terms of iii "Fill into the slot 'you/we should...'", this is the traditional pattern of Chinese mottos. And this potential sentence pattern should be kept. All the university mottos can be rewritten into a full sentence initiated by this slot. As for carrier, it is indispensable according to Aunger (2000, p.277). Memes are possible to be transmitted instantly or not. If not, they need carriers to hold them and get ready to be copied and transmitted when possible.

#### 4. CASE STUDY

"*hanhong guangda, jiwang kailai*" (Comprehension is wide, and brightness great; carry forward the cause of the predecessors and forge ahead into the future) of Southwest University.

The sound pattern of the motto is BBAD DCAB. BB is a level contour according to Liu (2005). Repetition of the same tone is a way rhyming and emphasizing but it cannot be overused. Alternative uses of different tone would be better. This motto sounds good to the ears.

As to meaning, we can read the full explanation on the website of the Southwest University. The former part is cited from *The Book of Change*. Each character has a deep connotation. And the basic idea is all-embracing or all-inclusive. The latter part is the words of Zhu Xi, a great scholar in the Song dynasty. The meaning is carrying forward the cause of the predecessors and forging ahead into the future.

Southwest University, as one of the largest campuses in China, enjoys a history of over 100 years. It is the integration of two large universities. In total, there are 11 disciplinary categories, covering 40 first level subjects. So the former part of the motto is a proper term of the feature of this university. Nevertheless, the new name, Southwest University, was given in 2005. It stands on a brand new start line. Therefore, the later part, means forge ahead, is what the students and teaching staff have to do. This motto is a custom-designed for Southwest University from this angle.

The sentence pattern of it is the most frequently used antithesis. It is pleasant to the ear and easy to read. As for the part of speech of the componential words, all of them could be verbs. Verbs could put forward a sense of urging, which urges the readers to practice it. It can be extended into a full Chinese sentence in our slot yet a little change has to be made in English version for the sake of coherence.

On the homepage, the motto is very sight attractive. What's more, it is easy for the interested visitors to

find the full strength of explanation of the motto. If the authority part of the university would organize some activities centering on the motto between times, it would be more impressive.

It is theoretically a successful one from the evaluation of our model though something more needs to be done.

However, as for the rest of the mottos, the majority of them are far from satisfactory. And it is convincing that the less than good mottos can be greatly improved by consulting the model in this paper, even though no more samples can be done here because of the shortage of space.

#### CONCLUSION

Based on Memetics, this paper analyzed 486 China's university mottos and exposed the paradox and finally provided solutions to the problems. We strongly hold that, university mottos should represent the specialties of a university, rather than some irrelevant classic words or sentences. Take those factors into consideration, a model has been provided. The model is expected to serve as a helping hand to improve the current situation of China's university mottos.

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