

Presentation and Analysis of *Xiehouyu* in Literature and as a Linguistic Phenomenon¹

Xie Chuyue

Beijing Foreign Studies University, China

e-mail: soniaxie@bfsu.edu.cn

ORCID: 0009-0004-5097-7079

Abstract

My work is concerned with the topic of *xiehouyu*, a phenomenon specific to the Chinese language, but little known in Poland. I try to present and analyse *xiehouyu* and its use in literature. The paper consists of three chapters. In the first chapter, I describe *xiehouyu* in general. The second chapter analyses the use of *xiehouyu* in Chinese literature. The last chapter offers a summary of the significance of *xiehouyu*. By means of concrete examples and textual analysis, the article aims to help readers grasp the meaning and value of *xiehouyu* and to deepen their understanding of Chinese literary works and the Chinese way of thinking.

Keywords

xiehouyu, Chinese language, Chinese literature

In the present article, I discuss the subject of *xiehouyu*, which is a typical phenomenon of the Chinese language, but it is little known in Poland. I shall present and analyse this linguistic form and its use in literature. The paper consists of three parts. In the first one, I explain what *xiehouyu* is, in the second one, I analyse its application in literature, and in the last one, I summarise the significance of *xiehouyu*. In my method, I present concrete examples, which prove helpful in grasping the meaning and the value of

¹ This article was originally published in Polish: “Przedstawienie i analiza *xiehouyu* w literaturze oraz jako zjawisko językowe”, *Przegląd Humanistyczny* 2024, no. 2, pp. 144–158, <https://doi.org/10.31338/2657-599X.ph.2024-2.10>.

xiehouyu. In this way, the readers may better understand Chinese literary works and the Chinese way of thinking.

1. Definition and classification of *xiehouyu*

Xiehouyu is a metaphorical enunciation composed of two parts. It is a unique form of expression proper to the Chinese language. The first part is descriptive, followed by the clause providing a solution to the metaphorical phrase. This short, amusing linguistic form is created and used mainly by the Chinese people in everyday practice, but also in literature.

1.1 Definition and structure of *xiehouyu*

The term *xiehouyu* (歇后语, pronunciation: xiē hòu yǔ) refers to a form of colloquial speech of highly literary nature. It is also a kind of characteristic colloquial phrase used in the everyday life of ordinary Chinese people. When we divide the name *xiehouyu*, we see that Xie (歇) literally means ‘to rest’ – here used in its extended meaning, that is, ‘to remove’ certain characters. Hou (后) means ‘after’ and Yu (语) means ‘language, sentence’. So, *xiehouyu* is a sentence after removing certain characters or words. Only some characters are removed, so the listener’s or reader’s task is to guess the omitted part. The speaker or writer often adds an explanation in the second part, thus creating a unique language game relying on a determined interdependence of both clauses.

This is a unique linguistic form. It is a common conviction that a similar kind of idiom does not exist in other languages,² so it is impossible to translate its name. According to linguist John Rohsenow, *xiehouyu* may be translated as “enigmatic folk similes” or “truncated witticisms”.³

Xiehouyu is usually composed of two parts, resembling a riddle and its solution. The first one uses vivid, creative language subtly introducing the metaphor, whereas the second one is a clue that explains the meaning and suggests the solution of the riddle. In order to understand the whole, one has to guess the meaning of the first part, so in terms of linguistic form *xiehouyu* is also perceived as a pun. By custom, the two parts are connected typographically with double em dash, but in practice, especially in literature, we observe greater flexibility and variability of use.

² Gao Lidong (高立东), 歇后语的构成方式及特点 [The Means and Character of Creating *Xiehouyu*], *Social Scientist* (社会科学家) 2006, no. 10, pp. 321–322.

³ Nastazja Stoch, “Distinctive Features of Chinese Proverbs: A Comparative Study of *Suyu* and *Yanyu* and Other Types of *Shuyu*”, *Roczniki Humanistyczne* 2016, vol. 64, no. 9, p. 53.

The original meaning of *xiehouyu* refers to a way of speaking, in which one intentionally omits a word or half of the sentence to demonstrate their sense of humour. Here is one such example:

五六七八九——无事(四)⁴

*Five, six, seven, eight, nine – “four” is missing, so nothing is going on.*⁵

In this *xiehouyu*, “Five, six, seven, eight, nine” constitutes the riddle, and ““four” is missing, so nothing is going on” is the answer. Five numbers are listed here, but number four is missing. In Chinese, the pronunciation of the word ‘four’ is similar to the pronunciation of the word meaning ‘affair’ or ‘event’. By way of a pun, the lack of number four means the lack of any affair or event, i.e., nothing is going on.

In consequence of its continuous, long-lasting development, *xiehouyu* is no longer limited to simple omission of characters, but it incorporates elements of language, culture, common people’s life, religion and other sources in order to create complex and varied riddles and answers. In this way, it is more interesting, wittier and more broadly applicable.

1.2 Classification of *xiehouyu*

Xiehouyu has a long history. It draws from a wide range of sources, has many authors and presents no special requirements of the writers. Hence, it is impossible to count the actual number of *xiehouyu*. The *Great Dictionary of Xiehouyu*, edited by Wang Taoyu in 1988, collected 16,000 of them.⁶ However, there are many *xiehouyu* that have not been preserved to this day, and at the same time, new *xiehouyu* continue to be created. Therefore, the ways of classifying such a great number of *xiehouyu* are of key importance. There are two chief types of classification: according to the syntactic structure of the sentence and according to the creation method.

In accordance with the first type of classification, i.e., by the sentence’s syntactic structure, there are three kinds of *xiehouyu*: 1) subject–predicate structure; 2) structure

⁴ Wang Taoyu (王陶宇), Sun Yufen (孙玉芬), 歇后语大辞典 [Great Dictionary of *Xiehouyu*], Chengdu: Sichuan Lexicographical Publishing House 2022, p. 538.

⁵ All *xiehouyu* in this article will first be shown in Chinese characters, then translated into English and explained. Considering the uniqueness of *xiehouyu*, it is difficult to translate them into foreign language. Therefore, I will not focus on the translation. I rather want to concentrate on the analysis of individual *xiehouyu* to make it easier for the reader to understand them. (The English versions of *xiehouyu* are based on Xie Chuyue’s Polish translations – trans. note).

⁶ Liu Xicheng (刘锡诚), 王陶宇编《歇后语大辞典》序 [Introduction to Wang Taoyu’s *Great Dictionary of Xiehouyu*], in: Wang Taoyu (王陶宇), 歇后语大辞典 [Great Dictionary of *Xiehouyu*], Chengdu: Sichuan Cishu Chubanshe (四川辞书出版社) 1988.

without predicate; 3) series of actions. *Xiehouyu* of the first kind has a subject and a predicate, and it is used as an independent or component clause. The following *xiehouyu* can serve as a good example:

猫哭老鼠——假慈悲⁷

A cat wept over the dead mouse – false pity, pretended mercy.

We know that cats feed on mice. If a mouse is dead, the cat is glad, for it gets fed. If a cat is weeping over a dead mouse, this is not sincere sorrow, but false pity and pretended mercy. This *xiehouyu* is used to describe a person who pretends to care about the problems of other people.

Xiehouyu of the second kind has no verb; it usually functions as an element of a sentence, like for example:

盐店的老板——闲人⁸

The owner of a salt shop – an idler

The owner of a salt shop often touches salt, so he himself becomes “salty”. In the Chinese language, ‘salty’ and ‘idle’ have the same pronunciation, so a salty person is someone idle, an idler.

Xiehouyu of the last kind has a more complicated structure in the form of a series of actions, as exemplified here:

骑驴看唱本——走着瞧⁹

To ride a donkey, looking at the script – we’ll see what happens.

If someone is reading a script while riding on a donkey, he is reading it in constant motion. This motion may be understood as moving forward in spatial terms, but also as moving onwards in time and thus seeing what happens in the future. As for “looking”, it may be interpreted literally as looking at the script (reading what comes next), but also as looking at the future situation. 走着瞧 (pronunciation: zǒu zhe qiáo), literally “walking and looking”, may signify seeing what happens in the future, with a sense of certainty that the future will meet the person’s expectations.

The second type of classification is based on the method of creating *xiehouyu*. It comprises three basic kinds: metaphor, logic and pun. Here is an example of *xiehouyu* created by means of a metaphor:

茅坑里的石头——又臭又硬¹⁰

A stone in a latrine – stinking and hard

⁷ Wang Taoyu, Sun Yufen, 歇后语大辞典 [Great Dictionary of *Xiehouyu*], p. 354.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 583.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 407.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 357.

Stones are hard and latrines are stinking, so a stone in a latrine is naturally stinking and hard. In the Chinese language, the word ‘stinking’, apart from referring to an unpleasant smell, may also describe the face of an angry person or someone impetuous who easily gets furious. We say then that such a person has a “stinking” face and a “stinking” temper. As for ‘hard’, it also means ‘stubborn’. Hence, the phrase “a stone in a latrine” is used to describe an impetuous and stubborn person.

Xiehouyu can also be created with the use of logic:

哑巴吃黄连——有苦说不出¹¹

A mute person is eating Huanglian – one cannot speak about suffering.

Huanglian is a plant used in traditional Chinese medicine, known for its bitter taste. From a logical point of view, a person without any disability could complain: “this is very bitter”. But if a mute person is eating this plant, they cannot say it. The bitterness refers here not only to an unpleasant taste, but also symbolises suffering and hardships in life. A mute person who suffers cannot speak about it. This *xiehouyu* describes a person in a difficult situation, which they can neither solve, nor speak about.

Also, *xiehouyu* often use puns. This results from the fact that in the Chinese language, many characters are pronounced in a similar or the same way. Based on those puns, the Chinese created a large number of *xiehouyu*. For example:

外甥打灯笼——照旧(舅)¹²

A nephew holds a lantern – sheds light on the uncle / the same old.

This is a very classic *xiehouyu*. The words ‘nephew’ and ‘uncle’ are semantically closely related, one evokes the other. Therefore, when a nephew holds a lantern, it also sheds light on the uncle. In the Chinese language, ‘to shed light’ and ‘to follow’ are the same word, while ‘uncle’ and ‘old’ have the same pronunciation. Hence, the uncle on whom light is shed means someone who follows the same old ways.

1.3 The origin of *xiehouyu*

Xiehouyu has a long past and complex history of evolution. To this day, scholars have not formulated the final conclusion regarding the origin of *xiehouyu*. In 1984, Tan Yongxiang presented in his *New Treatise on Xiehouyu* a theory of the pluralistic origin of this linguistic form. This is currently the most widely accepted hypothesis. He suggested that there are three main predecessors of *xiehouyu*: figurative language from before the Qin dynasty, ancient stories and descriptions of events, and poems in

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 579.

¹² Ibidem, p. 523.

“Fengren” style (风人体).¹³ Moreover, some *xiehouyu* have been transformed from proverbs or Chengyu.

The figurative language from before the Qin is an ancient rhetoric. In the *Book of Odes*, we find, for example, this sentence: 牂羊坟首,¹⁴ meaning ‘a little sheep with a big head’. It was deemed obvious that only a ram can have a big head, so this phrase expresses an impossible thing. A currently existing *xiehouyu* was formed by the conjunction of the metaphor from this sentence with its literal meaning.

The second source includes ancient stories and events. Those that have been preserved in written form constitute Chengyu, whereas the more colloquial ones, used in speech, have evolved into *xiehouyu*.

The third origin are poems in “Fengren” style. “Fengren” is a genre of ancient folk songs which use puns, for example:

雾露隐芙蓉，见莲不分明。(《子夜歌》)¹⁵

Lotus flowers in mist and dews, they are visible, but not clearly.

Lian, that is lotus, has the same pronunciation as the word signifying the feeling of love. This *xiehouyu* expresses the anxiety of a woman who does not know whether a man loves her or not.

The name *xiehouyu* appeared for the first time in Zheng Qing’s biography from the *Old Book of Tang*, in which it is noted that Zheng Qing was skilled at writing poems with puns. The style of his poetry was known as *xiehou*. With time, *xiehouyu* became popular among the people and its richness was gradually increasing.

In summary, today’s *xiehouyu* are the result of folk knowledge and they do not have a single, specified author. Users constantly create and modify *xiehouyu* in the practice of life. In the processes of dissemination of *xiehouyu*, different variants and interpretations prevail, depending on geographical region, local phraseology and communicated message.

2. *Xiehouyu* in Chinese literature

Although *xiehouyu* is a form of colloquial, spoken language, it is often used in Chinese literature. In this chapter, I shall present the literary application of *xiehouyu*, its role in literature and the influence that literature exerts on *xiehouyu*.

¹³ Tan Yongxiang (谭永祥), 歇后语新论 [New Treatise on *Xiehouyu*], Jinan: Shandong Education Press 1984.

¹⁴ *Shaozhihua* (苕之华), in: 诗经译注 [Book of Odes with Annotations], part 2: *Lesser Court Hymns* (*Xiaoya*, 小雅), ed. Zhou Zhenfu (周振甫), Beijing: Chinese Publishing House 2002, pp. 391–392.

¹⁵ *Ziye Song* (子夜歌), no. 35, <https://www.chinesepoems.org/poems/ziyege-ziye-1> [accessed 9 July 2025].

2.1 The use of *xiehouyu* in Chinese literature

The early use of *xiehouyu* in literature dates back to the times of the Yuan dynasty, when this form was gradually becoming more popular in plays and novels. However, in most cases, those *xiehouyu* are vague and primitive, because they do not resemble oral enunciations and have no literary value.¹⁶

In the novels from the times of the Ming and the Qing dynasties, the use of *xiehouyu* was more common and more mature. Thanks to its growing sophistication and application by writers, its position in literature significantly increased – it became a literary phenomenon worth researching. It has been proven that the classic masterpiece *A Dream of Red Mansions* (红楼梦) contains 183 *xiehouyu*.¹⁷ The frequency of *xiehouyu* in this novel is very high. In the first eighty chapters, written by Cao Xueqin, *xiehouyu* is used, on average, twice in every chapter.¹⁸ In another famous novel of manners from the Ming dynasty, *The Plum in the Golden Vase* (金瓶梅), there are over 220 *xiehouyu*.¹⁹ In contemporary works, *xiehouyu* remains popular and appreciated by authors. For example, the writer Liu Jiang from Shanxi province, in his work from 1959 entitled 太行风云 [An Age in the Taihang Mountains], which altogether is composed of less than 500,000 words, included 227 *xiehouyu*.²⁰ The novel *The Hurricane* (暴风骤雨), written by Zhou Libo in 1948, also contains many *xiehouyu* of local character.²¹

Xiehouyu in literary works touches upon various topics, including marriage, illness, professional work, religion, seasons of the year, cooking, habits of the animals, agriculture, housekeeping, clothes, conduct, etc. In this way, the writer creates a realistic portrait of ordinary life in the country or in town, with characters representing various professions from the times in which the work was written. For example, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, we find the following *xiehouyu*:

嫁出去的女儿——泼出去的水²²

A daughter given away in marriage – spilled water

¹⁶ Wang Menglu (王梦璐), 《红楼梦》中歇后语的概念合成分析 [A Conceptual, Synthetic Analysis of *Xiehouyu* in *A Dream of Red Mansions*], *Jianan Literature* (剑南文学) 2011, no. 12, p. 121.

¹⁷ Gao Lidong, 歇后语的构成方式及特点 [The Means and Character of Creating *Xiehouyu*], p. 322.

¹⁸ Ji Wenxiu (冀文秀), 石韞玉而山晖 水怀珠而川媚——《红楼梦》歇后语运用的特点和效用 [The Characteristic and Usefulness of *Xiehouyu* in *A Dream of Red Mansions*], *Yinshan Academic Journal* (阴山学刊) 1995, no. 4, p. 32.

¹⁹ Meng Xianzhang (孟宪章), 谈《金瓶梅》中的歇后语 [Discussion on the *Xiehouyu* in *The Plum in the Golden Vase*], *Journal of Xuzhou Normal University* (徐州师范学院学报) 1990, no. 4, pp. 25–30.

²⁰ Wu Jianying (巫建英), 《太行风云》中歇后语的运用 [The Use of *Xiehouyu* in *An Age in the Taihang Mountains*], *Contemporary Chinese Language* (现代语文) 2009, no. 5, pp. 62–65.

²¹ Feng Qingtang (冯庆堂), 黑土地的芬芳——解读《暴风骤雨》中的文学语言 [Scent of the Black Soil – Interpretation of the Literary Language in *The Hurricane*], *Beauty and Epochs* (美与时代) 2003, no. 5, pp. 74–76.

²² Cao Xueqin (曹雪芹), 红楼梦 [*A Dream of Red Mansions*], Beijing: Beijing Normal University Press 1987, p. 1305.

This *xiehouyu* is related to marriage. In ancient China, which was a patriarchal society, when a daughter got married, she belonged to her husband's family and had no relationship with her kin, just like spilled water cannot be withdrawn.

Even though *xiehouyu* is a permanent structure of discourse, intended for a specific use, some necessary modifications may be introduced that result from the differences in the expressed content. The structure of the sentence changes, but the original meaning remains the same. The aim is to avoid word similarities so that the language is livelier. In literary works, a ready-made *xiehouyu* often appears in its entirety, but it may sometimes be adjusted to various scenes, situations, characters and styles by the use of a half of *xiehouyu* or by splitting it. In the book *醒世姻缘传* [Marriages to Awaken the World] from the Qing dynasty, it is stated that Mrs. Ji rebuked another character by saying that he is like a supervising officer of the armed forces in the Cao region. Here is the complete version of this *xiehouyu*:

曹州兵备——管得宽²³

*A supervising officer of the armed forces in Cao region –
exercising broad control over all affairs*

A supervising officer of armed forces is an ancient Chinese military position. The Cao region borders with three provinces, so the supervising officer of the armed forces of this region is in charge of a vast area. Logically, this *xiehouyu* refers to someone who exercises control over many things and it is used as a metaphor for a person who meddles in other people's affairs. In this case, instead of pronouncing the whole *xiehouyu*, the heroine skips the second half, because the complete form was quoted earlier in the novel. This helps avoid repetitions and makes *xiehouyu* more flexible. Thanks to this modification, which consists in shortening the *xiehouyu*, Mrs. Ji's anger and irritation are better expressed.

2.2 The role of *xiehouyu* in Chinese literature

The role of *xiehouyu* in literary works is threefold: it serves to build characters, to enrich the language style and to make the subject matter more sublime.

First of all, thanks to *xiehouyu*, the characters are more vivid, they become richer. *Xiehouyu* is used in accordance with their identity and personality. The author carefully considers who in his work will have a predilection for this language form and what kind of *xiehouyu* he or she will be choosing. For example, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the heroine who pronounces the greatest number of *xiehouyu* is Wang Xifeng, which shows not only that, for the author, this character is particularly worth attention, but it also

²³ Xi Zhousheng (西周生, pseud.), *醒世姻缘传* [Marriages to Awaken the World], Shangdong: Qilu Publishing House 1993, p. 627.

makes it possible for the reader to feel her eloquence. As for the way she uses this form of speech, she often omits the explanatory part of *xiehouyu*. She likes parallelisms and uses a lot of *xiehouyu*, one after another, which makes her words short and powerful. As for the content, many of Wang Xifeng's *xiehouyu* are, in comparison to other characters, wittier and more sarcastic, allowing the reader to feel her sharp tongue and lively nature.²⁴ In chapter 68, Wang Xifeng rebukes You Erjie: "You have neither talent, nor eloquence, you're like a bottle gourd with its mouth cut off; all you can do is to be blindly cautious to defend your virtuous reputation".²⁵ The comparison of You Erjie to a bottle gourd comes from this amusing saying:

锯了嘴子的葫芦——没口齿²⁶

A bottle gourd with its mouth cut off – has no eloquence.

The *xiehouyu* is quoted in reverse order. The heroine used the explanatory part first – "has no eloquence", and then the metaphorical one – "like a bottle gourd with its mouth cut off". A bottle gourd is empty inside and it can contain a lot, but without a "mouth", that is without an "opening", it is impossible to take out its contents. Similarly, people who lack eloquence cannot express their deep thoughts. This metaphor reflects Wang Xifeng's ease at speaking. As for the book *The Plum in the Golden Vase*, Pan Jinlian is the heroine who pronounces the greatest number of *xiehouyu*, which in a lively manner describe her envious, cruel and malicious personality.²⁷

Secondly, *xiehouyu* makes a literary work more energetic, precise and succinct. By skillful addition of witty and ironic elements, the flexibility, energy, humour and subtlety of the Chinese language are used to full advantage, without tedious repetitions. This unique linguistic form largely enhances the literary expression of the Chinese language. When abstract notions are set against concrete things in *xiehouyu*, the linguistic expression becomes more vivid in its imagery. In the book 儒林外史 [The Unofficial History of the Scholars], one of the characters, Zhou Jin, lost his job as a teacher and failed at imperial office exams, ending up with no livelihood at the age of sixty. At this time, his brother-in-law persuaded him to start a business together. Although in ancient China, scholars looked at businessmen with disdain, Zhou Jin had no better option in this situation, so he laughed to himself:

瘫子掉在井里——捞起也是坐²⁸

A paralytic falls into a well – he gets pulled out, still he can only sit.

²⁴ Ding Yuzhou (丁煜州), 《红楼梦》中歇后语的运用特点及效果分析 [Analysis of the Characteristic and Usefulness of the Application of *Xiehouyu* in the *A Dream of Red Mansions*], *Tomorrow* (明日风尚) 2022, no. 9, pp. 159–162.

²⁵ Cao Xueqin, *红楼梦* [*A Dream of Red Mansions*], p. 1305.

²⁶ Wang Taoyu, Sun Yufen, 歇后语大辞典 [Great Dictionary of *Xiehouyu*], p. 223.

²⁷ Lanling Xiaoxiaosheng (兰陵笑笑生, pseud.), *金瓶梅* [*The Plum in the Golden Vase*], Beijing: People's Literature Publishing House 2008.

²⁸ Wu Jingzi (吴敬梓), *儒林外史* [The Unofficial History of the Scholars], Tianjin: Tianjin People's Publishing House 2016, p. 18.

A paralytic who falls into a well, even if he gets pulled out from it, still cannot stand on his feet, he can only sit. This *xiehouyu* reflects precisely Zhou Jin's hopeless situation – no matter what choice he makes, nothing good will come out of it. Thus, *xiehouyu* provides a concrete image for his inward reflections.²⁹ Instead of describing the details of his difficult life, the character uses this *xiehouyu* to illustrate his situation and his mood. This makes the language of the novel concise and lively.

Thirdly, *xiehouyu* can be used to enrich the work, thus increasing its rank. *Xiehouyu* is the sum of wisdom of the Chinese society and contains philosophical elements. It reveals the laws of the objective development of nature and endows the work with greater depth. In chapter 26 of *A Dream of Red Mansions*, the housemaid Jiahui complains about the unjust salary. In response, her friend Hongyu says:

There's no need to be angry; even if the tent at a farewell banquet is one thousand miles long, there is no banquet that doesn't come to an end. We won't be working here for the rest of our lives, and in a few years we'll all be scattered, so there's no need to be angry.³⁰

The heroine makes use of the following *xiehouyu*:

千里搭帐篷——没有不散的筵席³¹

The tent at a farewell banquet is one thousand miles long – there is no banquet that doesn't come to an end.

At farewell parties, the length of banquet tents is constantly prolonged to avoid the necessary parting. As if increasing the size of tents could postpone the inevitable end. But in fact, even if the banquet takes long and the tents are vast, the moment will always come when all have to finish the celebration, say “goodbye” and part. There is no banquet that does not come to an end. No friends can stay together forever. This *xiehouyu*, which came from the mouth of a housemaid, by revealing some objective principles in the society, gives the reader food for thought and suggests that even if great families in the novel are rich and influential, they will eventually be torn apart.

In addition to the enumerated functions, the use of *xiehouyu* makes the atmosphere of the work livelier and favours a more realistic representation of social life.

2.3 The impact of Chinese literature on the development of *xiehouyu*

Xiehouyu and literature influence one another. *Xiehouyu* is of great importance for literature, and the latter plays a vital role in the development of *xiehouyu*. Before

²⁹ Zhu Nana (朱娜娜), Liu Huiming (刘慧敏), 《儒林外史》歇后语运用特点和修辞效用分析 [Analysis of Features and Rhetorical Usefulness of *Xiehouyu* in *The Unofficial History of the Scholars*], *Appreciating Masterpieces* (名作欣赏) 2016, no. 20, pp. 128–129.

³⁰ Cao Xueqin, *红楼梦* [*A Dream of Red Mansions*], p. 420.

³¹ Wang Taoyu, Sun Yufen, *歇后语大辞典* [Great Dictionary of *Xiehouyu*], p. 410.

xiehouyu began to be incorporated in literary works, this special form of language existed, in fact, only in colloquial speech. Thanks to its increased use in literature, the scope of its application was extended, while its standards and literary qualities were augmented. This contributed to the greater research value of *xiehouyu* and improved its status and worth. *Xiehouyu* in literary works is often treated as an important object of research. Its kinds, uses, modifications in time and other aspects are studied by analysing *xiehouyu* that can be found in literary works.

Moreover, new *xiehouyu* are created in literature. The characteristic classic literary figures and plots become a source of new forms of this kind. *Xiehouyu* are based on commonly known stories, rich in typical character features and cultural meanings, so they become forms of communication, harbouring multiple meanings within the limited space of a sentence.³²

Four classic Chinese novels contain many heroes who were at the origin of a large number of *xiehouyu*. In chapter seven of the book *西游记* (*Journey to the West*), the Monkey King Sun Wukong is so powerful that he can cover the distance of 108,000 miles in one jump, but he cannot jump out of the hand of Buddha Rulai. Rulai flipped his hand, which turned into an immense mountain that crushed the Monkey King. Catching him by Rulai was so easy – he only needed to flip his hand gently. This story lies at the origin of the following *xiehouyu*:

如来佛捉孙大圣——易如反掌³³

Catching the Monkey King by Buddha Rulai – easy, like a gentle flip of the hand.

This *xiehouyu* is used with reference to a person who can easily, without any effort perform a task perceived as difficult.³⁴ Another example comes from the book *三国演义* (*Romance of the Three Kingdoms*):

周瑜打黄盖——一个愿打，一个愿挨³⁵

Zhou Yu is beating Huang Gai – one willingly beats, one willingly gets beaten.

In the period of the Three Kingdoms, Huang Gai, an old national general of Eastern Wu, received orders to pretend that he had surrendered to Cao Cao. He knew, however, that Cao was very shrewd and would not believe the trick so easily. So, in order to win his confidence, another general of Eastern Wu, Zhou Yu, deliberately beat Huang Gai, who accepted the public punishment and then pretended that he had left his former kingdom out of irritation and now intended to swear loyalty to his earlier enemy.

³² Guo Bing (郭冰), 水浒歇后语探略——兼论水浒的民间接受 [Discussion of *Xiehouyu* in the *Water Margin* and the Popular Reception of the Novel], *Scientific Review of the Harbin Institute of Technology* (哈尔滨工业大学学报社会科学版) 2006, no. 4, pp. 140–144.

³³ Wang Taoyu, Sun Yufen, 歇后语大辞典 [Great Dictionary of *Xiehouyu*], p. 431.

³⁴ Ma Qihong (马启红), 《西游记》中的俗语探析 [A Study on *Suyu* in the *Journey to the West*], *Journal of Xinzhou Normal University* (忻州师范学院学报) 2007, no. 6, pp. 36–40.

³⁵ Wang Taoyu, Sun Yufen, 歇后语大辞典 [Great Dictionary of *Xiehouyu*], p. 633.

In consequence, Cao believed him and did not manage to defend himself against Huang Gai in further battles, which eventually led to his defeat. In this story, Huang Gai is ready to endure the beating and Zhou Yu willingly inflicts the blow. This *xiehouyu* describes a situation when both parties want the same thing, without any coercion. Such *xiehouyu* derived from classic stories are commonly used by the Chinese in everyday life and in many literary works.

3. The significance of *xiehouyu*

In this chapter, I shall analyse the value of *xiehouyu* as a linguistic phenomenon and the importance of conducting research on this form of language.

3.1 The significance of *xiehouyu* as such

Xiehouyu is an important phenomenon in the Chinese language, reflecting the Chinese culture, literature, philosophy and values. It constitutes the kernel of Chinese culture, because it expresses in short phrases its essential characteristics: importance attached to agriculture, belief in deities, cult of spirits and ancestor worship, taboo and its circumventing, attitude to family and marital relationship, etc.

For example, in *A Dream of Red Mansions*, we find this *xiehouyu*:

焦了尾巴梢子——绝后³⁶
Burnt tail – no progeny

A tail is placed at the back of a body, and in Chinese language *hou* (后) may refer both to the position at the back and to progeny. In feudal China, fertility was a matter of tremendous importance, whereas childlessness was perceived as the greatest shame and disrespect for one's parents and ancestors. Particularly high demands concerned female fertility. As a result, the lack of progeny became a linguistic taboo, and pronouncing such words was ill-omened. In verbal communication, it was necessary to use relatively decent euphemisms for the taboo matters. Therefore, one could use this *xiehouyu* to avoid a direct statement about having no children. For this reason, only the first half of *xiehouyu* was used in the novel, because it communicates the message clearly and remains euphemistic.

Xiehouyu show elements of Chinese culture, but they do not always follow unquestioningly its guiding principles. Rather, in ironical or metaphorical way, they present human perception of those norms. Therefore, *xiehouyu* are not stern and

³⁶ Cao Xueqin, *红楼梦* [*A Dream of Red Mansions*], p. 1768.

serious, but demonstrate the sense of humour, the attitude to life and the character of the whole Chinese society.

3.2 The importance of conducting research on *xiehouyu*

At foreign universities, research on *xiehouyu* is still not perceived as an important element of studies dedicated to Chinese language and literature. The reason for this is, inter alia, the difficulty with the appropriate deciphering and translating of *xiehouyu* and with understanding its significance in the everyday life of the Chinese and in the Chinese literature. Nonetheless, *xiehouyu*, which is a unique linguistic phenomenon and a vital element of Chinese culture and literature, deserves attention, appreciation and research conducted by a greater number of linguists. An in-depth analysis of *xiehouyu* allows for a more precise interpretation of a literary work in which this linguistic form plays an important role, because this knowledge helps better understand the personality and social status of literary figures, the background of the story, the events and topics mentioned in the work. *Xiehouyu* helps writers build distinctive, concrete characters, who are based on model personality types, which makes them memorable for the reader: Zhuge Liang's wisdom, Cao Cao's suspiciousness, Lu Zishen's justice – these associations of persons and qualities are also used in everyday life.

Moreover, when studying *xiehouyu*, one learns more about the philosophy, ideas and values cherished by the Chinese, who use this linguistic form to present the principles which they perceive as fundamental. Research on *xiehouyu* will, therefore, allow foreigners to know better the nature of Chinese society by understanding what is important for this nation. In addition, it may contribute to the improvement of intercultural communication and thought exchange.

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