



CILC2022: XIII International Corpus Linguistics Conference

Dipartimento di Lingue, Letterature e Culture Straniere. Università degli Studi di Bergamo
Bergamo, Italy, May 26-28, 2022

Contrastive phraseocultural analysis : stereotypes and representations of the head in Chinese and French

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Introduction

French idiomatic expressions

VS

Chinese *chéngyǔ*

Like many nature languages, French and Chinese are rich in idiomatic expressions (IEs) or *chéngyǔ*, which are reflections of national, societal, or cultural particularities. Through these expressions, humans perceive the influence of historical antecedents, different perceptions of the universe, ways of life and thought, and customs.

Phraseoculturologie - Phraseoculture : phraseography, phraseodidactics,
phraseotraductology

Metaphors for the human body

Head

1. French idiomatic expressions and Chinese *chéngyǔ*

chéngyǔ 成语

“成 chéng” means “mature, accomplished, completed”.

“语 yǔ” means “the speech, the language”.

The *chéngyǔ* are **polylexical sequences**, fixed syntagms or short phrases functioning as monolexical units within the sentence. **Semantically**, they are endowed with a specific meaning, not compositional and not directly deducible from the various characters. **Syntactically**, their basic form, which most often follows a **fixed quaternary (quadrisyllabic) rhythm**, divided phonetically or syntactically into two hemistiches, is conventional and has remained unchanged for generations, hence the term *chéngyǔ*, “ready-made expressions.” **Culturally**, they carry the idiosyncrasy of a culture (González Rey 2002: 40). Most often derived from classical literary language, they are elegant and concise and frequently contain powerfully allusive content (Chen 2021: 129).

For example :

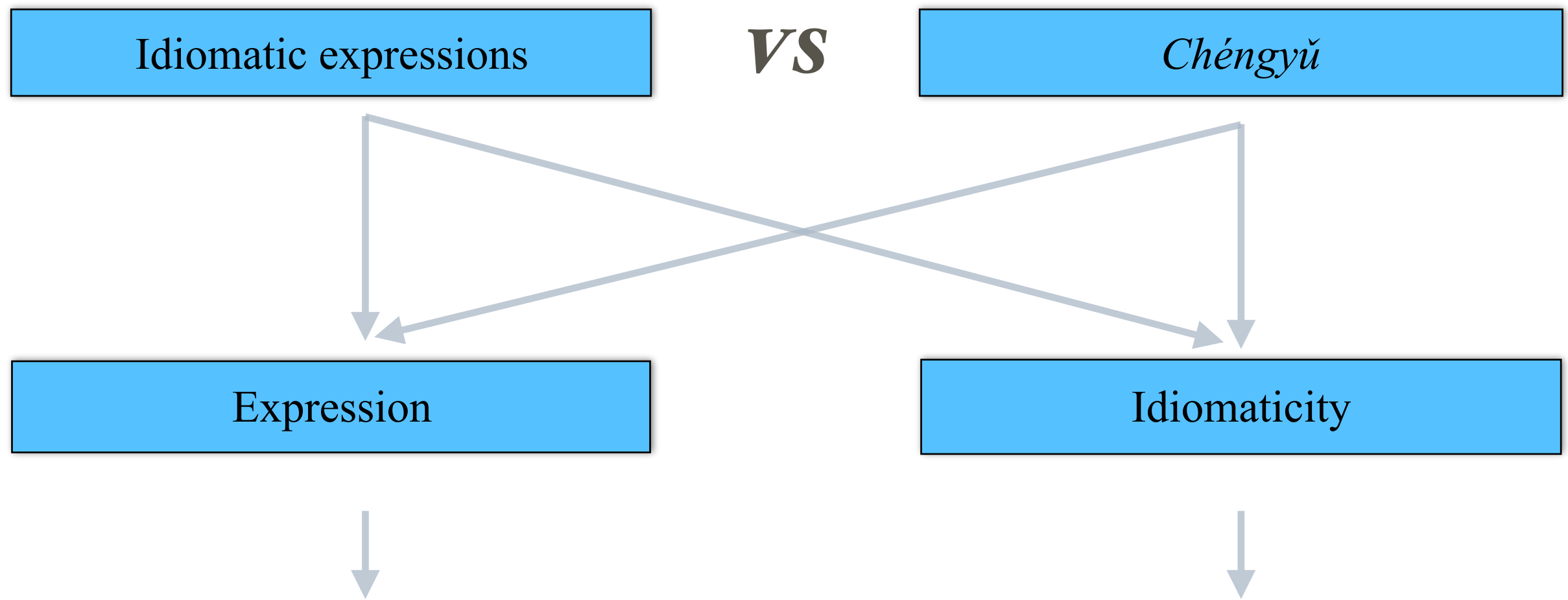
佛口蛇心 (Buddha+mouth+snake+heart)

Pinyin : fókǒu-shéxīn

Literal translation : words of a Buddha, heart of a snake

Equivalence : mouth of honey, heart of gall (Proverb.)

1. French idiomatic expressions and Chinese *chéngyǔ*



Idiomatic expressions

VS

Chéngyǔ

Expression

Idiomatycity

implies a rhetoric and a stylistic; most often involves the use of a “metaphor, metonymy, etc.

For example:

« avoir la tête dans les nuages » : **have one's head in the clouds/be distracted**

« Avoir un chat dans la gorge » : **to have a cat in the throat/to have a frog in one's throat**

1) Non-autonomous lexical units: polylexicality

2) Functional integrity

3) High degree of fixity: non-compositionality; paradigmatic non-substitutability; syntax blocking.

2 The metaphorical domain of the head: "head-heart" dualism in the West, but poorly developed in the Eastern tradition

Four humors of ancient Greek



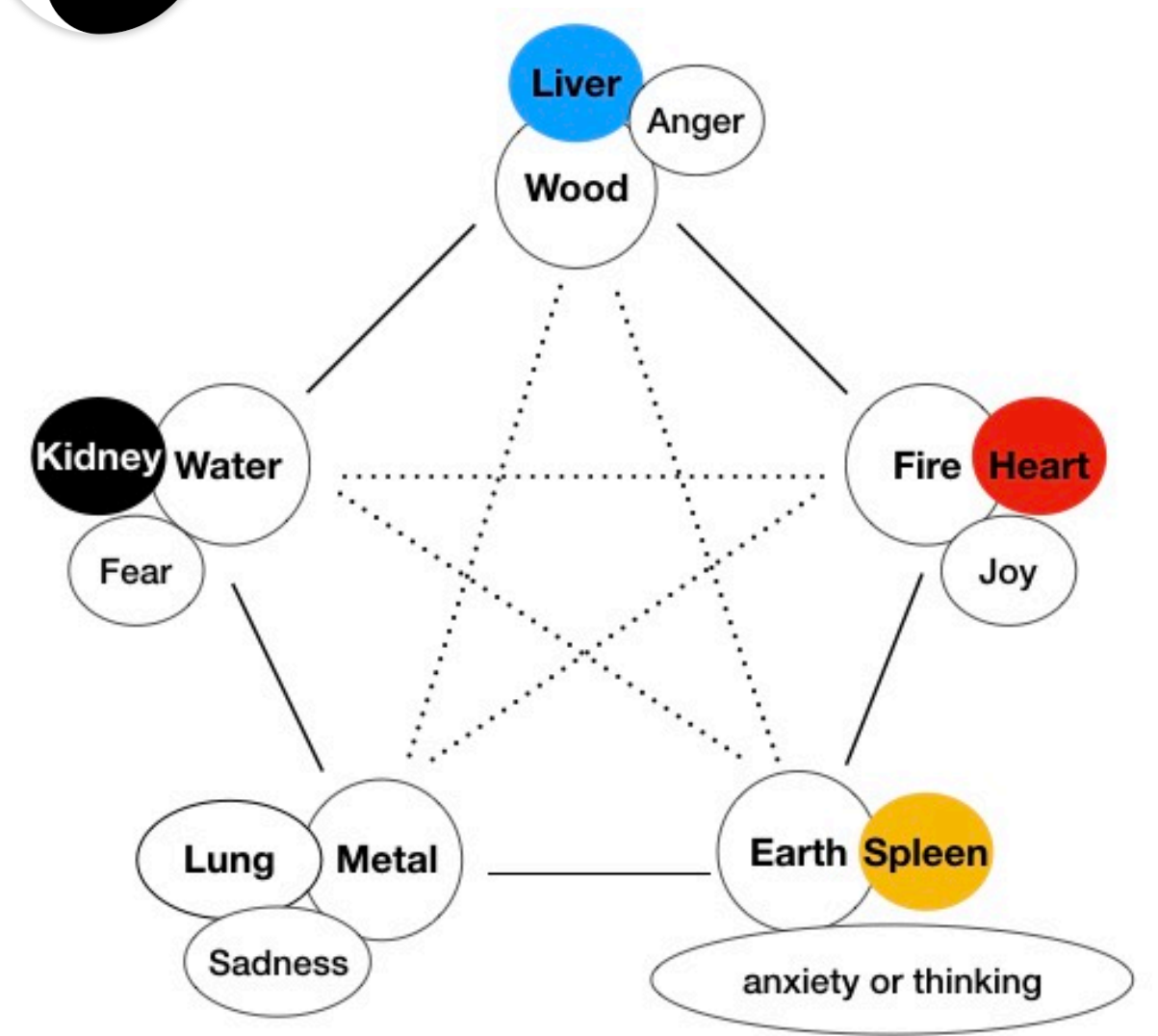
Head vs Heart

VS

Five organs/elements of Chinese philosophy



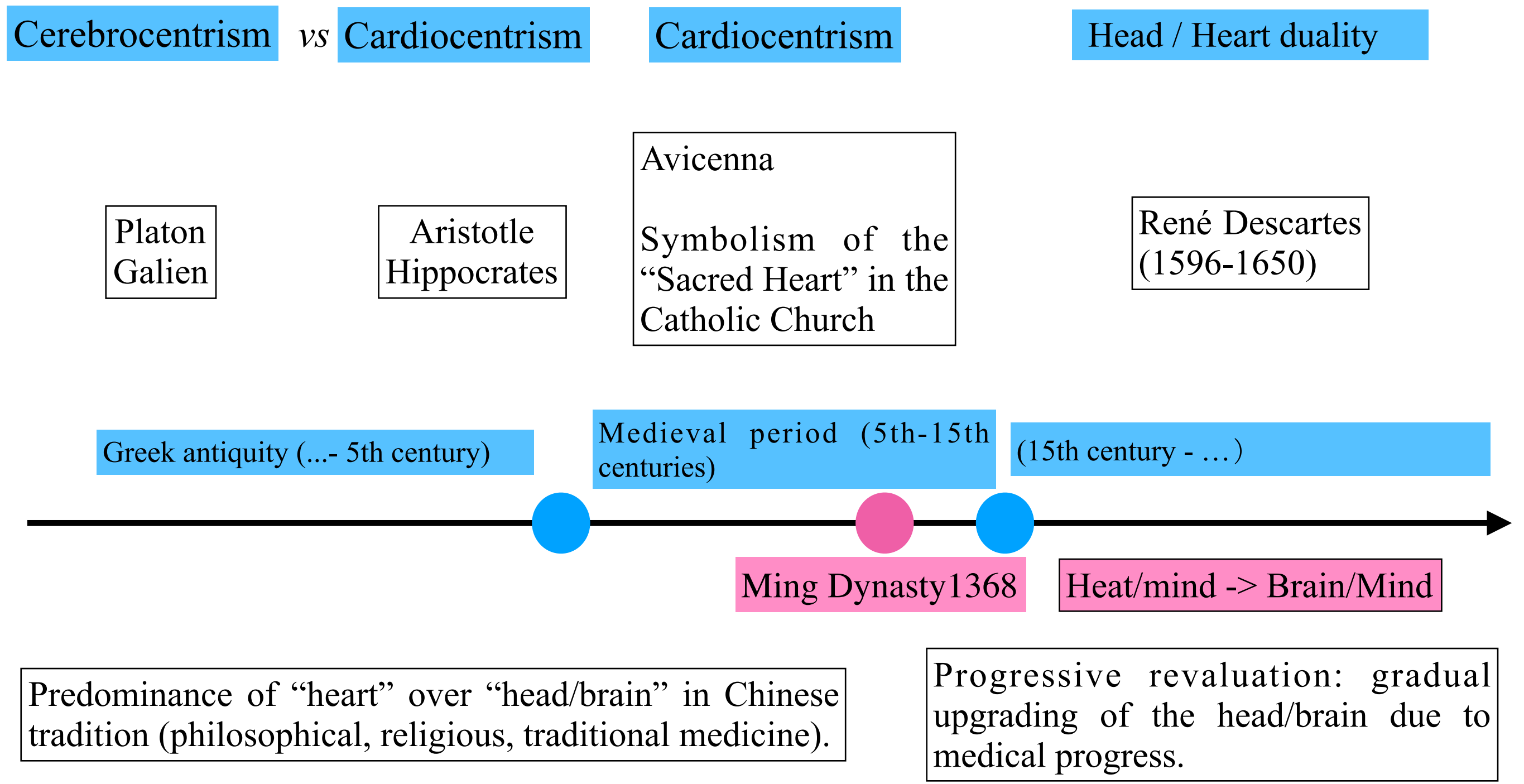
五脏 *wǔzàng*: five internal organs



Body dominated by the heart, absence of the head.

2 The metaphorical domain of the head: “head-heart” dualism in the West, but poorly developed in the Eastern tradition

The head in the West: dichotomy between “cardiocentrism” and “cerebrocentrism.”



The head in China: the traditional, philosophical and religious culture of the heart was dominant, but this position was challenged by the increased importance of medicine and science after the Ming and Qing dynasties.

3 Contrastive phraseoculture: Analysis of corpus attestation

French : *tête, cerveau (cervelle)*

VS

Chinese : 头tóu, 首shǒu, 脑nǎo

Quadrisyllabics

	Keywords : head (brain)	Number of expressions found in specialized dictionaries	Number of expressions retained (according to use in daily life)
French	Cervelle/cerveau (brain)	91	50
	Tête (head)		
Chinese	头 tou (head)	102	68
	脑 nǎo (brain)		
	首 shǒu (head)		

3.1 Representations and motivations common to both languages: the ontological meaning of the head as part of the human body

A) The head, as an extremity in both languages

a) Spatial oppositions between body extremities (high/low or front/back).

sans queue ni tête (without tail or head) = 没头没尾 *méitóu-méiwěi*
(negation+**head**+negation+tail) => nonsensical

b) Meaning of first, beginning or start.

tête de liste (head of the liste) = 名列榜首 *mínglièbǎngshǒu* (name+classify+list+**head**/first)
=> top of the list

ne pas savoir où est la tête (not knowing where the head is) = 茫无头绪 *mángwútóuxù*
(disordered+negation+source) => to not know which way to turn

c) Meaning of “superior and leading position”:

être à la tête de (to be the head of); *prendre la tête de* (to take the lead in), of “person who leads”. Meaning of “chief” or “leader”.

In Chinese:

群龙无首 *qúnlóngwúshǒu* (group+dragon+negation+**head**/leader): leaderless

罪魁祸首 *zuìkuí-huòshǒu* (crime+chief+misfortune+**head**): ringleader/principal culprit

d) Head movements / action.

Foncer (se jeter...) tête baissée sur ...: “with violence”. Here, an animal image is the basis of the phrase head down (ex. the bull).

In Chinese :

迎头痛击 *yíngtóutòngjī* (face+**head**+smite): to deliver a frontal assault / to meet head-

on

B) The head, synonymous with the brain and as the seat of thought, represents intellectual wisdom and memory

se creuser la **cervelle**/se creuser la **tête**

=

绞尽脑汁 : (twist, totally, **brain**)

Pinyin : jiǎo jìn nǎo zhī

Implied meaning : to torture one's mind

Source : Lao She (1899-1966), *Four Generations under One Roof*.

=> to rack one's brains

avoir un petit pois (un pois chiche) dans la tête (to have a pea): to be stupid, idiot

没头没脑 *méitóu-méinǎo* : to have neither head nor brain/(do or say sth) abruptly, all of a sudden, with no previous thinking or reasoning

愣头愣脑 *lèngtóu-lèngnǎo* : (spoken) impetuous/rash, reckless/dull, slow (in response)

Very few *chengyu* related to the head designate intelligence, thought, etc. They were formed in modern times, not inherited from the ancient traditional culture that privileged the heart.

la tête comme une passoire ou *une tête de linotte / de moineau* : beanbrain/scatterbrain.

No *chengyu* in Chinese to designate memory

3.2 Close representations and motivations - logical similarities or metaphorical convergences

a) The head as a representation of facial expressions, emotions and the look

Faire la tête (to make the head/to sulk/to pout/to be glum/ to visibly show one's displeasure)

has no idiomatic Chinese equivalents. But there are expressions like « 拉长脸 *lāchángliǎn* » (litt. to pull a long face), « 板脸 *bǎnliǎn* » (stiffen+face).

avoir une sale tête (look dreadful, look awful, look terrible), in Chinese non idiomatic expression: « 脸色很难看 *liǎnsè hěn nánkàn* »

b) The head as a representation of a person as a center of interaction and relationship: physical appearance, size, or a person

à la tête du client: It depends on the person

une tête de turc: a head of Turkish/whipping boy

manger la soupe sur la tête de quelqu'un: Be much taller (or stronger)

The Chinese use the following expression to describe the appearance of a person:

肥头大耳 *fěitóu-dàěr* (fat+head+big+ears): A fat head, two big ears /obesity/fat person

贼头贼脑 *zéitóu-zéinǎo* (thief+head+thief+brain) : to behave like a thief / furtive / underhand

c) The head as a place of dignity and prestige

In French : *lever (relever) la tête* (raise one's head)/*la tête haute (levée)* (head raised/head up)

The Chinese also use “to raise the head” to show the honor of a person:

昂首阔步 *ángshǒu-kuòbù* (raise+**head**+ride+step): hold up one's head high and advance by long strides

昂首挺胸 *ángshǒu-tǐngxiōng* (raise+**head**+stand upright+chest): head high, chest out/to keep up one's spirits/in fine mettle (of animal)/Lift your head and straighten your chest

In Chinese, when a person has finally earned his honor :

出人头地 *chūréntóudì* (out+person+**head**+place): rise head and shoulders above others/become outstanding/to stand out among one's peers/to excel

出头之日 *chūtóuzhīrì* (out+**head**+of+day): have one's day/the day to hold up one's head.

When a person is famous or has a very high social status:

头面人物 *tóumiàn rén wù* (**head**+face+person): leading figure/bigwig

有头有脸 *yǒutóu yǒuliǎn* (have+**head**+have+face): Have face/a top man/respected/having fame and prestige

On the contrary,

Baisser la tête (lower one's head) = 垂头丧气 *chuítóu-sàngqì* (lower+**head**+lose+courage) = hanging one's head dispiritedly/dejected / crestfallen

3.3. Different representations in the two countries

3.2.1 Head in one country, another body part in the other language

obéir à quelqu'un au doigt et à l'œil (to obey someone with **finger** and **eye**) = 俯首帖耳 *fǔshǒu-tiē'ěr* (stoop, **head**, close, **ear**) => be totally subservient/obey someone slavishly/obey [sb] to the letter)

In the French expression, the emphasis is on the gesture of the giver of the order; in the Chinese expression, the emphasis is on the attitude of the one who receives the order and listens.

3.2.2. Heart in Chinese, head in French: the same metaphorical value carried by different words

Head in French



VS



Heart in Chinese

avoir la **tête** vide

=

无所用心 (negation, use, **heart**)
Pinyin : wú suǒ yòng xīn

have an empty mind/remain idle



Head in French

avoir une idée derrière la tête
(have something in the back of your mind)

- a) se creuser la tête
- b) se creuser la **cervelle**
- c) se casser la tête
(to rack one's brains)

VS

Heart in Chinese



别有用心 *biéyǒuyòngxīn* (other+have+use+**heart**), : to have an ulterior motive/a hidden agenda

别出心裁 *biéchūxīncái* (another+come out+**heart/idea**): to hit on sth new/to display originality / to adopt an original approach

处心积虑 *chùxīnjīlǜ* (to deal with+**heart**+to accumulate+thought): to think through sth deliberately and methodically/to plot actively/scheming/calculating

a) 煞费苦心 *shàfèikǔxīn* (very+to cost+bitter+**heart**) : to take a lot of trouble/painstaking/at the cost of a lot of effort

b) 挖空心思 *wākōngxīnsī* (dig+empty+**heart/thought**) : to dig for thoughts/to search everything for an answer / to rack one's brains

c) 枉费心机 *wǎngfèixīnjī* (to waste+spend+**heart/mind**) : to dig for thoughts/to search everything for an answer/to rack one's brains

d) 用心良苦 *yòngxīnliángkǔ* (use+**heart**+very+bitter) : to ponder earnestly / to give a lot of thought to sth

e) 费尽心机 *fèijìnxīnjī* (spend+whole+**heart/mind**) : to rack one's brains for schemes/to beat one's brains out



Head in French

Avoir la **tête** dans les nuages (have one's head in the clouds)

coup de **tête** (head-butt/impulse)

VS

Heart in Chinese



= a) 粗心大意 *cūxīn-dàyi* (big+**heart**+inattentive) : **negligent/careless/inadvertent**
b) 心不在焉 *xīn bú zài yān* (litt. **heart** is not there) : **absent-minded/preoccupied/inattentive/with one's thoughts wandering**

= 心血来潮 *xīnxuèláicháo* (litt. the blood rises from the **heart** like a tide) : **to be prompted by a sudden impulse/carried away by a whim/to have a brainstorm**

3.2.3. Other IEs with different motivations that cannot be translated as such from one language to another.

tête de cochon (pigheaded) ≠ 猪头 *zhūtóu* (pig, head)

回头是岸 (to return around, **head**, is, shore)
Pinyin : *huí tóu shì àn*
Meaning : it is never too late to mend/just repent and salvation is at hand

Conclusion