

## On the Cultural Traits of Chinese Idioms

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This study is designed to provide a basis for a theory of Chinese idioms '*chengyu*' as a phenomenon in natural language. The study focuses on a description of idioms and formations of idioms with emphasis on the exploration of cultural traits to historical backgrounds. Idioms are defined as '*chengyu*' usually in four-character form, distinguished by form, meaning, function, and sources from literary works or sayings.

Most Chinese idioms have to be distinguished from other lexemes by virtue of their conventional implicature. Understanding the cultural traits of Chinese idioms helps people better understand Chinese communication both within the culture and across cultures.

### 0. Introduction

The Chinese idioms<sup>1</sup> '*chengyu*'<sup>2</sup> lie near the heart of the Chinese language. It is a special category of lexical items which not only distinguish themselves by their constituent relations, but also show singular types of intrinsic grammatical structure. Idiom's integrated sense lies in the whole unit as defined in 1.2, thus each idiom can be considered as a single lexeme. As a consequence, the communicative use of idioms in

integrated expressions or sentences is recognized. By analyzing the constituent relations, and the idiom's grammatical functions relating to other expressions or sentences, the purpose is to provide a basis for a theory of idioms as a phenomenon in natural languages. A description as well as formations of Chinese idioms with emphasis on the exploration of cultural traits to historical backgrounds are presented in this study.

## 1. A Survey of Definitions of Idioms

There are abundant lexemes and a variety of set phrases in Chinese. Idiom is one of them. What are idioms? According to the literal meaning of the term, idioms are ready-made or set phrases. The definitions of idioms provided in the traditional dictionaries such as *Ts'u-yuan* (1915)<sup>3</sup>, *Ts'u-hai* (1936)<sup>4</sup>, and *Hanyu cidian* (1936) (*Chinese dictionary*) are very general. The more detailed definitions of idiom are given in the standard dictionaries published at a later time, such as the revised version of *Ts'u-hai* (1963), *Xiandai hanyu cidian* (1959) (*Modern Chinese dictionary*); and two other representative works such as *Xiandai hanyu zhishi* (1973) (*Modern Chinese knowledge*) and *Xiandai hanyu* (1975) (*Modern Chinese*).

### 1.1 Definitions Given in Various Representative Dictionaries

The definitions of idiom are given in the various standard dictionaries listed below. In *Ts'u-yuan* (1915):

An idiom is a form of old expression. Those that become prevalent in society and could be referred to their historical allusions, and express one's ideas are called idiom (Ma 1978: 1; Shi 1979: 3)<sup>5</sup>.

In *Ts'u-hai* (1936):

An idiom is a form of old expression. Those that become prevalent in society and which could express one's ideas are called idiom. The sources of idioms are mainly the Chinese classics, poems, and other standard works, or arose from ballads and common sayings<sup>6</sup> which are well known and widely used in society by the common folk on a daily basis (Ma 1978: 1; Shi 1979: 3).<sup>7</sup>

In *Hanyu cidian* (1936):

An idiom is a form of old expression. Those that become prevalent in society are called idiom (Ma 1978: 1; Shi 1979: 3).<sup>8</sup>

In *Xiandai hanyu cidian* (1959), an idiom is described as:

Idioms are set phrases and short sentences, usually in pithy forms with concise meanings, prevalent in society, used by the common folk, which have seen ages of constant use. Idioms are mostly composed of four characters. The meanings for some of them are not difficult to deduce from the constituents, such as 'xiao3 ti2 da4 zuo4'<sup>9</sup> - 'make an issue out of a minor theme', which means 'to fuss about trifles', 'hou4 lai2 ju1 shang4' - 'those that started late get ahead', which means 'later started finish first', etc.. On the other hand, with some idioms, their meanings cannot be directly gained from their constituents unless we know the semantic fields or the historical sources such as the incident, or the background from which the particular set phrase comes about. Examples of this are 'zhao1 san1 mu4 si4' - '\*three in the morning and four in the evening', which means 'chop and change', or 'of two minds about'; 'bei1 gong1 she2 ying3' - '\*the reflection of a bow in a cup a snake'<sup>10</sup> which means 'take every bush for a bugbear', etc. (Ma 1978: 2; Shi 1979: 9).<sup>11</sup>

In the new version of *Ts'u-hai* (1963):

An idiom is a type of fixed phrase, usually in four-character form with varying constituent constructions and diverse origins. The meanings for some of them can be deduced from their constituents, such as 'wan4 zi3 qian1 hong2' - '\*ten-thousand purple thousands red', which means 'resplendent colors in their full glory'; 'cheng2 feng1 po4 lang1' - '\*ride wind break wave', which means 'sail before the wind', or 'brave the winds and waves' etc.. By contrast, in the case of some idioms, their meanings cannot be directly inferred from their constituents unless we know the semantic fields

or reference of the original historical allusions to which the particular set phrase refers. Examples of this are 'wo4 xin1 chang2 dan3' - '\*lie on firewood and taste the galls', which means 'go through thick and thin', or 'to nurse vengeance'; and 'po4 fu3 chen2 zhou1' - '\*smash the cauldron and sink the boat', which means 'go for broke' or 'fight to the last ditch', etc. (Ma 1978: 2).<sup>12</sup>

## 1.2 Definitions Provided in Representative Works

More thorough explanations concerning idioms are provided in the following two works, *Xiandai hanyu zhishi* (1973), and *Xiandai hanyu* (1975). These two works were published later than the above dictionaries, the structure, or form, meaning, and function of idioms, was given. In *Xiandai hanyu zhishi* (1973):

Idioms are set phrases which are formed through ages of constant use. They are also called 'ready-made phrases' by some people. Two distinctive characteristics of idioms are: (1) The meaning of an idiom is not likely to be inferable from its constituents. (2) The internal components are fixed, that is, none of its constituents can be replaced by any other elements, nor can the constituent order be changed (Shi 1979: 8).<sup>13</sup>

In *Xiandai hanyu* (1975):

An idiom is a set phrase, shaped through the practice of the language for ages of constant use. Its meaning cannot be simply inferred from its constituents. Its structure cannot be freely changed, nor could its constituents be replaced by any other elements unless it is required for a specific need or purpose. An idiom functions as one lexeme in full expressions or sentences. However, it behaves more vividly and symbolically than its synonyms represented by common lexemes (Shi 1979: 9).<sup>14</sup>

### 1.3 A Generalized Definition of Idioms

Many of the definitions of idioms mentioned are thorough. They take into account the (1) broad understanding, (2) structure or form, (3) semantics, (4) function, and (5) sources of the idioms.

#### **Broad Understanding**

An Idiom is an old expression, prevailed in society for a long period of time.

#### **Structure or Form**

An idiom is a set phrase, or short sentence. It is usually in four-character form, with varying constituent constructions. The internal constituent relations are fixed. None of its constituents can be changed or replaced by any other element.

#### **Semantics**

The meanings for most of idioms can be deducible from their constituents. With some of the idioms, the integrated meanings are unlikely to be directly inferred from their constituents.

#### **Function**

An idiom functions as one lexeme in full expressions or sentences. However, it behaves more vividly and symbolically than its synonyms represented by common lexemes. Since idioms are usually in four-character form, they function as a special type of lexeme in full expressions or sentences rather than as a common lexeme. According to Shi (1979: 6) and Ma (1978: 69), this aspect, however, is the primary criterion to distinguish idioms from commonly used phrases 'putongcizu'. Idioms can function as subject, object, verb, adjective, adverb, adverbial phrase, verb complement in sentences.

#### **Allusive Origins**

The sources of idioms are mainly the classics, poems, and other standard works, or arose from ballads and common sayings '*suyu*' or '*suyan*'.

Shi (1979) claimed that colloquialisms, such as ballads and common sayings which contain allusions to historical, quasi-historical, legendary, or mythical persons or events, are the main source of idioms. Through the span of time, a great number of poetic lines and common sayings of high literary quality became conventional in society. As such they were widely used by the common folk, and also adopted by scholars in their literary writings. Once they survived the test of time and were used in literary writings, their status as idioms was established. Therefore, Shi (1979)

argued that colloquialism is the primary origin of idioms rather than the written form. In fact, these two sources are mutually dependent. The colloquialism may have incorporated some fragments of the literary language '*wenyan*'. And Chinese proverbial use is so interwoven with the spoken language that Chinese scholars cannot possibly ignore it in their writings altogether. For some idioms, it is even harder to tell whether their real origins were in the classical or the oral traditions. However, it is certainly true that those quotations extracted from the classics, poems, and other standard works have written sources. Thus, most of idioms could be attributed to one of the written works. However, some of those whose sources could not be identified could also be idioms.

It is ascertained that idiom owes more to the written traditions than to oral traditions and could be contrasted with the proverbs '*yanyu*', which are much more vernacular according to Ma (1978) and Shi (1979).

## 2 The Standard Form of Idioms

Chinese idioms are different from both English phrases and clauses. In English grammar, the phrase is distinguished from the clause; it is composed of a group of two or more associated words, not containing a subject and predicate. However, Chinese idioms can be either the counterpart of an English phrase or a short sentence.

### 2.1 Fixed Form

An idiom is different from a common saying, proverb, maxim or adage '*geyan*', primarily because of its distinctive fixed form. The fixed form has two aspects. The first aspect concerns semantics. Its meaning comes from the whole unit no matter what the meanings of the individual constituent may be. For instance, '*xiong1 you3 cheng2 zhu2*' does not signify '\*In the chest, there is bamboo.' but instead means 'ready and able; totally confident'. The second aspect concerns the structure. None of the constituents of the idiom can be deleted or replaced by any other element; nor can one add another element, or change the word order of the phrase. However, some variants and inverted forms exist.

For example, concerning '*yi1 luo4 qian1 zhang1*' - 'a fall of 1,000 zhang<sup>15</sup> - depression, degradation', the following points should be noted:

- (A) No constituent of the entry may be deleted, such as *\*'yi1 luo4 zhang4'*. There is no such phrase in Chinese.
- (B) No constituent of the entry may be replaced by any other element, e.g., *\*'yi1 luo4 wan4 zhang4'*– 'one fall of 10,000 zhang'. Although the meaning of this deviant form is not changed much, it is no longer an idiom but a created phrase.
- (C) No other element may be added, such as *'\*yi1 luo4 er2 qian1 zhang1'*, which by reason of this change becomes a created phrase.
- (D) The word order may not be changed, e.g. *'\*qian1 zhang4 yi1 luo4'* is a valid Chinese topicalization, but not an idiom.

Some variants and inverted forms of idioms exist.

(E) **Variants**

- a. *mo4 ming2 qi2 miao4*  
'(1) Cannot understand its mystery.'  
'(2) Past comprehension.'
- b. *ming2 fu2 qi2 shi2*  
'(1) The name agrees with reality.'  
'(2) To be worthy of one's name.'

In (a), '*ming2*' has two variants. One attains the literary meaning 'understand', the other 'name'; in (b), '*fu2*' can be replaced by '*fu4*'.

(F) **Inverted Forms**

- a. *bing4 jia4 qi2 qu1* or *qi1 qu1 bing4 jia4*  
'(1) Abreast ride together drive.'  
'(2) Shoulder to shoulder.'
- b. *feng1 he2 ri4 li4* or *ri4 li4 feng1 he2*.  
'(1) Wind gentle sun beautiful.'  
'(2) A beautiful sunny day.'

**2.2 Four-Character Form**

The fixed form of idiom has been shaped through history. Indeed, it might be said that most Chinese spoken expressions and written sentences continue to be based on the idiom's four-character form. This basic structure can be traced to the era of *Shi Jing - Book of Odes*.<sup>16</sup> One feature of the poems in the Odes is that the lines are four-character in length. New lines

were preserved intact. This impact on Chinese writings was conceivable in two ways. First, the four-character-line was to persist as a form on writings. "The evenness of the four-word line would easily produce a stilted rhythm, comparable to steady 4/4 time in music" (Chen, 1961: 31). Secondly, the four-character pattern is regarded as one of the orthodox literary dictions. The phrases in these ancient songs became permanent fixtures in the speech and writing of the learned and have echoed in Chinese literature for over two thousand years.

As the *New Ts'u-hai* says, idioms are typically in four-character form. However, there is still a small number of idioms of three, five, six, or seven, up to sixteen-character forms,<sup>17</sup> etc., according to Ma (1978), Shi (1979), and others. These non-four-character idioms are not considered in this study.

### **3 The Characteristics of Idioms**

Why are idioms so widely used in Chinese? They are pithy. With these terse expressions, happiness, sorrow, and insights can be fully expressed. They are also full of rhythm and cadence, a perception primarily attributable to the four-character structural pattern. These can usually be divided into two feet, a tempo easy to verbalize and memorize. In addition to the fixed form discussed above in 2 and 2.1, the characteristics of idioms can also be viewed from the perspective of (1) prevalence of use in society, (2) historical traits, and (3) cultural traits (Ma 1978).

#### **3.1 Prevalence of Use in Society**

Both time and space have to be considered here. With regard to time, the idiom's existence is not limited to a specific era. It has no time domain, usually being handed down from generation to generation. Unlike the dialect, which is spoken in a certain area, idioms are generally dynamic, being widely used and shared by people nationwide.

#### **3.2 Historical Traits**

##### **Material Selection**

Some components are usually based on contemporaneous incidents, such as (Ma 1978: 30),



- a. *qin2 jin4 zhi4 hao3*  
'(1) Cross-marriage between Qin and Jin.'<sup>18</sup>  
'(2) Co-exist in harmony.'
- b. *xiao1 gui1 cao2 sui2*  
'(1) Prime minister Xiao He made plans and rules which were followed by his successor, Prime minister Cao Sen.'<sup>19</sup>  
'(2) Follow in the footsteps.'

### Historical Structures

Idioms preserve many of the critical usages which belong to classical Chinese, but do not exist in modern Chinese.<sup>20</sup> Above all, the preservation of the classical language is the most prominent phenomenon. This aspect is well shown in its composite lexemes, mono-morphemes, and classical syntax.

#### 1. Lexemes (or Words) Not Used in Modern Chinese

- a. *hua4 xian3 wei2 yi2*  
'(1) Turn danger to safety.'  
'(2) Weather the storm.'

The lexeme 'yi2'- safety, is expressed as a two-character compound '*ping2an1*' in modern Chinese.

- b. *fang4 dang4 bu4 ji1*  
'(1) Dissipated and unrestrained.'  
'(2) Have one's fling.'

The lexeme 'ji1' - restrain, a two-character compound '*ju1shu4*' is used in modern Chinese.

- c. *yi4 fen4 tian2 ying1*  
'(1) Righteous indignation fills the bosom.'  
'(2) One's blood boils with indignation.'

The lexeme 'ying1' - bosom, is replaced with '*xiong1*' in modern Chinese.

## 2. Mono-morphemic

Classical Chinese is mainly mono-morphemic. Each character is a lexeme. This particular phenomenon is often seen in idioms. However, modern Chinese tends to use compounds. The following examples are lexemes which are not used in modern Chinese.

## 3. Syntax of the Classical

### (A) Noun functions as verb, or adverb

*sheng1 dong1 ji2 xi1*

N<V>

'(1) To sound in the east and strike in the west.'

'(2) Distraction'

### (B) Use of particles peculiar to classical Chinese

a. *huan4 ran2 yi4 xin1*

'(1) Shiningly a new one.'

'(2) Take on a new look.'

The character 'ran2' functions as 'di5', which is realized as an adverb particle.

b. *quan2 yi2 zhi1 ji4*

N particle N

'(1) A plan of expediency.'

'(2) Makeshift device.'

The character 'zhi1' functions as 'de5', an adjective particle.

### (C) Auxiliary insertion in Verb-Object inversion

*wei2 li4 shi4 tu2*

Adv O Aux V

'(1) Seeking profit only.'

'(2) Work exclusively for profit.'

Based on the form '*wei2 tu2 li4*' (Adv V O), auxiliary '*shi4*' is

inserted after Verb-Object inversion.

(D) Reversed order of coverb and object

*ye4 yi3 ji4 ri4*  
O cov V O  
'(1) Night continuing into day.'  
'(2) Continuously.'

'*yi3 yie4 ji4 ri4*' (Cov O V O) is the syntax in modern Chinese. The classical syntax - Cov and O inversion, is preserved in idioms.

(E) Numeral preceding verb

- a. *yi1 lao2 yong3 yi4*  
Num V Num V  
'(1) One effort eternal ease.'  
'(2) Make a great effort to accomplish something once and for all to save future trouble.'
- b. *qian1 bian4 wan4 hua4*  
Num V Num V  
'(1) Thousand changes ten thousand variations.'  
'(2) Ever-changing.'

**3.3 Cultural Traits  
Content**

For most idioms, their contents are reflected from historical incidents and contemporaneous conventions in society of the time. This aspect is correlated with historical traits. For example,

- a. *wo4 xin1 chang2 dan3*  
'(1) Lie on firewood and taste the galls.'  
'(2) Go through thick and thin. To nurse vengeance.'

(Recall the story of King *Go Jian* of *Yue* after he was defeated by King *Fu Chai* of *Wu*.)

- b. *yue1 fa3 san1 zhang1*  
'(1) Three articles of a covenant.'  
'(2) Make a few simple rules to be observed by all concerned.'



(This recalls the event regarding Emperor *Liu Bang* of the Han Dynasty at the time he entered the Capital to take over power.)

### Linguistic Structure

There is often preserved a parallel, or symmetrical structure. This is enhanced by the mono-morphemic nature and uniform size of the written Chinese characters. "Chinese writing is ideally suited to this peculiar trait.", as observed by Chen (1961: 190). The balance, with regard to numerals, repetition, overlapping, synonymic and antithetical coordination (Ma 1978), is pervasive in idioms.

#### 1. Numeral Coordination

- a. yi1 dao1 liang3 duan4  
'(1) One knife cuts it into two.'  
'(2) Break with. Sever at one cut. Split up.'
- b. si4 fen1 wu3 lie4  
'(1) Four separated parts and five cracks.'  
'(2) To be torn asunder. Break up. Fall apart.'
- c. san1 san1 liang2 liang3  
'(1) By twos and threes.'  
'(2) A sprinkling of. In twos and threes.'

#### 2. Repetition

- ren2 shan1 - ren2 hai3  
'(1) A mountain of people and a sea of humanity.'  
'(2) A large crowd.'

#### 3. Overlapping Coordination

- a. jing2 jing2 you3 tiao2  
'(1) Like the Chinese character, Jing, arranged  
in good order.'  
'(2) In apple-pie order. Keep everything ship-shape.'

- b. die2 die2 bu4 xiu1  
'(1) A ceaseless chattering.'  
'(2) Talk a horse's hind leg off. Chatter away.'
- c. bi2 bi3 jie1 shi4  
'(1) Here and there all is the same.'  
'(2) Right and left. Here and there and everywhere.'
- d. zhan4 zhan4 jing1 jing1  
'(1) Trembling with fear.'  
'(2) Very gingerly. To be on thin ice.'

#### 4. Synonyms

feng1 ping2 - lang4 jing1  
'(1) Winds calm and waves quiet.'  
'(2) Calm and unruffled sea.'

#### 5. Antithesis

yi4 qu3 - tong2 gong1  
'(1) Different rhymes but same achievement.'  
'(2) Same result attained by different ways.'

#### 4 A Formation of Idioms

According to Ma (1978) and Shi (1979), a formation of idioms could be recognized as: (1) the derived, (2) the inherited, and (3) the borrowed.

##### 4.1 The Derived

To cope with the changes in society, an increasing number of new idioms are created based on the existing ones. Most of these variants become widely used, and tend to replace the original ones. The following instances taken from Ma <sup>21</sup> (1978: 95) can well represent this particular phenomenon.<sup>22</sup>

Original form

Derived form

- a. *yie4 yi3 ji4 ri4* ---> *ri4 yi3 ji4 yie4*  
'day continuing ---> 'night continuing  
into night' into day'
- b. *ming2 bu4 fu2 shi2* ---> *ming2 fu2 qi2 shi2*  
'the name does not ---> 'the name agrees  
agree with reality' with reality'
- c. *shi4 ban4 gong1 bei4* ---> *shi4 bei4 gong1 ban4*  
'half amount of effort ---> 'double the amount  
brings double the of effort brings  
result' half the result'

The lexemes which comprise the derived idioms usually belong to the literary language. The idiom attempts to maintain the time-honored four-character pattern. For example,

- a. *li4 zheng1 shang4 you2*  
'(1) Strive for first place.'

The lexeme '*li4*' is recognized as '*nu2li4*' - 'working hard', in the modern lexeme.<sup>23</sup>

- b. *mo4 bu4 guan1 xin1*  
'(1) Of no concern in the heart.'  
'(2) Careless.'

The lexeme '*mo4*' represents the modern lexeme '*mo4ran2*' - 'not concern'.

- c. *ma2 mu4 bu4 ren2*  
'(1) Be numbed and unresponsive.'

The lexeme '*ren2*' is the equivalents of the modern lexeme '*ren2ai4*' or '*ren2ci2*' - 'benevolence'.

#### 4.2 The Inherited

The inherited idioms could be roughly classified into the following five classes based on Smith (1961), Ma (1978), Shi (1979), Liu (1981), and the study of 678 idioms collected.

(A) Quotations, or adaptations of quotations, from the classics and other standard works. For example,

- a. *chu1 qi2 zhi4 sheng4* - Shi Ji<sup>24</sup>  
'(1) By surprise, to win the battle.'  
'(2) To outwit.'
- b. *ju3 yi1 fan3 san1* - Lun Yu<sup>25</sup>  
'(1) Raising one hints the other three.'  
'(2) Know how to take a hint.'
- c. *ren2 duo1 kou3 za2* - Red Chamber Dreams<sup>26</sup>  
'(1) Many men, many tongues.'

(B) Quotations, or adaptations from poetry, and antithetical couplets, independent of any larger text. For example,

- a. *men2 dang1 hu4 dui4* - Yuan Qu<sup>27</sup>  
'(1) The door suitable, the window corresponding.'  
'(2) Matched.'
- b. *shui3 luo4 shi2 chu1* - Su Shi<sup>28</sup>  
'(1) Stones come out from the receding water.'  
'(2) The truth will out.'
- c. *yi2 shi4 wu2 cheng2* - Bai Ju-yi<sup>29</sup>  
'(1) Without a single accomplishment.'  
'(2) Having nothing to show for it.'

(C) Those that contain allusions to historical, quasi-historical, legendary, or mythical persons or events. For example,

- a. *wo4 xin1 chang2 dan3*  
'(1) Lie on firewood and taste the galls.'



'(2) Go through thick and thin. To nurse vengeance.'

(Recall the story of King *Go Jian* of *Yue* after he was defeated by King *Fu Chai* of *Wu*.)

- b. *yue1 fa3 san1 zhang1*  
'(1) Three articles of a covenant.'  
'(2) Make a few simple rules to be observed by all concerned.'

(Recall the event concerning Emperor *Liu Bang* of the Han Dynasty at the time he entered Capital to take over power.)

(D) Derived from mixed forms and other linguistic diversions. For example,

- a. *qi1 shou3 ba1 jiao3*  
'(1) Seven hands and eight feet.'  
'(2) Clumsy.'
- b. *shou3 mang2 jiao3 luan4*  
'(1) The hands hurried, and the feet in confusion.'  
'(2) Distractedly busy.'
- c. *bu4 yue1 er2 tong2*  
'(1) In agreement without previous arrangement.'  
'(2) With one accord.'
- d. *cheng2 qian1 shang4 wan4*  
'(1) Thousands upon thousands.'

(E) Miscellaneous: those that could not be appropriately classified to fit the above four categories.

### 4.3 The Borrowed

Some idioms are borrowings from foreign languages or cultures such as those which have their traces in the Buddhist scriptures. The essence may be borrowed, but the structure remains that of the Chinese idioms. The following examples from *Fo Jing - Buddhist classics* are illustrative.

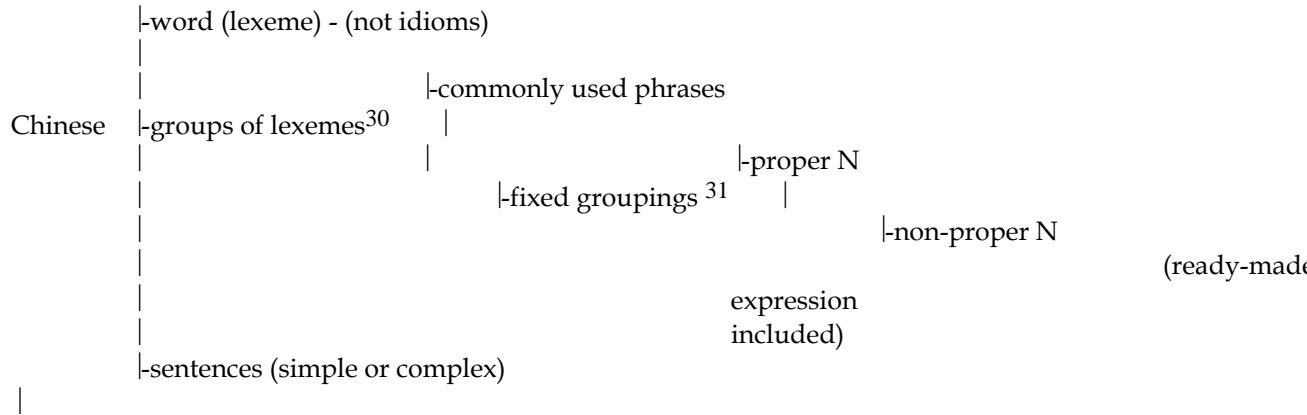
- a. *xiang3 ru4 fei1 fei1*  
'(1) To think of something fanciful.'  
'(2) Build castles in the air. Go off into wild flights of fancy.'



- b.     *xin1 hua1 nu4 fang4*  
           '(1) Flower of the heart in full bloom.'  
           '(2) Burst with joy. To be in one's glory.'

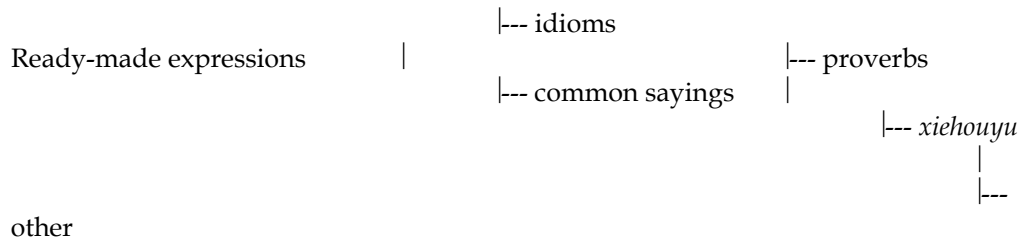
## 5     **Summary**

The scope or division of the Chinese language is summarized in Figure 1 (Shi 1979: 269).



**Figure 1. The scope of the Chinese language.**

Based on the above analysis, the conclusion can be drawn in Figure 2 to indicate the range of ready-made expressions.



**Figure 2. The range of ready-made expressions.**

## 6 Summary and Conclusion

The Chinese idiom '*chengyu*' is a set phrase, an old expression, prevalent in society, used by the common folk, has seen ages of constant use, usually in four-character form with varying constituent constructions and diverse origins. The meanings for some of the idioms can be deduced from their composite constituents. By contrast, with some of them, their meanings cannot be gained from their constituents unless we know the semantic fields or historical sources. The fixed form in its structure, and semantics is its critical characteristic. It functions as a lexeme in sentences, behaves more vividly and symbolically than its synonyms represented by common lexemes. Its formation can be derived, inherited, or borrowed. An idiom preserves the use of the literary language '*wenyan*' in its composite lexemes, parallel structures, and syntax.

### Notes

1. The term idiom will be used to denote the Chinese idioms henceforth in this study. When idioms other than Chinese idioms appear, the term German idiom or English idiom will be specified for differentiation.
2. '*Chengyu*' are realized as literary fused phrase idioms.
3. An old Chinese dictionary of the traditional school, published in the last century, was reprinted in different years by different publishers.
4. The old Chinese dictionary adopted in this study was reprinted in 1936.
5. This is cited in *Chengyu* (Ma 1978: 1) and in *Hanyu chengyu yanjiu* (Shi 1979: 3), translated by the author.
6. Ballads '*geyao*' and common sayings '*suyu*' or '*suyan*' are referred to as '*yaoyan*' together here.
7. This is cited in *Chengyu* (Ma 1978: 1) and in *Hanyu chengyu yanjiu* (Shi 1979: 3), translated by the author.
8. This is cited in *Chengyu* (Ma 1978: 1) and *Xiandai hanyu yanjiu* (Shi 1979: 3), translated by the author.

9. The numbers are standard tone distinctions: 1 stands for the level tone, 2 the rising tone, 3 the falling-rising tone, 4 the falling tone, 5 the neutral tone.
10. This is the literal word-for-word translation which does not represent the real meaning of this particular idiom.
11. This is cited in *Chengyu* (Ma 1978: 2), and *Hanyu chengyu yanjiu* (Shi 1979: 9), translated by the author. The literal translation and English equivalents for the idioms adopted in this definition are provided by the author.
12. This is the revised version of *Ts'u-hai*, first published in 1963, reprinted in 1977, cited in *Chengyu* (Ma 1978: 2), translated by the author. The literal translation and English equivalents for the idioms used here are provided by the author.
13. This is cited in *Hanyu chengyu yanjiu* (Shi 1979: 8), translated by the author. It was edited by the Chinese Department, *Guang Xi Teachers' College*.
14. This is cited in *Hanyu chengyu yanjiu* (Shi 1979: 9), translated by the author. It was edited by the Chinese Department, *Ha Er Bin Teachers' College*.
15. 'Zhang' is a Chinese unit of linear measure, equal to ten 'chi', the Chinese foot.
16. *Shing Jing* - Book of Odes consists of 305 rhymed ballads in various meters, circa 600 B.C.
117. The frequency of occurrence in the case of non-four-character idioms as given in the *Dictionary of usage frequency of modern Chinese* (Liu and Liang *et al.* 1990) and *Liu's frequency count of 40,000 Chinese words* (Liu *et al.* 1975) is low. Some non-four-character idioms are illustrated in my Master's research paper (Wu 1989). They are not included in this study.
18. *Qin* and *Jin* are two of seven nations in the era of the Seven Warriors Kingdoms. The intermarriages between the two nations was to achieve the purpose of peaceful co-existence.
19. *Xiao He* and *Cao Sen* were Prime ministers in the West Han Dynasty.
20. Classical Chinese tends to be mono-morphemic, modern Chinese tends to be compounds.
21. The English translation is provided by the author.
22. The English translations are provided by the author.
23. The modern lexemes tend to be compounds in contrast to the literary lexemes which are primarily mono-morphemic.

24. *Si Ma-qian* (186-145 B.C., in the Han Dynasty).
25. The Analects of Confucius (Confucius 551-479 B.C.).
26. *Cao Xue-qin* (circa 1720 A.D. - unknown, Ching Dynasty).
27. From a song-poem in the Yuan Dynasty (1277-1367 A.D.).
28. A poet (1036-1101 A.D.) in the Sung Dynasty.
29. A poet (780-820 A.D.) in the Tang Dynasty.
30. Groups of lexemes are recognized as 'cizu'. In Chinese, one lexeme can be a character or a compound.
31. Fixed grouping is also recognized as fixed-lexeme-groupings 'gudingcizu'. Ready-made expressions are included in this category.

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