

# Introduction

By Haiwang Yuan

In English, set phrases and expressions can be called adages, aphorisms, idioms, maxims, proverbs, sayings, and even winged words—all of which have subtle shades of meaning. Students of English may be confused to learn that an “adage” can be defined as an “aphorism,” which is in turn more colloquially known as a saying. They only grow more confounded to hear that a “maxim” may refer to an “adage,” that can also, sometimes, be an “epigram.”

This confusion is also true for Chinese *shuyu* 熟语 (idioms), a generic word for Chinese set phrases and expressions. *Shuyu* have subcategories, for example *guanyongyu* 惯用语 (a commonly used phrase or a colloquial usage), *yanyu* 谚语 (a farmers’ saying or an old saw), *xiehouyu* 歇后语 (a two-part allegorical saying), *geyan* 格言 (a maxim, motto, or aphorism), and *chengyu* 成语 (a proverb).

*Chengyu* is commonly translated as “proverb,” but the English “proverb” and the Chinese *chengyu* are not exactly the same. *The Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines “proverb” as “a brief popular epigram or maxim” or an “adage,” which it explains as “a saying often in metaphorical form that embodies a common observation.” Close to those definitions, the Chinese *chengyu*, however, has its own characteristics:

First of all, the number of characters that form a *chengyu* is normally limited to between three and ten, but the majority of *chengyu* are formed of four characters, as the Chinese have always had a penchant for even numbers and symmetry (in language).

Secondly, most of the above-mentioned subcategories of *shuyu* can transform into an actual *chengyu* by adjusting their structure and number of characters. This is particularly true for the two-part allegorical sayings (*xiehouyu*). Unique to the Chinese language, a *xiehouyu* is a two-part enigmatic folk simile that starts off with a basic statement describing an actual

situation and finishes with an unexpected twist, thereby creating a humorous or witty effect. More often than not, the second part of a *xiehouyu* acts like an answer to a riddle posed in the first part and is often omitted. This is very much like dropping “do as the Romans do” and leaving only “When in Rome...” in the popular English proverb. Therefore, Chinese speakers often use the *chengyu* “Eight Immortals crossing the sea” (*ba xian guo hai* 八仙过海) and omit the latter part of the original *xiehouyu* “each demonstrating his or her own unique skill” (*ge xian qi neng* 各显其能). Some other *xiehouyu*-turned-*chengyu* included in this book are “the tree likes it calm, but the wind won’t stop” (*shu yu jing er feng bu zhi, zi yu yang er qin bu dai* 树欲静而风不止, 子欲养而亲不待), and “Sai Weng loses his horse” (*Sai Weng shi ma, yan zhi fei fu* 塞翁失马, 焉知非福).

Thirdly, a great number of *chengyu* can be classified as *diangu* 典故, a Chinese term for “classical allusions” or “literary quotations.” In other words, a *diangu* is a story or a quote from traditional poetry or prose found in ancient books or records. As some of these quotes have become *chengyu*, their meaning is often only clear to those who are familiar with the content and context of the original source. Not all *diangu* are *chengyu*, and, by the same token, not all *chengyu* have *diangu* in them. In this book, we include predominantly *chengyu* that originated from *diangu* (we refer to them as “proverb stories”), because these are the most interesting stories for language learners or non-Chinese speakers.

Some of these proverb stories are about ancient people, as in the *chengyu* “sleeping on sticks and eating bile” (*wo xin chang dan* 卧薪尝胆), which came from the story of King Fu Chai of the state of Yue during the Warring States period. Some are about historical events, such as “three people can create a tiger” (*san ren cheng hu* 三人成虎), the Chinese equivalent of “fake news,” which originated from an occurrence during the Warring States period when the king of Wei, convinced by repeated rumors about a tiger, began to distrust his favored minister. Others are about Chinese myths, fables, and legends. For example, “heaven separated from earth” (*kai tian pi di* 开天辟地) comes from a Chinese genesis myth; “the fox assuming the power of the tiger” (*hu jia hu wei* 狐假虎威) tells the fable of a fox tricking a tiger into fearing him; and “high mountains, flowing water” (*gao shan liu shui* 高山流水) comes from a legend of a musician being loyal to someone who is keenly appreciative of his talent. There are other sources of proverb stories, such as quotations from famous historical figures, as in the case of “no tiger’s den, no tiger’s cub” (*bu ru hu xue, yan de huzi*

不入虎穴，焉得虎子), a phrase uttered by the Eastern Han dynasty statesman Ban Chao.

These proverb stories are meaningfully succinct and vividly expressive. Therefore, judicious use of proverbs in Chinese writing or formal conversation is regarded as a sign of good education (and excellent language skills) rather than pedantic showing-off of one's knowledge or repetition of clichés. For this reason, the mastery of a certain amount of frequently used *chengyu* is essential to the learning process for a serious student of Chinese. Replete with summaries of prior experiences, quotes from famous ancient sages, as well as myths, legends, and fables, the proverb stories open a window through which any reader of this book can gain a glimpse into the otherwise mysterious and fascinating big picture of Chinese culture.

During its 5,000-year-long history, Chinese has generated innumerable proverbs. There is a proverb for almost any situation. *A Comprehensive Dictionary of Chinese Idioms (Zhongguo chengyu da cidian*, Shanghai cishu chubanshe 2007) has identified more than 18,000 *chengyu*. The *New Chinese Dictionary (Xinhua zidian)* includes 31,922 while the online *Chinese Dictionary* (<http://www.hydc.com/>) claims to contain 51,398. With such numbers, we have to address the question of why and how the forty proverbs for the first volume of this book were selected. To be frank, the sheer size of the pool of *chengyu* made the selection a daunting task. Instead of reinventing the wheel, however, we built our list upon the experiences and results of numerous Chinese teachers and linguists, looking at their selections of proverbs for textbooks used in elementary and secondary schools in China. We then selected forty *chengyu* with compelling stories (*diangu*) to arouse the interest of anyone who picks up the book. Meanwhile, we admit that picking the “perfect” forty would be mission impossible. As for classifying the proverbs by difficulty levels instead of by subject or other methods, we listened to the suggestions from teachers of Chinese that we were in contact with via social media networks. These levels of difficulty are guidelines, and we expect teachers who use the book to apply the proverbs to their curriculum as they see fit. For this purpose, we have provided the convenience of an alphabetical list (by pinyin) and a list by subject. The *chengyu* and their stories, as well as the annotated vocabulary and sample sentences are all written in English and simplified Chinese. The bilingual nature of the book is designed to help both native and non-native speakers of Chinese to learn the *chengyu* proverbs.

While we hope that teachers and students will find this book instructive, we also hope that it will be useful to a wide range of readers interested in Chinese culture, whether or not they intend to learn the language. After all, reading proverb stories such as those found in this book is one of the most entertaining ways to begin to understand the collective psyche and consciousness of the Chinese people.



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