CHINESE IDIOMS (CHENG-YU) FOR SECOND-LANGUAGE LEARNERS:

TOWARD A PEDAGOGICAL APPROACH

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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This thesis considers the importance of cheng-yu (Chinese language-specific, idiomatic lexical-syntactic units) in second-language acquisition at the intermediate and advanced levels and examines current research in order to formulate an instructional approach. Informed by linguistic and pedagogical research on idioms generally, the study aims to apply research relevant to Chinese language idioms specifically. Main topics to be considered include: the importance of cheng-yu in higher-level discourse including the social significance of cheng-yu use; the patterned structure of cheng-yu; idiom teaching methods and a review of idiom content and presentation in commonly-used Chinese language textbooks; and the significance of corpus data in cheng-yu instruction. Results confirm the importance of cheng-yu in discourse and recommend practicable, research-based classroom strategies. Finally, a sample lesson is provided which encourages the use of corpus data and utilizes research findings on the structure of cheng-yu and on teaching practices thought to foster acquisition.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: CHENG-YU IN CHINESE LANGUAGE INSTRUCTION

Recently, there has been a great increase in the number of students studying Chinese as a foreign language, with many seeing this language skill as important to career and professional aspirations (Ke & Li 2011). With this trend, there is an added expectation that instruction in Chinese language will equip speakers to not only be capable of character writing and correct pronunciation, grammar, and vocabulary; but also to be able to converse in an educated manner on a variety of subjects. While the process of language acquisition is lengthy, by the intermediate level of language learning, students may already be able to shift away from the rudimentary tasks of gaining familiarity with phrases and general language structures and may begin to learn higher-level language skills and discourse ability. The question is: what are these higher-level language skills deserving the attention of intermediate-level students?

Savignon, a scholar of second-language acquisition, states that there are four broad skill areas which must be developed in order to gain true communicative competence: these include; discourse, sociocultural, grammatical, and strategic abilities (Savignon, 1983). Generally speaking, discourse ability means that a student is able to understand and produce language that is textually coherent and fitting with a particular context or circumstance; sociocultural skills enable a student to understand cultural norms of communication; grammatical skills allow a student to correctly use the linguistic structures to express intended meaning; and strategic abilities prepare students to employ various methods to understand and communicate in instances in which the

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language is unfamiliar or when vocabulary is lacking. When it comes to the discourse, sociocultural, and grammatical categories, Chinese four character idioms (cheng-yu) are particularly important. They are a component of the language that enables a speaker to engage in higher-level discourse, their sociocultural role is significant, and their varying grammatical functions within sentences may be an obstacle for students. As will be discussed in chapter 2, there are also strategic methods that may be employed in order to determine the meaning of a cheng-yu. In other words, cheng-yu are important in communication and should not be overlooked while students progress towards fluency.

Why are cheng-yu so important for Chinese language learners to know? Interestingly, research suggests that idiomatic expressions are used more frequently in Chinese than in English (Zhang, 2009). According to Zhang (2009), there are both linguistic and cultural explanations for this including (1) cheng-yu function more like words than English language idioms and are therefore more readily used (2) cheng-yu often have more than one grammatical role, so they may be used in a greater variety of ways than can English idioms (3) unlike English idioms, many cheng-yu have a special status culturally and have been treasured and preserved and (4) cheng-yu are used by speakers to demonstrate erudition, while English speakers may tend to discard old expressions. While perhaps all of these reasons contribute to the difference in usages between idioms in each language, one important thing to note is that cheng-yu are indeed an important part of using the language fluently, formally, and eloquently. Given the differences in the esteem accorded to idioms, students may not realize that in many cases it would be preferable to use a cheng-yu rather than a longer explanation. Moreover, in formal writing especially, four character idioms have a significant role. This idea is

reinforced in the fourth-year level textbook, "Business Chinese: An Advanced Reader" (Cui, 2004) which notes that:

> Four-Character Phrases are used widely in the written language, especially in political essays, legal documents and notices, business letters and papers, advertisements and manuals, poems and proses as well. By using Four-Character Phrases, the language can be more terse and succinct; texts may look more symmetric in form, and the beat of a discourse sounds more rhythmical.

Cheng-yu are common in higher-level types of discourse, and therefore are important for students to comprehend and use. Moreover, there is an important aesthetic element to cheng-yu (i.e., the conciseness, rhythmic and symmetric aspects mentioned above) which are important in conveying information in a stylistically appropriate manner. As the researcher Zhang (2009) notes, cheng-yu have an important cultural role. Many are derived from ancient stories and historical events, so in just four words, idioms like "looking at the flowers while riding a horse" 走馬觀花 carry with them rich associations and vivid meanings to listeners who are familiar with the related stories. Therefore, unlike basic vocabulary terms which could possibly be skimmed over and understood by context, skimming over a cheng-yu could mean a significantly decreased understanding of a text.

Although cheng-yu have a long history, they can be found in various current media, advertisements, and literature. Even modern talk shows may make use of cheng-yu, illustrating that they are not at all a purely academic, pedantic, or out-date language form (Quitter, 1999). News stories on various topics employ cheng-yu. For example, a 2010 BBC News Chinese story on an academic test (Shang hai zhong wen, 2010) included at least seven cheng-yu including "spare no pain or effort" (不遺餘力), "as everyone knows" (眾所周知), and "completely devotedly" (專心致志). Yet another

recent article on textbooks (Zhang, 2010) uses the expression "a muddled mess" (一塌糊塗). Advertisements also often use conventionalized four-character lexical combinations that are similar to cheng-yu, such as "pleasant form" (外形美觀), "easy to use" (操作便利), and "reliable performance" (性能穩定) (Cui, 2004). Clearly, then, although cheng-yu can be considered formal, literary-language, they also have many common, every-day applications. So, studying the most typical cheng-yu may be of great assistance in increasing students' fluency and stylistic sophistication.

Given the important role of cheng-yu, it is clear that Chinese language students would benefit from studying and knowing them. Yet, how should one choose which cheng-yu to emphasize? Some are more obviously literary in nature, being based on historical events and stories. Others may not have as clear of an etymology. Still others seem to take on the four-character form of a cheng-yu but are not quite as idiomatic as the prototypical (e.g., 世界第一). In this paper, cheng-yu will be defined broadly to also encompass non-prototypical idioms since, from the perspective of language production, the precise category of speech matters not nearly so much as being able to communicate effectively. Linguistically, there are different cheng-yu structures. Simply put, cheng-yu are by definition a varied language form.

An informal survey of commonly used intermediate-level textbooks shows that chengyu are indeed contained in many lessons. Yet, despite this fact, they remain notoriously difficult for students to remember and use. What might account for this? First, as mentioned above, students may not be aware of the communicative value of cheng-yu and thus may not spend as much time as necessary to commit them to memory.

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Secondly, it may be the case that, being unfamiliar in structure, idioms are difficult to comprehend and recall and thus difficult to use. As noted in a preface to a Chinese-English idiom dictionary,

> An idiom is a form of expression peculiar to a language. It is formed of a group of words which, in most cases, taken together convey a meaning on its own different from the individual words of the group when they are taken alone. For maintaining the characteristics of brevity, balance in form, or rhyme, the arrangement of words in an idiom is often strange, seemingly illogical, or even grammatically incorrect (Chen & Chen, 1983).

The difficulty of idioms may make cheng-yu very difficult to remember. Moreover, students may simply not have enough exposure to cheng-yu used in various contexts. Often, textbooks list them alongside vocabulary and they are perhaps used only once in the context of a dialogue. If an instructor does not use the cheng-yu other times throughout the class, students may have minimal encounters with the phrases and may be at a loss as to how to use them – particularly if they have more than one application or grammatical role. Additionally, if the textbook cheng-yu are uncommon, students would be very unlikely to encounter them outside the classroom.

Applying Krashen's Input Hypothesis, a single encounter with a cheng-yu would be woefully inadequate. According to this theory, "Humans acquire language in only one way – by understanding messages, or by receiving 'comprehensible input.'" (Krashen, 1985). To be effective, that input should be frequent. If students read or hear an idiom just a couple of times in a single context, the input is minimal and the cheng-yu could be overlooked, with students focusing instead on vocabulary or grammar points. Finally, if students are deluged with a large number of cheng-yu in a vocabulary list, for example, they may be unable to memorize all of them or unable to discern which ones to prioritize

in studying and apply in communication. All of these factors perhaps contribute to students' difficulty in learning cheng-yu.

In sum, cheng-yu are an important part of the Chinese lexicon, communicative practice, and linguistic culture in general. They have an important sociocultural status as they are often historical or literary in nature; they are prized for their rhythmic qualities and aesthetic appeal; and they may serve to indicate a speaker or writer's level of education. Additionally, they are commonly used in many forms of discourse encountered in every-day life. At the same time, their content is often opaque, and correct usages may elude language students. The presentation of cheng-yu in textbooks may not reflect the actual usage patterns of cheng-yu in real-world communications, causing students to use certain cheng-yu that native speakers would be unlikely to use. Given these obstacles and the importance of cheng-yu to communication, it seems a worthwhile endeavor to further investigate the role of cheng-yu in language and in language teaching.

This paper will consider the role and important aspects of cheng-yu and approaches to language teaching. Analysis will refer to previous work on idioms, figurative language, and language teaching as well as corpus data on cheng-yu usage. First, there will be a consideration of figurative language in relation to Chinese language instruction and with a special emphasis on research that suggests that idioms are particularly effective in conveying information so that speaker and listener are in agreement about meaning and moreover that idioms containing the same items may overlap thematically, facilitating the learning of cheng-yu. Secondly, there will be a discussion of the overlap between metaphorical mappings in cheng-yu and Song dynasty poems on two nature words. This

section inquires into the extent of this overlap and suggests that it may be used to assist students in better understanding unfamiliar cheng-yu and even some poetic metaphors. Next, there will be a study of current research on second-language idiom instruction and a consideration of the use of mnemonic devices in language recall with a suggestion that the stories that go along with many cheng-yu might act as "built in" mnemonic to assist students in recollection. This is followed by a survey of Chinese textbooks used in intermediate-level courses that determines the types of cheng-yu often included and the methods used to introduce them. Then, there will be information about the frequency of usage for cheng-yu in authentic texts as revealed by corpus data, and a study of whether typical textbook content reflects this information. Finally, based on the information gained from the study, the paper will conclude with some pedagogical recommendations.

CHAPTER II.

LINGUISTIC BACKGROUND INFORMATION ON IDIOM PROCESSING

Idioms in Discourse

Research on idiom processing points to the advantages of using idioms, noting

their effectiveness in conveying information as well as their role in relational

communication. This information, while of interest to instructors contemplating the

extent to which idioms should be emphasized in a curriculum, may also be of use as a

motivational tool to students daunted by the task of learning idioms or reticent to employ

them. Cornell (1999) offers his own take on the utility of relaying such information to

students:

> "[M]y own experience has suggested that many courses will contain a significant
> minority of students apparently impervious to the charms of idioms particularly,
> perhaps, when they are studying a language in combination with another, major
> subject which is their main interest. The interest of such students may, however,
> be gained if they can see a reason for studying tricky idioms – if they see that
> awareness and understanding of them can be in their own long-term interest . . ."

Thus, we can now turn to a consideration of some of the linguistic research that suggests

that learning and using idioms really is in the "long-term interest" of students.

Linguistic research on the processing of idioms in discourse provides a number of

conclusions that seem to point to their importance in vividly, effectively, and quickly

conveying an idea. Specifically, research suggests that idioms correspond to particular

mental pictures that are largely consistent across a group of speakers and that commonly-

used idioms are comprehended at least as quickly as are typical phrases.

One study (Gibbs, 1994) on idioms and conceptualization examines individuals' visualizations of the meaning of an idiom versus a literal description. In the experiment, participants were provided with a metaphor or literal description and asked to picture and describe what is being conveyed: the fascinating discovery of this research is that, while within a group there may be various different ways of imagining a literal description, there is largely a consensus among individuals picturing idioms (Gibbs, 1994). In other words, when using an idiom, both the speaker and the listener have similar impressions of what is being said. That being the case, presumably it would be quite effective to use an idiom in communication because it would be likely to be understood in the same way by both a speaker and listener.

Another notable finding on the topic of idioms and communication, called the "idiom superiority effect," notes that idioms are identified by listeners as quickly as or even more quickly than are typical expressions (Tabossi, Fanari, & Wolf, 2009). Scholars propose a number of explanations for this phenomenon. In a study by Tabossi et al. (2009), three hypotheses (the lexical representation, idiom decomposition, and configuration hypotheses) were all considered. The study had participants look at a screen that scrolled words across (some of which constituted decomposable and nondecomposable idioms as well as clichés) and press a button when a coherent series of words was on the screen, and researchers found that any formulaic language (including clichés) would be responded to more quickly than the experimental control (Tabossi, et al., 2009).

Citing research by J.S. Burt, and noting that familiar idioms are recognized more readily than are novel ones, Tabossi, Fanari, and Wolf (2009) conclude that it is not an

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inherent characteristic of idioms that causes the difference in response times: rather, familiarity with the idiom is actually the cause. Since this experiment considered only familiar idioms and clichés, it is not clear what the response times would be for unfamiliar idioms. However, what is certain is that the use of familiar idioms impart the communication advantage of speed in recognition.

While linguistic research on visualization of idioms and on speed of processing suggests the ease to which they convey an idea, the idiomatic processing model (Gibbs, 1980); which posits that the figurative meaning of idioms is processed first (rather than the literal meaning); may point to a challenge confronting those learning second-language idioms. Namely, a non-native speaker is likely to approach idioms in the reverse manner, beginning with a literal approach to understanding an unfamiliar idiom. If it were a decomposable idiom, approaching it through a word-by-word analysis may enable one to correctly determine the meaning; but if it were non-decomposable, the task would be quite laborious if not nearly-impossible. Moreover, it would not be the same process used by a native speaker. Therefore, a student desiring near-native fluency would need to learn the idiom thoroughly enough so that when it is encountered again, its non-literal meaning is the first to be understood. Intuitively, this seems to suggest that students need a sufficient level of familiarity with an idiom before being able to process it as would a native speaker.

Idioms and Relational Influence

Beyond the question of processing, there is also a field of research that studies the role of idioms in conveying extralinguistic information about things such as speaker-intent and relationship closeness.

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A study by Richard M. Roberts and Roger J. Kreuz (1994) examined the "speech goals" of various types of figurative language including idioms. Their experiment asked undergraduate students to produce a specified type of figurative language and cite the reasons for its use, and over a third of the students assigned to produce idioms cited the main reason for their usage as: "to be conventional," "to be humorous," and "to clarify" (Roberts & Kreuz, 1994). In other words, this study suggests that discourse objectives are an important aspect of idiom usage so that they are employed purposefully. While the research did not consider Chinese idioms specifically, it is quite reasonable to assume that they are also motivated by specific discourse objectives.

Additionally, other research indicates that idioms are a relevant part of relationship communication. For example, Gerrig and Gibbs (1988) suggested that figurative language can help delineate group membership, establishing a sense of community among some individuals while keeping others at a distance. Other research (Bell & Healey, 1992; Dunleavy & Booth-Butterfield, 2009) considers the language used in friendship and romantic relationships, noting that idiom usage, including amount and diversity of type used, correlated with higher relationship closeness. (However, studies on the latter topic considered idioms that were unique to individuals in the relationship and were not used in society at large.) Nevertheless, the studies do show that the use of idioms is related to relationship closeness and group membership or exclusion.

Conclusion

Given the findings on the importance of idioms in communication as well as their importance in relationships communication, it is clear that they further communication by

conveying information clearly, representing extra-linguistic motivation, and perhaps even by being used in the context of relationships.

In light of this research, cheng-yu specifically, which are highly valued in Chinese discourse, seem to merit attention in any intermediate or advanced-level Chinese language classroom. However, "the bar is set high" for second language learners: according to the research presented above, native speakers have automatic processing of idioms, understanding the non-literal meaning first. For second language learners to achieve this level of fluency, a lot of practice would certainly be required. Yet, there are many competing demands at the intermediate to advanced levels, such as increasing vocabularies and improving grammar and character writing: is it really worthwhile to spend time on cheng-yu?

According to a systematic study on corpus data (Zhang, 2009), the frequency of idiom use in Chinese is far greater than in English, perhaps partially due to their versatility and functionality in terms of where they may be placed in a sentence as well as their status as a refined and aesthetically-pleasing language form. Given their frequent usage, their reputation, and their versatility in function, cheng-yu are unarguably a vital part of Chinese communication and thus important to upper-level Chinese instruction.

That said, how can cheng-yu be taught most efficiently? The next chapter will consider the semantic patterns and metaphorical consistency of cheng-yu as features that may be utilized to effectively teach students a large number of related idioms as well as equip them with strategies to use when encountering unfamiliar cheng-yu or literary metaphors.

CHAPTER III

PATTERNS IN LANGUAGE AND LITERATURE (HOW KNOWING CHENG-YU

CONVENTIONS COULD SERVE AS A LEARNING AID)

It is clear that cheng-yu are an important part of communicating at a high-level of fluency, but there is still the question of how to help students with acquisition. In this chapter I describe some of the fairly-consistent cheng-yu patterns and conventions and suggest that they may provide students with strategies for idiom memorization, interpreting unfamiliar cheng-yu, and even understanding unfamiliar metaphors in literature.

Perhaps the most noticeable examples of similarities among cheng-yu occur at the structural level. For example, many cheng-yu are structured around pairs of antonyms (e.g., 東__西__), repeated words (e.g., 不__不__), or around certain grammatical categories (e.g., VERB-NOUN-VERB-NOUN). Learning these common constructions may enable students to study a large number of similarly structured idioms at one time and, according to Jiao (2011), to more strategically infer the meaning of unfamiliar idioms.

Apart from structural patterns, at times there are consistencies across idioms in terms of the metaphorical implications of particular terms (e.g., mountains implying largeness). These metaphors are often consistent whether they occur in poetry or cheng-yu so that understanding the metaphorical connotations of a single term may allow students to better understand an unfamiliar metaphor containing a particular term. In this

chapter, both the structural regularity and the conceptual consistencies of the idioms will be examined in depth.

Cheng-yu Language Patterns at the Structural Level: ABAB Pattern

Often, the structure of cheng-yu can be broken into groups of two characters (Jiao, 2011). Splitting the cheng-yu in this way, there are two common structures that may be loosely described as: ABAB and AABB.

The ABAB structure consists of two pairs of related characters (often antonyms or repeated words, such as; 東, 西; 左, 右; 上, 下; 前, 後; or 不, 不;) and the word pairs are typically separated by characters that are also related. Often these related words are near-synonyms (e.g., 東拉西扯), similar words (e.g., number-words in 七上八下), repeated words (e.g., 能上能下), or sometimes even antonyms (e.g., 前因後果).[1]

More specifically, cheng-yu that are given one of these structures often convey somewhat similar ideas. For example, cheng-yu using the 東,西 construction tend to emphasize antitheticality, extensiveness, or a back-and-forth direction (both literally and figuratively). For example, in cheng-yu such as 東張西望（look all around), 東拉西扯 (to be disorderly in speech), 東征西討 (war all around), and 東倒西歪 (sway back and forth), the inserted word pairs are related words: synonyms or near-synonyms. This structure has the effect of presenting a similar entity or action (e.g., 張, 望) occurring in opposing directions. This is also the case in cheng-yu using this antonym pair in which

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[1]   The cheng-yu used in this chapter as well as their definitions can be found online at: MDBG Chinese-English Dictionary: [http://www.mdbg.net/chindict/chindict.php], and/or at 在線成語詞典: [http://cy.5156edu.com/].

the inserted words are non-synonyms or even antonyms. For example, 聲東擊西 (to misdirect) and 拆東補西 (a stopgap measure), both convey antitheticality. Often, the connotation of this construction is negative (Jiao, 2011).

Similarly, in the 左__右__ construction, the directional terms are meant figuratively, the idiom typically refers to one's surroundings or condition, and often the inserted words are synonyms as in; 左鄰右舍 (neighbors or colleagues), 左顧右盼 (looking around), and 左思右想 (to consider thoroughly).

The__ 上 __下 construction, another ABAB construction, often contains repeated words or similar words. Many of these express a sense of disorder, but may also describe rank. For example, 七上八下 (in a mess or upset), 忽上忽下 (to fluctuate), 能上能下 (willing to take a high or low position), 上竄下跳 (rushing around on sinister errands), and 上行下效 (to follow the example set by a superior).

In cheng-yu that use the 前,後 construction, the directional terms very often refer to time or spacial configuration, but sometimes may be read literally instead. Again, inserted words in these cheng-yu are often synonyms. Examples of those related to time or chronology include; 承前啓後 (adhering to the past and welcoming the future), and even 思前想後 (think over and over again) and 前因後果 (cause and effect). Those that refer to spacial configuration include 前仆後繼 and 前呼後擁. (The one in front falls, and the one behind carries on.)

A slightly different cheng-yu form from those using antonym pairs is the repeated 不,不 construction. In this form, the meaning of the idiom generally related to whether

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the inserted words have different or similar meanings. If the inserted words are distinct, (e.g., 不卑不亢, 不三不四）the cheng-yu is likely to connote something that is moderate: 'neither this nor that.' If the inserted words are synonyms or near-synonyms, (e.g., 不幹不淨), the structure has the effect of reinforcing the negation of a particular quality. Cases of the latter type of these cheng-yu abound. For example, 不知不覺 (unintentionally), 不折不扣 (completely), 不聞不問 (uninterested), 不屈不撓 (unyielding), and 不聲不響 (noiselessly) are all expressions that are emphatic in their repeated negation of a particular quality. Other common cheng-yu structures that contain repeated words may use a repetition of; the character 無, to emphasize an absence or lack of something; or the character 大, to emphasize largeness in size (Jiao, 2011).

Cheng-yu Language Patterns at the Structural Level: AABB, AABb, and AaBb

Additionally, there are idiom structures that can loosely be described as AABB or AABb. Here, the cheng-yu may consist of two repeated characters (e.g., 三三兩兩), and the repetition often serves to add emphasis. For example, 兢兢業業, repeats words meaning cautious and anxious and ultimately signifies one being the epitome of cautiousness and anxiousness when it comes to behavior towards others: in other words, 'conscientious;' 千千萬萬 repeats the characters for thousand and for ten-thousand to signify a very large amount; and 形形色色, indicates a variety of forms and colors, (Jiao, 2011).

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The AABb construction may also consist of two repeated initial characters, but these are followed by two distinct characters (e.g., 默默無聞, meaning silent and unrecognized, and 奄奄一息 (meaning to breath weakly) (Jiao, 2011).

The even looser AaBb structure has two initial characters that together form a coherent structure, and two other characters that complete the cheng-yu. For example, cheng-yu such as 家常便飯 begin with a character pair (e.g., 家常) that may have meaning outside of the cheng-yu structure and end with another meaningful character pair (e.g., 便飯). Thus, in these cases the idioms are relatively decomposable in that the character pairs directly contribute to the meaning of the idiom as a whole. Similarly, such idioms may begin with the phrase, 不可 which signifies that something (i.e., what is stated in the last two characters of the idiom) cannot be done (Jiao, 2011). For example, 不可避免 (cannot avoid); 不可或缺 (cannot lack, necessary); 不可多得 (cannot obtain a lot, rare); 不可一世 (extremely arrogant); 不可分割 （cannot separate, indivisible), 不可救藥 (cannot take a medicine for it, incurable, beyond remedy).

Given the prevalence of cheng-yu structured around word pairs (e.g., 東,西; 左,右; 上,下; 前,後; and 不,不) and the AABB, AABb, and AaBb structures, it seems wise to determine ways in which they could be presented and described in order to assist students and provide strategies to be used when encountering unfamiliar cheng-yu. Firstly, it may be helpful to point out that word pairs are often separated by synonyms or near-synonyms. That is to say, when encountering a cheng-yu that uses one of these constructions (or when recalling one from memory), if an individual knows only one of the two inserted characters, he or she could reasonably suppose that the unknown

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character was a synonym of the other inserted character. A second strategic guess would be that the unknown character is an antonym of the other inserted character.

Additionally, many of the same types of structured cheng-yu have similar meanings. As mentioned above, the antonym pair 東,西 often emphasizes antitheticality or expansiveness, cheng-yu that are structured around 前,後 often refer to temporal concepts (e.g., chronology and time) or spacial concepts. Additionally, when it comes to the AABB, AABb, and AaBb structured idioms, it would be useful to know commonly-used elements and their meanings (e.g., 不可) as well as the emphasis that is often connoted by the repetition of two characters in the AABB structure. That is to say, beyond memorizing a few cheng-yu that use these structures, it may also be useful to commit to memory the typical connotations of a given cheng-yu structure, antonym pair, or phrase.

One example of how this information might be used: if a student encountered the cheng-yu 不聞不問, and did not know the meaning of 聞, he or she might reason that it was a synonym for 'ask.' Knowing that, in 不,不 construction, two inserted synonyms results on an emphasis on the lack of a particular quality, the student might assume that this cheng-yu emphasized a lack of inquiry. Although 'ask' is not a correct translation for 聞, this student's assumption would not be so inaccurate as to completely obscure the actual meaning of the cheng-yu. In fact, understanding this idiom to emphasize an absence of questioning is not too far from the real meaning of 'uninterested.' Provided a context, this student would have a reasonable chance of understanding the basic meaning

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of this unfamiliar idiom, and more importantly would generally understand the idea the speaker wants to convey.

Or, given a more difficult example: suppose a student encountered the cheng-yu 東掩西遮 and only understood one of the inserted words. Again, the student would be wise to assume, based on knowledge of the 東, 西 structure that the other inserted word was a synonym (meaning 'to cover'). The student might also reason that the phrase may have a connotation of antitheticality, extensiveness, or a back-and-forth direction. In this instance, the student would have a general sense of the phrase's possible meanings, but context clues would be invaluable in determining that the meaning of the cheng-yu referred to covering up facts. Nevertheless, knowledge of the cheng-yu structure provides a strategy where otherwise the student may be completely at a loss as to the meaning of the phrase.

Grammatical Patterning of Cheng-yu SPSP, VOVO, MHMH

Apart from the more obvious antonym pair ABAB structure, many cheng-yu are be patterned around common syntactic patterns. Firstly, there is a pattern that contains, in alternation, subjects and predicates and may be described as SPSP. In this case, the two subjects have a non-arbitrary semantic relationship (e.g., referring to things that can be considered as belonging to the same category of items), and the two predicates are often synonyms or near-synonyms. The effect is often an emphasis on a particular quality given that a particular idea is essentially repeated using different characters. Examples are numerous and include; 花好月圓 (conjugal happiness), 鶯歌燕舞

(prosperous), 山高水長 (long-standing reputation, benevolence), 任重道遠 (great responsibility and a long struggle), 頭重腳輕 (unhealthy, or lacking foundational integrity), 手舞足蹈 (extremely happy), 眉清目秀 (delicate, beautiful appearance), 目瞪口呆 (surprised and dazed), 精疲力盡 (exhausted), and 情投意合 (being compatible).

Another structure based on grammatical parts of speech consists of verbs and objects in alternation and here is referred to as the VOVO pattern. The two related verbs typically echo one another and the two objects are also semantically related, sometimes constituting a lexical unit that may be used independently of the cheng-yu (e.g., 牙齒，世俗，山水，家業). Again, given that a similar sentiment is repeated, the structure has the effect of emphasizing a given idea. Examples of this pattern include: 咬牙切齒 (to gnash one's teeth in anger), 憤世嫉俗 (to be cynical about the state of the world and human traditions), 跋山涉水 (the hardships of a journey), 成家立業 (to settle down to a career and family).

Finally, a third pattern type structured around grammatical categories consists of alternating modifiers and heads (or adjectives and nouns) and can be referred to as the MHMH pattern. In these instances, the modifiers are semantically similar and the heads correspond in terms of the category of items to which they refer. Like the SPSP and VOVO patterns, the MHMH pattern also, by nature of its structure, repeats and emphasizes a particular idea. Some examples of this type of cheng-yu include: 濃眉大眼 (angry expression)，輕歌曼舞 (lovely music and dance), 細皮嫩肉 (delicate skin), and 豐衣足食 (prosperous, having an abundance of clothing and food).

While the SPSP, VOVO, and MHMH grammatical structures differ, they share the common features of being structured around alternating grammatical parts and of serving to emphasize a given concept through repetition of similar phrases. That said, these structures may be taught alongside, for example, cheng-yu included in textbooks that exemplify the structures. This approach would allow students to better understand how an idea is conveyed through the repetition inherent in these cheng-yu patterns.

Ultimately, if students have a knowledge of common cheng-yu structures, it does not guarantee that they will comprehend all of the nuances of an unfamiliar cheng-yu: however, it does ensure that students are equipped with a strategic approach so that they are better able to understand unfamiliar, structured idioms. In fact, of the five hundred commonly used cheng-yu listed in a frequency dictionary (Jiao, 2011), approximately a third are structured. Moreover, knowledge of these structures may also assist students in remembering and recalling the patterned cheng-yu that they have already learned.

Interestingly, research proposing the usage-based model of cognitive grammar seems to support this assertion. The usage-based model of cognitive grammar posits the importance of frequent encounters with grammatical structures in order to entrench those structures in a speaker's mind, supporting the idea that exposure to a large variety of instantiations of a pattern or "schema" will better enable students to learn the "schema" for the purpose of productive use (Dabrowska, 2004; Croft, 2004). Since the idiom constructions based on grammatical parts of speech and antonym pairs or repeated words constitute a pattern that recurs throughout the language, they are likely to be frequently encountered and may better be recalled. The frequency of exposure may be strategically

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increased if the classroom environment also supplies sufficient encounters with these structures.

Cheng-yu Patterns and Consistencies at the Semantic-level: 山

Beyond the language structure itself, students may also be able to draw comparisons between the metaphorical comparisons present in cheng-yu and those in Chinese literature. These comparisons could also serve as a learning aid to students seeking to memorize cheng-yu and even to understand literary metaphors. To consider a more specific example: Song Dynasty poetry (詞) often conveys meaning by using the implied metaphorical connotations of nature words such as mountain or flower. Interestingly, the metaphors are not unique to each poem, but are often used in quite conventional ways. Moreover, in considering Chinese four-character idioms regarding these natural phenomena, one discovers significant overlap in the connotations or figurative meanings of the cheng-yu and their figurative uses in Song Dynasty poetry. Therefore, it may be possible that understanding the figurative meanings of these words in cheng-yu may assist one in comprehending Song poetry: or vice versa.

Two questions that emerge are: what is the extent of this overlap, and how might it be used to assist students in learning cheng-yu? The following pages will explore these questions, particularly examining the overlap between Song poems and cheng-yu related to mountains (山), and flowers (花).

山

Mountains, a typical natural feature in Song poetry as well as in cheng-yu should perhaps first be considered for their most rudimentary meaning: as elements of scenery,

providing background and setting. Indeed, various cheng-yu emphasize the role of

mountains at this level in which they are an element of beauty in nature. Yet, they also

are often used metonymically as they represent the landscape itself. This metonymy is

also reflected in the compound-word 山水, which literally means 'mountain and water:'

and can be translated as 'landscape.' A number of cheng-yu represent this more

fundamental meaning of mountain, and some of them are structured to include the words

山 (as the second word) and 水 (as the forth word). For example, the phrases; 遊山玩水

(to tour the landscape), 青山綠水 (beautiful scenery), and 湖光山色 (beautiful lakes and

mountains) use the word mountain (along with the word for water) to metonymically

refer to landscape itself. The phrases, 小山包包 (hilly landscape) and 牛山濯濯 (bare

hill) use the word mountain to refer literally to a hill.

　　　　Aside from the literal and metonymic meanings of mountain, there are a number

of figurative connotations of the word mountain that are present in Song poetry and in

cheng-yu. First, consider the following Song Dynasty poem by Xin Qiji (辛棄疾).

玉樓春

何人半夜推山去？ 四面浮雲猜是汝。
常時相對兩三峰，　走遍洗頭無覓處。
西風瞥起雲橫渡，忽見東南天一柱。
老僧拍手笑相誇，且喜青山依舊住。

This well-known poem begins by asking, "Who moved the mountain away in the middle

of the night?" and responding with a guess that it was, "The floating clouds on all four

sides." As the poem progresses, the wind blows the clouds away, and the mountain is

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again revealed. These very ordinary events illustrate the figurative connotations of mountains. In this poem, the mountain is unchanging, and when the clouds move, the mountain is found to exist "as before." This connotation is further reinforced by the two last lines that end with zhu (柱) meaning 'pillar' and zhu (住) meaning 'to exist.' Both of these refer to the mountain.

This same quality of mountains is also emphasized in various cheng-yu, where it is extended to describe things far removed from the considerations of natural scenery. For example, the idea of mountains as immovable is metaphorically extended to refer to discipline that are inflexible or indisputable. For example, 號令如山 (an order like a mountain) means that a rule cannot be violated, and 執法如山 (carry out the law like a mountain) means to strictly enforce the law. Similarly, 鐵證如山 (evidence like a mountain) refers to facts that cannot be refuted. Even the expression, 壽比南山 (life-span like the southern mountain), which is used as a birthday greeting to wish one a long life, can be thought of as containing the connotation of mountains being enduring.

While there are indeed many examples of mountains referring to something long-standing, one may argue that a very familiar expression seems to contradict this view: 江山易改，本性難移. (Mountains and rivers are easy to change, but it is hard to change one's character.) However, while on the surface this expression literally states that mountains are easy to change, this idea is presented as a hyperbolic contrast, emphasizing the great difficulty in changing one's character by stating that it is even more difficult than changing mountains and rivers.

In other poems and cheng-yu, mountains refer to other characteristics. Take, for example, this Song poem by Yan Shu (晏殊):

蝶戀花

檻菊愁煙蘭泣露，
羅幕輕寒，
燕子雙飛去。
明月不諳離恨苦，
斜光到曉穿硃戶。
昨夜西風凋碧樹，
獨上高樓，
望盡天涯路。
欲寄彩箋無尺素，
山長水遠知何處。

The poem suggests a separation between the speaker and someone far away. The last line of the poem notes that "the mountain range is long and the waters are far." In this case the mountain not only represents the landscape, but also represents distance, separation, and an obstacle between the speaker and the absent person. Interestingly, in many cheng-yu and other common expressions, the term mountain is used to convey this idea of a separate or distant location. For example; 山珍海味 (the treasure of the mountain, the flavor of the sea) refers to delicacies that are from distant locations; 巴山夜雨 (Ba mountain's evening rain) refers to the loneliness one feels when in a foreign place; 山窮水盡 (where the mountains and rivers end) means that one is "at the end of one's rope;' and 坐山觀虎鬥 (sitting on the mountain to watch the tigers fight) means 'to watch from a distance in order to later gain advantage.' In all of these expressions, there is a sense of distance, location, or separation.

In other instances, the mountain metaphor is extended further into the realm of human behavior. For example; 隔行如隔山 (different occupations are like different mountains) means that professions are each quite different; 這山望著那山高 （this mountain thinks another is taller) refers to dissatisfaction with one's circumstances; 他山之石可以攻玉 (another mountain's stone can polish jade) means to learn from another's criticisms; and even the expression, 隔山 (separate mountains), used to refer to half-siblings, seems to express the idea of separation between things that is conveyed by the word *mountain*.

Other common figurative connotations for the word mountain include: mountains as representing something large, weighty or dangerous. Many of these connect mountains with the idea of vastness or large quantities of something in examples such as, 萬里江山 (ten thousand miles, river and mountain), which refers to a large territory; 文山會海 (articles mountain, meetings sea), meaning a lot of paperwork and meetings; and 鰲背負山 (a mountain on a turtle's back), referring to a large burden of debt. Cheng-yu about mountains that are related to danger are also plentiful and include; 火海刀山 (sea of fire, mountain of daggers), meaning grave danger; 窮山惡水 (bare hills and treacherous waters), meaning an inhospitable terrain; and 地動山搖 (the ground moves and the mountains tumble), referring to the great impact of something.

Many of these cheng-yu are more specifically related to danger: particularly, danger in the context of a journey. For example; 爬山涉水 (climb mountains, wade rivers), refers to a challenging journey; 棧山航海 (inn on a mountain, boat on a sea),

meaning a long and difficult journey; 翻山越嶺 (over the mountain, over the peaks) meaning hardships during travel; and even 縱虎歸山 (allowing the tiger to return to the mountain), which means to neglect something which will lead to negative consequences in the future.

Then, to summarize, the word mountain in Song poetry and cheng-yu has a number of common, related connotations including mountains as; unchanging or long-lasting; referring to separation; representing importance, or largeness; and related to obstacles or danger. While the word *mountain* may convey any one of these connotations, it is interesting to note that there is in fact some overlap between a lot of the categories. Thus, defining and noting these categories may be a useful exercise for language learners so that newly encountered metaphors in cheng-yu and poems may be more readily understood and cheng-yu metaphors may be more easily committed to memory. However, it should be mentioned that aside from these common metaphorical relationships, there are a few outliers and unique metaphors in cheng-yu on the topic of mountains. Still, being made aware of these common connotations is a useful starting point and strategy for students.

Cheng-yu Patterns and Consistencies at the Semantic-level: 花
花

Flowers play a large role in many Song poems, and their metaphorical implications are highly conventionalized. Typically a flower in a poem refers to a woman. When the metaphor is extended, falling flowers refer to a loss of youth. Another aspect of this common metaphor is an emphasis on the brevity of the flower's

blooming stage and the inevitability of the coming frost or heavy rains. Consider, for

example, this poem by Li Qingzhao (李清照).

如夢令

昨夜雨疏風驟，
濃睡不消殘酒。
試問捲簾人，
卻道海棠依舊。
知否？知否？
應是綠肥紅瘦。

The first line sets the scene of windy, rainy weather. Later, the speaker in the poem asks

about whether the crab-apple blossoms are as they were before. The inquiry gains

urgency in the second to last line when she asks twice: "Don't you know? Don't you

know?" She concludes that the flowers should have barely started to fade: mostly green

and hardly red at all. Taken literally, the speaker of the poem may be concerned because

of the destructive effect of the weather on flowers. Yet, given the urgency of the

questioning, the claim that the blossoms ought to be more green than red, and the

conventionality of the flower metaphor, one can assume that the speaker of the poem is

concerned about the loss of youth or the inevitable passage of time. This type of

reflection on time along with the conventional flower metaphor is also present in this

poem by Yan Shu (晏殊).

浣溪沙

一曲新詞酒一杯，
去年天氣舊亭台。
夕陽西下幾時廻？
無可奈何花落去，
似曾相识燕歸來。

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小園香徑獨徘徊。

In the fourth line of the poem, the poet emphasizes the inevitability of flowers falling, and in the last line of the poem, there is a fragrant trail of someone pacing back and forth alone in a garden. In conjunction, these two lines seem to subtly link the idea of flowers, fragrance, and a solitary woman pacing. The rest of the poem also contains elements that suggest a concern with the passage of time including: the sun setting in the west, a question of when the sun will come out again, and the swallows returning in flight.

In each of the poems above, flowers are associated with women, may represent the brevity of youth, and may have subtly romantic connotations.

In cheng-yu, some of these themes are continued, but often flowers are used at a literal level and often have a positive connotation. For example, 遍地開花 (everywhere on the land the flowers bloom) means 'to blossom everywhere;' and 踏青賞花 (tread on green, appreciate flowers) means to 'enjoy flowers in spring,' Often, flowers are positive in connotation as in the phrase; 開花 (blooming flower), which means 'happy;' and 柳暗花明 (dark willows, bright flowers) meaning, 'at the worst time, there is a glimmer of hope;' and even 鏡花水月 (flowers in the mirror, moon in the water), which means, 'being unrealistically optimistic about everything.' Sometimes, as the poems above demonstrate, the word flower is used to represent a woman such as in the expression for maiden: 黃花幼女 (yellow flower young girl). Beauty is also referred to in many examples of figurative language, such as; 花容月貌 (appearance like a flower or the moon); 花枝招展 (a swaying, flowering branch), meaning woman being gorgeously dressed; and 閉月羞花 (overpowering the moon, disgracing the flowers), which

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expresses that one is more beautiful than the moon or flowers. However, sometimes use of the term flower refers to women when the topic relates to philandering behavior. For example, 花天酒地 (to engage in debauchery and drink); 花花公子 (a playboy); and 拈花惹草 (to philander). More related to the Song poems mentioned is the phrase 花無百日紅 (good times do not last long).

Clearly then, there is some variety in the metaphorical usages of the word flower. While the typical flower in Song poetry refers to women and the passage of time, in many of the cheng-yu there are other meanings that are often (though not always) related to those themes. Nonetheless, it is helpful to have a basic sense of the connotations of the word 'flower' in order to understand cheng-yu containing the term. Again, students should be encouraged not to take this too far. Some startling counter-examples in the language include; 天花 (sky flower), meaning 'small pox;' 浪花 (wave of flowers), which means the events of one's life; 花邊新聞 (flower-side news), meaning sensational news; and 花花腸子 (flower intestine), which is colloquial language meaning a cunning plot.

The study of 山 and 花 reveals an interesting overlap between metaphors in cheng-yu and metaphors in Song poetry. These two nature words tends to be linked with certain connotations and figurative expressions. Generally speaking; mountains are seen as unchanging, important, dangerous, and related to separation and distance. In poetry, flowers are related to women, aging, and romance, but in cheng-yu they more often may literally refer to flowers or connote happiness, beauty, or even philandering behavior. While there may not always be a clear one-to-one relationship between the nature word and the metaphorical connotation, and while some metaphors differ greatly from the

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expected meaning, there are still discernible categories. Ultimately, this coherence in metaphorical language, when introduced and described to language learners, may provide a useful tool to understanding unfamiliar metaphors.

Finally, consistencies and patterns in cheng-yu structure as well as the overlap between metaphorical language in literature and idioms can be utilized as a learning aid to students. In teaching cheng-yu, for example, an instructor might introduce poems that contain similar metaphors in order to solidify the students' understanding and assist them in remembering the meaning of the idiom. Or, an instructor could choose to focus on cheng-yu that all use a similar construction, allowing students to become familiarized with some of the structural conventions and simplifying the process of learning idioms. While this chapter has considered cheng-yu specifically, the next chapter will discuss research findings on effective pedagogical methods in idiom instruction generally.

CHAPTER IV

APPROACHES TO CHENG-YU BASED ON COMMONLY-USED TEXTBOOKS

In most language classrooms, a textbook provides the primary structuring feature around which lessons are built. While it may be the case that no two instructors go about teaching this given material with identical teaching styles or with an emphasis on exactly the same things, it is still possible to make the general assumption that these textbooks contain the bulk of material that the students will be responsible for learning in the class. For the sake of argument, one can assume that even if a few instructors are supplementing the textbook materials with, for example, cheng-yu lessons, it is unlikely that all instructors are straying far from the textbook material in this way in all cases. In other words, what is printed in the textbook with regards to cheng-yu is what is most likely to be taught in the class.

That said, in this section, the issue of cheng-yu and pedagogy will be considered from the perspective of the practical issue of textbook content, with the purpose being to understand the various ways in which cheng-yu are presented in these textbooks. For example: How many are presented in each lesson? Are the cheng-yu part of a vocabulary list, and is each one mentioned more than once throughout the textbook and in different contexts? Importantly, do the idioms presented correspond with high-frequency cheng-yu according to corpus data? Given that cheng-yu are largely absent from first-year textbooks, this study will consider intermediate (second to fourth year) Chinese textbooks. As a contrast to these general textbooks, there will also be a consideration of a "high-intermediate" level book specifically intended for instruction on "colloquial

idioms." Overall, this section aims to provide a clear sense of the ways in which textbooks have dealt with the presentation of cheng-yu. From this factual starting point, one can begin to consider the strongpoints and the areas for improvement or supplementation in idiom instruction.

Chinese Language and Culture: An Intermediate Reader

One textbook used in intermediate level language courses at both the Univerity of Oregon (as a third-year textbook) is *Chinese Language and Culture: An Intermediate Reader* (Huang, 2002), published by The Chinese University of Hong Kong. The textbook is organized around twenty-two chapters on a variety of different topics such as "Going to College in China," and even, "The Origins of Chinese Proverbs." Each chapter includes essays, vocabulary lists, explanations and samples of grammar structures, as well as a number of fill-in-the-blank or short answer questions. Notably, there are many cheng-yu in the essays and corresponding vocabulary list. Yet, cheng-yu do not typically have a prominent role in the practice materials at the end of the chapters.

Exceptions include; an essay called, "Matchmaking," that is centered around a cheng-yu story (坐馬觀花); and a chapter entitled, "The Origins of Chinese Proverbs," in which there are activities requiring students to match a cheng-yu with its definition, provide short answers to questions about the content of the text, write the meaning of cheng-yu, and write their favorite cheng-yu story. Yet, even though practice questions are about cheng-yu, they may not necessarily require that an answer contain cheng-yu. In other words, a student would be able to complete the task without practicing how to use

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the cheng-yu in context. Moreover, since the cheng-yu in one essay do not seem to be repeated in other essays, it is possible that students would only encounter a given idiom only once in context. In that case, it is quite possible that without additional practice, students would be unsure as to how to use the cheng-yu in their own communication. Additionally, the majority of cheng-yu contained in the chapter do not appear to be high-frequency.[2] For example, the first vocabulary lists in chapter 16 and in chapter 20 each contain four cheng-yu, and none of these are contained in the top 500 most-frequently used cheng-yu list.

Still, given that the cheng-yu are featured prominently in this textbook, their meanings are clearly described, and they are used in context, the textbook would serve as a useful starting point alongside additional information on usages and frequencies or in conjunction with sample sentences (perhaps taken from corpus data). Additional opportunities for practice could be incorporated into the short answer question activity by requiring students to use cheng-yu in their responses.

Chaoyue: Advancing in Chinese: A Textbook for Intermediate and Preadvanced Students

Another textbook used in third year University of Oregon Chinese classes is *Chaoyue: Advancing in Chinese: A Textbook for Intermediate and Preadvanced Students* (Chen, 2010), published by Columbia University Press. This textbook is unique in that it is geared toward heritage speakers, who may have had more exposure to spoken Chinese, but may need additional practice in reading and writing. Given this target audience, it would seem that cheng-yu, a critical part of establishing high-level competence in

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[2]   Determined by comparing textbook content against *500 Common Chinese Idioms: An Annotated Frequency Dictionary* (Jiao, 2011).

communication, would be an important feature. Yet, the textbook contains very few cheng-yu (less than 25 overall), almost none are listed in the vocabulary lists, and there are no activities specifically dealing with them. Instead, the cheng-yu typically appear in the context of the lesson text. While some of these may be familiar or easily understandable four-character phrases; such as 舉例來說, 海外華人, or 隨處可見; many others, such as 白手起家 and 志同道合 are likely to require some explanation in terms of their definition as well as their usages. Generally speaking, this textbook does not lend itself to a curriculum that emphasizes cheng-yu, although an instructor may emphasize those that the textbook does contain, providing definitions, examples, and activities.

Connections I: A Cognitive Approach to Intermediate Chinese

This textbook, *Connections I: A Cognitive Approach to Intermediate Chinese* (Liu, 2004), published by Indiana University Press, structures the lessons in order to maximize cognitive effectiveness, meaning that, for example, mnemonics are provided, content is relevant to students, and vocabulary is reviewed. Each chapter contains a number of different items including a vocabulary list, essay, dialogue, stories, character writing practice, grammar, cultural information, and a song. The chapter vocabulary lists do not appear to contain any cheng-yu. However, in each chapter (ten total), there is a story section in which an idiom story, related to the chapter topic, is retold. While there do not appear to be specific activities requiring the in-context usage of these idioms, there are questions asking the meaning of the idiom as well as its relevance to the chapter topic. Five out of these ten cheng-yu detailed in the stories section are included in the

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500 most-frequently used list. However, these cheng-yu were in fact included in the

frequency dictionary due to their presumed cultural significance rather than their true

frequency. In other words, many of these cheng-yu may also not be widely-used, but are

nevertheless broadly considered to be important. While the cheng-yu story sections

provide an engaging way to learn cheng-yu, classroom activities could supplement the

material by requiring in-context usages of the cheng-yu and by requiring that frequently-

used cheng-yu be learned in addition to those story-based cheng-yu contained in the

textbook.

Encounters

The next textbook in the series by Liu is entitled *Encounters: A Cognitive*

Approach to Advanced Chinese (2010), published by Indiana University Press. This

high-intermediate to advanced textbook is structured around ten chapters on a variety of

topics, each containing a dialogue, narrative, and exposition. According to the

introduction, the emphasis is on a cognitive approach to Chinese pedagogy and in

assisting high-intermediate level students in increasing vocabulary and verbal eloquence.

Thus, vocabulary is intentionally repeated both within a single chapter and throughout the

entire textbook in order to facilitate vocabulary learning. For some vocabulary items,

two sample sentences are also provided so that students may better understand in-context

usages. However, when it comes to cheng-yu, there are very few presented throughout

the textbook. Of those that are included, only one (莫名其妙) is included in a frequency

dictionary (Jiao, 2011) of the 500 most-frequently used cheng-yu. In other words, it may

again be necessary to supplement the materials in order to provide intermediate level

students with more opportunities to learn and use commonly-encountered idioms.

A Course in Chinese Colloquial Idioms

In contrast to these more general purpose textbooks, it may be informative to consider the methods used in a notable textbook that is concerned primarily with a language form similar to cheng-yu. In *A Course in Chinese Colloquial Idioms* (Shen, 2003), published by Beijing Language and Culture University Press, the emphasis is on commonly-used phrases (慣用語), and the content includes these apparently frequently-used phrases. These informal idioms are are presented in context, included in an entertaining dialogue, listed at the end of the text, and used in two or three sample sentences. Sometimes, there is also an explanatory note about variations, contexts, and how to negate these idioms. Finally, there is a workbook page at the end of the lesson with fill-in-the-blank sentences in which one is required to use the idioms. In sum, this textbook is notable for providing adequate contextualized examples; emphasizing (presumably) frequently-used phrases; and providing opportunities to practice using the idioms in context. While the practice problems are fill-in-the-blank questions, these may be supplemented in the classroom context with less-structured practice in which students come up with their own sentences using the target idioms. Unfortunately, this textbook does not deal with cheng-yu specifically, but its methods and approach seem as though they would be extremely useful for non-colloquial idioms.

While the selection of a textbook must take many factors into consideration, the purpose here has been to show that when it comes to cheng-yu, there are many different textbook approaches, some requiring more supplementation on the part of instructors than others. Ultimately these intermediate-level textbooks place differing levels of emphasis on cheng-yu and present them in a variety of ways. (See Table 1.) Textbooks range from

containing very few cheng-yu, such as *Chaoyue*, to containing them throughout, such as

Chinese Language and Culture : An Intermediate Reader. They range from emphasizing

the cheng-yu stories, as in *Connections*, to having cheng-yu simply listed in vocabulary

lists, to including questions about the cheng-yu meanings. Suffice it to say, there does

not seem to be a consensus among the textbooks as to how to best present cheng-yu.

Overall, what seems to be lacking are; a systematic approach based on cheng-yu

structure; an emphasis on the most-frequently used cheng-yu; and the inclusion of

adequate sample sentences and usages. Given the importance of cheng-yu in

communication as well as this reality concerning textbooks, it appears that it may often

be the case that supplementing the cheng-yu content of textbooks (in order to emphasize

frequently-used ones, for example) is advisable.

Table 1: Idiom Content of Intermediate Level Textbooks
(Y= yes)

	Idioms a prominent feature	In vocabulary lists	Introduced in context	Reviewed more than once in context	Activities or questions about	Activities or question requiring their use in context	Background story sometimes included	Idioms contained are cheng-yu
Chinese Language and Culture : An Intermediate Reader	Y	Y	Y		Y		Y	Y
Chaoyue:		Y	Y					Y
Connections I: A Cognitive Approach to Intermediate Chinese			Y		Y		Y	Y
Encounters: A Cognitive Approach to Advanced Chinese		Y	Y					Y
A Course in Chinese Colloquial Idioms	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	Y	NA	

CHAPTER V

PRIORITIZING CHENG-YU ACQUISITION BASED ON CORPUS DATA

There are seemingly innumerable cheng-yu dictionaries with entries that may number in the hundreds or even thousands, and each textbook seems to highlight a slightly different selection of these idioms: how does one know which ones to prioritize in second-language teaching such that students acquire the most-useful cheng-yu? Additionally, although students may know an idiom's definition, they may be unsure of how to use idioms, so there is the related task of providing sufficient contextual examples for acquisition of these idioms. In this section, it will be argued that the use of corpus data in idiom teaching would address both of these issues. Namely, by indicating the frequency of a given character or phrase, the corpus allows one to easily discern which idioms would be most useful to students; and by exemplifying common usages, students are exposed to a greater number of authentic speech examples than they might otherwise encounter. This section will begin by noting that the "usage-based model" of language seems to point to the need for language learners to have high quality and a large quantity of input. Next, there will be a consideration of a frequency dictionary; a study on the usage of corpus data in language learning; and finally, a discussion of the corpus data findings in comparison with the content of common Chinese textbooks.

Usage-based Theory

When it comes to prioritizing cheng-yu in teaching contexts, the usage-based theory of language can provide a number of important insights. As described in the

second chapter, this theory suggests that language learners would be most successful

when there is high-quality, large-quantity input, and that the frequency with which one

encounters these linguistic units leads to their being "entrenched." Moreover, as

Langacker (1987) argues, the degree to which linguistic structures are entrenched

corresponds with one's ability to function in the language. Succinctly: "Every use of a

structure has a positive impact on its degree of entrenchment, whereas extended periods

of disuse have a negative impact. With repeated use, a novel structure becomes

progressively entrenched." (Langacker, 1987: 59).

While it may come as no surprise to language teachers that increased practice of a

given linguistic structure leads to greater ability, it is still important to note the cognitive

importance of intentional use of these language structures, and more specifically, the

need to not only hear a given cheng-yu in context once or twice but also to produce

correct usages a number of times. Moreover, the fact that frequent usage increases

entrenchment supports the idea of teaching most-frequently used cheng-yu so that

students will have many opportunities to encounter and produce them in second-language

environments. Liu (1980: 301) draws a similar conclusion in a work on teaching idioms

in Cantonese:

> The usefulness of an idiom in a particular context is generally determined by
> its frequency in the context. In other words, given a set context, the more
> frequently an idiom appears, the more useful it is. In general, high-frequency
> idioms should be taught before low-frequency ones.

That said, there is still the issue of determining which cheng-yu are most frequently-used.

As the previous chapter mentioned, it cannot be assumed that textbook content will

emphasize high-frequency cheng-yu.

Frequency-based Dictionaries

A frequency-based dictionary of cheng-yu is an extremely useful tool in this effort to strategically teach those idioms which students are most likely to encounter in second-language contexts. A good example of such a resource is *500 Common Chinese Idioms* (Jiao, et al., 2011.), which not only lists the idioms in order of usage frequency but also provides a number of sample usages as well as a description of the cheng-yu's common role or position within a sentence. This dictionary draws from six sets of up-to-date corpus data, totaling over 370 million characters. The two corpora upon which the bulk of the entries are based include the *People's Daily* newspapers from 1996-2000, and Professor Weiguo Zhang's personal corpus. Other corpora used to determine 75 of the entries include the Balanced Corpus from Academica Sinica, a Spoken Beijing Dialect Corpus done by Hu Mingyang and Zhang Weiguo, and 24 volumes of elementary and secondary school language textbooks. Interestingly, compilers of the dictionary also considered fifty less-frequently used idioms as significant enough to include in the dictionary. These idioms were those that had special historical or literary background stories, and were judged to be culturally significant. While this means that one would need to pay attention to this issue when selecting frequently used idioms from this dictionary, the frequency dictionary may also provide a model for incorporating a few less-frequent idioms into one's content while still maintaining an overall emphasis on frequency.

Corpus Data as a Learning Tool

Aside from frequency dictionaries that are based on corpus data, the corpus itself may also be utilized in classroom instruction. This approach has the advantage of not

only saving the time it would take to thinking up a number of appropriate examples but also of providing authentic usages that may span a large variety of topics and situations. There are certainly many ways to use corpora in instruction including selecting usages to provide to students and explaining those examples or the less structured approach of simply allowing access to the corpora itself and asking students to infer the meaning from context.

One study, by MacArthur and Littlemore (in Boers, 2008: 160), uses the latter methods, allowing Spanish and English language learners access to corpora, and observing as the students worked together to find the meaning of a given word. They note that electronic corpora can "isolate a large number of usage events involving polysemous words, providing learners with the kind of information gained by native speakers over a long period of time in their daily contact with the language" (Boers, 2008: 160). In other words, the corpus data increases the frequency of students' encounter with a given language feature. Moreover, they suggest that the use of corpus data may enable students to gain familiarity with the types of phrases that commonly accompany a given figurative usage (Boers, 2008: 160). While MacArthur and Littlemore's study is concerned with individual words that are used in a figurative sense, the increase in exposure to the language that one gains through use of corpora would also hold true for searches involving cheng-yu.

In their conclusion, MacArthur and Littlemore note that this type of activity, in which students determine the meaning based on multiple usages, may demand significant teacher-involvement in guiding the process and that some of the sentences may constitute highly specialized usages: they recommend a possible alteration to the activity would

involve selecting out sentences from the corpus and only providing this data to the students, although the researchers note that it is unsure as to whether this would in fact be more beneficial than allowing the students to encounter the greater variety of examples in the corpus itself (Boers, 2008: 183). Overall, then, whether one chooses to use samples of the data that better suit the students' level and area of specialization or whether one thinks it best for students to be challenged by encountering all types of examples in the corpus, one can be sure that the use of corpora data in classroom teaching provides numerous examples of authentic language usage. Additionally, frequent encounters with the high-quality, large-quantity input found in the corpus data will better enable students to learn correct usages.

While corpus data and frequency dictionaries are useful classroom tools, they will likely be used in conjunction with a course textbook. For example, corpus data could be used to supplement a textbook that provides few examples of a given cheng-yu in context: students might read the data sentences in order to better understand usages before attempting to write their own practice sentences. Frequency dictionaries would be especially helpful when used to compare entries against textbook content and make determinations about which idioms should be emphasized due to their frequency.

For example, in the commonly used textbook, *Chinese Language and Culture: An Intermediate Reader* (Huang et al., 2002), chapter 19 contains nine cheng-yu in its vocabulary list, yet just two of those are found (in identical form) in the frequency dictionary, *500 Common Chinese Idioms* (Jiao et al., 2011). Interestingly, one of the idioms used in the textbook, 相依爲伴, is quite similar in form and meaning to the frequency-dictionary entry, 相依爲命. In this case, checking the frequency dictionary

against the textbook material alerts an instructor to a situation in which it may be useful to go beyond the textbook and introduce a related idiom that may be more frequently encountered. Thus, using the frequency dictionary alongside the textbook enables one to know which idioms to emphasize.

In sum, when it comes to determining which cheng-yu to emphasize and how to best provide numerous authentic examples, frequency dictionaries and corpus data prove to be useful tools. Frequency dictionaries may be used alongside textbooks to help determine which cheng-yu to emphasize, and sentences from corpora may be given to students to assist them in understanding how a particular idiom is used in context.

CHAPTER VI

PEDAGOGICAL RECOMMENDATIONS BASED ON FINDINGS

Introduction to Sample Cheng-yu Unit

When it comes to structuring a lesson containing cheng-yu, there are a number of issues to consider, such as how much the textbook should shape the content of the lesson and in what manner to present the cheng-yu. Reconsidering the findings of the second and third sections of this thesis, there are a couple of important insights that may be applied to the classroom setting. Firstly, pointing out the consistency in terms of the structure and semantics of cheng-yu and basing a lesson on these commonalities could enable students to learn a larger quantity of cheng-yu at once and may provide a strategy for interpreting similarly-structured cheng-yu in the future. Additionally, research suggests that increasing the cognitive effort required during the instruction (through mnemonics, guessing the meaning, etc.) is a strategy that facilitates acquisition. Thus, the question becomes how to apply these strategies in the classroom.

The following sample cheng-yu unit is intended to introduce patterned cheng-yu to intermediate-level students studying the first essay in chapter 18 of *Chinese Language and Culture: An Intermediate Reader* (Huang, 2002), which happens to be about the origin of cheng-yu. The essay itself uses four new cheng-yu and nine review cheng-yu, and two of the new cheng-yu are used twice in the context of the essay. One strong point of this textbook chapter is that the essay and word-definition matching problems provide

opportunities to review a few specific cheng-yu that have been taught in previous chapters.

However, there are also some weaknesses in the chapter. First, the cheng-yu are simply listed or cited in the essay and then explained or defined rather than being used in a context in which their meaning is expressed. (e.g., 『...還有一些是由人們口頭常說的四字俗語形成的，如『三心二意』,『一乾二淨』等等。』) Similarly, while the practice problems at the end of the section require students to match a cheng-yu with its definition, define a cheng-yu, or write a cheng-yu story; they do not require the use of any cheng-yu in context. In these cases, students may merely grasp factual information about the given cheng-yu without knowing how to use it in context. Thus, the sample cheng-yu unit attempts to remedy this by recommending the use of sample sentences extracted from corpus data in order for students to gain a better sense of the meaning and usage of the cheng-yu and to observe structural and semantic regularity across multiple cheng-yu.

A second issue is that, of the new cheng-yu mentioned in the textbook, not one is listed in *500 Common Chinese Idioms: An Annotated Frequency Dictionary* (Jiao, 2011), and only two of the review cheng-yu (both related to stories) are listed in this frequency dictionary. This discrepancy suggests that the inclusion of cheng-yu in the textbook is not informed by empirical findings on actual cheng-yu usage. That is, there is a dissociation of the teaching of cheng-yu from real-world language use. Therefore, the sample cheng-yu unit does not include all of the cheng-yu listed in this chapter. Instead, it emphasizes only one of these cheng-yu (眉來眼去) in order to teach a recurring

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semantic pattern in cheng-yu. While only one of the cheng-yu listed in the sample is included in the frequency dictionary, the semantic pattern itself recurs in various cheng-yu.

Sample Cheng-yu Unit

The cheng-yu unit provided in Figure 1 would be used after the students had become familiarized with the vocabulary and content from the chapter 18 essay through homework, class discussion, and activities. The instructor could use this page in order to provide literary background information on the cheng-yu 眉來眼去, to introduce a number of related cheng-yu structured around the 來/去 pattern, and to structure classroom activities. The page and suggested activities have been designed with the objectives of increasing cognitive demand in order to facilitate acquisition and providing ample opportunities to practice and receive feedback.

Figure 1: Sample Cheng-yu Unit

X 來 Y 去

Typically, in cheng-yu containing the character pair, 來 and 去, the other two characters are synonyms or a repeated character. Since they refer to something or some action "coming and going," the meaning is often related to movement or recurrent actions and is sometimes is negative in connotation.

宋· 辛棄疾

落日蒼茫，
風才定，
片帆無力。
還記得，
眉來眼去，
水光山色。

Identify the cheng-yu that first occurred in this Song Dynasty poem by Xin Qiji. What do you think it means in the poem? Is the meaning of the cheng-yu used today different than the phrase in the poem?

Try to guess the meaning of the following cheng-yu. Refer to corpus data for sample sentences.

眉來眼去 ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

推來推去 ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

繞來繞去 ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

呼來喝去 ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

顛來倒去 ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

一來二去 ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

直來直去 ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

翻來覆去 * ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

來鴻去燕 ＿＿＿＿＿＿＿

Describe the types of situations in which it would be appropriate to use each of the cheng-yu listed.

As homework, write a practice sentence for each one of the cheng-yu listed. Then, create a visual mnemonic or diagram depicting one of the cheng-yu, and prepare to present and explain it to the class using Chinese.

Now that you are familiar with the 來, 去 pattern, you may be able to find other commonalities among cheng-yu you encounter. For example, some are structured around 眉 and 眼. In these cases, the other two characters may be synonyms or antonyms, and the meaning is often related to facial expressions or appearance. For example:

眉高眼低，眉開眼笑，濃眉大眼，
直眉瞪眼，賊眉鼠眼，丟眉丟眼

* Indicates a frequently-used cheng-yu

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION

Ultimately, this project has emphasized both linguistic and pedagogical issues related to cheng-yu. First and foremost, it has been stressed that cheng-yu are an important element of Chinese-language communication that (1) are frequently used in higher-level discourse, (2) convey cultural information, and (3) serve to indicate a speaker's level of education.

In the first section, I have discussed the importance of figurative language in discourse and have found that this type of language is particularly effective in conveying an idea so that an audience will understand the meaning. Given this important role, as well as the challenges of using cheng-yu correctly, it is clear that they merit significant attention.

In the second section, I discussed patterns in the structure of the cheng-yu as well as overlap between cheng-yu and common literary metaphors, with the suggestion that these provide a sense of consistency which may be advantageous in enabling students to learn a large number of related cheng-yu at once. When it comes to the overlap between literary and idiomatic metaphors, for example, being made aware of the consistency across literary metaphors and cheng-yu may assist students in determining the meaning of unfamiliar metaphors on a given topic. Additionally, the consistency seen among the structures of cheng-yu (e.g., 東, 西; 左, 右; 上, 下; 前, 後; 不, 不) may also enable students to learn a larger quantity at once and may provide a strategy for interpreting similarly-structured cheng-yu in the future.

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Section three addressed the question of pedagogical approaches to cheng-yu by considering research on idiom teaching in other languages. This research suggested that: (1) students are better able to grasp idioms that have corresponding meaning in the native language but a "lack of formal similarity" (2) typical source domains for idioms differ among languages (3) diagrams are useful for facilitating learning in cases where the meaning of a term is abstract (4) teaching idioms based on similarity groupings may be effective (5) learners do better when the etymological background is first explained before they are asked to predict the meaning of an idiom and, (6) increasing the cognitive effort required (through mnemonics, guessing the meaning, etc.) is a helpful strategy. These findings offer insights that may be transferable to a Chinese language-learning context. For example, it may be useful to note English idioms that correspond to the cheng-yu and to provide diagrams or facilitate guessing the meanings of idioms in order to encourage acquisition.

The fourth section provided a survey of certain commonly used textbooks and their methods of presenting cheng-yu. While these all differ slightly in their presentation of cheng-yu, what tends to be lacking is typically (1) an emphasis on the most commonly used idioms, (2) explanations of the common structural and semantic patterns underlying the cheng-yu which can further be extended to similar items in the lexicon, (3) and clear opportunities for practice and for review of previously-encountered cheng-yu.

The fifth section argues for the utility and benefit of using cheng-yu frequency dictionaries and corpus data in order to shape instructional approaches. Specifically, the content of frequency dictionaries may be compared against textbook content in order to determine which cheng-yu deserve particular emphasis due to their prevalence. Corpus

data can be used to provide sufficient, authentic sample sentences to students who might otherwise be unsure about how to use a cheng-yu in context.

Given these findings, the proposed cheng-yu unit provides the link between the research and the practical consideration of classroom application. This unit illustrates one possibility in expanding upon existing textbook content while considering the issue of cheng-yu frequency and research on effective methods for facilitating learning. While this proposed lesson would depart from the specific content of the chapter, that is not to say that similar methods that adhered more closely to textbook content would not also be possible.

Finally, in concluding this thesis there are two thoughts that come to mind regarding the cheng-yu pedagogy. Firstly, in working on the project, it became clear that much of the research on idiom instruction provides ideas that are highly practicable in the classroom. One example of the product of cheng-yu research includes the extremely useful frequency dictionary (Jiao, 2011) which, from a vast amount of data, determines the most commonly-used idioms. An instructor could use this information to select and use idioms that students would be most likely to encounter. Likewise, this thesis has attempted to utilize the research to determine practical, research-based approaches, specifically in the sample cheng-yu unit.

Secondly, in researching this topic, it seemed that much of the existing work in English on idiom instruction pertained to languages other than Chinese. While some insights can be gained from this research, it may not be completely transferable given the unique structural features, historical background, and sociocultural functions of cheng-yu. Thus, this work, in a small way, attempts to fill in a "gap" in existing English-language

research while looking forward to future language-specific research on pedagogical approaches to cheng-yu that may provide additional information to be applied in the classroom. It is hoped that the linguistic as well as sociocultural significance of cheng-yu detailed in this paper suggest that they deserve a carefully-considered role in any intermediate or advanced Chinese language classroom.

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