Review of 500 Common Chinese Idioms

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SUMMARY

‘500 Common Chinese Idioms: An Annotated Frequency Dictionary’ is a Chinese-English dictionary/textbook designed for English-speaking learners of Mandarin Chinese at the intermediate level or above. It aims to be used as a dictionary and a supplementary textbook for school classes and self-study. Based on the statistical analysis of six large Mandarin corpora, the book presents the 500 most commonly used Chinese idioms (497 of them are four-character idioms, 3 of them have more than four characters). Different from the alphabetical order found in most dictionaries, the entries of this book are presented according to their frequency order, starting from the most common one. The size of the six corpora ranges from one million to 307 million characters; five of them are China-based and the other one is Taiwan-based. The corpora include both spoken and written data. However, it is no surprise that most of the common idioms selected are from the two corpora with primarily written data, since Mandarin idioms are usually non-colloquial.

In addition to selection based on statistics, another appreciated principle for selecting entries is, using the authors’ own words, the ‘specially handled’ 50 idioms derived from fables or tales. These idioms appear as the tenth idioms (10, 20, 30, 40, etc.) according to their frequency of use. This principle allows the inclusion of some idioms that may have been left out due to their inability to make to the list of 500 common idioms.

Before the idiom entries, the book starts with an introduction (characteristics of the book, etc.) and a master list of the 500 entries in simplified Chinese, sorted by frequency number. The main body of the book offers a comprehensive account of each entry by systematically providing many key features. Each entry includes a wealth of information in a fixed sequence: (1) the idiom in simplified and traditional characters and pinyin (i.e. the Romanized system of
(1) the literal translation of the idiom (e.g. the literal translation for "you can’t teach an old dog new tricks" is "you can’t teach an old dog new tricks"); (2) the English gloss of each character, a literal English translation of the idiom, and/or freer translations and English equivalents of the idiom (e.g. the literal translation for "ye yi ji ri" is "using night to continue day," while the freer translation is "night and day"); (3) two example sentences (in simplified characters with pinyin and English translation); (4) a usage section providing a short syntactic or pragmatic note, such as "functions as adverbial," "serves as predicate," "often preceded/followed by," common combinations with such-and-such word, and other useful comments.

The majority of the entries also include near-synonyms and/or antonyms presented in simplified and traditional characters, pinyin, and translation. Some of the main entries also include a supplementary note (e.g. "has a negative connotation" and "written-style usage") and allusion (i.e. the stories or tales responsible for the coinage of the idiom).

At the end of the book, a brief appendix discussing the common structural patterns of idioms and two entry indices are provided; one is sorted by pinyin and the other by stroke (i.e. the number of strokes needed to produce a character).

EVALUATION

The authors acknowledge that none of the Chinese idiom dictionaries on the market in China is suitable for non-native Chinese language learners (p. vii). The situation is similar in the U.S. The Chinese idiom books in university or public libraries in the U.S. are mostly Chinese-Chinese dictionaries (Ju 1995, Wen 2007, Zhao 2005) and Chinese-English idiom story books (Situ 1984). Among those that may serve as Chinese-English idiom dictionaries, some list Chinese and English translations only (Heng and Zhang 1988, Keuper 1997, Wang et al. 1987), while some include example sentences and/or other usage information, but do not provide pinyin and English translation for the examples (Pan 2000, Tan 1987). Some others include entries and examples in Chinese with English translation, but no pinyin at all (Qi and Xu 2002). The design of most of these books does not reflect a clear target audience. This is probably the reason why they do not include some essential details. This book, therefore, is possibly the first lexicographical work that thoroughly and consistently lists the Chinese characters, pinyin, and English translation for entries and example sentences. This feature makes it more complete than most Chinese idiom dictionaries and makes it as learner-friendly as textbooks.

The format of this book is much more readable than that of regular dictionaries; each entry is shown in larger, bold font and entry idioms, within the example sentences, are bolded. As well-acknowledged, alphabetically-ordered dictionaries are not designed to be used as textbooks and are not friendly for learning. The format of this book, listing entries according to frequency order, makes it a useful textbook. Furthermore, students will appreciate the authors' copious examples. The examples and usage details are very important and helpful for learning the idioms and to understand and acquire the idiom within a context, not just by itself. The well-written allusions also make the reading as enjoyable as reading a literary work. As a non-native speaker of English, I benefit from the English translation and take great pleasure in reading the allusion. I trust that the English parts in this book will equip non-native English teachers of Chinese with better explanations of the meaning of these idioms as they teach English-speaking students.

Although most idiom books claim to include commonly used idioms, the 'commonness' is not justified by any objective criteria, and the selection of entries seems to present merely the author's preference. This makes much of this type of work look like a nicely-kept notebook of idioms. Moreover, the not-so-common entries may discourage the reader's motivation to study the book. Therefore, I appreciate the authors' time-consuming corpus work in selecting the most commonly used idioms. I also heartily concurred with the authors' decision to 'specially handle' 50 idioms derived from fables or tales because they embody rich Chinese culture and stories. Their effort immediately makes the book an indispensable reference for readers. At times, though, I was distracted by some entries and their frequency numbers. For example, as someone who frequently uses idioms in speech and writing, I found myself almost never using the two most frequently used idioms, entries 1 and 2, "shì shì qīu shì, 'seek truth from facts,'" and "jiàn kù fēn dōu, 'arduous struggle.'" This is probably because the entries were selected mainly based on Mainland China corpora. This is not to say that the entries are not representative, since most Chinese idioms have a long history and are used by Chinese speakers worldwide. However, it is noteworthy that readers without a Mainland China background may not connect as readily with some idioms. In fact, the personal connection or lack thereof with some idioms may expose interesting cultural observations. As the authors point out in the note for entry 1, "shì shì qīu shì" is one of the crucial thoughts of Mao Zedong and can be found in many buildings across China.
In the main body of the book, the usage and note information for each entry include some English grammar terminology, which language learners may not understand. It would be helpful if the book were to include a glossary (and short explanation) for special terminology, such as attributive, predicative, and complimentary.

The last section includes a Pinyin Index, listing the entries in alphabetical order, and a Stroke Index. Some dictionaries include two stroke order indices so that readers can reference either the simplified or traditional version of entries (e.g. Jiang and Lu 2007). This book only provides one stroke order index based on simplified versions of entries. Although including both simplified and traditional versions of stroke indices would be convenient for readers with different preferences, this should not be considered a shortcoming since it is clear that the writing system adopted in this book is simplified Chinese. However, the rationale for how the entries were ordered within the same stroke category is unclear. For example, within the two-stroke category, it is unclear why the following order is presented: liao ‘understand,’ ren ‘person,’ ru ‘enter,’ and ba ‘eight.’ This calls for a footnote-length explanation.

It would also be beneficial to readers if the List of Entries and/or the Stroke Index were expanded to include English translations and pinyin. The advantage of expanding the Stroke Index is that readers will be able to compare idioms which share one or two identical characters, such as si mian ba fang ‘all directions’ and si mian chu ge ‘find oneself besieged on all sides.’ Without an index with Chinese and English translations, even just for quick reference, readers have to look them up in two different places (entry 28 and 160 respectively). This index would be especially convenient for reviewing and self-testing.

As a frequency dictionary, ‘500 Common Chinese Idioms’ presents a beautiful marriage between a dictionary and a textbook. For pedagogical/self-learning use, students and teachers may study the materials in divided portions, such as learning two idioms a day (or ten a week), thus going through the 500 idioms in two semesters. For lexicographical use, obviously, a dictionary with 500 entries is by no means an exhaustive dictionary (which is not the purpose of this book). Whenever students encounter a new idiom, I recommend that they look it up in this book first to see whether it is listed (i.e. a common idiom). If so, they should carefully study the idiom presented in the book, and if not, they should look it up in a regular dictionary for quick understanding. This will prevent students from feeling overwhelmed by too much vocabulary and feeling obligated to study each idiom they encounter, which sometimes makes them shy away from learning any idioms at all.

Although readers can easily find many language books presenting the ‘common’ 200 or 500 characters, expressions, etc., books supported by corpus work that scientifically select entry items are scarce. What is even rarer is the authors’ diligent and respectable work that is revealed in every page of this book. In a word, ’500 Common Chinese Idioms’ is an ‘uncommon’ book and a quality resource for any Chinese learner and teacher’s library.

Its value extends beyond a supplementary textbook, a dictionary, or a collection of idiom stories. Students and teachers of Chinese language, culture, and civilization will all find worthwhile materials for their studies/classes in this book. Even family members or friends (or any English speakers) without any knowledge of the Chinese language will enjoy the translations and allusions and appreciate the Chinese wisdom and philosophy richly embedded in the book.

I hope that work on this valuable dictionary will continue, and that other specialty dictionaries, such as 500 common business/traveler/medical Chinese terms will be produced in the years to come.

REFERENCES


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ABOUT THE REVIEWER

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