Following the publication of *500 Common Chinese Idioms* (成语五百条, “500 Idioms” for short), Professor Hsiang-Hua Chang wrote a review (see Vol.47:1, 171–175) calling on the authors to continue their effort to write “other specialty dictionaries, such as 500 common Chinese business, travel, or medical terms.” Here we have an immediate answer to Professor Chang’s call: *500 Common Chinese Proverbs and Colloquial Expressions* (俗语五百条, “500 Proverbs” for short). According to the authors, these books are jointly conceived sister volumes (P. xii), and the many similarities between these books justify a collective review.

**Basic information and formats**

Each dictionary contains 500 entries that are arranged by frequency, which was obtained via computational and sociolinguistic methods. Each entry is complete with both simplified and traditional Chinese characters, pinyin Romanization, character-to-character translation, literal translation, functional/free translation, and two usage examples. These examples are written in simplified Chinese characters and include pinyin, English translation, usage information, and an informative note. Each idiom’s entry also contains near synonyms and antonyms. Finally, both books include indices organized by both stroke order and pinyin.

**Special features of the two books**

There are dozens of books on Chinese idioms in bilingual format, and hundreds, if not thousands, in monolingual format. However, these two books stand out because of several unique features.
First, they are tailored for learners of Chinese as a foreign language, especially those at the intermediate level and above. As we may all agree, formulaic phrases are useful or even essential for Chinese learners who strive to reach the advanced or superior level. However, these phases are hard to grasp for non-native speakers because they require deep cultural knowledge and their actual meaning is usually not the simple sum of all of their constituents. For example, if one does not know the story of 破釜沉舟 (#100 in 500 Idioms), he or she might have a hard time comprehending why this phrase means “one’s determination not to retreat.” Similarly, the actual meaning of 吃豆腐 (#206 in 500 Proverbs) is totally different from the sum of 吃 ‘to eat’ and 豆腐 ‘tofu’. The authors crafted these two books with profound knowledge of what is hard but ultimately necessary for Chinese learners to master.

500 Idioms and 500 Proverbs, with a focus on the important aspects of written Chinese and spoken Chinese respectively, pave the way for learners of Chinese to go from advanced level to superior or near-native level. It is necessary to point out that there are four commonly recognized categories of Chinese formulaic language: 成语 ‘idiom,’ 惯用语 ‘locution,’ 俗语/谚语 ‘proverb’ and 歇后语 ‘two-part allegorical saying’ (Wen 2005). Is it necessary to write separate books on each of these respective topics? It seems not. Two-part allegorical sayings are actually language play that is not suitable for learners. For example, if a learner of Chinese uses a two-part allegorical saying, such as “猪八戒照镜子 — — 里外不是人” [Zhu Bajie [Pigsy, a fictional pig] looks in the mirror — a Catch 22 situation] to a Beijing taxi driver, the reply might be, “兄弟, 二齿钉耙锄地 — — 有两下子” ’My friend, to hoe the field with a two-tine rake —— You are really something’ whose true meaning a foreigner could hardly figure out. In this case, the learner is simply asking for trouble. Proverbs and locutions have a common linguistic feature: most of them are very colloquial, broadly the opposite of idioms in terms of language register. Therefore, it is beneficial to combine common proverbs and locutions in one book, and this is a feature of 500 Proverbs. For example, #1, 好马不吃回头草, is a proverb and #2, 小菜一碟, is a locution. Note that 500 Proverbs uses the term “colloquial expression” instead of ‘locutions.”

Second, these two books are based on sound methodology. According to one recently published dictionary (Leng et al. 2014), there are 61,000 Chinese idioms. If this is the case, how many idioms or proverbs should Chinese learners know? The authors of these two books favor 500. 500 is not a magic number, albeit I have written a book with 500 in the title (Ho 2012). It is a number based on statistics of texts of around 372 million characters and from six mega corpuses which include a full five-year set of issues of People’s Daily, Academia Sinica Balanced Corpus of Modern Chinese from Academia Sinica, Taiwan, 24 volumes of elementary and secondary school language textbooks in mainland China, etc. (500 Idioms, Pp. vii–ix).
Furthermore, one of the co-authors, Dr. Jiao, recently authored a detailed account of Chinese idioms and explained why 500 is an appropriate number for learners to grasp (Jiao 2016). The 500 entries in each book are the result of exhaustive statistical analysis and an on-site survey of more than 900 Chinese college students. Chinese idioms appear mainly in written texts, so 500 Idioms was written after statistical analysis of written materials such as newspapers, textbooks and corpuses. Proverbs and colloquial expressions, on the other hand, are mainly colloquial, and searching written texts exclusively is insufficient. Consequently, 500 Proverbs used a sociolinguistic method and surveyed more than 900 college students. The authors consulted one of the world’s foremost linguists, Professor William Labov, about how to conduct the survey of entries. The inquiry was made easier as the lead author and Prof. Labov are both of the University of Pennsylvania, a situation that can be illustrated by the entry on 近水楼台先得月 (#103). Are college students the best informants for proverbs and collocations? Not everyone agrees. You may argue that old people know more proverbs owing to their life experience, but young people are the main force behind language change, especially in the era of the Internet.

Third, grounding in sound methodology itself does not guarantee the success of a reference book: details of the contents determine if it will be successful or not. I will illustrate this point from the following aspects: the two books’ respective formats, selection of examples, arrangement of idioms derived from fables or tales, marking of tones on colloquial expressions, and indices.

For each entry, two examples are given, in the form of sentences for idioms, and in the form of short dialogues for proverbs. A mini dialogue vividly demonstrates where and how a proverb or colloquial saying can be used. For example, the second example of 羊毛出在羊身上 (there’s no such thing as a free lunch #257) is A: 这个小区的房子真好，买一套房免费送一个车库 (This community’s houses are great. If you buy a house you get a garage for free.)。B：羊毛出在羊身上，开发商不傻，肯定会在其他方面找回来 (There’s no such thing as a free lunch. The developers aren’t stupid. You can be sure they’ll find another way to make that money back.)。There are altogether 2,000 example sentences or mini dialogues in the two books, and the examples are proper, typical, and amusing. The authors state “most of the example sentences were written only after examining 200 or more instances of actual use” (500 Idioms, P. viii). Professor David Crystal endorses the authors’ efforts: “Learners will appreciate the care they (the authors) have taken to ensure that the material is maximally relevant and clear.” Many examples are humorous and down to earth (See #500, 接地气). For instance, the first example of 肉烂在锅里 (#415 it’s all in the family) is: A：今天打麻将赢了多少 (How much did you win playing Maj-jong today)？B：不知道，玩儿以前没数，玩儿以后也没数 (I don’t know. I didn’t count before or
after). A: 你真是, 赌博不在乎输赢 (Look at you, not caring whether you win or lose when you gamble)！B: 那也不是, 因为都是亲戚, 输赢没关系, 反正肉烂在锅里 (It's not like that. Because we’re relatives, winning or losing doesn’t matter. After all, it’s all in the family).

Some of the books’ arrangements are ingenious. One example is the arrangement of idioms derived from fables (e.g. #10, 自相矛盾 “self-contradictory”) or tales from Chinese history (e.g. #40 纸上谈兵 “be an armchair strategist”). This kind of idiom is not as frequently used as ordinary idioms like 莫名其妙 (#17 “unable to make head or tail of something”) or even 津津有味 (#252 “do something with gusto”), but idioms with allusions carry more cultural significance and, more importantly, language learners love them. The authors aptly ensured that every tenth entry falls into this category, such that these 50 idioms divide the book into sections and maintain the readers’ attention. There are actually two subsets totaling 500 entries: one subset consists of 50 idioms which originate from allusions, and the other subset 450 idioms without allusions. Within each subset, the idioms are listed strictly according to their frequency. Additionally, it is extremely hard for non-native speakers to detect the level of sarcasm or abrasiveness of a colloquial saying. In light of this problem, the authors separated the tone of colloquial sayings into four categories: humorous (e.g. #40 三个臭皮匠, 顶个诸葛亮 “two heads are better than one”), neutral (e.g. #200 谋事在人, 成事在天 “man proposes, god disposes”), slightly derogatory (e.g. #306 说风凉话 “crack wise”) and derogatory (e.g. #387 脱了裤子放屁 “as useless as tits on a bull”). Therefore, learners will know even though they think their Chinese superiors did something excessive and unnecessary, they can never say 脱了裤子放屁 to the boss.

We also see some improvements of *500 Proverbs* over its predecessor *500 Idioms*. For example, a Chinese word index is added, and the font size of the Chinese characters in the examples is larger.

**Areas to improve**

The section annotating idioms and proverbs seems somewhat redundant. At present, the format for an idiom entry is as follows: “X [Character A] means…, X [Character B] means… A literal translation of the whole idiom is …, with a freer translation being…The format for a proverb is this: Translated character by character, … [the whole entry] means …, whereas the implied meaning of this proverb would be … Its functional translation is…The layout would be neater and save some space if written as follows:”
Character to character translation: …
Literal translation/Implied meaning: …
Free translation/Functional translation: …

To write *500 Proverbs*, Dr. Jiao surveyed more than 900 students who were all studying in colleges along the east coast of China. The demographic of students is not ideally balanced even though students originally from the middle and western parts of China can enroll in a college on the east coast. Similarly, while *500 Idioms* takes account of language data from Taiwan, *500 Proverbs* does not specify if the authors surveyed informants from Taiwan.

I also found that two entries overlapped in the books: 五十步笑百步 (#500 in *500 Idioms* and #293 in *500 Proverbs* “the pot calling the kettle black”) and 家常便饭 (#456 in *500 Idioms* and #45 in *500 Proverbs* “run of the mill, or par for the course”). There is a long-standing debate on the differentiation between 成语 (idioms) and 惯用语 (locutions) (Xu 1997), but in a reference book for learners, the definitions should be clearer and ambiguity should be avoided. *500 Idioms* does not offer differentiation between near synonyms. It does list near synonyms for each idiom; for example, there are two near synonyms 按部就班 (do things in an orderly fashion) and 井井有条 (methodical) under the entry idiom 有条不紊 (#175 “orderly, methodical”). It is good to enlarge learners’ inventory of idioms this way, but as 井井有条 is also listed as an entry (#436), what is the difference between these two idioms? It would benefit learners a lot if near synonyms were differentiated.

In conclusion, *500 Idioms* and *500 Proverbs* are groundbreaking in their overall design and stand out due to the authors’ meticulous effort. They are tailored for intermediate to advanced learners of Chinese and have set high standards for similar books in the years to come. I hope to see more such reference works from these authors.

References


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