

What makes Chinese idioms so difficult to understand? : A study of the semantic transparency of Chinese idioms

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Abstract

The difficulty of understanding idioms is found in the disparity between the literal and figurative meanings of the idioms. Semantic transparency is a method used to illustrate the extent to which the meaning of an idiom can be derived from the literal meaning of its constituent parts. The purpose of this pilot study is to explore the semantic transparency of Chinese idioms which typically consist of only four characters. By referring to Gibbs and Nayak's (1989) classification of idioms, a scale of semantic transparency for Chinese idioms was developed. A questionnaire with different levels of idioms was then designed to see if participants could speculate on the meaning of unfamiliar idioms and whether their responses would reflect the transparency level of the idioms. The results showed that differences in Chinese idioms' level of transparency could be explained and defined by the relationship between the idioms and their constituent compounds, and that the differences in Chinese idioms' transparency level could also affect participants' comprehension of unfamiliar idioms.

Key words: idioms, compounds, semantically transparent, semantically opaque, decomposability

1. Introduction

On May 20, 2006, the former president of Taiwan, Chen Shui-bian, misused an idiom pertaining to countless wrongdoings to describe the contribution of volunteer workers in Taiwan. This unfortunate slip of the tongue, or faux pas, disturbed the public at large because of the confusion it engendered. It would seem that even a well-educated man like the former president could misinterpret an idiom and use it inappropriately. A possible explanation for this is that some of the words used in Chinese idioms are rarely used in today's Mandarin Chinese; their meanings could have been changed or been neglected over time. It may also be due to the fact that the historical context in which a certain idiom originated has long been forgotten; as a consequence, people simply do not know what a particular idiomatic expression refers to. Most of all, the difficulty of understanding and effectively using idiomatic expressions lies in the heart of the disparity occurring between the literal and figurative meanings of these expressions (Palmer, Shackelford, Miller, & Leclerc, 2006).

Despite the relative difficulty of acquiring idiomatic expressions, idioms are widely used in society and are part of language users' daily discourse. How we comprehend figurative language has thus come to intrigue many researchers. Numerous hypotheses and models have been proposed to explain the ways in which idiomatic expressions are processed (Abel, 2003; Cacciari & Tabossi, 1988; Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989; Kintsch, 1998; Titone & Connine, 1999). It was recognized that idiomatic expressions do not necessarily take longer to process than regular speech patterns. They can be processed as unitary words, requiring an idiom entry, and/or as compositional word sequences on their own (Abel, 2003; Caillies & Butcher, 2007; Titone & Connine, 1999). Depending on their semantic analyzability, some idioms are easier to comprehend than others (Cacciari & Levorato, 1998; Nippold & Duthie, 2003).

With specific regard to Chinese idioms, which most often have a pattern of containing only four characters, most literature is devoted to discuss the use of syntactic variants (Ji, 2007; Sun, 2006) and the use of metaphor and metonymy (Jing-Schmidt, 2008; Kornacki, 2001; Ye, 2001; Yu, 2000) in Chinese idioms. The idea of semantic transparency was adopted by Shu et al. (2003) to analyze

the properties of Chinese characters. Nevertheless, little research is available on the semantic transparency involving Chinese idioms. Through an examination of Chinese idiom formations, I intend to address the subject regarding Gibbs and Nayak's (1989) notion of idiom decomposability.

The purpose of the study was to explore the semantic transparency of Chinese idioms. Based on the way compounds are used in an idiom, a transparency scale was developed for Chinese four-character idioms. In addition, a questionnaire was designed to determine whether participants were able to speculate on the meaning of the idioms unfamiliar to them. It was predicted that the extent to which participants could obtain the meaning would reflect the given transparency level of the Chinese idioms. Finally, the study also asked participants to identify factors that have influence over their understanding of a Chinese idiom.

2. Idioms and semantic transparency

Idioms are found in every language and are used by most native speakers. Because of this, knowledge of idioms is sometimes regarded as an indicator of one's overall language proficiency. For native speakers, it takes practice to appropriately use an idiom, but for foreign language learners, it takes more than that. Even after they have learned an idiom, that idiom is rarely included in their daily use of the language. What makes idioms difficult to understand and use is that most idioms simply do not adhere to the notion of a fixed sequencing of words associated with a 'fixed meaning' (Martin, 1996, p. 88). As noted by some researchers, idioms are 'giant lexical units whose figurative meanings are arbitrary and not easily discerned from analyzing the words composing them' (Gibbs, 1994; Speake, 1999).

In the field of linguistic research, early generative studies focused more on humans' innate ability to construct infinite new sentences, and considered formulaic expressions such as idioms as a marginal form of communication (Chomsky, 1957; F. Palmer, 1971). As quoted by Van Lancker Sidtis (2004), the use of formulaic expressions was generally thought to be a 'lazy solution to linguistic selection' (Drew & Holt, 1988; Redfern, 1989). However, it was not

until recent years that linguists began to realize the role of formulaic expressions in any complete model of language (Sprenger, 2003), the function of using formulaic expressions in communication (Wray & Perkins, 2000), and the importance of understanding figurative language's contribution to language learners' social and academic success (B. C. Palmer et al., 2006).

Recent research related to the comprehension of idiomatic expressions has centered around the role of semantic transparency or semantic analyzability in the comprehension and processing of idioms (Cacciari & Levorato, 1998; Frisson, Niswander-Klement, & Pollatsek, 2008; Nippold & Duthie, 2003). According to Gibbs & Nayak (1989), depending on the extent of their semantic analyzability, most idioms could be classified into three separate categories: normally decomposable idioms, abnormally decomposable idioms, and non-decomposable idioms. Normally decomposable idioms, or so-called semantically transparent idioms, are those idioms whose figurative meaning can be derived directly from the literal meaning of the words composing them; while non-decomposable idioms, or semantic opaque idioms, refer to those idioms whose figurative and literal meaning are not interrelated. Gibbs and Nayak's classification of idioms are based on the relationship between the idioms and the words that compose them. Gibbs and Nayak also pointed out that semantically transparent idioms are easier to comprehend than semantically opaque idioms. In Cacciari and Levorato's (1998) study related to idiomatic speech, participants were asked to paraphrase the meanings of idioms and then to explain what may motivate the implied meaning of the idioms in use. Their results showed that in analyzable idioms, the direct relationship between the meaning of an idiom and its constituent words helps to facilitate participants' explanations and interpretations of those idioms. Nippold and Duthie (2003) used equal numbers of transparent and opaque idioms to investigate the relationship between mental imagery and the comprehension of idioms. They asked participants to describe their mental images for the idioms and then use a multiple-choice task to evaluate participants' comprehension of the idioms. They found that people's mental imagery will come to reflect their understanding of the idiomatic expressions, and that when compared to opaque idioms, relevant mental images for transparent idioms are more easily produced.

3. Chinese idioms

In Chinese, idioms are called Cheng Yu¹ (成語). According to Shi (2005), Cheng Yu is “those expressions that have been long conventionalized in Chinese; and normally with fixed structural patterns and compositional constituents; they usually have specific meanings which cannot be inferred from their literal meanings” (p.35). As Ji (2007) points out, Shi’s definition highlights three characteristics prominent in Chinese idioms: They are conventionalized, their structure is fixed, and their meaning is difficult to infer. The fact that idioms are rooted in the culture of the people who use the language illustrates the aspect of conventionality in idioms. This feature also explains why it is sometimes hard to derive the figurative meaning of an idiom since it was established hundreds or even thousands of years ago.

One attribute that distinguishes Cheng Yu (成語) from idioms in other languages is that it is highly condensed: only four written characters are required for it to be conveyed. The four characters are usually placed together by combining words, which are compounds themselves bound by certain principles. For instance, the idiom Xin-zhi-kou-kuai (心直口快, translated literally, mind-straight-mouth-fast), describes someone who says whatever comes to his / her mind. This idiomatic expression is formed by joining two compounds: xin-zhi (心直, mind-straight) and kou-kuai (口快, mouth-fast). Both of them are bound by the subject-predicate principle, that is, the first morpheme in the compound is the subject and the second morpheme specifies the semantic quality of the subject. In Chinese, there are several compounding principles. Compounds formed by these principles can be nominal, verbal, or adjectival in nature. Table 1 lists some of the major compounding principles and provides examples of the idioms whose compounds are formed under these principles.

¹ Throughout the paper, *Hanyu Pinyin* Romanization system is used for the transcription of the Mandarin data.

Table 1. Major Principles of Compounding in Chinese

Name of the Principles	Methods of Compounding	Examples
主謂 subject-predicate	Consists of two morphemes; the first morpheme is the subject described, while the second morpheme specifies the quality of the subject.	心直-口快 Xin-zhi-kou-kuai (mind-straight-mouth-fast)
動賓 predicate-argument	Consists of two morphemes; the first morpheme represents an action and the second morpheme the receiver of the action.	說長-道短 Shuo-chang-dao-duan (say-long-talk-short)
偏正 modifier-head	Consists of two morphemes; the first morpheme modifies the second morpheme.	花言-巧語 Hua-yan-qiao-yu (flower-word-clever-language)
聯合 apposition	Composed by two morphemes of similar or opposing meanings.	悲歡-離合 Bei-huan-li-he (sorrow-joy-parting-reunion)
補充 complementing	Consists of two morphemes; the second morpheme explains the first morpheme.	人山-人海 Ren-shan-ren-hai (people-mountain-people-ocean)
疊合 reduplication	Morphemes are reduplicated.	是是-非非 Shi-shi-fei-fei (right-right-wrong-wrong)

Although not every four-character idiom is formed by combining two adjacent compounds, the majority of Chinese idioms contain at least one compound in their construction. The four characters in an idiom are usually used together as a single contiguous unit, but since they are compounds by nature, they can be abbreviated or extended in communicative context. For example, as Ji (2007) observed, the four-character idiom Hua-she-tian-zu (畫蛇添足, draw-serpent-add-feet) which describes redundancy in an action, can be abbreviated to two characters, she-zu (蛇足, serpent-feet). Ji accounted for this structural abbreviation by explaining that the verbal morphemes are omitted because the figurative meaning of the idiom, a redundant action, can be implied by the contradictory juxtaposition

of the nominal pair *she-zu* (蛇足, serpent-feet). In terms of extension, Ji argued that it is a process that turns the four-character idiom into an extended idiomatic expression by the addition of modifying or restrictive elements (p.4). One of the examples given by Ji is the idiomatic expression *Yu-po-cuo-luan-wu-lun-ci* (語頗錯亂無倫次, talking-very-wrong-chaos-without-order-sequence) extended from *Yu-wu-lun-ci* (語無倫次, talking-without-order-sequence). The idiom is used to depict someone who talks without logical sequence. The insertion of *po-cuo-luan* (頗錯亂, very-wrong-chaos) occurs between the first morpheme (the verbal subject) and the following adverbial modifier. Its function is to place more stress on the described quality of the subject.

The assumption behind Ji's observation is that it is the semantic, rather than syntactic, relationship held by the constituents that makes any syntactic modification possible (Nunberg, 1994). In order for language users to utilize an idiom flexibly, the meaning of the idiom must first be available to language users before they know what to leave out and / or what to include. In the present study, Chinese idioms are analyzed as if they are composed of compounds. The approach is to identify not only the semantic relationship held by the four characters, but also the semantic transparency of the idioms.

Most studies on Chinese idioms have been dedicated to the use of metaphor and metonymy (Jing-Schmidt, 2008; Kornacki, 2001; Ye, 2001; Yu, 2000). Some studies have focused on the dynamic use of Chinese idioms (Ji, 2007; Sun, 2006). However, little is offered to address the possibility of outlining different degrees of semantic transparency in Chinese idioms. In the next section, I shall try to propose a method to define different levels of transparency found in Chinese idioms.

4. Method

4.1 Researcher-developed scale of semantic transparency

Since the majority of Chinese idioms are based on two adjacent compounds, it may be reasonable to examine the semantic transparency of Chinese idioms by the manner in which compounds are used in the formation of an idiom. By referring to Gibbs and Nayak's (1989) classification of idioms, a scale of semantic

transparency for Chinese idioms was developed. The transparency level of an idiom was determined by two criteria: first, how the meaning of an idiom was related to the compounds that compose it (e.g. literally or metaphorically); and second, whether, or not, background knowledge (e.g. knowledge of the names of a historical figure/place) was required in the comprehension of the idiom in use. Definitions for each level of semantic transparency as well as examples of the idioms are provided in Table 2.

Table 2. A Transparency Scale for Chinese Idioms

Levels of Transparency	Definitions	Examples
Transparent	The meaning of the idiom can be related to the compounds literally.	名疆利鎖 Ming-jiang-li-suo (fame-rein-wealth-lock)
Semi-transparent	The meaning of the idiom can be related to the metaphorical meaning of the compounds.	雞皮鶴髮 Ji-pi-he-fa (chicken-skin-crane-hair)
Opaque	1.) There is a semantic relation between the two compounds. The meaning of the idiom has to be related to the metaphorical state described by the two compounds together.	空谷足音 Kong-gu-zu-yin (empty-valley-feet-sound)
	2.) The idiom includes names of people or places that have to be understood in terms of historical context.	五日京兆 Wu-ri-jing-zhao (five-day-the capital-a million million)

Based on the proposed transparency scale central to this work, research questions were formed as follows:

- (1) When native Chinese speakers come across an unfamiliar Chinese idiom, can they predict or deduce the meaning of it? To what extent can native Chinese speakers predict the meaning of an idiom?
- (2) Do Chinese four-character idioms present the same level of ease or difficulty to native speakers?
- (3) What may be the major factor that affects native Chinese speakers' comprehensions of a Chinese idiom?

4.2 Participants

A total of 69 native Chinese speakers participated in the study; 20 of them were male, 45 female, and four did not indicate their gender in the survey. All of them were adult students enrolled in a weekend extension-education program at a private university majoring in Applied English. Most of them thought that by getting a Bachelor's degree in Applied English, it would help them to get a better job. All of them volunteered to participate in the current study.

4.3 Materials

A questionnaire was developed to elicit the participants' responses to the research questions specified above. The questionnaire contained a set of nine Chinese four-character idioms: three idioms were given for each of the three proposed levels of semantic transparency. All of the idioms were from the *Gu-xiang Practical Dictionary of Idioms* (故鄉實用成語辭典) (1981). To verify the appropriate placement of the idioms with the specified categories they were classified into, twenty-five idioms were initially selected for content-validity judgment (see Appendix 1). The idioms, with their corresponding meanings consulted from the dictionary, were then presented to three native Chinese speakers and professors of linguistics at National Kaohsiung Normal University. These experts were asked to rate the idioms on a 6-point Likert scale (0 = no match, 1 = least match, and 5 = perfect match). According to the results of their ratings, nine idioms with mean scores over the mid-point 3 were included into the questionnaire.

For each idiom presented, four questions were asked. To get an idea of how familiar or unfamiliar the participants were with these idioms, the first question asked the participants whether they had ever heard of the idioms presented. The second question invited the participants to write down what they thought the meaning of the idioms was. The third question asked the participants to rate the degree of difficulty with regards to the meaning of the idioms, all using a 4-point Likert scale (1 = very difficult, 2 = difficult, 3 = easy, 4 = very easy). The last question then asked the participants to check reasons that made a certain idiom difficult for them. They were allowed to check more than one

reason, if more than one answer applied. The full questionnaire can be found in Appendix 2.

4.4 Scoring Procedures

To rate the meanings of the idioms given by the participants, a scoring guideline was developed to judge the level of their responses. Points were assigned to the given responses as follows:

- 0 = the meaning given is irrelevant to the actual figurative meaning of the idiom
- 1 = the meaning given is partially relevant to the actual figurative meaning of the idiom
- 2 = the meaning given is relevant to the actual figurative meaning of the idiom

For example, different meanings attributed to the idiom Qiu-feng-guo-er (秋風過耳, translated literally, autumn-wind-through-ear) were marked in the following manner:

- 0 = a chilling atmosphere
- 1 = vanishing into the air
- 2 = showing indifference, remain unmoved

All the participants' responses were reviewed by the researcher of the present study.

5. Results

Regarding the first question provided in the questionnaire, most of the participants reported that they had not heard of the set of idioms tested at the time when they answered the questionnaire. As shown in Table 3, two of the most commonly heard idioms are Ji-pi-he-fa (雞皮鶴髮, chicken-skin-crane-hair) (49.3%) and Bai-yun-cang-gou (白雲蒼狗, white-cloud-grey-dog) (48.5%). The least frequently heard idiom was taken to be Ming-jiang-li-suo (名疆利鎖, fame-rein-wealth-lock) (4.3%).

Table 3. Percentage of Participants Who Have Heard the Idioms

Categories	Idioms	Percent
Transparent	名疆利鎖 Ming-jiang-li-suo (lit. fame-rein-wealth-lock)	3*/69** (4.3%)
	沿才授職 Yan-cai-shou-zhi (lit. follow-talent-give-job)	10/69 (14.5%)
	擊節嘆賞 Ji-jie-tan-shang (lit. beat-tempo-praise-appreciate)	14/68 (20.6%)
Semi-transparent	秋風過耳 Qiu-feng-guo-er (lit. autumn-wind-through-ear)	17/68 (25.0%)
	雞皮鶴髮 Ji-pi-he-fa (lit. chicken-skin-crane-hair)	34/69 (49.3%)
	炊金饌玉 Chui-jin-zhuan-yu (lit. cook-gold-drink-jade)	12/68 (17.6%)
Opaque	空谷足音 Kong-gu-zu-yin (lit. empty-valley-feet-sound)	22/69 (31.9%)
	白雲蒼狗 Bai-yun-cang-gou (lit. white-cloud-grey-dog)	33/68 (48.5%)
	五日京兆 Wu-ri-jing-zhao (lit. five-day-capital city-a million-million)	14/68 (20.6%)

* Number of participants who have heard the idiom

** Total valid number of participants

The second question asked the participants to write down what they thought the meanings of the idioms might be; each meaning given by the participants was then scored on a 3-point scale (0 = irrelevant, 1 = partially relevant, 2 = relevant). The result is reported in Table 4. Except for the idiom Ming-jiang-li-suo (名疆利鎖, fame-rein-wealth-lock), the transparent type of idioms had mean scores over one point; the mean scores for the three semi-transparent idioms were all around 0.84, and no idioms in the opaque type received a mean score over 0.35. To determine if the three types of idioms correspond to their related level of difficulty, means of the three types of idioms were compared using repeated measures of One-way ANOVA. Mauchly's test indicated that the assumption of Sphericity had not been violated ($X^2(2) = 0.11, p = .95$). The results show that there were significant differences between the mean scores of the three types of idioms, $F(2,56) = 30.70, p = .000$. Post Hoc tests using Bonferroni indicated

that the participants' scores on the transparent idioms were significantly higher than their scores on the opaque idioms. Their scores on the semi-transparent idioms were also significantly higher than on the opaque idioms. No significant differences were found between the participants' scores on the transparent and semi-transparent idioms. This indicates that the opaque idioms are far more difficult to understand than both the transparent and semi-transparent idioms.

Table 4. Participants' Performance on the Meanings of the Idioms (n = 56)

Type	Idioms	M	SD
Transparent	名疆利鎖 Ming-jiang-li-suo (fame-rein-wealth-lock)	0.71	0.85
	沿才授職 Yan-cai-shou-zhi (follow-talent-give-job)	1.14	0.91
	擊節嘆賞 Ji-jie-tan-shang (beat-tempo-praise-appreciate)	1.20	0.85
Semi-transparent	秋風過耳 Qiu-feng-guo-er (autumn-wind-through-ear)	0.84	0.83
	雞皮鶴髮 Ji-pi-he-fa (chicken-skin-crane-hair)	0.84	0.79
	炊金饌玉 Chui-jin-zhuan-yu (cook-gold-drink-jade)	0.81	0.74
Opaque	空谷足音 Kong-gu-zu-yin (empty-valley-feet-sound)	0.07	0.26
	白雲蒼狗 Bai-yun-cang-gou (white-cloud-grey-dog)	0.35	0.73
	五日京兆 Wu-ri-jing-zhao (five-day-the capital-a million-million)	0.16	0.48

To compare the meanings given by the participants who had heard the idioms and those who had not, a one-way ANOVA was performed, with raw scores for the meaning of each idiom serving as the dependent variables. Among the three transparent idioms, only Ji-jie-tan-shang (擊節嘆賞, beat-tempo-praise-appreciate) yielded statistically significant difference between the two groups, $F(1, 49) = 5.229$, $p < .05$. The participants who had heard of the idiom prior to the test scored higher ($M = 1.67$) than those who had never heard of it ($M = 1.05$). No significant differences were found between the two groups for the idioms Ming-jiang-li-suo (名疆利鎖, fame-rein-wealth-lock), $F(1, 54) = 0.357$, $p > .05$,

and Yan-cai-shou-zhi (沿才授職, follow-talent-give-job), $F(1, 61) = 1.411$, $p = .240$, suggesting that even for those who had never heard of the idioms prior to the test, their prediction on the meaning of the two idioms could be as good as those who had previously heard of the idioms.

As for the semi-transparent idioms, significant differences were found between the two groups only for the idiom Ji-pi-he-fa (雞皮鶴髮, chicken-skin-crane-hair), $F(1, 60) = 45.310$, $p < .05$. No significant differences were found between the two groups for the idioms Qiu-feng-guo-er (秋風過耳, autumn-wind-through-ear), $F(1, 55) = 0.011$, $p = .916$, and Chui-jin-zhuan-yu (炊金饌玉, cook-gold-drink-jade), $F(1, 55) = 0.016$, $p = .899$. Again, this indicates that whether the participants had heard of the idioms would not necessarily affect the overall accuracy of their prediction on the meaning of the idioms.

Nevertheless, this is not the case for the opaque type of idioms. Results from two opaque idioms yielded significant differences between the two groups: Bai-yun-cang-gou (白雲蒼狗, white-cloud-grey-dog), $F(1, 53) = 6.791$, $p < .05$; Wu-ri-jing-zhao (五日京兆, five-day-the capital-a million-million), $F(1, 42) = 17.561$, $p < .05$. The participants who had heard of Bai-yun-cang-gou (白雲蒼狗, white-cloud-grey-dog) ($M = 0.57$) and Wu-ri-jing-zhao (五日京兆, five-day-the capital-a million-million) ($M = 0.67$) were able to predict the meaning of the idioms more accurately than those who had not previously heard of the two idioms: Bai-yun-cang-gou (白雲蒼狗, white-cloud-grey-dog), ($M = 0.08$) and Wu-ri-jing-zhao (五日京兆, five-day-the capital-a million-million) ($M = 0.02$). No significant differences were found between the two groups for Kong-gu-zu-yin (空谷足音, empty-valley-feet-sound), $F(1, 55) = 0.660$, $p = .420$.

Despite differences in the participants' prediction of the meanings of the three types of idioms, their ratings on the idioms' degree of difficulty did not vary much. On a 4-point scale, from very difficult to very easy, the idioms' mean ratings ranged from 1.58 to 2.44. The participants seemed to consider all nine idioms to be equally difficult regardless of their ability to infer the meanings. Table 5 lists the participants' ratings for all three types of idioms provided.

Table 5. Participants' Ratings for All Three Types of Idioms Provided (n = 62)

Type	Idioms	M	SD
Transparent	名疆利鎖 Ming-jiang-li-suo (lit. fame-rein-wealth-lock)	2.06	0.74
	沿才授職 Yan-cai-shou-zhi (lit. follow-talent-give-job)	2.44	0.66
	擊節嘆賞 Ji-jie-tan-shang (lit. beat-tempo-praise-appreciate)	2.16	0.73
Semi-transparent	秋風過耳 Qiu-feng-guo-er (lit. autumn-wind-through-ear)	2.16	0.77
	雞皮鶴髮 Ji-pi-he-fa (lit. chicken-skin-crane-hair)	2.42	0.89
	炊金饌玉 Chui-jin-zhuan-yu (lit. cook-gold-drink-jade)	2.26	0.77
Opaque	空谷足音 Kong-gu-zu-yin (lit. empty-valley-feet-sound)	2.15	0.68
	白雲蒼狗 Bai-yun-cang-gou (lit. white-cloud-grey-dog)	2.03	0.72
	五日京兆 Wu-ri-jing-zhao (lit. five-day-the capital-a million-million)	1.58	0.59

Finally, with regard to what makes it difficult for the participants to comprehend an idiom, the two most frequently selected reasons concern the figurative meaning of the idioms and the background of them. “Not knowing the figurative meaning that could be derived from the characters” was chosen 138 times by 33 participants who considered a particular idiom difficult, and “not knowing the background of the idiom” was chosen 139 times. The participants also identified the difficulty of “not knowing the relationship between phrases,” which was selected 75 times. When compared to the other three reasons, the reason “not knowing the meaning of the characters / words,” which was selected 20 times, ranked the lowest among responses given.

6. Discussion

In this study, Chinese idioms were classified into three semantic transparency categories by their relationship to the compounds that compose them. It was predicted that these three types of idioms would present differing degrees of dif-

difficulty to the participants involved. The thinking behind this prediction is that although the majority of Chinese idioms consist of only four characters, the four characters are not placed together in an arbitrary fashion. Instead, they are bounded by the principles that form Chinese compound words. Since the concept of semantic transparency is often defined by the relationship occurring between the constituents and their representatives (e.g., Shu et al. 2003, for Chinese characters, and Gibbs & Nayak, 1989; Nunberg, 1978, for English idioms), the way in which compounds are used in Chinese idioms should present differing levels of semantic transparency to native Chinese speakers.

Initial analyses confirmed that the opaque idioms had the lowest mean scores among the three types of idioms presented. The participants' speculations on the meanings of the opaque idioms were mostly irrelevant to the real meanings of the idioms. As predicted, most of the transparent idioms had the highest mean scores, and the mean scores for semi-transparent idioms were found to be in-between those of the transparent and the opaque types of idioms.

Further evidence was observed in that, the number of people who had heard the idioms prior to the test was higher in the opaque idioms than in the transparent idioms (see Table 3); and, for two-out-of-the-three opaque idioms, significant differences were found to exist between the group that had heard the idioms and the group that had not. Given these specifications, one would naturally assume that if more people have heard of the idioms in the opaque category, their interpretations of the idioms should have been more accurate. However, the results showed the opposite; the mean scores for the opaque idioms were among the lowest of all three categories of idioms. By contrast, the number of the participants who had previously heard the idioms was not as many in the transparent type, and significant differences between the groups were found in only one of the transparent idioms. Yet the mean scores in all three transparent idioms were higher than those of the opaque idioms. Together, the results demonstrated that there are differences in Chinese idioms' levels of transparency, and that these differences can considerably affect the participants' comprehension of the idioms.

The second finding of the study came from the participants' rating on the idioms' relative degree of difficulty. Results showed that although the participants performed better on their comprehension of some idioms than of others, their ratings did not reflect changes related to the transparency scale. This contrast implied a conservative attitude towards learning. Traditionally, most Chinese students rely on their teachers to give them answers to the questions; they do not usually feel comfortable to explore the answers on their own, and they are not often encouraged to do so. Consequently, all the subject-matter that was not taught is considered at once to be difficult. Since the majority of the idioms tested were unfamiliar to the participants, it may be understandable why these idioms were considered more or less to be equally difficult to them.

The same prevalent attitude was also reflected in the participants' choices of reasons that are said to hinder their comprehension of the idioms. The option, "not knowing the background of the idiom," was selected as one of the major obstacles to the participants' understanding of an idiom. But, the truth is that except for the idiom *Wu-ri-jing-zhao* (五日京兆, five-day-the capital-a million-million), which incorporates the term *jing-zhao* (京兆) that was used in a historical context non-relevant to today's society, no other idioms tested required the kind of socio-historical background knowledge necessary to comprehend the meaning of the idioms. Without having the background knowledge connected to the unfamiliar idioms, the participants seemed to feel that they were not able to comprehend the intended meaning fully.

Upon scoring meanings given by the participants, a pattern for interpreting the meaning of an idiom was discerned. It was found that when no other cues were available in making sense of an unfamiliar idiom, the participants would quickly rely on their own understanding of the Chinese characters and/or words to infer possible meanings of the idiom. As a result, their interpretations may be irrelevant to the real meaning of the idiom, but some of them would show a strikingly similar thought process. For example, consider the idiom *Ming-jiang-li-suo* (名疆利鎖, literally, fame-rein-wealth-lock), instead of relating *jiang* 'rein' and *suo* 'lock' as possible tools to bind people, several participants coincidentally interpreted them as fortifying equipment used to protect a city, leading

to a completely irrelevant explanation of the idiom.

Finally, the participants' responses to the idioms presented also revealed their awareness of the semantic relationship between the idioms and their constituents. Some of the participants' answers involved a syntactic modification (i.e. abbreviation and extension) of the idioms given. For instance, when giving their interpretation of the idiom *Ming-jiang-li-suo* (名疆利鎖, literally, fame-rein-wealth-lock), several participants abbreviated it into *ming-li* 'fame and wealth'; one participant extended it to become *You-ming-de-jiang-yu-ji-rui-li-de-suo* (有名的疆域及銳利的鎖, literally, famous boundary and sharp lock). The way in which the participants modified the syntactic form of the idiom reflected their knowledge of the relationship between the idioms and their constituent compounds, which consequently supports the study's assumptive premise that most Chinese idioms have compounds as their base.

7. Conclusion and implications for instruction

In sum, the present study has shown that the semantic transparency of Chinese idioms can be analyzed through the relationship existing between the idioms and their constituent compounds. This aspect of Chinese idioms is in line with previous studies that examined the semantic compositionality of idiomatic expressions by drawing a solid connection between individual words and the overall figurative meaning of an idiom (e.g., Gibbs & Nayak, 1989; Gibbs, Nayak, & Cutting, 1989; Titone & Connine, 1999). Although the participants did not show great differences in their ratings of the idioms' levels of difficulty, their responses to the meaning of the idioms showed that the semantic transparency of an idiom can affect people's relative comprehension of that idiom.

In addition, the participants' responses indicated that without context cues, people's interpretation of an unfamiliar idiom may be restrained by their genuine understanding of the Chinese characters and/or words composing the idioms. The result of their guesses may work for transparent idioms but not for opaque idioms. From an instructional standpoint, one immediate implication of the present findings is that context should be provided whenever an idiom is taught. By providing context for usage, it helps learners to understand the idioms and

prevents them from misusing the idioms. For opaque idioms or for idioms that are less heard, inclusion of the socio-historical background of the idioms in instruction can facilitate learners' comprehension of the culture that generated the Chinese idioms in the first place. Finally, learners should be encouraged to take guesses on the meaning of an idiom from its context as most proficient Chinese native speakers have learned to do in daily usage.

8. Limitations of the study and future research

Although the present study has attempted to provide empirical support for relating the semantic transparency of Chinese idioms and people's comprehension of them, one major limitation of the present study is that the study is an exploratory one. The criteria for determining the transparency level of Chinese idioms, as well as ways of scoring, were developed by the researcher and have not been tested in other studies. Further research should try different measures to investigate whether there are other factors that may influence the transparency level of Chinese idioms.

This study is also limited by the fact that it is difficult to control the number of participants in the group that has heard the idioms and the group that has not heard the idioms. Thus, there were not equal numbers of participants in the two categories, which can be statistically undesirable. In light of these limitations, future research should include idioms that are of higher frequency in order to balance the numbers of participants on both groups.

The study given here presents one method of approaching the semantic transparency in Chinese idioms. It is intended to serve as a foundation for further research on the vast topic of Chinese idioms. More research is required in the area of exploring the argument structure of Chinese idioms, in particular, whether the syntactic relationship that holds the constituents of an idiom would affect the idiom's semantic transparency. Furthermore, it would be interesting to see how the semantic and syntactic structure of the Chinese idioms would contribute to the dynamic use of them in today's society.

What makes Chinese idioms so difficult to understand?

APPENDIX 1: Content Validity Expert Form

請參考下頁附表所提供之成語用法，判斷該成語是否符合其所屬類別。謝謝您！

	Definition	Idioms	No Match	Least Match	Perfect Match
Transparent	The meaning of the idiom can be related to the compounds literally.	籠鳥檻猿	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		精金良玉	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		深溝高壘	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		名韁利鎖	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		沿才授職	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		蒸沙成飯	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		耕當問奴	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		擊節嘆賞	0	1 2 3 4 5	
Semi-transparent	The meaning of the idiom can be related to the metaphorical meaning of the compounds.	吉光片羽	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		梅妻鶴子	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		雞皮鶴髮	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		河清海晏	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		炊金饌玉	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		秋風過耳	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		目不交睫	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		衣錦夜行	0	1 2 3 4 5	
Opaque	1. The meaning of the idiom cannot be derived by relating to the individual compounds. There is a semantic relationship between the two compounds. The meaning of the idiom can be related to the metaphorical state described by the two compounds together.	空谷足音	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		白雲蒼狗	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		秀才人情	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		稱雨道晴	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		築室道謀	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		見兔顧犬	0	1 2 3 4 5	
	2. The idiom includes names of people or places that have to be understood in historical	五日京兆	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		齊東野語	0	1 2 3 4 5	
		吳市吹簫	0	1 2 3 4 5	

附表：成語及其用法

成語	用法
籠鳥檻猿	用以比喻人失去行動的自由。
精金良玉	用以喻稱一個人品性存良溫和。
深溝高壘	比喻堅固防禦工事，嚴守陣地。
名韁利鎖	表示追逐名利的人，限於名利而無法自拔；如同被韁鎖束縛，不能自由。
沿才授職	表示依照一個人的才能而授予職務。
蒸沙成飯	用來比喻不可能的事。
耕當問奴	用以比喻凡事當與有經驗、有見識的專家商討。
擊節嘆賞	用來表示十分讚賞他人的行為或詩文作品。
吉光片羽	比喻殘餘的藝術珍品，如同神馬既已不可見，得其片羽撮毛，亦足珍貴。
梅妻鶴子	比喻隱居山林，與草木禽獸為伴的清靜生活。
雞皮鶴髮	用來比喻老人白髮蒼蒼，滿臉皺紋。
河清海晏	古代以黃河澄清為祥瑞之兆，東海平靜無波亦為太平之兆。用以形容天下太平，人民安居樂業的盛世。
炊金饌玉	極言豪富者飲食之奢華。
秋風過耳	比喻不經心、漠然不為所動。與「無動於衷」同。
目不交睫	交睫，謂合眼。用以形容人辛勞或憂慮。
衣錦夜行	用以比喻榮顯不為人所知，如穿著華麗在夜間行走，不為人所見。
空谷足音	在空谷中聽到人跡的聲音。比喻難能可貴的事物或言行。
白雲蒼狗	天上浮雲，斯須變幻成蒼狗。常用以比喻世事變化萬端，與「滄海桑田」同。
秀才人情	秀才多以詩文書畫贈人，故後世凡是有喜事，而祝賀者以字畫文章相贈，皆稱為秀才人情。
稱雨道晴	「長官稱雨，縣丞道晴，終日如此不合也。」用以喻稱彼此言語不合。
築室道謀	路人意見多，築室自然不成。比喻議論多，事情無法做成。
見兔顧犬	看見兔子，馬上找狗捕捉。用來比喻當機之急務。
五日京兆	京兆，京都首長。比喻暫居其位，準備離職。
齊東野語	齊東鄉野之民的言語。用以比喻俚俗傳說不可信之言。
吳市吹簫	伍子胥出奔，無以為生，乞食於吳市。比喻英雄失意窮困。

APPENDIX 2: Questionnaire

I. 受試者背景資料：請勾選您所屬的族群

性 別： 男 女

II. 請針對下列成語勾選出您的答案，只有第四題可複選。

1. 名疆利鎖	(1)您聽過此成語嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 聽過 <input type="checkbox"/> 沒有聽過 (2)您想此成語的意思是用來比喻_____ (3)此成語的意思好猜嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 非常不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 好猜測 <input type="checkbox"/> 非常好猜 (4)若不好猜原因為何： <input type="checkbox"/> 有不懂的字或詞 (可複選) <input type="checkbox"/> 知道字面意思，但不知引申意思 <input type="checkbox"/> 不知道成語的背景 <input type="checkbox"/> 不清楚成語內詞與詞間的關係
2. 秋風過耳	(1)您聽過此成語嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 聽過 <input type="checkbox"/> 沒有聽過 (2)您想此成語的意思是用來比喻_____ (3)此成語的意思好猜嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 非常不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 好猜測 <input type="checkbox"/> 非常好猜 (4)若不好猜原因為何： <input type="checkbox"/> 有不懂的字或詞 (可複選) <input type="checkbox"/> 知道字面意思，但不知引申意思 <input type="checkbox"/> 不知道成語的背景 <input type="checkbox"/> 不清楚成語內詞與詞間的關係
3. 空谷足音	(1)您聽過此成語嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 聽過 <input type="checkbox"/> 沒有聽過 (2)您想此成語的意思是用來比喻_____ (3)此成語的意思好猜嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 非常不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 好猜測 <input type="checkbox"/> 非常好猜 (4)若不好猜原因為何： <input type="checkbox"/> 有不懂的字或詞 (可複選) <input type="checkbox"/> 知道字面意思，但不知引申意思 <input type="checkbox"/> 不知道成語的背景 <input type="checkbox"/> 不清楚成語內詞與詞間的關係
4. 雞皮鶴髮	(1)您聽過此成語嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 聽過 <input type="checkbox"/> 沒有聽過 (2)您想此成語的意思是用來比喻_____ (3)此成語的意思好猜嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 非常不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 好猜測 <input type="checkbox"/> 非常好猜 (4)若不好猜原因為何： <input type="checkbox"/> 有不懂的字或詞 (可複選) <input type="checkbox"/> 知道字面意思，但不知引申意思 <input type="checkbox"/> 不知道成語的背景 <input type="checkbox"/> 不清楚成語內詞與詞間的關係
5. 沿才授職	(1)您聽過此成語嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 聽過 <input type="checkbox"/> 沒有聽過 (2)您想此成語的意思是用來比喻_____ (3)此成語的意思好猜嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 非常不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 好猜測 <input type="checkbox"/> 非常好猜 (4)若不好猜原因為何： <input type="checkbox"/> 有不懂的字或詞 (可複選) <input type="checkbox"/> 知道字面意思，但不知引申意思 <input type="checkbox"/> 不知道成語的背景 <input type="checkbox"/> 不清楚成語內詞與詞間的關係

6. 白雲蒼狗	(1)您聽過此成語嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 聽過 <input type="checkbox"/> 沒有聽過 (2)您想此成語的意思是用來比喻_____
	(3)此成語的意思好猜嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 非常不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 好猜測 <input type="checkbox"/> 非常好猜 (4)若不好猜原因為何： <input type="checkbox"/> 有不懂的字或詞 (可複選) <input type="checkbox"/> 知道字面意思，但不知引申意思 <input type="checkbox"/> 不知道成語的背景 <input type="checkbox"/> 不清楚成語內詞與詞間的關係
7. 炊金饌玉	(1)您聽過此成語嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 聽過 <input type="checkbox"/> 沒有聽過 (2)您想此成語的意思是用來比喻_____
	(3)此成語的意思好猜嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 非常不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 好猜測 <input type="checkbox"/> 非常好猜 (4)若不好猜原因為何： <input type="checkbox"/> 有不懂的字或詞 (可複選) <input type="checkbox"/> 知道字面意思，但不知引申意思 <input type="checkbox"/> 不知道成語的背景 <input type="checkbox"/> 不清楚成語內詞與詞間的關係
8. 五日京兆	(1)您聽過此成語嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 聽過 <input type="checkbox"/> 沒有聽過 (2)您想此成語的意思是用來比喻_____
	(3)此成語的意思好猜嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 非常不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 好猜測 <input type="checkbox"/> 非常好猜 (4)若不好猜原因為何： <input type="checkbox"/> 有不懂的字或詞 (可複選) <input type="checkbox"/> 知道字面意思，但不知引申意思 <input type="checkbox"/> 不知道成語的背景 <input type="checkbox"/> 不清楚成語內詞與詞間的關係
9. 擊節嘆賞	(1)您聽過此成語嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 聽過 <input type="checkbox"/> 沒有聽過 (2)您想此成語的意思是用來比喻_____
	(3)此成語的意思好猜嗎？ <input type="checkbox"/> 非常不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 不好猜 <input type="checkbox"/> 好猜測 <input type="checkbox"/> 非常好猜 (4)若不好猜原因為何： <input type="checkbox"/> 有不懂的字或詞 (可複選) <input type="checkbox"/> 知道字面意思，但不知引申意思 <input type="checkbox"/> 不知道成語的背景 <input type="checkbox"/> 不清楚成語內詞與詞間的關係

感謝您的配合，謝謝！

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