What is the Starting Point?
In Search of a Working Definition of Chinese Idioms

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Abstract
In comparison with recent studies on English idioms, the field of Chinese idioms or *Cheng Yu* as we say in Chinese has not been sufficiently explored. Many works focused on the subject do not go much beyond a general description of the etymological origins of Chinese idiomatic expressions or the significant aesthetic or rhetoric value that such idioms may have in Chinese prose. In this paper, I am hoping to be able to throw some light on the nature and functionality of Chinese idioms, which is indeed an immense yet somehow understudied research area. In so doing, the current work may well be of some help preparing the ground for any future research on Chinese phraseology towards a deeper and better understanding of the subject.

Keywords
Chinese idioms; conventionality; idiomatic variants; structural versatility

Issues and Literature Review
In the generative research tradition, the study of language is concerned with the discovery of universal grammar, which consists of a set of core grammars with a periphery of elements and constructions. In such a view, the idiosyncratic nature of idiomatic phenomena makes it necessarily belong to the periphery and not the core of the language system. As a consequence, the study of idioms has been deliberately avoided in the literature, for this would otherwise expose the inability of most traditional grammars to deal with the semantic-syntactic idiosyncrasies that the use of idioms in naturally-occurring contexts may imply. However, since the late 1970s, such situation was changed, which was motivated by the urgent practical needs coming from computational linguistics and psycholinguistics in natural language processing and human language model configuration. The lexicon, especially idiomatic expressions, has become increasingly important in several theoretical linguistic
frameworks like lexical functional grammar (Bresnan, 1982), Head-Driven Phrase Structure Grammar (Pollard, C & Sag, J, 1988) and Categorical Grammar (Oehrle, D & Bach, E. & Wheeler, D., 1988), to name but a few. From there, idiomatic expressions, which make up a large and crucial part of our knowledge of language, have just begun to show their complex and integral nature.

The well-known difficulty in studying idioms starts from the very beginning when trying to find an adequate definition of idioms that may help differentiate idioms from other equally fuzzy categories like clichés, sayings, proverbs, fixed phrases, etc. In fact, terminology in this field has always been problematic, which has been addressed extensively in the literature by Gläser (1984), Čermák (1988), Nunberg et al. (1994), Barkema (1996), Pastor Corpas (2003), etc. A common definition of idiom is “a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words” (Hornby, 2005). Two points worth emphasizing in this definition of English idioms is that, firstly, being a combination of words, idioms are phrasal by nature; and secondly, the meaning of an idiom cannot be approached in a straightforward manner, for the semantic contributions that individual constituent words make to the meaning of the idiom are deemed to undergo a kind of semantic integration once they are combined together. The final meaning of the idiom, therefore, is not the simply accumulation of meanings carried by each word taken separately. Unquestionably, this linguistic phenomenon is apparent in all human languages and represents an important way in which we perceive the external world. Nevertheless, no matter how common this phenomenon may be, the resulting expressions are named very differently in different languages. Idioms, the English name for these expressions, are very idiosyncratic by nature and one can hardly adopt a simplistic approach to the study of idioms in any one language, let alone across more than one language.

A recent and popular definition of Chinese idioms, or Cheng Yu as we say in Chinese, is the one given by the Chinese linguist Shi Shi as follows: “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” (Shi, 2005: 35). As we can see, Shi lists three conditional factors which help him to highlight the semantic-syntactic peculiarities of Cheng Yu. In the first place, there is the conventionality of idioms. Like in any other languages, Cheng Yu are conventionalized expressions in Chinese, and the peculiar meaning of a Cheng Yu as a whole cannot be predicted, not entirely anyway, by simply drawing on the knowledge that one has of each of its semantic-syntactic constituent. This is an important observation to make regarding the long-