

TIMELESS CLASSIC

Ancient Chinese idioms continue to be relevant today, writes **ninotaziz**

IDIOMS. Peribahasa. Chengyu. Figures of speech that roll off the tongue effortlessly into our daily lives yet belong to a time gone by. They survive because they're timeless, carrying implied or hidden meanings that are crystal clear when uttered in written text or in speech.

A conversation with a friend recently reacquainted me with the delightful Chinese idioms, chengyu, and the legends and fables they originated from. Generally in the form of four-character idioms, they often convey a deeper meaning, a lesson of life.

It was some years ago whilst researching Asian legends that I came across this literary form, specifically from the story of *Old Man Yu Moves The Mountain*, *Old Man Sai Weng Loses His Horse but it doesn't mean It's Unlucky* and perhaps, most apt this year, *To Kill A Chicken To Warn The Monkey*.

Sha ji jing hou is the saying or "kill the chicken to scare the monkey", which means to make an example out of someone as a way to warn others.

There's a folktale associated with this idiom. Once upon a time, there was a street entertainer and his dancing monkey. Whenever he played the drums, the monkey danced and everyone who came to watch them paid lots of money.

One day, the monkey refused to dance. The master kept silent and brought out a live chicken, killing it in front of his monkey. The message was clear. The monkey immediately resumed dancing when his master played the drums. It knew full well that it would also suffer the same fate if it stopped.

CHENGYU IN MALAYSIA

Chengyu, used in ancient classical Chinese written language, has survived the ages to still be relevant in vernacular writing. In today's Sekolah Jenis Kebangsaan Cina schools, primary students are made to memorise thousands of idioms and the legends that gave birth to them. They're a critical part of the Chinese language lessons as students need to use them in their UPSR and SPM exam papers.

They're difficult to memorise, even harder to master. But the lessons they impart last a lifetime. Prof Ding Choo Ming, formerly from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia or UKM, has spent a lifetime studying Asian folklores and the

lessons they impart. He shares: "Indeed, thousands of Chinese and Malay proverbs inherited from the corpus of wisdom and stories are rich in values that are not only universal, they're acceptable to all communities, and are timeless."

ORIGIN

There are about 5,000 Chinese idioms although there are listings which identify up to 10,000 of them. Some exist as far back as the Han Dynasty. One example, read literally, means melon field under the plums. This idiom implies suspicious situations. To understand its true meaning, we go back to an excerpt from a Han Dynasty poem. The poem contains two phrases, which describe a code of conduct that says, "Don't adjust your shoes in a melon field and don't tidy your hat under the plum trees." This is to ensure that you avoid the suspicion of stealing.

ANCIENT WISDOM

It has been established that there are idioms from the many different dynasties such as the Zhou, the Han, and the Tang dynasties.

As the chengyu are often linked to a myth or historical fact, they're unique, and sometimes don't actually make sense on their own. They offer a compact, succinct and yet all-encompassing belief and don't follow the usual grammatical structure of modern Chinese.

The four characters reflect the moral behind a story rather than the story itself. For example, the phrase *pof chen zhou* literally means "break the woks and sink the boats". This signifies resolve and a no-surrender, no-retreat attitude when going into battle. It's therefore not surprising that this comes from a historical account where General Xiang Yu ordered his troop to destroy all cooking utensils and boats after crossing a river into enemy territory.

Not all chengyu are born of fables. Indeed, there are chengyu which, similar to our peribahasa, are totally unrelated to legends but exist as universal truths. Some examples include *pao zhuan yin yu* which literally means throwing out bricks to attract jade, a saying which is akin to uttering "my humble two cents worth", and is considered a commonplace way to contribute an idea to an on-going discussion so that others may come up with more valuable opinions. Then, there's *xin xue lai chao* which basically means "spur of the moment" or "on a whim", and *ban tu er fei* which literally means to walk halfway up the road and give up. It refers to someone or something done halfway.

The idioms above do not refer to any historical incident, but are complete and succinct in their original meaning.

LESSONS FROM OUR PAST

It's not surprising that ancient civilisations persevere to protect their



Old man Sai Weng loses his horse but doesn't mean it's unlucky.



Prof Ding Choo Ming

一 马 当 先
 yì mǎ dāng xiān
 ONE HORSE TAKES THE LEAD
 TEN THOUSAND HORSES GALLOP

万 马 奔 腾
 wàn mǎ bēn téng

metaphors, sayings and legends for the next generation. Values that survive from one generation to the next keep us rooted and confident in our beliefs.

A young English teacher from Sungai Petani, Eunice Tan, shares that it was from learning Chinese idioms during her school days that she's now able to better understand Chinese culture, history and ancient wisdom from ancient dynasties. "They're still relevant and useful today. Students shouldn't only memorise the idioms and their meanings, they should also learn the origin and fables associated with them."

It's wonderful to learn about the legends and fables of the world, and then

travel to see how these legends have and continue to shape civilisations. In learning other legends and cultures, we can better understand people and appreciate past histories because they deliver subtle and interesting lessons.

But first, we must have a strong foundation in our own culture and legends. Start this in our schools with the young. For when we appreciate our own timeless idioms and fables, we can begin to appreciate its magic in others.

ninotaziz believes that our legends and folklores are the memories of our ancient civilisation. Our Hikayat belongs to all of us. To protect. To love. To share. To cherish.



Kill the chicken to scare the monkey.