

# A Cultural Reflection Study of Chinese Idiomatic Expressions Containing the Word “鱼” (Fish)

Chitchanok Thodprasoet<sup>1</sup> Ittipol Kabao<sup>2</sup>

Vongchavalitkul University<sup>1</sup> Marie Vittaya School<sup>2</sup>

Nakhon Ratchasima, Thailand<sup>1,2</sup>

E-mail: Chitchanok\_tho@vu.ac.th

Received 8 March 2025; Revised 22 April 2025; Accepted 25 April 2025

## Abstract

The study titled “A Cultural Reflection Study of Chinese Idiomatic Expressions Containing the Word “鱼” (Fish)” aims to explore the cultural implications reflected in Chinese idiomatic expressions featuring the character “鱼”. The researcher gathered 36 idioms from the Chengyu Dictionary (Chengyu Dictionary Editorial Committee, 2020) and conducted an in-depth analysis to categorize their cultural meanings. The findings reveal that Chinese idioms containing “鱼” can be grouped into four main categories of cultural reflection: (1) Natural Reflections, comprising 7 idioms (19.44%); (2) Behavioral and Psychological Reflections of Humans and Animals, the largest category, consisting of 27 idioms (75%); (3) Reflections on Lifestyle and Living Conditions, including 6 idioms (16.68%); and (4) Reflections on Beliefs and Religion, with 4 idioms (11.11%). Notably, some idioms reflect characteristics from more than one category. Furthermore, the study did not find any idioms that reflect aspects of music or traditional performances, as there is no apparent connection between fish and musical instruments or folk entertainment in Chinese idiomatic expressions. These

findings offer a deeper understanding of how language encodes cultural perceptions and values, highlighting the symbolic significance of fish in Chinese culture. Future comparative studies on idioms involving “鱼” in Chinese and their equivalents in Thai could provide valuable insights into cross-cultural linguistic patterns.

**Keywords :** Cultural reflections, Chinese Idiomatic, Fish symbolism

## Introduction

Fish serve as significant cultural symbols and hold profound symbolic meanings in Chinese culture. Sontiang (2016) stated that fish are considered auspicious symbols in Chinese tradition, representing wealth, prosperity, affluence, and abundance. This symbolism arises from the phonetic similarity between the Chinese character “鱼” (yú), meaning “fish”, and “余” (yú), which means “surplus” or “abundance”. This linguistic connection is evident in Chinese New Year greetings such as “年年有余”, which conveys the wish for continuous wealth and abundance year after year. Consequently, fish are an essential dish in Chinese celebratory feasts. It can thus be asserted that humans maintain a close relationship with fish, and this connection is prominently reflected in linguistic expressions, including words, idioms, and proverbs.

Chinese idioms, or chengyu (成语), are an invaluable part of the linguistic and cultural heritage of the Chinese people. The use of Chinese idioms reflects cultural traditions and the way of life of the Chinese people from ancient times to the present. They serve as concise records of historical events, functioning as moral teachings and cautionary reminders passed down through generations. A distinctive feature of Chinese idioms is their

brevity and simplicity, yet they often carry profound meanings. Their significance extends beyond daily language use, as they play a crucial role in literary creativity, cultural transmission, and historical documentation. Furthermore, Chinese idioms contribute to understanding social values, beliefs, and the ways of life of the Chinese people.

As a former student majoring in the Chinese language, the researcher has had the opportunity to read books and articles on Chinese idioms and has observed that idioms containing the character “鱼” do not necessarily refer to fish in a literal sense but rather convey different meanings depending on the structural composition of the idiom. An example from the book *Principles of Thai-Chinese Translation* (Thamcharoenkit, 2010) illustrates this point: the idiom “鱼目混珠”, which literally translates to “mixing fish eyes with pearls”, metaphorically refers to the act of passing off counterfeits as genuine items.

Therefore, the researcher selected and analyzed Chinese idioms that include the character “鱼” from the dictionary *Comprehensive Chengyu Dictionary* (Chengyu Dictionary Editorial Committee, 2020). These idioms were categorized based on their cultural reflections, classified according to their meanings using the theoretical framework of cultural imagery in idioms proposed by Kanchanakaphan (2000, pp. 2-5). This framework categorizes idioms into five types based on their cultural reflections: (1) reflections of nature, (2) reflections of human and animal behaviors and emotions, (3) reflections of lifestyles and dwellings, (4) reflections of beliefs and religion, and (5) reflections of musical instruments and traditional performances.

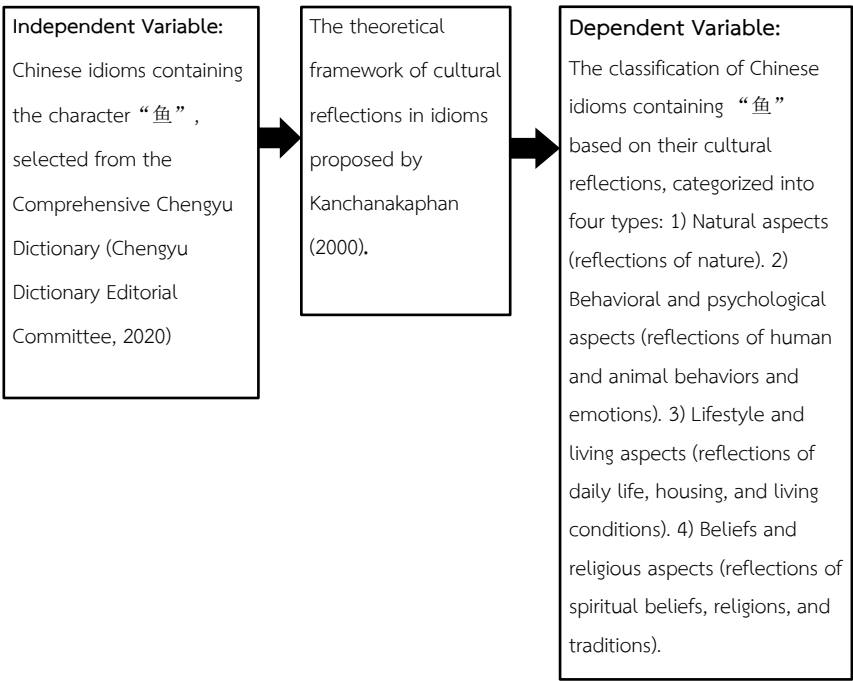
Research Objectives

To study the cultural reflections of Chinese idioms containing the character “鱼”

Research Scope

The study focuses exclusively on four-character Chinese idioms that contain the character “鱼”, selected from the Comprehensive Chengyu Dictionary (Chengyu Dictionary Editorial Committee, 2020)

1. Conceptual Framework



## **2. Concepts Related to the Origins of Idiomatic Reflections**

Kanchanakaphan (2000, pp. 2-5) stated that Thai idioms have existed since ancient times and have evolved alongside the changing historical and social contexts of the country. Idioms do not emerge naturally but rather originate from various causes, such as nature, human actions, the environment, customs, traditions, religious beliefs, folklore, legends, and other cultural elements.

## **3. Relevant Research on Idiomatic Comparisons**

Surakhachorn (2001) conducted a comparative study of Chinese and Thai idioms containing animal-related terms. The research aimed to examine the general characteristics of Chinese and Thai idioms involving animals and analyze the comparative aspects of idioms related to four specific animals: horses, tigers, dragons, and fish. The study also explored the cultural reflections embedded in these idioms in relation to environmental factors, traditions, customs, and the way of life of both Chinese and Thai societies. The findings revealed that while some idioms in both languages share similarities, others differ in their expressions. The study categorized the comparison into three groups: (1) idioms in both languages that contain the same animal-related term, (2) Chinese idioms containing a specific animal-related term while Thai idioms use a different animal, and (3) Chinese idioms that include an animal reference while the corresponding Thai idioms do not mention any animal at all. The study concluded that idioms serve as reflections of environmental conditions, cultural values, and societal perspectives.

Sawatthayothin (2019) studied Thai and Chinese idioms containing the word “snake” with three key objectives: (1) to classify the types of Thai

and Chinese idioms that include the word “snake”, (2) to examine the cultural reflections embedded within these idioms, and (3) to assess the comprehension of Thai idioms containing the word “snake” among undergraduate students. The study involved 121 participants from an English for International Communication program, divided by academic year. The research employed comprehension tests to evaluate their understanding of idioms, using statistical measures such as mean scores, standard deviation, and frequency distribution. The results indicated that idioms containing the word “snake” in both Thai and Chinese could be classified into three categories: (1) idioms where both languages contain the word “snake”, (2) idioms where only Chinese contains the word “snake” while Thai does not, and (3) idioms where Thai contains a different term altogether. The cultural reflections observed in these idioms were divided into five aspects: nature, human and animal behavior and emotions, way of life and living conditions, beliefs and religion, and traditional music and performances. Additionally, the study found that first-year and fourth-year students demonstrated higher levels of comprehension, whereas second- and third-year students showed moderate levels of understanding. The overall comprehension of idioms was found to be at a moderate level.

Phlananumas et al. (2021) conducted a comparative study of Chinese idioms containing the word “虎” (tiger) and Thai idioms containing the word “เสือ” (tiger). The research analyzed 92 Chinese idioms and 26 Thai idioms, referencing two Chinese dictionaries, one Thai dictionary, and information from the website of the Royal Society of Thailand. The objectives were (1) to study the meanings and classifications of these idioms and (2) to compare the meanings of Chinese and Thai idioms containing the

word “tiger”. The study revealed six primary similarities in idiomatic meanings between the two languages: (1) emotions and mental states, (2) risk-taking, (3) moral teachings, (4) submission, (5) behavioral traits and personality, and (6) human actions. In Chinese idioms, the word “tiger” was predominantly used to describe human actions, accounting for 29 idioms (29.9%). In contrast, Thai idioms most frequently used the word “tiger” in contexts related to moral teachings and risk-taking, with five idioms (19.2%) in each category. This suggests that while both Chinese and Thai cultures view the tiger in both positive and negative aspects, the emphasis of its meaning varies between the two languages.

Yu (2014) analyzed the semantic structure and cultural interpretations of idioms containing the word “fish”. The research aimed to explore the specific meanings of “fish” as recorded in authoritative dictionaries, categorize its symbolic meanings, examine its grammatical structure and function in idioms, and investigate the cultural implications associated with its usage. The study concluded that Chinese idioms encapsulate the wisdom of the Chinese people, carrying deep cultural connotations and linguistic elegance. By analyzing idioms containing the word “fish”, the research classified their grammatical structures into six types: (1) compound structures, (2) modifier-head structures, (3) subject-predicate structures, (4) verb-object structures, and (5) compound verb structures. Furthermore, idioms were categorized into nouns, verbs, and adjectives based on their syntactic functions. The findings indicated that the word “fish” in idioms symbolizes various social situations, human behaviors, abilities, and emotions. Through a detailed examination of these meanings,

the study provided deeper insights into the symbolic nature of “fish” in Chinese culture and the unique charm of the language.

Lin (2014) conducted a comparative study of animal-related idioms in Chinese and Thai. This research examined idioms involving animals from both languages, analyzing their semantic and cultural variations and identifying the underlying causes of these differences. The study was divided into three key areas: (1) defining Chinese and Thai idioms, verb usage, and idiomatic classifications, (2) comparing cultural factors influencing idioms, including religious beliefs, behavioral traits, daily life, traditional customs, and historical legends, and (3) analyzing the cultural implications reflected in idioms. The study highlighted how idioms serve as linguistic reflections of social and cultural backgrounds, natural environments, and emotional perspectives of Chinese and Thai people toward animals. The findings aimed to enhance the understanding of cultural factors in idioms for Chinese and Thai language learners.

Based on the reviewed literature and related studies, several researchers have examined cultural reflections in idiomatic expressions. In this study, the researcher explores Chinese idioms containing the character “鱼” to serve as a framework for further investigation aligned with the research objectives.

Findings from the literature review indicate that research on Chinese idioms containing “鱼” in Thailand remains limited. Most existing studies focus on idioms related to specific animals, primarily in a comparative context between Chinese and other languages. However, there has been no research exclusively dedicated to idioms featuring “鱼”, nor an in-depth examination of the cultural reflections embedded within these idioms.



Therefore, this study aims to analyze Chinese idioms containing “鱼” to better understand the cultural values and perspectives reflected through them. By doing so, it will contribute to more accurate and effective communication in Chinese language studies.

## Research Methodology

This study aims to examine the cultural reflections of Chinese idioms that contain the character “鱼” to enhance the understanding of cultural representations in Chinese idioms.

### 1. Population and Sample

#### 1.1 Population

This study focuses exclusively on four-character Chinese idioms that include the character “鱼” as documented in Chengyu Dictionary (Chengyu Dictionary Editorial Committee, 2020).

#### 1.2 Sample

A total of 36 four-character Chinese idioms containing the character “鱼” were selected from Chengyu Dictionary (Chengyu Dictionary Editorial Committee, 2020).

### 2. Data Collection Instrument

A classification table was employed to categorize the cultural reflections based on the meanings of the selected Chinese idioms containing the character “鱼” .

**Table 1**

*Classification of Cultural Reflections in Chinese Idioms Containing the Character “鱼”*

| Category of Cultural Reflection               | Number of Idioms Containing “鱼” |
|---|---------------------------------|
| 1. Nature-related aspects                     | 7                               |
| 2. Human and animal behaviors<br>and thoughts | 27                              |
| 3. Lifestyles and living conditions           | 6                               |
| 4. Beliefs and religion                       | 4                               |
| Total   | 44                              |

Based on the table above, the researcher compiled a total of 36 four-character Chinese idioms containing the character “鱼” from Chengyu Dictionary (Chengyu Dictionary Editorial Committee, 2020). However, since some idioms can be classified into two categories, the total number of classifications after analysis and categorization amounts to 44 instances.

### 3. Data Collection

3.1 Collected 36 four-character Chinese idioms containing the character “鱼” from Chengyu Dictionary (Chengyu Dictionary Editorial Committee, 2020).

3.2 Analyzed the meanings of the selected idioms and categorized them based on their cultural reflections.

### Research Results

The researcher compiled 36 four-character Chinese idioms containing the character “鱼” from Chengyu Dictionary (Chengyu Dictionary Editorial Committee, 2020). These idioms were categorized into four cultural reflection aspects. The first aspect pertains to nature, with 7 idioms. The

second aspect reflects human and animal behaviors and thoughts, comprising 27 idioms. The third aspect relates to lifestyles and living conditions, including 6 idioms, while the fourth aspect concerns beliefs and religion, with 4 idioms. This study aims to analyze the cultural reflections found in these idioms. Notably, some idioms exhibit characteristics of more than one category, leading to their classification under multiple aspects. The details of these classifications are presented in the following table.

**Table 2**

*Analysis of Cultural Reflections in the Meanings of Chinese Idioms Containing the Character “鱼”*

| Category of Cultural Reflection            | Number of Idioms | Percentage (%) |
|--|------------------|----------------|
| 1. Nature-related aspects                  | 7                | 19.44          |
| 2. Human and animal behaviors and thoughts | 27               | 75.00          |
| 3. Lifestyles and living conditions        | 6                | 16.68          |
| 4. Beliefs and religion                    | 4                | 11.11          |

According to Table 2, the researcher initially collected a total of 36 four-character Chinese idioms that contain the character “鱼” from Chengyu Dictionary Editorial Committee (2020). However, upon further analysis, it was found that some idioms reflect more than one cultural aspect. Specifically, eight idioms were identified as having meanings that could be classified under two different cultural categories. As a result, after categorization, the total number of classified idioms increased to 44. The idioms that exhibit multiple cultural reflections are as follows:

1. 鸢飞鱼跃: This idiom, which describes the energetic movement of kites flying in the sky and fish leaping in the water, symbolizes a vibrant and lively natural environment. At the same time, it metaphorically reflects human emotions, aspirations, and freedom, classifying it under both nature and human/animal behaviors and thoughts.

2. 鱼跃鸢飞: Similar to the previous idiom, this phrase emphasizes the dynamic harmony between creatures in nature, illustrating both environmental and emotional expressions. It is categorized under nature and human/animal behaviors and thoughts.

3. 枯鱼涸辙: Literally meaning “a dried-up fish in a parched rut”, this idiom symbolizes a state of extreme distress or helplessness. The phrase vividly depicts a natural phenomenon—fish struggling in a drying riverbed—while also conveying human hardship and suffering, making it relevant to both nature and human/animal behaviors and thoughts.

4. 涸辙之鱼: This idiom shares a similar meaning with 枯鱼涸辙, referring to a desperate situation where survival is uncertain. It illustrates a natural occurrence while metaphorically representing human struggle, thereby falling under both nature and human/animal behaviors and thoughts.

5. 如鱼得水: This phrase, meaning “like a fish in water”, describes an individual who finds themselves in a suitable or ideal environment. While its literal meaning reflects the natural relationship between fish and water, its figurative use relates to human comfort and well-being in their surroundings. Therefore, it is classified under both nature and lifestyles/living conditions.

6. 犹鱼得水: With the same fundamental meaning as 如鱼得水, this idiom also describes someone thriving in a favorable environment. As it reflects both a natural phenomenon and human adaptation to an ideal setting, it is categorized under nature and lifestyles/living conditions.

7. 水清无鱼: Translated as “clear water has no fish”, this idiom implies that excessive purity or strictness can lead to undesirable consequences. It reflects a natural observation while metaphorically applying to human behaviors and governance, thus fitting under both nature and human/animal behaviors and thoughts.

8. 鱼龙混杂: This phrase, meaning “fish and dragons mixed together”, describes a situation where the good and bad coexist, such as an environment where people of varying character are found together. It reflects the diversity of living conditions while also carrying a connotation of belief systems and societal dynamics, making it relevant to both lifestyles/living conditions and beliefs/religion.

By considering the overlapping cultural reflections of these idioms, the researcher determined that the total number of categorized idioms increased from 36 to 44, as each idiom that fit into multiple categories was counted separately within each classification.

**Table 3**

*Table Showing the Meanings and Cultural Reflections of Four-Character Chinese Idioms Containing the Word “鱼” in the Context of Nature*

| No. | Chinese Idiom                       | Meaning of the Idiom  |
|-----|-------------------------------------|---|
| 1   | 鸢飞鱼跃<br>(Eagle - Fly - Fish - Leap) | The eagle soars in the sky while the fish leaps in the water. This describes the natural behavior of animals and metaphorically represents a person's |

| No. | Chinese Idiom                                      | Meaning of the Idiom   |
|-----|--|--|
|     |  | joy when they achieve their desires.   |
| 2   | 鱼跃鸢飞<br>(Fish - Leap - Eagle - Fly)                | The eagle soars in the sky while the fish leaps in the water. This describes the natural behavior of animals and metaphorically represents a person's joy when they achieve their desires.       |
| 3   | 枯鱼涸辙<br>(Withered - Fish - Dried Up - Wheel Track) | A dried-up fish in a parched rut, metaphorically describing a person in a dire situation, struggling with difficulties and unable to escape hardship.  |
| 4   | 水清无鱼<br>(Water - Clear - No - Fish)                | Water that is too clear cannot support fish. This serves as a metaphor suggesting that one should not be overly demanding or strict, as it may lead to isolation or lack of support from others. |
| 5   | 涸辙之鱼<br>(Dried Up - Wheel Track - Fish)            | A fish in a dried-up rut, symbolizing someone in a desperate situation who cannot solve their problems alone and urgently requires external assistance.  |
| 6   | 犹鱼得水<br>(Like - Fish - Gain - Water)               | A fish finding water, representing a situation where someone is in an environment or condition that suits them well, whether in their personal life or career.                                   |
| 7   | 如鱼得水<br>(As If - Fish - Gain - Water)              | A fish finding water, symbolizing an individual thriving in an environment that is well-suited to their needs, whether in living conditions or their professional life.                          |

From Table 3, the researchers identified seven idioms that reflect natural phenomena involving fish. These idioms use naturally occurring

elements and behaviors of fish to metaphorically represent various aspects of life. The key findings from the analysis are as follows:

Idioms such as 枯鱼涸辙 and 涸辙之鱼 illustrate the natural adaptability of fish to environmental changes. As seasons transition from winter to summer, water bodies in certain areas dry up, leading to water shortages. Some fish species have adapted by burying themselves in the mud to survive during droughts. When the rainy season arrives, previously dry areas regain moisture, allowing fish to return to their original habitat. In addition to depicting natural adaptation, these idioms also serve as metaphors for human struggles, signifying individuals facing adversity. Consequently, these idioms can also be classified under human behavior and emotions due to their depiction of life's hardships.

Idioms such as 鸢飞鱼跃, 鱼跃鸢飞, 如鱼得水, 犹鱼得水, and 水清无鱼 reflect the natural characteristics of birds and fish. Birds, as creatures of the sky, instinctively fly, and their migration patterns are influenced by seasonal changes. Similarly, fish rely on water for survival. However, if the water is excessively clear, fish face difficulty in sustaining life due to a lack of shelter, making them vulnerable to predators. As a survival instinct, fish leap above the water's surface to evade danger or when encountering new habitats.

Additionally, certain idioms serve as metaphors for human emotions and behavior. The idioms 鸢飞鱼跃 and 鱼跃鸢飞 not only depict natural phenomena but also symbolize human joy and fulfillment. When people achieve their aspirations, they express their happiness through gestures and actions, akin to birds soaring and fish leaping.

Idioms such as 如鱼得水 and 犹鱼得水 extend beyond nature and reflect aspects of human living conditions. They metaphorically represent individuals thriving in environments that best suit their personal and professional lives, reinforcing the connection between natural phenomena and human existence.

Through this analysis, it is evident that idioms containing the character “鱼” not only reflect elements of nature but also convey deeper meanings related to human emotions, behavior, and social conditions.

**Table 4**

*Table Showing the Meanings and Cultural Reflections of Four-Character Chinese Idioms Containing the Word “鱼” in Terms of Human and Animal Behaviors and Emotions*

| No. | Chinese Idiom                      | Meaning of the Idiom  |
|-----|------------------------------------|---|
| 1   | 鸢飞鱼跃<br>(Hawk-Flying-Fish-Leaping) | The eagle soars in the sky, and the fish leaps in the water. This natural behavior of animals symbolizes the joy of people who have achieved their desires. |
| 2   | 鱼跃鸢飞<br>(Fish-Leaping-Hawk-Flying) | The eagle soars in the sky, and the fish leaps in the water. This natural behavior of animals symbolizes the joy of people who have achieved their desires. |
| 3   | 察见渊鱼<br>(Observe-See-Deep-Fish)    | Having sharp vision to see fish in deep waters metaphorically compares to being inquisitive about others' affairs.  |
| 4   | 河决鱼烂<br>(River-Breach-Fish-Rot)    | The inability to mend a dam's leak, leading to the decay of fish, symbolizes a situation that has deteriorated beyond repair due to internal factors.       |
| 5   | 枯鱼涸辙<br>(Dry-Fish-Empty-Road)      | A dried-up fish in a desiccated ditch symbolizes a  |



| No. | Chinese Idiom                    | Meaning of the Idiom   |
|-----|----------------------------------|--|
|     | (Withered-Fish-Dry-Ruts)         | person in a dire situation with little hope of escape.   |
| 6   | 枯鱼之肆<br>(Withered-Fish-Stall)    | A hopeless and irreversible situation, signifying despair over past mistakes that cannot be undone.                                |
| 7   | 水清无鱼<br>(Water-Clear-No-Fish)    | Overly clear water lacks fish, signifying that excessive strictness or transparency can lead to isolation.                         |
| 8   | 鱼烂土崩<br>(Fish-Rot-Soil-Collapse) | Rotten fish and collapsing earth symbolize division and the disintegration of unity within a group.                                |
| 9   | 鱼目混珠<br>(Fish-Eyes-Mix-Pearls)   | Substituting fish eyes for pearls, signifying deception by passing off fake items as real.   |
| 10  | 涸辙之鱼<br>(Dried-Ruts-Fish)        | A fish in a dried-up rut represents someone in an extremely difficult situation requiring urgent assistance.                       |
| 11  | 为渊驱鱼<br>(For-Deep-Chase-Fish)    | A tyrannical ruler forcing the people to flee, often to join opposing forces, indicating poor leadership that drives away loyalty. |
| 12  | 弹铗无鱼<br>(Strike-Sword-No-Fish)   | Seeking help from others in difficult times is not shameful, signifying the necessity of assistance during hardship.               |
| 13  | 鱼贯而出<br>(Fish-Enter-and-Exit)    | Moving in an orderly manner like a school of fish, symbolizing coordinated movement toward a shared goal.                          |
| 14  | 鱼贯而入<br>(Fish-Enter-and-Enter)   | Moving in an orderly fashion like fish swimming together, symbolizing unity in entering a situation collectively.                  |

| No. | Chinese Idiom                       | Meaning of the Idiom   |
|-----|-------------------------------------|--|
| 15  | 鱼贯而行<br>(Fish-Enter-and-Move)       | Moving in an orderly fashion, metaphorically representing people advancing in unison toward a common destination.      |
| 16  | 鱼肉百姓<br>(Fish-meat-hundred-surname) | Being oppressed and exploited, reflecting injustice by those in power over the weaker populace.                        |
| 17  | 缘木求鱼<br>(Climb-Tree-Seek-Fish)      | Climbing a tree to catch fish symbolizes attempting the impossible due to misguided efforts.                           |
| 18  | 混水摸鱼<br>(Turbid-Water-Catch-Fish)   | Fishing in murky waters symbolizes taking advantage of chaos for personal gain.  |
| 19  | 浑水摸鱼<br>(Muddy-Water-Catch-Fish)    | Fishing in murky waters symbolizes taking advantage of chaos for personal gain.  |
| 20  | 鱼游釜底<br>(Fish-Swim-Cauldron-Bottom) | A fish swimming at the bottom of a cauldron symbolizes someone trapped in a perilous situation with no escape.         |
| 21  | 鱼游釜中<br>(Fish-Swim-Cauldron-Center) | A fish swimming at the bottom of a cauldron symbolizes someone trapped in a perilous situation with no escape.         |
| 22  | 鱼死网破<br>(Fish-Die-Net-Break)        | A fish dying and a net breaking symbolizes a desperate struggle where one fights to the end regardless of the outcome. |
| 23  | 漏网之鱼<br>(Escape-Net-Fish)           | A fish escaping from the net represents a wrongdoer who evades capture.  |
| 24  | 釜底游鱼<br>(Cauldron-Bottom-Swim-Fish) | A fish swimming at the bottom of a cauldron, metaphorically describing severe danger and inescapability.               |

| No. | Chinese Idiom                           | Meaning of the Idiom  |
|-----|---|---|
| 25  | 釜底枯鱼<br>(Cauldron-Bottom-Withered-Fish) | The fish swimming in the pot represents people who are in a dangerous situation, reflecting human life at that time.  |
| 26  | 沉鱼落雁<br>(Sink-Fish-Fall-Wild Goose)     | Describing beauty so mesmerizing that fish forget to swim and geese forget to fly.                                    |
| 27  | 如鱼似水<br>(Like-Fish-Get-Water)           | Signifying a close relationship, particularly between lovers or spouses, indicating mutual understanding and harmony. |

Based on Table 4, the research team identified 27 Chinese idioms containing the word “鱼” that pertain to human and animal behavior and emotions. These idioms describe human and animal actions or expressions, such as oppression by those in power, as well as various emotional states. The researchers have analyzed them as follows:

1. 如鱼似水: This idiom falls under the category of behavioral and emotional reflection in humans and animals. It signifies close relationships, such as friendships, romantic partnerships, and marital bonds, likening them to fish and water. For instance, a married couple shares joys and hardships together, understanding each other instinctively, as if they are part of the same entity.

2. 河决鱼烂, 鱼烂土崩: These idioms indicate severe internal chaos within organizations, institutions, or families. If foundational problems are ignored while only addressing surface-level issues, the core problems will persist, leading to irreparable consequences. The analogy compares societal stability to a well-fed population; when moral integrity is lost among leaders or citizens, chaos ensues, ultimately resulting in irreversible destruction.

3. 枯鱼之肆: This idiom conveys regret over past mistakes that cannot be undone, akin to time that has passed and cannot be reclaimed.

4. 水清无鱼: This idiom suggests that excessive clarity or strictness can be detrimental. If water is too clear, fish cannot survive, paralleling situations where excessive honesty or rigid regulations create discomfort for those involved. A balance must be struck between principles and flexibility to maintain harmony in social interactions.

5. The idioms 鱼目混珠, 察见渊鱼, 为渊驱鱼 and 鱼肉百姓 reflect aspects of human nature, both good and bad. Using negative traits to harm others, whether intentionally or not, is something that should be avoided. For instance, the idiom 鱼目混珠 describes the act of mixing fake items with real ones or falsely claiming that something of inferior quality is actually valuable. This represents deceitful behavior aimed at misleading others, which can cause significant harm to the victim. In terms of social etiquette, everyone should uphold basic manners. Interfering in matters that do not concern oneself is considered impolite. A lack of proper etiquette can also extend to selfish behaviors such as exploiting others. The idiom 鱼肉百姓 refers to those who take advantage of others by oppressing them, showing a lack of humanity. Similarly, 为渊驱鱼 illustrates a situation in which a leader governs unjustly, forcing the people to abandon them and even align with their enemies.

6. 缘木求鱼: This idiom illustrates futile attempts, akin to undertaking a task in an irrational or impractical manner. It serves as a warning against pursuing goals without proper strategy or consideration.

7. The idiom 沉鱼落雁 reflects human emotions and perceptions of beauty through both human and animal imagery. It originates from the

legendary tale of Xi Shi (西施), one of China's Four Great Beauties. According to folklore, her beauty was so mesmerizing that fish in the water, entranced by her appearance, forgot to swim and sank to the riverbed. Similarly, wild geese in the sky, captivated by her, forgot to flap their wings and fell from the sky. However, in reality, birds naturally possess the ability to fly, and fish are instinctively skilled at swimming. This idiom, therefore, represents an imaginative and exaggerated perception of beauty, illustrating how human emotions can shape poetic expressions that transcend the boundaries of nature and reality.

8. 鱼进行行, 鱼进而入 and 鱼进而出 These idioms reflect the instinctive movement of fish swimming in schools to protect themselves from predators and facilitate food searching. It metaphorically describes humans following a structured, unified movement, such as people leaving a meeting room in an orderly fashion.

9. 混水摸鱼 and 浑水摸鱼 These idioms depict opportunistic behavior, where individuals manipulate chaos for personal gain, akin to stirring water to catch fish more easily.

10. 釜底游鱼, 鱼游釜中, 釜底枯鱼, 鱼游釜底, 鱼死网破 and 漏网之鱼 These idioms depict struggle and survival instincts. A fish in a pot symbolizes being trapped in a dire situation, where escape is nearly impossible. Meanwhile, a fish escaping a net signifies rare opportunities to break free from adversity. The imagery reflects human resilience in facing difficulties, demonstrating determination despite slim chances of survival.

11. 鸢飞鱼跳 and 鱼跳鸢飞 These idioms depict the natural behaviors of eagles soaring in the sky and fish leaping in water. They

symbolize boundless joy and elation, comparable to human expressions of excitement when achieving their desires.

12. 枯鱼涸辙, 弹铗无鱼 and 涸辙之鱼 These idioms express struggles faced by individuals in extreme adversity. A fish stranded in a dried-up ditch must desperately seek water to survive, mirroring people in desperate situations who require external assistance. These expressions emphasize perseverance despite seemingly insurmountable odds.

Through analyzing these Chinese idioms, it is evident that the symbolism of fish is deeply intertwined with human experiences, emotions, and societal structures. These idioms reflect a wide range of themes, including interpersonal relationships, governance, morality, resilience, and joy. Their metaphorical meanings provide valuable insights into cultural perspectives on behavior and survival, offering profound wisdom applicable to modern contexts.

**Table 5**  
*A Table Illustrating the Meanings and Cultural Reflections of Four-Character Chinese Idioms Containing the Word “鱼” in Relation to Lifestyle and Living Environment*

| No. | Chinese Idiom                       | Meaning of the Idiom   |
|-----|-------------------------------------|--|
| 1   | 犹鱼得水<br>(Like-fish-receives-water)  | This idiom conveys the idea of being in an environment or situation that is highly suitable and beneficial, whether in one's home or professional life.                    |
| 2   | 如鱼得水<br>(As if-fish-received-water) | Similar to the previous idiom, this phrase describes an individual thriving in an environment that aligns well with their needs, preferences, or professional aspirations. |

| No. | Chinese Idiom                     | Meaning of the Idiom   |
|-----|-----------------------------------|--|
| 3   | 鱼米之邦<br>(fish-rice-of-country)    | This idiom refers to a region rich in fish and rice, symbolizing agricultural prosperity and natural abundance. It highlights the importance of natural resources in sustaining livelihoods.                           |
| 4   | 鱼米之乡<br>(fish-rice-of-hometown)   | Similar in meaning to 鱼米之邦, this idiom refers to a native land or village characterized by agricultural abundance, particularly in terms of staple food resources.   |
| 5   | 鱼龙混杂<br>(Fish-dragon-mixed-mixed) | This idiom metaphorically describes a situation where individuals of varying qualities—both virtuous and deceitful—are intermingled, making it difficult to discern good from bad.                                     |
| 6   | 情同鱼水<br>(mood-like-fish-water)    | This phrase illustrates a deep and inseparable bond between individuals, akin to the interdependent relationship between fish and water. It is often used to describe strong emotional connections or mutual reliance. |

Based on Table 5, the researchers identified six Chinese idioms containing the character “鱼” that reflect aspects of lifestyle and living environments. These idioms depict themes related to livelihood, habitation, agricultural abundance, environmental suitability, and interdependence among humans. The analysis of these idioms is as follows:

1. The idiom 情同鱼水 illustrates the concept of mutual dependence and collaboration. In many situations, individuals cannot achieve certain tasks alone and require assistance from others. This reciprocal support benefits both parties, fostering cooperation and shared advantages. This idiom also reflects traditional communal practices, such as

the exchange of food and resources among neighbors, which reinforces the idea of interdependence in human society.

2. The idioms 鱼米之乡 and 鱼米之邦 symbolize the prosperity of a region in terms of its natural resources and agricultural productivity. These idioms are comparable to the concept of a land of abundance, where natural resources, such as fish in water and rice in fields, sustain the local population. They reflect the traditional agrarian lifestyle, where farming and fishing are essential for survival and economic stability. These idioms emphasize the importance of fertile lands and rich natural environments in sustaining livelihoods.

3. The idioms 犹鱼得水 and 如鱼得水 convey the idea of finding an environment or situation that is most suitable for oneself. These idioms metaphorically compare human life to that of a fish, which thrives in water. Just as a fish cannot survive outside its natural habitat, individuals flourish when they are in environments that align with their abilities, preferences, or social circles. Additionally, these idioms reflect natural principles, as fish inherently require water to survive. They highlight the necessity of choosing an appropriate environment for one's well-being and success.

4. The idiom 鱼龙混杂 describes a society where both virtuous and immoral individuals coexist. It conveys the complexity of human nature, emphasizing that people possess both good and bad traits. This idiom metaphorically contrasts fish and dragons to represent different human characteristics. People's true nature often becomes evident only after close interaction. Furthermore, this idiom can also be interpreted as a reflection of cultural beliefs and religious traditions. The dragon, as one of the twelve Chinese zodiac animals, holds a significant place in traditional cosmology.



Notably, all zodiac animals are terrestrial or aerial creatures, with none originating from underwater or subterranean realms. This further underscores the cultural significance of distinguishing between different types of individuals within a community.

In conclusion, these idioms illustrate various aspects of human existence, emphasizing the importance of suitable living conditions, mutual support, agricultural prosperity, and the complexities of social interactions. They serve as linguistic representations of both natural and cultural reflections embedded in Chinese society.

**Table 6**

*The Meaning and Cultural Reflections of Four-Character Chinese Idioms Containing the Term “鱼” in the Context of Beliefs and Religion*

| No. | Chinese Idiom                     | Meaning of the Idiom   |
|-----|-----------------------------------|--|
| 1   | 葬身鱼腹<br>(burial-body-fish-belly)  | “Buried in the belly of a fish”—metaphorically describes a person who encounters significant misfortune or destruction, leaving them with no escape. It conveys a sense of tragic fate, often implying an untimely or dishonorable death. This idiom reflects traditional beliefs regarding destiny and the consequences of adverse circumstances. |
| 2   | 鱼龙混杂<br>(Fish-dragon-mixed mixed) | “Fish and dragons intermingled”—symbolizes a society where virtuous and immoral individuals coexist. It highlights the difficulty of distinguishing between good and bad people in a complex social environment. The contrast between fish and dragons reflects the unpredictable nature of human interactions and the necessity for               |

|   |  |   |
|---|--|---|
|   |  | discernment in social engagement.   |
| 3 | 鲁鱼亥豕<br>(Stupid-fish-position 12 in the earth diagram-pig) | Represents unintentional errors in writing or printing, where one character is mistakenly substituted for another due to visual similarity. This idiom emphasizes the importance of accuracy in textual transmission, particularly in classical or religious texts. |
| 4 | 鲁鱼帝虎<br>(Stupid-fish-god-tiger)                            | Similar to 鲁鱼亥豕, this idiom also refers to mistakes in writing or printing, where miswritten characters lead to errors in meaning. It underscores the value of precision in scholarship and the potential for misinterpretation if textual errors are overlooked.   |

Based on Table 6, the researchers identified four Chinese idioms containing the term “鱼” that reflect beliefs and religion. These idioms illustrate traditional religious beliefs, the significance of fish and auspicious animals in the Chinese zodiac, and cultural interpretations of fate, morality, and textual accuracy. The analysis of these idioms is as follows:

The idiom 葬身鱼腹, which translates to “buried in the belly of a fish,” reflects religious beliefs associated with funeral rituals. Burial customs vary across religions and cultures, with each tradition carrying its own spiritual significance. In Chinese beliefs, burial and cremation are common practices, as it is thought that burial allows the soul to travel through underground currents, known as the “Yellow Springs” (黄泉), ultimately leading to reincarnation. However, discarding a body into a river is considered inauspicious, often associated with unclaimed bodies or a form of punishment for criminals, allowing fish to consume the remains rather than

following proper burial rites. In contrast, in Indian traditions, dying by the banks of the Ganges River or having one's ashes scattered in its waters is regarded as a form of spiritual purification, believed to cleanse sins before ascending to heaven.

The idioms 鱼龙混杂, 鲁鱼亥豕 and 鲁鱼帝虎 also reflect religious and cultural beliefs, as they include references to auspicious animals such as dragons, pigs, and tigers—each of which holds significance in the Chinese zodiac. Among these, the dragon is particularly revered in Chinese culture. It is a mythical creature regarded as a deity, symbolizing power, prosperity, and imperial authority. It is believed that dragon saliva can produce magical pearls capable of bringing agricultural abundance. The dragon has also been historically associated with emperors, representing supreme power and good fortune. The pig, another zodiac animal, is traditionally believed to embody warmth, sincerity, and trustworthiness, while also symbolizing innocence and emotional sensitivity. Likewise, those born in the Year of the Tiger are thought to be confident, courageous, and bold in their actions. In Chinese tradition, zodiac signs are also used for fortune-telling related to career prospects, marriage compatibility, love, and health. In examining the cultural reflections of idioms containing the word “fish”, it is notable that although the fish is not included in the twelve Chinese zodiac animals, it holds an auspicious connotation in Chinese culture. The pronunciation of the word “鱼” (yú) is a homophone for “余” (yú), meaning “abundance” or “surplus”, which is frequently used in New Year blessings such as 年年有余, meaning “May you have abundance every year”. Additionally, it is believed that hanging fish images on the front door brings prosperity. The association between fish and dragons is also reflected in the phrase 鲤跃龙门 or

鲤鱼跳龙门, a legendary tale about a carp leaping over the Dragon Gate, symbolizing success. According to this legend, any carp that successfully leaps over the gate will transform into a dragon, signifying perseverance and achievement. However, some Feng Shui scholars have questioned why fish, despite being an auspicious symbol, were not included in the twelve zodiac animals or the earthly branches (地支). One possible explanation is that all the zodiac animals are terrestrial creatures—whether four-legged or winged—while fish, being aquatic, were intentionally excluded.

Furthermore, the idiom 鱼龙混杂 can also be categorized as a reflection of social life. It metaphorically describes the coexistence of virtuous and corrupt individuals within society, emphasizing the complexity of human interactions and the necessity for discernment in distinguishing good from bad.

## Discussion of Results

The study of Chinese idioms that contain the term “鱼” provides insights into cultural reflections and linguistic patterns. The findings align with the framework proposed by Sanga Kanchanakaphan, which categorizes cultural reflections into four key aspects.

The most prominent category is reflections on Human and animal behaviors and thoughts, which accounts for 27 idioms (75%). This category captures various human and animal actions, including gestures, movements, habits, and emotional expressions. The second most common category is Nature-related aspects, comprising 7 idioms (19.44%), which depict natural characteristics of animals and environmental phenomena. The third category, Lifestyles and living conditions, includes 6 idioms (16.68%) and

portrays aspects of daily life, subsistence, and mutual dependence. Lastly, reflections on beliefs and religion account for 4 idioms (11.11%), emphasizing ancient religious beliefs, symbolic meanings of fish, and their association with auspicious animals in the Chinese zodiac.

Notably, the study found that idioms containing “鱼” do not fall into the category of musical instruments or traditional performances, as no Chinese idioms related to fish reference these aspects. Instead, fish are primarily linked to food culture, as they are widely consumed in Chinese cuisine. Every part of the fish is utilized in cooking, and ornamental fish are often kept for aesthetic pleasure, interior decoration, and Feng Shui purposes to attract prosperity and wealth.

The findings of this study align with previous research by Phlananumas et al. (2021), which compared Chinese idioms containing “虎” (tiger) with Thai idioms containing “เสือ” (tiger). In her research, she analyzed 92 Chinese idioms and 26 Thai idioms, drawing from two Chinese dictionaries, one Thai dictionary, and data from the Royal Society of Thailand’s website. She identified six common idiomatic categories in both languages, including idioms related to emotions and psychology, risk-taking, moral lessons, submission, behaviors and character traits, and human actions.

Upon comparison, the present study found that three categories of Chinese idioms containing “鱼” align with idioms containing “虎” in Chinese and “เสือ” in Thai: 1) Idioms related to emotions and psychology 2) Idioms depicting behaviors and character traits 3) Idioms describing human actions

These findings suggest that idiomatic expressions in different languages may share common conceptual and cultural foundations despite variations in symbolic representations.

## Recommendations

Based on the study's findings, further research could be conducted in the following areas:

1. A comparative study between Chinese idioms containing “鱼” and Thai idioms containing “ปลา” (fish) to explore linguistic and cultural parallels.
2. An analysis of figurative meanings associated with “鱼” beyond its literal translation as “fish”, examining its extended metaphorical uses and cultural implications in various contexts.

Such studies could provide deeper insights into the interplay between language, culture, and cognition in idiomatic expressions.

## References

- Chengyu Dictionary Editorial Committee. (2020). *Chengyu da cidian* (2nd ed., 34th printing). The Commercial Press International Co., Ltd.
- Lin, X. (2014). *A comparative study of Chinese and Thai animal idioms* [Master's thesis, Nanjing Normal University]. China National Knowledge Infrastructure.
- Phlananumas, P., Kumduang, A., & Kaewsuwan, J. (2021). A comparative study of Chinese idiomatic expressions containing the word “虎” (Tiger) with Thai idiomatic expressions containing the word “suea” (Tiger). *Suthiparithat Journal*, 35(4), 74–103.

- Sawatthayothin, S. (2019). Thai and Chinese Proverb with the Word “Snake”. *Journal Of Language, Religion And Culture*, 8(2), 100–125.
- Sontiang, S. (2016, February 9). *Chinese-related matters and Chinese language: Popular Chinese New Year blessings 年年有余 (wishing abundance every year)*. Blogger. [http://suwannas.blogspot.com/2016/02/blog-post\\_9.html?m=1](http://suwannas.blogspot.com/2016/02/blog-post_9.html?m=1)
- Surakhachorn, P. (2001). *Chinese and Thai idioms related to animals: A comparative study* [Master’s thesis, Chulalongkorn University]. Chulalongkorn University Institutional Repository.
- Thamcharoenkit, K. (2010). *Principles of Thai-Chinese translation* (3rd ed.). China Siam Publishing House.
- Kanchanakaphan, S.. (2000). *Thai idioms*. Technology Promotion Association (Thailand-Japan).
- Yu, X. (2014). *Semantic structure analysis and cultural interpretation of fish-related idioms* [Master’s thesis, Fujian Normal University]. China National Knowledge Infrastructure.



**Name :** Chitchanok Thodprasoet

**Highest Education:** Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Chinese

**Affiliation:** Vongchavalitkul University



**Name :** Ittipol Kabao

**Highest Education:** Bachelor of Arts (B.A.) in Chinese

**Affiliation:** Marie Vittaya School