

A Study on the Intentional Use of Chinese Idioms in the Historical Drama *Love Like the Galaxy*

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Abstract

This research, entitled *A Study on the Intentional Use of Chinese Idioms in the Historical Drama Love Like the Galaxy* (《星汉灿烂》), aims to examine the communicative intentions behind the use of Chinese idioms (成语) appearing in the dialogues of the historical Chinese television drama *Love Like the Galaxy*, which was broadcast in 2022 and gained considerable popularity in Thailand. The study seeks to analyze the contextual meanings and communicative functions conveyed through idiomatic expressions in different conversational situations.

The data were collected from all 56 episodes of the drama streamed on the WeTV application between June and July 2025. A total of 114 Chinese idioms were identified and analyzed based on contextual usage and communicative intentions through a qualitative content analysis approach grounded in pragmatics.

The findings revealed six categories of communicative intentions in the use of Chinese idioms: 1) warning intentions: 20 idioms (17.54%);

2) sarcastic intentions: 16 idioms (14.04%); 3) opinion-expressing intentions: 13 idioms (11.40%); 4) admonishing intentions: 30 idioms (26.32%); 5) appreciative intentions: 12 idioms (10.53%); and 6) other intentions: 23 idioms (20.18%). Among these categories, idioms expressing admonishing intentions appeared most frequently. This finding may be attributed to the dramatic themes of political conflict, interpersonal tension, strategic survival, and criticism of characters' behaviors throughout the series.

The study demonstrates that Chinese idioms function not only as artistic linguistic devices but also as important communicative tools reflecting emotions, attitudes, interpersonal relationships, cultural values, and social perspectives in Chinese society. Understanding the communicative intentions behind idiom usage contributes to deeper knowledge of Chinese language use, intercultural communication, Chinese language learning and teaching, and translation studies.

Keywords: Chinese Idioms, Communicative Intention, Chinese Drama

Introduction

In the contemporary era, entertainment media from China has gained widespread international popularity, particularly in Thailand. The Chinese historical drama *Love Like the Galaxy* (《星汉灿烂》), which was broadcast in 2022, became highly popular and received several prestigious awards, including the Chinese American TV Festival – Golden Angel Award, the Tencent Golden Goose Awards, and the International Summit Award in 2023. The series attracted considerable attention from Thai audiences due to its intense storyline and emotional depth. It portrays the life of the female protagonist, Cheng Shaoshang (程少商), who grows up in a family lacking

love and understanding and who must face numerous hardships from childhood. As a result, she relies on her intelligence and inner strength to survive. Such narrative development reflects social and emotional aspects of human life that are relatable across cultures.

The appeal of this series lies not only in its engaging plot and meticulously designed historical settings, but also in its sophisticated use of language, particularly the use of Chinese idioms (成语) in the dialogues of the characters. These idioms reflect the scriptwriter's intentions in conveying profound meanings, emphasizing character traits, expressing emotions and feelings, as well as creating the atmosphere within the story.

The intentions behind the use of Chinese idioms in the series are diverse. For instance, some idioms are used with admonishing intentions to criticize or reproach characters, while others are employed sarcastically to express dissatisfaction or ridicule. In addition, appreciative idioms are used to praise virtues and honor others, whereas emotional expressions are utilized to emphasize the attitudes and feelings of the characters. These communicative intentions constitute an important literary device employed by the scriptwriter to deepen character development and enhance the progression of the narrative.

Since idioms may convey different intentions depending on the context, certain idioms can be interpreted in multiple ways according to the situational usage at that particular moment. Consequently, many viewers may experience confusion or misuse these idioms in actual communication.

For this reason, studying the intentional use of Chinese idioms in the drama *Love Like the Galaxy* is highly significant in enhancing understanding of communication between characters and the contextual

use of Chinese idioms within the series. Understanding the communicative intentions behind idiom usage is also beneficial for intercultural communication, Chinese language learning and teaching, as well as translation studies.

Research Objectives

To study the communicative intentions behind the use of Chinese idioms based on the contexts in which they appear in the historical drama *Love Like the Galaxy* (《星汉灿烂》).

Research Scope

This study focuses on the communicative intentions behind the use of Chinese idioms (成语) appearing in the Thai-subtitled version of the historical Chinese drama *Love Like the Galaxy* (《星汉灿烂》). The study examines idiomatic expressions used in the dialogues of the characters throughout all 56 episodes of the series. The analysis emphasizes the contextual meanings and communicative intentions conveyed through idiom usage in different conversational situations.

1. Literature Review

A review of related literature revealed several studies concerning the communicative intentions of Chinese idioms and idiomatic usage in literary and media contexts.

Tangtianchai (2009, p. 1), in her study *Chinese Idioms: Linguistic Structure and Communicative Intentions*, stated that Chinese idioms have long played an important role in spoken and written Chinese. The Chinese language contains numerous idiomatic expressions, including both ancient

and modern idioms. These idioms reflect Chinese linguistic culture, as they enable speakers to convey meanings concisely and effectively without lengthy explanations, allowing listeners to understand the intended meaning immediately.

Tangtianchai (2009, p. 189) further proposed that the communicative intentions of Chinese idioms can be categorized into five types: 1) admonishing intentions, 2) warning intentions, 3) opinion-expressing intentions, 4) appreciative intentions, and 5) sarcastic intentions.

Li et al. (2020, p. 33) studied the communicative intentions of Chinese and Thai idioms related to colors. Their findings indicated that both Chinese and Thai color-related idioms share the same five communicative intentions: 1) admonishing intentions, 2) warning intentions, 3) opinion-expressing intentions, 4) appreciative intentions, and 5) sarcastic intentions.

Loewalanch (2020, p. 97) stated that the communicative intentions found in *Mo Dao Zu Shi* could also be classified into five categories, namely warning intentions, sarcastic intentions, admonishing intentions, appreciative intentions, and opinion-expressing intentions.

Wanichwirit and Thong-em (2020, pp. 232–233) conducted a study by selecting and classifying idioms according to the principles of idiomatic intention classification proposed by Sunan Anchaleenukul (2000), together with the concept of sarcastic language use proposed by Thanya Pichaiphaet (1988). Chinese idioms were categorized into five major types: 1) idioms expressing admonishing intentions, 2) idioms expressing warning intentions, 3) idioms expressing opinions, 4) idioms expressing appreciation, and 5) idioms expressing sarcasm. Categories 1–4 were based on the framework proposed by Sunan Anchaleenukul (2000), whereas the fifth category

applied the theory of sarcastic language use proposed by Thanya Pichaiphaet (1988) in analyzing certain Chinese idioms.

Based on the review of literature and previous studies concerning theories of communicative intentions in idiom usage, it was found that idiomatic intentions can generally be classified into five categories: warning intentions, admonishing intentions, sarcastic intentions, appreciative intentions, and opinion-expressing intentions.

However, the present study identified an additional category of communicative intention that was not explicitly discussed in previous studies.

Nevertheless, a review of related studies revealed that no previous research has specifically examined the communicative intentions behind the use of Chinese idioms in the Chinese historical drama *Love Like the Galaxy* (《星汉灿烂》). Therefore, the present study may contribute to expanding the scope of research on the communicative intentions of Chinese idioms and provide a more comprehensive understanding of idiomatic usage in Chinese media.

2. Conceptual framework

The present study is grounded in pragmatic approaches to language use and theories concerning the communicative intentions of Chinese idioms proposed by previous scholars, particularly the framework developed by Tangtianchai (2009). The study adopts five categories of communicative intentions commonly identified in previous studies: warning intentions, admonishing intentions, opinion-expressing intentions, appreciative intentions, and sarcastic intentions.

In addition, the researcher analyzes idiomatic expressions according to their contextual meanings and communicative functions in verbal interaction. The analysis also considers the relationships between speakers and listeners, emotional expressions, and communicative situations appearing in the drama.

Furthermore, the study identifies an additional category of communicative intention beyond those commonly discussed in previous literature.

Research Methodology

This study employed a qualitative research approach using content analysis to investigate the communicative intentions behind the use of Chinese idioms appearing in the Thai-subtitled version of the Chinese historical drama Love Like the Galaxy (《星汉灿烂》). The analysis focused on understanding the contextual meanings and communicative functions of idiomatic expressions used in various conversational situations throughout the series.

1. Data Collection

The data were collected from all 56 episodes of Love Like the Galaxy, streamed on the WeTV application between June and July 2025. The researcher surveyed and collected Chinese idiomatic expressions appearing in the dialogues of the characters, including Chinese idioms (成语), proverbs (俗语), and common colloquial idiomatic expressions. A total of 114 Chinese idioms were identified for analysis.

In addition, the researcher reviewed related documents, theories, and previous studies concerning communicative intentions and Chinese

idiom usage. Chinese idioms were further examined through reference materials, including *Zhonghua Chengyu Da Cidian* (Zheng & Zhou, 2019) and the Chinese–Thai Idiom Dictionary (Phasupong, 2002). Relevant academic studies were also reviewed through the ThaiJO database.

2. Data Analysis

The present study employed content analysis to examine patterns of idiom usage and communicative intentions reflected in the dialogues of the series. The procedures of data analysis were conducted as follows:

2.1 Transcription of Dialogues

Dialogues containing Chinese idioms were transcribed into written form together with information regarding speakers and communicative situations in order to prepare the data for analysis.

2.2 Determination of the Unit of Analysis

The unit of analysis in this study was defined as “each individual Chinese idiom” appearing in the dialogues of each episode. The analysis considered the form, meaning, and contextual usage of each idiom.

2.3 Classification of Communicative Intentions

The researcher classified Chinese idioms according to the communicative intentions conveyed by the speakers. Based on previous studies, communicative intentions were generally categorized into five types. However, the present study identified one additional category. Therefore, the idioms were classified into six categories as follows:

Chinese idioms expressing warning intentions

Chinese idioms expressing sarcastic intentions

Chinese idioms expressing opinions

Chinese idioms expressing admonishing intentions

Chinese idioms expressing appreciative intentions

Chinese idioms expressing other intentions

2.4 Interpretation and Contextual Analysis

The researcher analyzed and interpreted the idioms in order to explain their communicative functions and contextual meanings in different situations. The analysis considered relationships between speakers and listeners, emotional expressions, language levels, and communicative contexts appearing in the drama.

2.5 Frequency Counting and Descriptive Analysis

The frequency of idioms in each communicative intention category was calculated to identify patterns of idiom usage throughout the series. The findings were then described and discussed in relation to communicative intentions, contextual meanings, and cultural perspectives reflected through the use of Chinese idioms.

Research Results

In this chapter, the researcher analyzed the communicative intentions behind the use of Chinese idioms appearing in the historical Chinese drama *Love Like the Galaxy* (《星汉灿烂》) in order to demonstrate the characteristics of idiomatic intentions found throughout all 56 episodes of the series streamed on the WeTV application. The data were collected between June and July 2025.

The researcher analyzed the criteria used to classify the communicative intentions of Chinese idioms based on the contexts in which the idioms appeared in the series. A total of 114 Chinese idioms were

identified from all 56 episodes. Previous studies generally categorized communicative intentions into five major types. However, the present study identified one additional category. Therefore, the communicative intentions of Chinese idioms in this study were classified into six categories as follows: 1) warning intentions, 2) sarcastic intentions, 3) opinion-expressing intentions, 4) admonishing intentions, 5) appreciative intentions, and 6) other intentions.

Table 1

Classification of Communicative Intentions in Chinese Idioms

Communicative Intentions	Frequency	Percentage	Examples
1. Warning intentions	20	17.54	天理不容 (“Heaven will not tolerate it”), 忍气吞声 (“to suffer in silence”)
2. Sarcastic intentions	16	14.04	一唱一和 (“to act in collusion”), 明知故犯 (“to knowingly commit an offense”)
3. Opinion-expressing intentions	13	11.40	虎穴龙潭 (“a dangerous place”), 以儆效尤 (“to make an example of someone”)
4. Admonishing intentions	30	26.32	心不在焉 (“absent-minded”), 口无遮拦 (“to speak without restraint”)
5. Appreciative intentions	12	10.53	恩重如山 (“gratitude as heavy as a mountain”), 敢作敢为 (“bold and decisive”)

Communicative Intentions	Frequency	Percentage	Examples
6. Other intentions	23	20.18	死不瞑目 (“to die with unresolved regret”), 逢凶化吉 (“to turn misfortune into good fortune”)

Among these categories, idioms expressing admonishing intentions were found most frequently, accounting for 30 idioms or 26.32 percent of the total data.

1. Chinese Idioms Expressing Warning Intentions

Chinese idioms in this category clearly convey warning intentions, referring to expressions used to advise or caution another person so that they become aware of their behavior or actions (Wanichwirit & Thong-em, 2020, p. 234). A total of 20 idioms were found in this category, accounting for 17.54 percent.

Example: 天理不容 (Source: Zheng & Zhou, 2019, p. 1421) Episode 5, Minute 05:22

Thai subtitle translation: “Heaven and earth will punish.”

Context: This idiom appeared during the housewarming ceremony of the Cheng family, when the family members waited for the eldest elder, Cheng Shaoshang’s grandmother, to arrive before beginning the ritual. When she arrived, she told Cheng Shaoshang’s father that there was no need to be overly strict about auspicious timing. Cheng Shaoshang’s father then replied that the ritual could not begin before the head of the Cheng family

arrived, as failing to respect one's elders and lacking filial piety would be considered morally unacceptable and "Heaven would not tolerate it."

Example sentence: 程家的一家之长不来,我们哪敢祭燎,人不敬不孝,天理不容。

Thai translation: "If the head of the Cheng family has not arrived, how could we dare perform the ritual? Those who are disrespectful and unfilial will surely be punished by heaven."

2. Chinese Idioms Expressing Sarcastic Intentions

Chinese idioms in this category clearly convey sarcastic intentions. The speaker intentionally uses ironic or mocking expressions to criticize, ridicule, or indirectly express dissatisfaction toward another person (Wanichwirit & Thong-em, 2020, p. 238). A total of 16 idioms were found in this category, accounting for 14.04 percent.

Example: 一唱一和 (Source: Zheng & Zhou, 2019, p. 1698) Episode 10, Minute 11:31

Thai subtitle translation: "To act in perfect harmony."

Context: Miss Wang mocked A'Yao for being weak and having his engagement canceled by He Zhaojun. Cheng Shaoshang defended him by saying that failed engagements were common matters. A'Yao thanked Cheng Shaoshang, which angered Miss Wang, who sarcastically accused the two of acting in collusion.

Example sentence: 好, 你个楼垚竟与她一唱一和。

Thai translation: "Well, Lou Yao, you truly act in perfect harmony with her."

3. Chinese Idioms Expressing Opinions

Chinese idioms in this category are used to express opinions, beliefs, or judgments rather than criticism, warnings, or praise (Wanichwirit & Thong-em, 2020, p. 235). A total of 13 idioms were found in this category, accounting for 11.40 percent.

Example: 虎穴龙潭 (Source: Zheng & Zhou, 2019, p. 642) Episode 24, Minute 36:35

Thai subtitle translation: “A tiger’s den and dragon’s pool.”

Context: Cheng Shaoshang’s parents explained why they opposed the marriage granted by the emperor, believing that the Chengyang Marquis residence was an extremely dangerous place.

Example sentence: 我与你阿母都觉得城阳侯府是虎穴龙潭,所以才拼死拒婚。

Thai translation: “Your mother and I both believe that the Chengyang Marquis residence is like a tiger’s den and dragon’s pool, so we risked our lives to refuse the marriage.”

4. Chinese Idioms Expressing Admonishing Intentions

Chinese idioms in this category clearly convey admonishing intentions. The speaker uses idiomatic expressions to criticize, reproach, or indirectly point out another person’s inappropriate behavior (Wanichwirit & Thong-em, 2020, p. 233). A total of 30 idioms were found in this category, accounting for 26.32 percent, which represents the highest frequency among all categories.

Example: 心不在焉 (Source: Zheng & Zhou, 2019, p. 1598) Episode 11, Minute 17:25

Thai subtitle translation: “Absent-minded.”

Context: Huangfu Yi, the teacher of Yuan Shanjian, noticed that Yuan Shanjian broke the string of his guqin while playing. The teacher therefore reproached him for being distracted and inattentive.

Example sentence: 心不在焉，才会伤及自身。

Thai translation: “You are absent-minded; that is why you harmed yourself.”

5. Chinese Idioms Expressing Appreciative Intentions

Chinese idioms in this category clearly convey appreciation or admiration. The speaker expresses praise or satisfaction indirectly through idiomatic expressions rather than through direct compliments (Wanichwirit & Thong-em, 2020, p. 237). A total of 12 idioms were found in this category, accounting for 10.53 percent.

Example: 恩重如山 (Source: Zheng & Zhou, 2019, p. 427) Episode 24, Minute 23:25

Thai subtitle translation: “A favor as heavy as a mountain.”

Context: Cheng Shaoshang expressed her gratitude toward General Ling, who had repeatedly risked his life to save her and suffered injuries as a result. She described his kindness as being as great as a mountain.

Example sentence: 之前在骅县,凌将军为救我 险失一臂,后来在涂高山 又为救我,旧伤复发 他对我恩重如山。

Thai translation: “Previously, in Hua County, General Ling nearly lost an arm while saving me. Later, at Tu Gao Mountain, his old injury relapsed while rescuing me again. His kindness toward me is as great as a mountain.”

6. Chinese Idioms Expressing Other Intentions

This category was additionally identified by the researcher and was not explicitly mentioned in previous studies. Idioms in this category are

primarily used to emphasize emotional states, psychological conditions, attitudes, encouragement, or emotional reassurance in various situations. A total of 23 idioms were found in this category, accounting for 20.18 percent.

Example: 死不瞑目 (Source: Zheng & Zhou, 2019, p. 1371) Episode 13, Minute 40:52

Thai subtitle translation: “To die without closing one’s eyes.”

Context: Huangfu Yi wished to meet Cheng Shaoshang’s third aunt, who had once been his former lover. After encountering bandits on the journey, he expressed his deep regret and emotional burden, saying that if he could not personally apologize to her, he would die without peace.

Example sentence: 我欠她情债太多,若是不能当面与她吐露心中愧疚,为师此生,死不瞑目。

Thai translation: “I owe her too great a debt of love. If I cannot personally express my guilt to her, I will die without peace.”

The researcher selected representative idioms from each category for brief analysis. Each section consists of the communicative intention of the idiom, the contextual usage of the idiom, and example sentences taken directly from the dialogues in the series.

The findings revealed that Chinese idioms expressing admonishing intentions were the most frequently occurring category, accounting for 26.32 percent of the total 114 idioms identified in the historical drama *Love Like the Galaxy* (《星汉灿烂》). This is primarily because the storyline and narrative contexts involve various forms of conflict, including political struggles, strategic survival tactics, and criticism of the characters’ behaviors. These situations often occur within tense interactions between characters.

The use of admonishing idioms effectively conveys dissatisfaction, criticism, and emotional intensity expressed by the speakers. As a result, idioms with admonishing intentions appeared most frequently throughout the series. Such idiomatic expressions emphasize the attitudes and emotions of the characters and clearly communicate the intended meanings and emotional states of the speakers, enabling viewers to perceive the emotional atmosphere of each situation more vividly.

Discussion of Results

The findings revealed that Chinese idioms appearing in the historical drama *Love Like the Galaxy* (《星汉灿烂》) serve important communicative functions in conveying emotions, attitudes, interpersonal relationships, and cultural values within the context of ancient Chinese society. A total of 114 Chinese idioms were identified and classified into six categories of communicative intentions, namely warning intentions, sarcastic intentions, opinion-expressing intentions, admonishing intentions, appreciative intentions, and other intentions.

The findings showed that idioms expressing admonishing intentions appeared most frequently, accounting for 26.32 percent of the total data. This may be attributed to the narrative structure and thematic content of the series, which involve political conflict, social hierarchy, strategic survival, and criticism of characters' behaviors. Such situations often create tension among characters, resulting in frequent use of idiomatic expressions conveying criticism and dissatisfaction. The findings suggest that admonishing idioms function as indirect communicative devices that allow speakers to

express disapproval while maintaining linguistic politeness and social decorum.

This finding is consistent with the study of Wanichwirit and Thongem (2020), which proposed that Chinese idioms are commonly used to reflect emotions, communicative intentions, and social relationships, particularly within hierarchical social contexts. In addition, the findings support Tangtianchai's (2009) argument that Chinese idioms serve as concise linguistic devices capable of conveying profound meanings and emotional implications without lengthy explanations.

Idioms expressing warning intentions were also frequently found in the study. Such idioms often appeared in contexts involving close interpersonal relationships, including family members and close companions. The findings indicate that warning idioms are commonly used to express concern, care, and goodwill while simultaneously reducing the harshness of direct admonition. This reflects the indirect communication style frequently found in Chinese linguistic culture.

Furthermore, idioms expressing sarcastic intentions demonstrated that Chinese idiomatic expressions can convey implied meanings beyond their literal interpretations depending on contextual usage. The use of sarcastic idioms enabled characters to criticize or ridicule others indirectly without employing overly confrontational language. This finding reflects pragmatic approaches to language use, in which contextual meaning and speaker intention play significant roles in interpretation.

Idioms expressing opinions and appreciative intentions also revealed important communicative and cultural functions. Opinion-expressing idioms allowed speakers to communicate viewpoints and

persuasive attitudes more vividly through metaphorical language, whereas appreciative idioms reflected cultural values concerning gratitude, respect, and social reciprocity within Chinese society.

Most importantly, the present study identified an additional category referred to as “other intentions,” which was not explicitly discussed in previous studies. Idioms in this category primarily reflected emotional states, psychological conditions, encouragement, hope, regret, and emotional attachment. This finding suggests that the communicative functions of Chinese idioms extend beyond interpersonal communication and also serve as symbolic representations of internal emotional and psychological experiences.

Therefore, the present study expands previous frameworks concerning communicative intentions in Chinese idiom usage and contributes to a broader understanding of contextual Chinese language use in media discourse. The findings also demonstrate that Chinese idioms function not only as artistic linguistic devices but also as important cultural tools reflecting emotions, social relationships, and values within Chinese society.

Recommendations

The present study focused on the communicative intentions behind the use of Chinese idioms in only one historical Chinese drama, namely *Love Like the Galaxy* (《星汉灿烂》). Therefore, the findings primarily reflect idiomatic usage within the contexts of historical, political, romantic, and dramatic narratives. Future studies should expand the scope of data collection by examining Chinese idioms in a wider variety of television

genres, such as contemporary dramas, comedy series, action dramas, fantasy dramas, and historical-fiction series. Comparative analyses across different genres may contribute to a broader understanding of idiomatic usage patterns and communicative behaviors in diverse social and cultural contexts.

In addition, the present study mainly focused on textual and contextual analysis of idiomatic expressions appearing in the series and did not investigate audience perceptions or interpretations. Future research may employ quantitative methods, such as questionnaires or interviews, to examine how audiences understand and interpret Chinese idioms appearing in media. Such studies may provide deeper insights into intercultural communication, audience reception, and the transmission of cultural values through media discourse.

Furthermore, future studies should investigate the use of Chinese idioms in other forms of media, including variety shows, stage dramas, songs, novels, literary works, and online media platforms such as TikTok and Weibo. Since each type of media possesses distinct linguistic characteristics and target audiences, examining idiomatic expressions across diverse media platforms may contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary Chinese language use and linguistic changes in modern society.

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