

500

Common Chinese Idioms

An Annotated Frequency Dictionary

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Liwei Jiao
Cornelius C. Kubler
Weiguo Zhang

500 Common Chinese Idioms

‘The authors have done a magnificent job explaining this important dimension in the use of Chinese. Learners will appreciate the care they have taken to ensure that the material is maximally relevant and clear. The dictionary will be an invaluable aid to both comprehension and production.’

David Crystal, *Honorary Professor of Linguistics, The University of Wales, UK*

‘Grounded in corpus research, this dictionary has a number of laudable features: with focused attention on learner usage, entries are clearly analyzed, exemplified and contextualized.’

Zheng-sheng Zhang, *San Diego State University, USA*

500 Common Chinese Idioms is the ideal tool for all intermediate to advanced learners of Chinese. Based on large corpuses of authentic language data, it presents the 500 most commonly used Chinese idioms or **chéngyǔ**, along with a variety of synonyms, antonyms and the most common structures, enabling the reader to make educated guesses about the meanings of hundreds of unfamiliar idioms.

Key features include:

- the idiom in both simplified and traditional characters
- a literal English translation and English equivalents
- two suitable example sentences, plus explanations and usage notes
- a pinyin index and stroke order index.

This practical dictionary is suitable both for class use and independent study and will be of interest to students and teachers of Chinese alike.

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Introduction

500 Common Chinese Idioms: An Annotated Frequency Dictionary is a dictionary of common Chinese idioms that is based on frequency statistics. Designed for native English-speaking learners of Chinese at the intermediate level or above, it is designed so that it can both serve as a reference work and also function as a supplementary textbook for either class instruction or independent learning. In addition, the dictionary can be used as a resource by teachers of Chinese as a second/foreign language for developing pedagogical materials or assessment tools.

Chinese idioms and why they are important

There exist in both spoken and written Chinese a great number of idioms called 成语 (成語 chéngyǔ), literally ‘set language’ or ‘set expressions,’ which we here translate into English as ‘idiom.’ These may be general in nature or they may allude to famous events or stories from Chinese history, or they may be direct quotations from famous works of Chinese literature. The great majority of Chinese idioms is composed of four characters, which usually – though not always – can be parsed in groups of two. Chinese idioms are usually composed in Classical Chinese and thus typically have a different grammatical structure from that of Modern Chinese. In their speech and writing, Chinese people make frequent use of idioms, since these often sum up succinctly a meaning which it would otherwise take many words to express.

Contextually appropriate use of idioms tends to impress hearers as to the educational level and eloquence of the speaker. Since idioms are frequently used in formal speech and higher-level written materials, such as newspaper editorials and commentaries, they serve as a useful medium for helping learners move up on the proficiency ladder. Familiarity with idioms can also be helpful for the non-native in gaining credibility in Chinese society. Indeed, almost nothing impresses a Chinese person more than an aptly used idiom coming from the mouth of a foreigner.

There is a great number of idioms in Chinese, with certain dictionaries of idioms including well over 20,000 entries. All Chinese people know idioms, even though the total number known by any one individual will depend on her or his education, linguistic talent, general intelligence, etc. Idioms are such an important part of Chinese popular culture that there even exists a game called 成语接龙 (成語接龍 chéngyǔ jiēlóng) that involves someone calling out an idiom, with someone else then being supposed to think of another idiom to link up with the first one, so that the last character of the first idiom is the same as the first character of the second idiom, and so forth. According to the Chinese search engine Baidu, the longest idiom chain ever created was all of 1,788 idioms long!

For the learner of Chinese as a second/foreign language, idioms are not so easy to understand, since the functional meaning of idioms is often different from the surface meaning and may, to quote an English idiom, be ‘greater than the sum of its parts.’ This is because Chinese idioms frequently involve literary allusions, extended meanings, and metaphors. For example, take the idiom 雪中送炭 (雪中送炭 xuě zhōng sòng tàn). This could be translated literally as ‘in the snow to deliver charcoal’; however, the actual meaning usually has nothing at all to do with ‘snow’ or ‘charcoal,’ but rather involves the rendering of aid to someone at a time of need.

Similarly, it is not so easy to use idioms. For example, consider the idiom 衣食住行 (衣食住行 yī shí zhù xíng). The literal meaning of this idiom is ‘food, clothing, shelter, and transportation,’ that is, ‘the basic necessities of life.’ This would seem to be not that difficult to understand. However, in speech or in written compositions, students will frequently produce a sentence such as *每个人都有衣食住行, with the intended meaning: ‘Everyone possesses the basic necessities of life’; yet this idiom cannot be used in such a way. The basic problem here is that students understand only the general meaning of the idiom but are not clear about how to use it appropriately in their own speech or writing. And precisely because idioms are difficult to use appropriately, students tend to avoid them in their Chinese.

Idioms have a long history in Chinese, with some having existed for well over 2,000 years. Indeed, the grammatical structure of most Chinese idioms is that of Classical Chinese. There are three common origins of idioms: ancient fables and historical tales; Buddhist and Confucian classics as well as other works of ancient Chinese literature; and habitual collocations of terms that gradually came to be stable and used in a certain way, even though their exact origin is not known today.

To use a Chinese idiom, we could say there are in the Chinese language as many idioms ‘as there are hairs on an ox’ (多如牛毛 duō rú niú máo ‘many as ox hairs’). So, how many idioms should a foreign learner of Chinese learn? We have found that, based on our own statistical surveys, whether one employs a larger corpus consisting of several tens of millions of characters (which would include 6,000–7,000 idioms) or a smaller corpus consisting of several hundred thousand to a few million characters, 500 idioms will in either case cover about 40 percent to 50 percent of the total of the frequency of occurrence of all idioms. This is the reason why it was decided to include 500 entries in this dictionary.

Special characteristics of this dictionary

There are many dictionaries of Chinese idioms on the market in China, with the largest containing over 20,000 entries. However, none of these dictionaries is particularly suitable for the use of non-native Chinese language learners. This is primarily for the following reasons:

First, the choice of idioms to be included is often not practical or otherwise appropriate for non-native learners of Chinese. For example, in not a few monolingual dictionaries of Chinese idioms, the first entry is 阿鼻地狱 (阿鼻地獄 Ābí Dìyù) ‘Avici Hell (in Buddhism)’ – not exactly a particularly useful idiom for the average non-native learner and, indeed, one that even many Chinese readers would not

readily understand. Second, most dictionaries of idioms in China lack English translations, and the Chinese used for explanation and exemplification is typically too difficult for someone whose native language is not Chinese; in fact, the language of the explanations is in many cases even harder than the idiom being explained! Third, there may not even be Pinyin romanization provided. Also, in many monolingual Chinese dictionaries of idioms there are no example sentences, or else the example sentences are too difficult, deriving from famous works of classical literature such as *Dream of the Red Chamber*. Perhaps such examples are appropriate for native Chinese users, but certainly they are not very helpful for non-native users. Also, usage explanations, if present at all, may be quite vague and without information on common collocations. Finally, the great majority of dictionaries of idioms are arranged according to Pinyin romanization, stroke order, or meaning categories. Though arranging entries based on Pinyin or stroke order may be convenient for looking up idioms, such an arrangement is definitely not the most conducive for learning.

The idioms included in this dictionary were chosen and arranged based on their frequency and practicality for non-native learners. Moreover, all the example sentences have been written in clear, everyday Modern Chinese and provide an invaluable context for the idiom being exemplified. Indeed, most of the example sentences were written only after examining 200 or more instances of actual use in the linguistic corpora on which the dictionary was based. Also included are synonyms, antonyms, sociolinguistic information, and fairly detailed descriptions of usage that provide information on grammatical functions and, when applicable, common collocations.

How the entries of this dictionary were determined

In determining the 500 entries to be included here and their order in the dictionary, we considered the following six corpora:

Name of corpus	1. <i>People's Daily</i> newspaper, all issues from 1996–2000	2. Professor Weiguo Zhang's personal corpus	3. Balanced Corpus from Academia Sinica, Taiwan	4. Spoken Beijing Dialect Corpus by Hu Mingyang and Zhang Weiguo	5. 2009 PRC elementary/secondary school language textbooks (24 volumes)	6. Peking University Center for Chinese Linguistics (CCL) corpus
Number of characters	45 million	9.5 million	8 million	1 million	1–2 million	307 million
Type of material	primarily news; general	primarily literature	general	speech	general	general

Regarding corpus 3, while we did consult the frequency list for that corpus, it should be noted that the list includes only those idioms that occur ten or more times in the corpus. As for corpus 6, though it was not possible for us to search

all of the idioms in that corpus, we did consult that corpus in deciding the order for the entries included in our dictionary.

The procedure for determining the entries was as follows: First, an exhaustive search was conducted of all the idioms in corpora 1 and 2 above, with the goal of compiling for each of these corpora a list of the 800 highest-frequency idioms. It turned out that the two lists of 800 idioms had 305 idioms in common; therefore, it was decided that these 305 idioms should form the basis for this dictionary.

Next to be selected were a group of 75 idioms that were relatively high in frequency in corpora 3, 4, and 5, but which happened not to be included among the 305 idioms described in the preceding paragraph. Adding them to the 305 idioms just mentioned, a list of 380 entries was obtained. Finally, after tabulating all the idioms in the first five corpora, an additional 120 high-frequency idioms that did not appear on the list of 380 entries were selected. In this way, the grand total of 500 entries was arrived at. The frequency of occurrence of the 500 entries in all the different corpora was then added together, and it was thus that the overall frequency number of each entry was obtained.

It should be pointed out that, among the 500 idioms, there are 50 that derive from fables or tales from Chinese history. After we obtained the overall frequencies of occurrence for each of the 500 idioms, we took the 50 idioms that derive from fables or Chinese history and arranged them according to frequency, and then ordered them so that one would occur as every tenth idiom, from idiom number 10 through idiom number 500. With this one exception, the 500 entries were arranged strictly according to frequency of occurrence.

The reason why we decided the order of fables and historical idioms separately from the other entries is that, if we had proceeded purely by frequency, then most of these idioms would not have been included in the dictionary; and yet these idioms are often even more concise and embody even more Chinese culture than 'ordinary' idioms. It is for these reasons that we gave what one might call 'special handling' to these idioms that derive from fables and tales from ancient Chinese culture, which we recommend to learners for their learning and use, when appropriate.

How this dictionary is organized

Each entry in this dictionary consists of the following:

1. *Number of the idiom.* On the first line of each entry is the number of the idiom in this dictionary.
2. *Idiom in simplified characters.* Next on the first line is the idiom printed in simplified characters [indicated by thick brackets].
3. *Idiom in traditional characters.* Also on the first line is the idiom printed in traditional characters (indicated by thin parentheses).
4. *Idiom in Pinyin romanization.* The last item on the first line of each entry is the idiom written in Pinyin romanization.
5. *English translation of idiom.* Starting on the second line of each entry is the English translation and/or explanation of the idiom. When possible, the individual characters that make up the idiom are also translated. These are often

- followed by a literal translation of the whole idiom and one or more freer translations of the idiom.
6. *Example sentences.* Next, two example sentences are provided for each idiom to illustrate how the idiom is used. We urge users of this dictionary to study the examples carefully and to pay special attention to the linguistic context in which the entries occur. Each example sentence is given first in simplified Chinese characters and then in Pinyin romanization, followed by an English translation. In translating the examples, we have in most cases not attempted to find an equivalent English idiom, which could be confusing for learners, since they might not understand which part of the Chinese corresponds to which part of the English. Instead, we have usually translated into ordinary prose. To help learners understand the structure of the Chinese original, the English translations tend to follow the structure of the Chinese quite closely; as a result, some of the English in the translations is rather stilted. Our concern was that, had we translated into smoother English, many learners might have been puzzled how we got from the Chinese to the English. As concerns the examples, we should state here that the example sentences are merely linguistic examples, not in any way being indicative of the authors' personal beliefs or advocations.
 7. *Usage.* For most of the entries, comments on usage are provided. Here, we try to indicate the main grammatical functions of the idiom; for example, whether it occurs as subject, predicate, complement, attributive, or adverbial. Comments on common collocations, that is, other words together with which the entry frequently occurs, are sometimes included. These comments are based on approximately 200 examples in the corpuses and the authors' own judgment.
 8. *Allusion.* If applicable, information is included on literary or historical allusions related to the idiom. In these cases, we often provide a somewhat simplified version, in English translation, of the Chinese story of how the idiom came into common use.
 9. *Note.* Many entries include a note on the sociolinguistic function of the idiom, for example, whether its use is complimentary or derogatory. Information may also be included here on the origin of the idiom, or on whether it is used primarily in speaking or writing, etc.
 10. *Near synonyms.* So as to help more advanced students expand their vocabulary, we list near synonyms of the main entry when they exist. These are presented in simplified characters [in brackets], in Pinyin and traditional characters (in parentheses), and in English translation 'in single quotation marks.'
 11. *Antonyms.* Common antonyms of the main entry are also provided. As with the near synonyms, these are presented in simplified characters [in brackets], Pinyin and traditional characters (in parentheses), and in English 'in single quotation marks.'

How to use this dictionary

This dictionary can be used as a reference to look up idioms that you have read or heard. If you know the pronunciation of the idiom, you may look it up in the

Pinyin index at the end of the volume (Appendix Two), which is arranged in alphabetical order. On the other hand, if you do not know the pronunciation of at least the first syllable of the idiom, then you may look up the idiom by the stroke order of the first character in the stroke order index at the end of the volume (Appendix Three).

Though every entry in this dictionary is independent and complete and the dictionary can serve for general reference purposes just like any other reference work, it is our hope that, since the dictionary is arranged in order of frequency, readers will – if at all possible – study this dictionary in the order of the entries, from beginning to end. In this way, by the time they have finished working their way through the dictionary, readers will have in the most efficient way possible raised their overall proficiency level in understanding and using Chinese idioms. In an organized Chinese language class, the instructor could assign one to five idioms to be studied for each class session. In the case of independent learners, they could take up one to five idioms per day, depending on the amount of time they have available.

Background of the compilation of this dictionary and acknowledgments

In 2007, Liwei Jiao devised a plan for writing a dictionary of idioms and invited Cornelius C. Kubler and Weiguo Zhang to join him in the project. Weiguo Zhang subsequently undertook a statistical frequency survey of idioms in linguistic corpora 1, 2, and 4, as described above. He suggested taking the 305 idioms that overlapped on the first 800 entries of corpora 1 and 2 as the basis for the dictionary. Liwei Jiao was responsible for the remainder of the statistical work and determined the 500 entries to be included in the dictionary as well as their order. He then proceeded to draft in Chinese the explanations of the idioms, example sentences, and usage notes, and compiled the lists of near synonyms and antonyms. Later, Liwei Jiao also added the traditional characters and initial versions of the Pinyin romanization, as well as writing the Chinese version of Appendix One. Kubler translated all of the Chinese in this book into English, edited the Pinyin romanization, and provided input regarding the explanations, example sentences, and this Introduction.

The three authors wish to express here their appreciation to the following for their assistance in the compilation of this dictionary: Professor Shuiguang Deng of the Department of Computer Science of Zhejiang University, P.R.C.; Ms. Lijun Wu, also of the P.R.C.; Mr. William Xuefeng Wang of Canada; and Ms. Margaret Howard, Ms. Sarah Basham, and Ms. Barbara Wei, all of the U.S. Finally, the authors would be remiss not to also thank our families for their crucial support, without which this dictionary would surely never have seen the light of day.

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| 191 | 引人入胜 | 238 | 独树一帜 | 285 | 集思广益 | 332 | 川流不息 |
| 192 | 不堪设想 | 239 | 惊天动地 | 286 | 一应俱全 | 333 | 迎刃而解 |
| 193 | 义无反顾 | 240 | 东窗事发 | 287 | 不得而知 | 334 | 对症下药 |
| 194 | 焕然一新 | 241 | 铺天盖地 | 288 | 提心吊胆 | 335 | 热火朝天 |
| 195 | 一视同仁 | 242 | 大张旗鼓 | 289 | 货真价实 | 336 | 不足为奇 |
| 196 | 五颜六色 | 243 | 彬彬有礼 | 290 | 鸡犬升天 | 337 | 脱胎换骨 |
| 197 | 束手无策 | 244 | 熙熙攘攘 | 291 | 奋不顾身 | 338 | 扬眉吐气 |
| 198 | 十字路口 | 245 | 无影无踪 | 292 | 精打细算 | 339 | 荡然无存 |
| 199 | 与日俱增 | 246 | 至高无上 | 293 | 目不转睛 | 340 | 叶公好龙 |
| 200 | 拔苗助长 | 247 | 司空见惯 | 294 | 车水马龙 | 341 | 一脉相承 |
| 201 | 博大精深 | 248 | 接二连三 | 295 | 一望无际 | 342 | 置之不理 |
| 202 | 喜气洋洋 | 249 | 斩钉截铁 | 296 | 一成不变 | 343 | 身先士卒 |
| 203 | 不可或缺 | 250 | 滥竽充数 | 297 | 脱口而出 | 344 | 精神抖擞 |

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|-----|------|-----|------|-----|---------------|-----|---------------|
| 345 | 侃侃而谈 | 385 | 同甘共苦 | 425 | 同日而语 | 464 | 立竿见影 |
| 346 | 诚心诚意 | 386 | 明目张胆 | 426 | 曾几何时 | 465 | 冲锋陷阵 |
| 347 | 千军万马 | 387 | 耳闻目睹 | 427 | 高高在上 | 466 | 水到渠成 |
| 348 | 绞尽脑汁 | 388 | 啼笑皆非 | 428 | 一往情深 | 467 | 危言耸听 |
| 349 | 垂头丧气 | 389 | 死灰复燃 | 429 | 痛心疾首 | 468 | 何去何从 |
| 350 | 掩耳盗铃 | 390 | 塞翁失马 | 430 | 鹬蚌相争,
渔翁得利 | 469 | 有求必应 |
| 351 | 日复一日 | 391 | 口口声声 | 431 | 无时无刻 | 470 | 杯弓蛇影 |
| 352 | 奄奄一息 | 392 | 水落石出 | 432 | 欢天喜地 | 471 | 风平浪静 |
| 353 | 千载难逢 | 393 | 我行我素 | 433 | 殚精竭虑 | 472 | 逍遥法外 |
| 354 | 未雨绸缪 | 394 | 望而却步 | 434 | 通情达理 | 473 | 灯红酒绿 |
| 355 | 居高临下 | 395 | 有血有肉 | 435 | 从天而降 | 474 | 顶天立地 |
| 356 | 心安理得 | 396 | 天涯海角 | 436 | 井井有条 | 475 | 有鉴于此 |
| 357 | 一意孤行 | 397 | 轻描淡写 | 437 | 苦口婆心 | 476 | 义愤填膺 |
| 358 | 三令五申 | 398 | 哭笑不得 | 438 | 人山人海 | 477 | 不可告人 |
| 359 | 依依不舍 | 399 | 自告奋勇 | 439 | 运筹帷幄 | 478 | 指手画脚 |
| 360 | 乐不思蜀 | 400 | 指鹿为马 | 440 | 才高八斗 | 479 | 简明扼要 |
| 361 | 叹为观止 | 401 | 设身处地 | 441 | 沾沾自喜 | 480 | 螳螂捕蝉,
黄雀在后 |
| 362 | 大有人在 | 402 | 天方夜谭 | 442 | 皆大欢喜 | 481 | 一举两得 |
| 363 | 雪中送炭 | 403 | 雅俗共赏 | 443 | 大千世界 | 482 | 置之度外 |
| 364 | 一筹莫展 | 404 | 无所适从 | 444 | 举一反三 | 483 | 永垂不朽 |
| 365 | 水泄不通 | 405 | 不容置疑 | 445 | 不了了之 | 484 | 美中不足 |
| 366 | 相依为命 | 406 | 流连忘返 | 446 | 得不偿失 | 485 | 人声鼎沸 |
| 367 | 街头巷尾 | 407 | 翻来覆去 | 447 | 偷工减料 | 486 | 天真烂漫 |
| 368 | 无微不至 | 408 | 无中生有 | 448 | 高屋建瓴 | 487 | 就事论事 |
| 369 | 不假思索 | 409 | 庞然大物 | 449 | 恋恋不舍 | 488 | 大手大脚 |
| 370 | 江郎才尽 | 410 | 黔驴技穷 | 450 | 围魏救赵 | 489 | 漫山遍野 |
| 371 | 不相上下 | 411 | 三三两两 | 451 | 花团锦簇 | 490 | 刻舟求剑 |
| 372 | 居安思危 | 412 | 发号施令 | 452 | 悲欢离合 | 491 | 生龙活虎 |
| 373 | 近在咫尺 | 413 | 心旷神怡 | 453 | 今非昔比 | 492 | 不甘示弱 |
| 374 | 卷土重来 | 414 | 雷厉风行 | 454 | 一事无成 | 493 | 循循善诱 |
| 375 | 冰天雪地 | 415 | 朝夕相处 | 455 | 不伦不类 | 494 | 万家灯火 |
| 376 | 有的放矢 | 416 | 踌躇满志 | 456 | 家常便饭 | 495 | 执迷不悟 |
| 377 | 一尘不染 | 417 | 金碧辉煌 | 457 | 平心而论 | 496 | 千疮百孔 |
| 378 | 事半功倍 | 418 | 同舟共济 | 458 | 变本加厉 | 497 | 悬崖勒马 |
| 379 | 不同凡响 | 419 | 志同道合 | 459 | 名正言顺 | 498 | 半斤八两 |
| 380 | 井底之蛙 | 420 | 唇亡齿寒 | 460 | 望梅止渴 | 499 | 共襄盛举 |
| 381 | 大同小异 | 421 | 柳暗花明 | 461 | 意气风发 | 500 | 五十步笑百步 |
| 382 | 谈笑风生 | 422 | 袖手旁观 | 462 | 双管齐下 | | |
| 383 | 不亦乐乎 | 423 | 豁然开朗 | 463 | 含辛茹苦 | | |
| 384 | 承前启后 | 424 | 诗情画意 | | | | |

500 common Chinese idioms

1. 【实事求是】(實事求是) shí shì qiú shì

实 means ‘actual,’ 事 means ‘situation,’ 求 means ‘seek,’ and 是 means ‘original way.’ The meaning of this idiom is ‘to handle matters according to their actual situation.’ This idiom is conventionally translated as ‘seek truth from facts.’

Example 1: 我们应该坚持**实事求是**的原则，把理论和实践结合起来。

Wǒmen yīnggāi jiānchí shíshì-qiúshì de yuánzé, bǎ lǐlùn hé shíjiàn jiéhé qīlai.

‘We should insist on the principle of seeking truth from facts, and integrate theory and practice.’

Example 2: 大家要**实事求是**地评价毛泽东的历史地位，不能因为有了文化大革命就全盘否定他以前的贡献。

Dàjiā yào shíshì-qiúshì de píngjià Máo Zédōng de lìshǐ dìwèi, bù néng yīnwèi yǒule Wénhuà Dà Gémìng jiù quán pán fǒudìng tā yǐqián de gòngxiàn.

‘Everyone should evaluate Mao Zedong’s position in history by seeking truth from facts; one can’t totally repudiate his earlier contributions because of the Cultural Revolution.’

Usage: Functions mainly as attributive and predicate; can also serve as adverbial.

Note: Because 实事求是 is part of the contents of Mao Zedong thought, these four characters can be seen on the buildings of many Chinese organizations. The photograph below was taken at the entrance to Renmin University in Beijing. The four characters in the photograph are 实事求是, with 實 being the traditional form of the simplified character 实.



courtesy of Du Jian

Antonym: [弄虚作假] (nòng xū zuò jiǎ 弄虚作假) ‘use trickery or deception to create a false appearance.’

2. 【艰苦奋斗】(艱苦奮鬥) jiān kǔ fèn dòu

艰苦 means 'difficult' and 奋斗 means 'struggle.' The meaning of the whole idiom is 'difficult struggle, arduous struggle.'

Example 1: 即使在今天, 我们也不应该丢掉**艰苦奋斗**的精神。

Jíshǐ zài jīntiān, wǒmen yě bù yīnggāi diūdiào jiānkǔ-fèndòu de jīngshen.

'Even today, we should not lose our spirit of hardworking struggle.'

Example 2: 经济困难时期, 全国人民都**艰苦奋斗**, 最后终于渡过难关。

Jīngjì kùnnán shíqī, quán guó rén mín dōu jiānkǔ-fèndòu, zuìhòu zhōngyú dùguò nánguān.

'In difficult economic times, all the people of the country struggled arduously; in the end, they finally got through the difficult period.'

Usage: Functions mainly as attributive or predicate. As attributive, usually followed by nouns such as 精神 (jīngshen) 'spirit,' 作风 (zuòfeng 作風) 'way of working,' and 传统 (chuántǒng 傳統) 'tradition.'

Note: Complimentary in meaning.

Near Synonyms: [克勤克俭] (kè qín kè jiǎn 克勤克儉) 'hardworking and thrifty,' [奋发图强] (fèn fā tú qiáng 奮發圖強) 'work hard for the strength and prosperity of the country.'

Antonyms: [花天酒地] (huā tiān jiǔ dì 花天酒地) 'flowers in the sky and wine on the ground – lead a frivolous life,' [铺张浪费] (pū zhāng làng fèi 鋪張浪費) 'extravagant and wasteful,' [骄奢淫逸] (jiāo shē yín yì 驕奢淫逸) 'indulge oneself in a proud and extravagant lifestyle.'

3. 【千方百计】(千方百計) qiān fāng bǎi jì

The literal meaning is 'by every possible means,' with a freer translation being 'by hook or by crook.'

Example 1: 由于农民的收入跟城市居民的收入差距比较大, 所以政府**千方百计**地增加农民的收入。

Yóuyóu nóngmín de shōurù gēn chéngshì jūmín de shōurù chājù bǐjiào dà, suǒyǐ zhèngfǔ qiānfāng-bǎijì de zēngjiā nóngmín de shōurù.

'Due to the relatively large gap between the salaries of rural residents and those in the city, the government increased rural residents' salaries by every possible means.'

Example 2: 这家工厂**千方百计**地降低产品的成本。

Zhè jiā gōngchǎng qiānfāng-bǎijì de jiàngdī chǎnpǐn de chéngběn.

'This factory decreased the production costs of its products by every possible means.'

Usage: Functions mainly as adverbial modifier.

Near Synonyms: [想方设法] (xiǎng fāng shè fǎ 想方設法) ‘try every possible means,’ [绞尽脑汁] (jiǎo jìn nǎo zhī 絞盡腦汁) ‘rack one’s brains,’ [费尽心机] (fèi jìn xīn jī 費盡心機) ‘think of every possible means.’

Antonyms: [无计可施] (wú jì kě shī 無計可施) ‘have no plan to carry out – at one’s wit’s end,’ [束手无策] (shù shǒu wú cè 束手無策) ‘tied hands without plan – at a complete loss about what to do.’

4. 【全心全意】(全心全意) quán xīn quán yì

The literal meaning is ‘complete heart complete intention,’ with a freer translation being ‘with all one’s heart and all one’s soul, wholeheartedly.’

Example 1: 公务员应该**全心全意**地为人民服务。

Gōngwùyuán yīnggāi quánxīn-quányì de wèi rénmin fúwù.

‘Civil servants should serve the people with all their heart and all their soul.’

Example 2: 她一边哭一边说, “我这样**全心全意**地对你, 你为什么对我有二心?”

Tā yì biān kū yì biān shuō, “Wǒ zhèyàng quánxīn-quányì de duì nǐ, nǐ wèishénme duì wǒ yǒu èrxīn?”

‘She cried as she said, “I treat you like this with all my heart and all my soul; why are you disloyal to me?”’

Usage: Functions mainly as adverbial, often followed by 为人民服务 (wèi rénmin fúwù 為人民服務) ‘to serve (for) the people.’

Note: Somewhat complimentary in meaning.

Near Synonym: [一心一意] (yì xīn yí yì 一心一意) ‘with one heart and one mind, wholeheartedly.’

Antonyms: [三心二意] (sān xīn èr yì 三心二意) ‘of two minds, half-hearted,’ [朝三暮四] (zhāo sān mù sì 朝三暮四) ‘fickle and inconstant.’

5. 【无论如何】(無論如何) wú lùn rú hé

无论 means ‘no matter’ and 如何 means ‘how?’ The meaning of the whole idiom is ‘no matter how, no matter what, in any event, in any case.’

Example 1: 你们**无论如何**都要在三天内把这件事情做完。

Nǐmen wúlùn-rúhé dōu yào zài sān tiān nèi bǎ zhè jiàn shìqíng zuòwán.

‘No matter what, you should complete this matter within three days.’

Example 2: 我看她非常面熟，但是**无论如何**都想不起她的名字来。

Wǒ kàn tā fēicháng miànshú, dànshì wúlùn-rúhé dōu xiǎngbuǐ tā de míngzi lái.
'When I look at her, she's very familiar, but no matter what I can't think of her name.'

Usage: Functions as adverbial.

Near Synonym: [在所不惜] (zài suǒ bù xī 在所不惜) 'will not grudge, will spare no effort, will not hesitate to.'

6. 【前所未有】(前所未有) qián suǒ wèi yǒu

未 means 'did not, not yet.' The meaning of the whole idiom is 'never happened before in the past, unprecedented.'

Example 1: 她遇到了**前所未有的**挑战。

Tā yùdào le qiánsuǒwèiyǒu de tiǎozhàn.
'She encountered unprecedented challenges.'

Example 2: 这次行动规模之大、速度之快，在历史上是**前所未有的**。

Zhè cì xíngdòng guīmó zhī dà, sùdù zhī kuài, zài lìshǐ shàng shì qiánsuǒwèiyǒu de.
'The scale and speed of the operation this time were unprecedented in history.'

Usage: Functions mainly as attributive; can also serve as predicate.

Near Synonyms: [史无前例] (shǐ wú qián lì 史无前例) 'in history there is no precedent, unprecedented,' [前无古人] (qián wú gǔ rén 前无古人) 'no ancients who can compare – peerless, unprecedented.'

Antonym: [司空见惯] (sī kōng jiàn guàn 司空见惯) 'get used to seeing something and no longer find it strange.'

7. 【坚定不移】(坚定不移) jiān dìng bù yí

坚定 means 'firm, steadfast' and 移 means 'move, change.' A literal translation of the whole idiom is 'firm and unchanging.' Freer translations include 'firm and unswerving, steadfast and unchanging, resolute.'

Example 1: 在一场政治危机中，他**坚定不移**地站在总统一边。

Zài yì cháng zhèngzhì wēijī zhōng, tā jiāndìng-bùyí de zhàn zài zǒngtǒng yì biān.
'In a political crisis, he steadfastly stood on the side of the president.'

Example 2: 中国将**坚定不移**地推进改革开放。

Zhōngguó jiāng jiāndìng-bùyí de tuījìn gǎigé kāifàng.
'China will steadfastly advance the policy of reform and opening up.'

Usage: Functions mainly as adverbial.

Note: Complimentary in meaning.

Near Synonyms: [始终不渝] (shǐ zhōng bù yú 始终不渝) ‘from beginning to end not changing – steady, steadfast,’ [矢志不渝] (shǐ zhì bù yú 矢志不渝) ‘arrow(-like) determination not to change – determined not to change.’

Antonyms: [举棋不定] (jǔ qí bù dìng 举棋不定) ‘hold a chess piece without deciding – indecisive,’ [见异思迁] (jiàn yì sī qiān 见异思迁) ‘see something different and want to change – fickle, capricious.’

8. 【引人注目】(引人注目) yǐn rén zhù mù

引 means ‘attract’ and 注目 means ‘fix one’s eyes on, gaze at.’ A literal translation would be ‘attract other people’s attention.’ Freer translations include ‘draw attention, noticeable, conspicuous.’

Example 1: 在一场引人注目的比赛中，他的运气及发挥都很好，因此轻松战胜对手。

Zài yì chǎng yǐnrén-zhùmù de bǐsài zhōng, tā de yùnnqì jí fāhuī dōu hěnhǎo, yīncǐ qīngsōng zhànshèng duìshǒu.

‘In an attention-grabbing competition, his luck and his performance were both very good, therefore he defeated his opponents without effort.’

Example 2: 台湾电子行业的迅速发展格外引人注目。

Táiwān diànzǐ hángyè de xùnsù fāzhǎn géwài yǐnrén-zhùmù.

‘The rapid development of Taiwan’s electronics industry especially attracts people’s attention.’

Usage: Functions mainly as predicate and attributive.

Antonyms: [隐姓埋名] (yǐn xìng mái míng 隐姓埋名) ‘conceal one’s identity,’ [无人问津] (wú rén wèn jīn 无人问津) ‘no one asks about the ford – no one shows any interest.’

9. 【因地制宜】(因地制宜) yīn dì zhì yí

因 here means ‘according to,’ 地 means ‘locality,’ 制 means ‘formulate,’ and 宜 means ‘appropriate measures.’ A literal translation of the whole idiom is ‘according to the locality formulate appropriate measures,’ with a freer translation being ‘adapt to local conditions.’

Example 1: 那座城市有几座历史名胜古迹，因此该城市因地制宜地大力发展旅游业。

Nà zuò chéngshì yǒu jǐ zuò lìshǐ míngshèng-gǔjì, yīncǐ gāi chéngshì yīndì-zhìyí de dàlì fāzhǎn lǚyóuyè.

‘That city has several famous historical sites; therefore, the aforementioned city is vigorously developing tourism, adopting appropriate measures according to concrete local conditions.’

Example 2: 国家在推行一些地方政策的时候要**因地制宜**，不能搞一刀切。

Guójiā zài tuīxíng yìxiē dìfāng zhèngcè de shíhòu yào yīndì-zhìyí, bù néng gǎo yì dāo qiē.

‘When the country implements local policies, it should enact appropriate policies based on local conditions; it must not adopt a cookie-cutter approach.’

Usage: Functions mainly as predicate and adverbial.

Near Synonyms: [对症下药] (duì zhèng xià yào 對癥下藥) ‘suit the medicine to the illness,’ [因势利导] (yīn shì lì dǎo 因勢利導) ‘guided by the circumstances.’

Antonym: [一成不变] (yì chéng bú biàn 一成不變) ‘fixed and unalterable.’

10. 【自相矛盾】(自相矛盾) zì xiāng máo dùn

自 means ‘self,’ 相 means ‘mutually,’ 矛 means ‘spear,’ and 盾 means ‘shield.’ The connotation is ‘self-contradictory.’

Example 1: 那个政治家显然在撒谎，上个月说的话跟这个月说的话**自相矛盾**。

Nàge zhèngzhìjiā xiǎnrán zài sāhuǎng, shàng ge yuè shuōde huà gēn zhège yuè shuō de huà zìxiāng-máodùn.

‘That politician is obviously lying; what he said last month and what he said this month are self-contradictory.’

Example 2: 他的文章的逻辑不太清楚，有**自相矛盾**的地方。

Tā de wénzhāng de luóji bú tài qīngchū, yǒu zìxiāng-máodùn de dìfāng.

‘The logic of his essay is not very clear; there are places that are self-contradictory.’

Usage: Functions mainly as predicate or attributive.

Allusion: There was a man who was selling a spear and a shield at the same time. He boasted about his shield, saying, “My shield is the strongest in the world! There is nothing that can penetrate it.” He also said, “My spear is the sharpest in the world! There is nothing it can’t penetrate.” Consequently someone asked him, “If you use your spear to stab your shield, what will happen?” The man could not answer. (from *Han Feizi*)

Antonyms: [自圆其说] (zì yuán qí shuō 自圓其說) ‘make one’s argument consistent and not self-contradictory,’ [无懈可击] (wú xiè kě jī 無懈可擊) ‘with no chink in one’s armour, leave no room for criticism.’

11. 【成千上万】(成千上萬) chéng qiān shàng wàn

成 here means ‘becoming’ and 上 mean ‘surpassing.’ The meaning of the whole idiom is ‘tens of thousands of.’

Example 1: 为了找到一个好位置来看他们喜爱的歌星，**成千上万**的歌迷一下子挤进了体育场。

Wèile zhǎodào yí ge hǎo wèizhì lái kàn tāmen xǐ'ài de gēxīng, chéngqiān-shàngwàn de gēmí yíxiàzi jǐ jìnle tǐyùchǎng.

‘In order to find a good spot to see their beloved singing star, tens of thousands of fans all at once pushed their way into the stadium.’

Example 2: 这部新的法律影响到**成千上万**人的利益，所以引起了大家热烈的讨论。

Zhè bù xīn de fǎlǚ yǐngxiǎng dào chéngqiān-shàngwàn rén de lìyì, suǒyǐ yǐnqǐle dàjiā rèliè de tāolùn.

‘This new law affected the interests of tens of thousands of people, so it touched off passionate discussions by everyone.’

Usage: Functions mainly as attributive and predicate.

Near Synonym: [不计其数] (bú jì qí shù 不計其數) ‘not calculate its number – too numerous to count.’

Antonym: [寥寥无几] (liáo liáo wú jǐ 寥寥無幾) ‘very few.’

12. 【卓有成效】(卓有成效) zhuó yǒu chéng xiào

卓 means ‘outstanding, excellent’ and 成效 means ‘effect, result.’ A literal translation of the whole idiom is ‘outstanding and having effect,’ with freer translations including ‘with outstanding results, highly effective.’

Example 1: 近年来，双方在文化领域内进行了**卓有成效**的合作。

Jìn nián lái, shuāngfāng zài wénhuà lǐngyù nèi jìnxíng le zhuóyǒuchéngxiào de hézuò.

‘In recent years, both sides have carried out extremely effective cooperation in cultural spheres.’

Example 2: 政府的新经济政策**卓有成效**，受到人民的高度赞扬。

Zhèngfǔ de xīn jīngjì zhèngcè zhuóyǒuchéngxiào, shòudào rénmin de gāodù zànyáng.

‘The government’s new economic policy is highly effective; it has received a high degree of approval from the people.’

Usage: Functions mainly as attributive. Often preceded by the verbs 进行 (jinxing 進行) ‘carry out’ and 开展 (kāizhǎn 開展) ‘develop’; often followed by the noun 合作 (hézuò) ‘cooperation.’ Can also serve as predicate and adverbial.

Note: Complimentary in meaning.

Near Synonym: [行之有效] (xíng zhī yǒu xiào 行之有效) ‘implement with efficiency, efficient.’

Antonyms: [无济于事] (wú jì yú shì 無濟於事) ‘not help matters, of no avail, to no effect,’ [劳而无功] (láo ér wú gōng 勞而無功) ‘endeavor but have no success – work with no gain.’

13. 【当务之急】(當務之急) dāng wù zhī jí

当 means ‘should,’ 务 means ‘pursue,’ and 急 means ‘an urgent matter.’ The literal meaning is ‘an urgent matter that should be pursued.’ The whole idiom means ‘a matter of great urgency.’

Example 1: 如何保持经济持续发展，是我们的**当务之急**。

Rúhé bǎochí jīngjì chíxù fāzhǎn, shì wǒmen de dāngwù-zhījī.

‘How to maintain continued economic development is a matter of great urgency for us.’

Example 2: 二十世纪五六十年代，迅速推广普通话是语言文字工作者的**当务之急**。

Èrshí shìjì wǔ-liùshí niándài, xùnsù tuīguǎng pǔtōnghuà shì yǔyán wénzì gōngzuòzhě de dāngwù-zhījī.

‘In the 1950s and 60s, the rapid spread of Putonghua was a matter of great urgency for language and writing specialists.’

Usage: Nominal element, functions mainly as object and subject.

Near Synonyms: [燃眉之急] (rán méi zhī jí 燃眉之急) ‘the urgency of fire singeing the eyebrows – a matter of great urgency,’ [迫在眉睫] (pò zài méi jié 迫在眉睫) ‘pressing on the eyebrows and eyelashes – very urgent,’ [刻不容缓] (kè bù róng huǎn 刻不容缓) ‘allow no delay, extremely urgent.’

Antonyms: [一拖再拖] (yì tuō zài tuō 一拖再拖) ‘drag on or delay without end,’ [遥遥无期] (yáo yáo wú qī 遙遙無期) ‘not in the foreseeable future.’

14. 【独立自主】(獨立自主) dú lì zì zhǔ

独立 means ‘independent’ and 自主 means ‘be one’s own master.’ The whole idiom can be translated as ‘independent and being one’s own master’ or ‘independent and possessing the right of self-determination.’

Example 1: 中国一贯奉行**独立自主**的和平外交政策。

Zhōngguó yíguàn fèngxíng dúlì-zìzhǔ de hépíng wàijiāo zhèngcè.

‘China has all along pursued an independent and peaceful diplomatic policy.’

Example 2: 那位亿万富翁的儿子不想借助他父亲的影响，而愿意**独立自主**地开创他自己的事业。

Nà wèi yìwànfūwēng de érzi bù xiǎng jièzhù tā fùqīn de yǐngxiǎng, ér yuànyì dúlì-zìzhǔ de kāichuàng tā zìjǐ de shìyè.

‘That billionaire’s son does not want to make use of his father’s influence, but wants to independently establish his own career.’

Usage: Functions mainly as object or adverbial.

Note: Complimentary in meaning. 独立自主 is a foreign policy of China; therefore, this idiom often appears in diplomatic contexts.

Near Synonyms: [自力更生] (zì lì gēng shēng 自力更生) ‘one’s own strength changes one’s life – rely on one’s own efforts,’ [自食其力] (zì shí qí lì 自食其力) ‘oneself eat one’s own strength – support oneself by one’s own labor.’

Antonyms: [仰人鼻息] (yǎng rén bí xī 仰人鼻息) ‘rely on other people’s noses for breath – slavishly dependent,’ [寄人篱下] (jì rén lí xià 寄人篱下) ‘live as a dependent or parasite in another’s home – rely or depend on others.’

15. 【脱颖而出】(脱颖而出) tuō yǐng ér chū

脱 means ‘break free from, escape from’ and 颖 means ‘an awn of wheat’ (i.e., the bristle-like fiber in the wheat). This refers to the fibers that often stick through a sack of wheat. By metaphor, this has come to mean ‘talent being fully exposed, talent revealing itself.’

Example 1: 尽管很多人批评高考，但是高考的确能使很多优秀的人才**脱颖而出**。

Jǐnguǎn hěn duō rén pīpíng gāokǎo, dànshì gāokǎo díquè néng shǐ hěn duō yōuxiù de réncái tuōyǐng-érchū.

‘Even though many people criticize the Chinese college entrance examination, it really can make many outstanding people of talent be revealed.’

Example 2: 第一次世界大战以后，梵高的作品**脱颖而出**，受到人们的重视。

Dìyī cì shìjiè dàzhàn yǐhòu, Fàn Gāo de zuòpǐn tuōyǐng-érchū, shòudào rénmen de zhòngshì.

‘After World War I, Van Gogh’s works became fully revealed, and were greatly valued by people.’

Usage: Functions as predicate.

Note: Complimentary in meaning.

Near Synonym: [崭露头角] (zhǎn lù tóu jiǎo 崭露头角) ‘distinguish oneself.’

Antonym: [韬光养晦] (tāo guāng yǎng huì 韬光养晦) ‘conceal one’s abilities and bide one’s time.’

16. 【无可奈何】(無可奈何) wú kě nài hé

The literal meaning is 'helpless; have no alternative; there's no way out.'

Example 1: 他无可奈何地说: “对不起, 这件事我帮不了你。”

Tā wúkě nài hé de shuō: “Duìbuqǐ, zhè jiàn shì wǒ bāng bùliǎo nǐ.”

‘Having no alternative, he said: “I’m sorry, I can’t help you with this.”’

Example 2: 辛普森案判决以后, 虽然不少人都感到不满, 但是无可奈何。

Xīnpǔsēn àn pànjúé yǐhòu, suīrán bù shǎo rén dōu gǎndào bùmiǎn, dànshì wúkě nài hé.

‘After the verdict of the Simpson case, although a good number of people felt unsatisfied, there was nothing they could do about it.’

Usage: Functions mainly as predicate or adverbial modifier.

Near Synonyms: [爱莫能助] (ài mò néng zhù 愛莫能助) ‘want to help but not be in a position to do so,’ [无计可施] (wú jì kě shī 無計可施) ‘at one’s wit’s end.’

Antonym: [花样百出] (huā yàng bǎi chū 花樣百出) ‘one pattern or scheme after another.’

17. 【莫名其妙】(莫名其妙) mò míng qí miào

The literal meaning is ‘no one can explain it; unable to make head or tail of something; be baffled.’

Example 1: 他一会儿说这样做, 一会儿说那样做, 大家都感到莫名其妙。

Tā yíhuìr shuō zhèyàng zuò, yíhuìr shuō nàyàng zuò, dàjiā dōu gǎndào mò míng-qí miào.

‘One moment he said to do it this way. The next moment he said to do it that way. Everyone felt baffled.’

Example 2: 我的手机莫名其妙地不见了。

Wǒ de shǒujī mò míng-qí miào de bú jiàn le.

‘My cell phone inexplicably disappeared.’

Usage: Functions mainly as predicate, complement, or adverbial modifier; can also serve as attribute. Common combinations include 让人~ (ràng rén ~ 讓人~), 感到~ (gǎndào~), and ~的话 / 病 (~ de huà/bìng 的話 / 病).

Note: There is an alternative form 莫明其妙 (mò míng qí miào).

Near Synonym: [匪夷所思] (fěi yí suǒ sī 匪夷所思) ‘who would have thought it, unthinkable.’

Antonym: [洞若观火] (dòng ruò guān huǒ 洞若觀火) ‘see something as clearly as a blazing fire.’

18. 【自力更生】(自力更生) zì lì gēng shēng

自力 means 'rely on one's own efforts' and 更生 means 'revive, rejuvenate.' The meaning of the whole idiom is 'one's own strength changes one's life – rely on one's own efforts.'

Example 1: 二十世纪六十年代, 中国在失去苏联援助的情况下, **自力更生**, 艰苦奋斗, 在尖端科技方面并没有落后太多。

Èrshí shìjì liùshí niándài, Zhōngguó zài shīqù Sūlián yuánzhù de qíngkuàng xià, zìlì-gēngshēng, jiānkǔ-fèndòu, zài jiānduān kējì fāngmiàn bìng méiyǒu luòhòu tài duō.

'In the 1960s, China – in the situation of having lost the Soviet Union's assistance – relied on its own efforts in its development and struggled arduously, not falling behind too much in the advanced sciences.'

Example 2: 灾区人民**自力更生**, 很快完成了家园的重建工作。

Zāiqū rénmin zìlì-gēngshēng, hěn kuài wánchéng le jiāyuán de chóngjiàn gōngzuò.

'The people of the disaster area relied on their own efforts; they quickly finished the work of reconstructing their homeland.'

Usage: Functions mainly as predicate and adverbial.

Note: Complimentary in meaning. Used mainly in slogans, often together with other idioms such as 艰苦奋斗 (jiān kǔ fèn dòu 艱苦奮鬥) 'arduous struggle,' 艰苦创业 (jiān kǔ chuàng yè 艱苦創業) 'experience great difficulty in starting an undertaking,' or 奋发图强 (fèn fā tú qiáng 奮發圖強) 'work hard for the strength and prosperity of the country.'

Near Synonyms: [自强不息] (zì qiáng bù xī 自強不息) 'strive constantly for self-improvement,' [自食其力] (zì shí qí lì 自食其力) 'oneself eat one's own strength – support oneself by one's own labor.'

Antonyms: [仰人鼻息] (yǎng rén bí xī 仰人鼻息) 'rely on other people's noses for breath – slavishly dependent,' [寄人篱下] (jì rén lí xià 寄人籬下) 'live as a dependent or parasite in another's home – rely or depend on others.'

19. 【一如既往】(一如既往) yì rú jì wǎng

既往 means 'formerly, in the past.' The meaning of the whole idiom is 'exactly the same as in the past, as before.'

Example 1: 中国将**一如既往地**加强同非洲国家的友好关系。

Zhōngguó jiāng yìrújìwǎng de jiāqiáng tóng Fēizhōu guójiā de yǒuhǎo guānxi.

'China will, exactly as in the past, strengthen friendly relations with African nations.'

Example 2: 今天，那位老教授一如既往地提前十分钟来到了教室。

Jīntiān, nà wèi lǎo jiàoshòu yìrújìwǎng de tíqián shí fēn zhōng láidào le jiàoshì.

‘Today that old professor, exactly as in the past, came to the classroom ten minutes ahead of time.’

Usage: Functions as adverbial, often preceded by 将 (jiāng 將) ‘will.’

Near Synonyms: [一成不变] (yì chéng bú biàn 一成不變) ‘fixed and unalterable,’ [始终如一] (shǐ zhōng rú yī 始終如一) ‘beginning and end like one – consistent, constant.’

Antonyms: [一反常态] (yì fǎn cháng tài 一反常態) ‘depart from one’s normal behavior,’ [朝三暮四] (zhāo sān mù sì 朝三暮四) ‘fickle and inconstant.’

20. 【扑朔迷离】(撲朔迷離) pū shuò mí lí

扑朔 means ‘move all over the place’ and 迷离 means ‘dim, blurred.’ The original meaning of this idiom had to do with the difficulty of distinguishing between male and female rabbits (see note below). The extended meaning is ‘things are intricate and complicated and difficult to distinguish clearly.’ A freer translation is ‘confusing, hard to distinguish, all mixed up.’

Example 1: 中国古典长篇小说的线索往往比较多，因此故事情节扑朔迷离。

Zhōngguó gǔdiǎn chángpiān xiǎoshuō de xiànsuǒ wǎngwǎng bǐjiào duō, yīncǐ gùshi qíngjié pūshuò-mílí.

‘There are often rather many threads in Classical Chinese novels; because of this, the plot of the story is confusing.’

Example 2: 这次多方谈判，由于每一方都尽力维护自己的利益，所以谈判的前景扑朔迷离。

Zhè cì duōfāng tánpàn, yóuyú měi yì fāng dōu jìnlì wéihù zìjǐ de lìyì, suǒyǐ tánpàn de qiánjǐng pūshuò-mílí.

‘In the current multiparty negotiations, because each side is trying its best to protect its own interests, the prospects for the negotiations are murky.’

Usage: About half the time functions as predicate, often occurring at the end of a sentence. Can also serve as attributive.

Allusion: A Northern Dynasties folk song, *Mulan Ci*, sang the praises of the young woman Mulan, who joined the military on behalf of her father. Mulan had been in the military for twelve years and involved in many military exploits when she was finally recognized by her comrades as being a woman. Her explanation then was this: “The male rabbit’s foot moves all over, the female rabbit’s eyes are dim. When both rabbits are running on the ground, how can one distinguish whether they are male or female?” The meaning of this is that when rabbits are grabbed by their ears so they can’t move, the male rabbit’s feet will keep moving

wildly, while the female rabbit's eyes will half close, which makes it easy to distinguish males from females. But when two rabbits – one male, one female – are moving next to each other, how can one easily distinguish male from female? The story of Mulan spread far and wide in China; in 1998 in the U.S., the Disney film studios produced the animated film *Mulan*, which was based on this story.

Antonym: [一清二楚] (yī qīng èr chǔ 一清二楚) 'completely clear.'

21. 【不可思议】(不可思議) bù kě sī yì

The whole idiom means 'unthinkable, inconceivable, unimaginable.'

Example 1: 她一百米跑了九秒七零，简直太不可思议了！

Tā yībǎimǐ pǎole jiǔ miǎo qīlíng, jiǎnzhí tài bùkě-sīyì le!

'She ran 100 meters in 9.7 seconds, which is simply inconceivable!'

Example 2: 他的性格有一点儿奇怪，有时候会做出一些不可思议的事情。

Tā de xìnggé yǒu yìdiǎnr qíguài, yǒu shíhòu huì zuò chū yìxiē bùkě-sīyì de shìqíng.

'His temperament is a little strange; sometimes he does unthinkable things.'

Usage: Functions mainly as predicate and attributive.

Near Synonym: [匪夷所思] (fěi yí suǒ sī 匪夷所思) 'who would have thought it, unthinkable.'

22. 【坚持不懈】(堅持不懈) jiān chí bú xiè

坚持 means 'persist' and 懈 means 'relax, let up.' A literal translation of this idiom is 'persist and not relax.' Freer translations are 'persist, persevering, unremitting.'

Example 1: 不管社会怎么变化，都应该坚持不懈地抓好青少年的思想工作。

Bùguǎn shèhuì zěnmě biànhuà, dōu yīnggāi jiānchí-búxiè de zhuā hǎo qīngshàonián de sīxiǎng jiàoyù gōngzuò.

'No matter how society changes, we should persevere without letting up in getting a good grip on the work of the youth's ideological education.'

Example 2: 经过坚持不懈的努力，艾滋病蔓延的势头终于被遏制了。

Jīngguò jiānchí-búxiè de nǔlì, àizībìng mànyán de shìtóu zhōngyú bèi èzhì le.

'Through persistent efforts, the momentum of the spread of AIDS has finally been contained.'

Usage: Functions mainly as adverbial; can also serve as attributive.

Note: Complimentary in meaning.

Near Synonyms: [持之以恒] (chí zhī yǐ héng 持之以恒) ‘persevere,’ [锲而不舍] (qiè ér bù shě 锲而不舍) ‘work with perseverance.’

Antonyms: [浅尝辄止] (qiǎn cháng zhé zhǐ 浅尝辄止) ‘shallowly taste then stop – stop after gaining a little knowledge of something,’ [半途而废] (bàn tú ér fèi 半途而废) ‘give up halfway.’

23. 【供不应求】(供不應求) gōng bù yìng qiú

供 means ‘supply,’ 应 means ‘respond to,’ and 求 means ‘demand.’ A literal translation of the whole idiom is ‘supply does not respond to demand,’ with freer translations being ‘supply does not meet demand’ and ‘in short supply.’

Example 1: 在美国，医护人员供不应求。

Zài Měiguó, yīhù rényuán gōngbùyìngqiú.

‘In the U.S., medical personnel are in short supply.’

Example 2: 据说那种中药能够治疗艾滋病，于是大家纷纷抢购，那种中药一夜之间出现了供不应求的情况。

Jùshuō nà zhǒng zhōngyào nénggòu zhìliáo àizībìng, yúshì dàjiā fēnfēn qiǎnggòu, nà zhǒng zhōngyào yí yè zhījiān chūxiànle gōngbùyìngqiú de qíngkuàng.

‘It’s said that kind of Chinese medicine can cure AIDS, so everyone one after another rushed off to purchase it; regarding that kind of Chinese medicine, overnight there emerged a situation of supply not meeting demand.’

Usage: Functions mainly as predicate and attributive. As attributive, usually followed by 局面 (júmiàn) ‘situation,’ 情况 (qíngkuàng 情况) ‘circumstances,’ or 现象 (xiàxiàng 现象) ‘phenomenon.’

Near Synonym: [僧多粥少] (sēng duō zhōu shǎo 僧多粥少) ‘monks many but gruel little – not enough to go around.’

Antonym: [供过于求] (gōng guò yú qiú 供過於求) ‘supply exceeds demand.’

24. 【行之有效】(行之有效) xíng zhī yǒu xiào

行 means ‘put into practice,’ 之 means ‘it,’ and 效 means ‘effect, efficiency.’ A literal translation of the whole idiom is ‘put it into practice having effect or efficiency.’ Freer translations include ‘implement with efficiency’ and ‘efficient.’

Example 1: 这是一套行之有效的实验方法，很多大实验室都使用过，从来没有出现过错误。

Zhè shì yí tào xíngzhī-yǒuxiào de shíyàn fāngfǎ, hěn duō dà shíyànshì dōu shǐyòngguo, cónglái méiyǒu chūxiànguò cuòwù.

‘This is a very effective method of experimentation; many large laboratories have used it; mistakes have never occurred.’

Example 2: 专家呼吁，有关部门应该采取**行之有效**的政策来切实保护农民工的权利。

Zhuānjiā hūyù, yǒuguān bùmén yīnggāi cǎiqǔ xíngzhī-yǒuxiào de zhèngcè lái qièshí bǎohù nóngmíngōng de quánlì.

‘Experts have appealed that the relevant departments should adopt effective policies to protect, in a practical manner, the rights of migrant workers.’

Usage: Functions mainly as attributive; often followed by nouns such as 办法 (bànfǎ 辦法) ‘method,’ 方法 (fāngfǎ) ‘method,’ 做法 (zuòfǎ) ‘method of doing,’ 措施 (cuòshī) ‘measure,’ and 政策 (zhèngcè) ‘policy.’

Note: Complimentary in meaning.

Near Synonyms: [卓有成效] (zhuó yǒu chéng xiào 卓有成效) ‘with outstanding results, highly effective,’ [屡试不爽] (lǚ shì bù shuǎng 屢試不爽) ‘repeated tests never deviate – effective every time.’

Antonyms: [劳而无功] (láo ér wú gōng 勞而無功) ‘endeavor but have no success – work with no gain.’

25. 【众所周知】(衆所周知) zhòng suǒ zhōu zhī

The literal meaning is ‘as is known to all; it is well-known that; it is common knowledge that. . .’

Example 1: **众所周知**，中国人是很讲究饭桌上的客套的。

Zhòngsuǒzhōuzhī, Zhōngguó rén shì hěn jiǎngjiu fàn zhuō shàng de kètào de.

‘As everyone knows, Chinese people are very particular about etiquette at the dinner table.’

Example 2: 孩子学习外语比成年人学得快，这是**众所周知**的道理。

Háizi xuéxí wàiyǔ bǐ chéngniánrén xué de kuài, zhè shì zhòngsuǒzhōuzhī de dàolǐ.

‘Children learn foreign languages faster than adults – this is a truth that is known to all.’

Usage: In general used at the beginning of sentences or as an attribute.

Note: This is written-style usage.

Near Synonym: [家喻户晓] (jiā yù hù xiǎo 家喻戶曉) ‘known to every family, widely known.’

Antonym: [默默无闻] (mò mò wú wén 默默無聞) ‘unknown to the public.’

26. 【全力以赴】(全力以赴) quán lì yǐ fù

赴 means ‘go.’ A literal translation is ‘with all one’s strength go to some place,’ with a freer translation being ‘put all one’s energy into something, spare no effort.’

Example 1: 面对困难，大家**全力以赴**，终于克服了困难。

Miànduì kùnnán, dàjiā quánlì-yǐfù, zhōngyú kèfúle kùnnán.

'In facing the difficulties, everyone spared no effort, so that in the end they overcame the difficulties.'

Example 2: 中国正在**全力以赴**地进行经济建设，因此一个稳定的国际环境非常重要。

Zhōngguó zhèngzài quánlì-yǐfù de jìnxíng jīngjì jiànshè, yīncǐ yíge wěndìng de guójì huánjìng fēicháng zhòngyào.

'China is putting all her energy into undertaking economic construction; therefore, a stable international environment is very important.'

Usage: Functions as adverbial and predicate.

Note: Somewhat complimentary in meaning.

Near Synonym: [竭尽全力] (jié jìn quán lì 竭盡全力) 'do one's utmost.'

27. 【理所当然】(理所當然) lǐ suǒ dāng rán

理 means '(according to) reason' and 当然 means 'should be like this.' The meaning of the whole idiom is 'of course, naturally, needless to say, it is only right and proper that...'

Example 1: 有钱的人拿出一部分钱来回馈社会，帮助穷人，这是**理所当然**的。

Yǒuqián de rén náchū yíbùfēn qián lái huíkui shèhuì, bāngzhù qióng rén, zhè shì lǐsuǒ-dāngrán de.

'That rich people should take out part of their money to give back to society and help poor people is only right and proper.'

Example 2: 二十一世纪是生物医学的世纪，所以国家在生物医学方面加大投资是**理所当然**的事情。

Èrshíyī shìjì shì shēngwù yīxué de shìjì, suǒyǐ guójiā zài shēngwù yīxué fāngmiàn jiādà tóuzī shì lǐsuǒ-dāngrán de shìqíng.

'The 21st century is the century of biomedicine, so for a country to increase its investment in the area of biomedicine is completely natural.'

Usage: Functions mainly as predicate, adverbial, and attributive.

Near Synonyms: [天经地义] (tiān jīng dì yì 天經地義) 'unalterable principle, entirely justified,' [名正言顺] (míng zhèng yán shùn 名正言順) 'perfectly justifiable.'

28. 【四面八方】(四面八方) sì miàn bā fāng

面 here means 'side' and 方 means 'direction.' The literal meaning of this idiom is 'the four sides and the eight directions,' with a freer translation being 'all directions, all around, far and wide.'

Example 1: 每年的三月，中国的人大代表都会由**四面八方**进入北京，举行一年一次的全国人民代表大会。

Měi nián de sānyuè, Zhōngguó de Réndà Dàibiǎo dōu huì yóu sìmiàn-bāfāng jìn rù Běijīng, jǔxíng yì nián yí cì de Quánguó Rénmín Dàibiǎo Dàhuì.

'In March of every year, representatives from China's National People's Congress enter Beijing from far and wide to hold the annual National People's Congress.'

Example 2: 杭州是中国的旅游胜地，常年吸引**四面八方**的游客前去旅游。

Hángzhōu shì Zhōngguó de lǚyóu shèngdì, chángnián xīyīn sìmiàn-bāfāng de yóukè qiánqù lǚyóu.

'Hangzhou is a famous tourist spot in China; year in and year out it attracts tourists from all over to go there to tour.'

Usage: Functions mainly as object and attributive.

Near Synonym: [五湖四海] (wǔ hú sì hǎi 五湖四海) 'from the five lakes to the four seas – throughout the land.'

29. 【兴致勃勃】(興致勃勃) xìng zhì bó bó

兴致 means 'interest' and 勃勃 means 'full of life, exuberant.' The meaning of the whole idiom is 'full of interest and enthusiasm.'

Example 1: 总理**兴致勃勃**地参观了当地的一所小学并且与小学教师进行了亲切的交谈。

Zǒnglǐ xìngzhì-bóbó de cānguānle dāngdì de yì suǒ xiǎoxué bìngqiè yǔ xiǎoxué jiàoshī jìnxíng qīnqiè de jiāotán.

'Full of enthusiasm, the prime minister visited a local elementary school and engaged in a cordial conversation with the teachers.'

Example 2: 新闻发布会后，总统**兴致勃勃**地邀请客人到他的乡下别墅继续会谈。

Xīnwén fābùhuì hòu, zǒngtǒng xìngzhì-bóbó de yāoqǐng kèrén dào tā de xiāngxià biéshù jìxù huìtán.

'After the news briefing, the prime minister, full of enthusiasm, invited the guests to his country villa to continue the talks.'

Usage: Functions as adverbial, often followed by verbs such as 参观 (cānguān 參觀) 'visit,' 参加 (cānjiā 參加) 'participate in,' 游览 (yóulǎn 遊覽) 'sight-see,' and 访问 (fǎngwèn 訪問) 'visit.'

Note: Complimentary in meaning.

Near Synonym: [兴趣盎然] (xìng qù àng rán 興趣盎然) 'with great interest.'

Antonyms: [无精打采] (wú jīng dǎ cǎi 無精打采) 'listless, in low spirits,' [垂头丧气] (chuí tóu sàng qì 垂頭喪氣) 'hang one's head in dejection.'

30. 【一鸣惊人】(一鸣驚人) yì míng jīng rén

鸣 means ‘cry (of birds)’ and 惊 means ‘surprise.’ A literal translation of the whole idiom is ‘one cry surprises others,’ with freer translations being ‘amaze the world with a single brilliant feat, achieve overnight success.’

Example 1: 她在这次奥运会上一鸣惊人，打破了保持了三十年的世界纪录。

Tā zài zhè cì Àoyùnhuì shàng yì míng jīng rén, dǎ pò le bǎo chí le sān shí nián de shì jiè jì lù.

‘She amazed the world in this Olympic Games; she broke a world record that had held for thirty years.’

Example 2: 我在咖啡店看见了前几天一鸣惊人的女歌手。

Wǒ zài kāfēi diàn kàn jiàn le qián jǐ tiān yì míng jīng rén de nǚ gē shǒu.

‘In a coffee shop I saw the female singer who had shocked the world a few days ago.’

Usage: Functions mainly as predicate; can also serve as attributive and adverbial. Often preceded by 不鸣则已 (bù míng zé yǐ 不鳴則已).

Allusion: In the middle of the 4th century, B.C.E., there was a king in the country of Qi who loved metaphorical language but who frequently indulged himself in pleasure. His country declined and it seemed as though it might soon be conquered by other countries, yet no one dared to try to stop him. One day, a man by the name of Chunyu Kun said to the king: “In our country, there is a big bird which stays in your courtyard, but for three years it has neither flown nor cried. What kind of bird is it?” The king answered, “Once it flies, it will fly high into the sky; once it cries, it will surprise the whole world.” Subsequently, the king began governing his country strictly by law, and ended up making his country the strongest among many. (from “Huaji Liezhuan” in *Records of the Grand Historian*)

Near Synonyms: [一举成名] (yì jǔ chéng míng 一舉成名) ‘one action become famous – achieve instant fame,’ [一步登天] (yí bù dēng tiān 一步登天) ‘one step ascend the sky – attain the highest level in one step’ (derogatory in meaning).

Antonym: [臭名远扬] (chòu míng yuǎn yáng 臭名遠揚) ‘bad reputation widely spread – notorious.’

31. 【想方设法】(想方設法) xiǎng fāng shè fǎ

方 means ‘method,’ 设 means ‘presume, suppose,’ and 法 means ‘way.’ A literal translation is ‘think of methods and presume ways,’ with a freer translation being ‘think of all kinds of ways, try every possible means.’

Example 1: 现在很多国家都想方设法吸引外国的优秀人才前来工作。

Xiànzài hěn duō guójiā dōu xiǎngfāng-shèfǎ xīyǐn wàiguó de yōuxiù réncái qián lái gōngzuò.