

## Native Chinese speakers' perception of Chinese idiom usage by foreign language learners

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### Abstract

This article investigates how a specific group of native Chinese speakers perceive the usage of four-character Chinese idioms, *chengyu*, as social markers employed by foreign learners of Chinese to build their second-culture persona. Specifically, this study examines listeners' perceptions via the Matched Guise Technique, utilizing 18 matched sets of audio recordings of *chengyu* usage in various social situations created by two non-native speakers and one native speaker of Chinese. Listener responses were collected in semi-structured interviews followed by a survey. The method of cognitive interviewing was adopted to collect quantitative data in both procedures to capture the complex cognitive processes underlying native perceptions and rationales in regard to the sociocultural contexts. Interview data and experimental results show that *chengyu* usage impacts social perceptions variably, inhabiting an indexical field of related meanings. Native speakers' perceptions of the social meanings of *chengyu* are context dependent. While speakers' familiarity with Chinese culture, language proficiency, and likability are centrally linked to the usage of *chengyu*, an array of other social meanings associated with it are also presented in the data. Interview data suggests that native Chinese speakers use a stereotypical foreign speakers' image as a frame of reference when deciding which of the many social meanings to assign to a contextualized *chengyu* usage. The predominantly positive evaluation of non-native speakers' appropriate use of *chengyu* provides empirical evidence for the beneficial role of these idiomatic expressions in establishing non-native Chinese learners as effective communicators, especially in formal contexts.

## 1. Introduction

The agentive role of speakers in constructing their own identities in verbal exchanges has become increasingly studied. Studies explore speakers' use of linguistic variations as indexing social objects, such as speech act and stances (Ochs 1992), and identity traits, including membership in a certain social group (Podesva 2006; Podesva, Roberts, & Campbell-Kibler 2001). However, while it is the speakers who take the initiative in choosing the linguistic resources to convey intended social meanings, a successful social performance has to be interpreted by the listeners in desired ways. Understanding a listener's perception and interpretation is central to the function of linguistic variations and its consequences in the negotiation of meanings in language use. It is especially imperative when it comes to communicating in a second cultural environment. When engaging with native speakers of the target language, foreign learners play a vastly different language game than the one they grew up playing in their base culture. Depending on how the native speakers perceive the linguistic variations used by foreign speakers in particular sociocultural contexts; the rules of the new game are sometimes favorable to foreigners and other times disadvantageous to them.

Previous literature on the role of *chengyu*, four-character Chinese idioms, in the development of Chinese language proficiency argues that native Chinese speakers value the appropriate use of *chengyu* by L2 learners as evidence of an intelligent and knowledgeable personal trait, since the use of such elements displays one's familiarity with and respect for the past elegance in the Chinese tradition (Bai 2010; Cui 1997; Jiao, Kubler, & Zhang 2011; Yang 2014). Yet, little empirical evidence has been provided through in-depth investigation in support of, or against, this claim. Two studies provide some supporting evidence for the beneficial role of *chengyu* skills as one aspect of advanced Chinese language capacities. McAloon (2008) shadowed five native English speakers who used Chinese as L2 at advanced levels at their workplace in China and examined their Chinese language usage in the workplace through interviews with them and their Chinese colleagues. His findings revealed that both the English speakers and their native Chinese colleagues believed that advanced Chinese learners can benefit substantially from the ability to use *chengyu* and other cultural references. One Chinese learner explicitly expressed his desire for mastery of *chengyu* and classicisms in speech and writing because "it would improve Chinese people's perception of (the learner)" (2008: 391). Another study capturing professional Chinese language learners' expertise in the workplace in China reveals a similar conclusion from a native Chinese perspective. Zeng (2015) reported that a foreigner's capacity to use *chengyu* and other cultural references in speech is considered impressive by native Chinese speakers and is interpreted as the foreigner's recognition of the richness of the Chinese cultural achievement.

While previous studies report on the general ideology regarding the beneficial role of appropriate *chengyu* usage in establishing advanced L2 learners in meaningful communication in Chinese professional settings, there have been no empirical studies focusing on *chengyu* skill itself. Further inquiries remain unmade about what constitutes "appropriate *chengyu* usage" under different circumstances and to what degree non-native speakers of Chinese can take advantage of these culturally significant idiomatic expressions to negotiate their intentions effectively with their Chinese counterparts. This study intends to fill the gap. Guided and informed by sociolinguistics and social psychological inquiries into language attitudes, this article examines how a group of native speakers of Chinese perceive foreigners' employment of four-character Chinese idioms, as well as the cognitive rationales behind these varied perceptions in different social contexts. This study also aims to contribute to existing discussions on the role

of the listener in constructing social and linguistic identities of others (Bell 2001; Butler 2001; Giles & Powesland 1975).

In the next section, the methods employed in collecting and analyzing the data are described, including the development of the stimuli, the recruitment of participants, the design of the questionnaire-based experiment, and the collection of semi-constructed interview commentary. The third section discusses the native speakers' perceptions of the usage of *chengyu* by foreign learners, as revealed in the experimental data, and utilizes examples from the interviews to illustrate the rationales underlying the pattern found. The last section concludes the article with theoretical and pedagogical implications.

## 2. Methodology

### 2.1 Stimuli

One native speaker (male) and two non-native speakers (male and female) of Chinese were recruited to produce audio stimuli<sup>1</sup> that, during the experiment stage, were played to elicit listener responses. Both of the non-native speakers have been learning Chinese for over 10 years and have reached Advanced High in the OPI test. Each speaker was asked to enact the Chinese scripts involving *chengyu* usage in six sets of social contexts from the most formal (public speech), to less formal (spontaneous conversations in professional settings), to the most casual (spontaneous conversations in casual settings). One important rationale for categorizing the stimuli in this formal/casual dimension is *chengyu*'s significant association with written genres. In Chinese traditions, public speech normally follows a prepared written script, which renders the use of *chengyu* in this setting the closest to those in written texts. Conversation in a professional setting, such as a Q&A during a press conference, allows for more colloquial expressions. Yet the working environment still requires a certain level of formality in terms of discourse. At the casual end of the continuum is daily conversation among friends, which represents a type of casual, colloquial speech.

For each set of audio stimuli of the same message, three variations were created, as shown in Appendix A. One stimulus contains the appropriate use of *chengyu* (in terms of both accuracy and the quantity of *chengyu* tokens)<sup>2</sup> in a specific context. In the other two stimuli, the use of *chengyu* were replaced, respectively, with non-literary language expressing the same meaning in the same context and improper use of *chengyu* (in terms of semantic accuracy, grammatical accuracy, and the number of *chengyu* tokens). All the "appropriate" variations are adapted from authentic Chinese discourse and have been tested in a pilot study for authenticity with native speakers. The "improper" and "none use" variations were created by the researcher. Efforts have been made to include five types of "improper" usage, which are reflective of mistakes made by non-native Chinese learners in using *chengyu*. These include (a) improper use of new Internet idioms in formal discourse; (b) overuse, the compiling of more than two *chengyu* items in one sentence or a short speech; (c) semantic misuse, which refers to the violation of the conventionalized indexical relationship of a *chengyu* item's semantic properties and a given semantic context; (d) grammatical misuse; and (d) inventive use, the appropriation of the original expression by substituting components with new words.

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<sup>1</sup> The focus of this article is on the native Chinese listeners' reactions to the non-native speaker's speech stimuli. While the analysis of listeners' perception of the use of *chengyu* performed by native Chinese speakers will be drawn on later as the baseline, it is not the focus of this article.

<sup>2</sup> The labels "appropriate usage" and "improper usage" are tested in a pilot study based on native Chinese speakers' judgment of the appropriateness of the *chengyu* usage under given contexts.

## 2.2 Participants

Participants recruited in this study are native Chinese speakers who are either in the position to supervise, or work as colleagues of, non-native Chinese speakers in several Chinese organizations in Shanghai and Beijing. Twenty participants were recruited in total, 10 from each city. The reason for this specific participant group is that Chinese supervisors and colleagues are in direct contact with non-native Chinese employees on a daily basis. Therefore, they serve as the most valid evaluators of the Chinese learners' linguistic, professional, and interpersonal performance in a Chinese working environment. Out of the 20 participants, six are males and 14 are females. In terms of age, three participants are in their early 40s and the rest are between 25 and 40. In this study, the gender and age of the participant population are not examined as crucial factors affecting the final results of the study.

## 2.3 Data collection

Participant responses were collected during one-on-one interview sessions, first, in the format of a semi-controlled interview, followed by a survey. During both procedures, cognitive interviewing grounded in the interpretivist framework was utilized to explore how and why the respondents reached those conclusions. Cognitive interview methodology is a qualitative approach that examines the cognitive processes used by respondents as they form answers to survey questions. The underlying assumption is that the respondents' cognitive responses drive the survey responses, and an understanding of cognition is central to understanding the question responses and to justify the validity of the questions (Schwarz 2007; Willis 2005; Miller 2014). In this study, the goal is not so much to reduce problematic questions as it is to gather information about how the respondents interpret the questions and formulate their answers in regard to their own lives, experiences, and perceptions. As noted by Chepp and Gray, individuals' understanding of the social world, in this case both the stimuli and the survey questionnaire, is "filtered through a complex set of interpretations that are variously informed by social experiences and cultural contexts" (2014:8). This set of interpretations may be shaped by social factors, such as age, education level, cultural background, and participants' prior experience (e.g., experience working with/supervising foreigners). The utility of incorporating these interpretivist modes of analysis into this study centers on its potential to represent the complexity of cognitive processes, shaped by broader sociocultural processes and relations.

Semi-controlled interviews were conducted to collect qualitative data on listener reactions to the speakers and listener beliefs about the use of *chengyu* in the given stimuli. The goals for the interviews are (a) to determine the general reactions to the speakers and to collect terms used spontaneously by participants to describe the speakers and (b) to determine the intuition and ideologies regarding the use of *chengyu* and its effect on the evaluation of the speakers' social identity and personal characteristics.

At the beginning of the interview session, in order to emphasize the ethnic and linguistic background of the speakers, the participants were shown a picture of the individual whose voice they were going to hear. Then, they listened to one recording from each of the six sets of stimuli in a random order. Efforts were made to ensure that the stimuli assigned to each participant covered all appropriate use, none-use, and improper use of *chengyu*. After listening to each stimulus, participants were asked to describe the context to check their understanding of the recorded stimuli, specifically the type and formality of each context.

Without being directed to the *chengyu* usage in each stimulus, participants were then asked to give as detailed a description of the speaker as possible based on the recordings and to explain

how they perceived and evaluated the identity and personal characteristics of her/him. This was to investigate whether the participants were able to establish a link between the use of *chengyu* and their perception of the speaker's identity and personal traits. *Process-oriented probes* such as “你□什么会有□□的印象?” (how come you get this impression?), “□什么□么□得?” (why do you feel this way?), and “你是根据什么做出判断的?” (what criteria did you base your judgment on?) were employed to elicit the process by which the respondent calculated his or her answer, decided between alternative answer categories, or made a judgment about the answer.

A survey was conducted following the interview session where participants were asked to listen to the same set of stimuli in the same order again and to rate the speaker in terms of a set of personal traits on a scale of 0 to 4: 0 being the lowest and 4 being the highest. The set of personal traits is illustrated in Table 1. After rating each stimulus, the participants were asked to describe how and why they answered the question the way they did. During this process, in addition to *process-oriented probes*, I also employed *meaning-oriented probes* that centered on respondents' independent interpretation of the terms used to describe the personal traits, such as “受教育水平” (education level), “可信度” (trustworthiness), and “好感度” (likability), as well as the rating scale (0 to 4). The underlying rationale for using *meaning-oriented probes* was to elicit rich, thickly detailed accounts of participants' interpretations of these terms via narratives. As Geertz (1973) argues, meanings are multilayered, and simply describing the surface of an interaction cannot fully extract the “true” meaning of the situation. At the methodological level, both process-oriented and meaning-oriented probes were adopted to elicit a more comprehensive and accurate account of the underlying meaning of the question-response process.

Table 1. Personal traits rated in the survey

Native Speaker	Non-native Speaker
Education level 受教育水平	Education level 受教育水平
Appropriateness 适当得体性	Appropriateness 适当得体性
Linguistic ability to convey ideas □言表达能力	Linguistic ability to convey ideas □言表达能力
Trustworthiness/Pervasiveness 可信度/□服力	Trustworthiness/Pervasiveness 可信度/□服力
Likability 好感度	Likability 好感度
	Chinese language capacity 中文水平
	Knowledge about Chinese culture □中国文化熟知度

The survey instrument utilized, as shown in Appendix B, was designed based on a previous pilot study in which interviews were conducted in a similar way, as described above, but with a

smaller participant pool (N=7). Slight adjustment was made to the choice of wording to improve the fit of the survey questions to the specific population in this study.

Key events from the approximately 20 hours of interviews with the participants were identified and transcribed. In the transcripts, and therefore in this article, the names of the Chinese participants were replaced with English pseudonyms.

### 3. Results

In discussing the results, I will draw from the data collected from both the survey and interview sessions. Introduction to the results of the survey ratings will establish the foundation for the discussion of the rich information discovered from the listener commentary made during the interviews. Since the main purpose of this study is to explore native speakers' perception of foreigners' use of *chengyu*, this section will only focus on the analysis of data pertinent to participant reactions to stimuli produced by the two non-native speakers.

#### 3.1 *Chengyu* usage by non-native speakers in formal contexts

The four sets of stimuli containing variations of *chengyu* usage in formal contexts include an excerpt of a formal speech at the anniversary of the founding of a university, a question asked by a journalist at a press conference, a formal response given at a press conference by a government official, and a conversation over a newly released film during a radio/TV talk show. The categorization of these four contexts as "formal" occasions is based on participants' intuitive responses. Upon hearing each audio excerpt, all of the participants were able to pinpoint the contexts of the stimuli, or at least come up with a context of a similar type and formality. Among the six sets of stimuli, participants in this study generally considered the first four contexts as "formal" and the last two as "casual."

The most obvious pattern that emerges from this set of survey data is the predominantly favorable ratings of the "appropriate use" of *chengyu*. Except for the rating of "education," appropriate use of *chengyu* were evaluated more positively across the board by native Chinese participants, compared to "improper use" and "none-use." This indicates that in formal situations, native speakers of Chinese favor the use of *chengyu* by non-native Chinese speakers that follows the "norms" constructed and abided by native Chinese.

Participants' commentary in the interviews provided further support for this finding. In response to stimuli categorized as "appropriate use," the participants perceived the foreign speaker positively and described the speaker as "well-educated," "knowledgeable about the Chinese language," "very appropriate in terms of language choice in formal situations/able to tailor one's language to a formal situation," and "with perfect choice of word." Many of the participants explicitly commented on the speaker's use of *chengyu* without being prompted to focus on any aspect of the speakers' language. For example, upon hearing the foreign speaker using *chengyu* in a public speech at the anniversary of a university's founding, the first thing participant Sam commented on was the speaker's impressive use of a few *chengyu* items, which to her is an indicator of this foreigner's familiarity with Chinese language and culture, especially given the required level of formality of the context.

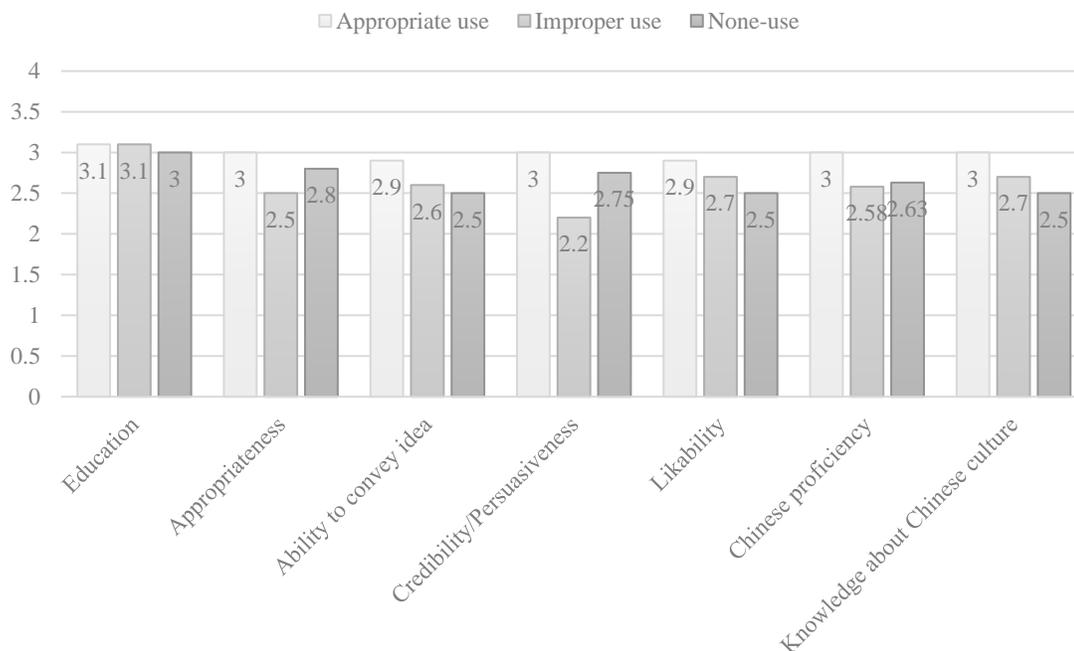


Figure 1. Ratings for Formal contexts (means)

Improper use of four-character Chinese idioms in formal settings seem to have received mixed evaluations. In terms of the speaker’s “appropriateness,” “credibility/persuasiveness,” and “Chinese proficiency,” improper use of *chengyu* were rated lower than none-use. This seems to indicate that under formal situations, if foreigners can’t employ *chengyu* in an appropriate way, using them wrong will do more damage to the aspects of their identities related to “appropriateness,” “credibility/persuasiveness,” and “Chinese proficiency.” Particularly, when asked how trustworthy or convincing the foreign speakers’ improper *chengyu* usage sounded, the participants gave a 2.2 (compared with 3 for “appropriate use” and 2.75 for “none-use”), which is the lowest rating among all non-native stimuli in formal contexts.

In the interviews, another negative attribute the foreign speaker associated with improper *chengyu* usage, including cases of both overuse and incorrect use, emerged from the participant responses. Some participants interpreted the failed attempts to use *chengyu* items correctly as “showing off his Chinese skills” and “trying too hard to impress.” Participant Jake, for example, gave the following commentary:

(Laughter) Foreigners using these literary language sounds so interesting, especially when they use several in a row. It shows that he has a good enough knowledge of Chinese literature to use these accurately. But I think he is kinda showing off, trying too hard to demonstrate his Chinese skills. The reason he needs to use this many *chengyu* is that he is not confident about his command of Chinese. If this were done by a Chinese [speaker], it’s definitely overuse. Considering that he is a foreigner, it is probably because he hasn’t reached the proficiency level to use Chinese autonomously under this [formal] situation. As a result, he tried too hard.

Jake’s comment further reveals another common ideology native Chinese speakers hold in regard to foreigners’ *chengyu* usage. While improper use of *chengyu* performed by native Chinese speakers is recognized as intentional, reflecting certain types of an unfavorable

personality, improper use of *chengyu* performed by non-native speakers of Chinese is always ultimately attributed to foreigners' insufficient Chinese capacity, rather than personality traits. Many remarks from the participant interviews also attest to this observation. That is to say, non-native speakers are being judged and perceived differently from the way native Chinese speakers interpret intention indexed in the same social behaviors of native speakers. Instead, a different set of rules is at work, which centers on the foreigners' Chinese proficiency and knowledge about Chinese culture as perceived by native Chinese speakers. This set of rules subjects foreigners to a stereotypical image based on native speakers' daily encounters with other foreigners speaking Chinese.

The other participant, Chris, who also perceived the improper use of *chengyu* as “showing off,” stated that “Chinese people normally won't dislike foreigners who show off their Chinese. We would just think they are not using it in the most appropriate way at most.” In fact, in the majority of the cases, improper use of *chengyu* doesn't keep the native participants from appreciating the foreign speakers for at least trying to use *chengyu*. Participants generally recognize non-native speakers' effort to learn and employ *chengyu* in formal contexts, despite the mistakes they made, as “it is already very rare and not easy for a foreigner to be able to use (*chengyu*).” This finding is also evidenced by the survey data. In particular, in formal situations, participants gave higher ratings for improper use of *chengyu* than none-use in terms of the speakers' “ability to convey an idea,” “likability,” and “knowledge about Chinese culture.” That is to say, Chinese participants are generally willing to overlook improper usage and link these attempts to use *chengyu* with high ratings of the speakers' likability, language ability to convey ideas clearly, and familiarity with Chinese culture.

### 3.2 *Chengyu* usage by non-native speakers in casual contexts

In this section, I will focus on listener responses to the two sets of *chengyu* stimuli in casual contexts in more detail. These two sets of stimuli exhibit two special cases of *chengyu* usage: inventive use and humorous use. As the following discussion will demonstrate, depending on the specific social context and other information available, the criteria employed by native Chinese speakers to define “appropriate” and “improper” use of *chengyu* vary.

The following discussion also suggests that native Chinese listeners react differently even when hearing the same speaker using the same cue. The inventive use of *chengyu* were interpreted by some participants as appropriate and desirable and by others as improper and evident of insufficient mastery of the appropriate use of *chengyu*.

#### 3.2.1 Inventive use

The set of stimuli involving inventive use of *chengyu* were a conversational exchange between two colleagues, as shown in (1) and (2). Since Chinese culture places great emphasis on a verbatim tradition in the employment of *chengyu* and cultural reference, creative wordplay with Chinese idioms is in most cases perceived negatively by native speakers and in extreme cases is criticized as “disgracing the tradition and purity of the Chinese language” (Mao & Luo 2013). Based on this understanding, the inventive use of the idiom 望子成□ (*lit.* hope for one's son to become a dragon) was originally labeled as “improper use.”

##### (1) Stimulus 5-Appropriate use

同事 A：现在的家长周末都要孩子上补习班，你说是不是太过分了？

Colleague A: Parents nowadays send their kids to cram schools even on weekends, don't you think it is too much?

同事 B: 是有点儿过分。不过现在的家长都望子成龙, 周末让孩子上补习班也可以理解。

Colleague B: It is a bit too much for the kid. But these days parents all hope for the child to become a dragon. It's understandable that they would send their children to cram schools on weekends.

(2) Stimulus 5-Improper (inventive) use

同事 A: 现在的家长周末都要孩子上补习班, 你说是不是太过分了?

Colleague A: Parents nowadays send their kids to cram schools even on weekends, don't you think it is too much?

同事 B: 是有点儿过分。不过现在的家长都望子成硕士, 望子成博士, 周末让孩子上补习班也可以理解。

Colleague B: It is a bit too much for the kid. But these days parents all hope for the children to get a masters degree, and hope for them to get a Ph.D. degree. It's understandable that they would send their children to cram schools on weekends.

The results from the survey and interviews in this study suggest, however, that the inventive use of 望子成□ by non-native speakers was not unanimously taken as negative by the listeners. In the survey, the inventive use of the idiom was even rated higher than the appropriate use in regard to the speakers' "education" and "likability." Interview data with the participants provide a window into the reasoning behind the numbers, showing that Chinese participants in this study developed divergent interpretations over the creative use of 望子成□. Some participants were less tolerant of the inventive use of *chengyu* and stood by the legitimacy of the original 望子成□. Kate, for example, gave the following comments:

His use of “望子成□士, 望子成博士” (*lit.* hope for the children to become a master degree holder, hoping for them to become a Ph.D. degree holder) left me [with] a deep impression. Chinese *chengyu* are “fixed language” after all and have their own set of rules. If you use it like this, it would bother people who are strict, or the older generation.... I feel, or anyone who is relatively particular and strict about the Chinese language will feel [the speakers' creative use] is not a good use of language. This gives me the impression that he (the speaker) lacks sufficient understanding of Chinese culture.

Yet, this type of negative evaluation of the inventive *chengyu* usage was not passed on to the foreign speakers, especially in terms of their likability. Participant commentary during interviews revealed the reason for the high likability rating of inventive use, suggesting that participants have lower expectations of a foreigner's ability to employ *chengyu* in spoken discourse. Even Kate, who clearly perceived the inventive use of *chengyu* as wrong and improper, gave the speaker a 3 on both “likability” and “Chinese proficiency” because “it is already very rare for a foreigner to be able to use the 望子成 X structure in Chinese.”

Among the participants, there were also native speakers who accept wordplay with 望子成□ completely. Max, for example, heard the same cue as Kate did and reacted drastically differently. She smiled upon hearing the foreign speaker using 望子成□士, 望子成博士 and continued to explain that she thought it was “very creative,” “made a lot of sense,” and “definitely a plus.” Another participant, Helen, also said the creative use of *chengyu* demonstrated the foreign speakers' flexibility using language. It also increased Helen's rating for the speaker's language proficiency because it sounded “humorous.” Helen ended up giving 4s across the board for this stimuli, which is the highest ratings she gave for non-native speaker stimuli.

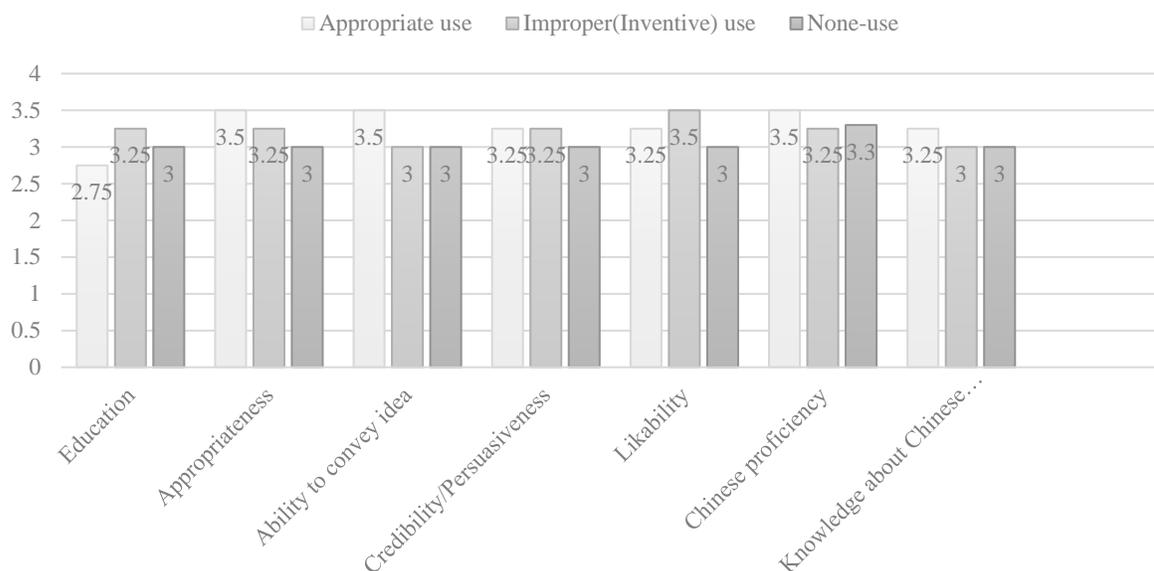


Figure 2. Ratings for inventive use in casual contexts (means)

### 3.2.2 Humorous use

The set of stimuli involving the humorous use of *chengyu* were also part of a conversational exchange between two colleagues, as shown in (3) and (4). Humorous use of *chengyu* in Chinese is a special phenomenon, which normally only works in casual contexts among interlocutors who consider each other as in-groups. Successful performance of the humorous use of *chengyu* is also accompanied by an exaggerated intonation, which is a crucial indicator of the social information intended for the listeners. This can be evidenced by the participant commentary about the humorous use of *chengyu* in stimulus 6 recorded by a native Chinese participant, Sam:

He (the native Chinese speaker) sounds like a hardworking white collar-worker to me.... He employs a humorous intonation here. Had he used a serious tone in this situation, it would [have] read as overly confident, even arrogant.”

In this case, the employment of a humorous intonation played a crucial role in helping the listener construct a social identity of the speaker as “hardworking” instead of “overly confident” and “arrogant.” Overall, combined with an appropriate intonation, native Chinese speakers’ humorous use of *chengyu* in casual contexts is easily recognizable and thus perceived positively as intended.

#### (3) Stimulus 6-Appropriate (humorous) use

同事 A：今天怎么这么用工加班到这么晚啊？

Colleague A: How come you are working overtime and staying until this late today?

同事 B：那可不，我可一直是严格要求自己，对待工作兢兢业业、任劳任怨。

Colleague B: You noticed it! I am always this strict to myself, and assiduous at work, bearing hardship without complaint.

#### (4) Stimulus 6-Improper use (overuse)

同事 A：今天怎么这么用工加班到这么晚啊？

Colleague A: How come you are working overtime and staying until this late today?

同事 B: 那可不, 我可一直是严格要求自己, 对待工作兢兢业业、勤勤恳恳、任劳任怨, 不辞辛劳。

Colleague B: You noticed it! I am always this strict to myself, assiduous, diligent and conscientious at work, bear hardship without complaint, and never shrink from toil and hardship.

The ratings for non-native speakers' humorous use of *chengyu* in casual contexts, however, deviate from the general pattern found in the previous sets of stimuli. By far in both formal contexts and the inventive use in casual contexts, the groups labeled as the “appropriate use” of *chengyu* are rated higher and in general more positive, compared to “improper use” and “none-use.” The same conversation exchanges employing humorous use of *chengyu* are rated much lower when spoken by non-native speakers of Chinese. More specifically, in terms of the foreign speakers' “education level,” “trustworthiness/persuasiveness,” “Chinese proficiency,” and “knowledge about Chinese culture,” this supposedly appropriate use of *chengyu* was rated lower than improper use and none-use.

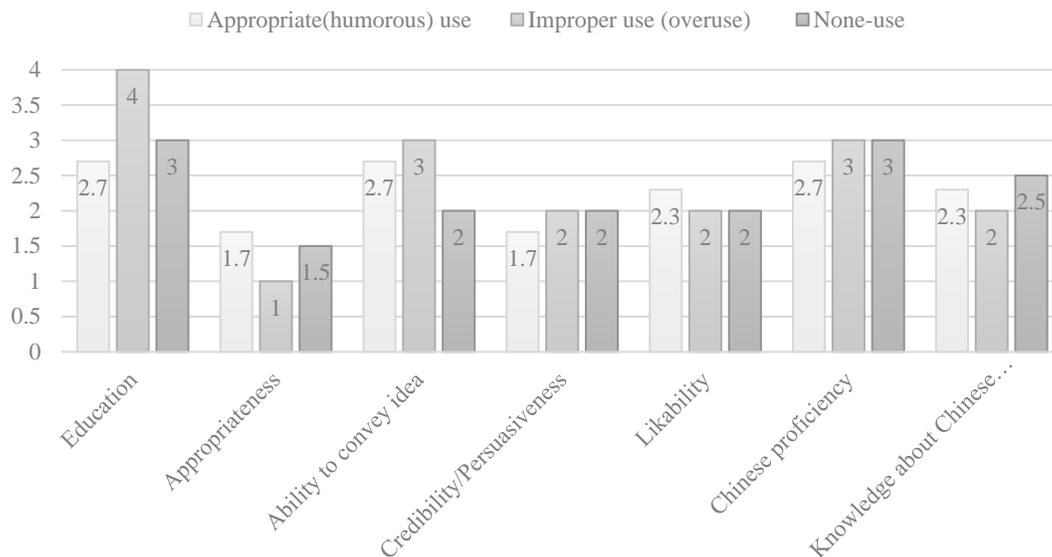


Figure 3. Ratings for humorous use in casual contexts (means)

Close examination of the interview data reveals the reason for this unusually low rating. All of the participants, listening to what was intended to be the non-native speakers' “humorous use” in stimulus 6, failed to recognize its humorous nature. Instead, participants described the use of *chengyu* 兢兢□□ (*lit.* assiduous about work) and 任□任怨 (*lit.* to bear hardship without complaint) in the given casual context as “way too formal,” “overly written-style,” and “excessively textbook-ish.” Chinese participants again attribute this improper use of *chengyu* to the limit of foreigners' Chinese capacity. Carol, for example, gave the following comments on the non-native speaker's failed attempt at the humorous *chengyu* usage:

(Laughter) This must have come from a textbook because it is overly written-style. He (the foreign speaker) would never encounter these words in his daily communication...He strikes me as an earnest Chinese language learner, who, unfortunately, learned a list of Chinese vocabulary

items that is useless. This foreigner lacks real experience talking directly to Chinese people. If this were a native Chinese [speaker], he would have used more spoken language.”

Another participant, Bob, also pointed out during the interview that the given use of 兢兢□□ and 任□任怨 by the foreign speaker deviated from the Chinese way of talking.

If a Chinese [speaker] says it this way, it comes across as a little bit pretentious. So Chinese people normally won't say it like this, unless you want to make a joke. If a foreigner uses the idioms this way, as a listener I think it is acceptable because [I know] there's a limit to his Chinese capacity.

Bob's comment validates the humorous use of *chengyu* in a casual context, however it seems that only native speakers were given the authority to be funny using Chinese idioms. When explicitly asked if he thought the foreign speaker was trying to be humor in this case, Bob didn't hesitate to deny the possibility. In contrast to the well-recognized humorous use of stimulus 6 by the native Chinese speaker, the intended humorous use of the stimulus by a non-native speaker indexed the stereotypical image of an unfortunate Chinese learner with insufficient Chinese ability and knowledge, who mistakenly used overly formal *chengyu* items in casual conversations.

In examining the underlying reasons behind the divergent responses toward humorous *chengyu* usage by native and non-native speakers, the intonation adopted by both should be taken into consideration. During the recording of the stimuli, the two non-native speakers were instructed to use a humorous intonation. However, it should be noted that the phonetic properties of their stimuli are by no means comparable to that of a stimulus pronounced by a native Chinese speaker. Therefore, without further examination of the phonetic details of the two groups of stimuli, the evidence is inclusive on the degree of influence a humorous intonation had on participants' failed recognition of the non-native humorous intention. Further inquiries remain to be made about whether the participants' awareness of the speaker as a non-native speaker of Chinese could have contributed, or led, to this perception. However, in this study, non-native-like intonation is part of the foreignness on which native Chinese participants' based their judgment. Therefore, it is valid to draw conclusions based on the current data so long as the limitation is clearly described.

## 4. Conclusions

### 4.1 Theoretical implications

The analysis of the results in last section demonstrates that perceptions of the social meanings of *chengyu* are context dependent. The formal/casual dimension and the nativeness of the speaker, for example, are both crucial factors for listeners in deciding the legitimacy of a certain *chengyu* usage. Data collected in this study indicates that appropriate employment of *chengyu* by non-native Chinese speakers is evaluated positively in highly formal situations, while similar usage is evaluated poorly in extremely casual contexts. Likewise, the humorous use of *chengyu* performed by a native Chinese speaker is easily recognizable and approved of by Chinese listeners, while the same use of *chengyu* performed by a non-native speaker failed to be interpreted as intended for a humorous rhetorical effect.

*Chengyu's* contextual dependence presents a problem for understanding the social meanings of linguistic variations in general. As suggested by the empirical data collected through interviews, speakers' familiarity with Chinese cultural, language proficiency, and likability seem

to be centrally linked to the use *chengyu*, whether appropriately or improperly, meaning that these categories were intuitively activated the most by participants. At the same time, participants presented an array of other social meanings associated with the use of *chengyu*. Even the exact same cue might elicit different participant responses, as suggested by the case of inventive use discussed in the last section. To properly capture and account for this complex picture, I borrow Eckert's (2008) concept of an indexical field, "a constellation of ideologically related meanings, any one of which can be activated in the situated use of the variable," as a solution. This notion of an indexical field indicates a more complex and interdependent relationship among *chengyu* usage and its potential social meanings. Instead of indexing one particular meaning, *chengyu* usage is tied to a network of related concepts. Depending on the availability of a number of contextual and social information as picked up by the listener, any of the qualities could have been assigned to a given context.

The remaining question, which is key to understanding how a given use of variables play out, is how do listeners decide which of the many indexed meanings they will assign to a given use of *chengyu*. As evident in participants' explicit comments in this study, listeners develop a perception of the social identity of the speaker based on (1) the rich information embodied in the immediately available speech signal, such as the nativeness of the speaker, as well as semantic and pragmatic content, and (2) participants' independent knowledge about "the speaker" from previous experience.

In this case, native Chinese speakers create a stereotypical "foreign speaker" image based on their daily encounters with other foreigner speaking Chinese and subject their perceptions of the specific non-native speaker to this stereotype. In this stereotype, non-native speakers are depicted as a homogeneous group of cultural outsiders with limited command of the Chinese language and cultural knowledge. Native Chinese participants constantly adjust their own expectations using the stereotype as a frame of reference when they make sense of the individual foreigner's performance immediately available. Any unusual performance that deviates from the stereotype in either direction is beyond recognition by the native Chinese speaker. On the one hand, foreigners are not recognized as agentively employing linguistic variations to construct their own identity. Improper linguistic performances by non-native speakers are predominantly attributed to their lack of linguistic and cultural capacity. On the other hand, some explicit comments suggest that Chinese listeners intuitively refuse to recognize that non-native speakers might be also capable of native-like use of *chengyu*. For example, when responding to a foreigner's appropriate use of *chengyu* in formal setting, participant Carol insisted that this non-native speaker was performing from a well-written script by a native speaker because "the choice of wording is too perfect" for a non-native speaker to be able to achieve.

In conclusion, this article has shown that *chengyu* usage by non-native speakers can carry social meanings that are interpretable by native listeners, although the interpretation is context dependent. Survey and interview data indicates that foreigners' *chengyu* usage can be thought of as residing in an indexical field of interrelated and interdependent social meanings at the center of which are speakers' Chinese proficiency, cultural knowledge, and overall likability. Both information embodied in the linguistic signals and listener's stereotypical knowledge about "the speaker" from previous experience influences how one, or a few, of the many constructs in the indexical field are linked to a given use of *chengyu* by the listeners.

## 4.2 Pedagogical implications

Specific patterns from the survey and interview data also shed light on the pedagogical aspects of the issue. The predominantly positive evaluations of the non-native Chinese speakers' appropriate *chengyu* usage over improper use and none-use provides empirical evidence for the beneficial role of *chengyu* in establishing non-native Chinese learners as effective communicators, especially in formal contexts. While improper use of *chengyu* are immediately noticeable to native speakers of Chinese, they are more than often interpreted as evidence of a hardworking foreign learner of Chinese, who is making an effort to learn *chengyu* and was viewed as likable by the Chinese participants in this study. These findings provide pedagogical justification for the teaching and learning of *chengyu* as an important indicator of advanced Chinese proficiency, familiarity with Chinese culture, and likable personality traits.

Another broader pedagogical proposition implied by this discussion addresses the importance of gaining an accurate understanding of native speaker expectations for foreign language learners. When engaging in the second language cultural environment, a successful performance by a non-native speaker has to be taken up by native speakers in the intended way. This study has shown that native Chinese speakers develop a stereotypical way of perceiving a Chinese-speaking foreigner, which evidently affects their perception and evaluation of specific *chengyu* usage provided in the experiment. Some aspects of this stereotypical way of thinking are captured here, which provide suggestions for how foreign learners of Chinese should approach *chengyu* in certain contexts at a micro level. For example, caution should be exercised when using the humorous use of *chengyu*. As indicated by the data presented, foreigners' attempts to employ *chengyu* in a humorous way are less recognizable by native Chinese speakers and are often mistaken as a poor command of Chinese. Further studies are needed to reveal more features of native Chinese speakers' stereotypical understanding about Chinese-speaking foreigners. Such an understanding benefits scholars, educators and learners of Chinese who share interests in the effective negotiation of intentions in cross-cultural communications.

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## Appendix A.

	<b>Casual Context</b>
Appropriate Usage	<p><b>Context:</b> Two close colleagues having a casual conversation about Chinese parenting style.</p> <p>同事 A：□在的家□周末都要孩子上□□班，你□是不是太□分了？            Colleague A: Parents nowadays send their kids to cram schools even on weekends, don't you think it is too much?            同事 B：是有点儿□分。不□□在的家□都望子成□，周末□孩子上□□班也可以理解。            Colleague B: It is a bit too much for the kid. But these days parents all <u>hope for the child to become a dragon</u>. It's understandable that they would send their children to cram schools on weekends.</p>
Improper Usage	<p>同事 A：□在的家□周末都要孩子上□□班，你□是不是太□分了？            Colleague A: Parents nowadays send their kids to cram schools even on weekends, don't you think it is too much?            同事 B：是有点儿□分。不□□在的家□都望子成□士，望子成博士，周末□孩子上□□班也可以理解。            Colleague B: It is a bit too much for the kid. But these days parents all <u>hope for the children to get a masters degree, and hope for them to get a Ph.D. degree</u>. It's understandable that they would send their children to cram schools on weekends.</p>
None	<p>同事 A：□在的家□周末都要孩子上□□班，你□是不是太□分了？            Colleague A: Parents nowadays send their kids to cram schools even on weekends, don't you think it is too much?            同事 B：是有点儿□分。不□□在的家□都希望孩子能有出息，成□出色的人才，周末□孩子上□□班也可以理解。            Colleague B: It is a bit too much for the kid. But these days parents all <u>hope for the children to become successful and excellent talents</u>. It's understandable that they would send their children to cram schools on weekends.</p>

## Appendix B.

## Survey Instrument

Excerpt 1<sup>3</sup>

## 片段一

This is Bob :

You can listen to the recording as many times as you like. Based on what you hear in the recording and your impression of the individual, rate his performance by the following categories on a scale of 0-4, 0 being the lowest and 4 highest. You will be asked to justify your evaluation.

□是 Bob 的一段□音。如果需要可以反复多次重听□段□音。根据你□听到的，□根据你□□□者的印象，就以下方面□他□行□分（0-4），并□□解□原因。

	0=很低	1=□低	2=平均水平	3=□高	4=很高
□ 受教育水平 (Education level)	<input type="radio"/>				
□ 适当得体性 (Appropriateness)	<input type="radio"/>				
□ □言表达能力 (Linguistic skills to convey ideas)	<input type="radio"/>				
□ 可信度/□服力 (Trustworthiness/ Persuasiveness)	<input type="radio"/>				
□ 好感度 (Likability)	<input type="radio"/>				
*□ 中文水平 (Chinese proficiency)	<input type="radio"/>				
*□ □中国文化熟知度 (Knowledge about Chinese culture)	<input type="radio"/>				

<sup>3</sup> During the data collection, only Chinese version of the survey were provided to the participants. English translations are provided here for the readers of this article.

**Excerpt 2**

## 片段二

This is Xiao Ming :

You can listen to the recording as many times as you like. Based on what you hear in the recording and your impression of the individual, rate his performance by the following categories on a scale of 0-4, 0 being the lowest and 4 highest. You will be asked to justify your evaluation.

□是小明的一段□音。如果需要可以反复多次重听□段□音。根据你□听到的，□根据你□□□者的印象，就以下方面□他□行□分（0-4），并□□解□原因。

	0=很低	1=□低	2=平均水平	3=□高	4=很高
□ 受教育水平 (Education level)	<input type="radio"/>				
□ 适当得体性 (Appropriateness)	<input type="radio"/>				
□ □言表达能力 (Linguistic skills to convey ideas)	<input type="radio"/>				
□ 可信度/□服力 (Trustworthiness/ Persuasiveness)	<input type="radio"/>				
□ 好感度 (Likability)	<input type="radio"/>				