

CHÉNGYŪ 成语 IN ADVERTISING: CONVENTIONAL USE AND *AD HOC* MODIFICATIONS IN WESTERN PROMOTIONAL CAMPAIGNS FOR THE CHINESE MARKET

SERGIO CONTI, CHIARA PICCININI

UNIVERSITÀ DEGLI STUDI ROMA TRE, UNIVERSITÀ CATTOLICA DEL SACRO CUORE
sergio.conti@uniroma3.it, chiara.piccinini@unicatt.it

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This small-scale exploratory study seeks to investigate the use of Chinese idioms (*chéngyǔ* 成语) in the advertising messages of Western brands directed to the Chinese market, with particular reference to *ad hoc* modifications of their original form or meaning. To this end, we analyzed a small corpus of 40 promotional campaigns collected between 2019 and 2022 from the most popular social media in China. Preliminary evidence shows that *chengyu* are consistently and consciously used in Western campaigns, suggesting the companies' willingness to adapt to Chinese linguistic and cultural references to promote their products. However, the use of *chengyu* seems not to be deployed at its full potential, the most common type of modifications being limited to phonetic substitution. Only few, remarkable exceptions are found to creatively combine a variety of modification strategies. These, skillfully complemented by visual information, are able to obtain extremely captivating and communicatively effective results.

Keywords: *chengyu*, Advertising Language, Chinese Idioms, Marketing Communication

1. Introduction

This contribution aims to explore the use of Chinese four-character idioms (*chéngyǔ* 成语)¹ in the advertisements of non-Chinese multinational companies that often adapt their entire advertising campaigns to the local market in order to adhere to its linguistic and cultural norms and conventions, ultimately appealing to Chinese-speaking consumers. Particularly, the analysis is aimed at observing the *ad hoc* modifications that idiomatic forms undergo, the themes and values they convey, and the communicative effects they achieve, focusing on the promotional campaigns created by Western (Europe- and North America-based) brands.

¹ In this paper, all in-text Chinese words and expressions are presented in simplified characters (*jiǎntǐzì* 简体字), preceded by a full *Pīnyīn* 拼音 transcription and followed by an English translation in brackets. In order to increase readability, for frequently recurring words (e.g., *chengyu*), the characters and tones marks are only included with their first occurrence.

Due to their linguistic and cultural relevance, *chengyu* constitute an important subgroup of Chinese idiomatic expressions (Conti 2019) and are widely employed in Chinese advertising communication. As underlined by many scholars (e.g., Chen 2006; Gao 2008; Jiang 2004; Lu, Xue 2013; Ren 2013), their conciseness, vividness, incisiveness, and familiarity, as well as their strong link to Chinese traditional culture, all contribute to make advertising messages remarkable and effective. To date, however, no previous studies have investigated the extent to which Western brands employ *chengyu* to promote their products on the Chinese market. Our contribution is a preliminary attempt to compensate this void. To this end, we adopted an exploratory, corpus-driven approach and analyzed a selection of promotional campaigns launched by major Western European and North American brands on the most popular social media platforms in China.

The paper is organized as follows: in Section 2, we briefly outline the previous literature on the main topics of interest for our study, namely, the development of advertising language in China in the last decades (§2.1, §2.2), the relevance of four-character units in Modern Chinese, the (tentative) definition of ‘core’ *chengyu* and their flexible use in different contexts (§2.3), and the use of *chengyu* in advertisements (§2.4). The research design is described in Section 3, while Section 4 reports the results of our analysis, both quantitative (§4.1) and qualitative (§4.2). In this section, we also present and discuss a selection of representative examples, focusing on the most frequent uses and modification strategies that emerged from our data, as well as some particularly noteworthy cases of hybrid modifications. Lastly, in Section 5 we discuss the main implications and limits of this preliminary investigation.

2. Literature review

2.1 Development of the advertising industry in China: a brief overview

“The production of advertisements is inevitably situated in a particular socio-cultural context” (Wu, Li 2019, 437), and the development of Chinese advertising is closely intertwined with the profound cultural, ideological, and socio-economic changes that took place in the contemporary Chinese society. A detailed account in this regard is provided by Ganesini (2007). According to the author, the advertising industry in China went through a period of progressive eclipse during the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976). In those years, advertisements were criticized as a “capitalist manifestation of waste and corruption” (*zīběn zhǔyì fǔxiǔ hé làngfèi de biǎoxiàn* 资本主义腐朽和浪费的表现): both the brands and the products that were already on the market became ‘problematic’ and had to change their names or were withdrawn from shops.

After Deng Xiaoping’s reforms and the re-opening of the Chinese market to the outside world in the ’80s, advertisements were re-introduced in the main communication channels and new promotion agencies opened to develop promotional campaigns for local and foreign products. At the beginning, mass communication campaigns were not fully developed, and the majority of advertisements were created by the government to spread

propaganda messages². The first policies that regulated advertisements were promulgated in 1984 and tried to protect the ideology of the Party in order not to ‘pollute’ people with capitalistic values. These attempts of the Chinese government to protect people from the spread of consumeristic values were all unsuccessful and all kinds of products started to be promoted on the most common channels of communication, including television, radio, posters, and social media platforms as soon as the Internet and mobile phones spread to the public starting from the new millennium.

According to Wu and Lin (2012), in the last forty years, from the ’80s to the 21st century, advertising in China has changed consistently in terms of the conveyed values: from the embedding of political discourse, mainly aimed at delivering moral and propagandistic messages, it has evolved to consumer-centered private discourse. Today, symbolic values such as ‘distinction’, ‘hedonism’, and ‘self-realization’ are widely embedded in advertising messages to emphasize modernization and globalization (Wu, Li 2019, 437). These values are transmitted through a slogan and a synthetic message, with a specifically designed theme of dissemination based on key cultural concepts of the Chinese culture, that are usually implicit in the message conveyed to the public³. Obviously, language was also affected by these changes, moving from a mainly informative to a more engaging style (Wu, Li 2019) that mixes vernacular and elegant registers and is heavily influenced by other languages, especially English (Wu, Lin 2012).

In this regard, a relatively recent phenomenon is that of glocalization, whereby consumers “appropriate the meanings of global brands to their own ends, creatively adding new cultural associations, dropping incompatible ones and transforming others to fit into local cultural and lifestyle patterns” (Wu, Li 2019, 439). These attempts for a ‘cultural fit’ result in a global-local fusion that mixes global appeals such as ‘modernity’, ‘pleasure’, and ‘individualism’ with local linguistic appeals in the form of brand names, headlines, and slogans (Wu 2008; see also Kim et al. 2020).

2.2 Chinese advertising language

The general features of advertisements are preciseness, conciseness, vividness, and novelty: according to Shirinbojevna (2020), these are essential to come up with unusual messages that can attract the consumer’s attention and to ensure that the product comes to mind when they hear or read that advertisement. These general characteristics have become part of the Chinese advertising language since the development of advertising agencies at the

² Although the so-called ‘propaganda or social advertisements’ (*gōngyì guǎnggào* 公益广告) and commercial advertisements (*shāngyè guǎnggào* 商业广告) both have common people as their interlocutors, they deeply differ as far as their aims, objectives, and approach are concerned. Social advertising operates in the interest of the public and aims to build society through the dissemination, in propositional or admonition form, of issues of public interest, which may range from the moral, ethical, religious to behavioral spheres suitable for the positive advancement of society (Gao 1999, 11; Puppin 2005).

³ In anthropological and ethnolinguistic studies, a cultural concept is a linguistic reflection of certain cultural values, that define and reveal people’s conceptualization of their universe (see Silverstein 2004; Wierzbicka 1997). By ‘key cultural concepts’ we refer to those concepts which pertain to the nuclear values of a given culture.

beginning of the 21st century, when the Internet and social media platforms became the most used means of communication for the advertising industry (Cao, Gao 2009; Che, Ip 2018; Chen, Cheung 2022).

Advertising language in the Chinese environment employs the described linguistic features to refer to a content, a subject, and to interlocutors that have specific characteristics, depending on the product they want to promote. These features are based on key cultural concepts that are shared by the recipients of the advertising message and are usually implicit in the message conveyed to the public, with the specific purpose of convincing the users to buy the product (Cao, Gao 2009).

As summarized by Wu and Li (2019), many studies have tried to identify the linguistic features of Chinese advertisements at the phonological, the lexicogrammatical, and the rhetorical level. These include phonological repetitions, the frequent use of evaluative adjectives, the absence of grammatical morphemes (e.g., particles and aspect markers), and the widespread presence of puns, literary parallelisms, vernacular expressions, and, most importantly for the purposes of the present study, idioms. In fact, the main distinguishing features of *chengyu*, particularly their conciseness, vividness, cultural relevance, and multi-layered meaning, perfectly satisfy the needs of marketing communication, making *chengyu* extremely suitable to promotional campaigns (e.g., Chen 2006; Liu 2012; Lu, Xue 2013; Ren 2013; Sun, Hou 1996). For this reason, they have been extensively used in advertising language since the opening of the Chinese market to the world and Western brands have made use of these idiomatic forms since they have started to produce *ad hoc* promotional campaigns for the Chinese public.

2.3 Four-character units and *chengyu*

Considered that conciseness is a core characteristic of Chinese advertisements, a common linguistic feature is the use of four-character sequences. Being “an aesthetic and intrinsic element of what we call the languages’ expressive melody” (Yip, Rimmington 2021, 287), these quadrisyllabic patterns constitute an integral and conventionalized part of the Chinese lexicon.

Generally speaking, four-character structures are characterized by the combination of two disyllabic words, used to convey a quick and ready-to-understand message (Yip, Rimmington 2021). Similar to *chengyu* in form (see *infra*), they can be distinguished from conventionalized idioms in that they are not established expressions; rather, they are arbitrarily put together for rhythmic purposes, that is, “they may be readily coined anew when necessary to introduce fresh ideas using existing formulations while satisfying the writer’s instinctive sense of rhythm in a particular passage” (Yip, Rimmington 2021, 288).

Chengyu, a subgroup of Chinese idioms or *shúyǔ* 熟语 (Conti 2019; Sun 1989; Yao 2012), constitute a conventionalized manifestation of native speakers’ preference for quadrisyllabic units: they are rooted in the long Chinese literary tradition and can be used in all genres and registers, from oral to written texts. For this reason, they possess a considerable stylistic, rhetoric, aesthetic, and cultural value (Conti 2019). Despite their relevance and frequency, there is still no consensus among scholars on how to define *chengyu* (Conti

2019; 2020a). Following Hu (2015), Conti (2020a) proposed instead to refer to ‘core’ or ‘prototypical’ *chengyu* (*diǎnxíng chéngyǔ* 典型成语), reconducting this category to an *Idealized Cognitive Model* (Lakoff 1987)⁴. This proposal takes into account the nature of these idiomatic forms as complex socio-cultural constructs, that can be defined according to the speakers’ socio-cultural and linguistic background. Based on these premises, the main characteristics of prototypical *chengyu* are the following (Conti 2020a): (i) they have a four-character structure, commonly presenting a prosodic ‘two-by-two’ bipartition; (ii) they have an invariable form, i.e., the order of their morphemes is fixed, and it usually cannot be modified; (iii) they have a unitary meaning with different degrees of compositionality, i.e., their meaning is not necessarily equivalent to the sum of the meaning of the individual morphemes that compose *chengyu*; (iv) they have literary origins and commonly preserve the grammatical and lexical features of classical language (*wényán* 文言), which makes them particularly suitable for a formal/written register; and lastly (v), they are treated as single lexemic units, i.e., their function is often that of a simple lexical unit or phrase.

As the most rigid type of Chinese idioms, variation patterns in *chengyu* are extremely rare, and while diachronic variation is well documented, synchronic variation is seldom observed (Conti 2020b). In fact, attested modifications are either limited to single morphemes, such as lexical variants in *chengyu* containing numbers (e.g.: *bǎi/qiān nián bù yù* 百/千年不遇 [not met in a hundred/thousand years]), or reverse forms in the case of *chengyu* with a juxtaposed structure, e.g., *zhèng dà guāng míng* 正大光明 / *guāng míng zhèng dà* 光明正大 [just and honorable] (Conti 2020b, 85). Any other sort of structural modifications that may go beyond or break down the generalized quadrisyllabic fixed structure, e.g. the addition or deletion of morphemes, “is definitely less preferred in the creation of Chinese idiomatic variants [...] for these types of distanced structural variations implicitly go against the institutionalized use of Chinese idioms within four-character patterns” (Meng 2018, 70).

Some studies, however, have underlined that idiosyncratic modifications of *chengyu* for pragmatic, stylistic, and rhetorical purposes can still occur in specific communicative settings (e.g., Liang, Ren 2006; Meng 2018; Zhou 2012). Zhou (2012), for instance, identified nine types of modifications that can occur to *chengyu*: these can involve their form (for example, modification of the order of the components), meaning (adding a more comic tone to *chengyu* through the substitution of a component) or use. Similarly, Meng’s (2018) corpus-based analysis detected several patterns of structural variability (e.g., substitutions of semantically synonymous nouns in VN1-VN2 sequences) operating simultaneously at the syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic level in response to the changing contextual circumstances.

This phenomenon of the so-called ‘flexible use of *chengyu*’ (*chéngyǔ huóyòng* 成语活用) has been described extensively in the literature (e.g., Sun, Hou 1996; Ye, Wang 2012) and is particularly frequent in advertising language (Chen 2006).

⁴ Lakoff developed his theory from the *Prototype Theory*, which pertains to the field of cognitive semantics, and was originally elaborated by Eleanor Rosch in the 1970s (Rosch 1973).

2.4 Use of *chengyu* in advertisements

Chengyu are widely employed in advertising communication: their conciseness, vividness, incisiveness, familiarity, and their strong link to Chinese traditional culture, all contribute to make advertising messages direct and understandable to all kinds of audience (Lu, Xue 2013; Sun, Hou 1996).

Often employed in marketing communication since the '80s (Gianesini 2007), the use of *chengyu* in advertisement has been analyzed since the '90s (Li 1998; Sun, Hou 1996). Many studies proposed a classification of different typologies of *chengyu* found in advertisements (Gao 2008; Jiang 2004; Li, Wu, Shao 2016); most of them, however, are not data-based: the only exception is Shen (2010), who carried out a cognitive analysis on a corpus of parodic *chengyu* (*fǎngnǐ chéngyǔ* 仿拟成语) in order to investigate how phonetic metaphor is employed in these idiomatic expressions.

Despite the many methodological and taxonomic differences, what all these studies underline is that the reasons for the efficacy of *chengyu* in advertisements is that their distinguishing features make them particularly suitable for promotional messages. First, they are vivid, concise, and brief, making the message and the related product easier to remember. Second, they are particularly familiar to and appreciated by Chinese speakers, therefore they are extremely recognizable, memorable, and easy to understand (Chen 2006; Xie 2009). Previous studies on *chengyu* in advertisements also underlined how their richness in cultural and ethnic contents (Chen 2006; Ren 2013) easily adapts to the recipients' cultural background and socio-economic situation (Liu 2012). Lastly, their ability to highlight the focus of information produces certain rhetorical effects, such as eliciting the idea of linguistic completeness and novelty to arouse the attention of consumers (Ye, Wang 2012).

A number of studies (e.g., Zong 2001) observed how Chinese advertisements often recur to deliberate violations of standard language use. This phenomenon also involves *chengyu*. Indeed, one key aspect of *chengyu* in advertisements is that they are often used flexibly, i.e., they undergo *ad hoc* modifications to promote the product more effectively. As observed by Zhou (2017), these modifications are characterized by arbitrariness, transiency, and unsystematicity.

Based on the existing literature, the strategies adopted for the modifications of *chengyu* in advertisements can be classified into three main categories: modification of form, modification of meaning, and the combined use of these two. Form modification can consist of the substitution, addition, deletion, or reordering of morphemes (Chen 2006; Gao 2008; Zhou 2015); meaning, on the other hand, can be modified on the connotative, literal, or idiomatic (figurative) level (Fu 2016; Gao 2008; Liu 2012; Ye, Wang 2012).

Lastly, a combined use of two or more modification strategies has been described by Sun and Hou (1996). The two researchers cited the example of *Gé lì diàn qì, chuàng zào liáng jī* 格力电器, 创造良机 [Gree Electric Appliances, creating good opportunities], the slogan of an air conditioning machine containing the *chengyu* *chuàng zào liáng jī* 创造良机 [creating good opportunities]. This message uses both the strategy of 'homophonic substitution' (*xié yīn chōu huàn* 谐音抽换) and that of 'extended meaning' (*tào yòng* 套用). The first strategy involves the character *liáng* 良 [good], which shares the same

pronunciation as *liáng (shuāng)* 凉 (爽) [cool]; the extended meaning is given by the use of *liángjī* 良机, where *jī* 机 can both mean [machine] and [opportunity], determining a new possible translation of the second part of the slogan: *chuàngzào liángjī* 创造凉机 [creating machines for fresh (air)].

3. Method

3.1 Research questions and design

As mentioned in §2.4, there are not many data-driven studies that analyze the use of *chengyu* in advertisements. Moreover, previous contributions on *chengyu* in advertising language do not take into consideration how these idiomatic forms are used in European and North American campaigns for the Chinese market, although localized advertisements by non-Chinese multinational companies have been spreading on the most common social media platforms and on the Chinese Internet since the advent of the new millennium. The present study constitutes a preliminary attempt to fill these gaps by answering the following research questions:

1. Are *chengyu* used in Western European and North American promotional campaigns for the Chinese market?
2. Are *chengyu* used in their conventional or modified form? What kind of modifications are observable?
3. What does the use of *chengyu* convey in terms of themes, values, and communicative-cultural contents?

To answer these questions, we adopted an exploratory, data-driven approach. The methodology combines (descriptive) quantitative data and qualitative observation.

3.2 Procedure

3.2.1 Data sampling and collection

The sample for our study was collected during a four-year (2019–2022) time span based on three main criteria. First, we only included internationally renowned European and North American brands with a consistently active presence on the most popular social media platforms in Mainland China such as WeChat (*Wēixìn* 微信), *Dǒuyīn* 抖音, and Sina Weibo (*Xīnlàng Wēibó* 新浪微博; see Zhou et al. 2022). Data collection was especially conducted during Western and traditional Chinese festivities such as Christmas or the Chinese New Year⁵, as the holiday season is a make-or-break time of year for brands

⁵ By ‘Western’ festivities we refer to those holidays that do not belong to Chinese traditional culture, not being recognized as national holidays by the Chinese government. They were introduced in the Chinese world after its encounter with the Western culture in the mid-19th century (i.e., Christmas, Valentine’s Day, New Year’s Eve, according to the Gregorian calendar, etc.). Many of these Western holidays are nowadays widely celebrated by Chinese people, to the extent that many discussions have been raised in China on the importance of maintaining traditional festivals (Fang 2017).

(Smith 1999) and promotional campaigns are particularly intense on these occasions, both in and outside of China (Chen, Cheung 2022; Lei et al. 2022; Taylor, Minton 2021).

The second and third criteria concerned the type of data and products. Data type considered both visual (images, wallpapers, etc.) and textual (i.e., social media posts) promotional material. Audiovisual or interactive advertisements were not considered for the present study. Lastly, we tried to balance the distribution of different product sectors. These included food and beverages (e.g., Lavazza, Ferrero), fashion and beauty (e.g., Armani, Gucci), vehicles (e.g., BMW, Tesla), etc.

The final sample consisted of 40 promotional campaigns. For the analysis, advertisements that were shared multiple times were only collected once: this led to a total of 71 advertising texts comprising 61 four-character sequences (see §4.1).

3.2.2 Data coding and analysis

The retrieval of the four-character units occurring in the sample was conducted manually. As seen in Section 2.3, the identification of *chengyu* is still controversial and largely based on native speakers' shared perception. Thus, the *chengyu* status of the retrieved forms was determined on a probabilistic basis by cross-checking six different references. These included two Web resources – the free open online encyclopedia *Bǎidù bǎike* 百度百科 and the free online Chinese dictionary ZDIC (*Hàndiǎn* 汉典)⁶ – and four paper dictionaries (Chen 2009; Shuo ci jie zi cishu yanjiu zhongxin 2009; Song, Duanmu 2000; Zhongguo shehui kexueyuan yuyan yanjiusuo cidian bianjishi 2016). Following Tang and Xu (2010), only the quadrisyllabic sequences attested in at least four of these sources were classified as *chengyu*; the remaining units were instead coded as pseudo-*chengyu*. Finally, the *chengyu* in our sample were further coded according to use (conventional or modified), type of modification (if any), conveyed contents, and overall frequency in Modern Chinese.

For the quantitative part of the analysis, the chi-square (χ^2) statistics reported in §4.1 were performed in RStudio (Posit team 2023). As for the qualitative part, our main interest rests on the linguistic dimension, i.e., the employment of *chengyu* in Western localized advertising and the communicative effect such an employment produces. However, advertising discourse is intrinsically multimodal in nature, whereby textual and visual information mutually interact in the process of meaning making (see Feng, Wignell 2011). Therefore, occasional reference to the visual component of the advertisements has been made whenever necessary.

⁶ *Bǎidù bǎike* 百度百科: <https://baike.baidu.com/>; ZDIC: <https://www.zdic.net/> (last accessed July 30, 2024).

4. Results and discussions

4.1 Quantitative data

In terms of tokens, a total number of 61 four-character sequences were found in our sample, corresponding to 54 individual types⁷. The high type-token ratio (88.5%) indicates a high degree of variation, meaning that few forms occurred more than once. In fact, most of the repetitions of the same units occurred in different texts of the same campaigns (e.g., *wú jiū wú shù* 无拘无束 [unrestrained], appearing twice in Versace's 2020 man clothing campaign). For this reason, the following analysis is based on type counts only.

Of these 54 forms, the actual *chengyu* were 30 (55.6%); the remaining 24 units (44.4%) were classified as pseudo-*chengyu*. As suggested by the results of the chi-square test, this difference is non-significant: $\chi^2(1) = 0.67, p = .41 > .05$, meaning that statistically *chengyu* and pseudo-*chengyu* were equally represented in our sample. An example of pseudo-*chengyu* is *yī wěn dòng xīn* 一吻冻心 [one kiss freezes the heart], used in a lip gloss advertisement by Armani in summer 2019.

Among the 30 *chengyu*, 12 (40%) were used in their conventional form, whereas 18 (60%) presented some kind of *ad hoc* modifications. The difference between conventional and modified *chengyu* is also non-significant: $\chi^2(1) = 1.20, p = .27 > .05$.

Modification strategies were classified into simple or hybrid – i.e., resulting from the combination of two or more simple strategies. As shown in Tables 1 and 2, homophonic substitution, simple or in combination with other strategies, is by all means the most frequently employed strategy for *ad hoc* modifications.

Table 1 - Simple modification strategies

	Strategy	#	Example
Form	Homophonic substitution	3	<i>Lù jiàn bù píng</i> 鹿见不平 [deer see an injustice] Original: <i>lù jiàn bù píng</i> 路见不平 [see an injustice on the street] Modification: <i>lù</i> 路 [street] > <i>lù</i> 鹿 [deer]
	Morphemic substitution	2	<i>Quán qíng yǐ fù</i> 全情以赴 [go with all feelings] Original: <i>Quán lì yǐ fù</i> 全力以赴 [go with all efforts] Modification: <i>lì</i> 力 [strength] > <i>qíng</i> 情 [feeling]

⁷ *Chengyu* that occurred more than once but presented different modifications were accounted for as different types. For instance, *quán lì yǐ fù* 全力以赴 [to go with all effort] was used in two distinct campaigns by Armani, each applying a different modification strategy.

Strategy	#	Example
Visual enhancement	2	<i>Cáng lóng wò "hǔ"</i> 藏龙卧“虎” [hidden dragon, crouching tiger] Modification: inverted commas
Meaning Meaning shift	2	<i>Mǎ dào chéng gōng</i> 马到成功 [immediate success] Modification: <i>mǎ</i> 马 [horse] > BMW (<i>Bǎomǎ</i> 宝马)
Total	9	

Table 2 - Hybrid modification strategies

Strategy	#	Example
Homophonic + morphemic substitution	2	<i>Hǔ yán hǔ yǔ</i> 虎言虎语 [tiger talk] Original: <i>hú yán luàn yǔ</i> 胡言乱语 [to talk nonsense] Modifications: <i>hú</i> 胡 [foolish] > <i>hǔ</i> 虎 [tiger]; <i>luàn</i> 乱 [messy] > <i>hǔ</i> 虎 [tiger]
Homophonic substitution + merging	2	<i>Dà jú rú yì</i> 大桔如意 (see fig. 3, §4.2)
Homophonic substitution + visual enhancement	3	<i>Qiān jiā wàn hǔ</i> 千家万“虎” [a thousand houses, ten thousand tigers] Original: <i>Qiān jiā wàn hù</i> 千家万户 [thousands of households] Modifications: <i>hù</i> 户 [household] > <i>hǔ</i> 虎 [tiger]; inverted commas
Meaning shift + morphemic addition + visual enhancement	1	<i>Tè · lì bù dú xíng</i> 特·立不独行 (see fig. 2, §4.2)
Morphemic substitution + visual enhancement	1	<i>"Hóng" yùn jiā shēn</i> “红” 运加身 [to add red luck on one's body] Original: <i>huáng páo jiā shēn</i> 黄袍加身 [to add a yellow robe on one's body] Modifications: <i>hǎo yùn jiā shēn</i> 好运加身 [to add good luck on one's body]; <i>hǎo</i> 好 [good] > <i>hóng</i> 红 [red]
Total	9	

Overall, the *chengyu* in our sample (conventional or modified) are relatively uncommon. In fact, only 8 (26.7%) rank among the top 300 most frequently used *chengyu* (Jiao et al. 2011) or the 20,000 most frequent words in Modern Chinese («Xiandai Hanyu changyong cibiao» ketizu 2008). As for the themes and the communicative-cultural con-

tent, the meaning content of the majority of the *chengyu* and their modifications is festivity-related (26.7%; e.g., *hǔ yán hǔ yǔ* 虎言虎语 [tiger talk], see example 3 below). Other recurrent themes included ‘exerting full potential’ (16.7%) and ‘uniqueness’ (10%; e.g., *tuō yǐng ér chū* 脱颖而出 [to reveal one’s talent, to rise above the others]). Thus, while satisfying the companies’ need for ‘glocalization’ by adapting their advertising communication to the traditional culture of the target market, the use of *chengyu* also contributes to introduce and promote global capitalistic values such as utilitarianism, individualism, hedonism, distinction, and self-realization (Wu, Li 2019, 440). A full account of the themes conveyed by the *chengyu* in our sample is reported in Table 3.

Table 3 - Themes, values, and communicative-cultural contents

Theme	<i>Chengyu</i> type		Total	Example
	Conventional	Modified		
Chance	2	0	2	<i>Qià dào hǎo chù</i> 恰到好处 [right on spot]
Community	0	1	1	<i>Tè · lì bù dú xíng</i> 特·立不独行 (see fig. 3, §4.2)
Efficacy	0	1	1	<i>Yī míng jīng rén</i> 一鸣惊人 [amaze the world with a single brilliant feat]
Festivity	0	8	8	<i>Hǔ yán hǔ yǔ</i> 虎言虎语 (see example 2, §4.2)
Full potential	2	3	5	<i>Mǎ dào chéng gōng</i> 马到成功 [immediate success]
Lead	0	2	2	<i>Yī mǎ dāng xiān</i> 一马当先 [take the lead]
Limitless	2	0	2	<i>Wú jū wú shù</i> 无拘无束 [unrestrained]
Notoriety	0	2	2	<i>Lù rén jiē zhī</i> 鹿人皆知 (see fig. 4, §4.2.2)
Novelty	2	0	2	<i>Tuī chū chū xīn</i> 推陈出新 [innovate]
Unforgettable	0	1	1	<i>Yǒng zhì nán wàng</i> 永志难忘 [forever unforgettable]
Uniqueness	3	0	3	<i>Bié jù yī gé</i> 别具一格 [unique, without equals]
Other	1	0	1	<i>Bù zhī bù jué</i> 不知不觉 [unconsciously]
Total	12	18	30	

4.2 Qualitative analysis

In this section, we present and discuss a selection of advertisements from our data, in order to exemplify the most frequent strategies of *chengyu* use and modification that emerged from the quantitative analysis.

4.2.1 Representative cases of *chengyu* use

As seen in §4.1, the simplest, yet very frequent case (40% of the entire sample) involved using *chengyu* in their conventional form. An example is reported in 1, extracted from a

post published on Armani's WeChat account⁸: as shown, the relatively frequent *chengyu* *dú shù yī zhì* 独树一帜 [a flag on a solitary tree] (i.e., unique; rank 238 in Jiao et al. 2011) did not undergo any kind of form modification or semantic shift, nor it displays any extra connotative nuance in addition to the positive one that the *chengyu* originally possesses. As for the communicative content, this *chengyu* is clearly used to convey a sense of uniqueness.

- 1) Versace 2019 早秋系列以标志性巴洛克印花搭配精致美杜莎细节，展现独树一帜的奢华风范。

Versace 2019 zǎoqiū xiliè yǐ biāozhixing bāluòkè yinhuā

Versace 2019 pre-fall series with iconic baroque print-flower

dāpèi jīngzhì Měidùshā xìjié, zhǎnxiàn dú-shù-yī-zhì-de

combine exquisite Medusa detail display solitary-tree-one-flag-DET

shēhuá fēngfàn.

luxury style

Versace's 2019 pre-fall collection combines iconic baroque prints with exquisite Medusa details, displaying a unique luxury style.

An example of conventional use worth mentioning is shown in Fig. 1, an advertisement from Armani's official WeChat account. Although the relatively frequent *chengyu* *rè qíng yáng yì* 热情洋溢 [brimming passion] (rank 7,410 in «Xiandai Hanyu changyong cibiao» ketizu 2008) did not undergo any modification, its literal meaning directly alludes to the name of the product, i.e., Armani's perfume *Si passione* [Yes passion]. This example demonstrates how the use of *chengyu* can add extra interpretative layers to the advertising message without necessarily modifying the form of the original expression.

In Fig. 1, also worth noting is the presence of two pseudo-*chengyu*, i.e. the first half of the headline *huā guǒ xiāng diào* 花果香调 [floral and fruity fragrance] and even the very Chinese name of the perfume (*Hóng sè zhī ài* 红色挚爱 [Red love]). As reported in §4.1, pseudo-*chengyu* constitute 44.4% of our sample; this example, therefore, is a demonstration of the relevance of quadrisyllabic sequences in Chinese marketing communication.

⁸ In the examples, Chinese characters and their corresponding *Pinyin* transcriptions are reported in the first and second lines, respectively. The third line provides the interlinear morpheme-by-morpheme glosses based on the Leipzig Glossing Rules (<https://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>; last accessed July 30, 2024), while the fourth line provides an English translation. The acronym CRS stands for 'Current Relevant State' (see Li, Thompson 1981, 240).

Figure 1 - *Armani's Si Passione* (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/2W0l2rtLWN4csfQTBGUrCA>; last accessed July 30, 2024)



Example 2 instead constitutes a representative case of substitution of a morpheme with a homophone, which corresponds to the most frequent type of *chengyu* modification, either simple or hybrid (Tables 1–2). The advertised product is the concealer *Power fabric* by Armani Beauty, and the employed *chengyu* is the extremely frequent (rank 26 in Jiao et al. 2011) *quán lì yǐ fù* 全力以赴 [to go with all effort]. In this example, the morpheme *quán* 全 [complete] in the original *chengyu* was replaced with the homophonous *quán* 权 [power]: again, the modification, visually reinforced through typographic enhancement, is aimed at making direct reference to the name of the product.

- 2) 夏日轻妆「权力」以赴
Xiàrì qīng zhuāng [quánlì]-yǐ-fù
 Summer-day light makeup power-to-go
 Light summer makeup, go with all the power

This type of modification is often adopted to refer to the extratextual context of the Chinese Spring Festival. The extract in 3, for instance, is a post published by Tesla during the celebrations for the Year of the Tiger. Here the homophonic substitution of *hǔ* 虎 [tiger] is repeated in three *chengyu*, each time enhanced with inverted commas. The substituted elements are, in order, the morpheme *hú* 胡 [reckless] in *hú yán luàn yǔ* 胡言乱语 [nonsense], the morpheme *hú* 湖 [lake] in *wǔ hú sì hǎi* 五湖四海 [five lakes, four seas] (i.e., all over the world), and the morpheme *hù* 户 [household] in *qiān jiā wàn hù* 千家万户 [thousands of households]⁹. Note, however, that among these expressions, the only

⁹ For the sake of simplicity, the example only reports an extract of the full text. However, note that the same strategy of substituting *hǔ* 虎 [tiger] with a homophonous morpheme was used for other four *chengyu* in the

common one is *qiān jiā wàn hù* 千家万户 [thousands of households], ranking 32 among the most frequent *chengyu* (Jiao et al. 2011) and 8810 among the most frequent words in Modern Mandarin («Xiandai Hanyu changyong cibiao» ketizu 2008).

- 3) 虎年就要到了，来看特斯拉的“虎言虎语”。特斯拉的足迹已经遍布五“虎”四海，走进千家万“虎” [...]
- Hǔnián jiù yào dào le, lái kàn Tèsīlā-de “hǔ-yán-hǔ-yǔ”.*
 Tiger-year soon must arrive CRS come see Tesla-DET tiger-talk-tiger-talk
Tèsīlā-de zújì yǐjīng biànbù wǔ-“hǔ”-sì-bǎi zǒu jìn
 Tesla-DET footprint already spread five-tiger-four-sea walk-enter
qiān-jia-wàn-“hǔ” [...]
 thousand-house-ten.thousand-tiger
 The Year of the Tiger is coming, come see Tesla’s “Tiger Talk”. Tesla’s footprints have spread all over the world [lit., five tigers and four seas] and entered thousands of households [lit., a thousand house, ten thousand tigers] [...].

The following cases represent two of the most notable examples of *chengyu* use in our sample. These cases were selected not only for their use of multiple modification strategies, but also for their capacity to creatively adapt *chengyu* to convey the desired message and at the same time give salience to the advertised brand or product.

The first case is a promotional campaign from Tesla, a car brand, which combines three different modification strategies, namely, meaning shift, morpheme addition, and visual enhancement. The advertisement in Fig. 2 is promoting the 2020 landing of the company’s official podcast on Himalaya (*Xīmǎlāyǎ* 喜马拉雅), a popular Chinese streaming service for audiobooks and other forms of spoken word contents. The original *chengyu* in the name of the podcast, which corresponds to the headline in the advertisement, is *tè lì dú xíng* 特立独行 [standing independently, walking alone] (i.e., being unconventional). This, *per se*, is a perfectly well-fitting description for the podcast of a car brand; however, the modifications operated on the original *chengyu* add at least two extra layers to the content of the message. First, *tè* 特 [special], the first morpheme of the idiom, is typographically isolated from the rest of the sequence: while remarking the uniqueness of the podcast, it is also a direct reference to *Tèsīlā* 特斯拉, the Chinese name of the brand. Second, the addition of the negation adverb *bù* 不 completely subverts the literal meaning of the original *chengyu*, so that the resulting headline *Tè · lì bù dú xíng* 特 · 立不独行 can be interpreted as follows: ‘Tesla is unique and so is its exclusive podcast: Thanks to it, you never travel alone’. Even on a rainy day in the city, when all you dream of is to just run away to the top of the Himalayas – or to listen to the podcast on the Himalaya app.

Figure 2 - Tesla's podcast advertisement (http://www.ce.cn/cysc/zljd/gd/202007/17/t20200717_35347387.shtml; last accessed July 30, 2024)



The second case is from the famous Italian coffee brand Lavazza, promoting its new tangerine- and chestnut-flavored latte on 2022 New Year's Day. This case is particularly interesting for its repeated patterns of *chengyu* modification in different parts of the campaign. Starting from the headline in example 4, the quadrisyllabic sequence *dà "jú" dà "lì"* 大“桔”大“栗” [big tangerine, big chestnut] derives from the *chengyu* *dà jí dà lì* 大吉大利 [big luck, big profit], a common New Year wishing phrase.

- 4) 2022王炸开年，大“桔”大“栗”
 2022 wángzhà kāinián, dà-“jú”-dà-“lì”
 2022 explosive open-year big-tangerine-big-chestnut
 Explosive 2022 year opening, big “tangerine” big “chestnut”

Once again, the modified expression is obtained by replacing the morphemes *jí* 吉 [luck] and *lì* 利 [profit] with the two (quasi-)homophones *jú* 桔 [tangerine] and *lì* 栗 [chestnut], further enhanced through inverted commas. These morphemes clearly allude to the promoted products: in fact, they are even contained in their very names, a combination of *dà jú* 大桔 [big tangerine] and *dà lì* 大栗 [big chestnut] with a second (pseudo-) *chengyu* (Fig. 3). For instance, the name of the tangerine latte is *dà jú rú yì nǎitié* 大桔如意拿铁 [big tangerine as wished latte]: while *dà jú* 大桔 [big tangerine] is extracted from the headline, *rú yì* 如意 [as wished] consists of the second half of the *chengyu* *wàn shì rú yì* 万事如意 [everything as wished], another common wishing phrase. Similarly,

dà lì duō fú nǎtiě 大栗多福拿铁 [big chestnut much fortune latte], the name of the chestnut latte, merges together part of the headline (*dà lì* 大栗 [big chestnut]) and part of the pseudo-*chengyu* *duō jīn duō fú* 多金多福 [plenty of gold and fortune]. In sum, by combining different strategies and different (pseudo-)*chengyu*, Lavazza was able not only to convey the festive atmosphere but also to give prominence to the peculiarities of its new products, while at the same time ensuring recognizability and memorability through the repetition of certain patterns.

Figure 3 - Lavazza's chestnut and tangerine lattes (<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/wG92P24tZAsbzXlf2aTthQ>; last accessed July 30, 2024)



4.2.2 The case of BMW

The last case we discuss is BMW's Christmas campaign on WeChat, Sina Weibo, and other social media platforms, which represents a particularly felicitous example of multiple *chengyu* use employing different modification strategies. This campaign was originally launched in 2013; however, it was particularly successful, as proven by the fact that even years later, including the period of our data collection, it was still mentioned by users, who praised it as a model for creative, engaging, and effective marketing communication¹⁰.

Consisting of four posters, each containing one or two different *chengyu* in the headline, the entire campaign was centered on *chengyu* modification¹¹. For brevity, in this Section we

¹⁰ See for instance this 2020 web article, stating that “*bǐ jiào yǒu yì sī de shì, Bǎo mǎ bù guāng yòng le xié yīn gēng, yě bǎ wǒ men cháng yòng de chéng yǔ róng hé zài le hǎi bào lǐ. Zhè bō jiè shì zhēn de hěn miào!* 比较有意思的是，宝马不光用了谐音梗，也把我们常用的成语融合在了海报里。这波借势真的很妙！[what's more interesting is that BMW not only used homophonic puns, but also incorporated commonly used *chengyu* into the posters. This wave of leveraging is really great!]” (<https://www.mad-men.com/articledetails/1131>; last accessed July 30, 2024).

¹¹ The campaign is available at the following link: http://mp.weixin.qq.com/mp/appmsg/show?search_click_id=2410753224235523785-1722435001718-6938668284&__biz=MjM5OTk5ODcwMQ==&appmsgid=10033499&citidx=1&sign=f815864ca01a93cbb651fabff305d64b#wechat_redirect (last accessed July 30, 2024). Since we only considered four-character sequences, for this analysis we excluded the idiom *lù yáo zhī mǎ lì* 路遥知马力 [one can only know the strength of a horse after a long road], a rare case of

will only comment on the poster reported in Fig. 4. As shown, the advertisement employs two four-character units, corresponding to two *chengyu* which underwent different types of form/meaning modifications. The first *chengyu* in the couplet is *yī mǎ dāng xiān* 一马当先, [one horse in the forefront] (i.e., to take the lead). Apparently, this *chengyu* is used in its conventional form; however, the *mǎ* 马 in the idiom is not a literal ‘horse’; rather, it refers to the brand itself, whose Chinese name is in fact *Bǎomǎ* 宝马 (lit. Treasure horse). As a matter of fact, the image clearly shows a rampant BMW in the foreground, leaving Santa and his reindeer far behind. Thus, the strategy employed in this *chengyu* is a semantic shift of the morpheme *mǎ* 马 [horse] from the literal to the contextual meaning.

The second strategy consists instead in the substitution of *lù* 鹿 [deer] with the homophonous morpheme *lù* 路 [street] in the original *chengyu* *lù rén jiē zhī* 路人皆知 [people in the street all know]. The resulting phrase *lù rén jiē zhī* 鹿人皆知 [deer and people both know] clearly refers to Santa’s reindeer on the one hand, and the potential consumers on the other, implicitly suggesting that BMW’s top-of-the-line quality is well renowned (on implicatures in advertising, see Lombardi Vallauri 2019). Even though the *chengyu* in the advertisement are not very frequent in Modern Chinese, this creative employment of different strategies results in a multilayered, humorous, and captivating combination of familiarity and novelty, brand identity, and cultural adaptation. At the same time, it skillfully conveys a sense of uniqueness, prestige, and supremacy of the brand, while also referring to the extralinguistic context of Christmas time.

Figure 4 - BMW’s Christmas campaign (<http://mmbiz.qpic.cn/mmbiz/q2shzfVe1fCNEcxmowcjtjFbzicLhyVBUfd8wj9SiahCusbhS6HWbITdWpNDiarfZwNnW8pMPU70kTgjk8RjicDL4w/0>; last accessed July 30, 2024)



five-character *chengyu*. This *chengyu* was modified into *lù yáo zhī mǎ lì* 鹿遥知马力 [deer in the distance acknowledge the strength of the horse], the ‘horse’ referring to BMW (see *infra*).

5. Conclusions

This study addressed the marketing communication strategies employed by Western European and North American companies for the promotion of their products on the Chinese market, focusing in particular on Chinese four-character idioms or *chengyu*. Our preliminary analysis of 40 campaigns posted on China's most popular social media platforms demonstrated a consistent and conscious use of *chengyu*, both in their conventional and modified form. Added to the widespread presence of pseudo-*chengyu* – a further confirmation of the linguistic and cultural salience of quadrisyllabic sequences in Modern Chinese – these results suggest Western companies' willingness to 'glocalize' their products, that is, to adapt to the linguistic and cultural practices of the target market. Particularly, the use of *chengyu* seems to fulfil a twofold function: if, on the one hand, it successfully establishes a connection with traditional culture, on the other hand it also contributes to China's 'ideological shift' (Wu, Li 2019) towards Western individualistic and consumeristic values in spite of the country's recent efforts to promote and strengthen national self-confidence (see Economy 2022; Zhang 2020).

From a communicative perspective, the creative and unexpected use of familiar, concise forms has the potential to make advertisements more appealing, memorable, and captivating to Chinese consumers, as epitomized by the BMW case; at the same time, it prevents undesired backlashes like the recently widely debated case of the Italian fashion brand Dolce & Gabbana (see Atwal et al. 2022; Ban, Lovari 2021; Tardelli 2023). This notwithstanding, the communicative effectiveness of *chengyu* use might be weakened by several factors. First, the *chengyu* in our sample are not deployed at their full potential. With the exclusion of few remarkable exceptions, *chengyu* modification is mostly limited to homophonic substitutions or visual enhancements, while other strategies are relatively infrequent. Second, modifications are predominantly directed to address the general context (e.g., festivities), but fail to target other salient aspects that might help increase desirability or brand recognition. Third, the majority of the *chengyu* in our sample were relatively infrequent in modern language: in the subtle interplay between familiarity and novelty which constitutes the advantage of *chengyu* use in advertising, this choice clearly goes to the detriment of familiarity. Needless to say, how these and other factors influence the appeal of advertisements on Chinese consumers must be addressed in follow-up studies (e.g., see Zhou, Belk 2004).

In conclusion, the results of our preliminary investigation may have several direct applications in different fields, including marketing communication, product localization, linguistic and cultural mediation, and teaching Chinese for specific purposes. Future research will hopefully compensate the limitations affecting this study, particularly its exploratory nature and the limited sample in terms of word size, number of brands and product sectors, and timespan for data collection.

Authorship Contributions

This work is the result of close collaboration between the two authors. For the concerns of the Italian academic evaluation processes, the writing of the article was divided as follows: Sergio Conti is mainly responsible for Sections 3, 4, and 5, while Chiara Piccinini is mainly responsible for Sections 1 and 2.

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