

# Proverbs in Zhangzhou: Interaction between Language and Culture

*Yishan Huang*

The Australian National University, Australia

Doi: 10.19044/llc.v6no2a1

[URL:http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/llc.v6no2a1](http://dx.doi.org/10.19044/llc.v6no2a1)

---

## Abstract

This work presents the first attempt to document proverbs of a Southern Min variety of Zhangzhou spoken in Southern China to the audience beyond the Chinese scholarly community. Four different forms of proverbs, namely sayings, allegorical sayings, trisyllabic idioms, and quadrisyllabic idioms, elicited from the field data collected by the author in the urban area of Zhangzhou are described in this study. The various forms differ from each other either in the internal structures, the way the integrated meanings are conveyed, or the number of syllables. Each component of the proverbs is glossed in English and their implied meanings are explained with reference to the associated cultural context of Southern Min. The documentation not only reflects how the local culture is embodied and passed down in terms of speech acts, but also provides valuable evidence for future studies in semantics, pragmatics, and/or anthropological linguistics.

---

**Keywords:** Saying; allegorical saying; trisyllabic idiom; quadrisyllabic idiom; Zhangzhou.

## Introduction:

Whether called maxims, truisms, idioms, idiomatic expressions, sayings, allusions, and/or adage, proverbs are considered a collection of pithy bits of wisdom and truth that reflect the values and beliefs of a community (Schuster, 1998; Stoch, 2017). They have prevailed for centuries and continue to be used as an effective spoken tool to express various meanings and intentions, ranging from the general truths of advice; values of ambition, virtue, patience, generosity and warning; and summary of human experience; to the instructions that encourage people to act and behave in difficult situations (Mieder, 1993; Schuster, 1998). For example, proverbs like ‘when in Rome, do as the Romans do’, ‘better late than never’ and ‘big fish eat small fish’ are often heard in personal interactions. The proverbs not only have a didactic function to support one’s arguments, educate younger generations, or

enrich daily conversations, but also contribute to the cultures of all nations despite the regional diversities.

The forms of proverbs are diverse. For example, they are understood as Shuyu 熟语 in Sinitic languages but include saying (Yanyu 谚语), allegorical saying (Xiehouyu 歇后语), quadrisyllabic idiom (Chengyu 成语), and other forms of idiomatic expression (Guanyongyu 惯用语). Various forms of proverbs differ from each other with respect to the internal structure (Li, 2016; Ma, 1994; Murar, 2009; Stoch, 2017; Wu, 1995; Yang, 2007). For example, a saying generally involves concise sentence(s). An allegorical saying contains two parts, whereby the first is either a descriptive phrase or a sentence, while the second appears to be an interpretative phrase. Idiomatic expression, instead, is a fixed phrase which functions as a special type of lexeme in full sentences. Thus, it is of linguistic interest to analyse different proverb forms within the formal paradigms of either discourse and/or syntax.

The meanings of proverbs are generally figurative and culturally-grounded (Li, 2016; Murar, 2009). In some circumstances, it appears difficult to deduce the integrated meanings of certain proverbs from their constituents without referencing the associated social-cultural context. In this regard, the insights that a proverb conveys can serve as a window into the history, culture, lifestyle, and mindset of a community being considered (Li, 2016). Learning proverbs of different backgrounds can thus provide a way to expand our multicultural repertoire, and through the sharing of proverbs, we can reinforce the similarities and differences among people around the world (Schuster, 1998).

This paper reports on the first work to document proverbs of a Southern Min variety of Zhangzhou spoken in Southern China to the audience beyond the Chinese community. Four distinct forms—sayings, allegorical sayings, trisyllabic idioms, and quadrisyllabic idioms—are described and interpreted. The chosen examples not only reflect how various forms of proverbs differ in their internal structures and how the local culture is embodied and passed down in terms of speech acts, but also shed light on future studies with respect to semantics, pragmatics, and/or anthropological linguistics.

## **Zhangzhou and Corpus**

### **Zhangzhou**

Zhangzhou 漳州 is a prefecture-level city situated in the southern Fujian province in South-eastern Mainland China, at the longitude 116° 54' 0" to 118° 08' 0" east and latitude 23° 34' 0" N to 25° 15' 0" north. It faces the Taiwan Strait to the east and borders Xiamen, Quanzhou, and Longyan to the

east, northwest, and west, respectively, in Fujian and, to the southwest, Chaozhou in the province of Guangzhou.

According to the Bureau of Statistics (2017) report, the total registered population of Zhangzhou was around 5.10 million, with a natural growth rate of 9.0%. Although the population is ethnically diverse, at about 98.5%, the Han ethnic group predominates, while the remaining 1.5% or 75,400 inhabitants, most of whom (about 58,000) immigrated to the city either to work or to study, are of 47 nationalities. Zhangzhou has the second largest population of She 畬 ethnic group in Fujian and has the largest population of Gaoshan ethnic group in Mainland China. Zhangzhou is also well known as the ancestral home of Taiwanese and other overseas Chinese expatriates.

The colloquial language spoken by the majority of inhabitants is Strait Hokkien, which is considered as the ancestor of Southern Min. The southern counties of Dongshan and Zhao'an appear to represent a variety of the adjacent Teochew Southern Min. The two Southern Min varieties have a certain degree of mutual intelligibility, while both are mutually unintelligible in relation to other Sinitic dialects (e.g., Mandarin, Hakka, Cantonese, Wu, Xiang, and Gan).

Mandarin, as the national language of China, is used as a medium of instruction in the educational and public contexts. Hakka is spoken only by a relatively small number of people living in mountainous areas of western Zhangzhou, for example, Hua'an, Nanjing, Pinghe, and Zhao'an counties, bordering a major Hakka-speaking city of Longyan.

## Corpus

Ma (1994) and subsequently Yang (2007) documented the proverbs in this Southern Min variety but in the form of Standard Chinese, constraining their accessibility to those scholars outside the Chinese community. Their phonemic transcriptions, especially in the tonal pitch, are considerably different from those examined in Huang's (2018) study that is grounded in field linguistics and acoustic phonetics. In addition, it appears difficult to identify the source of the data for Ma's work, since the descriptions provided by the author appear not as representative of the urban area as he claimed, but are rather a combination of the sound systems adopted in the urban and other counties, such as Zhangpu.

Thus, the aim of the present study was to provide an accessible and up-to-date documentation of this dialect. The corpus presented here was collected in 2015 by the author in conjunction with her field work for her PhD project. Twenty-one native speakers (nine men and twelve women) from the urban area of Xiangcheng and Longwen districts were recorded for the tone sandhi investigation. In addition, another group of six native speakers (four men and two women) was recorded for local vocabulary documentation. All twenty-

seven speakers included in the investigation were asked to offer a short narrative, local stories, proverbs or rhyming songs, or contribute other speech that they wished to share. The recordings of proverbs that were mainly provided by male speakers constitute the corpus presented in this study. All informants were born and raised in the inner city and have spoken Zhangzhou Southern Min as their primary colloquial language since childhood. Their parents and spouses are all native speakers as well. This selection of informants ensures that the obtained data is representative of this Southern Min variety.

In the present study, the transcriptions of both segments and suprasegments are kept consistent with those formulated by Huang (2018). Segments were transcribed using IPA 2005 symbols, whereas the tonal pitch was described using Chao's (1930) notational system with 1 representing the lowest level and 5 the highest of the individual's pitch range. For example, a level tone is represented by two instances of the same number (e.g., [33] or [55]), and a rising or falling tone is represented by increasing and decreasing numbers, respectively (e.g., [25] or [51]). When required, 6 was introduced to denote the tone having extra-high pitch level in the non-utterance final context. In what follows, each component of the proverbs is glossed in English before providing explanation of their implied meanings in italics. The details on the research locality and speaker selection, the data collection procedure, as well as the segmental and suprasegmental system of Zhangzhou Southern Min, can be found in Huang's (2018) thesis.

### Sayings

The sayings documented here are understood as Yanyu 谚语 in Sinitic culture. They generally involve grammatically full sentence to express an observation, opinion, advice, or a wisdom that exists in a vernacular form and could be memorised easily (Stoch, 2017). The meanings of sayings are not always figurative; instead, they can be explicitly stated. The contents conveyed in sayings are diverse, covering family, education, strength, health, success, and social networking topics, among others.

1. **tsø63 kəŋ35**                      **tsø63 kʌ63**    **ʔəm63.ɦin33.ɦəŋ35**  
 be        grandpa                      be        until    late and dark

‘Being a grandpa means being [active] until the day is late and dark.’

- tsø63 ɦẽ51**                      **tsø63 kʌ63**    **kjø63 ʔm32 kẽ51**  
 be        grandma                      be        until    shout Neg. dare

‘Being a grandma means being [active] until she does not dare to do so.’

*Grandparents used to look after their grandchildren while the parents did farm work. This saying draws reference to the long days spent by the grandparents at this task.*

2. **kəŋ33.ɸə̃51 sjə63 twə32 sun35**  
grandparents favour big grandson

‘Grandparents like the eldest grandson.’

- pə32.ɸə̃51 sjə63 se63 kjə̃51**  
parent favour small kid

‘Parents like the youngest kid.’

*The idea that grandparents love their eldest grandson for representing the start of a new generation while parents dote on the youngest suggests the differing views that individuals in differing circumstances can have on their surroundings.*

3. **ɸəj35 ɸəj35 ʔə sin33.pu33 sɛ33 twi63**  
**sjə35;**  
bad bad partial daughter-in-law three quantifier  
cook

‘The daughter-in-law is bad, but she cooks three meals each day.’

- hə35 hə35 ʔə tsew55.ʔə51 ki33 ɸwe35 ʔjə22**  
good good partial daughter diminutive branch end shake

‘The daughter is good, but she just likes a swaying branch of a tree.’

*In this vision of the past, the daughter-in-law, though not desirable, does crucial housework, while the daughter, though desirable, visits her parents only occasionally.*

4. **kin55.ʔə tsjə̃35**  
kid dimi. elf

- ʔu32 hi33 tʰjə̃35**  
have ears listen

**ʔu32 ts<sup>h</sup>wi41      bɛŋ32      tso63 sjɛ35**  
have    mouth            does not            make    sound

‘Elf child, listen with your ears, but keep your mouth closed.’

*Parents admonish their children to keep silent and not to speak up when adults are having a discussion. The English equivalent is “a child should be seen and not heard.”*

5. **pwɪ32 sin22    hɔŋ33.te63    twɛ33**  
meal    deity    emperor            big

‘The dinner god is as big as an emperor.’

*Having meals is an important part of daily life, so children are admonished to concentrate on eating and not to be distracted during meal times.*

6. **tsjɛ32 dɔ32    t<sup>h</sup>ɛw22;            sjɔ63            dɔ32    bwe51**  
eat    road    head            cherish            road    end

‘Relying (on someone’s help) at the beginning of a journey; cherishing (him) at the end as well.’

*This saying advises cherishing forever the persons/things that were helpful at the beginning.*

7. **t<sup>h</sup>ɛn63 tsɪ22    bɔ33    sɔ41;            sɛ63.bjɛ33    tjɔ32    kɔ41**  
earn    money no    number            life            need    take care

‘However much you earn, you need to take care of your health.’

*This saying admonishes individuals not to lose sight of what is more important—their live/health—while they are earning money.*

8. **tso63 hi63    t<sup>h</sup>ɛw22;            k<sup>h</sup>it65.tsjɛ32    bwe51**  
perform dramabegin            beggar            end

‘An actor at the beginning; a beggar in the end.’

*The idea here is that someone living a life of luxury, such as an actor, ends up penniless later in life. Thus, elders would admonish the younger generation not to squander the things that they had. The English equivalent is “Here today, gone tomorrow.”*

9. **sě33 dī33 kwě35; dǐ32 dī33 ɓwě51**  
three year official two year full

‘A three-year official has had enough in two.’

*The proverbial official has a three-year-long mandate but tires of it well before his tenure is up. The notion is that individuals tend to lose their enthusiasm over time, while also suggesting that some officials are unable to devote themselves fully to serving the public.*

10. **ts<sup>h</sup>jo63 t<sup>h</sup>ew33 ts<sup>h</sup>jo63 ɓin33 tsjɛ32 ʔu32 sin33.**  
smile head smile face eat have leftover

‘A smiling face leaves one with leftovers.’

- ɓin32 ʔju35 ɓin32 zjɛw22 pɛk65.tɔ51 ʔjɛw35.**  
face worried face wrinkle belly hungry

‘A worried and wrinkled face leaves one with a hungry belly.’

*The notion here is that a positive personality brings one more than enough to eat, while a negative personality brings one bad luck and not enough to eat.*

11. **tsɛ33.ɓɔ51 swi35 ɓɛk32.tsju35;**  
women beautiful eyes

‘Women are beautiful for their eyes.’

- tsɛ33.pɔ33 swi35 ts<sup>h</sup>i63.ts<sup>h</sup>ju35**  
man beautiful beard

‘Men are beautiful for their beards.’

*The notion here is that different classes of people are judged differently and that individuals view their surroundings in unique ways. This saying conveys an admonishment to have an open and positive attitude and to accentuate what is positive.*

12. **ts<sup>h</sup>ɛ33.ɓɛ33 tsɪŋ35; ʔě33.kɛw35 dɪŋ22**  
blind precise dumb effective

‘Though blind, the blind man is precise; though dumb, the dumb man is nimble.’

*The disabled compensate for their disabilities; more broadly, individuals tend to have defects but also merits.*

**13. tʰi33.kəŋ35 sjə63 ɣəŋ32 kjɛ̃51.**  
heaven deity favour stupid kid

‘The deity of heaven favours stupid kids.’

*Even foolish people can prosper.*

**14. twə32 pun51 pwə32 ɬə33 ɬun51**  
big capital gambler fear

‘There is no fear of gambling when one has lots of money.’

*This saying expresses the idea that the possession of resources brings confidence and also that officials sometimes squander public funds on themselves.*

**15. ʔə33.ku35 kɛ̃35 twə32.ʔjɛ̃22;**  
turtle fake big man

‘A turtle is a fake big man.’

**kʰit65.tsjɛ̃22 kɛ̃35 ɬə35.tjɛ̃35**  
beggar fake official

‘A beggar is a fake official.’

*The notion here is that those without power may behave in an overbearing manner as if they are powerful.*

**16. kʰi35 tsʰu41 pʰɛ̃j63 pwɛ̃63 djɛ̃w33**  
build house dispatch half material

‘Offer half the material to build a house.’

*This saying describes a negative social phenomenon: some individuals do shoddy work, skimping on the materials and thus their commitments to others.*

17. **zin33 tsiŋ22 tsun35 ts<sup>h</sup>j532 ki41;**  
human relation just like saw

**ʔu32 dɛj22 kə63 ʔu32 k<sup>h</sup>i41**  
have come also have go

‘Relationships among people are like a saw going back and forth.’

*Maintaining a relationship between individuals requires effort from both.*

18. **tsj532 swē35 k<sup>h</sup>wē63 swē33 si41;**  
climb mountain observe mountain shape

‘Climb a mount in to observe its shape.’

**zip32 ɸwī22 k<sup>h</sup>wē63 dɛŋ33 ʔi41.**  
enter door observe people feeling

‘When you to in, observe the host’s feelings.’

*Here the idea is that one should maintain a flexible attitude and adjust to changing surroundings.*

19. **si35 dʒēw35 kwə63 ts<sup>h</sup>ju32t<sup>h</sup>ew22,**  
dead cat hang tree head

‘Hang a dead cat on a tree.’

**si35 kəw51 pɛŋ63 tswi35 dɛw22.**  
dead dog place water flow

‘Let a dead dog be washed away.’

*This saying suggests that each individual has his or her own destination and that different issues have different solutions. It also advises remaining flexible and open to the world.*

20. **ts<sup>h</sup>in33 sē33 kjē51 ʔu32 tʃə63 ɸɛ32 ɸə35 ʔjen22**  
blood-related birth kid also need father mother destiny

‘Kids also need a predestined relationship with their parents.’

*This saying suggests that parents have a large influence on their children's lives and that individuals should be tolerant of the unfairness that they may encounter in life. It also reflects a general faith in Sinitic culture.*

- 21. tse33.ɸɔ35      kin35.ʔe      ts<sup>h</sup>ɛj63      tsi35      ɸjɛ̃33**  
 female              kid              vegetable              seed      destiny

‘Girls have a destiny like that of vegetable seeds.’

*This saying reflects the limited control that women used to have over their lives in the old days, since they left their parents after marriage, like seeds that scatter and grow wherever they end up.*

- 22. ts<sup>h</sup>ɛj32              tɔ35      ʔm32      dɛj33; dɛj32      tsjɛn33              si22**  
 vegetable              knife      Neg.      sharp      sharp      fry              spatula

‘A blunt kitchen knife but a sharp frying spatula.’

*This saying inverts the usual situation, in which the knife is expected to be sharper than the spatula; the implication is that, also contrary to expectations, men do not perform better than women.*

- 23. p<sup>h</sup>ɛ63      hɔ51      dʒɛ32      ts<sup>h</sup>ɛt221              ts<sup>h</sup>in              hjɛ̃33.ti33**  
 beat      tiger      catch      thief              blood-related      brother

‘Blood brothers overcome the tiger and catch the thief together.’

*The idea here is that close relations work together at crucial moments to confront threats, meaning that family members are the most supportive individuals in one's life and need to be cherished.*

- 24. ɸɔ33      hɔ35      si32.twɛ33;      dɔ32      ɸɔ33      hɔ35      si32.se41.**  
 no      good      adults              then      no      good      children

‘No-good parents mean no-good children.’

*This saying suggests that parents need to be a good role models for the next generation. The English equivalent is “The apple doesn't fall far from the tree.”*

- 25. sjɛw63              dʒɛn22              ʔm32      p<sup>h</sup>ɛ63.pjɛ̃41**  
 young              year              Neg.      strive

‘No striving in youth.’

**tsjɛ32 dɛw33 hɔ33 ɸjɛ33.sjɛ35**  
eat old Neg. reputation

‘No reputation in old age.’

*This saying suggests that success in life depends on hard work early on.*

**26. kɛ33 tsjɔ35 khjɔ41 khɛ63 hɔ35 dɛŋ32 tsjɔ41**  
more less collect comparative good active voice borrow

‘Gathering is better than borrowing.’

*This saying encourages self-sufficiency, indicating that accumulating a modest amount of resources is better than borrowing from others.*

**27. tsit32 hɔ32 bi51 tsjɛ32 pɛ63 ʔjɔ32 dɛŋ22.**  
one size rice eat hundred type people

‘One type of rice can nourish a hundred kinds of people.’

*This saying suggests that those who are raised in the same background can have different personalities, for better or worse.*

**28. ʔju33.kɛm35 hɔ35 ɸwe35 bi33;**  
gooseberry good final flavor

‘The gooseberry is sweet in the end.’

**kɛm33.tsjɛ41 tɸw33 ɸwe35 tɪ35.**  
sugarcane head end sweet

‘The sugar cane is sweet from one end to the other.’

*The idea here is that some experiences are pleasurable all the way through and others only at the end, suggesting that even those whose lives begin in difficulty may find sweetness in old age*

### Allegorical Sayings

Allegorical sayings, known as Xiehouyu 歇后语 in Sinitic languages, as one kind of proverbs, are unique in terms of form (Lai, 2008). They contain two parts: one portraying an image of an object, an event, or a situation, and

the other indicating the meaning to be derived from the first part. The first part can be either a phrase or a cause that functions as a subject; while the second part appears to be a predictive phrase. Their combination forms a full sentence that conveys information to be derived through conceptual mechanisms. In this section, nine allegorical sayings are presented, all of which are rooted in the folk knowledge with a high degree of colloquialism and reflect general opinions of Zhangzhou community. The two constituent parts mentioned above are separated by an em-dash.

1. **p<sup>h</sup>ɛ63.tsi22**    **ts<sup>h</sup>ju35kut41**  
 beat break      hand    bone

— **tø63**            **ʔjɔŋ51**  
 instead          strong

‘A fractured hand is that much stronger.’

*The idea here is that hardship makes an individual stronger.*

2. **ts<sup>h</sup>it65 ʔe**        **pwẽ63 ʔɛ55.ʔɛ**  
 seven Poss.      half    duck

— **ʔm32**            **tsẽj33 si51**  
 Neg.              know death

‘Ducks on the mid-July don’t foresee their deaths.’

*In Southern Min culture, thanksgiving offerings, mainly cooked poultry, including duck, are presented to deceased family members in the middle of the seventh month of the Chinese calendar (corresponding to mid-July), something of which the ducks are of course unaware. The idea is that individuals are often unprepared for momentous events in their lives.*

3. **ts<sup>h</sup>ẽ33.bẽ33**    **djẽw35**            **djẽw2.tjø**    **si35**    **djẽw35. ts<sup>h</sup>i51**  
 blind              cat                    catch          dead    mouse

— **t<sup>h</sup>ɛw63.tu35.k<sup>h</sup>ɛm51**  
 as luck would have it

‘A blind cat catches a dead mouse.’

*Since a blind cat would be a poor hunter of mice, its luck in coming across a dead mouse suggests the possibility of a happy coincidence.*

4. **hwe33.sj535** **djəm32** **kiŋ35**  
monk recite scripture
- **ʔu32** **ts<sup>h</sup>wi41** **ʃə33** **sim35**  
have mouth no heart

‘A monk recites the scripture with his mouth but not in his heart.’

*This saying describes an individual who is merely going through the motions when performing an important task.*

5. **ts<sup>h</sup>wə35.dɛ̃41** **dɛŋ32** **ke33** **kɛŋ35**  
grasshopper tease chicken male
- **ts<sup>h</sup>wɛ32** **si41**  
seek death

‘The grasshopper teases the rooster to its peril.’

*This saying describes individuals who take risks foolishly or in ignorance,*

6. **pɛŋ63** **p<sup>h</sup>wi41** **t<sup>h</sup>wi63** **k<sup>h</sup>ɔ41**  
release fart take off trouser
- **kɛ33** **kɛŋ35**  
**add** **effort**

‘He takes his pants off to fart.’

*This saying describes an individual prone to taking unnecessary actions.*

7. **ʃə33** **k<sup>h</sup>i51** **tsjɛ32** **tɛw32** **hu33**  
no tooth eat bean curd
- **tu35** **hə51**  
**just** **fine**

‘The toothless man has no problem eating bean curd.’

*This saying describes how individuals find ways to meet their needs despite obstacles.*

8. **hə35 djɛ̃w35 kwən35 pɛ32 kɛ35**  
good cat look after hundred home
- **kɛ33 pə22**  
home old lady

‘A good cat looks after hundred homes.’

*In Southern Min culture, old women are often regarded as involving themselves in affairs that are and are not their concern, so the saying criticizes meddlesome individuals.*

9. **sɛ̃33 kɛ33 ɸwĩ35 ɸə22; pɛŋ63 kɛ33 səj51 ʔu33**  
bear hen egg no place hen shit yes
- **ɸə33.ɸə32.ʔjəŋ33**  
useless

‘When a hen bears an egg, don’t keep it in chicken shit.’

*This saying describes an unproductive action.*

### Trisyllabic Idioms

Trisyllabic idioms are referred to as conventionalised expression (Guanyongyu 惯用语) in Sinitic languages. They differ from sayings and allegorical sayings in terms of the internal structure, while differing from other forms of idiomatic expressions in the number of syllables and/or the source/origin. The trisyllabic idioms are colloquialisms that are created and formed by the community members in the course of their everyday activities. They are mostly used to express emotional attitudes, such as disappointment, disgust, or appreciation. They function as a single lexeme in full sentences, but differ from other common lexemes by virtue of their conventional implications, which is difficult to deduce based on the literary meanings of individual components. Below, 18 trisyllabic idioms that are commonly heard in the local society are introduced.

1. **ɸə33 ɸək32.tsju35**  
no eye

‘Eyeless.’

*This term describes individuals who are indifferent to the world around them.*

2. **ḡə33 ts<sup>h</sup>ɛj35.kəŋ35**  
no effort

‘No effort.’

*This saying describes an individual who wastes effort on something unworthy.*

3. **ḡɛj35 ts<sup>h</sup>ju35si41**  
bad hand posture

‘Bad gesture’

*This saying describes an individual who is unlucky at gambling.*

4. **ḡə32 ki33 ts<sup>h</sup>ju35**  
five quantifier beard

‘Five beards.’

*This saying describes a lustful man, known as a ‘cat’ in Southern Min culture.*

5. **kī63 tsī33 si51**  
see money death

‘Die of seeing money.’

*This saying describes an individual who places financial gain above all else.*

6. **ʔjɛw35 sju32 pə33**  
shorten longevity strategy

‘A fatal strategy.’

*This saying describes an unworkable strategy.*

7. **ʔə33 ʔɛ33 ts<sup>h</sup>wi41**  
black crow mouth

‘With a crow’s black mouth.’

*This saying describes an individual who says something undesirable and ominous; the crow represents bad luck in Sinitic culture.*

8. **tək65 ts<sup>h</sup>wi63 kə51**  
fight mouth drum

‘Bicker.’

*This saying describes individuals who are joking around.*

9. **pwē63 t<sup>h</sup>ew33 ts<sup>h</sup>ē35**  
half head immature

‘With a head half-grown.’

*This saying describes an individual whose actions and decisions show a lack of maturity.*

10. **?m32 kəw63 kwi51**  
Neg. enoughghost

‘Not enough of a ghost.’

*This saying describes an individual who acts or dresses in an inappropriate manner.*

11. **hə35 ts<sup>h</sup>wi63 tswi51**  
good mouth status

‘He keeps his mouth good.’

*This saying describes an individual who likes to greet others with soothing words.*

12. **ts<sup>h</sup>ē33.ḃē33 ɣu22**  
blind cow

‘A blind cow.’

*This saying describes an illiterate individual suited only to menial labour.*

13. **kəw32 ?wə32 səj51**  
thick speech shit

‘Diarrhoea mouth.’

*This saying describes an individual who is overly talkative.*

- 14. səŋ63                      kɛ63                      ʔm41**  
send                      marriage                      aunt

‘An aunt of the bride duties.’

*This saying describes an individual is knowledgeable about the surrounding culture and also likes to dictate orders. In Southern Min culture, this term also refers to a professional (usually female) who provides services relating to traditional weddings.*

- 15. kɛ33                      pø33                      sə51**  
home                      elder woman                      sister-in-law

‘The old sister-in-law in the house.’

*This saying describes a woman who likes to involve herself in the affairs of others. Traditionally, women stayed at home to do housework and, when they met together, were thought to gossip.*

- 16. t<sup>h</sup>ɛw33 tsjɛ32                      pɔ33**  
steal eat                      step

‘Gain sth. by trickery’

*This saying describes individuals who take advantage of the rules to further their own purposes.*

- 17. k<sup>h</sup>jɛw63                      ts<sup>h</sup>wi63.tswi51**  
bend upwards                      mouth lips

‘Purse up one’s lips.’

*This saying describes an individual who is unhappy with an outcome or decision.*

- 18. dəw63 ʔɛ32                      hɛm35**  
drop lower jaw

‘He’s dropping his jaw.’

*This saying describes an individual who is overstating something.*

## Quadrisyllabic Idioms

Quadrisyllabic idioms known as *chengyu* 成语 in Sinitic culture are distinguished by form and function from sayings and allegorical sayings, while being distinct from trisyllabic idioms in terms of the number of syllables and sources. The quadrisyllabic idioms of Zhangzhou are largely colloquial, and their meanings appear deducible from their constituents. They are full of rhythm and cadence that can be divided into two feet, a tempo that is easy to verbalise and memorise (Wu, 1995). Due to their colloquial and rhythmic features, the quadrisyllabic idioms are commonly used by native speakers in everyday conversations to congratulate, attract attention, advise, suggest, or to warn. In this section, 18 quadrisyllabic idioms are presented to reflect the interaction between Southern Min language and culture.

**1. hwɛ33 tʰew33 hi35 ɸin33**

happy head happy face

‘Happy thoughts, happy face.’

*This saying suggests that happiness is an honest emotion.*

**2. tsjɛm33 kʰɛ33 ?ju63 tsʰju51**

needle foot tender hand

‘With a needle foot and a tender hand.’

*This phrase describes an individual who is pampered.*

**3. tʰɛj33 ke35 kɛ63 kɛw22**

kill chicken teach monkey

‘Kill the chicken to teach the monkey.’

*This saying describes punishing one individual as a warning to others.*

**4. ɸun35 kʰi41 kju33 tsɛj22**

tolerate breath pursuit wealth

‘Put up with [bad] breath to pursue wealth.’

*This statement suggests that one should not lose out on business opportunities because of another’s unpleasant personal characteristics.*

**5. ɸi33 sjɛ35 ɸɛ35 hɛw51**

donkeyvoice horse cry

‘The voice of a donkey and the braying of a horse.’

*This saying is used to describe harsh voices or songs.*

6. **pɛ35** **ɬɪ33** **pɛ33** **tse41**  
full year full festival

‘Full year, full festival.’

*This saying describes abundance at new year’s festivals.*

7. **kʰɛŋ33****tsʰwi63** **pɔ32** **tsi22**  
empty mouth chew tongue

‘Empty your mouth and chew your tongue.’

*This saying is used to describe individuals who gossip and say foolish things.*

8. **ʔɔ33** **ku35** **pi63** **tswɛ22**  
black turtle tortoisese

‘Black turtles, tortoises, and snakes.’

*This saying is used to describe a group of undesirable individuals.*

9. **ɬwi35** **tʰɔ22** **tsʰim33** **kut221**  
soft soil deep dig

‘Dig deep in soft soil.’

*This saying describes individuals who are easily bullied.*

10. **ɬɛŋ33** **ɬɛj33** **kɛ63** **kʰi41**  
people come guest go

‘People come, guests go.’

*This saying emphasizes the importance of mutual interactions for maintaining a relationship.*

11. **tsʰɛw63** **tʰɛw22** **kɛw32** **ʔjɔ22**  
stinking head thick medicine

‘Stinking head, thick medicine.’

*This saying indicates that individuals with a certain disease encounter a series of troubles.*

**12. djɤ32 ku35 tsɤw35pi41**  
catch turtle escape tortoise

‘Catch one turtle, lose tortoise.’

*This saying describes individuals who lose one thing while attending to another.*

**13. sɤm33 put65 ɢɔ32 si22**  
three unlike five hour

‘More like three than five hours.’

*This saying is used to describe something that happens very frequently.*

**14. fɤ33 ɢu22 sɤj35 fɛ51**  
no cow use horse

‘If there’s no cow, use a horse.’

*This saying describes the need to adjust to the changing circumstances.*

**15. put65 sɤm35 su32 djɤŋ51**  
unlike three like two

‘More like two than three.’

*This saying is used to refer to things or people that appear strange and are difficult to classify, are ‘neither fish nor fowl.’*

**16. pi35 ts<sup>h</sup>ju35 ʔwɤ32 tɔ35**  
gesture hand draw knife

‘Use hands to draw a knife.’

*This saying describes an individual who likes to use body language and also indicates that some individuals like to involve themselves in others’ business.*

**17. ʔu32 ʔjən22 bə33 ts<sup>h</sup>jən22**  
have fate no decline

‘Don’t decline a person who has a predestined relationship.’

*To express that people emphasize a predestined relationship in their social activities.*

**18. ts<sup>h</sup>ẽ33 t<sup>h</sup>ɛw33 ts<sup>h</sup>ɛ33 bin33**  
immature head immature face

‘Youthful face, youthful mind.’

*This saying describes an individual who is indifferent and arrogant.*

### References:

1. Chao, Y. (1930). ə sistəm əv “toun-lətəz” (A system of “tone letters”). *Le Maître Phonétique*, 45, 24-27.
2. Huang, Y. (2018). *Tones in Zhangzhou: Pitch and beyond* (PhD dissertation: Australian National University). Retrieved from <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/handle/1885/144938>
3. Lai, H.-l. (2008). Understanding and classifying two-part allegorical sayings: Metonymy, metaphor, and cultural constraints. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40, 454-474.
4. Li, Y. (2016). Comparison of the comprehension of three types of Chinese colloquial idioms by advanced Chinese L2 learners. (PhD dissertation: The University of Iowa). Retrieved from <https://ir.uiowa.edu/etd/2112/>
5. Ma, C. (1994). *Studies of Zhangzhou dialect (Zhangzhou Fangyan Yanjiu)*. Hongkong: Zongheng Publishing House.
6. Murar, I. (2009). Pragmatic and functional uses of idioms. *Analele Universității din Craiova. Seria Științe Filologice. Lingvistică*, XXXI, 1-2
7. Schuster, & Ellen. (1998). Proverbs: A Path to understanding different cultures. *Journal of Extension*, 36(1). Retrieved from <https://www.joe.org/joe/1998february/tt2.php>
8. Stoch, N. (2017). Distinctive Features of Chinese proverbs: A comparative study of suyu and yanyu and other types of shuyu. *Annals of Arts*, 64(9), 47-68.
9. Wu, C. H. (1995). On the cultural traits of Chinese idioms. *Intercultural Communication Studies*, 5, 61-82.

10. Yang, X. (2007). *Proverbs and songs in Zhangzhou dialect (Zhangzhou Fangyan Shuyu Geyao)*. Fuzhou, China: Fujian People's Publishing House.