

## 10. Idioms and Classical Elements

### 10.1 Four-syllable Idioms

Four-character idioms are fixed usages, four syllables in length, which convey simply and succinctly a certain meaning. That meaning can be a description of a person, object, or state of affairs, or some piece of wisdom about the world. There are other forms of idioms apart from the four-syllable type; the Chinese language, however, tends naturally to form words and phrases into twos—so much so that it has been called an “even number” language—and it particularly favors two- and four-syllable constructions. For this reason, four-syllable idioms are far and away the most numerous type.

Four-syllable idioms may be divided into two groups according to where they originate. Idioms of the first type are classical allusions, originating in the literary language of ancient Chinese; their content is usually the boiled-down essence of a story, fable or allegory. Some examples of this type are: *hú jiǎ hǔ wēi* 狐假虎威 (“the fox borrows the tiger’s might”: using one’s powerful connections to push people around); *shǒu zhū dài tù* 守株待兔 (“wait by the stump for the rabbit to dash itself against it”: put one’s faith in chance), and *sān gù máo lú* 三顾茅庐 (“pay three visits to the thatched cottage”: repeatedly request somebody to take up a post).

Idioms of the second type have their origins in the speech of the common people; they are sayings which because of their

pithiness, vividness and rich content have gradually become fixed usages. Some examples of this type are: *méi kāi yǎn xiào* 眉开眼笑 (“eyebrows lift and eyes smile”: beam with joy), *dǎ cǎo jīng shé* 打草惊蛇 (“beat the grass and frighten away the snake”: act rashly and alert the enemy), and *hú sī luàn xiǎng* 胡思乱想 (let one’s imagination run away with one).

Two problems confront HP orthography with regard to four-syllable idioms. The first is the question of how to differentiate these idioms from ordinary phrases in writing. This problem does not exist with Chinese characters, which break up everything equally into single-syllable units; but it is a serious problem in HP. Four-syllable idioms are wordlike objects, fixed in form and carrying a specific associated meaning; yet they are not altogether words. In order to be able to differentiate idioms from ordinary phrases, we need some sort of rule governing their written form—a rule that will tell us that constructions such as *fēng yún rén wù* 风云人物 (man of the hour), *kàn tú shí zì* 看图识字 (learn to read by using pictures) and *nán-nǚ píngděng* 男女平等 (equality between the sexes) are ordinary usages and not idioms. We also need to be able to differentiate those four-character patterns into which any number of monosyllabic words can be substituted from true idioms. A few these patterns are given here:

*lián...dài...* 连...带... (as well as): *lián rén dài mǎ* 连人带马 (men and horses both);

*yǒu...yǒu...* 有...有... (both... and...): *yǒu shuō yǒu xiào* 有说有笑 (talking and laughing);

*yī...jiù...* 一...就... (as soon as... then...): *yī kàn jiù dǒng* 一看就懂 (understand as soon as one sees it);

yuè...yuè...越...越... (the more... the more...); yuè lái yuè rè 越来越热 (hotter and hotter);

... lái ... qù ...来...去 (back and forth); shuō lái shuō qù 说来说去 (discuss something over and over);

dōng... xī...东...西... (left and right, east and west); dōng kàn xī kàn 东看西看 (look left and right);

yòu... yòu...又...又... (both... and...); yòu xiāng yòu tián 又香又甜 (both fragrant and sweet);

bù... bù...不...不... (neither... nor...); bù cháng bù duǎn 不长不短 (neither long nor short).

On the other hand, constructions like dōngzhāng-xīwàng 东张西望 (gaze about) and bùgān-bùjìng 不干不净 (filthy) may be treated as idioms, because their second and fourth syllables are not two independent words, but the two syllables of a disyllabic word zhāngwàng 张望 (to look around); gānjìng 干净 (clean).

The second problem that idioms present is that of simple orthography—how they should be written. Once we have determined that a given four-syllable sequence is an idiom, how should we write it in HP? Much discussion among researchers of orthography has been focused on this question, and various written forms proposed. The results of all this discussion and experimentation are the three different forms below (using as our example 满城风雨, “the whole city is full of wind and rain”: the talk of the town):

Separated; mǎn chéng fēng yǔ

Hyphenated; mǎn-chéng-fēng-yǔ

Connected; mǎnchéngfēngyǔ

Each form has its good points as well as its drawbacks. The first form is similar to the written form of an ordinary phrase, and gives no clear indication that the phrase in question is an idiom. The second form contains too many hyphens, and is neither pleasing to the eye nor convenient to write. The third form is straight forward and easy to write, but difficult to read and interpret. Moreover, none of these three forms gives any indication of the internal structure of the idiom, which is often complex and always an important guide to meaning. The first and second forms in particular are not appropriate for most idioms. One gets a better idea of the meaning of this idiom if it is written “mǎnchéng fēng-yǔ” or perhaps “mǎn-chéng-fēngyǔ.”

These last two written forms are suggested on the basis of the semantic content of the phrase. Considering meaning, however, tends to increase the complexity of the written form. It is much simpler to take the idiom as a single unit and then to analyze it from the angle of phonetics. This is because almost all four-character idioms can be broken up into two halves, called *yǔjié* 语节 (language segments), on the basis of phonetic structure. The simple expedient of connecting the two *yǔjié* with a hyphen then provides idioms with their own distinctive written form, and assures ease of writing and reading. It is also a simple rule for students of HP to master. In the following section, we will try this form out on various types of idioms.

Four-syllable idioms may be divided into two groups, symmetrical and asymmetrical, on the basis of internal structure. Each of these groups may be further subdivided, as in the discussion that follows below.

**Symmetrical four-syllable idioms** 四字对称式成语

The adjective “symmetrical” indicates that the two yǔjié which constitute the idiom are similar or identical in structure. Placing a hyphen between the yǔjié is thus highly appropriate with this form, as it balances and separates the two halves. Note that the yǔjié themselves, regardless of their internal structure, are always written as single units.

**1) Subject-predicate / / subject-predicate form** 主谓式

(Here and throughout the discussion of idioms, the double stroke // indicates the boundary between two yǔjié.)

huāhǎo-yuèyuán 花好月圆 (“the flowers are good and the moon is full”: perfect conjugal bliss);

lóngtóng-hǔyuè 龙腾虎跃 (“dragons rise and tigers leap”: a scene of bustling activity);

dǎnzhàn-xīnjīng 胆战心惊 (“the gallbladder trembles and the heart starts”: terror-stricken);

gǔwǎng-jīnlái 古往今来 (“the past goes and the present comes”: throughout the ages);

jiāyù-hùxiǎo 家喻户晓 (“families and households know”: widely known, a household word);

kǒushì-xīnfēi 口是心非 (“the mouth says yes, the heart says no”: say one thing and mean another);

mùdèng-kǒudāi 目瞪口呆 (“eyes stare, mouth gapes”: dumbstruck);

nǐsǐ-wǒhuó 你死我活 (“you die, I live”: life-and-death, to the death);

rén yǎng mǎ fān 人仰马翻 (“men and horses lie on the ground”: an utter defeat);

yǎnmíng-shǒukuài 眼明手快 (“eyes are bright, hands are quick”: quick-eyed, nimble and deft);

yuǎnyuǎn-liúcháng 源远流长 (“the source is distant and the stream long”: of long standing and well established);

yúnxīāo-wùsǎn 云消雾散 (“the clouds lift and the fog clears”: vanish without a trace);

zìchuī-zìléi 自吹自擂 (“one blows (the trumpet) and beats (the drum) for oneself”: blow one’s own trumpet).

In the examples above, the two halves of each idiom stand in a relationship of equality. In the following examples, the two halves of each idiom stand in a before-and-after, or priority, relationship.

guāshú-dīluò 瓜熟蒂落 (“the melon ripens and it falls from its stem”: things are easily resolved when the time is right);

kǔjìn-gānlái 苦尽甘来 (“bitterness ends and sweetness comes”: after suffering comes happiness);

qiánpū-hòujì 前仆后继 (“the one in front falls and the one behind takes his place”: step into the breach left by the fall of another);

shìbàn-gōngbèi 事半功倍 (“trouble is half and reward is double”: get twice the result with half the effort);

shìbèi-gōngbàn 事倍功半 (“trouble is double and reward is half”: get half the result with twice the effort);

shuǐdào-qúchéng 水到渠成 (“water flows and a channel is formed”: when conditions are ripe, success follows).

## 2) Verb-object / / verb-object form

zhǎncǎo-chúgēn 斩草除根 (“cut the weeds and dig up the roots”: destroy something root and branch);

chuítóu—sàngqì 垂头丧气 (“hang the head and lose one’s vigor”: crestfallen);

diānsān—dǎo sì 颠三倒四 (“overturn three and four”: confused, incoherent);

dǐngtiān—lìdì 顶天立地 (“bear the sky on one’s head and stand on the earth”: gigantic in stature);

hàochī—lǎnzhuò 好吃懒做 (“love eating and dislike work”: gluttonous and lazy);

huíxīn—zhuǎnyì 回心转意 (“turn one’s heart and intent”: change one’s views);

páishān—dǎohǎi 排山倒海 (topple the mountains and overturn the seas);

tóutiān—huànrì 偷天换日 (“steal the sky and change the sun”: perpetrate a gigantic fraud);

zhāobīng—mǎimǎ 招兵买马 (“recruit soldiers and buy horses”: recruit followers);

zhuāngfēng—màishǒ 装疯卖傻 (“feign madness and act stupid”: play the fool).

In the examples above, the two halves of each idiom stand in a relationship of equality to each other. In the following examples, the two halves stand in a priority relationship:

chūqí—zhìshèng 出奇制胜 (“pull out a surprise and make a victory”: defeat one’s opponent by a surprise move);

gùcǐ—shībǐ 顾此失彼 (“attend to one thing and lose sight of another”: have too many things to attend to);

qǐsǐ—huīshēng 起死回生 (“raise the dead and restore them to life”: snatch a patient from the jaws of death);

qǔcháng—bǔduǎn 取长补短 (“take the long to make up the

short”: learn from other’s strong points to overcome one’s own weaknesses);

wángyáng—bǔláo 亡羊补牢 (“repair the pen after the sheep is lost”: close the stable door after the horse has bolted);

wàngméi—zhǐkě 望梅止渴 (“slake one’s thirst by looking at plums”: console oneself with false hopes and daydreams).

There is yet another type of verb-object // verb-object idiom in which the object of the first yǔjié also serves as the subject of the second:

diǎnshí—chéngjīn 点石成金 (“touch a stone and turn it into gold”: turn a crude essay into a literary gem) — shí 石 (stone) is both object and subject;

diàohǔ—líshān 调虎离山 (“lure the tiger to leave its mountain”: lure the enemy away from his base) — hǔ 虎 (tiger) is both object and subject.

### 3) Verb-complement // verb-complement form

gǎnjīng—shājué 赶尽杀绝 (“drive out and kill all”: spare none, be ruthless).

The four-syllable idiom only rarely takes this form. When it does, it is most often composed of a disyllabic word split up and set in a framework such as.. lái ...quò ...来 ...去 (back and forth). A few examples:

diǎnlái—dǎoqu 颠来倒去 (over and over) — from diāndǎo 颠倒 (to turn upside down);

fānlái—fùqu 翻来复去 (toss and turn) — from fānfù 翻复 (to overturn);

sīqián—xiǎnghòu 思前想后 (think over again and again) — from sīxiǎng 思想 (thought).



Note that if the elements inserted into the framework are monosyllabic verbs, then the two halves are written as independent words:

**zǒulái zǒuqù** 走来走去 (pace back and forth);

**xiǎngláidǎ xiǎngqù** 想来想去 (turn something over and over in one's mind).

**4) Modifier-modified // modifier-modified form**

The modified element in such constructions can be a noun, verb, adjective, numeral, or another word functioning as any of these:

**dádāo—kuòfǔ** 大刀阔斧 (“big sword and broad axe”: bold and resolute);

**yīwǔ—yīshí** 一五一十 (“a five and a ten”: systematically and in full detail);

**cháoyú—jiǔhòu** 茶余酒后 (“after a few glasses of wine or tea”: at one's leisure);

**cūzhī—dà yè** 粗枝大叶 (“thick branches and big leaves”: careless and slapdash);

**dānqiāng—pímǎ** 单枪匹马 (“one spear and single horse”: singlehanded);

**hǔtóu—shéwěi** 虎头蛇尾 (“a tiger's head and a snake's tail”: a fine start but a poor finish);

**lǎoniú—pòchē** 老牛破车 (“an old ox and a broken-down cart”: make slow progress);

**shānzhēn—hǎiwèi** 山珍海味 (“treasures of the mountains and flavors of the sea”: dainties and delicacies);

**qīzuǐ—bāshé** 七嘴八舌 (“seven mouths and eight tongues”: all talking at once);

tīānyá-hǎijiǎo 天涯海角 (“edge of the sky and corner of the sea”; the ends of the earth);

yìkǒu-tóngshēng 异口同声 (“different mouths, one voice”; with one voice);

sìtōng-bādá 四通八达 (“four connections and eight accesses”; extend in all directions);

yīzhī-bànjiě 一知半解 (“one know and half an understand”; have only a smattering of knowledge);

yuǎnzǒu-gāofēi 远走高飞 (“walk far and fly high”; be off to distant parts);

wànzi-qīnhóng 万紫千红 (“ten thousand purples and a thousand reds”; a blaze of color);

yīgān-èrjìng 一干二净 (“one and two clean”; thoroughly).

In the examples above, the two halves of each idiom stand in a relationship as equality to each other. In the following examples, the first and second halves of each idiom stand in a priority relationship.

jiǔniú-yīmáo 九牛一毛 (“one hair from nine oxen”; a drop in the ocean);

yījiàn-shuāngdiāo 一箭双雕 (“two hawks with one arrow”; two birds with one stone);

shēnrù-qǐnchū 深入浅出 (“go in deep and come out shallow”; explain complex things in simple terms);

xiǎotí-dàzuò 小题大作 (“small problem made big”; make a mountain out of a molehill).

**5) Coordinate compound / // coordinate compound form**  
This is a relatively rare form for a four-syllable idiom to take.

bēihuān-líhé 悲欢离合 (“joys and sorrows, partings and reunions”; the vicissitudes of life);

gǔjīn-zhōngwài 古今中外 (“ancient and modern, in China and abroad”; at all times, in all places);

qīngzhòng-huǎnjí 轻重缓急 (“important and unimportant, leisurely and hurried”; relative importance and urgency of a matter);

shēngsǐ-cúnwáng 生死存亡 (life-and-death).

This type of idiom must not be confused with the common construction in which four independent items in a series are linked by hyphens (review Chapter 1, Section 7 for details):

chī-hē-wán-lè 吃喝玩乐 (“eat, drink, have fun and be merry”; waste one’s time seeking pleasure);

shēng-lǎo-bìng-sǐ 生老病死 (“birth, age, illness and death”; the stages of human life);

yī-shí-zhù-xíng 衣食住行 (“clothing, food, housing and transportation”; the basic necessities of life).

#### 6) Reduplicated / / reduplicated form

This is simply the AABB form discussed in connection with adjectives and onomatopoeic words in earlier chapters. If AB is a disyllabic word, then AABB may be treated as a form of reduplicated word, and written as a single unit with a hyphen separating the two halves:

qīngqīng-chǔchǔ 清清楚楚 (crystal clear) — from qīngchū 清楚 (clear);

dīngdīng-dāngdāng 叮叮当当 (noise of jingling or clattering) — from dīngdāng 叮当当.

If A and B do not form a disyllabic word together, then the

AABB construction they form should be considered an idiom. However, since the written form is the same in either case, it is unnecessary to determine the exact nature of the construction. Some examples of constructions in which A and B are two independent words:

guiguí-suisui 鬼鬼祟祟 (furtive, stealthy);

sānsān-liǎngliǎng 三三两两 (in twos and threes);

xíngxíng-sèsè 形形色色 (of every description);

zhànzhàn-jìngjìng 战战兢兢 (cautiously; fearfully).

### 7) Disyllabic word / / disyllabic word form

Four-syllable idioms take this form only very rarely. An idiom made up of two disyllabic words in coordination is very difficult to distinguish from two words forming an ordinary coordinate phrase, especially those words that are frequently used together in such phrases. In order to eliminate this problem, it is best to treat idioms of this form as phrases and break them up into their two component words. No hyphen is used to connect the two. If for some reason it is necessary to emphasize the idiomatic nature of the whole, it may be enclosed in quotation marks. A few examples of this type:

fánróng chāngshèng 繁荣昌盛 (thriving and prosperous);

gānjìng lìluò 干净利落 (neat and tidy);

jīmáo suǎnpí 鸡毛蒜皮 (“chicken feathers and garlic skins”: trivialities);

xiǎoqiǎo línglóng 小巧玲珑 (small and exquisite);

zhèngdà guāngmíng 正大光明 (open and aboveboard);

Zhāng Sān, Lǐ Sì or “Zhāng Sān” “Lǐ Sì” 张三李四 (any old Tom, Dick, or Harry).

### Asymmetrical four-syllable idioms

Asymmetrical idioms, as their name implies, cannot be divided into two equal halves. Rather, they must be analyzed into unequal components: subject and predicate, verb and object, verb and complement, and so on. Despite this fact, the phonetic standard may still be applied to determine an appropriate written form for them. Any asymmetrical four-syllable idiom that can be divided into two disyllabic yǔjié is written as two halves, linked by a hyphen.

#### 1) Subject-predicate form

These are of two types: those in which the first two characters together form the subject (as the first example below), and those in which the first character alone forms the subject (as the second example below). Both types are written in the 2-2 form:

cǎomù-jīēbīng 草木皆兵 (“weeds and trees all (look like) soldiers”: a state of extreme nervousness);

shíchén-dàhǎi 石沉大海 (“a rock dropped into the great sea”: disappear for ever);

chírén-shuōmèng 痴人说梦 (“a lunatic tells of his dream”: idiotic nonsense);

gǒudǎn-bāotiān 狗胆包天 (“a dog’s gallbladder enfolds the sky”: monstrous audacity);

guīxīn-sìjiàn 归心似箭 (“the heart returning home is like an arrow”: be eager to get home);

kūmù-féngchūn 枯木逢春 (“spring comes to the withered tree”: get a new lease on life);

shǔmù-cùnǎng 鼠目寸光 (“a mouse’s eyes see only an inch”: see only what is under one’s nose);

tíxiào—jiěfēi 啼笑皆非 (“neither laughing nor crying”: not know whether to laugh or cry);

xīnhuā—nùfàng 心花怒放 (“the heart’s flowers are in full bloom”: wild with joy);

yúnmù—hùnzhū 鱼目混珠 (“mix fish eyes with pearls”: pass off sham articles as genuine);

kǒuruò—xuánhé 口若悬河 (“the mouth is like a pouring river”: be eloquent);

mùkōng—yíqiè 目空一切 (“the eye looks on all as empty”: supercilious);

shìrú—pòzhú 势如破竹 (“the situation is like splitting bamboo”: like a hot knife through butter);

xiōngyǒu—chéngzhú 胸有成竹 (“have a full-grown bamboo in one’s heart”: have a well-thought-out plan).

## 2) Verb-object form

biéyǒu—tiāndì 别有天地 (“another world”: a place of exceptional beauty);

chóngzhěng—qígǔ 重整旗鼓 (“arrange the flags and drums once more”: rally one’s troops after a defeat);

diāndǎo—hēibái 颠倒黑白 (“confuse black and white”: stand facts on their heads);

gùnòng—xuánxū 故弄玄虚 (purposely create mysteries);

huàwéi—wúyǒu 化为乌有 (“turn into nothing”: come to naught);

sōusuǒ—kūcháng 搜索枯肠 (“search one’s impoverished mind”: rack one’s brains);

xūzhāng—shēngshì 虚张声势 (“display empty noise and force”: make an empty show of strength).

3) **Verb-complement form** 动补式 (dòngbǔshì)

huirén-bùjuàn 诲人不倦 (be tireless in teaching);  
céngchū-bùqióng 层出不穷 (emerge in an endless stream);  
titiē-rùwēi 体贴入微 (“care for down to the smallest thing”;  
care for with great solicitude);

zǒutóu-wúlù 走投无路 (“reach the end of the road”; have no  
way out);

jírú-xīnghuǒ 急如星火 (“rapid as a shooting star”; extremely  
urgent);

shǒukǒu-rúping 守口如瓶 (“guard one’s mouth like a  
bottle”; keep one’s mouth shut);

yírú-fǎnzhǎng 易如反掌 (“as easy as turning over one’s  
hand”; easy as falling off a log).

4) **Modifier-modified form** 偏正式 (piānzhèngshì)

Idioms of this type can take many different forms. The  
modified component may be a noun, or a verb or adjective. The  
two types are introduced separately below.

**Modified element is a noun.** 偏正式 (偏正式)

It is best to write the two halves of this type of idiom  
separately, without a hyphen:

yǔhòu chūnsǎn 雨后春笋 (“bamboo shoots after a rain”; spr-  
ing up like mushrooms);

gǒupí gāoyào 狗皮膏药 (“dogskin plaster”; quack medicine);

jiǔròu péngyou 酒肉朋友 (“wine and meat friend”; fair-  
weather friend);

qūqū xiǎoshì 区区小事 (a tiny or trifling matter);

zhǎngshàng míngzhū 掌上明珠 (“a pearl in the palm of one’s  
hand”; a beloved daughter).

**Modified element is a verb or adjective**

The hyphen is used to link the two halves of this type of idiom:

chēnrè-dǎtiě 趁热打铁(strike while the iron is hot);

dàhǎi-lāozhēn 大海捞针(“look for a needle in the sea”: look for a needle in a haystack);

huǒshàng-jīāyóu 火上加油(“pour oil on the fire”: add fuel to the flames);

kuākuā-qítán 夸夸其谈(exaggerate);

shùnshǒu-qīǎnyáng 顺手牵羊(“pick up a goat as one passes”: walk off with something on the sly);

suíshēng-fùhè 随声附和(echo what others say);

xuězhōng-sòngtàn 雪中送炭(“send charcoal when it snows”: provide timely help);

yuèyuè-yùshì 跃跃欲试(“hop up and down and want to try”: be eager to try).

**5) Coordinate compound form**

In addition to those idioms that are indisputably composed of two words in coordination, we have also here included those idioms composed of two yǔjié which it has been impossible to classify as belonging to one of the categories above. These are all written as two halves, linked by a hyphen:

bànyè-sāngēng 半夜三更(“midnight, at the third watch”: in the depths of the night);

fēngfù-duōcǎi 丰富多采(rich and varied);

guātián-lǐxià 瓜田李下(“in the melon patch or under a plum tree”: in suspicious circumstances);

húshuō-bādào 胡说八道(talk nonsense);



mómù—bùrén 麻木不仁 (apathetic and insensitive);

xìxiào—yánkāi 喜笑颜开 (“beaming and smiling with joy”:  
wreathed in smiles);

yóushǒu—hàoxián 游手好闲 (“with hands idle and loving  
ease”: idle about);

Zhāngguān—Lǐdài 张冠李戴 (“put Zhang’s hat on Li’s head”  
: confuse one thing with another).

6) **Four-syllable idioms which cannot be divided into two  
yǔjié**

Four-syllable idioms which are not composed of two  
disyllabic yǔjié make up only a small fraction—under 5% — of  
the whole. Division of these idioms into two halves produces a  
distortion or total loss of meaning. Let us look at some of the  
forms these idioms take.

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There are very few examples of this form. It is best to write  
the several components of this type of idiom as separate words,  
and to enclose the whole in quotation marks to make it clear that  
it is an idiom:

“rú niǎo—shòu sǎn” 如鸟兽散 (“be scattered like birds and  
wild beasts”: be utterly routed, flee wildly);

“yī yīdài shuǐ” 一衣带水 (“a belt of water”: a narrow strip of  
water).

2 + zhī + 1

The third syllable of this type of construction is the classical  
Chinese particle zhī 之. Again, this type of idiom is best divided  
into separate words in writing, and enclosed in quotation marks:

“hàiqún zhī mǎ” 害群之马 (“the horse that harms the entire

- herd”; black sheep);  
“huǎnbīng zhī jì” 缓兵之计 (stalling tactics);  
“wūhé zhī zhòng” 乌合之众 (“a crowd of crows”: a motley crew);  
“wújià zhī bǎo” 无价之宝 (a priceless treasure);  
“tuōjiǐng zhī mǎ” 脱缰之马 (“a horse dragging its reins”: like a runaway horse, out of control).

Note that the first two syllables of this type of idiom are written as one word even if they are grammatically two words (e.g. hàiqún 害群 to harm the herd), huǎnbīng 缓兵 to delay troops). This is done to prevent the idiom as a whole from becoming too spread out, in order to aid readability.

#### One long string

Some idioms have been in use for so long and are so generally known that they are always taken as a single unit; the hearer never bothers to break them down into their individual components to interpret their meaning. It is for this reason feasible to consider such idioms as four-syllable words and to treat them as single units in writing, making no divisions between their components. The most common of these idiom-words are listed below:

Classical and literary:

- bùyilèhū 不亦乐乎 (extremely);  
mǎnbùzàihu 满不在乎 (not care in the least);  
mòmíngqǐmiào 莫名其妙 (baffled);  
wēihūqíwēi 微乎其微 (next to nothing, very little);  
wéisuǒyùwéi 为所欲为 (do as one likes);  
wúsuǒshìcóng 无所适从 (be at a loss);  
xīnbùzàiyān 心不在焉 (preoccupied);

*zǒng'éryánzhī* 总而言之 (to make a long story short);  
*bùliǎoliǎozhī* 不了了之 (be forced to leave a matter unsettled);  
*wūhū'āizāi* 呜呼哀哉 (dead and gone);  
*zìrán'érrán* 自然而然 (of oneself, spontaneously).

Colloquial: *luànqībāozāo* 乱七八糟 (in a mess);

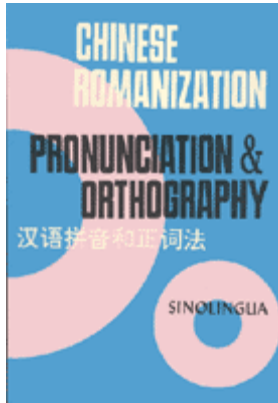
*wūqībāozāo* 乌七八糟 (messy; filthy).

## 10.2 Adages, Proverbs and *Xièhòuyǔ* (歇后语)

This section takes under consideration the various types of idioms that exceed four syllables in length—adages, proverbs and *xièhòuyǔ*. These, like four-syllable idioms, have their origins in two distinct sources: one the literary language of ancient Chinese; the other the speech of the common people. Those of the former type are archaic in form, though despite this they continue to be used in modern Chinese. Some of the idioms that originate as colloquialisms have over time been modified into half-literary, half-colloquial forms by adding elements from classical Chinese to them. Because of their half-and-half form, some idioms of this latter type are difficult to analyze grammatically.

All idioms over four syllables in length are broken up into individual words in written HP. The “words” we speak of here cover a broad range: colloquial words, literary words, and words from ancient Chinese. For the sake of clarity, moreover, we can sometimes disregard actual word boundaries and group several short words together as a longer unit. This makes the whole easier to read and comprehend. Thus we write “*kuàidào zhǎn luànmó*” rather than “*kuài dào zhǎn luàn mó*” for the five-syllable idiom

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