

20 Essential Chengyu (成语)

Every Mandarin Learner Should Know

Four-character idioms used daily by native speakers — with meanings, origins & usage notes.

1

一石二鸟

yī shí èr niǎo

— Kill two birds with one stone

Literally 'one stone, two birds.' Accomplishing two goals with one action. Intuitive for English speakers and immediately applicable.

2

马到成功

mǎ dào chéng gōng

— Immediate success

Literally 'the horse arrives, success is achieved.' Used to wish swift success in a new venture. Very common at Chinese New Year.

3

千载难逢

qiān zǎi nán féng

— A once-in-a-thousand-years opportunity

Literally 'hard to encounter even in a thousand years.' For rare and precious opportunities, or as a strong compliment when meeting someone remarkable.

4

打草惊蛇

dǎ cǎo jīng shé

— Alert the enemy through careless action

Literally 'beat the grass, startle the snake.' A warning against rash action that tips off an adversary. Common in business and strategic contexts.

5

盲人摸象

máng rén mō xiàng

— Blind men and the elephant

Each person sees only part of the truth and argues without the full picture. From the ancient Indian fable — useful in any debate involving partial information.

6

冰山一角

bīng shān yī jiǎo

— The tip of the iceberg

Identical in meaning to the English expression. Common in news and analysis when visible problems are only a fraction of a deeper, hidden reality.

7

进退两难

jìn tuì liǎng nán

— Caught in a dilemma

Literally 'difficult to advance or retreat.' The Chinese equivalent of 'between a rock and a hard place.' Very commonly heard in everyday speech.

8

口蜜腹剑

kǒu mì fù jiàn

— Sweet words, hidden malice

Literally 'honey on the lips, a sword in the belly.' Someone who speaks pleasantly but harbours deceptive intent. Traced to Tang dynasty chancellor Li Linfu.

9

起死回生

qǐ sǐ huí shēng

— Bring back from the dead

Used literally (medical miracles) and figuratively — to revive a failing project, relationship, or business. Very common in modern business language.

10

闭门造车

bì mén zào chē

— Working in a bubble

Literally 'build a cart behind closed doors.' Criticises working in isolation without outside input. Extremely common in business and innovation discussions.

11

满载而归

mǎn zài ér guī

— Return with great success

Originally about a hunter returning with a full catch. Now used to wish success before an event, or to describe completing a task with everything achieved.

12

三思而后行

sān sī ér hòu xíng

— Think before you act

Literally 'think three times, then act.' Attributed to Confucius in the Analects. Widely used in formal and advisory contexts — timeless wisdom.

13

一言为定

yī yán wéi dìng

— It's a deal

Literally 'settled in one word.' A verbal handshake — the signal two parties have agreed definitively. The Chinese equivalent of 'you have my word.'

14

五花八门

wǔ huā bā mén

— A great variety; all sorts

Literally 'five flowers, eight gates.' Describes a rich, diverse mix of people or options. Used positively and vividly to convey abundance and variety.

15

走马观花

zǒu mǎ guān huā

— To do something superficially

Literally 'look at flowers while riding a horse.' Criticises a hasty or cursory approach. Very common in educational and professional contexts.

16

水到渠成

shuǐ dào qú chéng

— Things fall into place naturally

Literally 'when water flows, channels form.' When conditions are right, outcomes follow without force. Reflects a Daoist sensibility — deeply culturally resonant.

17

半途而废

bàn tú ér fèi

— To give up halfway

Literally 'abandon the journey midway.' A warning against quitting before a task is complete, or describing someone who consistently fails to follow through.

18

名山大川

míng shān dà chuān

— Famous mountains and great rivers

Describes natural grandeur and, by extension, things of great distinction. Reflects how deeply landscape is embedded in Chinese cultural identity.

19

欲速则不达

yù sù zé bù dá

— Haste makes waste

Literally 'if you desire speed, you will not arrive.' From the Analects of Confucius. Almost identical to the English proverb. Still very much in everyday use.

20

天下无难事，只怕有心人

tiān xià wú nán shì, zhǐ pà yǒu xīn rén

— Nothing is impossible for a willing heart

One of the most beloved classical sayings in Chinese. Used as encouragement and motivation. Technically longer than 4 chars but deeply embedded in Chinese culture.