
| RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Study of Development of Idioms and Proverbs in Middle Chinese

Zhangchenxi Zhu¹, Hulin Ren² and Yuming Li³ ✉

¹²³School of Foreign Studies, University of Science and Technology, Beijing, China

Corresponding Author: Yuming Li, E-mail: hulinr@aliyun.com

| ABSTRACT

There are numerous idioms and proverbs in the Chinese language which constitute the important content of the middle Chinese. The paper is focused on the development of Middle Chinese idioms and proverbs to explore their nature. By examining the related concrete examples from their origins, the paper finds the enrichment of idioms and proverbs of the Middle Chinese language. Among which, there are three sources of idioms, that is, idioms from ancient books, idioms from medieval works and spoken language, as well as idioms from Buddhist works and the sources of proverbs. The paper concludes with features of the development of idioms and proverbs in Middle Chinese.

| KEYWORDS

Middle Chinese, idioms and proverbs, medieval sources

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

ACCEPTED: 24 March 2023

PUBLISHED: 26 March 2023

DOI: 10.32996/ijllt.2023.6.3.18

1. Introduction

The Chinese language is featured with its richness and colorfulness of words. With the enrichment and abundance of Middle Chinese words, idioms and proverbs have also been greatly enriched and developed (Chen, 1978). Some medieval idioms have been handed down from ancient times, such as *huá ér bù shí* 華而不實, *qiǎo yán lìng sè* 巧言令色, *láng zǐ yě xīn* 狼子野心, *jué cháng bǔ duǎn* 絕長補短, *chún wáng chǐ hán* 唇亡齒寒, *wèi shǒu wèi wěi* 畏首畏尾, and so on. A large number of idioms came into being in the middle ages (Ji, 1980). Meanwhile, the proverbs develop at a quick rate. Hence, it is necessary to investigate the nature of the sources of development in Middle Chinese. The paper first explores the sources of idioms with concrete examples; each type of exemplified idiom is explored with its related origin and context usage. In what follows, idioms from medieval works and spoken language are articulated. Furthermore, idioms from Buddhist works are fully described. Finally, there is the investigation of sources of proverbs in Middle Chinese.

2 Idioms from ancient books

There are a large number of vivid and profound witticisms, aphorisms and fables in many important classics of the Zhou, Qin and Han Dynasties, which are often recited and quoted by people and gradually solidified into idioms over time. Some idioms are quoted completely from the original books, while others are not necessarily four words in the original book but are often processed and transformed. Idioms taken from *shī jīng* 詩經 [The Book of Songs] can be seen below.

The idiom *míng zhé bǎo shēn* 明哲保身 can be traced back to *chéng mǐn* 蒸民 [Chengmin] of *dà yá* 大雅 [Daya] of *shī jīng* 詩經 [The Book of Songs]. It reads that “*Jì míng qiě zhé, yǐ bǎo qí shēn.*” 既明且哲，以保其身。(One needs to be worldly-wise to play safe.) Kong Yingda (653) annotated it that “*Jì néng míng xiǎo shàn è, qiě yòu shì fēi biàn zhī, yǐ cǐ míng zhé zé ān qù wēi, ér bǎo quán qí shēn, bù zhì huò bài.*” 既能明曉善惡，且又是非辨知，以此明哲擇安去危，而保全其身，不致禍敗。(We can know good and evil and distinguish right from wrong. In this way, we can have a sound choices and get away from danger, protecting ourselves against disaster.) Originally, the purpose of this poem is to praise Zhong Shanfu. In medieval times, it is summarized as the idiom *míng zhé bǎo shēn* 明哲保身, which means that a wise man is good at protecting himself and does not do anything that may

Copyright: © 2022 the Author(s). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) 4.0 license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>). Published by Al-Kindi Centre for Research and Development, London, United Kingdom.

bring danger to himself. In the Tang Dynasty, Bai Juyi 白居易 wrote in *dù yòu zhì shì zhì* 杜佑致仕制 [Du You's Official System] that "Jīn cuì shì jūn, míng zhé bǎo shēn, jìn tuì shǐ zhōng, bù shī qí dào." 盡悴事君，明哲保身，進退始終，不失其道。(Do your best to serve the emperor, be wise and protect yourself, advance and retreat at the proper time, and do not lose the way.) In *gāo zǔ wǔ nián lùn* 高祖五年論 [On the Fifth Year of Gaozu] of *hàn jì* 漢紀 [Records of Han Dynasty] of *zī zhì tōng jiàn* 資治通鑑 [History as a Mirror], it reads that "Tuō yú shén xiān, yí qì rén jiān, dèng gōng míng yú wù xī bo, zhì róng lì ér bù gù. suǒ wèi míng zhé bǎo shēn zhě, zǐ fáng yǒu yān." 托於神仙，遺棄人間，等功名於物夕卜，置榮利而不顧。所謂明哲保身者，子房有焉。(He prays to the gods for coming to the world, and he cares neither fame and wealth nor honor or interests. When it comes to self-protection, Zifang is an example.) In Modern Chinese, *míng zhé bǎo shēn* 明哲保身 refers to the liberal style of refusing to comment on principled issues for fear of making mistakes or offending others, being with derogatory meaning.

Some idioms are from *yì jīng* 易經 [The Book of Changes], which can be evidenced in the following idioms. The idiom *jìn dé xiū yè* 進德修業 can be traced back to *wén yán* 文言 [Wen Yan] of *qián* 乾 [Qian] of *yì jīng* 易經 [The Book of Changes]. It reads that "Jūn zǐ jìn dé xiū yè. zhōng xìn, suǒ yǐ jìn dé yě. xiū cí lì qí chéng, suǒ yǐ jū yè yě." 君子進德修業。忠信，所以進德也。修辭立其誠，所以居業也。(People with outstanding talent and morality strengthen moral cultivation, study knowledge, loyalty, selflessness, and keep promises, so they improve morality. They exercise and cultivate the ability of verbal expression, showing honest quality. Hence, he has accumulated knowledge.) It was used as an idiom in medieval times, referring to improving moral cultivation and expanding achievements and achievements. In the Jin Dynasty, Tao Qian 陶潛 wrote in *jiǎ yì* 賈誼 [Jia Yi] of *dú shǐ shù jiǔ zhāng* 讀史述九章 [Reading the Nine Chapters of History] that "Jìn dé xiū yè, jiāng yǐ jí shí." 進德修業，將以及時。(We will improve our moral character and study hard in time.) In the Tang Dynasty, Liu Ze 柳澤 wrote in *lùn shí zhèng shū* 論時政書 [On Current Politics] that "Huò dǎ qiú jī gǔ, bǐ zhōu jì shù huò fēi yīng bēn quǎn, pán yóu sǒu zé. cǐ shén wèi bù dào, fēi jìn dé xiū yè zhī běn yě." 或打毬擊鼓，比周伎術；或飛鷹奔犬，盤遊藪澤。此甚為不道，非進德修業之本也。(Whether it is learning to play ball or drum or sending eagles and dogs to chase wild animals and play everywhere, it's not good behavior, nor is it the fundamental way to cultivate morality.)

In addition, there are idioms from *Shàng Shū* 尚書 [The Book of History], as can be seen in the following examples. The idiom *kè qín kè jiǎn* 克勤克儉 can be traced back *dà yǔ mó* 大禹謨 [Dayu Mo] of *shū* 書 [The Book of Documents]. It reads that "Kè qín yú bāng, kè jiǎn yú jiā." 克勤於邦，克儉於家。(Be diligent in the state and thrifty at home.) In medieval times, *kè qín kè jiǎn* 克勤克儉 was combined to form an idiom, which means *being able to work hard and be thrifty*. In *liáng tài miào lè wǔ cí* 梁太廟樂舞辭 [Sprinkle Beans of Lyrics of Music and Dance of The Imperial Ancestral Temple of the Liang Dynasty] of *lè fǔ shī jí* 樂府詩集 [Yuefu Poetry Anthology], it reads that "Kè qín kè jiǎn, wú dài wú huāng." 克勤克儉，無怠無荒。(Be diligent and thrifty. Do not be sluggish or lazy.) In the *zhang yun shen zhuàn* 張允伸傳 [Biography of Zhang Yunshen] of *jiù táng shū* 舊唐書 [The Old Book of the Tang Dynasty], it reads that "Yūnshēn lǐng zhèn fán èr shí sān nián, kè qín kè jiǎn, bǐ suì fēng dēng." 允伸領鎮凡二十三年，克勤克儉，比歲豐登。(Yunshen has been leading here for altogether 23 years. He has been diligent and thrifty, resulting in being more prosperous than ever before), which also known as *kè jiǎn kè qín* 克儉克勤. In the Song Dynasty, Chen Liang 陳亮 wrote in *tíng duì* 廷對 [Answer the Emperor's Consultation in the Imperial Court] that "Tuī qí běn yuán, zé yuē kè jiǎn kè qín, bù zì mǎn jiǎ ér yǐ." 推其本原，則曰克儉克勤，不自滿假而已。(It is speculated that the fundamental reason is to be diligent and frugal and not complacent.)

There are also idioms from *chūn qiū sān zhuàn* 春秋三傳 [Three Commentaries on the Spring and Autumn Annals] and *sān lǐ* 三禮 [Three Rites], as exemplified below.

The idiom *bāo cáng huò xīn* 包藏禍心 can be traced back to *zhāo gōng yuán nián* 昭公元年 [The First Year of Zhao Gong] of *zuǒ zhuàn* 左傳 [Zuo's Commentary on The Spring and Autumn Annals]. It reads that "Xiǎo guó wú zuì, shì shí qí zuì. jiāng shì dà guó zhī ān jìng yǐ, ér wú nǎi bāo cáng huò xīn yǐ tú zhī." 小國無罪，恃實其罪。將恃大國之安靖已，而無乃包藏禍心以圖之。(A small country like us have no sin other than relying too much on a big country. Originally, we intended to rely on the great powers to stabilize ourselves, but I was afraid they were hiding evil intentions to plot against us.) This is what Ziyu, a doctor of the state of Zheng, said when he denounced Wei from the state of Chu. *Bāo cáng huò xīn* 包藏禍心 means *seemingly silent and calm from the outside, yet actually evil and vile from the inside*, which was used as an idiom in the middle ages in China. In the Tang Dynasty, Luo Binwang 駱賓王 wrote in *wèi xú jìng yè tǎo wǔ mò xí* 為徐敬業討武墨檄 [Call to Arms against Wu Zhao] that "Rén shén zhī suǒ tóng jí, tiān dì zhī suǒ bù róng. yóu fù bāo cáng huò xīn, kuī qiè shén qì." 人神之所同嫉，天地之所不容。猶復包藏禍心，窺竊神器。(Man and God are jealous of what she already takes, and heaven and earth cannot tolerate her. What's worse, she harbors evil intentions to covet the throne.) Furthermore, there are idioms from the works of scholars in the Pre-Qin Dynasty, as exemplified below.

There are additional idioms from the *zhàn guó cè* 戰國策 [Policies of the Warring States] and *chǔ cí* 楚辭 [Poetry of the South], as exemplified below.

The idiom *zhān qián gù hòu* 瞻前顧後 (look ahead and backward) can be traced back to *lí sāo* 離騷 [On Encountering Trouble] of *chǔ cí* 楚辭 [Poetry of the South]. It reads that “*Zhān qián ér gù hòu xī, xiāng guān mǐn zhī jì jí.*” 瞻前而顧後兮，相觀民之計極。(Think of the past dynasty, sigh at future generations, and explore the reasons for the rule of the world). In the Han Dynasty, Wang Yi 王逸 annotated that “*zú yǐ guān chá wàn rén zhōng níng zhī móu, qióng qí zhēn wěi.*” 足以觀察萬人忠佞之謀，窮其真偽。(In this way, it is enough to observe thousands of people and judge whether they are loyal or not.) In the middle ages, *zhān qián gù hòu* 瞻前顧後 was used as an idiom to describe that you have to think before you leap. In the *zhang heng zhuàn* 張衡傳 [Biography of Zhang Heng] of *hòu hàn shū* 後漢書 [The Book of the Later Han Dynasty], it reads that “*xiàng shǐ néng zhān qián gù hòu, yuán jìng zì jiè, zé hé xiàn yú xiōng huàn hū?*” 向使能瞻前顧後，援鏡自戒，則何陷於凶患乎？(If the envoy can look forward and back and use the mirror to warn himself, how could he be in such danger?) It also means that *someone worries too much about doing things*. In *zōng lùn wéi xué zhī fāng* 總論為學之方 [General Theory about Learning] of the eighth volume of *zhū zǐ yǔ lèi* 朱子語類 [Quotations of Zhu Zi's Remarks], it reads that “*Dàn rú xiàng yǔ jiù zhào, jì dù, shěn chuán pò fú, chí sān rì liáng, shì shì bì sǐ, wú hái xīn, gù néng pò qín. ruò zhān qián gù hòu, biàn zuò bù chéng.*” 旦如項羽救趙，既渡，沈船破釜，持三日糧，示士必死，無還心，故能破秦。若瞻前顧後，便做不成。(Once a man like Xiang Yu saving the State of Zhao, he crossed the boat, sank the boat and broke the kettle. Their rice could hold no more than three days. He showed the soldiers that they would rather die than return to their family. And that is the very reason why they can defeat the powerful Qin army. They can never make it if they think too much with much hesitation).

Literature and history of the Han Dynasty were highly developed with time going on. Among which, *shǐ jì* 史記 [Records of the Grand History] and *hàn shū* 漢書 [The Book of Han] had a great influence on it. In medieval times, many idioms were solidified and summarized from the two books, as exemplified below.

The idiom *yīn rén chéng shì* 因人成事 (rely on others for success in work) can be traced back to *píng yuán jūn yu qīng liè zhuàn* 平原君虞卿列傳 [Biographies of Zhao Sheng and Yu Qing] of *shǐ jì* 史記 [Records of the Grand History]. Mao Sui wrote that “*Gōng děng lù lù, suǒ wèi yīn rén chéng shì zhě yě.*” 公等碌碌，所謂因人成事者也。(You are just ordinary people who have to rely on others.) In medieval times, it was used as an idiom to refer to those relying on the power of others to do things. In the Tang Dynasty, Liu Zhiji 劉知幾 wrote in *bǔ zhù* 補注 [Revisal] of *shǐ tōng* 史通 [Shi Tong] that “*dà dǐ zhuàn shǐ jiā zhù zhě, huò yīn rén chéng shì, huò zì wǒ zuò gù.*” 大抵撰史加注者，或因人成事，或自我作故。(Most people who annotate history either rely on others or on themselves.) In the Song Dynasty, Wang Shi 王識 wrote in *yǎ liàng* 雅量 [Elegance] of *táng yǔ lín* 唐語林 [Tang Yulin] that “*Dí liáng gōng duì yuē: chén yǐ wén zhāng zhí dào jìn shēn, fēi lù lù yīn rén chéng shì zhě.*” 狄梁(公)對曰：臣以文章直道進身，非碌碌因人成事者。(Di Liang [Duke] said to him, I have made my own accomplishment by writing excellent articles, not by relying on others.)

Some idioms come from other works of the Han Dynasty. See the following examples. The idiom *bù qī àn shì* 不欺暗室 (be scrupulously honest even when there is no one around), Liu Xiang 劉向 wrote in *wèi líng fū rén* 衛靈夫人 [Mrs. Wei Ling] of the *liè nǚ zhuàn* 列女傳 [Biography of Women] that “*Lian bo yu, wèi zhī xián dài fū yě, rén ér yǒu zhì, jìng yǐ shì shàng, cǐ qí rén bì bù yǐ àn mèi fèi lǐ.*” 蓮伯玉，衛之賢大夫也，仁而有智，敬以事上，此其人必不以闇昧廢禮。(Lian Boyu, the wise doctor of Wei, is both benevolent and wise and always treats elderly people with respect.) In the middle ages, it was summed up as the idiom *bù qī àn shì* 不欺暗室, meaning that you have a bright heart and do not do anything wrong even where no one sees you. In *suí wáng shì chēn mù zhì* 隋王世琛墓誌 [The Epitaph of Wang Shichen of the Sui Dynasty] of *hàn wèi nán běi cháo mù zhì jí shì* 漢魏南北朝墓誌集釋 [A collection of Epitaphs of the Han, Wei, northern and Southern Dynasties], it reads that “*Xìn xíng suǒ lǚ, bù qī àn shì.*” 信行所履，不欺闇室。(What you do or believe will be of no difference if under supervision or not.) In volume 13 of *běi mèng suǒ yán* 北夢瑣言 [Trivial Words on Northern Dream], it reads that “*Nǚ xiān wèi jiàn zhāng yuē: zǐ bù qī àn shì, suǒ wèi jūn zǐ rén yě.*” 女仙謂建章曰：子不欺暗室，所謂君子人也。(The female immortal said to Jianzhang that ‘You did not do anything wrong even if you are not under supervision.’) In volume 68 of *tài píng guǎng jì* 太平廣記 [Records of the Taiping Era] quoted *fēng zhì* 封陟 [Feng Zhi] of *chuán qí* 傳奇 [Legend], it is written that “*Zhi nǎi nù mù ér yán yuē: wǒ jū shū zhāi, bù qī àn shì, xià huì wèi zhèng, shū zǐ (céng yáng hù) shì shī.*” 陟乃怒目而言曰：“我居書齋，不欺暗室，下惠為證，叔子(曾羊祐)是師。” (Zhi is angry and says, ‘I live in the study and do not do anything wrong even if without supervision. Xiahui is the evidence. My uncle (Zeng Yanghu) is my teacher.)

The above idioms come from ancient times and are formed in medieval times. Among which, some idioms are directly transformed from the original sentences, such as *rì jiù yuè jiāng* 日就月將 (The day is coming and the moon is coming), *yǎn wú xiū wén* 偃武修文 (desist from military activities and encourage culture and education), *xìn ér yǒu zhēng* 信而有徵 (Confirmed with evidence), *zì qiáng bù xī* 自強不息 (constantly strive to become stronger) and *fèn bú gù shēn* 奮不顧身 (be brave and not considering personal safety). Some idioms are processed and transformed on the basis of the original sentence, such as *shāng fēng bài sú* 傷風敗俗, *yì*

yán xīng bāng 一言興邦 and qiān lǜ yì dé 千慮一得. Others are made by summarizing and combining the meaning of the original text, such as chéng hú shè shǔ 城狐社鼠, bá miáo zhù zhǎng 掘苗助長, bù qī àn shì 不欺暗室, sài wēng shī mǎ 塞翁失馬, and so on.

3 Idioms from medieval works and spoken language

Many famous writers, poets and scholars in medieval times made great achievements in the use of the Chinese language, whose achievements spread widely and had a great influence on the development of the Chinese language. Among which, idioms came from medieval works and spoken language. Some sentences come with vivid and concise forms, and rich and profound contents are often quoted from each other and transformed into idioms. Some of them come from people's spoken language. After being recorded and used by scholars, they have become written language and widely spread. There are idioms from historical books of the Six Dynasties and the Tang and Song Dynasties, as can be seen below.

The idiom zhí mí bú wù 執迷不悟 (obstinate) means *to persist in mistakes without realizing them*. In *wǔ dì jì shàng* 武帝紀上 [The Biography of Emperor Wu I] of *liáng shū* 梁書 [The Book of Liang], it reads that "Ruò zhí mí bú wù, jù nì wáng shī, dà zhòng yī lín, xíng zī wǎng shè." 若執迷不悟, 距逆王師, 大衆一臨, 刑茲罔赦。(If you are stubborn and confronted with the country's army when the army arrives, everyone will be punished, and no one can be forgiven.) In the Song Dynasty, Yue Fei 岳飛 wrote in *fèng zhào yí wěi qí xī* 奉詔移偽齊檄 [Follow the Imperial Edict to Remove Qi] that "rú huò zhí mí bú wù, gān wèi pàn rén, sǒu jié quǎn yǐ fèi yáo, lì liè shī ér kū hǔ, yì dāng gōng xíng tiān fá, yù shí jù fén, huò bìng zōng qīn, rǔ jí fù zǔ." 如或執迷不悟, 甘爲叛人, 噬桀犬以吠堯, 罾獵師而哭虎, 議當躬行天罰, 玉石俱焚, 禍並宗親, 辱及父祖。(If there is an evil tiger who is stubborn, willing to be a traitor of thieves, a fierce dog of tyrant Xia Jie, biting Tang Yao, and crying for being bitten to death in the face of hounds, then our imperial army will wipe out these stubborn thieves for the sake of people all over the world. It is suggested that you should practice punishment of the heaven, burn jade and stone, bring disaster to your relatives and humiliate your father and ancestors.)

There are idioms from medieval poetry and notebooks, as can be seen in the following examples. The idiom bié yǒu tiān dì 別有天地 (scenery of exceptional charm) in volume 12 of *tài píng guǎng jì* 太平廣記 [Records of the Taiping Era] quoted *shén xiān zhuàn* 神仙傳 [The Biographies of Immortals] by Ge Hong 葛洪 and wrote that "zài hú gōng qiú fèi zhǎng fáng gēn tā tiào rù hú zhōng, zhǎng fáng yī yán, guǒ bù jué jǐ rù, bù fù jué shì hú, wéi jiàn xiān gōng shì jiè." 載壺公求費長房跟他跳入壺中, 長房依言, 果不覺已入, 不復覺是壺, 唯見仙宮世界。(The man with the pot asked Fei Changfang to jump into the pot with him. He took the man's advice and jumped inside, and he would no longer feel that it was a pot but only see the fairy palace world.) In the Tang Dynasty, Yang Jingshu wrote the poem of *fèng hé shèng zhì xià rì yóu shí cóng shān* 奉和聖制夏日遊石淙山 [The Summer Tour of Shicong Mountain] that "Shān zhōng bié yǒu shén xiān dì, qū qū yōu shēn bì jiàn chuí." 山中別有神仙地, 屈曲幽深碧澗垂。(There is a fairy land in the mountain, deep and steep, and the green stream hangs down.) In the Tang Dynasty, it was transformed into the idiom *bié yǒu tiān dì* 別有天地, meaning there is another realm or space. It is often used to describe elegant and fascinating scenery. In the Tang Dynasty, Duan Chengshi 段成式 wrote in *nuò gāo jì xià* 諾舉記下 [Notes of Nuo Yi II] of *nuò gāo jì xià* 酉陽雜俎 [You Yang Za Zu] that "yì zhī hòu dì zhī xià, bié yǒu tiān dì yě." 抑知厚地之下, 別有天地也。(I know there is a different world beneath the thick land.) In the Tang Dynasty, Li Bai 李白 wrote in the poem *shān zhōng dá wèn* 山中答問 [Answer Questions in the Mountains] that "Táo huā liú shuǐ qióng rán qù, bié yǒu tiān dì fēi rén jiān." 桃花流水穹然去, 別有天地非人間。(Peach blossoms and flowing water go away, there is a different world quite different from the human world.)

4 Idioms from Buddhist works

Buddhism was introduced into China during the Han Dynasty and spread widely from the Six Dynasties to the Tang and Song Dynasties, which had a great impact on the lexical increase of Chinese words. There were not only a large number of loanwords and/or new words but also a large number of idioms related to Buddhism, as can be seen in the following idioms.

The idiom bú èr fǎ mén 不二法門 was from Buddhism, which refers to the only and unspeakable way that can directly enter the Tao. In the State of Wu of The Three Kingdoms Period, Zhiqian 支謙 translated *wéi mó jié jīng rù bù èr fǎ mén pǐn* 維摩詰經 - 入不二法門品 [The Vimalakirti Sutra-The Only Way to Enter the Dharma] and wrote that "rú wǒ yì zhě, yú yī qiè fǎ, wú yán wú shuō, wú shì wú shí, lí zhū wèn dá, shì wèi rù bù èr fǎ mén." 如我意者, 於一切法, 無言無說, 無示無識, 離諸問答, 是爲入不二法門。(As I like, in all dharmas, there are no words or no knowledge, and away from all questions and answers. There is no other way to enter.) In the Liang Dynasty of the Southern Dynasties, Shen Yue 沈約 wrote in *wéi mó jié jīng rù bù èr fǎ mén pǐn* 佛記序 [The preface to the Book of Buddha] that "Kuò bù èr zhī fǎ mén, guǎng yī chéng zhī zhǎng mò." 廓不二之法門, 廣一乘之長陌。(Make the only way cleaner and the long road wider.) In the Tang Dynasty, Chen Ziang 陳子昂 wrote in *xià rì huī shàng rén fáng bié lǐ cān jūn xù* 夏日暉上人房別李參軍序 [Preface to Farewell to Li's Joining the Army] that "Kāi bù èr zhī fǎ mén, guān dà qiān zhī shì jiè." 開不二之法門, 觀大千之世界。(Open the only way to see the wonderful world.) In the Tang Dynasty, Pei Guan 裴灌 wrote in *shǎo lín sì bēi* 少林寺碑 [Shaolin Temple Stele] that "Kōng xīn, yuán cuì, huì xìng, yān yuǎn chuán bù èr fǎ mén, yǒu shèn shēn dào yè." 空心、元粹、惠性、淹遠傳不二法門, 有甚深道業。(Kongxin, Yuancui, Huixing and Yanyuan are the only ones of preaching. They have

very deep practice.) In the Song Dynasty, Shen Zuojì 沈作誥 wrote in the seventh volume of *yù jiǎn* 寓簡 [Yu Jian] that “sān shí yī pú sà gè shuō bù èr fǎ mén. zhì wén shū dú yuē: wú yán shuō.” 三十一菩薩各說不二法門。至文殊獨曰：無言說。(All the thirty one Bodhisattvas each believe what they teach are unique, but Manjusri alone believed he had nothing to say). In modern times, it is used as a metaphor to describe the best or unique method.

The above idioms are in four character format, with rich and vivid content and strong vitality. The vast majority of them have lived up until now. Some idioms from Buddhism have gradually gone beyond the scope of religion and are used by the majority of people, enriching the whole Chinese idiom system. Some idioms are remote or reflect the decadent and backward thoughts of the feudal ruling class. With the development of society and the improvement of people's ideological understanding, these idioms have been gradually eliminated day by day.

5 Sources of proverbs

In addition to the enrichment of idioms, the proverbs in medieval times also witnessed great development. The number has increased, and the scope has been widened to include weather, geographical environment, agricultural production, people's life, human relations, officialdom, character comments and so on. Some of the proverbs are handed down from ancient times, and most of them are new in medieval times. Some proverbs are from literati works, most of which are spoken by the people, and only a few are related to Buddhist and Taoist literature, which are exemplified below.

The proverb *là gǔ míng, chūn cǎo shēng* 臘鼓鳴，春草生 is related to seasons. In the Liang Dynasty of the Southern Dynasties, Zong Li 宗慄 wrote in *zhū zǐ yǔ lèi* 荆楚歲時記 [The Annals of Jingchu] that “Shí èr yuè bā rì wèi là rì, yàn yún: ‘là gǔ míng, chūn cǎo shēng.’ cūn rén bìng jí xì yāo gǔ, dài hú tóu, jí zuò jīn gāng lì shì yǐ qū yì.” 十二月八日為臘日，諺云：‘臘鼓鳴，春草生。’村人並擊細腰鼓，戴胡頭，及作金剛力士以驅疫。(December eighth is called *La Ri*. As the saying goes, ‘The drums beat in December, so will the grass grow in spring’. Correspondingly, the villagers wear a thin waist drum, a beard and are dressed like warriors to drive away the epidemic.) Spring comes early in south China. On the eighth of December of the lunar calendar, people will beat the drums, suggesting that spring is coming.

As for the proverb *wǔ yuè xià xiá, sǐ ér bú diào* 五月下峽，死而不吊, the Three Gorges of the Yangtze River is often flooded in May, so boating there is very dangerous. Too many people were drowned, and there was no time for condolence. In the Tang Dynasty, Li Zhao 李肇 wrote in the second volume of *táng guó shǐ bǔ* 唐國史補 [Supplement to the History of the State of Tang] that “Dù bīn gōng zì xī chuān chú jiāng líng, wǔ yuè xià xiá, guān zhōu qiān sōu, bù sūn yī zhī . jiù yàn yuē: ‘wǔ yuè xià xiá, sǐ ér bú diào.’ cǐ zé bīn gōng zhī hóng fú, zì gǔ wèi zhī yǒu yě.” 杜邠公自西川除江陵，五月下峽，官舟千艘，不損一隻。舊諺曰：‘五月下峽，死而不吊。’此則邠公之洪福，自古未之有也。(Duke Du Ying traveled all the way down the gorges from Xichuan to Jiangling in May. There were thousands of official boats, but none was damaged. As the old proverb goes, the number of people who died while traveling on the Yangtze River in May is so large that there is no time to mourn for the dead. This is the great blessing of Ying Gong, not having existed since ancient times.)

The proverb *mài guò rén, bú rù kǒu* 麥過人，不入口 is also an agricultural proverb that summarizes the experience of crop planting. Too much fertilization leads to excessive growth of wheat seedlings, and they are thus very easy to fall down, resulting in reduced yield or even no harvest. In the Song Dynasty, Zhuang Zhuo 莊綽 wrote in the first volume of *jī lè biān* 雞肋編 [Collections of Trifle Information] that “Yàn yún: mài guò rén, bú rù kǒu. jìng kāng yuán nián, mài duō gāo yú rén zhě, jì shú, dà yǔ, suǒ sǔn shí bā.” 諺云：麥過人，不入口。靖康元年，麥多高於人者，既熟，大雨，所損十八。(As the saying goes, do not fertilize them when the wheat seedlings are of the height of human beings. In the first year of Jingkang era, when the majority of wheat seedlings were higher than human beings and were about to ripen, there came the heavy rain that destroyed eight - tenth of them.)

Most of the above proverbs come from folk, and some others come from literati works. In the Song Dynasty, Lu You 陸游 wrote in *lǎo xué ān bǐ jì* 老學庵筆記 [Jottings from Laoxue An] that “jīn shì sù suǒ dào sù yǔ, duō táng yǐ lái rén shī.” 今世俗所道俗語，多唐以來人詩。(The proverbs we are using today are actually poems from the Tang Dynasty.) “Hé rén gèng xiàng sǐ qián xiū.” 何人更向死前休 (Who is more willing to take a break before death?), which is written by Han Tui that “Guǎng lín xià hé céng jiàn yī rén.” 廣林下何曾見一人。(He has never seen anyone in the forest.) “Zhǎng ān yǒu pín zhě, wèi ruì bù yí duō.” 長安有貧者，為瑞不宜多。(There are a lot of poor people in Chang'an, so it is better not to be too auspicious), which is written by Luo Yin. “Shì luàn nú qī zhǔ, nián shuāi guǐ nòng rén.” 世亂奴欺主，年衰鬼弄人。(The world is chaotic, the slaves deceive the Lord in a chaotic world; and the ghost play tricks on people in a bad year.) “Hǎi kū zhōng jiàn dǐ, rén sǐ bù zhī xīn.” 海枯終見底，人死不知心 (The bottom of the sea can be seen once the sea is dried up, but people will never fully understand someone's heart till his death.) Which is written by Du Xunhe. “Shì xiàng wú xīn dé.” 事向無心得。(The less you pursue, the better you do) is written by Zhang Jie. “Dàn yǒu lù kě shàng, gèng gāo rén yě xíng.” 但有路可上，更高人也行。(However difficult it may be, as long as there is a way, people will try their best), which is written by Gong Lin. That “guǎng rěn shì dí zāi xīng.” 廣忍事敵災星。(The more one can tolerate, the less

likely one will have disasters) is written by Si Kongtu. The proverb “yī zhāo quán zài shǒu, kàn qǔ líng xíng shí.” 一朝權在手，看取令行時。(Once the power is in hand, and the order will be taken) is written by Zhu Wan. The proverb “zì jǐ qíng suī qiè, tā rén wèi kěn máng.” 自己情雖切，他人未肯忙。(Although you need it in great urgent, others may not be willing to lend you a helping hand) is written by Pei Shuo. The proverb “dàn zhī xíng hǎo shì, mò yào wèn qián chéng.” 但知行好事，莫要問前程。(Just practice what is good and do not ask about one’s future) is written by Feng Dao. The proverb zài jiā pín yì hǎo 在家貧亦好 (It is good to be poor staying at home) is written by Rong Yu.”

A large number of medieval proverbs have disappeared completely now. Only a few proverbs are comments on people or facts. For example, in the Southern Song Dynasty, Liu Yiqing 劉義慶 wrote in *wén xué* 文學 [Appreciation of Reputation] of *shì shuō xīn yǔ* 世說新語 [A New Account of the Tales of the World] that “Hòu lái lǐng xiù yǒu péi xiù.” 後來領袖有裴秀。(Pei Xiu became the leader later.) In the Jin Dynasty, Pei Qi wrote in *Yu Lin of Peizi* that “Zhāng shì shí lóng, rú yǎ wēn gōng.” 張氏十龍，儒雅溫恭。(The ten descendants of the Zhang family are gentle and courteous.) In the Tang Dynasty, Zhang Jing 張驚 wrote in the fourth volume of *cháo yě qiān zài* 朝野僉載 [Stories of Official and Vernacular Lives] that “Yàn yún, sān gōng hòu, chū sǐ gǒu.” 三公後，出死狗。(As the saying goes, the offspring of high officials are often incompetent). Some proverb meanings are not very clear or relatively negative. For example, volume 363 of *tài píng guǎng jì* 太平廣記 [Records of the Taiping Era] quoted *tōng yōu jì* 通幽記 [Tong You Ji] and wrote that “Yàn yuē, yī jī sǐ, yī jī míng.” 諺曰，一雞死，一雞鳴。(As the saying goes, when one Rooster dies, the other crows.) In the Tang Dynasty, Han’e wrote in volume 22 of *sui huá jì* 歲華紀麗 [In the Good Times] that “chéng nán wéi dù, qù tiān chǐ wǔ.” 城南韋杜，去天尺五。(Weidu, which is in the south of the city, is only five feet away from the heaven.) In *chá jiǔ lùn* (bìng xù) 茶酒論(並序) [Preface to Theories about Tea and Wine] of *dūn huáng biàn wén jí* 敦煌變文集 [The Anthology of Dunhuang Bianwen], it reads that “Yǎng xiā má dé shuǐ bìng bào kǔ.” 養蝦蟆得水病報苦。(Raising a toad, however, got the water bug disease and suffered for no reason.) Times have changed, social life and people’s ideas have changed accordingly. The Chinese language itself has developed, and the familiar character facts in the past have been forgotten by people. The values of these proverbs have been lost and passed away as time goes on.

6 Conclusions

With the purpose of investigating the features of the development of idioms and proverbs in Middle Chinese, the paper finds that there are multiple factors contributing to the advancement of idioms and proverbs in Middle Chinese. Among these factors, idioms may be from ancient books, medieval works and spoken language, and/or from Buddhist works. As for proverbs, there are factors such as weather and geographical environment which make the richness of proverbs. In addition, some proverbs are handed down from ancient times, others are new in medieval times and are from literati works, most of which are spoken by the people, and only a few are related to Buddhist and Taoist literature. These findings are beneficial for further study of the application of idioms and proverbs in Middle Chinese. The study is limited to relatively small examples selected in the investigation. Future study needs to further investigate the concrete application of idioms and proverbs in different contexts.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Conflicts of Interest: The authors declare no conflict of interest.

All claims expressed in this article are solely those of the authors and do not necessarily represent those of their affiliated organizations, or those of the publisher, the editors and the reviewers.

References

- [1] Bai J 白居易 (843). *Dù yòu zhì shì zhì* 杜佑致仕制 [The Suggestion of Du You on Official System].
- [2] Chen, K 陈克炯. (1978). Zuozhuan fuyinci chutan 左传复音词初探. *Journal of Central China Teachers College* 华中师院学报, (4).
- [3] Ge H 葛洪 (301) *Shén xiān zhuàn* 神仙傳 [The Biographies of Immortals]
- [4] Jiǎ Y 賈誼 [Jia Yi] (B.C. 172) *Dú shǐ shù jiǔ zhāng* 讀史述九章 [Reading the Nine Chapters of History]
- [5] Ji, X 季羨林. (1980). *Jìxiānlín xuānjí* 季羨林選集. Hongkong: Hongkong Literature Research Publishing Co., Ltd.
- [6] Kong Y 孔穎達. (653). The 180 volume of *Wujingzhengyi* 五經正義 [The Five Classics and Justice].
- [7] Liu X 劉向 (B.C. 57) *Liè nǚ zhuàn* 列女傳 [Biography of Women]
- [8] Liu Y 劉義慶 (432) *Shì shuō xīn yǔ* 世說新語 [A New Account of the Tales of the World]
- [9] Lu Y 陸游 (1126) *Lǎo xué ān bǐ jì* 老學庵筆記 [Jottings from Laoxue An]
- [10] Si M 司馬遷 (B.C. 149) *Shǐ jì* 史記 [Records of the Grand History]
- [11] Zong L 宗慄 (421) *Zhū zǐ yǔ lèi* 荆楚歲時記 [The Annals of Jingchu]