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Tranßcripting: playful subversion with Chinese characters

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ABSTRACT

This article discusses a relatively under-explored phenomenon that we call Tranßcripting – writing, designing and digitally generating new scripts with elements from different scriptal and semiotic systems. The data are drawn from examples of such scripts created by multilingual Chinese users in everyday online social interaction. We analyse the dynamic processes of how such scripts are created that transcend language boundaries as well as transforming the subjectivities of the writer and the reader. We are particularly interested in the playful subversiveness of such practices, and discuss it against the background of uni-scriptal language ideology in China. We are also interested in the methodological challenges of researching such practices, including the challenge of drawing distinctions between the 'ordinary' and the 'unordinary'. We analyse the data from a translanguaging perspective.

On 28th August 2012, a group of over 100 language enthusiasts, public figures and academics in China wrote an open letter to the State Administration of Press and Publication and the State Language Commission to protest the inclusion of 239 so-called alphabetic words in the latest, 6th edition of the popular dictionary *A Dictionary of Modern Chinese*. The letter writers claimed that the inclusion of words such as NBA, CPI, and $PM_{2.5}$ violated the Chinese laws regarding the protection of the Chinese writing system, because the Chinese script is not alphabetic but logographic.[1] A national debate ensued, with unprecedented media coverage. The vast majority seemed to be on the side of the complainants who evidently felt that the Chinese language was under threat from foreign influence. Those who argued for the acceptance of alphabetic words were in the minority and seen as rebels. The dictionary compilers, many of whom were senior academics in public office, had to issue lengthy explanations. They argued that the dictionary was not intended to dictate what was acceptable but to record words in common usage.

This incident is only one example of how strongly the Chinese feel about their writing system. They believe that the Chinese script is one of the oldest continually used writing systems in the world; that it has had a major influence on other East Asian languages and beyond; and that all attempts in history to change the system have failed. Nonetheless, new writing inventions appear all the time in China, and most of them are intrinsically

tied to social, cultural, political and economic changes. This article focuses on the emerging phenomenon of creating scripts that defy the writing conventions of Chinese by incorporating elements that are deemed 'foreign' or by manipulating the structural norms of Chinese written characters, including their traditional sound-meaning mapping process and visual representation. We call this phenomenon 'tranßcripting'. While we want to highlight the creative processes of tranßcripting, our main purpose is to explore the socio-political dimensions of the phenomenon, in particular, the playful subversion it represents. Understood from the analytical perspective of translanguaging, we emphasise how such subversion occurs through the usage of 'non-Chinese' language resources and how such practices are 'ordinary' linguistic phenomena created and circulated by ordinary people in everyday, digitally mediated social interaction (Dovchin, 2017; see also Androutsopoulos, 2007; Blommaert, 2015). Simultaneously, they are examples of how the 'ordinary' can be both linguistically 'playful' and 'subversive', commonly practised in spite of various official efforts to censor their usage and minimise their sociocultural impact.

The Chinese script and the Chinese uni-scriptal ideology

The Chinese writing system is roughly logosyllabic (i.e. a character generally represents a syllable in spoken Chinese); it may be a word on its own or part of a di- or polysyllabic word. Some characters are pictographs or ideographs, depicting objects or abstract notions they denote; others are either logical aggregates in which two or more parts are used to yield a composite meaning, or phonetic complexes where one part indicates the general semantic category of the character and the other part the phonetic value, which are known as semantic and phonetic radicals, respectively. Many Chinese characters in use today can be traced back to the late Shang Dynasty, about 1200–1050 BCE, though the process of creating the characters is thought to have begun some centuries earlier. Historically, Chinese characters have been widely used throughout East Asia: they spread to Korea during the 2nd century BCE; they were adopted for writing Japanese during the 5th century CE; and they were first used in Vietnam in 111 BCE. Overall, this spread gave rise to the notion of the Sinosphere or Sinophone World, variably known also as the Sinic world, the Chinese cultural sphere, and the Hanzi (Chinese characters) cultural sphere/world. Several languages of south and southwest China, including Zhuang, Miao and Yao, were formerly written in Chinese characters or in writing systems based on Chinese characters. The characters' long history, logosyllabic structure, and influence in East Asia have all contributed to the popular belief amongst Chinese language users that their writing system is unique and virtuous, as it is intrinsically linked with Confucianism, Taoism and Buddhism, and has mystical power to bind people together culturally and spiritually.

The belief in the uniqueness of the Chinese writing system manifests in a number of contradictory views. For instance, many Chinese hold the view that there is only one writing system for the Chinese language, and that the First Emperor of China, Zheng of Qin (259–210 BCE), unified the writing system so that speakers of mutually unintelligible regional varieties of Chinese could all use the same script in written communication. In fact, there is a very long tradition of regional written Chinese. Scholars such as Snow and Chen (2015) and Bauer (2018) have documented in detail written Cantonese since

the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644 CE), a tradition that has seen new growth in the last twenty or thirty years in Hong Kong. Other regional varieties of Chinese such as Wu, which includes Shanghainese and Suzhounese, developed their writing systems at similar times (see Snow, Shen, & Zhou, 2018; Snow, Zhou, & Shen, 2018). Admittedly, these writing systems are based broadly on Chinese characters. But they are sufficiently different that a reader fluent in Mandarin would not be able to comprehend a text written in these regional languages. There are other well-documented cases of different writing systems for different varieties of Chinese. For example, Nüshu, literally 'women's script', was used exclusively among women in the Hunan province of China during the 13th century. Unlike the standard written Chinese characters, Nüshu is phonetic, with a syllabary of approximately 600–700 items. *The Dictionary of Nüshu* lists 1,800 variant characters and allographs (Zhou, 2002). Dungan, used by the Dungan people in Central Asia, especially those who are Muslims of Chinese descent in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, was previously written in Arabic script and is now written in Cyrillic. Its spoken form is comprehensible to the speakers of northwestern varieties of Mandarin. Moreover, there are at least two main transliteration systems for Chinese: *pinyin* and *bopomofo*. The former is based on the Latin alphabet. The latter, also known as Zhùyīn fúhào, derives its symbols from ancient Chinese writing, and was used in China before the 1950s and is still used in Taiwan. There is also Jyut6jyu5 for transcribing Cantonese. Historically, a number of transliteration systems, including the Wade-Giles for Mandarin, and the Morrison, Yale and Lau systems for Cantonese, were used. In mainland China, there has been a number of attempts to simplify the characters, resulting in the current system that is so different from the traditional characters that remain in use in Taiwan, Hong Kong and other Chinese-speaking communities.

It is popularly believed that the writing system helps to set a standard for pronouncing Chinese words in a uniform way, known as Putonghua. The relationship between the written characters and pronunciation in Chinese is a complex and controversial one. Unlike the Latin alphabet, the Chinese characters do not represent pronunciation in general terms. If a character has a phonetic component, and many characters do not, then that component may give only a clue to the pronunciation of the character. This is because the phonetic component itself is usually a character when it is used independently; however, its pronunciation when acting as a phonetic component may or may not have anything to do with its pronunciation as an independent character. Modern Chinese has many homophones, so the same spoken syllable may be represented by many different characters depending on the meaning. Cognates in Chinese, therefore, are characters with similar meanings represented by similar semantic components but very different pronunciations. While children in China are taught that characters are visual representations of meanings, with a fixed template and strict stroke order (see Figure 1), the pronunciation of the characters must be learned separately. Children are also taught that there is a standard way of pronouncing each written character, the Putonghua pronunciation, irrespective of how the meaning may be expressed in the spoken form of regional languages and dialects. An essential part of primary education in China is to learn how to write and pronounce written characters in a standardized way. The ability to do so is an indicator of one's educational level. This puts speakers of regional varieties of Chinese at an immediate disadvantage, as the standard pronunciation is based
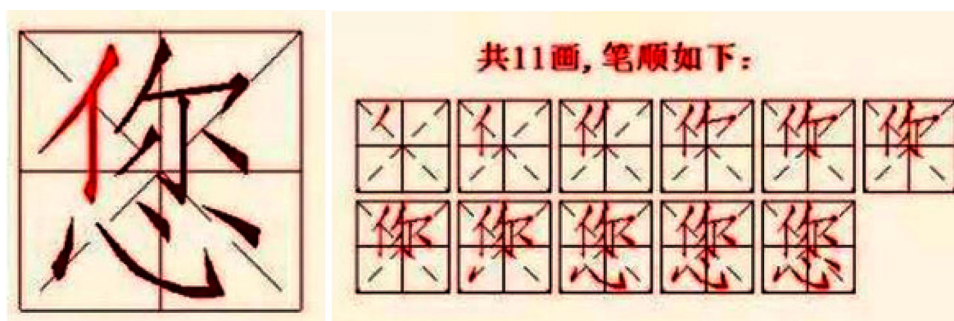
Figure 1. Template for Chinese character formation and stroke order (x 11) for the word 您 *nin*, 'you' polite form .

broadly on Mandarin, though many Mandarin speakers have accents that are quite different from Putonghua.[2]

Further, many Chinese think that their writing system is exclusive in the sense that it can and has influence(d) other non-Chinese languages, but it cannot and must not be influenced by others. Indeed, there is huge popular resistance to 'foreign invasion' despite the indisputable fact that Chinese, like all other world languages, is a contact language and has always borrowed from other languages. The impact of Manchu, a Tungusic language, on Chinese is well documented (e.g. Hidehiro, 1992; Wadley, 1996), so is the impact of Sanskrit through the translation of Buddhist classics (e.g. Zhu, 1994). The non-Han imperial dynasties that ruled northern China between the 10th and 13th centuries CE – Han being the dominant ethnic group in China – developed scripts including the Khitan, Tangut and Jurchen scripts, and used them alongside Chinese characters. Opponents to foreign influence on Chinese often point out that even 'borrowings' must adapt phonologically and morphologically into the Chinese norms in order to be acceptable and usable.

Additionally, the Chinese take pride in believing that their script is the most complex and difficult writing system in the world. Laboratory evidence suggesting that processing Chinese characters involves neural networks that are not normally activated in processing the Latin alphabet (e.g. Tan et al., 2001) is often cited as an indication of Chinese literates' higher intelligence or cognitive advantage. Proponents of Chinese's superiority also often point to the fact that few foreigners, even those who have mastered the spoken form, write the characters fluently or in shapes that would be expected of a Chinese person with a reasonable level of education. The shape of each Chinese character conforms roughly to a square frame, each standing on its own. And the components of the characters are further subdivided into strokes, which in turn fall into eight main categories. Children are taught the stroke order in schools in a fairly rigid way, and if an adult is seen to write a Chinese character following the wrong stroke order, they may be ridiculed or dismissed as uneducated.[3]

These and other popular beliefs about the uniqueness and superiority of the Chinese writing system help to elevate its status to something almost sacred in the Chinese people's regard. In our survey of language attitudes and ideologies in various Chinese diasporic communities (Li & Zhu, 2010), many of our interviewees expressed a view that

knowledge of the Chinese writing system was essential to Chinese cultural identity and that overseas-born children of Chinese heritage could not be regarded as 'authentic' or 'proper' Chinese unless they knew how to read and write Chinese characters (see also Tan, 2017). The belief that Chinese written characters must be absolutely protected manifests itself in education, too: the principal objective of Chinese heritage language schools all over the world seems to be teaching the standard form of Chinese characters.

Socio-cultural changes in China and the need for new writing

The last three decades have witnessed unprecedented development in China, with its economy becoming the second largest in the world. The Chinese government is more willing than ever to exercise its economic, political and military power on the world stage. The promotion of the Chinese language internationally is a crucial part of China's geopolitical strategy. Hundreds of Confucius Institutes and Classrooms, which teach Chinese language and culture, have been set up across the globe. There is a realisation that language could also play a key role in the relationship between mainland China and Taiwan as well as in strengthening ties with Chinese diasporic communities worldwide. The publication of *A Global Chinese Dictionary* (2010) and *A Comprehensive Global Chinese Dictionary* (2016) received unprecedented political support from mainland China, Taiwan, and Singapore, as did the *A Cross-Strait Dictionary of Commonly Used Words* (2012). While the intention of publishing these reference works was to facilitate communication between people in different Chinese-speaking regions, it also highlights the significant differences between the varieties of Chinese, spoken and written, across different regions and communities.

Within China, people's sense of regional and local identity is growing. In this regard, the government's policies on protecting local cultures, including regional languages and dialects, appear to be at odds with the policy of promoting a uniform standard national language. The Ministry of Culture is investing heavily in folk operas and art forms such as calligraphy, which require the use of regional languages and dialects and traditional unsimplified characters. Creating written records of folk operas, songs, and poetry entails the revival of old characters that had been abandoned and the invention of new characters to transcribe regional expressions and dialectal words. This has led to complaints from many teachers, who, under the governance of the Ministry of Education, are tasked to teach only Putonghua and the standard script.

Technological advancement has had a huge impact on language practices in China. Rapid expansion of social media means that information is exchanged at an overwhelming scale and speed. The Chinese government is acutely aware of the fast expansion of social media and the impact of new linguistic creations on the promotion of standard speech and script. The Xinhua News Agency, a ministry-level institution directly reporting to the Communist Party's Central Committee, has been issuing lists of banned words and expressions for the official media annually since 2015. Some banned words are politically sensitive expressions and euphemisms, but most are new creations by social media users that deliberately violate the conventions of standard Chinese characters and in many instances mix foreign elements. As we will show later, such official mandates have had little effect in the realm of social media; in fact, they may have pushed social media users to be more creative and critical, as new creations keep emerging and are more

inventive than ever. These new linguistic creations pose challenges to authority, to central control, and to cultural and political hegemony.

In this regard, the use of foreign words and expressions has been seen as a particularly rebellious act. Although a written vernacular based on Mandarin Chinese was used in novels in the Ming and Qing dynasties, print literature and official documents were all written in classical Chinese before the early twentieth century. After the last emperor was overthrown by the republicans in 1912, a group of intellectuals based at Peking University called for the creation of a new Chinese culture based on what they understood as Western standards. They specifically charged classical Chinese as a barrier to social progress, and they promoted a new written vernacular known as *Baihuawen*, literally 'plain language writing'. Linguists such as Y. R. Chao began to study spoken forms of Chinese and regional dialects using Western linguistic theories and models. And the literary output in the new written vernacular was huge in volume, many of which included transliterations of foreign terms and neologisms. The movement turned political on 4 May 1919 when students in Beijing protested against the Paris Peace Conference, which transferred German territorial rights over the Shangdong peninsula to Japan. The New Culture Movement, especially the May the Fourth Movement, is now memorialised in Chinese history books as an anti-foreign hegemony movement. Such memorialisation glosses over the Movement's original objectives of developing vernacular literature for the common people, putting an end to the patriarchal family and supporting individual freedom and women's liberation, and promoting democratic and egalitarian values and an orientation to the future rather than the past. May the Fourth is now the Youth Day in China. The irony, however, is that the Movement saw the beginning of a massive importation of foreign words, expressions and concepts, including *communism, democracy, parliament*, etc. Most Movement leaders were fluent in foreign languages and were known for deliberately mixing foreign words and expressions in their speech and writing as a demonstration of their open-mindedness and global outlook.

We can see parallels in China today, where people embrace certain aspects of globalisation, such as free trade, mass open online technologies and international tourism and consumption, but also express national pride and anti-foreign sentiments, especially against the U.S. and Japan. Public discourses concerning language practices are full of contradictions: protecting Chinese against borrowings from foreign languages and promoting it as a global language while investing heavily in foreign language education. For Chinese characters though, the dominant discourse is that they must be kept authentic and standard; foreign borrowings should be minimised and must conform to the shape and form of the Chinese script; and new concepts should be expressed through existing characters rather than through the creation of new ones.

It is against this socio-cultural backdrop in China that the new translingual script is emerging. Technological advancement, especially the availability of social media, provides new affordances for tranßcripting. eMarketer estimated in 2017 that over 600 million people in China are regular social media users and usually over 200 million users are online simultaneously: these are the main tranßcripters. Practical challenges facing social media users include the following:

- How can Chinese characters be used to reflect the actual pronunciation/accent of the language users in social interactions?

- Should social media users choose characters to match their pronunciation/accent instead of using the standard characters that do not reflect their actual pronunciation/accent?
- How can they create new characters for new concepts, objects and expressions?
- What are the implications for choosing existing characters for new concepts, objects and expressions?

These are issues that Chinese linguists and language planners have struggled with for generations. Before we examine some of the solutions ordinary Chinese social media users have presented, we will define what we mean by tranßcripting and explain our analytical approach.

Tranßcripting from a translanguaging perspective

We use the term tranßcripting to refer to the linguistic practice of creating a script with elements from different writing systems, such as Chinese and English, or by mixing conventional language scripts with other symbols and signs including emoji. As in translanguaging, the *trans-* part of the term is about transcending, i.e. going beyond, the conventional scriptal systems, and *-ing* emphasises the temporal nature, the instantaneity, of the practice. Together, these two parts of the term highlight the simultaneous and continuous engagement with two or more entities. They constrain the normative force of conventional scripts while at the same time bring out the creative potential of the script. The *-ing* aspect also gives agency to the scripter while accentuating the process of scripting. Behind each script, there is a person or a community and their life stories that motivate the process of writing the script in a particular way. And it is the process of scripting along with the scripters and their motivations that we want to investigate.

We approach tranßcripting from a translanguaging perspective. As has been argued by Garcia and Li (2014) and Li (2018), translanguaging is a dynamic process whereby multilinguals use multiple linguistic and semiotic resources, including scriptal, digital, and visual resources, as an integrated communication system to mediate complex social and cognitive activities – to act, to know, and to be. The process brings together different dimensions of language users' personal histories, experiences and environments; their attitudes, beliefs and ideologies; and their cognitive and physical capacities into one coordinated and meaningful performance, making it into a lived experience (Li, 2011). Tranßcripting, then, is a creative and critical act, as it pushes and breaks the boundaries between the old and the new, the conventional and the novel, and the acceptable and the unacceptable, and problematises and challenges received wisdom. Moreover, tranßcripting tells the stories of the scripters' social experiences and attitudes.

All the examples below are taken from WeChat, the most popular multipurpose messaging, social media, and mobile payment app in China, which is increasingly used outside China, too. These examples can also be found on the Internet, freely accessible to everyone in China. We have selected those that mix elements from different scriptal systems, or language scripts, and other semiotic symbols.[4] The analysis below centres on three types of tranßcripting: Chinese + English, Chinese characters + alphabetic letters, and Chinese characters + numerals.

Chinese + English

Figure 2 is a poster that has circulated widely on WeChat. This is a good illustration of the type of tranßcripting that gives common Chinese catch phrases and sayings new twists.

The formula is to use a similar-sounding English word to replace parts of the phrase or saying in Chinese. In the first example from the poster, 无fuck说 (wu **fuck** shuo), results from deliberately segmenting 无话可说 (wu **hua ke** shuo, or 'have nothing to say') in a nonsensical way: 话可 (huake) = 'speech + can' does not make sense. But this kind of Chinese + English tranßcripting is the most productive formula, with hundreds of phrases appearing online all the time.

On the whole, it is popular, common phrases that are tranßcripted, with certain elements replaced by quasi-homophonic words in English. Some of the English words are vulgar; others are linked to new media technologies. They bring out additional meanings that distort the meanings of the original phrases, giving them a humorous or satirical tone. But there is no apparent pattern as to which element in a phrase will be tranßcripted. And it is precisely this unpredictability of the tranßcripted elements that makes such constructions fun to read. Each expression becomes a story. We will discuss this further after looking at more examples.

It is also difficult to ascertain how stable these phrases become and whether they are used in these forms consistently by the same people. The ones in the poster are widely circulated on social media. But there are many more, created spontaneously by multilingual Chinese netizens, including, for example the following:

关你peace (guan ni **peace**) = 关你屁事（guan ni **pi shi** 'it's none of your business'）

Figure 2. Popular poster with Chinese + English tranßcript.

黄焖jimmy饭 (*huang men* **jimmy** *fan*) = 黄焖鸡米饭（*huang men* ***ji mi*** *fan* 'braised chicken with rice'）

笑到昏gucci (*xiao dao hun* **gucci**) = 笑到昏过去（*xiao dao hun* ***guo qu*** 'laughing too much that one almost faints'）

哈哈怎么都coach不清 (*ha ha zen me dou* **coach** *bu qing*) = 哈哈怎么都口齿不清(*ha ha zen me dou* ***kou chi*** *bu qing* '[laughing] why are you speaking with a speech impediment'）

Chinese characters + numerals

Another form of tranßcripting is combining traditional characters with numerals. One such example is 老老77 (*laolao qiqi* 'old old seven seven'), which is derived from 老老实实 (*laolao shishi* 'honest' or 'simple-minded'). The numeral 7 is used here to stand for the character实. Their pronunciations are similar, but in southern dialects and accented Mandarin – not standard Putonghua – they rhyme.

There are several other examples in common circulation, including those depicted in Figure 3. The first example, 森7 (*senqi*), literally 'forest seven', is 生气 (*shengqi*) or 'angry' tranßcripted. The Chinese character 森 (*sen*) is more complicated than 生 (*sheng*). But its pronunciation is closer to the accent of southern dialect speakers of Mandarin. The second example 亻3表 is shorthand for 三个代表 (The Three Represents), a guiding political theory credited to the former Chinese President, Jiang Zemin. In his speech at the 16th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in 2002, Jiang urged the Party to represent 'advanced social productive forces', 'the progressive course of China's advanced culture', and 'the fundamental interests of the majority'. The new character combines the two characters代表 (*represent*), by having the亻 radical on the left, the 表 character on the right, and the numeral 3 in the middle. Finally, 4言，comes from the current Chinese President Xi Jinping's call for more confidence in the Party's continuing legitimacy

Figure 3. Examples of character + numeral invention.

to govern China against criticism from foreign governments and pressures for political reform. It became known as 四个自信 (four types of self-confidence): 'confidence in our chosen path', 'confidence in our political system', 'confidence in our guiding theories', and 'confidence in our culture'. The character uses the numeral 4 to replace 亻 in信 (belief/confidence); the character and numeral look graphically similar. The pronunciation of 4 is *si*. The semantic radical on the right, 言， has an independent meaning of 'speech' when used alone and is pronounced *yan*. 4 + speech is homophonic to 食言 (*shiyan*) '*eat one's words*'. As we can see, tranßcripting that involves numerals can be used not for frivolous purposes but to reflect various 'serious' concepts, such as the critique of ubiquitous political ideologies.

Chinese characters + alphabetic letters

Another form of tranßcripting that involves replacing Chinese characters with alphabetic letters in two-character expressions shows even greater potential for playful language as well as political subversion. For example, P民 (*pì mín*) stands for 屁民 (*pi min*), literally *fart people*, meaning 'hoi polloi' and often used ironically, to reflect how ordinary people feel about their position in society. Kai子(*kai zi* 'kai person') or K子, meaning an 'idiot', is a transliteration of a Teochew term, popular in Taiwan and Hong Kong. The first syllable has no standard character and is sometimes written with 凯 or 开, whose Putonghua pronunciation is *kai*. These combinations, and the Chinese-English mixed phrases above, do not challenge the internal organisational principles of Chinese characters themselves – instead, Chinese characters and English words and letters are put side by side.

Other instances are arguably more creative in that they combine a Chinese radical and a Latin letter in a single character. One such example is牛B„ which follows the semantic radical plus phonetic radical convention (see Figure 4). The left part of the character is an animal radical, derived from the character 牛 (*niu* 'cow'). The right part is the letter B, standing for the Chinese taboo word for female genitalia. The pronunciation of the combined character is *niubi*, which is the pronunciation of the Chinese phrase meaning 'awesome'. While the new Chinese character has its own meaning, it does not have an independent, single-syllable pronunciation. The pronunciation as *niubi*, which is the only way to read it, violates the convention of the pronunciation of Chinese characters insofar as it has two syllables instead of the typical single syllable in a simple consonant-plus-vowel combination.

Figure 4. Niubi – awesome.

In another example, 亻A, the left part of this character is the semantic radical for human (see Figure 5). The right part is a stylised letter A, and the pronunciation of this character is *ta*, for the third-person singular pronoun 'she', 'he', or 'it'. Standard Chinese characters for the third-person pronoun differentiate between genders, 她 (she) and 他 (he), and between human and non-human, 它 (it), as in English, but they are all pronounced as *ta*. 亻A, is the new, translingual gender-neutral third-person pronoun in Chinese invented by multilingual Chinese social media users, manipulating the pinyin Romanisation of the syllable sound and the character.

While the example 5 relies on a manipulation of the pinyin conventions, Figure 6 demonstrates how Chinese scriptal conventions can be unexpectedly adhered to through alphabetic letters. In the case of 尸Y, the character is a combination of 尸 (*shi*, 'corpse') and Y. Y stands for the character 歪 (pronounced *wai*, meaning 'crooked/devious/underhand'). The two-character word 尸歪 is sometimes used by Cantonese and Hokkien speakers to mean a deadly person who is full of intentions to hurt other people. Putting the letter Y underneath the character 尸 conforms to the semantic radical-plus-phonetic-radical formation rule, and it acts as a shorthand for the two-character/syllable word.

As suggested above, it is important to emphasise that tranßcripting is not merely about frivolous manipulation of language but at times emerges in direct response to serious contemporary socio-political issues. During and after the 2014 Umbrella Movement in Hong Kong, a protest triggered by the decision of the Standing Committee of China's National People's Congress to rescind universal suffrage in the 2017 election of Hong Kong's Chief Executive, a number of tranßcripted characters emerged with the English letters HK in them. The first example stands for the phrase, 反中亂港, or 'Oppose China, Destabilise Hong Kong', a phrase that the pro-Beijing camp used to characterise the actions of the protesters (Figure 7(a)). Here, the character 亂 has been tranßcripted with the character 反 (oppose) in the middle of the left-hand radical, the character 中 (middle/Middle Kingdom/China) is on the top right-hand side, and HK is below it.

Conversely, Figure 7(b) results from an adaptation of 賣港賊, which comes from the Chinese phrase 賣国賊, for traitor, literally 'sell + country + thief', with the middle character 国 (country) being replaced with 港 (short for Hong Kong). 賣港賊 thus refers to someone who betrays Hong Kong. The tranßcripted character uses the character for sell (賣) as a radical on the left-hand side and incorporates the letters HK on top of the right-hand radical. The lower part of 賣 (sell) is the same as the left part of 賊 (thief). So the lower

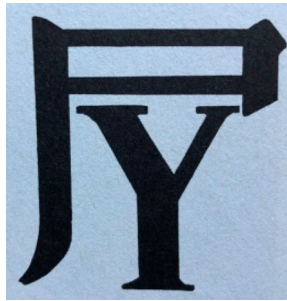**Figure 5.** Ta – gender neutral third person singular pronoun.

Figure 6. Shiwai – 'deadly person', euphemistically referring to CY Leung, the former Chief Executive of Hong Kong.
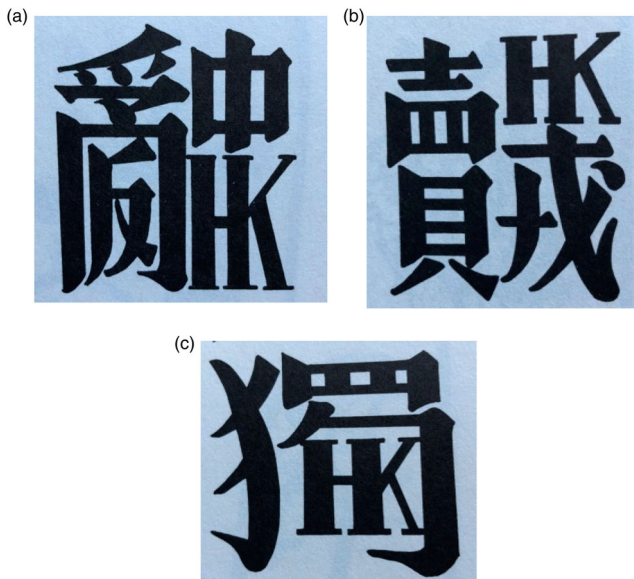

Figure 7. (a) Oppose China, Destabilize Hong Kong, (b) Thief/Seller of Hong Kong, and (c) Hong Kong independence.

part of the tranßcripted character is賊 (thief). This new character is used in signs targeted at people who are believed to have sold Hong Kong's interests to the Beijing government.

One of the most controversial examples of tranßcripting from the Umbrella Movement derives from 港獨, or 'Hong Kong independence' (Figure 7(c)). In the tranßcripted version, the middle part of the right-hand radical 獨 (independence) is replaced by the letters HK. The tranßcripted 'Hong Kong independence' is widely associated with the anti-China political movement.

Playful subversion

The tranßcripted writing we have discussed in this paper disrupts the normative patterns and standards of the Chinese writing system, causing turbulence in the linguistic

landscape of China. Ordinary Chinese netizens are acutely aware of and sensitive to the nationalistic ideologies that the current government has been promoting and to the fact that language has been used to promote China's political and economic influence globally, through institutions such as the Confucius Institutes and Classrooms. Language has also played a key role in cross-strait relations between mainland China and Taiwan, and in China's relations with several Southeast Asian countries. Intensified nationalism is taking place in the context of new geopolitics – China's emergence as a new politico-economic world power has been met with hostility from both the U.S. and neighbouring countries in East and Southeast Asia. There is indeed a *de-han*, or de-Sinification, movement in Southeast Asia, particularly in Viet Nam. Domestically, meanwhile, there is growing dissatisfaction with the rampant corruption at all levels of governance, resulting in abuses of power and social problems, such as pollution and food insecurity. This is a highly paradoxical situation, not uncommon in postmodern societies, where ordinary citizens are unhappy with what the state provides for them individually in their everyday lives, yet these citizens are ideologically united in national pride. The tranßcripting phenomenon that emerges in this context is thus layered with subversive potential. It is a running commentary on what is happening in China and provides insight into Chinese people's views of the world.

From a translanguaging perspective, we can understand the tranßcripted characters as a form of 'playful subversion'. They are 'playful' because the tranßcripted characters, words, and expressions are clear examples of language play. They manipulate the Chinese character formation template, visual representation and iconicity, sound, font and scriptal system as a source of enjoyment (Crystal, 1998) to do things that conventional writing does not normally do, and to create an 'alternative reality' (Cook, 2000) by bending and breaking prescribed rules. The alternative reality is afforded by new media technologies. WeChat and digital media in general invite play: they exist to be played with by ordinary users. As Cermak-Sassenrath (2018) says, social media use is essentially playful: 'Users are involved and active, produce form and content, spread, exchange and consume it, take risks, are conscious of their own goals and the possibilities of achieving them, are skilled and know how to acquire more skills. They share a perspective of can-do, a curiosity of what happens next' (p. xi).

The results of this playfulness, and the alternative reality it creates, are resistance and subversion that are simultaneously tacit and overt, intimate and public. They are tacit and intimate because manipulation of the linguistic norm is usually very subtle, and the motivations behind it may be quite personal; each invention tells a specific story and has an author behind the script. But these instances of tranßcripting are also overt and public, as they are shared via social media, and their connotations are usually fairly obvious. Further, they are subversive because they defy distinct and often long-held conventions, authorities and ideologies. We see them as part of what Raessens (2006) describes as the 'ludification of culture', the mocking of authorities, the creation of alternative meanings and realities, the subversion and deception of roles, and the breaking of boundaries through play.

It is easy to notice that apart from making fun of the conventional scriptal system of Chinese, most of the tranßcripted innovations involve rude or taboo words, pejorative or negative expressions, and euphemisms for politically sensitive issues. For these reasons, the Chinese authorities continue to be watchful of this emerging phenomenon.

The 2018 list of banned words and expressions issued by the Xinhua News Agency contains tranßcriptal phrases such as 齐B短裙 (short shirt at the length/height of female genitals) and 装13 (showing off pompously and stupidly). 13 has a double meaning: it can stand for B referring to female genitalia, or it can be read as a Shanghai slang term referring to someone who thinks there are 13 h on a clock face (implying stupidity). The official effort to censor tranßcripting seems to affirm its subversive potential. Of additional significance is that tranßcripting represents the translinguistic resourcefulness of ordinary people in their everyday social interactions, which in turn challenges top-down control over language use in social life.

Conclusion

It must be said that the tranßcripting we have discussed in this paper is only part of a larger translanguaging movement in China, including new Chinglish, net Chinese, regionalism, meme, the use of emoji, etc. (e.g. Lee, 2015a, 2015b; Li, 2016; Wong, Tsang, & Lok, 2017). More innovations are appearing all the time. As we conclude this paper, we consider an interesting recent case of tranßcripting. Kris Wu, a Chinese hip hop artist, actor and model, born in the Cantonese-speaking city of Guangzhou, educated partly in Canada, and a former member of the South Korean pop band EXO, became the producer and a celebrity judge of the Rap of China TV show in 2017. His mixing of English words and phrases with Chinese became his trademark, and many memes were created online with one of the questions he asked to the contestants: '你有freestyle吗？'(Do you have freestyle?). At the launch of the 2018 season of the show, Wu was asked to predict what would become the new buzzword. He said, 'Skr skr skr skr skr skr skr skrrrr', a sound that rappers often make in their performances. According to various online sources, *skr* represents the sound a car makes when it skids and has come to mean 'get off quickly'. It is also used as a reaction to bad ideas and suggestions, loosely an alternative to a facepalm emoji. Wu went on to use *skr* frequently during the show to refer to someone he regarded as talented or skilful, as in: 'His flow is *skr*! His break between the bars is *skr skr*!' In addition to adopting *skr* in their own daily interactions, Chinese social media users began mixing it with Chinese characters in common phrases, similar to the examples discussed earlier in the paper, and splitting it into two syllables and thereby manipulating the sound to make it homophonic with certain Chinese words:

skr 杀book辱 = 士可杀不可辱 (**shike** *sha* **buke** *ru* 'a scholar prefers death to humiliation')

笑skr人 = 笑死个人 (*xiao* **sige** *ren* 'deadly funny')

你s不 skr以点个赞? = 你是不是可以点个赞? (*ni* **shi**bu**shi ke**yi *diange zan*? 'Are you able to "like" it?'—as in clicking on the 'like' icon)

Figure 8 is a meme that shows a similar use of the 'buzzword' in a fake quotation attributed to Wu.

In July 2018, someone posted a video to the popular sports website Hupu of an allegedly un-autotuned recording of Wu's singing. His female fans launched an online attack against the website, which in turn led to strongly worded responses from the predominantly male sports-loving followers of Hupu. A huge number of postings were circulated within a short period of time, with all sorts of rumours about Wu's private life. Another

Figure 8. Meme created about Kris Wu: The man on the left asks, 'How many hotdogs do you want?', and the caption above Kris Wu on the right is his reply, 'skr (四根儿)' (*si ger* 'four long and thing objects').

meme (Figure 9) made fun of the scenario with a picture of Wu coming out of an airport. The caption says, 让我看看**s**哪**skr**在制造谣言 （*rang wo kankan **s na skr** zai zhizao yaoyan* 'Let me see who's making rumours'), in which是哪个儿（*shi nager* 'is who'）has been tranßcripted as s哪skr (*s na skr*). As one comment underneath the meme on the website says, 'This is so funny. I bet it's true'. But telling the truth is not the point; subverting the truth on multiple levels and in multiple directions is. That is what playful subversion is all about, and it is the essence of tranßcripting.

Figure 9. Fake news? Fake Quote? Fake Meme.

Notes

1. NBA = National Basketball Association; CPI = Consumer Price Index; PM$_{2.5}$ = Particulate matter with a diameter of 2.5 micrometers or smaller.
2. At the 100th anniversary celebration of the founding of Peking University, its President 'mispronounced' a rare word in front of the President of China, though not due to dialectal variation. He was lampooned by social media and had to make a public apology.
3. In December 2017, news broke out that the government had issued a 'stroke order' standard and that school children would be tested. This standard was issued again at the beginning of the 2018 school year, accommpanied by widespread media coverage.
4. There are many other newly invented characters, phrases, and expressions that manipulate the conventions of Chinese characters but do not involve any other scriptal system. They can also be regarded as tranßcripting in the sense that they transcend scriptal conventions, scripting a story and bringing forth a new voice in each case. However, such examples are not the focus of our paper.

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