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CHINESE SLANG

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INTRODUCTION

Slang is a linguistic category that has long defied those who have sought to define it (Dumas and Lighter 1978; Adams 2009). The qualities that make it so difficult to define apply to both its English and Chinese versions.¹ Part of the difficulty in identifying specific defining criteria stems from slang's status as a folk category. Slang is, in a sense, what the speakers of a given language believe it to be, and different speakers have different understandings about what it is.

The qualities most commonly attributed to it by those who define it are as follows:

1. Informality
2. Playful or imaginative use of standard vocabulary items
3. Humor
4. Ephemerality
5. Appropriateness in egalitarian relationships
6. Association with contexts wherein the dignity entailed in high status positions is not deferred to
7. Rebelliousness
8. Association with marginal and/or relatively powerless populations (such as youth, military personnel or criminal gangs)
9. Vulgarity

For present purposes this somewhat loose collection of attributes will serve as a guideline and a beginning point for an approach to slang. Not all of these qualities can be considered equally salient, however. Informality is a necessary attribute (though not a sufficient one) of any expression that might be considered slang. Other features listed here, humor and vulgarity, for example, may characterize a given slang expression, but they are not necessarily associated with slang in all of its usages and contexts.

Furthermore, these attributes can be clustered into related groups, each of which reflects a different aspect of slang. For example, those listed as numbers 2 through 4 can be seen as derived from slang's typically playful quality, playfulness here encompassing both a non-serious attitude and the willingness of an inventive speaker to work his or her will on the words and phrases of ordinary discourse. The playful or inventive redesignation of standard vocabulary as slang is one of the factors that makes much slang ephemeral or fleeting. What is currently a clever linguistic invention can become a hackneyed phrase with the passage of time. But, as will be discussed below, the ephemerality of slang is not a constant and universal attribute.

The features listed as numbers 5 through 9 refer to status relationships. Slang is most appropriately used as a register among people of roughly equal status and, conversely, is inappropriate where deference to authority figures and others of high status is demanded. Though people of differing status may use slang, such usage tends to minimize their status differences. Following from this is the common use of slang among marginal groups, those lacking power and/or status. Such groups are typically not committed to social hierarchies in the way that those who lead and organize such hierarchies are. Furthermore, these marginalized groups are often regarded as crude and vulgar by those of high status, the latter often using their refined speech and manners both as symbols of their status and devices for justifying their

position. When a student uses slang in speaking to a teacher, or a defendant does so in addressing a judge, the effect is often for the speaker to appear both rebellious and crude, i.e., lacking in the deferential attitude and polished manners that more formal language entails.

SLANG, INFORMALITY AND PLAY

The importance of playfulness and humor in slang is linked to its role in the promotion of social connections. Eble (1996) has noted the important part that slang plays in promoting sociability in her study of slang usage among American university students. Slang encourages speakers to display their sentiments in an egalitarian context where playfulness or humor may help promote social rapport. Humor and play often serve to diminish social barriers, and the wordplay and humor so common in slang expressions can be partly explained by the usefulness of these constructs in promoting sociability. Even when slang is not specifically humorous or particularly playful, it still entails a non-serious quality that distinguishes it from most standard language.

Another widely recognized function of slang is the marking of social boundaries as when specific slang terms are used by in-group members who, unlike non-members, are familiar with them. This boundary-marking function is also sometimes characteristic of humor - particularly, though not exclusively, in the form of satire. Slang, then, like humor, can be said to both promote sociability among group members, particularly in egalitarian contexts, and to mark the boundary between in-group members and everyone else. Not every expression of slang or *lǐyǔ* is humorous or playful, but most can be said to conjure up an ethos that at least suggests these qualities by virtue of their hyper-casual aspect. Slang can also be used aggressively, of course, but aggression is not a central function of slang, as it is, for example, of swearwords (Moore

2012). The distinction between slang and swearwords, and their different prototypical functions, will be discussed further below.

LIYU

In Mandarin, the term most commonly glossed as slang is *lǐyǔ* (俚语), with the element *lǐ* (俚) meaning unpolished or crude, and *yǔ* (语) meaning language (Xu Shen). The *Cihai*, or *the Encyclopedic Dictionary of Chinese*, defines *lǐyǔ* (俚语) as “a type of colloquial speech, often with dialectal characteristics.” This definition is followed by an 11th century citation in which a famous general is described as “illiterate and prone to the use of *lǐyǔ*.”

Lǐyǔ, however, is not merely unpolished or crude speech; it is best regarded as a subcategory of informal speech. Precisely what the defining attributes of that subcategory are is a matter about which different Chinese speakers have different opinions (Moore et al. 2010). A popular volume found in Chinese bookstores goes by the English title *New Slang of China*, and is further identified on the cover with the Chinese characters 最新中国俚语 (*Zuixin Zhongguo Liyu*). What this volume contains is not merely slang, but a number of expressions that might best be called common phrases (some of which can indeed be thought of as *lǐyǔ* proper) and common swearwords. The loose collection of expressions in a volume that purports to be strictly about slang bespeaks the difficulty of defining this category.

Though *lǐyǔ* is widely used as a gloss for slang, the history and current status of *lǐyǔ* does not precisely match that of the corresponding English term. The most significant difference is that *lǐyǔ* has long been understood as describing informal expressions strongly associated with specific regions. These expressions are embedded in local dialects and often thought to be long-lived rather than ephemeral. *Lǐyǔ*, so conceived, is not a perfect match with the fly-by-night words and phrases that most English speakers regard as true slang. But Chinese *lǐyǔ* and English

slang do match closely in a number of ways. Both serve to promote an egalitarian ethos by virtue of their informal, playful or humorous quality, both are largely oral, and both are inappropriate in formal contexts. For example, one is not likely to hear many *lǐyǔ* lexemes in the speech of CCTV news anchors, or to see them in school textbooks (Moore et al. 2010).

Chinese discourse is distinctive, and different from that of many Western traditions, in its use of various kinds of common or traditional sayings. Among these various types are, for example, four-character sayings, often taken from classical texts or traditional stories, that are generally referred to as idioms or adages (成語 *chéngyǔ*). These are quite different from *lǐyǔ* phrases. However, another category of popular sayings, often referred to as *súyǔ* (俗語) is sometimes compared to *lǐyǔ* or even thought to be a version of *lǐyǔ*. Given the difficulty in drawing sharp boundaries around the concept of *lǐyǔ*, I won't attempt to distinguish these two categories here on the basis of any absolute criteria, except to say that many *súyǔ*, in light of the respect they are sometimes given, and their widespread use in relatively formal contexts, do not qualify as *lǐyǔ* or slang.

REGIONAL LIYU

The traditional idea that *lǐyǔ* is a kind of informal language pertaining to specific localities parallels Chinese linguistic variation in general. Chinese is famous for comprising not one, but a multitude of speech forms, all of them ultimately linked to the written characters whose ancestry is rooted in Shang dynasty artifacts of the second millennium B.C.E. This collection of speech forms, which includes Mandarin, Cantonese, Shanghainese and others, comprises “Chinese” in the broadest sense of the word. Furthermore, each of these major regional varieties or *fāngyán* (方言) of Chinese can be subdivided into minor dialects some of which are associated with speech communities so localized as to be centered on a single market

town and its neighboring villages. An outstanding feature of Chinese, then, is the extraordinary array of speech forms that characterize it. Traditional understandings of *lǚyǔ* focus on this variety as a key defining feature.

Standard Mandarin Chinese is distinct from this diverse collection of local dialects and is formally regarded as enjoying superior prestige. Since it was the only linguistic avenue to advancement for the scholar official class of the Qing dynasty and is currently the official language of both the People's Republic of China and the Republic of China, Mandarin continues to be singularly important on both mainland China and Taiwan. However, local pride is not without significance, and local dialects, including their *lǚyǔ* expressions, do engender a kind of local patriotism for those who speak and understand them. A Cantonese speaker from, say, Guangzhou, will take a certain pride in Cantonese generally and perhaps in locally understood versions of *lǚyǔ* in particular. As further discussion will show, local and regional expressions are not the only form of slang typical of China. However, these have loomed large in traditional Chinese concepts of slang.

An example of *lǚyǔ* from Beijing is *gèsè*, (各色). In standard Mandarin this term refers to an array or an assortment but which in Beijing slang metaphorically describes someone with an odd personality, particularly someone who is unappealing or objectionable. This illustrates a typical way of constructing a slang expression, i.e., by putting standard vocabulary to new uses. Another slang expression illustrating the same process originated in Beijing but is now more widely known: *hùnqiúr* (混球儿). In standard Mandarin the first character means “mixed up” or “muddled,” while the second one means “ball.” Its slang meaning is “rascal” or “bad boy.” The third element marks the retroflex “er” (儿) ending typical of many Beijing Mandarin words and this ending gives this expression a distinctively “Beijing-style” quality. Also featuring the

Beijing “er” is the phrase, *dàlǎo yémen ’er* (大老爷们儿) which is slang for a “big shot.”

Another expression typical of Beijing and the northeast is *chědàn* (扯淡) which means nonsense or bullshit. It is typically applied to people who talk big but who don’t back up their talk with action.

As these words and phrases suggest, slang is often descriptive of people or behaviors that are emotionally charged, a quality that is related to slang’s basic informality. For entities that are likely to conjure affective reactions in a speaker, slang can provide the vocabulary that will do these feelings justice. The inherent informality of slang helps convey those sentiments that more formal linguistic forms are designed to obscure.

The local slang of Beijing is perhaps better known than that of any other region due to its role as the home of the central government and as the historical center for modern vernacular Chinese. Furthermore, the Standard Mandarin that is China’s national language is based on Beijing Mandarin. Other locales have their own local slang, of course, but these are less likely to catch on at the national level than is the slang of Beijing. A nationally known slang term is *èr* (二), which means “two” in Mandarin, but which as a slang term means stupid. In Hangzhou’s local slang, however, this term is sometimes modified to *liù èr* (六二) or “six two.”

The Cantonese-speaking south of China has its own slang both because its dominant language is not Mandarin and because the long colonial history Hong Kong has nurtured a local culture distinctly different from that of the PRC that has influenced the surrounding region (Bolton and Hutton 1997; Wright and Kelly-Holmes 1997). Slang in Cantonese is generally referred to as *juhkyúh* (俗语, the Cantonese term corresponding to Mandarin *súyǔ*) rather than *léihyúh* (the Cantonese term corresponding to *lǐyǔ*).

A popular Cantonese expression meaning “crazy” that has been in use for several decades is *chìsin* (痴线). The literal meaning of this phrase is something like “crazy wiring” and it implies that the individual described has had the equivalent of a short circuit in the brain. As with Mandarin terms, Cantonese *chìsin* gains some of its lively expressiveness from a somewhat humorous image suggested by the comparison between a malfunctioning brain and a shorted out appliance.

An example of figurative Cantonese slang based on a standard phrase is *hōichāan*, which literally means “to dine” or “to have a meal,” but has recently come to mean “to take drugs.” Similarly, *sāanjaaih* (山寨), which means “mountain stronghold” in ordinary Cantonese, is a slang term for a cheap imitation of a quality product, often a pirated copy. The widely shared idea underlying this term is that mountain-dwelling people are poor and therefore forced to make do with inferior homemade goods. They are also thought to sometimes operate beyond the reach of the law. This expression is now widely used in both Cantonese and Mandarin (*shānzhài*) and it isn’t clear in which dialect it originated. This borrowing (either from Cantonese to Mandarin or Mandarin to Cantonese) across not only regional but significant dialectical borders, serves as a reminder that the linguistic boundaries between localities, though real, are often porous.

One form of playfulness is the inserting of foreign words into Chinese discourse; slang terms are sometimes formed on the basis of non-Chinese lexemes. A Cantonese example of this is *A A jai* (A A 制) where “A A” is from the Latin alphabet and is pronounced as it would be in English. *A A jai* describes the custom that in English is known as going Dutch, i.e., where each individual pays for his or her own meal. This custom has become fairly common in China, though there was a time when it was rare among the Chinese and carried an anti-social connotation. Since gathering together for a meal has long been (and continues to be) an

important social activity, and one that may even be required for sealing a business deal, the dividing of the check so that each individual could each pay for his or her own portion was contrary to the spirit of togetherness that diners traditionally sought. Of course, when one individual pays for the entire meal in the standard Chinese manner, it is common practice for the diners to fight over the check, sometimes with such heated language as to create the impression that a real fight was threatening to break out any minute. In any case, it was assumed in the past that one individual would pay for the entire meal and the Western-influenced pattern of “A A *jai*” (or “one-by-one style”) marks a new approach to dining in China, one that has given rise to a relatively new slang expression.

Yāt gauh séui (一嚙水) or “one piece of water” refers to one hundred Hong Kong dollars, water being symbolic of money generally. *Gáauchēut yàhn mehng* (搞出人命) means to kill someone, but as a slang expression it means “to get a woman pregnant,” or, in English slang terms, “to knock her up.” Also, in the realm of love and sex, is *galēi gāi* (咖喱鸡, literally, “chicken curry”), a slang term for hickey or love bite. These Cantonese slang expressions again point to the emotionally charged nature of those topics that attract slang – mental disabilities, shoddy merchandise, money, and sex, for example.

SLANG VS SWEARWORDS

In popular culture, slang is often thought to include swearwords. These categories are, however, distinguishable, though they do overlap in function. In Chinese, swearwords are designated as *zānghuà* (脏话), that is, “dirty talk”. The most important difference between slang terms and swearwords is that the latter are strongly linked to stress and aggression. In fact, it can be said that the primary function of swearwords is to express serious and usually negative sentiments by referencing emotionally charged concepts using words that are taboo in most

contexts. Swearwords typically comprise a vocabulary drawn from the semantic fields of sex, scatology and/or religion. In addition to this, swearwords are usually not ephemeral, but endure with their emotional charge intact for centuries. Furthermore, they are not associated with specific subgroups of a society, though less well educated people are often thought of as using them more freely than do those of the middle and upper classes. In spite of these differences, swearwords are often thought of as slang because they share slang's informality and its egalitarian spirit (Moore 2012).

Swearing is not usually indulged in when one is in a formal setting (e.g., a courtroom or a religious ceremony) and its use pointedly contrasts with the attitude of deference that, for example, formal titles and other honorifics call for. In these regards it resembles slang. In fact, swearwords, though prototypically used to express pain, anger or similarly serious emotions, are often “borrowed” for use in contexts where the playfulness of slang is the dominant ethos. They may serve, in this borrowed role, to promote sociability in the same way that slang typically does. It is the borrowing of swearwords for this sociable function along with the traits of informality and egalitarianism that make swearwords seem rather slang-like despite their prototypically distinct function. Slang and swearwords (in both English and Mandarin) can be seen as subcategories of a single category, that is, language whose affective tone is inappropriate in formal contexts – aggressively so for swearwords, but in a manner that is lightly jocular, lively or otherwise non-deferential for ordinary slang.

Tāmāde (他妈的), a widely used Chinese expletive whose literal meaning is “His mother's...” is typically used in moments of stress or aggression. It derives its obscene charge from its implied reference to sexuality, and it has been part of popular Chinese discourse for over a century. The twentieth-century writer, Lu Xun, wrote a well-known essay on *tāmāde* in which

he declared it to be China's "national swear" *guómà* (国骂). Though it is a longstanding expression and one whose use is often not at all sociable or playful, many Chinese regard it as a kind of slang. Other swearwords can similarly be regarded as borderline cases, i.e., so slang-like as to be popularly regarded as slang. The word *rì* (日), for example, is a regional expression in northern China equivalent in meaning (and vulgarity) to the more widely known *cào* (操) meaning "fuck." As a regional expression, it is sometimes thought of as a kind of slang. Nevertheless, it is undeniably a swearword. There are also expressions like *níubī* (牛屌) and *diǎosī* (屌丝), both of which are obscene, and therefore classifiable as swearwords, yet whose sudden popularity among China's younger generation and their common usage in non-aggressive contexts, makes them unmistakably slang. In other words, the categories of slang terms and swearwords overlap both in function and in terms of how certain borderline lexemes may be designated by virtue of their characteristics.

Cào in fact, is one of the most vulgar and strongly tabooed words in Mandarin. It is widely used as a term of abuse in a particular construction, *cào nǐ mā* (操你妈) which means "fuck your mother." A slangy euphemism that substitutes for *cào* is *kào* (靠). *Kào* is often used in the phrase *Wǒ kào*, which has the general quality of the English slang phrase "Screw it!" *Kào* works well as a euphemism for the stronger expletive since they are roughly similar in pronunciation, even to the point of sharing the same tone. Furthermore *kào*, like *cào*, is a verb. *Kào*, whose literal meaning is to lean on or to depend on, represents another example of standard language being recruited into slang vocabulary.

INTERNET LIYU

One contemporary arena in which a new kind of *lǚyǔ* has flourished is the Internet, particularly as this brave new world has been put to use by young Chinese (Yang 2009). Chinese

campus life, especially in elite institutions, brings together students from widely varying regions and the heavy use of the Internet by young urban Chinese connects them to fellows of their generation from all over the country and beyond. In addition to the Internet *per se* is the cell phone, a device which, among young urban Chinese, has become the standard means of communicating with friends. Text messaging and the use of such sites as Weibo and Renren on the Internet parallel each other as major forums within which China's post-1980 and 90 generation are developing new ways of speaking. And this has had a transformative effect on the concept of *lǐyǔ*.

When Mandarin speakers talk about *lǐyǔ*, they often think in terms of the regional expressions whose use is thought to particularly characterize the “*laobaixing*” or common people of provincial China. However, *lǐyǔ* today is not understood to be merely a localized, dialect-based or long-lived register of vivid, informal expressions. The Internet and cell phone networks have been great enablers of China's current youth culture and the language of the Internet, as used by young Chinese, is heavily infused with a new kind of lively *lǐyǔ* that is neither regional nor enduring. The informal language of the Internet (*wǎngluò yǔyán* 网络语言) is a subcategory of “fashionable speech,” (*liúxíng yòngyǔ* 流行用语). Fashionable speech itself is a designation for the ever-changing vocabulary of China's youth culture. Where the slang or *lǐyǔ* of the Internet is concerned, several features that mark it are also attributes of English slang, particularly ephemerality and a propensity for wordplay. Of course, given that this new version of *lǐyǔ* is transmitted by Internet and text messages, it is also different from most types of slang in that it is written rather than oral. But being a written form has by no means dampened its creative and playful qualities (Moore et al. 2010).

The use of letters to stand in for Chinese characters is a common feature of Internet slang. Two common Internet expressions are *gg* and *mm*, the former referring to an appealing guy, the latter to a cute girl. The logic of these abbreviations is that *gēge* (哥哥) is actually the word for older brother, a term which can itself be considered slang (after all, one's older brother is not, in fact, a potential romantic partner). Similarly, the word for younger sister *mèimei* (妹妹) is slang for attractive girl. From these two expressions, the Internet abbreviations *gg* and *mm* are derived. The appropriateness of the abbreviation *mm* is reinforced by the expression *měiméi* (美眉) “pretty eyebrow,” which is also a slang term for a pretty girl. That these simple, two-letter codes could be used effectively to convey their meanings is testament to the interest of contemporary young Chinese in romantic issues. One of slang's functions, after all, is to provide a ready expression for a concept of widely shared, affectively charged significance.

“*TMD*” is an Internet abbreviation for the swearword *tāmāde* (他妈的). As with *gg* and *mm*, the *tmd* abbreviation calls to mind its designated lexeme so readily in part because the word is so well known. Numbers are also used to represent certain widely used phrases: “88” by virtue of its Mandarin pronunciation (*bābā*) is used to mean bye-bye or good-bye. The Mandarin phrase *yīshēng yīshì* (一生一世) means forever. The numbers 1314 are pronounced *yīsān yīsì*, and by virtue of their similarity in pronunciation to *yīshēng yīshì*, also stand for “forever.” Sometimes tones are helpful in identifying the meaning of Internet number codes. For example, 520, pronounced *wǔèrlíng*, is commonly used to mean “I love you” which is pronounced *wǒ ài nǐ* (我爱你) in Mandarin. Though the similarity between these two phrases may seem slight, their corresponding tones are quite close and render the 520 code easily interpretable.

Chinese Internet slang sometimes incorporates English phrases such as “lol” and “omg.” A Japanese word that is found both in Internet and in the spoken slang of young Chinese is *kawai*, meaning “cute.” The similarity between this word and the Mandarin phrase *kě ài* (可爱), which is very similar in meaning, has perhaps encouraged the adoption of the Japanese expression.

Other slang terms popular on the Internet include *zhuǎi* (拽), which describes a person who is somewhat arrogant about his or her talent or accomplishments and *nǎocán* (脑残) meaning “brain damaged” and descriptive of someone exhibiting foolish behavior. *Dǎ zhuānkuài* (打砖块, literally, “hitting bricks”) describes the playing of various online video games. This term may have originated with a popular game called *Yí Zhuānkuài* (移砖块 “moving bricks”). The Mandarin word for thunder (*léi*, 雷) is used to express amazement or embarrassment, more or less as the English expression “omg” is used.

The character 囧 (pronounced *jiǒng* in standard Mandarin) has occupied a prominent place in recent Internet slang. Its usage relies on a kind of wordplay that is only possible in a language whose written form employs ideographs, e.g., a language like Chinese. The character 囧 is thought to resemble a shocked or unhappy face, and it is used on the Internet to convey this kind of sentiment. Its use has been so popular in recent years that there might be said to have been a kind of 囧 fever in Internet communications in China.

In American youth slang, there is perhaps no semantic field richer in slang terminology than that concerning alcohol and drugs. Alcohol use among high school and university students has resulted in a proliferation of English slang terms descriptive of drunkenness – smashed, plastered, three sheets into the wind - to name a very few. Then, since the emergence of the 1960s counterculture, a parallel series of drug-related terms was born: e.g., wasted, zonked, high,

and stoned. Chinese youth culture has never focused on alcohol or drug use as the kind of context within which supposedly “liberating” or sexually adventurous activities were likely to be found, and, no doubt because of this, Chinese slang lacks the rich and endlessly augmented vocabularies related to drunkenness and drug use in American youth culture. There are, of course, a few slangy ways to reference alcohol-related behavior, as, for example the traditional colloquial term for a heavy drinker, *jiǔguǐ* (酒鬼) meaning, literally, “alcohol ghost.”

GENERATIONAL SLANG

Slang expressions can follow a number of different career paths. They may emerge suddenly, become popular and widely used and then quickly disappear. This is what happened to the American expressions “groovy” and “far out,” as the counterculture rose and then dispersed in the 1960s and 70s, for example. Alternatively, a slang expression may catch on and become part of the standard vocabulary as happened to “skyscraper” in the mid-twentieth century. And, as expressions like Cantonese *chìsin* and English “cool” illustrate, slang terms may endure for decades or longer.

Ephemerality is one of the features commonly attributed to slang, but this quality is less constant than is often realized. Some expressions, particularly those of the young generation, are, in fact, more likely to come and go quickly than are others. This is partly due to the fact that young people are both more concerned with fashions and trends than are the middle-aged, and more amenable to change in general. Sometimes the changes that the young embrace are partly motivated by their desire to mark themselves as distinct from their (stuffy, out-of-it) elders. This happened in the United States twice in the twentieth century, each time in association with youth movements that transformed important social values. The youth rebellion of the 1920s was linked to the slang term “swell,” while that of the 1960s was linked to “cool” and each of these

slang terms caught on with a young generation and then endured for decades as that generation grew up (Moore 2004).

In the 1990s, young Chinese embraced major cultural changes and their new, individualistic value system was linked to a new Chinese slang term: *kù*. By the mid-1990s, China had become open in a way that contrasted sharply with the closed and tightly controlled society of the Mao era (1949-1976). The reform era, which officially began in 1978 and which resulted in a gradual opening to the outside world, along with steadily increasing opportunities for entrepreneurship, utterly changed the way families and individuals thought about their lives and their prospects. Consequently, the generation that came of age in the 1990s embraced individualism in a way that their parents could not - given that their parents grew up in the 1960s and 70s when striving for individual benefits was regarded as immoral and was often harshly punished.

It was at this point in history, just as individualism was taking hold of a young generation, that China opened itself to the Internet. Starting in 1994, universities and eventually Internet cafes began to make it possible for young people to link up with the worldwide web. *Kù* was one of the first Internet slang terms to become widely popular, and as it did so, it came to be associated with the young generation of that era and with the individualism that they, in contrast to their elders, were happy to make their own (Moore 2005).

Kù, is phonetically based on the English slang term “cool,” and expressed in writing as 酷. This character, in standard Mandarin, is pronounced *kù* and means something like “cruel.” As is so often the case an old word was put to a new and slangy use. In the case of *kù*, the word made its way to the People’s Republic of China mainly through the Internet via Hong Kong and Taiwan where the word was already being used by the 1990s. The semantics of *kù* include the

image of the self-possessed, emotionally restrained male, that is, an image that matches quite closely the prototypical concept of cool in English. In addition to this, *kù* also calls to mind the flamboyant young rock star, male or female, whose outstanding trait is a style expressing an individualistic flair. Both of these ideals, the emotionally restrained and the flamboyant, are positively valued as were all things designated by the term *kù* in China's youth culture of the 1990s. As happened with swell and cool in the West, the word *kù* in China evolved from a term designating a specific ideal to one whose referents could be anything of which the speaker approved. By about 2005, *kù* had become so pervasive in China that some declined to consider it a slang term, since, according to some Chinese speakers, *lǐyǔ* should refer only to expressions that are linked to a subgroup, regional or otherwise. *Kù*, once a slang term that only young Chinese recognized, has become widely known among generations old and young today (Moore 2005).

Another recently emergent youth culture term is *níubī* (牛屄) which literally means “cow vagina” or, more crudely, “cow cunt.” Neither of these English words quite captures the affective tone of *níubī* which is much slangier and more vulgar than the former, but not quite so vulgar as the latter (Moore et al. 2010).

This expletive, which has been part of youth discourse since the 1990s, is used to express excitement and approval. It can be seen as a somewhat crude way to say, “Awesome!” and it is widely used, for example at sporting events when one side sees its team make a winning move. The prominence of *níubī* as a youth culture term resulted in Eveline Chao using it as the primary title of her 2009 book, *Níubī! The Real Chinese You Were Never Taught in School*, the subtitle designating a category within which *níubī* can certainly be counted.

Those reluctant to use the term in light of its vulgarity, may simply say *níu* to the same general, slangy effect. Females, for example, are much less likely than males to utter the full expression. On the Internet there are also ways to avoid writing 牛屄, again, given the crudeness of its second element. For example, the letter B may be substituted (牛 B) or, the commonly used letter X (which often stands in for obscene characters in Chinese) might also be used: 牛 X.

More recently some new slang terms have emerged and taken China's younger generation by storm. The first of these is *gāofùshuài* (高富帅) a word descriptive of the perfect young boyfriend: tall, rich and handsome. Of course these qualities don't really capture everything that every young woman looks for in a boyfriend or potential husband, but the expression *gāofùshuài* implies an image of young, male perfection. In a way it is comparable to the English phrase "tall, dark and handsome" that was popularly applied to ideal romantic partners in the English-speaking world in the 1950s.

Gāofùshuài is one of the most widely known current youth slang terms and has triggered the creation of a female counterpart, *báifùměi* (白富美), meaning light-complexioned, rich and beautiful. The rather sudden emergence of these twin terms is an example of slang, particularly the slang of adolescents and young adults, expressing an attitude that characterizes a generation and distinguishes the young from their elders. The terms *gāofùshuài* and *báifùměi* came along at a point when Chinese, particularly young Chinese, were feeling the positive effects of their impressively booming economy and when China itself had just confidently introduced itself to the twenty-first century world via the 2008 Olympics. These terms may well be linked to an attitude of youthful optimism – an attitude, to be sure, much more characteristic of educated urban youth than of young peasants or migrant workers. It is also connected to the freedom with

which young people now pursue romantic relationships, a freedom that has evolved only gradually since the beginning of the reform era.

By 2012, *gāofùshuài* had produced another spinoff term: *diǎosī* (屌丝). *Diǎosī* is a somewhat vulgar expression whose literal meaning is (male) pubic hair. Despite its crudeness, *diǎosī* took off dramatically in 2012 as a youth slang expression meaning “loser” or “slacker.” Originally it was applied as a derogatory term to people who were regarded as having no prospects in life, perhaps by virtue of their laziness or lack of ability. The prototypical *diǎosī* was a young man who had no job (or no decent job), who had few prospects of finding a decent job, and who wasted time playing video games rather than trying to improve his circumstances. Eventually young urbanites began to apply the term ironically to themselves when they perceived their situation as less than ideal. It became a kind of fad for young college graduates to call themselves *diǎosī* when they couldn’t get a job or their career prospects seemed otherwise less than promising. In 2012, just as the Chinese economy was slowing down and showing signs indicative of long-term trouble, posing as a *diǎosī* became all the rage among disappointed or frustrated young urbanites.

Another trend supported by the Internet is anonymous messages that direct criticism at the government, or, in some cases, business enterprises that act irresponsibly. The government itself has provided fodder for the creation of slang expressions as, for example in its use of the phrase *héxié shèhuì* (和谐社会), meaning “harmonious society.” The efforts of the authorities to ensure a “harmonious society,” have at times been so heavy-handed that Internet users began to use *héxié* (harmonious) as a verb meaning, essentially, “to suppress.” This is a bit of *lǐyǔ* in the form of satirical wordplay that grew quickly popular on the Internet until *héxié* itself was “harmonized” or suppressed by the powers who control the Great Firewall of China. Websites

that used *héxié* to mock government policy found themselves blocked. So, a new slang term emerged on the Internet: *héxiè* (河蟹) or “river crab” (Clark 2012). This phrase is almost identical in pronunciation to “harmonious” differing only slightly in tone. *Héxiè* or “river crab” is now one of the more popular Internet slang expressions. To support the idea of the river crab as an emblem expressing resentment against the government, a series of satirical images began to appear on Weibo including, for example, a depiction of China’s national flag with five crab images replacing the five stars in the upper left hand corner.

Added to the satirical rhetoric of *héxiè* is that of *sāngè dàibiǎo* (三个代表) or “the three represents.” The three represents is a program promoted by the former president of China, Jiang Zemin starting in 2002. In putting forward the *sāngè dàibiǎo* slogan, Jiang intended to encourage the party to represent the forces promoting advanced economic production, cultural development and reliance on the support of the majority of the people. However, in the hands of Internet rebels, *sāngè dàibiǎo* became *sāngè biǎo* (三个表) or “three wristwatches.” Again, pictorial images of three wristwatches soon began to supplement the written phrase, and before long, Internet artists came up with combined images, e.g., a river crab (*héxiè*) wearing three watches (*sāngè biǎo*).

An equally popular Internet phrase with attendant imagery is *cǎo ní mǎ* (草泥马) meaning “grass, mud, horse.” This seemingly meaningless combination is actually a near homonym of the abusively obscene phrase discussed above, *cào nǐ mā* (操你妈) meaning “fuck your mother.” *Cǎo ní mǎ* has been widely used to mock government authorities in a way that is difficult to censor since “grass mud horse” has no overt political meaning and includes no forbidden obscenities – it merely suggests them. Once again, verbal play has been supplemented by visual imagery as llamas with fuzzy coats or stuffed animals resembling llamas

have appeared on the Internet as representatives of the “grass mud horse.” The phrases *héxiè*, *sāngè biǎo*, and *cǎo ní mǎ* are examples of slang being put to pointedly political use in a way that was not possible before the emergence of the Internet in China. Though their political significance makes them different in function from other slang terms, their liveliness, their humor and their use of old words for new purposes are all classic features of *lǐyǔ*.

NICKNAMES

Nicknames can be seen as correlates of slang in that they reflect many of the same features typical of slang and they serve some of the same functions. Like slang, nicknames (Mandarin: *wàihào* 外号) are used in informal contexts wherein egalitarian relationships predominate. They are pointedly informal, they often rely on wordplay and/or humor for their non-serious effects, and their use sometimes defines social boundaries, i.e., distinguishing those who may from those who may not use a particular name. As with English speakers, Chinese who use nicknames are often those who are marginalized or relatively powerless, e.g., young people and members of criminal gangs (Moore 1993). If as Eble argues, one of the primary functions of slang is to promote sociability, then it is noteworthy that the same thing can be said of *wàihào*. Slang appears to be a universal feature of languages everywhere. It may well be that nicknames are similarly widespread and, if so, their existence, like that of slang, bespeaks a need for people to have access to a register or form of discourse that can set aside or overcome the barriers inherent in formality and status differences.

CONCLUSION

Lǐyǔ is that a register that was once disparaged as the crude and lively talk of uneducated provincials. But the Internet and the cell phone have engendered a lively new style of communication, particularly favored by urban youth that is informal and egalitarian. This is a

new kind of *lǚyǔ* one linked to the very same young people who are destined to be China's leaders tomorrow. Given this, China's slang may be said to have evolved to the point where it is now a bifurcated entity with one foot in traditional provincial speech and the other in the social media that are reshaping the world. Where future modes of communication and future generations will take *lǚyǔ*, of course, remains to be seen.

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ⁱ In this chapter, pinyin is used to Romanize Mandarin words and the Yale system is used for Cantonese.