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Shuangguan: Linguistic and cultural aspects of the Chinese art of punning

Abstract: With only 405 distinct syllables, Mandarin Chinese is particularly rich in homophones. Not surprisingly, this peculiarity of the language is exploited in wordplay, which is encountered in all manner of communicative settings, including poetry and prose, cultural symbols, jokes, advertisements and even public service posters and telegram messages. Interestingly, while speakers of English would use the term ‘pun’ to identify most instances of ambiguity-based wordplay, the speakers of Chinese take a much narrower view of what constitutes *shuangguan*, the term which is typically treated as the equivalent of the English word ‘pun.’ This article examines both more and less prototypical *shuangguan*, encountered in contexts representative of both high and low culture. It identifies three qualities of the Chinese language which make it particularly well suited for punning wordplay as well as three cultural factors underlying both the partiality Chinese speakers have for the ambiguity-based language play and the ways in which this partiality manifests itself.

Key words: puns, *shuangguan*, ambiguity, homophony, high context culture, face, social harmony

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1. Introduction

In the Chinese Art section of the British Museum, there is a scroll which must have puzzled many a visitor. Depicting a magpie and six persimmons it is entitled *The Gentleman Scholar*. To make sense of this seemingly absurd title one needs to understand that the two syllables making up the Chinese word for ‘elegant gentleman,’ that is, *yǎshì* (雅仕), sound almost the same as the combination of the words for ‘magpie,’ *yā* (鸦), and the ‘persimmon,’ *shì* (柿). The picture might seem to be a glorified rebus, yet lurking behind the two syllables there is another, hidden meaning, which makes the scroll a political allegory. The artist, a calligrapher Huang Miaozi painted it in 1994 at the time when Deng Xiaoping’s reforms were transforming the Chinese society. The major dilemma Chinese intellectuals were facing at that time was whether to continue their poorly paid scholarly pursuits or to try their hands at becoming businessmen. In case someone should miss the satirical message, the text accompanying the picture, given in (1), spells it out:

- (1) The greedy *bird* gazes at the *persimmons*
with the appetite of *intellectuals* yearning
to go into business.

Well, if you are really interested in money,
then go for it like a yuppie,
instead of dithering like a *scholar*.
Be a real man!

(italics added)

Huang Miaozi’s painting represents the age-long tradition of exploiting ambiguity-based wordplay in order to convey meanings in an indirect way, a tradition which manifests itself in a widespread use of a stylistic device referred to in Chinese as *shuangguan*, usually rendered in English as a pun. The aim of this paper is to offer a few observations on what might be described as the Chinese way of punning. It starts with a brief characterization of Chinese *shuangguan* contrasting them with English puns. It notes the paucity of *shuangguan*-related scholarly work written in English. It provides examples of more and less prototypical *shuangguan*, found in contexts representative both of Chinese high and low culture. Finally, it highlights the qualities of the Chinese language which make the profusion of punning wordplay inevitable and the cultural factors underlying both the penchant for the ambiguity-based language play and the ways in which this penchant gets expressed.

2. *Shuangguan* and puns

The Chinese word *shuāngguān* (双关) has been in use at least since the times of the Song Dynasty (960–1279). According to MA GUOQIANG (1998: 40, quoted in AI LIN 2007: 2), the first mention of this term can be found in Fan Zhongyan's *Preface to "Fu Lin Heng Jian,"* which includes the remark that "those which refer to two things simultaneously are called *shuangguan*."

The word *shuangguan* is usually regarded as equivalent to the English word 'pun.' However, as argued by AI LIN (2007), the two terms cannot be treated as indicating exactly the same trope since they are built around different prototypes. This is reflected in dictionary definitions of the two words. According to *The Oxford English Dictionary* (BURCHFIELD 1989), puns are a kind of wordplay involving "the use of a word in such a way as to suggest two or more meanings or different associations, or the use of two or more words of the same or nearly the same sound with different meanings, so as to produce a humorous effect." As for *shuangguan*, *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (LING 2002) defines them as "the use of a word in such a way as to capture one meaning on the surface while hiding another."

In other words, both puns and *shuangguan* involve using a linguistic expression in such a way that it makes available more than one meaning. The two are different in three major respects: (i) the number of appearances the key expression makes, (ii) the status of the meanings it yields, and (iii) the effect they are supposed to evoke. Let us briefly examine each of these differentiating features.

2.1. One or more pivotal fragment?

A prototypical pun can be vertical (paradigmatic) or horizontal (syntagmatic). In the former, a single use of the pivotal fragment gives access to more than one meaning. In the latter, the key fragment is repeated, on each occasion in a different sense. Thus in the vertical pun given in (2), the key word *lie* oscillates between two distinct meanings of 'untruth' and a 'position of a ball,' and in the horizontal pun given in (3), the word *hang* on its first occurrence is part of a phrase *hang together*, which means 'to be united', and on the second it means 'to be punished by hanging.'

- (2) Being in politics is just like playing golf: you are trapped in one bad **lie** after another.
- (3) We must, indeed, all **hang** together or, most assuredly, we shall all **hang** separately. (Benjamin Franklin)

In contrast, a prototypical Chinese *shuangguan* is signaled only by a single use of an expression capable of activating two different meanings. Thus, the slogan promoting the ‘one child’ policy, given in (4), is not a *shuangguan*, unlike the title of a book on economics, given in (5a), which is. In example (4) the word *sheng* (生) is repeated, on its first two appearances in the sense of ‘birth’ and on the third one as part of a word meaning ‘lifetime.’ In (5a) the key word *qian* ‘money’ evokes another homophonous (yet expressed with a different character) word meaning ‘forward’ (前), forming part of a Mao-era slogan, given in (5b).

- (4) 少 生 伏 生 幸福 一生
 Shǎo_A **shēng**_N fú_V **shēng**_N xìngfú_N yīshēng_N
 few_A birth_N reduce birth_N happiness one life
 ‘Fewer births, reduced births, happiness for a lifetime’

- (5) (a) 向 钱 看
 xiàng_{PREP} **qián**(钱)_N kàn_V
 towards money look
 Overt message: ‘Look to the money’

- (b) 向 前 看
 xiàng_{PREP} **qián**(前)_N kàn_V
 towards forward look
 Covert message: ‘Look forward to the future’

2.2. The status of multiple meanings in pun and *shuangguan*

Another defining feature of a *shuangguan* is that it is a vehicle for conveying oblique messages. In a prototypical *shuangguan*, we are dealing with two layers of meaning: the overt one and the covert one. Sometimes the overt meaning is spurious and the covert meaning is the intended one. Sometimes both are equally valid. Whatever their ‘informative’ weight, the essence of a *shuangguan* is using one word as a pointer to another meaning that has to be uncovered. As could be expected, poetry provides a perfect setting for intimating meanings in this manner, but *shuangguan* waiting to be unpacked may be encountered in texts fashioned for totally mundane purposes. Consider the tagline in (6a), featured on a billboard promoting tourism in the city of Kunshan. The way it is phrased, it openly proclaims it to be the city of opera, specifically, the Kunqu opera, a theatre art Kunshan is famous for. This meaning is reinforced by the accompanying picture of an actor from the Kunqu opera. The reference to the operatic traditions is made in the key

fragment of the slogan, *yǒuxì* (有戏), literally ‘having a play (戏剧 *xìjù*)’ or ‘having a game (游戏 *yóuxì*).’ Thus on its overt reading the slogan highlights the cultural heritage of the place. However, the pivotal fragment happens to be homonymous (except for the difference in tones) with the phrase *yǒuxī* (有希), meaning ‘having hope.’ Thus, while openly boasting about Kunshan’s venerated cultural heritage, the slogan also expresses the hope that the city has a vibrant future ahead of it. This second meaning is only hinted at. After all, the word for hope *xī* (希) would be expressed with a different character.

- (6) (a) 昆山， 一 个 有 戏 的 地方。
 Kūnshān_N, yī_{NUM} ge_{CLASS} yǒu_V xì(戏)_N de_{PART} dìfang_N
 Kunshan one [classifier] have opera [attributive] place
 Overt message: ‘Kunshan, the city of opera’
- (b) 昆山， 一 个 有 希 的 地方。
 Kūnshān_N, yī_{NUM} ge_{CLASS} yǒu_V xī(希)_N de_{PART} dìfang_N
 Kunshan one [classifier] have hope [attributive] place
 Covert message: ‘Kunshan, the city of hope’

Only some puns used in English exhibit a similar configuration of meanings. For instance, formulations involving *double entendre*, such as (7), convey an obvious and a less obvious meaning. Unlike in *shuangguan*, the covert meanings of the utterances of this sort tend to be limited to trivial matters, such as sexual innuendos. Example (7), an unofficial city promotional slogan for the American city of Atlanta, portrays the city as ‘buzzing with activity’ but it also makes a rather obvious reference to being sexually aroused.

(7) Atlantic City – Always **Turned On**.

Another type of pun, where a word is used as a pointer to another identically or similar-sounding word, can be seen in (8) and (9). To perceive these as puns one has to be familiar respectively with the homophonous expression *a stake in the market* and the imperfectly homophonous question *May I have the next dance please*, typically uttered by a man inviting a woman to dance.

- (8) A **Steak** In The Market. (headline of an article about a merger of two meat companies)
- (9) May I have the next **glance**, please? (a woman to a husband gazing at other women at a party)

Linguists may debate which of the two meanings in vertical puns is accessed first but there is no doubt that both are openly brought to the attention of the addressee. Even in the so-called single retention puns, both the fully valid meaning and the extraneous meaning are in plain view. The purpose of the newspaper headline in (10) is to inform the readers that the high cost of an iceberg towing project discouraged prospective investors, but the inadmissible literal meaning of *chill* is not only activated but lingers on, which is what in fact creates the pun.

- (10) [A] trial tow of a 6.5 million-ton iceberg would cost about \$10 million – a sum that **chilled** investors. (*The Time* July 31, 2011)

2.3. The expected communicative effect

The typical effect a pun is expected to evoke is humour. For speakers of English, puns are first and foremost a humorous kind of wordplay. This belief is not shaken by the fact that not all puns are funny. For instance, of the English examples quoted in this paper only (7) and (9) are likely to be judged as amusing. Nevertheless, endless jokes or comedy routines owe their effect to exploring puns which provoke laughter (or, to be more exact, guffaws). In Chinese too, many examples can be found of what we would consider pun-based jokes and pun-based comic lines. A comedian may announce that after he had lost his job he became a writer (*zuòjiā* 作家). Why? Because now he spends his days sitting at home (*zuòjiā* 坐家) doing nothing. Ordinary people may amuse themselves inventing noble sounding names, which evoke ideas which are anything but noble. For instance, Dù Zǐténg (杜子腾), meaning ‘Du, a son ascending,’ sounds very ennobling except it is homophonous with *Dùzi téng* (肚子疼), that is, ‘stomach ache.’ Nonetheless, such instances of frivolous wordplay are not regarded as the most representative examples of the exalted rhetorical figure, which is *shuangguan*. As we could see in Section 2, humour is not even part of their dictionary definition.

As established by ROSCH (1973, 1979), the prototypes around which we categorize concepts shade off first to less prototypical cases, then to cases which are totally peripheral. The concept of *shuangguan* is construed in much the same way. Some examples of ambiguity-based wordplay which I will examine in what follows will meet all the criteria for *shuangguan*-hood. Some will represent small, some big departures from the mental model.

3. *Shuangguan*-related research

Just as puns have generated an impressive number of publications written in English (CULLER 1988; REDFERN 1984; DELABASTITA 1997, 2010; SOLSKA 2012a, 2012b, 2012c, 2017; SOLSKA and ROJCZYK 2015), much has been written on *shuangguan* in their country of origin. Outside of China, however, *shuangguan* remain under-researched, if not downright ignored, despite the fact that the volume of scholarly literature written in English on practically every aspect of the Chinese language(s) and culture is vast and growing. The Internet is rife with publications produced in English by Chinese authors, but most of these are very poorly written by undergraduate and graduate students studying for a specific degree and are impossible to accept as representing serious scholarship. To date only a handful of studies which have been published on *shuangguan* in English are worth mentioning. Most of them have attempted to provide a contrastive analysis of English puns and Chinese *shuangguan*. Some have focused on specific features of the two, and the interpretation mechanism(s) involved in working out their meanings (LI 2000; LIN 2007; AI and AI 2010; SHAO *et al.* 2012). Some have explored the way punning wordplay is exploited in English and Chinese advertisements (BIN 2004) or examined the strategies typically adopted when translating puns into Chinese (WU and PAN 2012). The present article, documenting the peculiarity of the Chinese way of punning, barely scratches the surface of issues that would merit the attention of both language and culture scholars.

4. *Shuangguan* in Chinese high culture

Unlike their much maligned English cousins, *shuangguan* are regarded as a lofty rhetorical figure and the ability to use them skillfully is seen as evidence of a person's sophistication, refinement and wit. Not surprisingly, *shuangguan* in their most prototypical form abound in Chinese poetry, a medium that can be regarded as the ultimate embodiment of high culture. The often quoted example illustrating their use is the "Bamboo song," given in (11). This Tang dynasty poem, written in a folk-song form, exhibits several features highly valued by the Chinese society: the economy of expression, the preference for indirectness, awareness of the rich semantic potential of the spoken and written form of the language. Seemingly describing the weather, as shown in (11a), it is typically interpreted as indirectly expressing the meaning captured in (11b), that is, mixed feelings of a maiden in love. What makes it possible for this covert meaning to emerge is the skillful use

of two key words: *wúqíng* ‘not sunny’ (无晴) and *yǒuqíng* ‘sunny’ (有晴). The author, Liu Yuxi, chose them because they are homophonous with the expressions for ‘not in love’ (无情) and ‘in love’ (有情), in which *qing* is expressed with a different character. This deeper layer of meaning may remain uncovered if the addressee is not sufficiently discerning.

(11) 东 边 日 出 西 边 雨,
 Dōng_N bian_N rì_N chū_V xī_N bian_N yǔ_N
 east side sun appear west side rain
 ‘The sun is rising in the East, it’s raining in the West.’

(a) 道 是 无 晴 却 有 晴。
 Dào_V shì_V wú_V qíng(晴)_A què yǒu_V qíng(晴)_A
 say be lack clear but have clear
 Overt message: ‘I say it’s **not fine** but it is **fine**.’

(b) 道 是 无 情 却 有 情。
 Dào_V shì_V wú_V qíng(情)_N què yǒu_V qíng(情)_N
 say be lack affection but have affection
 Covert message: ‘I say I’m **not in love** but I am **in love**.’

One does not need to compose a poem to demonstrate sophistication and refinement. These may also be found in a text as ordinary as a telegram message. The one in (12), consisting of a single word/character *yǔn* (允), is an ingenious *shuangguan*. As reported by AI LIN (2007: 3), it was sent by a woman whose given name (*Yǔnhe*) incorporated the character. The point of the telegram was to inform the addressee that he finally had her father’s permission (*yǔn*) to marry her sister, the woman he had been in love with for a long time. The single character thus doubled up as the text of the message and the name of its sender. Yunhe’s decision to phrase the message in this way indicated not only her own commendable verbal skills but her conviction that the addressee was an intelligent man of high learning, capable of decoding the cryptic message and worthy of marrying her equally sophisticated sister.

(12) *Yǔn* 允 (text of a Chinese telegram, quoted in AI 2007: 3)
 (part of the sender’s given name *Yǔnhe*/‘permit’)

Not all *shuangguan* associated with the Chinese high culture are as brilliantly subtle as those in (11) and (12). The ones permeating the classic 18th-century novel *The Dream of the Red Chamber* are sometimes rather

crude. Many of the characters bear obviously ambiguous names encapsulating their personality traits, depicting their mental state, and giving implications to the end of the stories. Monickers such as ‘Fake Precious Jade’ (*Jiǎ Bǎoyù* 贾宝玉) and ‘Real Precious Jade’ (*Zhēn Bǎoyù* 甄宝玉) leave the reader in no doubt as to which protagonist is supposed to be positive and which less so.

5. *Shuangguan* in the Chinese low culture

5.1. *Shuangguan* in truncated witticisms *xiehouyu*

The penchant for conveying meanings indirectly via *shuangguan*-type of wordplay can also be observed in special two-part allegorical sayings, called *xiēhòuyǔ*, literally ‘sayings with the latter-part suspended.’ Sometimes described as folk similes or truncated witticisms, these are unique to the Chinese culture. They consist of two parts, the first of which describes some situation and is always stated. The second part, which carries the relevant message, typically remains unsaid. *Xiehouyu* function somewhat like the English saying *Speak of the devil*, which is produced when a person that has been talked about makes a sudden and unexpected appearance. The second part of the saying (*and he will appear*) is hardly ever uttered. In much the same way a Chinese speaker may fall on the *xiehouyu* given as example (13) to indicate that he is impressed with somebody’s knowledge. He will however only utter the first part of witticism, that is, (*Like*) *reading a book at the bottom of a well*. The second, omitted part sums up the quality of the knowledge: it is ‘not shallow.’

- (13) 井 底 看 书: [学 问 不 浅]。
jǐng_N dǐ_N kàn_V shū_N xuéwèn_N bù_{ADV} qiǎn_A.
 well bottom look at book knowledge not shallow
 ‘(Like) reading a book at the bottom of a well: [(Having) in-depth knowledge]’

The truncated witticism in (13) involves a metaphor, as its key fragment oscillates between the literal sense, applicable to wells, and a figurative sense, applicable to people’s knowledge. The witticism in (14), typically treated as a comment on somebody’s unruly behavior, incorporates a *shuangguan*. Again, what is uttered is its first, ostensibly irrelevant part (*Like*) *A monk holding up an umbrella*. Its second, unuttered part *with neither hair, nor sky*, is just as obscure. It makes a reference to the fact that Buddhist monks have shaved heads and that umbrellas block out the view of the sky. However, underneath this overt message there is another, in which the word for ‘hair’

is replaced with a homophonous word for ‘law,’ and the word for ‘sky’ is reinterpreted as the heavenly order of things. Thus the actual meaning of the witticism is ‘with no (respect for) law and order,’ an apt description of a person who refuses to obey authority.

(14) 和尚打伞: [无发无天]。

和尚 打 伞:

Héshàng_N dǎ_V sǎn_N

Monk open umbrella

‘(Like a) monk holding up an umbrella’

(a) wú_V fǎ(发)_N wú_V tiān_N

lack hair lack sky

Overt message: ‘With neither hair, nor sky’

(b) wú_V fǎ(法)_N wú_V tiān_N

lack law lack heaven

Covert message: ‘With no (respect for) law and order’

5.2. *Shuangguan* for auspiciousness

In his book about the complex linguistic, literary and political heritage of China, PERRY LINK (2013: 100) mentions a Chinese-born Princeton professor James Wei, reminiscing about his student days when his mother would give him packed lunch containing onions (*yángcōng* 洋葱) – in the hope that he would be smart (*cōngmíng* 聪明), garlic (*dàsuàn* 大蒜) – to boost his mathematical skills (*suànshù* 算数), and chicken hearts (*jīxīn* 鸡心) – to help him enjoy good memory (*jìxìng* 记性).

The way Professor Wei’s mother chose to ensure his scholarly success reflects the belief held by many Chinese people in what might be perceived as a magical connection between reality and the words which happen to sound the same as the words that are used to describe it. This belief underlies the conviction that number 4 (*sì*) is unlucky because it sounds similar to the word for ‘death’ (*sǐ*), while number 8 (pronounced *bā* in Mandarin Chinese) may bring prosperity, wealth and success because it sounds similar (in some Chinese dialects identical) to the word for ‘prosperity’ (*fā*). It is this belief that makes certain objects inappropriate as gifts and certain actions best avoided. For instance, clocks and watches do not make good presents since the phrase ‘to offer a clock’ (*sòng zhōng* 送钟) sounds exactly like *sòng zhōng* (送终), that is, ‘attend upon a dead person’. Shopkeepers may opt not to read books (*shū* 书) at work for fear that their business might suffer losses

(shū 輸). A Westerner visiting a Chinese restaurant may not realize that the colourful fish swimming in a fish tank or pictures of bats on the walls are not just for decoration but are supposed to guarantee the establishment's success. After all, the word for 'fish' (yú 鱼) sounds exactly like the word for 'surplus' (余) and the word for 'bat' (fú 蝠) like the word for 'good fortune' (fú 福).

5.3. *Shuangguan* for public safety

In the Western world public notices tend to be written in a dull, succinct way, and are the last place anyone would look for any kind of wordplay. Not so in China. Examples (15) and (16) both come from a public service poster (placed online by PASDEN 2013), instructing the public to replace blown-up fuses instead of trying to repair them. The poster carries two messages. The first one, given in (15), in which the key fragment is repeated, would not count as a *shuangguan* yet it clearly puns on the double meaning of the monosyllabic word *huàn*: on its first appearance it functions as a verb, meaning 'to replace,' and on its second one as a noun, meaning 'hazard' (in the 'safety hazard' sense). The second message, given in (16a), appears at the end of a longer stretch of text and says *Prevent danger before getting "burnt"!* The line puns on a classical phrase which ends with a different character yet one that sounds exactly like the one in quotation marks. The phrase in question is glossed in (16b) and functions much like the English sayings *Prevention is better than cure* or *Nip something in the bud*. Given the context, both the overt and the covert readings are equally apposite. Paradoxically, the covert message conveyed by this fragment is anything but hidden. The quotation marks encircling the key character capture the reader's attention and alert him to the *shuangguan*, which might otherwise be missed.

- (15) 你 是 要 换 还是 要 患?
 Nǐ_{PRO} shì_V yào_V huàn_V hái_{CONJ} yào_V huàn_N?
 you be want replace, or want hazard
 'Do you want to **replace** (it), or do you want a (safety) **hazard**?'

- (16) (a) 防 患 于 未 “燃”!
 Fáng_V huàn_N yú_{PREP} wèi_{ADV} rán(燃)_N
 prevent danger at not yet burn
 Overt message: Prevent danger before getting burnt!

- (b) 防 患 于 未然
 Fáng_V huàn_N yú_{PREP} wèirán(然)_{ADV}
 prevent danger at in advance
 Covert message: 'Prevent danger before it happens'!

6. Linguistic reasons for the ubiquity of *shuangguan*

The widespread use of *shuangguan* raises the question about the reasons for the partiality the speakers of Chinese seem to have for this figure of speech. One answer is that they merely exploit the potential of their language, whose phonological and morpho-syntactic features make punning inevitable. Particularly relevant are three features of Chinese: (i) a high rate of syllable homophony, (ii) monosyllabicity and (iii) the fluidity of lexical categories.

First of all, with only 405 distinct syllables, Mandarin Chinese is particularly rich in homophones. It is a tonal language, which makes the number of distinct tonemes much higher, but even at about 1200 (not all syllables appear in all four tones) that number is still not very high. Moreover, as could be observed in the examples quoted in this article, in the Chinese art of punning tones tend to be ignored.

Second, nearly all Chinese syllables express a morpheme, that is, carry a specific, lexical meaning. In fact, most syllables express more than one morpheme, the average being 5.4 morphemes per syllable (DUANMU 2000). Now, different morphemes/meanings tend to be expressed with distinct characters. Thus by carefully choosing the characters one can compose a text whose fragments may evoke other meanings associated with identically pronounced other characters. The task is made easier by the fact that practically all morphemes can function as standalone words and as components of complex lexemes. Only 23 syllables have no homophonic characters. Quite a few can activate a dizzying array of meanings, expressed with different characters: the syllable *ji* is expressed with more than 90 characters, the syllable *yi* with over 100.

Third, in Chinese words are not marked for parts of speech and are capable of assuming different syntactic roles. This multiplies the number of roles individual monosyllabic and polysyllabic words can assume. Depending on the context of its use the same word may function as a verb, noun, adjective or adverb. We saw this in “Bamboo song,” where the word *qing* was overtly used as an adjective (meaning ‘fine, clear’), yet on its covert meaning it functioned as a noun (indicating ‘feeling, affection’).

7. Cultural reasons for *shuangguan* use

It would be an oversimplification to say that the Chinese pun so much simply because they can. What is peculiar about the trope they refer to as *shuangguan* is that it is prototypically used as a sophisticated vehicle for

conveying meanings in an indirect way. This practice seems to be linked to three facts characterizing the Chinese society: (i) that it is a high-context culture, (ii) that one of its core values is social harmony, and (iii) that when interacting with each other its members are anxious to preserve both their own and their interlocutor's face.

The division into low-context and high-context cultures was made by Edward HALL in his influential book (1979) *Beyond Culture*. Members of low-context cultures tend to rely on explicit and direct verbal communication, members of high-context cultures tend to communicate in ways that are indirect and heavily dependent on the context. China belongs with the latter. The understated nuances of Chinese poems, the covert meanings lost on the uninitiated, important meanings *hinted* at in the *unspoken* fragments of proverbs, these can and usually are overlooked by outsiders unfamiliar with the Chinese ways of expressing meanings. An anecdote is often quoted about Chairman Mao Zedong informing President Richard Nixon during his visit to China in 1972 that he (i.e. Mao) is like a Buddhist monk holding an umbrella. The intended meaning of this seemingly innocuous statement (that Mao has no respect for laws) was lost on the American president unaware of the actual hidden meaning of the *xiehouyou*.

The notion of social harmony was elevated to the status of China's official political philosophy by Hu Jintao, the leader of the Chinese Communist Party in the years 2002–2012 (the way *shuangguan* were used to poke fun at Hu's decision merits a separate essay). Of course, the concept itself is not new: it dates back to ancient China, to the times of Confucius, the cornerstone of whose social philosophy was that each member of the society should strive for the common good, performing whatever his or her social role was as dutifully as possible and doing his or her best to neutralize forces that might threaten its unity. This philosophy put a premium on preventing conflict and avoiding confrontation or direct criticism. Resorting to *shuangguan* is definitely one way of preserving thus understood social harmony: Huang Miaozi's *Gentleman Scholar* can be perceived as being critical of the greediness driving the intellectuals to give up their ideals and go into business. However, a picture of a bird gazing at some fruits is a far-cry from head-on criticism. Similarly, the title of Wang Hong Wei's book on economics, which makes a veiled reference to a political slogan of a bygone era, given in (5b), might be construed as a way of distancing oneself from old attitudes. Conversely, as noted by HE (2016: 530), it might be seen as a way of upholding tradition in that in the new China looking towards money amounts to looking towards the future.

Related to the concept of social harmony is the concept of face (KORNACKI 2003). One of the key concepts in Chinese culture, it affects social interactions in the twin guises of *mianzi* (面子) and *lian* (脸). The former indicates “the social position or value of a person as recognized by others in the same society” (CHENG 1986: 322), the latter “the minimum social respectability a person has in the society regardless of his actual social position, prestige, wealth or power” (CHENG 1986: 336).

Resorting to *shuangguan* can function as a way to preserve the speaker’s own face as well as the face of the addressee. The maiden of “The Bamboo Song,” in (11), does not speak of her feelings directly. Using *shuangguan* provides her with a face-saving way of broaching a topic no respectable woman would openly talk about. Similarly, by phrasing her telegram message in (12) as a cryptic *shuangguan* the sender manages to preserve both her own and the addressee’s face: this expedient spares them both the embarrassment of communicating about personal affairs in public. *Shuangguan* use can also function as a way of ‘giving’ face to the interlocutor. The sender of the telegram went out of her way to ‘give’ the recipient face, in other words, to show her appreciation of his education, cognitive skills and cultural refinement.

8. Concluding remarks

Since ancient times *shuangguan* have been an important component of the Chinese culture. A figure of speech held in high regard, they have been exploited in poetry and prose, in paintings and in cultural symbols, in riddles and popular sayings. This paper is a modest attempt to bring this practice to the attention of the Western reader, one made in the hope that it will peak the curiosity of linguists and culture scholars and will inspire them to conduct their own research into the Chinese art of punning.

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Streszczenie: W standardowym języku mandaryńskim występuje jedynie 405 różnych sylab, co sprawia, że język ten jest szczególnie bogaty w homofony. Ta jego cecha wykorzystywana jest często w grach słownych, na które natknąć się można w najrozmaitszych kontekstach komunikacyjnych, a więc w poezji i prozie, w symbolach kulturowych, a także w dowcipach słownych, sloganach reklamowych, a nawet na tablicach informacyjnych i w telegramach. Choć wszystkie przytoczone w artykule przykłady opartych na niejednoznaczności gier słownych można określić angielskim terminem *pun* („kalambur słowny”), Chińczyk użyłby wyrazu *shuangguan*, uważanego za odpowiednik tego angielskiego słowa, tylko w stosunku do niektórych z nich. Artykuł omawia zarówno bardziej, jak i mniej prototypowe *shuangguan*, występujące zarówno w tekstach związanych z kulturą wysoką, jak i niską. Określa trzy cechy języka chińskiego, które decydują o niezwykłym rozpowszechnieniu tego rodzaju gier słownych. Wymienia też trzy czynniki kulturowe leżące u podstaw upodobania Chińczyków do wyrażania znaczeń w taki właśnie sposób.

Słowa kluczowe: kalambury słowne, *shuangguan*, wieloznaczność językowa, homofonia, kultura wysokiego kontekstu, społeczna harmonia, twarz