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# Language play in and with Chinese: traditional genres and contemporary developments

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**Abstract:** Language play is playing with the rules of language for fun. This article is one of the first attempts at providing an overview of the traditional genres and current trends of language play in and with Chinese, a topic that has received relatively little attention in English. We explore the specific aspects of the Chinese language that are susceptible to play, and discuss a number of conventional formulas of Chinese language play. We also examine the affordances of new media and what we call *translanguaging language play* that involves mixing different named languages and scripts as well as mixing linguistic with other semiotic resources. The motivations and effects of language play are discussed, giving particular attention to the socio-political dimensions of language play. Throughout the discussion, we provide historical as well as contemporary examples to illustrate the ways in which Chinese language users play with language for specific purposes.

**Keywords:** Chinese characters; language play; translanguaging

Each lunar new year, the Chinese create greetings that manipulate the character-sound of the year's zodiac sign. For example, 2020 was the Year of the Rat, and Rat is the first of the 12 animals in the Chinese zodiac cycle. Rat in Chinese is 鼠, which is pronounced in standard Chinese as 'shu' and is homophonic with the word for *counting* or *number* 数. Phrases like “鼠”不尽的收获 (*shu bujin de shouhuo*, or 'countless achievements'), “鼠”不尽的钞票 (*shu bujin de chaopiao*, 'countless banknotes'), “鼠”不尽的快乐 (*shu bujin de kuaile*, 'countless joy'), “鼠”不尽的笑容 (*shu bujin de xiaorong*, 'countless smiling faces'), “鼠”不尽的幸福 (*shu bujin de xingfu*, 'countless happiness'), etc. appear all over the social media. 2021 is the Year of the Cow, or 牛 'niu' in Chinese, which sounds like the English 'new'. So, in addition to the various auspicious greetings that make use of the word for 'cow', Chinese-English bilinguals also blend the two languages to create phrases such as Happy *Niu* Year and often use a cow's icon or image to replace the actual word.

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These are examples of language play in and with Chinese, a topic that has received relatively little attention in English. This article provides an overview of the traditional genres and recent developments in Chinese language play. We begin with a definition of language play and discuss which aspects of the Chinese language are susceptible to play, and then discuss a number of traditional genres of Chinese language play. We then proceed to look at the affordances of new media and what we call *translanguaging language play* that involves mixing different named languages and scripts as well as mixing linguistic with other semiotic resources. This is followed by a discussion of the motivations and effects of language play, giving particular attention to the socio-political dimensions of language play. We conclude with a summary of the key points made in the article and directions for future research. Throughout the article, we provide historical as well as contemporary examples to illustrate the ways in which Chinese language users play with language for specific purposes.

## 1 Defining language play

A simple definition of language play would be playing with the rules of language for fun. The rules of language include those that govern the structures of sounds, words, and sentences of a specific language as well as those governing the use of the language in specific contexts, including spoken interaction, written text and signs that represent the language. Whilst language play is often referred to as the ludic function of language, it needs to be stressed that it is the language user who plays with the language, and therefore achieves the ludic function, not the language itself. So any discussion of language play needs to include discussions of the strategies which language users deploy when they play with the language, the motivations and purposes of their language play, and the consequences and effects of their language play on social interaction, on social relationships and on the language itself. These will be addressed in the following sections. Since it is the language user who plays with the language, one may also wish to investigate who the user is and whether different language users, as differentiated by gender, age, ethnicity, and dominant language, would play with language differently in different contexts. Due to space limitations these latter aspects will not be dealt with in the present paper.

Crystal (1998) argued that language play is part of the language instinct of human beings (Pinker 1994). Children acquire language chiefly through language play. Nursery rhymes, tongue twisters, riddles, etc. are good language teaching material, often containing manipulations of sound and word meaning that help to raise awareness in young children of the structures of language. Crystal even went

so far as to claim that when people avoid playing with language or have difficulties understanding language play, that is a sign of communicative breakdown, or even of language pathology.

In everyday social interaction, people spontaneously produce puns and jokes, or use euphemisms and metaphors. These may be considered instances of language play if they involve ‘bending and breaking the rules of the language’ (Crystal 1998: 1). There are more overtly purposeful language plays in the contexts of commercial advertising, literary and creative writing, and social protests, where the ingenuity and cleverness of language use is aimed at achieving specific effects. Language play simultaneously draws attention to the message itself and the way the message is presented, embodying humour and insight in forms that can elicit feelings of surprise.

## 2 What can be played with: the material and materiality of language play

Language play involves manipulating the phonetic or orthographic features of a specific language, or its norms of usage, in order to achieve unexpected effects that can catch the attention of the hearer or the reader. Spoken Chinese has one of the simplest and most restricted syllable structures amongst the world’s languages: most syllables are open syllables, with an onset – a single consonant, or consonant + glide, or zero onset – and a vowel which can be a monophthong, diphthong or (rarely but in some varieties of Chinese) triphthong. Syllables that do have codas are restricted to nasals /m/, /n/, /ŋ/, and, depending on the variety, the retroflex approximant /ɻ/ and voiceless stops /p/, /t/, /k/, or /ʔ/. Chinese is a tonal language. All varieties of spoken Chinese use tones to distinguish words; the tones are therefore lexical.

The number of tones in spoken Chinese varies from variety to variety, and depending on the classification criteria, can differ from three to nine or more. Most standard Chinese dictionaries list under 400 syllables. These are syllables that have corresponding written characters and they can be used as (monosyllabic) words or part of (di- or poly-syllabic) words. Most syllables have words in different tones; however, the number of possible syllables is still relatively small in proportion of the meaningful words that exist. Homophones are therefore bountiful in Chinese. For example, the Online Chinese Dictionary (<http://xh.5156edu.com/html2/109.html>) lists 249 characters for the syllable *li*, providing a rich source for language play. Indeed, in the vast majority of cases, language play in Chinese is based on the manipulation of homophonic sound-character correspondence, as the examples at the beginning of this paper show.

Classifying the many varieties of spoken Chinese has proved to be extremely contentious. Whilst linguists such as Norman (2003) and Sun et al. (2007) argue that there are literally hundreds of mutually unintelligible varieties of Chinese, traditional Chinese dialectology conventionally groups the spoken varieties into seven *fangyan* (literally, ‘regional speech’) groups. They are Mandarin, including Standard Chinese, Beijing dialect, Sichuan dialect, but also, for example, Dungan language spoken in Central Asia; Wu, including Shanhai dialect, Suzhou dialect, and Wenzhou dialect; Gan (Jiangxi); Xiang (Hunan); Hakka; Yue, better known in the English-speaking world as Cantonese, although Yue refers to a much large variety of dialects including Taishan dialect; and Min, sometimes further divided into Northern Min and Southern Min, including Fuzhou dialect, Hainan dialect, and Chaozhou (Teochew) dialect. Southern Min is better known in the English-speaking world as Hokkien, also called Taiwanese by those who speak it in Taiwan. Phonological and lexical differences between these *fangyan* groups are another major source for language play as people manipulate the pronunciation and lexical choice to achieve special effects. For example, the Cantonese phrase 唔知 ( $m^4$   $zi^1$ , ‘don’t know’) is often rendered as 母鸡 ( $m\check{u}j\bar{i}$ , ‘hen’ in Mandarin). In Taiwan, netizens often use character combinations ludically to mimic the way certain words are pronounced in Taiwanese, such as the use of 踹共 ( $tshu\grave{a}i$   $k\acute{o}ng$ ) and 慶記 for 銃子 (both pronounced as ‘ $tsh\grave{u}ng-tsi^2$ ’) to respectively mean “come out and talk” (出來講 ‘ $tshut-l\grave{a}i$   $k\acute{o}ng$ ) and “bullet”.

The Chinese writing system is roughly logosyllabic, i.e. a character generally represents a syllable in spoken Chinese. And as mentioned above, a character may be a word on its own or be part of a di- or poly-syllabic word. As there are numerous homophones in Chinese even with the tonal differentiation, manipulating the character-sound correspondence, as in the examples at the beginning of this paper, is a very common example of language play. Many Chinese characters are aggregates in which two or more parts are used to yield a composite meaning, or phonetic complexes where one part (the semantic radical) indicates the general meaning category of the character and the other part (the phonetic radical) the sound value. These can be manipulated for language play, for instance, by changing the human radical to the animal radical to create an insulting expression (more examples below). But a large number of Chinese characters are pictographs or ideographs, depicting objects or abstract notions they denote. These provide another major source for language play and are also connected to the visuality and materiality of Chinese writing. Here, visuality refers to the culturally contingent physical representation and appearance of the Chinese written characters and the viewing of them as a cultural experience; and materiality refers to the physical medium and effect of the properties of the medium on the writing and reading of the characters. The best known example of language play that manipulates the

visual representation and the material medium is the artist Xu Bing's work: <http://www.xubing.com/> (see Lee 2015). Whilst the traditional writing instruments of brush, ink and paper continue to be used in language play, new communication technologies, particularly digital social media, have provided new affordances for novel modes of linguistic creativity, and the Chinese speakers have certainly made good use of the Internet and other digital platforms to create language-based memes, sign and symbols (more below).

Apart from the structures and properties of the Chinese language, including its writing system, norms of language use can also be manipulated for play. Pragmatic principles of politeness and cooperation can be deliberately violated to achieve special communicative effects. This kind of language play is closely associated with cultural traditions and community-specific norms of interaction. And the meaning and significance of the language play depend on shared understandings of cultural values and community practices. The originality in such instances of language play lies in their manipulation of conventions and may be motivated by a variety of factors to serve different purposes.

### 3 Traditional genres of language play in Chinese

Language play has different genres. Creative writing usually contains a significant amount of language play, as do jokes, puns and other humorous entertainments. Some genres of language play such as tongue twisters exist in all languages. Others are unique to a specific language and culture. Chinese has a number of traditional genres of language play, which we discuss in this section.

#### 3.1 Couplets 对联 and spring couplets 春联

Sometimes called antithetical couplets, these comprise a pair of lines with the same number of characters, typically seven, with corresponding meanings. Originating in classical Chinese poetry with strict tonal and lexical category rules, antithetical couplets set up a symmetrical, counterpoint relation between two lines, giving rise to an aesthetic effect that accord with lyrical sensibilities in the Chinese language. Nowadays they are usually seen on door frames or indoor hanging scrolls as decorations. They are read top-to-bottom and right-to-left. The door frame ones are supposed to change for each Chinese New Year, or Spring Festival, and usually come with a horizontal scroll, typically of four characters. Competitions are held during Spring Festivals for the most inventive spring couplets.

Here is a traditional couplet:

	Bottom	Top	
Knowledge <i>xué</i>	學	書	Book <i>shū</i>
Sea <i>hǎi</i>	海	山	Mountain <i>shān</i>
have not <i>wú</i>	無	有	have <i>yǒu</i>
Limit <i>yá</i>	涯	路	way <i>ù</i>
Pain <i>kǔ</i>	苦	勤	Diligence <i>qín</i>
Make <i>zuò</i>	作	爲	Be <i>wéi</i>
Boat <i>zhōu</i>	舟	徑	Path <i>jìng</i>

The English translation would be: “The mountain of books has one way and hard work serves as the path. The sea of learning has no end and effort makes the boat”.

One of the most famous couplets exists at the Meng Jiang Nü Temple near the Mountain Sea Pass at the east end of the Great Wall of China. The temple was built before 960 AD in commemoration of Meng Jiang Nü, the lead figure in one of the four best known Chinese folktales. As the legend goes, Meng Jiang Nü’s husband was pressed into service by the imperial officials and sent as unpaid labour to build the Wall. Because she heard nothing from him after his departure, she set out to bring him winter clothes. By the time she reached the Wall, the husband had already died. Hearing the bad news, Meng Jiang Nü wept so bitterly that a part of the Wall collapsed, revealing his bones. On the door frame of the front hall carved the couplet:

浮 海  
 云 水  
 长 朝  
 长 朝  
 长 朝  
 长 朝  
 长 朝  
 长 朝  
 长 朝  
 消 落

The characters 朝 and 长 are repeated seven times each. And in Mandarin they each can be read with two different pronunciations and two different meanings. 朝 can be read as *cháo*, meaning ‘tide’ or *zhāo* meaning ‘morning’, and 长 can be read as *zhǎng*, meaning ‘grow’ or *cháng*, meaning ‘often’. There are many different readings of the couplet. One popular reading is:

*hǎi shuǐ cháo, zhāo zhāo cháo, zhāo cháo zhāo luò; fú yún zhǎng, cháng cháng zhǎng, cháng zhǎng cháng xiāo*

meaning: ‘sea tidings, every morning, morning in morning out; floating clouds expanding, often expanding, often expand and often disappear’.

Here is a modern day door couplet, a sarcastic but light-hearted piece of advertisement for massage and reflexology services (horizontal scroll). In English, the couplet says: “Clearly can get enough food with my looks; but still need to earn a living with my hands”.

按摩足疗  
ànmó zúliáo

偏 piān ‘one-sided/contrary’	明 míng ‘clearly/clearly’
偏 piān ‘one-sided/contrary’	明 míng ‘clearly/clearly’
要 yào ‘want’	可 kě ‘can’
依 yī ‘depend’	靠 kào ‘rely’
手 shǒu ‘hand’	脸 liǎn ‘face’
谋 móu ‘seek’	吃 liǎn ‘eat’
生 shēng ‘living’	饭 fàn ‘food’

### 3.2 Riddles, anagrams and word puzzles

Another traditional form of language play that is associated with the Spring Festival but even more with the Lantern Festival, the 15th day of the first month of the Chinese lunar calendar, i.e. the first full moon, is the *miyu* 谜语, broadly equivalent to riddles, anagrams and word puzzles in English. Chinese riddles typically make references to historical figures, literary classics, names of cities and other places in China, or idioms, and contain messages of wisdom and good fortune. They give children and others of all ages the opportunity to have fun while practicing language and problem-solving skills.

One example is 千里会千金 (qiānlǐ huì qiānjīn), ‘thousand *li* (Chinese distance measurement) meet thousand gold’. In the Chinese culture there is an expression that a good horse can run thousands of *li* per day; so 千里 ‘thousand *li*’ refers to 马 (mǎ) ‘horse’. 千金 ‘thousand gold’, in the meantime, is a term used to refer to girls or daughters in the family, and the Chinese character is 女 (nǚ) ‘girl, daughter, female’. The word 会 ‘meet’ suggests that the two characters - 马 (mǎ) ‘horse’ and 女 (nǚ) ‘girl, daughter’ should be put together. So the solution of the riddle is 妈 (mā) (mother), which combines the female radical 女 with the horse radical 马 which is used here as the phonetic radical indicating the vowel of the character. The riddle makes use of the sound, meaning and the visual representation of the language.

There is a type of Chinese riddle that focuses specifically on written characters, and there are called *zimi* 字谜, ‘character riddle’, in Chinese. Here are a couple of examples:

一阴一暗，一短一长，一昼一夜，一热一凉。

(One-bright one-dark, one-short one-long, one-day one-night, one-hot one-cold.)

The solution is the character 明 ‘bright’ which combines the 日 ‘sun’ and 月 ‘moon’. The riddle plays on the semantics and the visual representation of the characters, but not the sound.

他俩差点都当兵

(they-two-missing-a bit [almost, nearly] both-become-soldiers, i.e. the two of them almost became soldiers)

The character for ‘soldier’ is 兵; the solution to this riddle is thus 乒兵 ‘ping-pong’ because each of these two characters is formed by removing one little stroke from the soldier character.

Archer Taylor (1951) suggests that riddling is a universal art. In the Chinese culture, riddles have long been closely associated with secretive or subversive political, diplomatic and military acts, in addition to entertainment. There are ample historical documents of 字谜 ‘character riddles’ being used as enigmatic codes to transmit military and diplomatic messages, for organizing rebellion, and to voice discontent. We will return to this point later when we discuss motivations and effects of language play.

### 3.3 歇后语 Two-part enigmatic similes

A unique genre of Chinese language play is the two part enigmatic similes, or 歇后语, literally ‘talk after a rest’. The formula is to have a statement which is usually a simile or some kind of euphemistic expression, and then the target idiom that the speaker intends to utter. It is usually delivered as a wisecrack. For example,

牛角抹油——又尖(奸)又滑(猾)

The first part says ‘rubbing oil on an ox horn’, and after the pause, the intended idiom says ‘sharper/more cunning and more slippery /treacherous’ where the words for ‘sharp’ and ‘cunning’ (尖 and 奸, both pronounced as jiān), and ‘slippery’ and ‘treacherous’ (滑 and 猾, both huá) are homophones.

老太太靠墙喝稀粥—背壁无齿又下流/卑鄙无耻又下流

The first part says ‘an old woman leaning against the wall drinking thin congee’, and the idiom plays on three pairs of homophonic expressions: 背壁 ‘carrying the wall on the back’ and 卑鄙 ‘mean’ (bēibǐ)、无齿 ‘no teeth’ and 无耻 ‘shameless’ (wú chǐ), and 下流 ‘obscene’ (xiàliú).



### 3.4 三句半 Three and a half turns

Three and a half turns typically involves three seven syllable rhyming turns and a half turn with no more than three syllables. The half turn is something unexpected, humorous, and clever. For example,

十五明月挂天空，  
元宵吃完来两盅  
待会赏灯可不要，  
风/疯

Fifteenth day's bright moon hanging in the sky,  
After the rice balls, let's have some drinks,  
Going to see the lanterns in a minute, so we don't need  
Wind/drunkenness

The two words, 风 'wind' and 疯 'drunkenness' are homophones and pronounced as *fēng*.

Three and a half turns are often performed by four people, each taking one, or the half, turn.

## 4 New affordances and translanguaging language play

Whilst the traditional genres of language play continue to be a major part of Chinese language users' social life, global cultural flow and technology advances in the form of social media and digital communication platforms have provided new affordances for creative language use that goes beyond the traditional practices.

On 21st January, 2018, Language Log had a posting titled 'Using Chinese non-standard characters to talk cute' (<https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=36309>), which reports a new trend amongst young Chinese Internet users to exchange certain characters with other phonetically close characters in their digital communication, so that the words sound more "cute". It gives the following examples:

jiègè 介個	—	zhègè 這個 ("this")
pényǒu 盆友	—	pényǒu 朋友 ("friend")
nánpiào 男票	—	nán péngyǒu 男朋友 ("boyfriend")
xièxiè 蟹蟹	—	xièxiè 謝謝 ("thanks")
kāisēn 開森	—	kāixīn 開心 ("happy")
suijué/jiào 碎觉	—	shuìjiào 睡覺 ("sleep")

As the post explains, the characters in the first half of each pair are being used for their sound rather than the meaning. But the latent meanings of the substituted characters add another level of levity:

jiègè 介個 (“interpose piece”) - this  
 pényǒu 盆友 (“basin friend”) - friend  
 nánpiào 男票 (“male ticket”) - boyfriend  
 xièxiè 蟹蟹 (“crab crab”) - thank you  
 kāisēn 開森 (“open forest”) - happy  
 suìjué/jiào 碎覺 (“shattered awake/asleep”) - sleep

The cuteness of these expressions comes from the pronunciation which mimics how southerners, particularly people from Taiwan, speak Mandarin, which Putonghua speakers and northerners of the Chinese mainland in general stereotypically perceive as childlike therefore cute. But underlying this phenomenon is the fact that the Chinese writing system does not adequately represent the way Chinese people speak in actual social interaction. Unlike alphabetic languages, the Chinese logographic characters represent syllables but can be pronounced in many different ways, and with different tones, by speakers of different varieties of Chinese. Omission of sounds, especially the vowels of the Chinese syllables which happen naturally in spontaneous talk cannot easily be represented by the written characters. In the last decade or so, Chinese social media users have made good use of the facilities afforded by new media technologies and created an alternative writing that is closer to actual pronunciation. Here are a couple of examples:

- 你醬子包爹 (*nǐ zheyangzi bao die*) – 你这样子不好的耶!/你這樣子不好的耶!  
 (*nǐ zheyangzi buhao di ye*) - ‘It’s not nice for you to behave like this!’ (you jam bun daddy)
- 飄吃雄獅/匈式炒雞蛋 (*biaochi xiongshi chao jidan*) – 不要吃西红柿炒雞蛋  
 (*buyaochi xihongshi chao jidan*) - ‘don’t want to eat tomato stir fried with eggs’  
 (violently eat male lion fried/Hungarian-style egg)

Such social-media-mediated language play not only produces humorous effects, but also challenges the traditional linguistic ideologies regarding the Chinese writing system. We will return to this point in the next section.

A visible and significant effect of the global cultural flow on language play in Chinese is the translation of foreign brands. The Chinese have a long and strong tradition to name goods for sale and businesses, especially the public facing service or trade businesses such as shops and restaurants, with auspicious names that are puns that make subtle references to luck, fortune, prosperity, happiness or success.

There are numerous names with words such as 富 (fu, ‘prosperity’), 福 (fu, ‘fortune’), 荣 (rong, ‘glory/luxury’), 乐 (le, ‘joy’), 华 (hua, ‘splendid/ China’), etc. as in:

富盈 (fuying), 富荣 (furong), 富明 (fuming), 富博 (fubo), 富华 (huhua), 富欣 (fuxin)

乐福 (lefu), 隆福 (longfu), 智福 (zhifu)

乐凯 (lekai), 乐秀 (lexiu), 乐丰 (lefeng), 乐多 (leduo)

华为 (Huawei), 华福 (huafu), 华乐 (huale)

The translation of foreign brands into Chinese character, however, play on the sound and the character’s meaning, evoking connotations that go beyond the original names and that a simple sound transliteration cannot achieve. The best known example of this kind is Coca-Cola. The Chinese name is 可口可乐 (kěkǒu kělè) which sounds similar to the English name. The characters are carefully chosen, meaning ‘delicious’ (kěkǒu) and ‘happy’ (kělè). Other examples include translating BMW (Bavarian Motor Works) into 宝马 (bǎomǎ) ‘precious horse’, Nike into 耐克 (nàikè) ‘enduring and persevering’, Dior into 迪奥 (dǐào) ‘enlightening and profound’, Subway (the Sandwich shop) into 赛百味 (sài bǎiwèi) ‘exceeding hundreds of flavours’, and Carrefour into 家乐福 (jiālèfú) ‘family happiness and prosperity’.

In the meantime, some Chinese brands have created English names for themselves using similar language play principles. For example, the cosmetics brand 百丽 (bǎilì) literally meaning ‘hundred, beauty’ has been translated as *Belle*; the electronic communication company 四通 (sìtōng) meaning ‘many connections’ uses the word *Stone* because it sounds similar; and the home appliances brand 美的 (měi dì), meaning ‘beautiful’, has invented its own English name *Midea*.

With the rapid mass expansion of social media amongst the Chinese language users, another language play phenomenon that manipulates the sounds and meaning across different languages has been on the increase. They are best described as Translanguaging (Li 2018), communicative practices that utilise and transcend the boundaries between named languages and between speech and writing and other semiotic signs such as meme and emoji. Here are some examples.



The above sign is of a well-known soft drink chain in China which has its brand in both Chinese and English 鲜果时间 (see above), literally ‘time for fresh fruit’, and It’s Time to ...’. The letter O in ‘to’ though is the ‘play’ icon; so the sign reads as ‘It’s time to play’, which is indeed the registered English name of the shop.

The following exchange goes back and forth between Chinese and English, playing with sounds and meanings in both languages.

Q. Who knows pigs very well?

A. 蜘蛛人 (zhīzhū rén), ‘Spider-Man’. (homophonic with 知猪人 ‘knowing pigs man’).

Q. Who is the worst superhero?

A. 失败的人 (shībài de rén) ‘loser’. (sounds like Spider-Man).

Q. What colour is 失败的人 (shībài de rén)? (loser/Spider-Man?)

A. 是白的人 (shì bái de rén). (‘white man’, sounds like Spider-man).

On 8th March 2019, the International Women’s Day, the following appeared on Chinese social media:

*Wo’men’s’ da’y*

The insertion of apostrophes into “Women’s Day” invites a reanalysis of the phrase as *wōmen shì dāyé* (我们是大爷), meaning ‘We are masters’ or ‘Women are masters’. This can be seen as a Translanguaging reading, where the term 大爷 (dāyé) in Beijing dialect and the second syllable in the rising tone refers to lazy, arrogant, and difficult persons. The reanalysed phrase thus subverts the original by way of adding a layer of sarcasm.

During the summer 2019 protests in Hong Kong, a bilingual poster sign appeared on social media:

Policemen = 暴力市民 (bàolì shìmín)

Playing with the sound, ‘policemen’ is transliterated into 暴力市民 (bàolì shìmín). The first two-syllable/character-word in Chinese means ‘violence’ and here it is used as a verb, whose direct object is 市民 (shìmín) ‘citizens’.

All these are instances of translanguaging, which refers both to the communicative phenomena that manipulates, and in doing so challenges, the boundaries between named languages and between languages and other semiotic signs, and to the analytic approach that focuses on the processes of transgressing and transcending such boundaries and emphasizes the creativity and criticality of the phenomena (Li 2018). Notice that most of these examples of translanguaging play are produced digitally on social media or in posters. The materiality of the medium enhances the creativity of the translanguaging play through its visuality.

The linguistic outcomes of such Translanguaging play are hard to predict due to the creative and dynamic nature of the process. But there are already some indications of morphological and semantic transfer that can happen. For example, the English morpheme *-er* is used productively with both English and Chinese social media brands to refer to their users. In cases where the English plural suffix *-s* is not added, one might say that the suffix *-er* has been blended into the Chinese morphological structure (for an example, see <https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=3111>). Similarly, *-ing* has been used widely in otherwise Chinese texts, to express, and emphasize, an ongoing action, which in Chinese is expressed through additional adverbs (Several interesting examples can be found here: <http://itre.cis.upenn.edu/~myl/languagelog/archives/005318.html>)

A different example is that of the expression ‘hold 住’ (zhù) which has spread over the Sinophone social media and entered into everyday discourse. It originated from a contestant on a TV show, 《大學生了沒》 (variably translated as *University, College Talk* and *College Students Did Not*, where university students compete in challenge games. On 9 August 2011, a contestant named Miss Lin was seen on screen to be mixing English words in her talk and refused to speak Chinese only after the show’s host prompt. And one of the expressions she repeatedly used was ‘hold 住’. But she appeared to be using it to mean ‘to stay calm’, ‘to have confidence’, and ‘to have courage’. The Chinese syllable 住 (zhù) is usually used as an adverb to denote ‘firmly’, ‘steadily’ or a pause in action, or when it is used with a negation marker, ‘no longer possible’. As the translingual expression ‘hold 住’ enters the everyday discourse, however, it is the new meaning of ‘stay calm’ and ‘be confident’ that is being used. It can also be shouted out to contestants and competitors to encourage them on as in ‘Come on!’.

## 5 Motivations and effects

The long tradition of language play amongst the Chinese users, especially in respect of the written Chinese characters, has been motivated by a variety of factors, far beyond the entertaining, fun and ludic function of language play in everyday social interactions. There are many stories of how military plans were secretly coded in riddles, puns, and enigmatic similes. Legend has it that Empress Wu Zetian (624–705) of the Tang Dynasty decoded a message sent by a court member to an army leader which had only two characters 青鵝, literally ‘blue goose’. She said to her staff that there would be a military coup in December that year as the first character 青 ‘blue’ is a combination of three characters 十二月, meaning ‘December’. And the second character is a combination of 我自与, meaning that the court member would then rebel from within. But language play in Chinese has played a central role in expressing ordinary people’s disapproval of the government, unhappiness with their living conditions and desire for social change throughout history.

In early April 1976, about three months after the Chinese Premier Zhou Enlai had died, thousands of people in Beijing gathered around Tiananmen Square, laying wreaths at the Monument to the People's Heroes. Many posters, often handwritten, with poems and couplets also appeared. One poem caught the attention of people and spread very fast. It reads:

黄浦江上有座桥，  
江桥腐朽已动摇，  
江桥摇，眼看要垮掉。  
请指示，是拆还是烧。

There is a bridge over Huangpu (Whampoa) River.  
The river bridge is rotten and shaky.  
River bridge shaky, appears to be claspings.  
Tell us to tear it down or to burn it.

The Huangpu River runs through Shanghai, the largest city of China and the political stronghold during the Cultural Revolution (1965–1976) by what became known as the Gang of Four: Jiang Qing, Mao's wife, Zhang Chunqiao, Yao Wenyuan, and Wang Hongwen. Jiang was once an actress in Shanghai in the 1930s, and Zhang, Yao and Wang organised the Shanghai Commune in the early 1960s and became leaders of the local communist party. Zhang ended up as a Vice Premier and a member of the Standing Committee of the Politburo. Yao began his career as a literary critic and rose to lead the propaganda department of the Central Committee of the Chinese Communist Party. Wang was a labour activist, less educated and experienced and younger than the other three and used by them as a puppet. *Jiang* in Chinese means 'river'; *qiao*, the last character in Zhang Chunqiao's name, means 'bridge', and *yao* is homophonic with the character 摇, 'shaking', 'rocking'. When these three characters were put together, and located in Shanghai, it was abundantly clear to the Chinese whom the phrase was refereeing to. The Gang of Four was deposed soon after Mao's death later that year.

More recent examples of the role of language play in social unrest come from Hong Kong. In 2019, the city was rocked by an unprecedented series of protests against the local government and the perceived hegemony of China's central government, leading to violent clashes between thousands of frustrated youths and the police. The affordances of social media facilitated the unraveling of the events, as it was through social media, such as the popular forum LIHKG, that the various protest groups communicated their plans and itineraries. This highly charged situation opened up a site for surprising developments in language play, where romanized Cantonese took on a new indexical value, namely that of a language of resistance.

There is a backstory to this: there were allegedly "spies" from the Chinese mainland who infiltrated the Hong Kong protest movement, camouflaging as black-shirted protesters with a view to instigating violence and undermining the movement

in the eyes of the general public. In response, the local protesters devised a contingent solution to communicate among themselves on social media – *to the exclusion* of non-native speakers of Cantonese, in particular Mandarin Chinese speakers. That solution was to codify their communications by transliterating Cantonese messages in a cryptic style that circumvents standard romanization systems such as the Yale system. The linguistic rationale behind such codification was that although Hong Kong Cantonese has its own vernacular script, it is largely derived from the standard Chinese script. Thus, a message scripted in Cantonese characters may still be vaguely discernible to non-native speakers, even if some of its characters may be unrecognisable to Mandarin Chinese speakers. To remedy this situation, the protesters foreignised their messages by two moves: first through a romanisation of the Cantonese into the Roman alphabet to alienate predominantly monolingual Mandarin Chinese users, and second by using a “bottom-up” romanisation method, characterized as the style of Kong Girl (Hong Kong Girl, or *gong nei* 港女 in Cantonese).

A series of crypted messages relating to the protest had been formulated, the first of which is reproduced below (the Yale romanisation, Cantonese script, and English translation are added):

This message (displayed on the left column) is intriguing not merely because it romanises Cantonese, hence inflecting Cantonese with an anglophone quality, but also because it transforms itself into a crypt. As mentioned above, this

Original message in Kong Girl crypt (capitalisation in original)	Message in Yale romanisation (tone values omitted)	Underlying message in Cantonese	Literal translation in English
LEI YUT GOU HAI 8.18 DA GA KAU TONG GE FONG SIK	lei yat go hai 8.18 daai ga kau tung ge fong sik	哩一個係8.18大家溝通嘅方式	This is our way to communicate on August 18:
IF U WAI YI YAU GHOST, WRITE ON A PIECE OF PAPER	IF YOU waai yi yau GHOST, WRITE ON A PIECE OF PAPER	如果你懷疑有鬼，在一張紙上寫：	If you suspect there is an undercover, write this on a piece of paper
“NEI GI NG GI NGO UP MUD 7 AH?”	“nei ji m ji ngo kap mat chat a?”	“你知唔知我up乜7啊?”	“Do you know what the hell I am talking about?”
YU GWOR KUI TAI NG MING JAU GI KUI HAI YUN DING HAI GWAI LA	yu gwo keui tai m ming jau ji keui	如果佢睇唔明就知佢係人定係鬼啦	If s/he doesn't understand, s/he must be undercover.
TONG NGO TUI BAO KUI AH DIU!!!!!!	hai yan ding hai gwai la tung ngo teui baau keui a diu	推爆佢啊屌!!!!!!	Fuck it! Upvote my post!!!!!!

manifests in the form of an unorthodox romanisation method familiar only to (younger-generation) locals, thus serving to delineate in- and out-group membership. The cryptic quality becomes evident when we compare the subversive Kong Girl romanisation with the standard Yale romanisation. Staples of Kongish - a dynamic mix of Cantonese, Hong Kong English, and other signs and symbols - such as the ubiquitous number 7 (associated with stupidity in Cantonese) and the vulgar word *diu* (the f-word in Cantonese) mark the vernacular and aggressive tone of the communication. At a crucial juncture, English words are sneaked in as if to confuse the untrained eye, as by virtue of the orthography, they integrate seamlessly into the transliterated Cantonese: “IF U WAI YI YAU [“suspect there is”] GHOST, WRITE ON A PIECE OF PAPER”, where “U” is “you” and “ghost” refers to the spies or undercovers.

Further, some words are made to assume an ambivalent identity, giving rise to contingent Cantonese-English confluences playing on oral-aural similarity. In “NEI GI NG GI NGO UP MUD seven AH”, “up” is a vulgar term for “talking” rather than a directional word in English; NGO, written in capital letters, is easily mistaken for the abbreviation for Non-Governmental Organisation, though here it represents the first-person pronoun “I”; and “mud” is a phonetic mimicry of the Cantonese *mat* 乜/麼 (‘what’), which rhymes with “cut” rather than “cat”.

What we are witnessing here is a cipher designed as a double-edged sword; to both communicate (with respect to locals) and miscommunicate (with respect to non-locals). It performs a linguistic duplicity, masking a Cantonese-English message beneath an anglophone façade, which evinces a ludic irreverence typical of language use on social media, but also a discursive resistance against being understood. Kong Girl romanisation in the final analysis, serves to reify an intensely localised identity that has become all the more exacerbated during times of crisis.

Another strong motivation for language play in the age of Big Brother/Data surveillance is to avoid censorship. And in this regard, we have seen ample examples of ingenious language play by Chinese language users, especially those who engage with the new social media. In March 2018, the 13th National Congress of China passed a number of amendments to the Constitution, including the removal of the clause that limit the tenure of the presidency and vice-presidency to two five-year terms, which in effect allowed the current president to reign for life. Western media described this as the ‘enthronement of the new emperor’. In Chinese, ‘enthronement’ is 登基 (*dēngjī*), which happens to be homophonic with 登机 ‘boarding an aeroplane’. The Chinese social media was full of jokes and images of aircraft boarding. An example of translanguaging play is the creation of the character 4言 which combines the numeral 4 with the character 言, meaning ‘speech’ or ‘words’. Its reference is the Chinese President Xi Jinping’s call for more confidence in the Party’s continuing legitimacy to govern China over the criticism from foreign governments



and the pressures for political reform. Xi's dictation 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'. In the translanguaging character, the numeral four replaces the human radical 亻 in 信 (belief/confidence); they look similar graphically. The pronunciation of four in Chinese is *si*. The radical 言 on the right is pronounced *yan*. 4 + 言 'speech/words' is near homophonic to 食言 (*shiyán*) 'to eat one's words'.

## 6 Conclusion

Language play exists in all language and cultures. But as David Crystal has pointed out, it has not been taken seriously in linguistic research because the manipulation of linguistic features is often assumed to be purely for enjoyment, or what Crystal described as 'the ludic function of language' (Crystal 1998: 1). We hope to have shown that this ludic function of language challenges the normal understanding of what language is and why it is used. Our main argument is that it is the language user who creates the ludic function of the language through a clever play with the linguistic material. Moreover, they do so with a purpose, which though can be mainly for fun, is often motivated for socio-political reasons. A crucial aspect of language play is to invite different readings of the same code, or in Crystal's words 'to entertain inconsistent alternative perspectives' (Crystal 1998: 223) on language, on society and on life. Language play therefore is a good example of the language user's creativity and criticality combined.

Given its long history and unique structural features, the Chinese language has been played with in many different contexts for many different purposes. Chinese language users have shown tremendous ingenuity in manipulating their language to achieve specific effects. The context, in particular, the socio-political context, in which language play occurs, is crucial in understanding both the form and significance of the play. To close with one final example: the discourse for Mid-Autumn Festival took an interesting twist in Hong Kong in 2019, whereby conventional expressions were inflected with political sensibilities. The following poem was contrived as a contemporary response to the Chinese tradition of writing encrypted poems with subversive content and inserting them into mooncakes (emphasis added).

五仁月餅 (five-nut mooncake)  
 有大有細 (big and delicate)  
 健康素食 (healthy vegetarian food)  
 供不應求 (demand exceeds supply)  
 不可或缺 (can't do without them)

再來一個 (have another one)  
 愛不釋手 (love it so much I can't let go)  
 可想而知 (understandable)

The poem camouflages the message: 五大素(訴)求, 缺一不可 (Five demands, not one less), the central slogan around which the Hong Kong protests revolved. Each word in the message is insinuated into one line in the poem (where *su* 訴 is playfully replaced by the homonym 素), to be deciphered by people “in the know” while eluding others. This instance of language play exemplifies the tactical appropriation of a traditional genre for contingent purposes, blending both creativity and criticality within a single ludic gesture.

As communication technology advances further and global cultural flow intensifies, we are witnessing more and more examples of language play that defy the neat boundaries of named languages and the boundaries between what is conventionally regarded as language and other semiotic material. The translinguaging examples we have seen in this article invite us to further explore how affordances of social media interact with the materiality of language play, how language play impacts on the structures of language and norms of language use, as well as how it impacts on global cultural flows and the language players' world-views, are important and useful questions for future research. As the Chinese language is increasing its global presence and impact, understanding language play in and with Chinese has wider implications for research, practice, and policy.

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