

Chinese Corner

Chinese as a lingua franca?

Many handy words and phrases born in China seem to be emerging in the English-speaking world. Some of them have been coined to describe new social phenomena that may be difficult to translate directly, whilst others are created as humorous intercultural wordplay, especially popular among young people. Since there are now over half a million foreign expats living in China, even more Chinese people studying and working overseas to spread the word, and an increasing number of foreigners learning Mandarin, we expect some of these to pop up soon in places like the OED.

A *tuhao* [tǔ háo 土豪] for instance, has jokingly come to signify a filthy rich man who has absolutely no class or sense; whilst according to *The Wall Street Journal*, his wife [tài tai 太太] is probably the *dama* [dà mā 大妈] or middle-aged woman buying enough jewellery to sway prices on the international gold market. On the other hand, perhaps due to some unsociable personal habits, or the fact that there are 70 million more young men than women in China, many *tuhaos* may end up as *guanggun* [guāng gùn 光棍] aka Chinese bachelors, who need to search abroad for a foreigner [lǎo wài 老外] as their bride. Other less lucky, more frustrated, young *diaosi* [diǎo sī 屌丝] (geeks, or losers) may take on the attitude of a *fenqing* [fèn qīng 愤青] or 'Chinese radical youth'; however, law and order will surely be upheld by the local *chengguan* [chéng guǎn 城管], the notorious municipal law enforcement officers.

Thanks largely to social media, youth culture is becoming a huge export driver in terms of Chinese loanwords and fun cross-cultural expressions. In fact, Chinglish may be going global as a new 'hip' lingua franca. Consider the immortal exhortation "Good good study, day day up!" (hǎo háo xué xí, tiān tiān xiàng shàng 好好学习, 天天向上 or 'work hard and improve every day!'), which has hit the pages of several English language newspapers in 2014. Next, another term popular among Chinese students abroad, now listed in the online Urban Dictionary, is "You can you up, no can no BB!" which assertively warns "Do it then, if you think you are so smart; otherwise shut up!" BB literally means 'Blah blah blah' here. Conversely, on social media and online gaming, "No zuo no die!" (不作不死) often warns not to do something foolish that can land you in trouble. Such lines may even feature in Chinese rap music.

Most fascinatingly, there are a host of new hybrid fusion words like "geilivable" (from gěi lì 给力 'to give strength or energy') and "niubi" (niú bī 牛逼), both of which mean 'cool' or 'awesome'; whilst "jiujieli" (jiū jié 纠结 hesitation), "erbility" (or usually '2B' èr bī 二逼 stupidity), "shability" (shǎ bī 傻逼 foolishness) and "zhuangbility" (zhuāng bī 装逼 boastfulness) all currently hit the spot lexically as a curious new breed of derogatory expressions.

So it seems that these new kids on the block are making Chinese loanwords that we were getting excited about only a few years ago, like *hongbao* [hóng bāo 红包], the red envelopes containing cash for Spring Festival, and *guanxi* (guān xi 关系 personal connections), look rather tame. Our advice therefore is to look out for a lot more *chingua franca* fun in the future!

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2014 is the Chinese year of the horse.

qiān lǐ mǎ [千里马], or 'a horse that can cover a thousand *lǐ* [=500 metres] per day' was used by people in ancient China to describe an able person, especially a person with special talents.