

PARADIGM SHIFT IN LANGUAGE CONVENTION—THE CASE OF MULTIPLICATION OF NEW PROVERBS IN CHINESE IN THE DIGITAL AGE

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Abstract: In the language convention equation for a long time the government plays a major role in Chinese. Since 1949, when the Peoples Republic of China was founded, Chinese used on mainland China has been much influenced, if not prescribed, by official government decrees, government official media and government supported literary publications. This has held true until very recently when Internet use became prevalent. This study of newly coined Chinese proverbs demonstrates that nowadays the tide of authority is being reversed and even the language used by the government's official media is being influenced by the populace or in other words by the people the media tries to influence.

I

Language is a convention (Saussure 1959, 10), and the components or players in this convention can be the vernacular, the scholarly writings and teachings, professional language associations, language regulating bodies, celebrities as well as the government media and decrees, though not necessarily by that order. In the name of language purity there are about 127 language regulating academies or agencies in the world pertaining to 107 major languages.¹ For Mandarin Chinese alone there are four agencies respectively; in mainland China, Taiwan, Singapore and Malaysia. Each of the four agencies are part of their respective governments. For mainland China and Taiwan the language regulating agencies are part of their ministries of Education. In Singapore the agency was established by the government as an independent entity. In Malaysia the agency is part of the Ministry of Information.²

In mainland China, since 1951, the government has been taking language purity seriously. As soon as the new republic was founded its official organ, the *People's Daily*, published an editorial entitled "Maintain the language purity and health by using our mother tongue correctly." (Editorial Board 1951). This editorial lambasted various language phenomena including multiplication of jargons, ungrammatical

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¹See Wikipedia http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_language_regulators accessed September 11, 2014.

²See Wikipedia under The State Language and Letters Committee, National Languages Committee, Promote Mandarins Council and Chinese Language Standardization Council of Malaysia.

structures, foreign words and outdated classic Chinese expressions. Its political overtone aside,³ considering when it was published, the editorial seemed seriously interested in guiding the country's media toward using modern Chinese with the standards made and promoted by language professionals such as Lü Shuxiang (吕叔湘) and Zhu Dexi (朱德熙).⁴ We say the country's media because in those days they were the main source which influenced people's speech and writing, and the media included publications in all forms, newspapers, magazines, broadcasting, film and stage performances. A special committee, The Language Reform Committee (predecessor of the National Language and Letters Committee) was charged with making language rules for schools and the media. It was this very committee which was responsible for pushing for a simplified version of Chinese and for instituting a Romanized sound scheme which were later embraced by Singapore and Malaysia, but not by Taiwan and Hong Kong.⁵ This editorial, it was believed, was a signal that the government had every intention to guide how Chinese should be written and spoken in mainland China. In a country with thousands of local dialects and thousands of years of literary tradition some kind of standardization seemed very much needed. Therefore these attempts on the part of the government were embraced by all. As a result the editorial was often cited by government officials and educators to promote the regulation and standardization of Chinese. For the next twenty years or so, especially after 1958 when the Language Reform Committee promulgated the Pin Yin Sound System,⁶ this committee was relatively dormant until 1977. It was here it picked up speed again by announcing a second group of Chinese characters as candidates for simplification. The attempt met with strong resistance. The reason why this regulating agency was less active during the years between the early 1950s all the way to the late 1970s is partly because during that period of time the government was in complete control of its media and publications in all forms. Except for a very brief period during the Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) when various political factions printed their own newsletters,⁷ it was an understatement to say that "the whole country thinks in one mind and speaks in one voice."⁸ For almost 10 years people's eyes were only allowed to view and read Mao's selected works and similar books by

³For instance it quoted profusely from Josef Stalin and Mao.

⁴Those two linguists were cited in the editorial as experts who would provide guidance. Lü was Director of the Institute of Linguistics and Zhu was a professor of Chinese at Peking University.

⁵The simplified Chinese is referred to as 简化字 [simplified Chinese characters]. The sound system is referred to as the 拼音 or Pin Yin system.

⁶See Wikipedia

<http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%B1%89%E8%AF%AD%E6%8B%BC%E9%9F%B3>

Accessed on September 12, 2014.

⁷During the Cultural Revolution for about a year or so in 1967 and 1968 the Red Guard organizations invariably printed their newsletters, which were generally mimeographed and did not have a large circulation.

⁸A popular slogan during the Cultural Revolution which urges the whole country to think and talk according to the official line.

Marx, Engels, Lenin and Stalin. Another exception was selected works by writer Lu Xun, who sympathized with the communists before their victory. On the stage only eight performances were approved to run, which included two ballets, an orchestral combination and five Peking opera productions. These plus a few warring movies against Japan and the Nationalists constituted the “entertainment” of the day. Needless to say everyday speech and writings in those 10 years were rife with expressions from them, and from works of those revolutionary leaders, especially Mao.

II

Four-character proverbs are a special feature in many East Asian languages, such as in Chinese, Japanese, Korean and Vietnamese.⁹ These proverbs generally carry certain philosophical overtones and originate from historical references or stories. In Chinese these proverbs generally are gleaned from classic Chinese writings and traditional literary works. They are used very often in everyday writings and speech. When used appropriately these proverbs can convey the message succinctly, often with a scholarly flair and therefore are admired as good writing components. From 1949 to 1979 the new additions to the proverbial repertoire are invariably from Mao’s works or poetry, articles from the *People’s Daily* and dialogs or arias from those eight official theatrical productions. So far there is, however, no listing of such additions available. It needs to be pointed out that a whole generation is influenced by this strict control on the language and speech. For quite a while, even long after the conclusion of the Cultural Revolution, students who grew up during that time found it hard not to fall into using jargon, cliches or verbiages popular during that time. Even Bei Dao, who arguably led the new cultural movement to steer away from the Cultural Revolution style of language, was not immune. For instance in his essay “*My Gambling Stories*” (Bei Dao, 1998), when describing people in a Vegas casino he unwittingly used a phrase from a Mao’s work, which goes “...we come from all walks of life for the same common revolutionary goal.” (Mao, 1966). It is safe to assume that in the language convention from 1949 to 1979 in mainland China the government played a dominate role in influencing the speech and writing of Chinese.

III

The next three decades (1979 to present) are regarded as the Reform Era as China opened its doors to the outside world. Though slow at first, this outside world, especially Western media, publications and entertainment, soon began to influence the Chinese language. After the Internet, the World Wide Web in particular, was introduced into China in 1992, the online population in China rapidly developed. In 1992 there were only 250 online users. In three years the number of users increased by 60 times (Wang, 2002). Today the number of online users is simply mindboggling. According to Lu Wei (2014), Director of China’s Office of Internet Information, at

⁹See <http://zh.wikipedia.org/wiki/%E6%88%90%E8%AF%AD>. Accessed September 12, 2014.

the time of writing of this article there are 600 million online computer users and 1.3 billion cell phone users in China. Now if we look at the various components in the convention, namely, the vernacular, the scholarly writings and teachings, the professional language associations, language regulating bodies, celebrities and the government media and decrees, we will find that there has occurred a paradigm shift. The vernacular, everyday speech on the street, which tended to be extremely local because of a total lack of exposure or demonstration in the past, is exerting considerable influence on Chinese, official or otherwise, because the definition of media is blurring. These days practically every cell phone user or every online user is potentially a publisher of some kind, whether he or she writes a blog, a webchat post, a tweet, a text message or comments on a webpage. When there are so many actual or potential “published” authors, and when there are so many actual or potential media outlets, language is bound to be influenced, big time as pointed out by M. L. ElBekraoui (2014):

Without a doubt, the Internet is the medium with more significant impact on language usage as well as change than the telegraph, telephone, radio, cinema, and TV all combined. In terms of depth and proportions, this new medium can be equated to the advent of Gutenberg’s printing machine in 1436 and to some extent to the Norman invasion in England of 1066. The Internet’s revolution has changed the world, collapsed its distances, and given new powers to individuals, peoples, and nations. This revolution has given a voice to many and offered platforms for new genres to evolve, affecting everything that is societal including language.

Many academics in the West believe that the influence on language brought upon largely by the Internet is negative. They argue, in the case of English, online writings tend to be sloppy and result in bad spelling, bad grammar and bad phrases (Campbell, 2007). On this front their Chinese counterparts seem to have a more balanced view. While some scholars worry about the lack of a standard with regard to the language used online, others are interested in the many new language phenomena as a result (Wu, 2010). The Chinese government, however, is not amused. On April 11, 2014, the *People’s Daily* published an article entitled “Stop the Foreign Word Flood!” In it author Hongliang Dong (2014) condemns the phenomenon as a result of the Internet when, in his view, language borrowings of all kinds flood the media, publications and indeed everyday speech. He points out there is a law¹⁰ which prohibits such wanton usage. Other similar official articles made special mentions of the 1951 *People’s Daily’s* editorial calling for language purity (Anonymous 2014). In other words the government wants to maintain its dominate role on how language is used. The number of foreign words or newly invented words must have reached an alarming stage to trigger such a vehement response from the government. In addition we have observed yet another phenomenon, which is even more significant culturally – the multiplication of new proverbs in recent years purely due to the Internet.

¹⁰The law he refers to is called 《中华人民共和国国家通用语言法》 [The Uniform National Language Law], which was passed by the Ninth People’s Congress on January 1, 2001.

IV

As we mentioned before, proverbs are a time-honored language tradition in Chinese. In general, a proverb is defined by OED as “A short, traditional, and pithy saying; a concise sentence, typically metaphorical or alliterative in form, stating a general truth or piece of advice; an adage or maxim.” (Oxford English Dictionary, 2014). In English, for instance, historical, biblical, mythological or philosophical references are often manifested by proverbs containing the phrases: “Noah’s Ark, Achilles’ Heels, Magna Charta, and Golden Fleece.” Similarly Chinese is rife with proverbs also carrying such historical and literary references (Smith, 1902). From *The Three Kingdoms*, a novel written during the Ming Dynasty (1368–1644), there are at least a dozen or so proverbs. Examples include 说曹操曹操到 (Speaking of the devil here he comes), 桃园结义 (Become sworn brothers), 败走麦城 (Meeting one’s Waterloo), 既生瑜何生亮? (If the heaven decides to let me born why give me him as a competitor?), 周瑜打黄盖, 愿打愿挨 (A drama staged to deceive the audience), 司马昭之心, 路人皆知 (An well-known intention). Almost 400 years have passed since *The Three Kingdoms* was written. Though we don’t have much idea about when those proverbs or sayings were first used it is relatively safe to assume they are at the least a few hundred years old. In other words it takes some time for a proverb to become established or recognized in the vernacular. That belief, however, is now about to change. On August 15 2013 Zhao Meidi (2013), a library information specialist at Eastern China Normal University wrote a blog, which has a following of 1,108 readers, among whom 547 identify themselves as her fans. In her blog she listed what she believed to be the established online proverbs which she had collected and provided the definition for each one complete with its background information. The blog initially listed 22 new proverbs, and in the addendum she added three more explaining these three were suggested by readers of her blog. In the opinion of the authors of this article her list is the most comprehensive so far.

The 25 new proverbs collected and annotated by Zhao Meidi are listed as follows:

1. 十动然拒 (Shi Dong Ran Ju) – *Get rejected by a girl though the girl says that she is touched by the show of love.* The story behind this proverb is that a student by the name of Wang Wenjin from China Central University of Science and Technology sent a love letter, which took him 212 days to write and contained 16,000 words, to the girl of his heart. The girl, though touched by the act, rejected the student.

2. 正龙拍虎 (Zheng Long Pai Hu) – *Using a fake picture or evidence for personal gains.* In this proverb a person’s name is used. This person is Zhou Zhenglong, a villager in An Kang area, Shaanxi Province. On October 12, 2007 Zhou put a few pictures of South China Tigers on the Internet. Many online users questioned the authenticity of those pictures, including a zoologist. But the local government officials sided with Zhou in the hope that the existence of those tigers would increase the value of the area as a tourist attraction. Later when mountains of evidence presented themselves Zhou admitted cheating. The proverb now is used to satirize someone would do anything for personal gain.

3. 不明觉厉 (Bu Ming Jue Li) – *Although I'm clueless about what you are saying you sound impressive.*

4. 累觉不爱 (Lei Jue Bu Ai) – *Too tired to love anymore.*

5. 月球挖坑 或 欧阳挖坑 (Yue Qiu Wa Keng or Ou Yang Wa Keng) – *Making conclusive remarks without checking the facts.* The background of this proverb is that when the Chinese Air Space Administration issued its first picture of a moon supposedly shot by its Chang'e 1 Satellite, the public questioned whether it was a copy of the old picture issued by the Americans. The spokesperson from the Chinese Air Space Administration pointed at the two holes on the surface of the moon and explained that in the American picture there was only one hole, and therefore this was a different picture. However readers later pointed out the picture actually had only one hole but appeared to have two because it was not lined up correctly. So the proverb literally says *going to the extent of digging holes on the moon in order to justify a false claim.*

6. 谁死鹿手 (Shui Si Lu Shou) – *Who is going to be killed by the powdered milk?* This proverb is derived from an incident in 2007 when milk powder products produced by the Three Deer Group were found having exceeded the limit of certain chemical additives and proved harmful to people, especially to children. The proverb plays on the word “deer” which appears in a well-established proverb “鹿死谁手” (*Who is going to kill the deer*), and the new proverb becomes “*who is going to be killed by the deer*”, referring to the Three Deer Group, which produced the contaminated milk powder.

7. 兆山羨鬼 (Zhao Shan Xian Gui) – *A callous or heartless person or act.* The background of this proverb is that Wang Zhaoshan, vice president of Shan Dong Writers' Association, wrote a poem ostensibly to commemorate the victims of the Wen Chuan Earthquake. But in the poem he says something to the effect that the victims should feel lucky because there is so much love expressed after their death. His poem met with general uproar of anger and was often ridiculed for being insensitive.

8. 火钳刘明 或 删前刘明 (Huo Qian Liu Ming or Shan Qian Liu Ming) – *Becoming recognized before one's blog becomes a “hot” blog or becoming recognized before one's blog is deleted by the web management.*

9. 男默女泪 (Nan Mo N Ü Lei) – *This is a situation when guys become silent and girls are shedding tears.*

10. 喜大普奔 (Xi Da Pu Ben) – *An extremely jubilate occasion.* This proverb uses the first character of four Chinese proverbs which all mean extremely happy.

11. 细思恐极 (Xi Si Kong Ji) – *The more one thinks about the situation the more one feels scared.*

12. 社病我药 (She Bing Wo Yao) – *The society is sick but how come I get to take the medication?*

13. 人艰不拆 (Ren Jian Bu Chai) – *Since the hardship is all around I will keep my mouth shut from speaking the truth.*

14. 说闹觉余 (Shuo Nao Jue Yu) – *Feeling left out.*

15. 啊痛悟蜡 (A Tong Wu La) – *Feeling really sad.* This is from the lyrics in a song sung by Hong Kong singer Deng Ziqi, which goes *Ah what a sad realization that I have come to!*

16. 地命海心 (Di Ming Hai Xin) – *A situation when a person in a lowly position tries to worry about managing the country.* In this proverb two particular references are made. One is the recycled edible oil, which is generally regarded as dirty or substandard for human consumption, and the other is Zhong Nai Hai where the leaders of the country work and reside. A literary rendition of this proverb is this is a situation when a person in a very low position, who can only afford dirty edible oil at home, starts to worry the future of the country just like the state leaders who live in Zhong Nai Hai.

17. 体亏屁思 (Ti Kui Pi Si) – *A situation which makes one think hard when there is a defect in the system the ordinary and innocent people have to pay for the mistake.*

18. 毒德大学 (Du De Da Xue) – *A picture taken with extremely high quality cameras.*

19. 秋雨含泪 (Qiu Yu Han Lei) – *Crocodile tears or someone whose expression of emotions is regarded as less than sincere.* In this proverb a well-known writer is mentioned. This writer is Yu Qiuyu, known for his sentimental essays. The background is during the Wen Chuan Earthquake in 2012 when many school buildings collapsed, and the people, especially parents of the children who were crushed by the fallen buildings, were lashing out at the government for failing to keep contractors honest in building the schools. Yu Qiuyu pleaded with those parents to put themselves in the shoes of the government and therefore was derided by the general public.

20. 聚打酱油 (Ju Da Jiang You) – *I don't care. It has nothing to do with me and I'm just passing by.* In this proverb soy sauce is mentioned to indicate that the speaker is on his/her way to do something insignificant. For example people might say something like – I'm on my way to get some soy sauce for dinner and haven't seen anything nor do I intend to make any comments on anything.

21. 黔驴三撑 (Qian Lǚ San Cheng) – *Doing whatever is necessary, including making up stories, to support an official position.* Qian (黔) is the symbol for the Gui Zhou Province. Qian Lǚ or the donkey from the Qui Zhou Province is part of an older proverb – 黔驴技穷 (*The Donkey from Gui Zhou is at the end of its wits*). In that story the donkey is introduced to an area where no other animals have ever seen him before. At first the donkey stands aloof from everyone and pretends to be powerful. Soon other animals realize that the donkey doesn't have much to show when challenged. The new proverb is based on an incident in 2008 when the spokesperson from the Public Security Bureau (police) in Gui Zhou Province Government made up a story which involved someone doing pushups when a woman committed suicide by jumping into the river.

22. 猪涂口红 (Zhu Tu Kou Hong) – *Putting lipstick on a pig, and it is still a pig.* This proverb is derived from an American expression, made more famous when it

was used during Barack Obama and Republican nominee John McCain's debate during the United States Presidential Election of 2008.

23. 十气然应 (Shi Qi Ran Ying) – *Accepting a marriage proposal after a demonstration of pretended anger.* It is based on a story when a freshman at China Central University of Science and Technology in a fancy car proposes to a girl of his love with a million RMB check, the girl looks insulted at first and then accepts the proposal.

24. 飞蝗芜湖 (Fei Huang Wu Hu) – *The message contains no pornographic content. Please don't delete it.* This proverb purposefully uses typos or homophones, a prevalent phenomenon in online communication in China.

25. 博超兽资 (Bo Chao Shou Zi) – *The stipend for doctoral students is higher than the salaries of their professors.* This proverb also contains intentional typos.

It needs to be pointed out that other people have also written blogs on new proverbs. Some even have longer lists.¹¹ However, after some comparison, we decided to use Ms. Zhao's list, because of her excellent annotations and her blog pops up first in a Google search.

According to the *OED*'s definition a proverb is “a [A] short, traditional, and pithy saying; a concise sentence, typically metaphorical or alliterative in form, stating a general truth or piece of advice; an adage or maxim.” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 2014). The definition of a proverb by Han Dian, the Chinese Online Dictionary, particularly stresses that generally “a proverb comes from classics or historical stories.” (Han Dian, 2014). If we examine the new proverbs as collected and annotated by Ms. Zhao only a few or less than half seem to fit both definitions.

If the government is bent on curbing unauthorized language use such as the flooding of foreign words and the multiplication of new proverbs, language professionals do not seem to be overly concerned. Chen Weizhan, Professor of Chinese at the Sun Yat-Sen University, was quoted as saying: “Such proverbs won't last.” He further indicates that China is a civilization of five thousand years. The formation of new words takes time. The new proverbs cited have emerged as a result of curiosity on the part of online users. They generally do not contain much logic and many people do not understand them. These new proverbs have no place in regular publications. Chen was not worried in the least. When asked if children would be affected, he argued, that the school textbooks are regulated by the government according to well established standards and unauthorized content cannot make it there.¹² Hao Mingjian, a noted linguist, regards those new proverbs as a kind of toy. He does not believe that new proverbs are able to damage the Chinese language. He said, “no matter how popular these new proverbs are online today they will pass. The young people may use them, just as in a game.”¹³ Are those proverbs indeed, as suggested by experts, a flash in the pan, and are they here today, gone tomorrow,

¹¹On July 7 2013 Deng Luo, a blogger from Shanghai, wrote a blog discussing new proverbs. He has 31 in total on his list. <http://baike.baidu.com/subview/10780397/11029681.htm>. Accessed on September 23, 2014.

¹²<http://baike.baidu.com/view/8358262.htm>. Accessed on September 24, 2014.

¹³<http://baike.baidu.com/subview/10780397/11029681.htm>. Accessed on September 24, 2014.

without any real following? To test this assumption on September 19, 2014 we went to [www. people.cn.com](http://www.people.cn.com), the official website of the *People's Daily*, China's government official newspaper and put the 25 new proverbs in the search box. The results are astounding. The following list demonstrates how many times each of the new proverbs appears on this official government site:

1. 十动然拒	(Shi Dong Ran Jue)	578
2. 正龙拍虎	(Zheng Long Pai Hu)	302
3. 不明觉厉	(Bu Ming Jue Li)	1341
4. 累觉不爱	(Lei Jue Bu Ai)	1006
5. 月球挖坑	(Yue Qiu Wa Keng)	10
6. 谁死鹿手	(Shui Si Lu Shou)	6
7. 兆山羨鬼	(Zhao Shan Xian Gui)	22
8. 火钳刘明	(Huo Qian Liu Ming)	49
9. 男默女泪	(Nan Mo NÜ Lei)	142
10. 喜大普奔	(Xi Da Pu Ben)	1708
11. 细思恐极	(Xi Si Kong Ji)	191
12. 社病我药	(She Bing Wo Yao)	3
13. 人艰不拆	(Ren Jian Bu Chai)	1191
14. 说闹觉余	(Shuo Nao Jue Yu)	53
15. 啊痛悟蜡	(A Tong Wu La)	25
16. 地命海心	(Di Ming Hai Xin)	12
17. 体亏屁思	(Ti Kui Pi Si)	3
18. 毒德大学	(Du De Da Xue)	0
19. 秋雨含泪	(Qiu Yu Hai Lei)	39
20. 聚打酱油	(Ju Da Jiang You)	6
21. 黔驴三撑	(Qian LÜ San Cheng)	9
22. 猪涂口红	(Zhu Tu Kou Hong)	9
23. 十气然应	(Shi Qi Ran Ying)	6
24. 飞蝗芜湖	(Fei Huang Wu Hu)	0
25. 博超兽资	(Bo Chao Shou Zi)	0

Out of the 25 proverbs only three are never used. However, four are used more than a thousand times, and four are used more than a hundred times, all by the official government website. This is a clear indication that in the digital age our language convention is witnessing a paradigm shift, which is, the vernacular or everyday speech is exerting a much bigger role in forming new language phenomenon.

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