

Soft power struggles: A diasporic perspective on the competing ideologies and innovative practices regarding the Chinese writing system

Li Wei  | Zhu Hua 

UCL Institute of Education, University College London, London, UK

Correspondence

Li Wei, UCL Institute of Education, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London WC1H 0AL, UK.
Email: li.wei@ucl.ac.uk

Both authors are at the same institution.

[The copyright line for this article was changed on 18 December 2021 after original publication]

Abstract

This critical essay aims to assess the linguistic ideologies regarding the Chinese writing system by locating them in historical and diasporic contexts and the new digital communication space. Drawing data from a long-term and ongoing digital ethnography of online communication and creative Sinographs in the global Chinese diaspora, it analyses how multilingual Chinese language users manipulate the affordances of the writing system in combination with the affordances of new, digital communication platforms to challenge the dominant language ideologies and policies, to articulate a new sense of transnationalism, and to participate in social activism. It argues that the diasporic perspective is not simply a context for the study of language variation and change but a crucial space for radical new thinking and actions that challenge orthodoxies of various kinds and enables cultural flow as well as social participation at a global scale.

KEYWORDS

CantoManto, Chinese diaspora, language ideology, linguistic innovation, Sinograph, Transcribing

本篇论文旨在从历史和海外华人及新数字空间角度，讨论有关汉字和中文书写系统的语言意识形态。我

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/) License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2021 The Authors. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd.

们用长期数字民族志中提取的语料,分析多语言中文使用者如何利用新的数字通信平台创造新字和表达方式,从而挑战占主导地位的语言意识形态和政策,表达新的跨国主义意识,并在全球范围内积极参与社会活动。移民社团不仅仅是研究语言变异和变化的场景,它同时为促进激进新思维,挑战各种传统观念,促使在全球范围内实现文化流动和社会参与提供了关键空间。

新汉字,中文书写系统,软实力,语言意识形态,超写实践,语言创新

On 21st December 2020, the Taiwanese President Tsai Ing-wen tweeted Figure 1 to mark the winter solstice. In the message composed predominately in English, she mentioned the Chinese terms for winter solstice, *Dongzhi* (冬至) and the sticky rice balls, *tangyuan* (湯圓), traditionally eaten in the south of China on the day. Tsai was immediately mocked and criticised by twitter and other social media users for using *pinyin* to represent these terms, even though she did have the Chinese characters in the tweet too. This is because *pinyin* is widely regarded as a mainland Chinese invention for Putonghua and Tsai has been advocating independence of Taiwan from China. The pro-independence camp that Tsai symbolises wants to maximize ways of differentiating the Taiwanese culture from what they call the Chinese culture, represented by the traditions and practices in mainland China. Those must include differentiation of languages. Some Taiwan-independence campaigners want to rebrand the localised form of Hokkien, a regional variety of Chinese, Taiwanese (臺語). The anti-Tsai camp, on the other hand, laughed at the idea that Taiwan could ever be rid of China's cultural and linguistic connections and influences.



FIGURE 1 Tsai's winter solstice tweet

The relevance of this example to the theme of this article is multiple: First of all, the notion of the Chinese diaspora is highly political. Who and which region is or is not regarded as part of the global Chinese diaspora is controversial and often emotionally charged. Second, language, especially the writing system, not only plays a crucial part in the construction of the global Chinese diaspora, but also causes heated debates over ideologies about language, race, and nationhood. The different written representations of pronunciation of the so-called Chinese language add further complexities to the ideological debates. Third, the competing ideologies lead to competing linguistic practices and are therefore important contexts for language variation and change, providing opportunities for linguistic innovation. In addition, the digital platforms and social media, such as Twitter, offer new affordances for linguistic innovation but also impact on the global Chinese diaspora as a political and ideological construct. This article has the dual aim of critically assessing the linguistic ideologies regarding the Chinese writing system by locating them in historical and diasporic context and analysing how multi-lingual Chinese language users manipulate the affordances of the writing system in combination with the affordances of new, digital communication platforms to challenge the dominant language ideologies and policies, to articulate a new sense of transnationalism, and to participate in social activism. This is a critical essay, not a report on a single piece of empirical research. Nevertheless, we draw data from a long-term and ongoing digital ethnography of digital communication in the global Chinese diaspora and creative Sinographs to demonstrate and to argue that the diaspora is not simply a context for the study of language variation and change but a crucial space for radical new thinking and actions that challenge orthodoxies of various kinds and enable cultural flow as well as social participation at a global scale.

The article consists of two parts. The first part examines the concept of the Chinese diaspora as an ideological construct and the role of language in the reinforcement of ethnic identity and unity. A brief account of the language ideology regarding the Chinese writing system is given in order to provide the necessary context for the analysis of examples of innovative linguistic practices in the diaspora in the second part. The second part then discusses forms of new transnationalism, diasporic imagination, and linguistic activism as evidenced in dynamic and innovative linguistic practices in the digital space, with a particular reference to the creative Sinographs that challenges the language ideologies surrounding the Chinese writing system. The article concludes with a discussion of the idea of Global Chinese as soft power, how the Chinese online, diasporic community turns the idea round in constructing their sense of new transnationalism, and the contributions of the diasporic perspective to a critical sociolinguistics of language ideology.

1 | THE CHINESE DIASPORA AS AN IDEOLOGICAL CONSTRUCT AND THE REINFORCEMENT OF RACIAL IDENTITY AND UNITY THROUGH LANGUAGE

Miles (2020) points out that any attempt at standardization of the notion of the Chinese diaspora is doomed to failure, because, as Li (2016) outlined, migration has long been a feature of the Chinese race; they have been moving beyond the Chinese borders for centuries, for very different reasons and purposes and to very different parts of the world. As the same, time there are competing, and confusing, discourses about the Chinese diaspora that are highly political. The Chinese call those who went across the seas surrounding the east and southeast of the Chinese mainland 海外华侨 (*haiwai huaqiao*) 'overseas Chinese'. If they settle permanently overseas and take up local citizenship, they, and their local-born children, are called 海外华人 (*haiwai huaren*) 'people of Chinese descent living overseas'. They form the core of the Chinese diaspora worldwide. The people of three specific regions – Hong Kong, Macau and Taiwan – have special but different status in this regard. Hong Kong and Macau were

British and Portuguese colonies until 1997 and 1998, respectively. The mainland Chinese government regarded the people in the two regions before their returns of sovereignty to China as overseas Chinese but called them 同胞 (*tongbao*) ‘siblings’ or ‘compatriots’. The same term is used to refer to the people of Taiwan, which China regards as ‘an inseparable part of the motherland’. Until the 17th century, the island of Taiwan was inhabited by indigenous people who spoke Austronesian languages, with sporadic settlers from mainland China’s Fujian and Guangdong provinces speaking Hakka, Hokkien and various Cantonese dialects. The island was colonised by the Dutch (1624–1662), the Spanish (northern part, 1626–1642) and the Japanese after 1895 who used it as a base for its invasion of Southeast Asia and the Pacific during World War II. After Japan’s defeat in mainland China in 1945, the Kuomintang-led nationalists took control of Taiwan and moved its government to the island in 1949 after its own defeat by the communists on the mainland. Nowadays, only about 2% of the population of Taiwan are of the indigenous origin, with the rest of Chinese descent. At the 19th National Congress of the Chinese Communist Party in October 2017, the term 三胞 (*sanbao*, ‘three compatriots’) was coined and has been in use since, especially in official documents, to refer to all the Chinese in Hong Kong and Macau, Taiwan and other parts of the world. From the mainland Chinese perspective then, the Chinese diaspora refers to all ethnic Chinese living outside mainland China, with its core in Southeast Asia.

In the ideological construction of the Chinese diaspora, language, especially the written language, has played a crucial role. Traditionally, the main source of overseas Chinese migration was the southeast coastal areas, of the Chinese mainland which happen to be mainly the non-Mandarin-speaking areas. Most of the overseas Chinese immigrants are therefore speakers of Cantonese, Hokkien, Teochew, Hakka, Shanghainese and Zhejiang (e.g., Wenzhou) dialects. These dialects are mutually unintelligible, necessitating the sharing of the same writing system in foreign lands. Indeed, despite the large numbers (10 million in Thailand, over 6.6 million in Malaysia, 3 million in Indonesia, 1.6 million in Myanmar, 1.3 million in the Philippines and 1 million each in Japan, South Korea and Vietnam), the Chinese are regarded as a minority in all the Southeast Asian countries except for Singapore (over 2.5 million) where they constitute over 76% of the population. In these minoritised situations, overseas Chinese have to find a key to unity as a community and that is the Chinese writing system. The logograph-based writing system enables speakers of mutually unintelligible regional languages to communicate with each other. Indeed, the Chinese diaspora is sometimes referred to as the Hanzi (汉字, ‘Chinese characters’) world or, in a more literary sense, the Sinophone world. Schools have been set up all over the world to teach the children of Chinese heritage how to read and write the Chinese characters; Chinese language newspapers and magazines first emerged in Southeast Asia, then spread all over the world. *Sin Chew Daily* (星洲日報), for example, founded in 1926 in Singapore, still has a daily circulation of over half a million outside mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong and Macau till this day.

The Chinese diaspora is a complex global network, facilitating mobility and cultural flows across geographic dispersal. It is also connected with European colonisation. The present-day Chinese outside Southeast Asia are predominantly post World War II migrants and their descendants. In Europe, many of the Chinese migrants came from former European colonies in Southeast Asia; for example, Indonesia to the Netherlands, and Vietnam to France. The largest group amongst these are of course the Hong Kong migrants to Britain. Like most immigrant communities across the world, the Chinese have had their share of hostility, marginalisation, and discrimination. The collective coping strategies for the immigrants often involve levelling their internal differences and stressing their commonalities. Once again, the written language has played an important part in their effort to deal with the fact they come from different parts of China, indeed different parts of the world for the secondary migrants, and speak different languages and dialects. Huge emphasis has been given to the sharable writing system that helps to overcome spoken dialectal differences. As mentioned above, the Chinese are particularly good at establishing community schools for their children. These are weekend schools for the children to

learn to read and write Chinese characters and they exist all over the world (see studies in Lausent-Herrera, 2015; Li, 2016). The vast majority of the schools operate in the larger regional varieties of Chinese: Cantonese, Hokkien and Mandarin. Children of other dialects-speaking families can only send their children to these schools. As Li and Zhu (2010) pointed out, the Chinese schools focus primarily on teaching the children reading and writing skills in Chinese, assuming that they would acquire their speaking skills at home from their parents. Indeed, they found that the Chinese immigrants place great emphasis on their children's learning of written Chinese. Many claim that one cannot be truly Chinese without knowing how to read and write the Chinese characters (see further Zhu & Li, 2016).

It has to be said that the Chinese diasporas were seen by successive governments in China, of different political persuasions, to be a breeding ground for radicals. Many political activists and dissidents lived in exile overseas and used the diasporic community as the base for their activities. In fact, the first leader of Kuomintang and Father of the Nation, Dr. Sun Yat-sen (1866–1925), lived in Hawaii during his formative years and led his political campaigns from Japan and Hong Kong that eventually overthrew the Manchu-led Qing Empire. During Mao's Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), many of returnees from overseas were persecuted. But after Mao died in 1976, the new Chinese leadership embarked on a major economic reform and reconstruction programme, an integral part of which is the so-called Open-Door Policy to attract overseas investment and sending Chinese scientists, academics and students abroad to learn new technologies. Overseas Chinese became an important part of the policy. Not only have they accumulated sufficient foreign currencies to invest in the reconstruction of their ancestral land, but they also have access to information and skills that China needed. The government played on the Chinese psyche and cultural traditions of 衣锦还乡 (return to one's hometown in silken robes), 光宗耀祖 (bring glory onto one's ancestors) and 落叶归根 (falling leaves gather at the root of the tree) and encouraged overseas Chinese to help their ancestral land to become stronger. Preferential policies are in place for these people to travel, work, study or live in mainland China and to attract inward investment from them. It has to be said, many overseas Chinese have suffered generations of discrimination as minorities and felt that successive governments in China could not provide the backing they needed because China itself was in chaos. They have longed for a stronger native country despite the fact that many of them are third and fourth generations of Chinese heritage and have never actually lived in China. The Chinese State Council established a ministerial-level Overseas Chinese Affairs Office in 1978, which was merged with the United Front Work Department of the Chinese Communist Party's Central Committee in 2018. The United Front Work Department is responsible for managing the relationships with people and entities that are not formally connected with the Communist Party, especially in the overseas Chinese community, who hold social, commercial or academic influence or who represent interest groups. An important part of its work is to promote the One China policy and to isolate Taiwan on the international stage. Through this department, various organizations were set up to support Chinese language learning in the Chinese diaspora by donating large volumes of language teaching materials and facilities and organizing 'roots-searching' trips to China, with the aim of promoting the idea of a distinctive, shared cultural heritage amongst the Chinese worldwide and the importance of having a united nation which includes the return of sovereignty of Hong Kong, Macau and ultimately Taiwan to the mainland.

Language has once again been used as a unifying tool for diverse range of Chinese from different parts of the world with vastly different life experiences and attitudes towards China and the Chinese culture. Language policymakers and scholars in China are advocating the idea of Global Chinese. *A Dictionary of Commonly Used Words Across the Taiwan Strait*, was launched simultaneously in mainland China and Taiwan in 2012. The launch event in Taipei, held on the 13th August 2012, was attended by the then serving Taiwanese president Ma Ying-jeou who hailed it as a key milestone in the cross-strait relations. And the Beijing launch event was attended by senior officials of the Communist

Party's Central Committee responsible for Taiwan affairs. The speeches at both events recognised that Chinese language used in mainland China and Taiwan has diverged in many significant ways, and that it was important to document the differences not only to facilitate communication across the Taiwan Strait, but also to hold onto shared Chinese cultural heritage that the language represents.

It seems somewhat ironic that efforts that record the differences in linguistic practices of different Chinese communities across the globe should be endorsed by the authorities in mainland China, Taiwan and Singapore as well as the various Chinese communities themselves. These efforts are in fact part of the discourse and ideology of harmony, because they memorialise the differences and emphasize commonality, propagating the One China policy, that is, Taiwan is an inseparable part of China, in particular. The fact that both the mainland and Taiwan have Mandarin as the commonly spoken language variety does contribute positively to the reunification ideal. It is worth noting that since 2009, Taiwan has been using *pinyin*, which was designed by the mainland government to promote Putonghua, in public signs and even official documents, and more and more simplified characters can be seen in public spaces. In North and Latin America, up to half a million people claim to have connections with Taiwan either by birth or by descent. But compared to an estimated population of up to 5 million Chinese immigrants in the Americas, they are a small minority. Most of the earlier immigrants from Taiwan had mainland roots and many who left Taiwan after the Martial Law in 1987 are ambivalent about the mainland–Taiwan relationship. In terms of language, they share more with the mainlanders than with people from Hong Kong, for example. So political allegiance aside, they do not feel a strong linguistic divide between them and the Chinese mainlanders. Some of the comments on Tsai's tweet in Figure 1 illustrate this point.

2 | CHINESE LANGUAGE IDEOLOGY AND COMPETING WRITING SYSTEMS FOR CHINESE

Any attempt at understanding the Chinese language ideology needs to get over the western linguistics obsession with phonology and syntax of the spoken language and shift the analytical attention to the complexity and symbolic power of the writing system (see recent developments in this regard, Weth & Juffermans, 2018). Due to the above-mentioned mutual unintelligibility amongst the different regional varieties of Chinese, a logographic character-based writing system has been imposed by the ruling class since the First Emperor (259–210 BC). This system, however, does not represent actual pronunciation. And because it was used exclusively by the educated elite, it led to a literary style, Classical Chinese, that had no resemblance to speech in daily interaction. The nationalist Kuomintang government of the Republic of China, founded in 1912, promoted two language policies: 言文一致 (consistency between speaking and writing), and 国语统一 (unifying the national language). The former led to what became known as the Written Vernacular Movement (白话文运动) which aimed to replace Classical Chinese writing with forms of written Chinese that are based on the spoken varieties in everyday use. Written Vernacular Chinese was, and continues to be, promoted with a standardised pronunciation, based on Beijing dialect. A romanization system was therefore invented to represent the standard pronunciation which the logographic Chinese characters themselves cannot represent. The most popular romanization scheme during the Republican period was the Wade–Giles system which was devised during the late 19th century by two British diplomats, Thomas Francis Wade and Herbert Allen Giles, and is still used for some locations, persons and other proper nouns across the Sinophone world.

With constant civil wars and wars against the Japanese invasion in the first half of the 20th century, efforts to promote a unified national spoken language were limited. And amongst the political class, there were concerns about the potential foreign influence on the Chinese language and culture through

romanization as well as transliteration and borrowing of foreign words. It has to be said that the translation of western philosophical, literary and scientific works in vernacular Chinese was particularly prolific during the Republican period, including the translation of the Communist Manifesto in 1920. Gradually a fault line emerged with the left-wing radical intellectuals advocating the use the written vernacular, and the traditionalists and political conservatives trying to conserve Classical Chinese and being anti-romanization. After the founding of the People's Republic in 1949, a number of language policy initiatives were introduced as part of the nation-building effort; most notably, the simplification of written Chinese characters and the new romanization system, *pinyin*, for Putonghua or 'common speech', the new standard national spoken language. Pinyin has also facilitated the teaching and learning of Chinese amongst non-first-language learners. Today, the simplified characters and pinyin are widely used in mainland China, Singapore and Macau, whilst Taiwan and Hong Kong continue to use traditional, 'complex' characters. The simplified version is increasingly visible in Taiwan and pinyin was officially adopted in the capital city of Taipei in 2002 and elsewhere in Taiwan since 2009. Nevertheless, different script systems did and continue to exist. In fact, there is a very long tradition of regional written Chinese. Moreover, there are various romanization systems for Chinese; for example, *zhùyīn fúhào* was used in mainland China before the 1950s under the Kuomintang government and is still used in some contexts in Taiwan; and *jyutping*, a romanisation system for Cantonese, developed by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong in the 1990s to facilitate digital processing of written Cantonese, is used in Hong Kong.

Throughout the Chinese history, fears of returning to the warring states drive its leaders' ruling strategies. The discourse of harmony, often couched in Confucius philosophical terms, that almost all Chinese leaders propagate is in fact due to an anxiety that the nation would fragment and collapse due to both internal conflict and external aggression (Khan, 2018). Language, especially the writing system, gives the facade of unity whilst enabling the ruling class to exercise control. It has hence played a crucial role in the construction of a national and racial identity and the political ideology of harmony. Over time, the language ideology of a national writing system has translated into a popular belief amongst ordinary Chinese within and beyond the Chinese borders of its necessity and superiority. Across China and the Chinese diaspora today, there is still a great deal of emphasis on the teaching and learning of the Chinese characters, down to the details of stroke order (Li & Zhu, 2010, 2014).

Having examined some of the historical dimensions of the diversity and complexity of the notion of the Chinese diaspora and the deep-rooted ideology and wide-spread discourses around the Chinese writing system as tool for national and ethnic unity, we now turn to the present-day language practices amongst the diasporic Chinese, to demonstrate how the Chinese diaspora continues to be a radical space for new thinking and actions and how new digital technology mediated writing offers affordances to grassroots practices that continue to transform the written script to reflect more adequately speech sound and social changes whilst challenging the dominant ideology of a unified, elite writing system.

3 | NEW TRANSNATIONALISM, DIASPORIC IMAGINATION AND LINGUISTIC ACTIVISM: DIGITAL MEDIA AND THE SINOGRAPH CHALLENGE

Rapid advances of digital technologies and social media in the 21st century have helped to heighten the interconnectivities between individuals, groups and communities, increasing information flow across time and space. In this particular regard, the Chinese diasporas find themselves at the forefront of new transnationalism exemplified by fast information flow in multiple directions aided by the latest media technologies, for example, WeChat, Tik Tok and so on (see Miles, 2020, for a discussion of

the role of new media in the present-day Chinese diasporas). A key feature of the new transnationalism is the grassroots, democratic actions that set out to challenge the status quo, the national and international rule making and the socio-economic structures such as the multinational corporations that were a prominent feature of earlier versions of transnationalism. However, compared to the more politically motivated transnational movements such as Extinction Rebellion, the actions the Chinese diasporas are taking seem rather mundane, though by no means less challenging and significant. Major socio-political changes in China and the new world order in which China is fast becoming a leading world power mean that a new position needs to be negotiated in the identification with the mother nation and present place of residence. This new position, or new thinking of the Chinese diaspora, is what Tsagarousianou (2004) calls 'potentialities' of diaspora, that is, 'the various creative possibilities opened by the activities of diasporas in both local and transnational contexts' (p. 58). In Brah's terms, 'diasporas are the sites of hope and new beginnings' (1996, p.193); rather than looking back in a nostalgic effort of recovering or maintaining their identity, they discover or construct notions of who they are and what home is by essentially looking forward, that is, diasporic thinking (Li & Zhu, 2013, 2016; Zhu & Li, 2018). Language again is playing a crucial role in this new Chinese transnationalism and diasporic imagination. We began to follow closely what Li (2016) called New Chinglish as part of our research in translanguaging practices amongst overseas Chinese in the early 2000. We noticed that as well as the new inventive and subversive ways of mixing English and Chinese in spoken interaction, there is a great deal of linguistic innovation in digitally mediated communication in terms of the visual representation of the Chinese characters. We have therefore been doing an extended digital ethnography (Kozinets, 2019; Sade-Beck, 2004) of the communicative practices in the online space amongst the global Chinese diaspora. We took a participatory approach, which is explained in Li et al. (2020). We envisage it as a long-term, ongoing project without an end date or defined limit, just like communication in the digital space. Whilst our focus is on linguistic innovation in the Chinese diasporic context, the specific analytical questions emerge in a typical ethnographical way as we participate in and observe what is going in the online community. Where it concerns a specific Facebook page, YouTube channel or some other digital domain, we seek permissions from the owners should we decide to use their data for analysis. As it is a participatory project, we exchanged views with them all the time and they had a good understanding of what we were doing. We are doing all this from London, as part of the transnational flow but from a specific geographic standpoint. We seek to capture the moments (Li, 2011) as new translanguaging practices appear.

We now discuss an example of a YouTube channel to demonstrate what we call new transnationalism and diasporic imagination that are emerging in the Chinese diaspora. We then analyse a selection of representative examples of innovative Sinographs, created in the diasporic context and mediated by the digital media, that challenge the ideologies regarding the Chinese writing system and the Chinese diaspora as we have discussed above.

3.1 | CantoMando

First, let us look at CantoMando, a YouTube channel which, in the words of its owners, 'offers comedic commentary on Asian culture by speaking on Asian stereotypes, problems and life' (<https://www.cantomandomedia.com/>). It was created in 2016 by three Chinese Canadian young men, Sheldon Ho, Mike Wu and Edward Leung, and has earned more than over half a million subscribers across the world with over 61 million views by early 2021. According to their websites, all three young men were born in 1995, Sheldon and Edward in Canada and Mike in Beijing. They met in the English–French bilingual immersion Pierre Elliott Trudeau High School in Markham, Ontario. Sheldon's

family came from Macau. He studied at Waterloo University and Nanyang Technological University in Singapore. And he is fluent in French, English, Mandarin and Cantonese. Mike also studied at Waterloo University and is fluent in English and Mandarin. Edward studied at Queen's University, Kingston, Ontario. His father is from Hong Kong, and his mother is from Guangzhou. He is fluent in French, English, Mandarin and Cantonese with good knowledge of Spanish. Apparently, it was Sheldon who began to post videos of himself teaching Mandarin and Cantonese on YouTube first. But he quickly expanded beyond teaching videos, and began making comedy skits. It was at that point that his two best friends, Edward and Mike, joined. Their videos are for the most part in English, with Cantonese and Mandarin frequently used and many mix all three. Several of their videos are specifically about language and literacy. In one video posted on January 9, 2018, the trio set themselves a challenge to write Chinese characters, which clearly showed the differences in their literacy level. But there was no sense of shame at all. In a number of Q&A videos to respond to their fans' questions, they talked about their language knowledge and abilities; they are very open about their lack of vocabulary in Chinese, giving one example of Mike being interviewed on the phone for a job in Shanghai but could not say the name of the degree he did at university in Chinese. They also commented that they did not find the Chinese community language schools useful for their learning of the language. Yet they seem to be very fond of the Chinese schools and their experiences there. Several videos are about them attending Chinese language classes.

CantoMando has a corresponding channel in mainland China on the video sharing platform bilibili, and it is called 男孩不靠“普” (*nanhai bu kaopu*), which is a play on the Chinese phrase 不靠谱 (*bu kaopu*) meaning 'unreliable'. Instead of the character 谱, meaning *menu* or *music score*, they put a homograph 普 for Putonghua in quotation marks. We asked them via email why they did this, and they explained that it was because their Putonghua is not very reliable and their videos are largely in English and does not rely on Putonghua. It is endearing to see an error in their introductory text in Chinese, which reads:

大家好!我们是来自加拿大的不靠“普”男孩,谢谢你们的支持和喜爱! Edward: 精明
难干老大哥 Mike: 精神小伙儿机灵鬼 Sheldon: 快乐源泉小奶狗

'Hello everyone. We are *bu kaopu* (unreliable/not relying on Putonghua) boys from Canada. Thank you for your support and love! Edwards is the clever and able elder brother. Mike is smart looking and a clever devil. Sheldon is a source of joy and a 'little milk dog'.

Instead of 能干 (*nenggan*, 'able'), they wrote 难干 (*nangan*, 'hard to do'). When we asked them about this, they said they had not realised the error. They used the pinyin input but missed out the final 'g'. So, the phrase 难干 came up instead of 能干. But because they did not know the target characters, they just chose the one that came up on the screen. This is an artefact of the digital, and in fact very common for the Chinese digital media users, who have to use an English alphabet-based keyboard to input pinyin and then choose the characters. When they realised the error, they showed no embarrassment; rather they viewed it as a source of fun for them and their followers. The text also contains trendy internet expressions such as 小奶狗 'little milk dog', an expression for cute, loving boys whom girls fancy to have as boyfriends.

The contents of the CantoMando videos have been praised as harnessing 'comedy not only for the sake of laughs, but also to bring focus to important issues facing Asians in a more light-hearted way' (<https://thetartan.org/2018/1/29/pillbox/cantomando>). They address intergenerational differences, cultural stereotypes and language learning. The three young men use the terms 'Asian American' and

'ABC' (American-born Chinese) to describe themselves. When they are asked on video why they do not identify themselves as Canadian, they explicitly say that by America(n), they mean the whole of America including Canada, not specifically the United States. And they feel they are part of the pan-Asian community rather than narrowly Chinese. When they are asked about their favourite places to visit in China, they include Macau in their list. These identity articulations are not done without thinking. They show their broad and open view of the world which transcend cultural, linguistic and nation-state boundaries. They make constant and explicit references to the differences between the three of them. But clearly it is their transcultural mentality and diasporic imagination that bind them together and make them stand out as a new generation of transnational Chinese.

3.2 | 别字 (biezi) 'Alternative characters'

The advancement of digital communication technologies, for which China is one of the world leaders, has provided new and in many ways unique affordances for Chinese language users to deal with everyday communication problems creatively and in doing so challenge the received language ideology and policies. For the Chinese, writing out what is spoken in logographic characters is a key literacy skill, a skill that the CantoMando guys find wanting and a skill that Chinese people spend years of schooling to acquire, because there is no direct character-to-sound mapping and multiple homographs are a distinctive feature of the Chinese language. The kind of errors made accidentally by the young men of CantonMando are quite common. We have observed, however, an emerging trend amongst the Chinese social media users to deliberately use the 'wrong' characters for fun as well as subversive reasons. For instance, 开森 (*kaisen*), literally 'open + forest', is often used instead of 开心 (*kaixin*) 'open + heart' or 'happy'; 阔以滴 (*kuoyidi*), a nonsense combination instead of 可以的 (*keyidi*) 'it's ok'; and 森7 (*senqi*) instead of 生气 (*shengqi*) 'angry'. The 'wrong' characters mimic the accents of regional dialect speakers speaking Putonghua, the national standard variety. As mentioned above, consistency between speaking and writing, or 言文一致, was a language policy promoted by the nationalists during the Republic of China period, together with the policy of unifying the national language (国语统一). The way Chinese social media users choose these wrong or alternative characters to represent naturally occurring accents supports one policy but mocks the other simultaneously. This kind of duality, or double voicing, is very common in our observation and seems to have gone through a process from being accidental to purposeful. We have asked a number of people during our online ethnography whose use of such substitute characters intrigued us and with whom we have personal contacts. Many of them said that because they were doing it digitally at a fast speed, they often make such errors without noticing them. These accidental errors then became jokes and got repeated by others and entered into wider circulation.

Other humorous examples of using the 'wrong' characters as a kind of shorthand for the actual pronunciation or accent in conversational exchanges include: 酱 (*jiang*) 'jam' instead of 这样 (*zheyang*) 'this way' or 'like this' and 飙 (*biao*) 'acting out violently' or 'show off' instead of 不要 (*buyao*) 'don't want to'. The example of 森7 (*senqi*) for 生气 (*shengqi*) 'angry' is a kind of shorthand representation. But it also involves the combination of a Chinese character and a numeral whose pronunciation in Chinese resembles that of the standard character. It is an example of what Li and Zhu (2019) called Transcribing – deliberate incorporation of 'foreign' elements in Chinese writing against the orthodoxy of Chinese writing conventions. We see on the internet lots of comments on such fun but subversive ways of digital writing. It seems that the educated elite find the phenomenon particularly annoying because they violate the standard. But many of the new generations of Chinese born outside China like the CantoMando trio do not know the standard characters anyway. They see the insistence on standard

character writing a kind of snobbery by the conservative elite. They seem more inclined to go for such innovative and fun way of writing and communicating. It meets the needs of people in the diaspora. The fact that it upsets the convention may be a bonus to them.

3.3 | Social activism through resemiotisation and manipulation of the visual: Sinographs

In recent years, a further development has been observed in the digital communicative practices amongst the Chinese diaspora that seems to turn the fun and subversive potentials of the creative use Chinese characters and other semiotic signs into social activism. For example, when the Me Too movement (#MeToo) started in the United States, the Chinese social media users transliterated it as 米兔 (*mitu*) ‘rice bunny’. This was in turn shorthanded into the sign in Figure 2. This caused a certain amount of misunderstanding and unease when it was recirculated back to the West where some people mistook the image to refer to the playboy bunny or Micky Mouse which in Chinese is called 米老鼠 (*mi laoshu*) ‘rice mouse’. But in fact, 米兔 (*mitu*) ‘rice bunny’ is the mascot rabbit for the Chinese mobile phone Xiaomi, sometimes simply called Mi. Chinese young people, especially social media users, use the sign to expose a series of sexual harassment cases in universities including a number of historical cases. In one case, a friend of a victim of sexual harassment by a well-known professor in a leading university in China used social media to rally support both outside and inside China. The friend is currently living in Canada and responded to the #MeToo movement in a series of online exposé in both Chinese and English that got recirculated back to China via social media with #米兔 (*mitu*) ‘rice bunny’. The case received huge public attention and the professor was sacked by his university. It is a good example of using the affordances of the digital social media, through innovative manipulation of the writing system and the resemiotisation of signs, for social activism.

A similar kind of social and political activism can be seen through the emergence of the newly invented Sinographs – signs that are based on Chinese characters with a Chinese character-looking shape, that is, square, but containing other semiotic elements, such as Figure 3.

This Sinograph stands for the phrase, 反中亂港 ‘Oppose China Destabilize Hong Kong’, a phrase that the pro-Beijing camp in Hong Kong used to accuse the protesters of doing. It is based on the



FIGURE 2 Mitu/#MeToo/Rice bunny



FIGURE 3 ‘Oppose China Destabilize Hong Kong’



FIGURE 4 Push/kick



FIGURE 5 Deer/horse

character for ‘chaos’ or ‘destabilise’ in its traditional form 亂, but has been transcribed with the character 亂 (oppose) in the middle of the left-hand radical, and the character 亂 (middle, Middle Kingdom, China) on the top of the right-hand side and the letters HK, representing Hong Kong, below it. Mixing alphabetic letters with the logographic characters has always been frowned upon by the traditionalists, and has been associated with the left-leaning radicals during the anti-European and anti-imperialist May the Fourth Movement (1919). So, using it to take a political stance on current affairs can be seen as a continuation of that tradition. But mixing letters and logographs in a single character pushes the convention to the extreme.

Each new Sinograph has its own story, or script, behind it. The Sinograph in Figure 4 first appeared during the crackdown of the 2019 anti-extradition law amendment bill protests in Hong Kong and got widely circulated via social media throughout the Sinophone world. It adds the semantic radical for ‘foot’ 足 on the left to the Chinese character 推 ‘push’. Readers of Chinese can easily read the meaning as ‘pushing with foot’. But there is no such a character in the standard lexicon, nor a pronunciation for it. The Sinograph was motivated by the claims and counterclaims between the protesters and the police that latter kicked some protesters whereas the police said they only pushed them. Many of the people we asked about this invented Sinograph mentioned the ‘nonsense’ side of the invented character and took it as mocking the police’s claims. A further Sinograph was invented and circulated on the social media a little later in the protest movement where the character for ‘stag’ 鹿 is fused with the character for ‘horse’ 馬, as in Figure 5. As a whole, it looks like the latter, 馬 ‘horse’. But the top is clearly 鹿 for ‘stag’. The invented Sinograph stands for the Chinese expression ‘to call a stag a horse’, meaning ‘deliberately confounding right and wrong’. It is another, visual commentary on the Hong Kong government’s account of the violence that broke out during the protests. A more visual, pictorial depiction is seen in Figure 6, and a handwritten two-Sinograph representation that fuses the four-character phrase 指鹿為馬 ‘to call a stag a horse’ is seen in Figure 7.

Note that most of the Sinographs are based on the traditional Chinese characters that are typically used in Hong Kong, Taiwan and some parts of the Chinese diaspora, not the simplified ones that are used in mainland China and Singapore. Most of these Sinographs are not easily seen in mainland China, although some, like the stag-horse fusion, has been resemiotised by mainland social media users to mock the false claims by the authorities over the management of COVID-19. It is an interesting case of transnational flow.

The play on the visual in the invention of these Sinographs is something that is particularly prominent on social media because of the affordances of the digital. To most non-Chinese readers who are not



FIGURE 6 Deer/horse poster

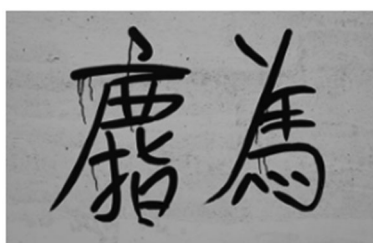


FIGURE 7 Handwritten deer/horse

familiar with the formation of the characters Figure 8 may look just a number of abstract shapes. But they are silhouettes of the characters for slogan of the Hong Kong protest movement, Free Hong Kong, Revolution Now. It implies that the Hong Kong government is trying to silence the protest movement; but people know what is happening. The standard Chinese character version is seen in Figure 9.

Figure 10 plays with the visual as well as the homophonic feature of the Chinese writing system. Again, it is a product of the Hong Kong anti-extradition law amendment bill protests which later morphed into anti-national security law in Hong Kong protests. The protestors had five basic demands, which in Chinese was known as 五大訴求 (Cantonese: ng⁵ daai⁶ sou³ kau⁴). The image in Figure 11 is of five Ikea style vegetarian meatballs 五大素球, which in Cantonese as well as in Mandarin are exact homophones of the Chinese characters for 'five demands'. The Ikea sign is transformed into an abbreviation for Hongkongers, and the Chinese text humorously says 'Essential food for Hongkongers' fights: five vegetarian meatballs, not one less!' This was one of the most widely circulated images on the Chinese social media circuit worldwide.



FIGURE 8 Silhouette of slogan

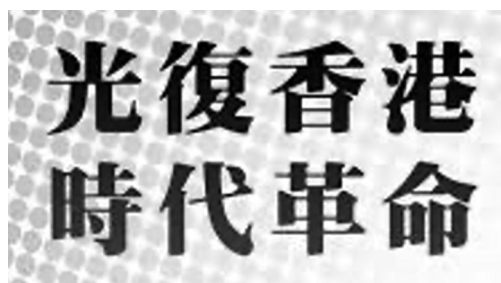


FIGURE 9 Slogan



FIGURE 10 Five vegetarian meatballs/Five demands

4 | CONCLUSION: TURNING THE IDEA OF GLOBAL CHINESE AS SOFT POWER AROUND

With the consolidation of mainland China as a leading world economic–political–military power, the mainland Chinese government has been investing heavily in the promotion of Chinese as a global language. A significant part of the thinking is linked to the uniqueness of the Chinese writing system: anyone who is willing to invest time and energy in learning the Chinese characters will be influenced by the Chinese worldview. Whilst the mainland China-initiated schemes, such as the Confucius Institutes, to promote Chinese as a global language have no explicit strategy regarding the overseas Chinese diaspora and the millions of Chinese-as-a-heritage-language users, the thinking behind these initiatives does seem to echo the traditional ideology about the Chinese writing system as a key unifying tool for the different groups of Chinese people across the globe, an ideology also strongly held by the Chinese diasporas as we discussed earlier in this article.

At the same time, however, the diaspora and the digital social media provide a crucial context and affordance for linguistic innovation which not only challenges the language ideology of a unified language and a unified writing system, but also seeks to turn the soft power of the language into social activism, giving rise to a new sense of transnationalism. This new transnationalism is about the



FIGURE 11 Zoom meeting

interconnectivities amongst the Chinese in different parts of the world, as well as with other communities; it is about making the best use of the economic and cultural capitals the global Chinese communities offer; and it is also about no longer staying silent and passive, but fighting against discrimination and for social justice and being politically connected, informed and active. This new form of transnationalism builds on the diasporic imagination that aims to make positive use of their in-betweenness and interconnectivities to challenge traditional ideologies and practices and to develop their own dynamic identities that respond creatively and flexibly to different conditions and contexts (see also Li & Zhu, 2016; Zhu & Li, 2018). The innovative communicative practices through the digital social media and the Sinographs as we see in this article are all parts of this new transnationalism and examples of a growing linguistic activism that challenges the ideology of the Chinese writing system while advocating broader socio-political change. As Li and Zhu (2019) argued, Transcribing is an alternative soft power to the dominant and traditional ideologies regarding the Chinese writing system. It is a grassroots practice and action in the radical tradition of the Chinese diaspora that we outlined in the first part of this article. Whilst seemingly continuing with the effort to make the written script to more adequately reflect speech, the transcribing practice reflects more of the social changes that are happening amongst the Chinese diasporas and therefore are more ideologically laden and subversive. Moreover, the transcribed Sinographs of the kind we have seen in this article also form part of a transnational trend of social and political activism mediated through dynamic translanguaging practices via digital social media (see Androutsopoulos, 2020; Panović, 2017; Sebba, 2012).

We end with two of the latest Sinographs which emerged amongst the winners of the 11th competition of inventive Chinese characters (December 2020) in Japan. They were immediately and widely circulated in East Asia and across the globe.

The one in Figure 11 replaces the lower half of the Chinese character for 'meeting' 会 with the English letter z, to mean 'zoom meeting', and the one in Figure 12 moves one of the radicals meaning 'person' 人 in the character for 'seat' or 'seating' 座 to a diagonal position to the other person radical, to mean 'social distancing seating'. The reason they are instant successes in the Hanzi world and beyond is precisely because they disrupt and manipulate the normative convention, challenge the orthodoxy and most importantly, reflect ongoing social changes.

The diaspora is not simply a context for linguistic variation and change, but a radical space for linguistic activism. A diaspora sociolinguistics should move away from a focus on how unique or different any observed linguistic practices in the diaspora are compared to some imaged norm, to the interconnectivities and flows between communities across geographical and social spaces, and to the



FIGURE 12 Social distance seating

diasporic imagination and diasporic thinking that motivate the linguistic innovation and activism and the challenges they present to orthodoxies of various kinds.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It was when Amelia Tseng and Lar Hinrichs kindly invited Li Wei to speak at the diaspora sociolinguistics colloquium during the 2018 Linguistic Society of America annual meeting that some of the ideas in this article were first presented. They subsequently encouraged us to develop the ideas further into the present paper and provided much needed support, comments and advice. Comments from two anonymous reviewers helped to clarify our thoughts enormously. And the encouragement and understanding by Monica Heller and Erez Levon helped to shape the final version. We are very grateful for all their support. Part of the online ethnographic work has been supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) of the United Kingdom through its grant AH/L007096/1.

ORCID

Li Wei  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-2015-7262>

Zhu Hua  <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-1500-3047>

REFERENCES

- Androutsopoulos, J. (2020). Trans-scripting as a multilingual practice: The case of Hellenised English. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 17(3), 286–308.
- Khan, S. W. (2018). *Haunted by Chaos: China's grand strategy from Mao Zedong to Xi Jinping*. Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press.
- Kozinets, R. V. (2019). *Netnography: The essential guide to qualitative social media research*. Sage.
- Lausent-Herrera, I. (2015). The language is race and patriotism: New schools and new Sino-Peruvian press in Peru – The debate on education of Chinese and mixed blood 1931–2015. *Global Chinese*, 1(2), 311–337.
- Li, W. (Ed.) (2016) *Multilingualism in the Chinese diaspora worldwide*. Routledge.
- Li, W., & Zhu, H. (2019). Transcribing: Playful subversion with Chinese characters. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 16(2), 145–161.
- Li, D. C., Aoyama, R., & Wong, T. S. (2020). Silent conversation through Brushtalk (筆談): The use of Sinitic as a scripta franca in early modern East Asia. *Global Chinese*, 6(1), 1–24.
- Li, W. (2016). New Chinglish and the post-multilingualism challenge: Translanguaging ELF in China. *Journal of English as a Lingua Franca*, 5(1), 1–25.
- Li, W. (2011). Moment analysis and translanguaging space: Discursive construction of identities by multilingual Chinese youth in Britain. *Journal of Pragmatics*, 43(5), 1222–1235.
- Li, W., & Zhu, H., (2010). Voices from the diaspora: Changing hierarchies and dynamics of Chinese multilingualism. *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 2010(205), 155–171.

- Li, W., & Zhu, H. (2013). Diaspora: Multilingual and intercultural communication across time and space. *AILA Review*, 26(1), 42–56.
- Li, W., Tsang, A., Wong, N., & Lok, P. (2020). Kongish Daily: Researching translanguaging creativity and subversiveness. *International Journal of Multilingualism*, 17(3), 309–335.
- Miles, S. B. (2020). *Chinese Diasporas: A social history of global migration*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press
- Panović, I. (2017). Arabic in a time of revolution: Sociolinguistic notes from Egypt. In N. Lenze, C. Schriwer & Z. A. Jalil (Eds.), *Media in the Middle East: Activism, politics, and culture* (pp. 223–256). Palgrave Macmillan
- Sade-Beck, L. (2004). Internet ethnography: Online and offline. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods*, 3(2), 45–51.
- Sebba, M. (2012). *Orthography as social action: Scripts, spelling, identity and power* (pp. 1–20). De Gruyter Mouton.
- Weth, C., & Juffermans, K. (Eds.). (2018). *The tyranny of writing: Ideologies of the written word*. Bloomsbury.
- Zhu, H., & Li, W., (2014). Geopolitics and the changing hierarchies of the Chinese language: Implications for policy and practice of Chinese language teaching in Britain. *The Modern Language Journal*, 98(1), 326–339.
- Zhu, H., & Li, W., (2016). Transnational experience, aspiration and family language policy. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 37(7), 655–666.
- Zhu, H., & Li, W., (2018) Translanguaging and diasporic imagination. In R. Cohen & C. Fischer (Eds.), *Routledge handbook of diaspora studies* (pp. 106–112). Routledge

How to cite this article: Wei, L., & Hua, Z. (2021). Soft power struggles: A diasporic perspective on the competing ideologies and innovative practices regarding the Chinese writing system. *Journal of Sociolinguistics*, 25, 737–753. <https://doi.org/10.1111/josl.12535>