

# Living with 中式英语 *Zhongshi Yingyu*

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An autobiographical account

## Early experiences with Chinglish

I first heard of the term ‘Chinglish’ when I was at Baiduizi (白堆子) Beijing Foreign Languages School in the 1970s, through Janet Adams’ book, *From Chinglish to English*. The book contained 60 short dialogues in simple American English. It was meant to be teaching us colloquial English, compared to, I suppose, the textbook English written by Chinese teachers. I found the term Chinglish rather odd, and it was an odd thing for us pupils at that particular school to be made aware of, because the school was, quite literally, the only school in China at the time where foreigners were directly teaching Chinese children foreign languages and cultures. Few of these foreign teachers had formal teaching qualifications, and they were not using any textbooks written by Chinese teachers, but in their own ways using material the school compiled specially for the pupils. It was a form of audio-lingual and direct method. The language we were taught was pretty colloquial and we did not, as far as I could tell, speak Chinglish that the examples in Adams’ book illustrated.

Soon after Chairman Mao’s death in September 1976, China embarked on major economic reforms under the new Open Door Policy. English was deemed to be a useful tool. Radio and television stations started English lessons for the masses. Curiously, those lessons always started with revolutionary slogans such as ‘Long Live Chairman Mao’, ‘Learn from Comrade Lei Feng’, or quotations from the *Communist Manifesto*, ‘Workers of the world, unite’. There was no other way to learn these but through rote learning. We knew these were translations. The meaning made sense but not the structure.

Universities in China started admitting students through national college entrance examinations, or Gaokao, from 1978. One of the most popular English textbooks for university students was *Xu Guozhang English*, first published in the 1960s. The contents of *Xu Guozhang English* and other similar teaching texts were largely Chinese stories, written in such a way that specific grammatical structures and vocabulary were targeted. For instance, ‘Aunt Wang goes to the pigsty at 6:00 o’clock every morning’ was used to teach present tense. We, the pupils at the Baiduizi school, were then told that the English of such texts was *Zhongshi Yingyu* (中式英语 ‘Chinese-style English’), and that *Zhongshi Yingyu* was a form of translation from Chinese; so it was bad!

After graduating from Baiduizi at the end of 1978, I worked at a district education bureau in Beijing. I had two tasks there: one was to teach English to teachers of Russian or other subjects who were converting to English because there



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was a growing need for more English teachers in schools, and the other was to teach special spoken English courses for those students in different schools in the district who wanted to study English at university and who therefore needed to pass an additional spoken English test.

It was a struggle to teach the material I was supposed to be teaching, because the structures were rigid and the contents were boring. So I asked one of my Baiduizi school's British teachers for help. He gave me some copies of Robert O'Neill's *Kernel Lessons*, Vivian Cook's *Active Intonation*, and Michael Swan's *Practical English Usage* – nobody can imagine the delight and honour I felt when I met these heroes of mine in person after I came to the UK and got to know them well. But the idea that Zhongshi Yingyu was bad and something to be rid of was deep in my mind.

## From Chinglish to China English

While I was working at the district education bureau, an older friend from our Baiduizi school who became a professional translator told me that an English language newspaper was going to be launched in China in 1981 and they needed people to help with translating news and other texts from Chinese sources into English. He said that he could get me a job with the newspaper. I was very tempted as I really liked the idea of becoming a journalist one day. But I had set my mind on doing the Gaokao and going to university so that I could get a proper degree. Since the newspaper was going to have a trial run for a short period first, my friend managed to get me a freelance job, translating news from Beijing local papers for the column 'Around Beijing'. The newspaper was, of course, *China Daily*.

It was a strange experience working for the column for *China Daily*. We were given some stories to translate chosen by the editors and I did what I thought were rather good English translations. But I got repeatedly corrected into a really rigid style of almost slogan-like English. So I protested that my translation was much more colloquial whereas the 'corrections' made it Chinglish. But I was told that they actually wanted to use 'China English' because it was more 'accurate' in representing the original meanings of the Chinese texts. That was the first time I heard the concept of China English, which I understood to be the official-speak of Chinese propaganda organs. But it was literal translation to me, and literal translation was bad in my mind.

In all fairness, the China English of *China Daily* was already a major improvement from that in other propaganda publications such as *Beijing Review*. I felt that if you did not know the Chinese language and had not lived in China, it must be very hard to understand what is being said in those China English publications. I nevertheless was intrigued by the fact that the editors of *China Daily* felt Zhongshi Yingyu would represent the original meanings of the Chinese texts more accurately. I discussed this topic with various people including the British and American students studying Chinese at Beijing Normal University that I entered in 1982. Most of them said that the Chinese way of thinking was very different from that of English speakers.

An opportunity arose in 1986 for me to come to England to teach Chinese in the then newly established East Asia Centre at Newcastle University. I now had to learn how to articulate my Chinese thought in English, but more importantly how to get my English-speaking students to think the Chinese way.

Living in the heart of Geordieland meant that I quickly realised there were many different Englishes, not entirely mutually unintelligible as amongst the *fangyans*, or regional speeches, of Chinese, but almost. My Chinese class had students from all nations of the United Kingdom and all regions of England. Very often they had to ask each other what something someone had said meant. I started joking with them that the lingua franca we had in the class was Chinese. More seriously, though, we were engaged in the same problem-solving process. Yes, we all had our different ways of speaking, in different named languages, but we were thinking about the same problems, issues and topics. We articulated our thoughts in our own ways and for me that was the most interesting dimension of intercultural and interlingual communication.

## Getting into language contact

I did an MA in English Language Studies while teaching Chinese and then got a fellowship to pursue a PhD under the supervision of Lesley Milroy. Lesley is a leading figure in variationist sociolinguistics, and linguistic innovation and change is a major theme of the field. My PhD focused on bilingual family interaction in the context of intergenerational language shift, with particular regard to the Chinese immigrant community in Tyneside. As I observed, Chinese-English bilinguals mixed the two languages a great deal in

their everyday interaction, and they also used a large number of locally-invented expressions. Some were literal translations, e.g. 台酒 (*toi<sup>4</sup> zau<sup>2</sup>* ‘table wine’); others were mixtures of Chinese and English. Most of the latter were produced spontaneously in conversations, where there was a great deal of bilingual punning and joking. Linguistic innovation and change in bilingual, language contact situations was, and still is, a relatively under-explored topic, at least from a methodological perspective, in the sense that research tends to follow well-established paradigms of quantitative variationist sociolinguistics or structural constraints on code-mixing, borrowing and switching. To complete a PhD required focus. Although I was very interested in the linguistic innovation and change theme, I did little on it in my PhD.

I later got a series of research grants to investigate intergenerational language transmission in families and community language schools. Again I noticed a great deal of creative use of both Chinese and English in spontaneous interaction and in learning. I looked for alternative ways of studying it. The moment came when I saw Colin Baker’s term ‘translanguaging’ in the second edition of his textbook, *Foundations of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* (2001). Although it referred to the Welsh revitalisation education context, the term itself gave me inspiration. The concept of ‘languaging’ has been in the literature for a very long time, and I knew it from the work of Michael Halliday, A. L. (Pete) Becker, and Merrill Swain. Adding the ‘trans-’ prefix, which I took as ‘transcending’, would help to capture the dynamics of bilingual innovation. It would also help to raise critical questions about the assumption that speakers of different languages think differently, from a bilingual and multilingual perspective (see further, Li, 2018)

The moment arrived after I moved to London and started to study multilingual practices amongst youths of Chinese ethnic background, which led to my first major publication on translanguaging (Li, 2011). The idea of translanguaging also led to a renewed interest in Chinglish as it offers an alternative way of approaching the phenomenon.

## Reclaiming Chinglish

English language education in China has grown stupendously since I left in the mid-1980s. The British Council estimates there are over 400 million learners of English in China (British Council, n.d.) The English language teaching textbook scene has

also changed recognisably. Imported textbooks are widely available. Even the China-made texts are compiled with input from experienced English L1 textbook writers. In the last 20 years or so, China has also dominated the world in terms of the number of newly created social media apps and platforms. One report estimates that there are 983 million active social media netizens in China as of 2021 (Statista, n.d.). Many people use social media to learn English and also to communicate with friends all over the world. As I became a regular user of WeChat and other Chinese social media, I noticed a huge amount of innovative combinations of different languages and of language and other semiotic signs.

One particular phenomenon caught my attention and that was the deliberate and subversive translation of Chinese expressions into English as well as coinage of English-looking or sounding expressions through mixing of elements of different named languages. Elsewhere, I discussed in detail (Li, 2016, 2020) examples of New Chinglish such as the following:

- (1) *You ask me, me ask who?* is a word-by-word translation of 你问我, 我问谁? *níwènwo, wówènshéi?* meaning ‘Don’t look at me. I have no idea’.
- (2) *We two who and who?* Is a word-by-word translation of 咱俩谁跟谁? *zánliǎ shuígēnshuí?* meaning ‘We are the best buddies’.
- (3) *Yakshit*: 亚克西 *ya ke xi* (*yack + shit*) comes from Uyghur (ياخشى) *yaxshi*, meaning ‘good’ as in praising people and things. The Chinese Central Television station runs an annual Spring Festival (Chinese New Year) gala and every year there is one act from Xinjiang, the Uyghur autonomous region, singing and dancing and saying how wonderful life is there. They almost always have the phrase *Yaxshi* in it. *Yakshit* is mocking the non-stop praise.
- (4) Z-turn: when the former Chinese president Hu Jintao used the phrase 不折腾 (*bu zheteng*, NEG + verb) in one of his official speeches as a warning, ‘Don’t make trouble or cause turmoil’, the Chinese social media went into a frenzy about how best to translate the verb 折腾 *zheteng* into English. And the Chinese netizens cleverly manipulated the sound, the letter shape, and the semantics and came up with Z-turn, which sounds similar to the Chinese 折腾 *zheteng*.

What we see here is rather different from the Chinglish or China English of the earlier decades,

because of the creative and subversive nature of these examples, and the fact they are produced by people with a good command of both Chinese and English. They are offering an online commentary of the social changes that are happening in China and beyond. I have called the phenomenon New Chinglish, and approached it from a translanguaging perspective. The translanguaging perspective entails a series of shifts away from

- i) taking a variety of English/language approach, because New Chinglish is not a thing-in-itself but a socio-political act that consciously manipulates boundaries of named languages;
- ii) taking an interlanguage approach and assuming that L2 users cannot be innovators of the language;
- iii) taking a named language approach, assuming humans think in named languages and one at a time, because bilinguals and multilinguals do not. They can claim ownership of multiple named languages, but they think beyond the boundaries of named languages.

It is important to focus instead on the social conditions that cause the rise of New Chinglish and its consequences and impact on individuals, the society, language and social media.

As the world changes and people from China and the rest of the world encounter each other more and more in different ways, Chinglish, China English, or Zhongshi Yingyu will continue to evolve. They are part and parcel of the social, cultural, ideological, economic and technological changes that are happening in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The various names they have also reflect the historical, cultural conditions of the times, and that itself is a worthy topic for continued attention.

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