CHINESE LANGUAGE ARTS

The role of language and linguistic devices in literary and artistic expressions

Chu-Ren Huang, Kathleen Ahrens, Tania Becker, Regina Llamas, King-fai Tam and Barbara Meisterernst

Introduction

Language arts is the study of how language is used in artistic and cultural expressions. One of the most significant and distinctive characteristics of Chinese language arts is the central role played by orthography. Note that Chinese character orthography is not only the common communicative tool for speakers of many mutually unintelligible dialects, its system has also remained largely unchanged over the last 2,000 years and hence, has become both the medium and the content of a shared cultural heritage. These facts have allowed speakers of all Chinese dialects (or Sinitic languages) in the past two millennia to share and develop many sophisticated devices of language arts based on the Chinese orthography as well as other linguistic devices common to all languages. In what follows, we will first introduce the linguistic devices used in Chinese language arts, then will provide an overview of different genres. Following the common ground laid by the second section, the third section introduces drama, the language art form which is probably closest to the simultaneous use of language (though scripted and highly stylized). The fourth section discusses cinema, a language art form delivered in a non-simultaneous medium with a focus on visual presentation. The fifth section discusses how language arts can interact with other media, especially in performing art. The sixth section introduces children's literature not only as another form of language arts but also as a foundation for building an appreciation for Chinese language arts.

Note that Chinese language arts does not have a well-established research tradition, even though there have been past studies focusing on the use of linguistics devices in literature. Some examples include Huang's 黃居仁 (1981) study of the use of temporal expressions and time metaphor in classifical Chinese poetry, Wang's (2013) exploration of linguistic expressions in *Shijing-Book of Odes* and Meisterernst's (2019) study on the use of rhymes in premodern literature (Chapter 8 of this volume). As one of the first attempts at an overview of Chinese language arts, this chapter aims to provide a comprehensive picture of this emerging area instead of focusing on diverse literature. Nevertheless, it should be noted that we recognize the versatility of topics and issues in those Chinese language arts discussed here, as well as those to be explored in the future.

Linguistic devices for Chinese language arts

In this section, we focus on linguistic devices specific to Chinese language arts and will not address devices common to all languages. By linguistic device, we include orthographic, morphological, syntactic, semantic and discursive devices. Topics such as metaphor, euphemism, irony, lying and synaesthesis are discussed in more detail in Chapters 19–25 of this *Handbook* (Huang and Xiong

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2019; Lee 2019; Ge and He 2019; Su and Huang 2019; Ahrens and Chung 2019; Xing 2019; and Jing-Schmidt 2019). Other related topics such as poetic language (Meisterernst 2019, Chapter 8 of this volume), gendered language (Chan and Lin 2019, Chapter 11 of this volume), language and religion (Assandri and Meisterernst 2019; Shi et al. 2019; and Masini 2019, Chapters 1–3 of this volume) and neologism (Jing-Schmidt and Hsieh 2019, Chapter 33 of this volume) are also discussed in other chapters. Since linguistic devices that are common with other languages are covered in these chapters and are well discussed in the literature, our focus in this section is on Chinese-specific linguistic devices, especially on the manipulation of the writing system.

The most distinctive feature of Chinese language arts is the manipulation of Chinese characters, which can be treated as visual symbols, as decomposable component, or as movable blocks. First, Chinese language arts often take advantage of the visual nature of the glyphs. A good example is the language riddle in which a character is viewed as a picture. The minimal riddle:

穷人盖被 *qióngrén gě bèi* 'Poor Person's Beddings' has three Chinese characters as its intended answer: 由 甲 申 *yóu jiǎ shēn*. The riddle uses characters as image art. The assumption is that poor people do not have enough money to afford bedding of the appropriate length. In order to understand the image, one has to bring to mind a cold winter's night when one's comforter is too short. The person first tries to cover his/her feet, but half of his/her chest is uncovered. S/he tries to pull up the bedding to cover his/her head, then anything below the waist is exposed. The poor person struggles more, at the end both the head and feet are exposed. The three characters 由 甲 申 portray a vivid picture of a person's struggle, with the character component 曰 *yuē* standing for the short comforter. This explicit manipulation of characters is also used in daily speech, such as when introducing the surname 王 *wáng* as 三横一竖王 *sān héng yī shù wáng* 'the Wang with three horizontal strokes and one perpendicular stroke'.

Second, Chinese characters are composed of 部件 *bùjiàn* 'component parts' which double as simple characters, and literature often makes word plays based on them. A good example is a short story in 聊斋志异 *liáo zhāi zhì yì* 'Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio', in which 狐仙 *húxiān*, a fox in human form who aspires to become a demi-deity by practicing Tao, is a recurring theme. A character's *húxiān* identity is often commented on and even teased (as a 'different' person). In this story, the protagonist said after being teased: "Yes, I am indeed *hu2xian1*; and you to my left is my humble son (小犬 *xiǎo quǎn* 'little dog'), and you to my right is a big pumpkin (大瓜 *dàguā* 'big melon')". Here the repartee is based on the two components of the character 狐 'fox': 犭 (radical variant of 犬) *quǎn* 'canine' to the left and 瓜 *guā* 'melon' to the right. Here the character component-based repartee is used to defuse the tension of being teased, which is a recurring theme of 聊斋 *Strange Tales from a Chinese Studio*. This device is also used in daily language to introduce the surname 李 *lǐ* as 木子李 'the Li that is composed of 木 *mù* (on top) and 子 *zǐ* (at the bottom)'. Lastly, the integral nature of the written character is so strong that Chinese language arts can manipulate characters in such a way as to break linguistic rules, such as breaking a disyllabic lexical word into two characters that are semantically non-compositional. A famous example is Tu Fu's 杜甫 露從今夜白 *lù cóng jīn yè bái* which grammatically should be 從今夜白露 'the Bailu season starts tonight'. In this stanza, the calendar term 白露 is broken apart to two characters

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neither carrying the intended meaning, with the second part 露 *lù* moved to the front of the stanza. With this device, Tu Fu is not only able to make the stanza match the rhyming scheme (which the grammatical sentence would not be able to do), but he also created an image of dew (露) at night that was not part of the representational meaning of the sentence. As a device of Chinese language arts, this is possible because the integrity and tradition of characters as writing units in Chinese is strong enough to overcome violations of lexical integrity.

The semantic and glyphic features of Chinese characters also play a role in Chinese poetic language in ways that are not possible in an alphabetic writing system. For instance, various literary rules often require matching character meanings, forms and components in addition to metres, rhymes and tones. For the simplest poetic form, the couplet (对联 *duìlián*), matching characters are often also considered. Some commonly followed rules include requiring that characters in corresponding positions in two stanzas have matching or compatible radicals and/or parts of speech. But occasionally identity is required, such as the supposedly nonmatchable first half of the couplet 上海自来水来自海上 *shànghǎi zìláishuǐ lái zì hǎi shàng* 'Water from Shanghai comes from the "ocean" '. In this first line, the nine characters are centred on 水 and form a mirror image of four characters on either side. This character-based palindrome has two unique features. First, the identical characters at corresponding positions may have different syntactic or lexical roles. Second, by imposing the palindromic structure, an extremely challenging requirement for the matching stanza is imposed. The character-based nature also allows a couplet to convey information by what is missing.

A wonderful example is a couplet reported by 郑板桥 Zheng Banqiao: '二三四五，六七八九' '2345,6789'. One has to use the knowledge of couplets to see that 'one' is missing from the first position of the top stanza and 'ten' is missing from the last position of the bottom stanza, as the current four character pairs fail to meet all basic requirements of a couplet and adding these two numbers is the most obvious way to save the couplet). The second step is to restate the couplet with missing element in the form of a four character *Chengyu* idiom with the form of 缺一少十 *quē yī shǎo shí* 'missing 1 and 10'. The final step is to activate phonological knowledge to interpret 一 *yī* 'one' as homophonous with 衣 'clothing', and 十 *shí* '10' as homophonous with 食 'food'. Hence, the pun 缺衣少食 *quēyīshǎoshí* 'lacking in clothing and food' is constructed in three steps. And, of course, the story does have a happy ending when the in-need state of the family is addressed through generous provisions from Zheng.

Lastly, 回文 *huíwén* is a Chinese-style palindrome that actually allows a text to be read in multiple ways (instead of the normal and reversed order reading of typical palindrome in alphabetic languages). The design of *huíwén* allows a text to begin at any character and, depending on where one begins, the order of characters can create different meanings. This relies crucially on the semantically centred orthography system (Huang and Hsieh 2015), which allows words with different grammatical functions but sharing the same conceptual sense to be represented by the same character, even when they can occasionally have different phonological forms. A famous example is five characters often engraved circling a teapot 也可以清心 *yě kě yǐ qīng xīn*, which can be read in five different ways, including the following four additional alternations: 可以清心

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也, 以清心也可, 清心也可以, 心也可以清. All readings present the same message that tea can 'cleanse your mind' with different emphases and modal meanings.

Another important characteristic of Chinese orthography is the fact that a common system is used to represent a full range of mutually unintelligible Sinitic languages (which are commonly referred to as Chinese dialects exactly because they share one writing system; see Kurpaska 2019, Chapter 12 of this volume). This means Chinese orthography is enriched by various linguistics sources. As 揚雄 Yang Xiong already documented in his monumental book 方言 *fāng yán* 'Fang Yan', many of the near synonymous characters/words in Chinese have their origin in different dialects. Many of the variations and versatility of Chinese language arts discussed in this chapter can be attributed to the differences in linguistic medium.

In what follows, we will look at the role Chinese language plays in different genres and in different art media.

The language of Chinese drama

Chinese drama at origin

Theatre is an aural genre that requires plain language, or at least an approximation to plain language to be understood in performance. In this sense, it is probably the form of language arts that is closest to natural language. But it is not until theatre begins to be written down that we can analyze its language. There are, however, problems with approaching theatre as a record of written language, since what we now call northern drama or Yuan 杂剧 *zájù* drama is really the result of the recensions of Ming literati interested in recreating and rewriting plays for a reading public. Southern theatre suffered a similar fate, since the first play we have extant, 張協狀元 *zhāngxié zhuàngyuán* 'Top Graduate Zhang Xie' was included in an imperial collectanea – the 永樂大典 *yǒnglè dàdiǎn* 'Yongle dadian' – and must have been revised before it was considered fit for publication. We are, nonetheless, on firmer ground, when discussing the language of southern drama, since much of it was written to be performed and considerations of language loomed large in the aesthetics of performance.

When we begin to be historically aware of what we generally designate as Chinese drama, it is already a fully formed genre with two distinct styles: a northern one called *zájù* and a southern one called 南戲 *nánxì*, which later evolved into 傳奇 *chuánqí*. The northern *zájù* is usually a four-act play where a wedge can generally be inserted and in which only one character can sing throughout the play. Each act can include a number of songs that can vary between four and twenty, and all songs must belong to the same key or mode[i].

Southern dramatic plays are much longer and can have more than 50 acts. In southern drama, all roles (and characters) can sing and they do not make use of modes, which may indicate a freer mode of musical composition. Both, however, make use of songs composed in verse (called 曲 *qū*) and spoken parts, generally written in different registers of classical and vernacular language. Some texts also make use of stage directions. But for the purpose of this short chapter, we are only concerned with the language of song and speech.

Song and speech

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Dramatic styles appeared already formed in written texts. Yet how the language was used in these texts was clearly a concern of the literati from the fourteenth century onwards, when the first manuals on the rhyme and phonology of dramatic song appeared (Zhou 周德清 1324/2001).

The earliest material we have for northern drama are a group of thirty texts that may date from the later Yuan or early Ming and are understood to be role texts intended to be sung by the main role. These are the so-called 元刊雜劇三十種 *yuán kān zájù sānshí zhǒng* 'Thirty Plays Printed in the Yuan'. These plays include mostly arias with little or no dialogue or stage directions. Many of these plays are a good example of the elevated nature of dramatic language, full of allusions and, at times, difficult to understand (West and Idema 2015). Later Yuan drama utilizes a mixture of classical poetic language for the lyrical parts and a vernacular register proximate to modern Mandarin that allowed it to express colloquial language on the page. The language of Yuan drama was praised by the scholar Wang Guowei 王国维 (1877–1926), author of the first modern analytical history of Yuan drama, as possessing the quality of "naturalness", a direct unmediated expression of sentiment able to convey the complexity of things without the interference of human agency (Wang 王国维 1998: 131).

The earliest text we have in the southern tradition, *Top Graduate Zhang Xie*, first appeared written in a mixture of classical language and an approximation to modern Mandarin speckled with a local dialect that made intensive use of idiomatic expressions. Although southern theatre is native to the southwest and may have made use of local language for some (if not most) of its performances, especially at the local level, our earliest extant play in a regional language dates from the Ming period, the anonymous 荔鏡記 *lìjìngjì* 'Lychee Mirror' written in a mixture of Chaozhou and Quanzhou dialects (of the Southern Min language)[ii].

Common to both styles of drama is the use of song and spoken parts presented as dialogue or as monologues. Scholars of Yuan drama generally divide the language into two domains: The spoken (and narrative) parts are understood to move forward the events of the story, while the lyrical parts deal with the description of the natural world as well as the private thoughts and innermost feelings of the main character. This division is common but not entirely reliable since lyrical parts were also used substantially to advance the plot. Because the division between the lyrical and narrative parts is generally based on Ming recensions of Yuan plays, it is possible that these boundaries were, in earlier times, not so clear-cut.

The function of the lyrical parts in early southern drama is to move the story along and express the inner world of the characters. Spoken parts, on the other hand, halt the story to insert comedic banter, often unrelated to the story. These comic scenes tend to use local language, and the meaning of some of these local expressions as well as the jokes is now lost to us. The later *chuánqí* form stylizes the comic parts, integrating them into the story as a means of ironic commentary. *Chuánqí*, like the Ming recensions of Yuan drama, also makes use of lyrical parts to express emotion and describe the scenery, while the spoken parts tend to move the story forward. In addition, the language of Yuan and Ming drama includes a variety of regional terms, popular terms, proverbs and 歇后语 *xīehòuyû* or two part allegorical sayings (Shu 2015), as well as terms in foreign languages (such as Mongolian) that can be difficult to understand without the assistance of specialized dictionaries. The use of allusion became the subject of theoretical debates in the Ming

period, in the discussions of playwrights searching for the correct language register of drama. It is to these debates that we now turn.

Drama's linguistic register

During the mid-Ming, one of the main concerns of dramatists and aficionados was the correct linguistic register of a play. They borrowed a term from Song Dynasty poetics – 本色 *běnsè* (lit. 'natural color') to define the preferred linguistic register of a play. In essence, the term *běnsè* was used as a standard valuation to define the capacity of a play to convey meaning through simple and clear language. Obscure language or the terse language of the classics, use of parallelism, or the use of classical allusions to excess were all contrary to *běnsè*. But what exactly playwrights meant by this term was not clearly defined, and while some playwrights considered Gao Ming's (ca. 1305–1370) canonical *nánxì* play 琵琶記 *pípajì* 'The Lute' to be perfect in its mode of expression, that is, the epitome of *běnsè*, others thought it too erudite and without the "natural language" a dramatic play was supposed to possess. The term *běnsè* was thus used as an approximation to the correct linguistic register rather than a concrete register of language. Just what a given critic meant by "natural color" was often as elusive as it was central.

While theatre includes colloquial speech (such as, at times, local dialects) not found in other branches of literature, it is far from being an unmediated record of the way people spoke. This is the case in part because plays that were originally composed to be spoken or sung were rewritten to be read, becoming a new genre in which literati could showcase their talent. But more importantly, the debates at the time show that there were aesthetic standards to be met and composing a good play meant meeting expectations of language that included the appropriate balance of poetry and dialogue and a language that was both elegant and natural.

Chinese language and cinema

Cinema is another art form which relies on spoken language projected as natural, although the medium dictates this art form is captured, preserved and appreciated at a time later than the performance time. The detachment from real-time observation as well as more focus on visual presentation allow the meta-linguistic features to play a more prominent role. Hence, the role of language choice and register is a central issue in cinema and the choice of which Chinese dialect to use is a particularly intriguing one. Anderson (1991) was most likely the first one to bring attention to the use of language in cinema with the heavy emphasis he placed on the role of language in nation building. The Nationalist Government's ban in the 1930s of the use of Cantonese in film underscores the politics and economics inherent in the debates of many artistic and cultural forms.

Anderson's (1991) oft-quoted point referred originally to print languages which "laid the bases for national consciousness" of an earlier age. The advent of cinema worldwide in the 20th century that coincided with the rise of many nation-states, however, logically extends his analysis to language used in film, where many emergent states are seen to use the film media with great deliberation to inculcate a common identity among their populace.

In this light, the dismal failure of the Nationalist Government's attempts at outlawing the use of dialects can be seen as a test case. That the National Government's efforts came to naught (Xiao

1999) resulted in part from the strong resistance of the Cantonese film industries at that time, which argued tenaciously that the government distrust of Cantonese disenfranchised them politically and disadvantaged them commercially. A tug-of-war thus ensued between central authorities and local interests until the full-scale Japanese aggression against China later in the decade diverted the national attention to more urgent issues.

If a common language helps to foster a common identity, dialects (and, by extension, accents) are seen to rupture and fragment it, and thus their use threatens to derail the nationbuilding project. Such a hostile relationship between the official language and regional dialects are at play in films produced in Hong Kong, Taiwan and other places of the diaspora in the last thirty years (Lu and Yeh 2005; Lu 2007). Dialects are used at various times to forge a regional consciousness, parody the official language and discourse, or articulate positions that are at odds with that of the state. Nevertheless, it would be a mistake to dwell excessively on the destabilizing effect of dialects. Languages, like people, fight and then makeup. The *North versus South* series in 1960s Hong Kong and its many subsequent copycats typically feature new immigrants speaking northern dialects living in close quarters with Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong. Language differences account for most of their conflicts, which they slowly learn to overcome throughout the course of the film, suggesting that languages can coexist in peace and their speakers can recognize the commonality between them (Ng 2007 and 2009).

On its own, even the state apparatus can be flexible when the time warrants it. International diplomatic isolation during the Cold War made it necessary for the PRC to reach out to overseas Chinese in whatever language possible. Even as it set up its own base of production of Mandarin-speaking film in Hong Kong in the years immediately after its establishment in 1949, it also supported Cantonese films with leftist tendencies and sympathies. The Southern Min-dialect and Chaozhou-dialect film industries of the 1950s and 1960s in Hong Kong also owed their short-lived existence to similar benevolent acquiescence, if not implicit encouragement (Yung 2013).

As Chinese film entered the transnational era, the stringent language policies of the state relaxed. Today, however, with the exception of Cantonese in Hong Kong and the Southern Min in Taiwan, the predominant local dialects respectively, no other dialects can claim to have a sustainable film industry. Instead, dialects of Szechuan, Hebei, Shanxi and elsewhere are sprinkled into films that are otherwise made entirely in Putonghua (Lu 2007). They serve as markers of provincialism, poverty and a lack of sophistication. Conversely, they can also be used to harken nostalgically to an earlier time of purity and innocence when people did not have to be constantly on guard against each other. Although used comically for the most part, the use of dialects in contemporary Chinese films often creates a poignantly alienating and defamiliarizing effect, a gesture to realism with unsettling results. Whatever dialect it may be, it works against the viewer's expected horizon that characters in film should and do now speak in Putonghua. Any deviance from that norm will stand out and cry for attention.

At present, not only is the use of Chinese language in cinema under debate, the terms with which these debates are carried out have also become a contentious issue. A proliferation of terms, each with its ideological underpinnings, have come into being to designate the very body of works that constitute the field of discussion: in Chinese, 中国电影 *zhōngguó diànyǐng*, 华语电影 *huáyǔ diànyǐng* and in English, Chinese cinema, Chinese-language cinema and Sinophone cinema, to say

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nothing of those that are used to label places of production such as 大陆片 *dàlù piān*, 港产片 *gǎngchǎn piān* or 国片 *guópiān*. All these testify to the complexity of language issues in Chinese films, which promise to occupy the attention of scholars for some time to come.

The art of word play

Drama and cinema are two forms of performing arts in which the performance involves language playing its naturally expressive and communicative functions, while the performance itself is delivered to be perceived and appreciated. In this section, we explore other forms of language arts where the art breaks out of this naturalistic setting and requires interaction either with other media and/or with the audience.

Puns, the web and performance art

Puns are linguistic acts that require interaction as a pun works only when the double entendre is understood by the hearer. It is expected, then, that the most popular language performance art often is built upon or centred around puns. The Chinese 相声 *xiàngsheng* is a prominent example. The linguistic device of *xiangsheng* is metahorically referred to as 包袱 *bāofu* 'package' (Hou and Xue 1981). Packages are unwrapped layer by layer (pun upon pun) and the unwrapping requires the audience to respond with both understanding and appreciation (with laughter). *Xiangsheng* is a performance which leads the audience through rich layers of meaning, often related to current context, with puns and other allusions (Moser 1990). The art of unwrapping is to deliver stinging criticism and comic relief at the same time (Moser 2018). *Xiangsheng*, as well as other forms of comedy (Tam and Wesoky 2018), ideally deserves at least another full chapter of discussion, but in what remains of this section we focus on the roles of puns in Chinese language arts across different media.

The availability and pervasiveness of the web has had a profound impact on how language arts have developed recently and how they are used, often in conjunction with performance art or an art installation. Given the pervasiveness and virtual nature of the web, it is not surprizing that language arts on the web are often anchored by puns. There is significant scholarly interest in the literature on puns on the web, their linguistic shapes, their political function and their impact, e.g. Wiener (2011), Yang (2015) and Wang et al. (2016). The artist Ai Weiwei played a vital role in bringing attention to these puns as well as their international recognition. In 2006, the Chinese telecommunications company Sina.com offered him, among others, a blogging platform in order to promote this new media. His blog soon became a kind of daily letter in which he posted photographs and documented both his artistic activities and his personal life.

Before he was arrested in 2011, Ai Weiwei devoted 90 percent of his energy to the web, which he regarded as one of the most powerful vehicles for social change (Ai and Ambrozy 2011). Ai spoke frequently about the political situation and social problems in China and had as many as a hundred thousand readers every day who all became part of his "social sculpture" by blog. This blog was banned, like many others, in the web clean-up on May 28, 2009. However, many of his blog entries have been stored, and a selection of these were published – paradoxically in classical book form – as Ai and Ambrozy (2011).

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Puns turn out to be the most popular and effective linguistic device for the web in China. One particular instance became almost synonymous with web puns and deserves more detailed discussion: 和谐/河蟹 *héxié/héxiè* 'harmony/river crab'. Referring to the Confucian concept of a harmonious society, Chinese leadership introduced the slogan of a 'harmonious world' in 2004 at the 16th Congress of the Chinese Communist Party (Wacker and Kaiser 2008). Harmony in society became the buzzword of the official ideological-political canon, which has been considered paradoxical given PRC's earlier effort to eradicate Confucianism as the residual evil of old China. The term *hé* 和 'harmony' appeared in Confucius's *Analects* in the context of 禮之用，和為貴 *lǐzhīyòng, héwéiguì* 'in the implementation of order and reason, it is most important to achieve harmony'. This political philosophy of avoiding conflicting rules, as expressed by Confucius, has been 'conventionalized' in China for two millennia, instructing members of society to avoid the creation of conflict and to subsume their personal idiosyncrasies under societal uniformity. The implementation of a "harmonious society" in China also extended to linguistic harmonization (Wang et al. 2016). Since the new slogan was introduced, government propaganda has smothered the country with so much "harmony" that when the government directed their efforts to "disharmonious" language on the web, the natural and spontaneous responses of China's netizens were: "我被和谐了!", *wǒ bèi héxié le*, I have been 'harmonized' when their messages in the Internet were deleted or one of their websites was closed down. Accordingly, this word became synonymous with censorship and in turn fell victim to the harmonizing process.

One of the avoidance strategies to circumvent censorship was the introduction of homophonic puns, e.g. the employment of (near) homophonous words for censored words. Li and Costa (2009) identified these puns as paronomasia. The term 'paronomastic usage' has also been used in Chinese historical linguistics to refer to the use of characters for the writing of different (near) homophonous words (Boltz 1999). The near synonymous 河蟹 *héxiè* 'river crab' was introduced in order to bypass the ban on the word 和谐 *héxié*. Ai Weiwei turned this linguistic pun into performance art by hosting a river crab feast and by installing art with over 3,000 ceramic river crabs at various international art exhibits in different configurations. At the same time, additional pseudo-mythical creatures and Internet memes made their appearance as neologisms;[iii] ironic-vulgar puns were introduced to outwit censors and as a part of the linguistic game of 骂人不带脏字 *mà rén bú dài zāng zì* 'to curse others without uttering dirty words' that has been practiced since the vernacular movement in the last century. These puns, obscure and amusing on the surface but with obscene connotations, are an indicator of the *subversive creativity* of the Internet community in reaction to the shutdown of websites and blogs under the pretext of pornographic contents (Wines 2009). One of these puns is the 草泥马 *cǎonímǎ* 'grass-mud horse', a (near) homophone of the obscene swear word *càonímā*.[iv] The "grass-mud horse" made its first appearance in the online encyclopaedia 百度百科 *bǎidù bǎ kē* 'Baidu Baike' shortly after the web clean-up campaign started in January 2009[v]. Initially in the guise of a zebra, the animal soon metamorphosed into a cute alpaca as it was credited with more and more virtues. Chat forums, videos, animated cartoons, fake documentaries, songs and even the sale of cuddly toy alpacas and T-shirts have made *caonima* a cult phenomenon in a very short time, triggering a still ongoing Internet movement that uses obscenity as a strategy in the fight against censorship. The simple and rather dull story about the struggle of the grass-mud horse to protect its habitat against the invading

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river crabs (河蟹 *héxiè*) reflects the situation outside of cyberspace and is recounted in several *YouTube* videos in the guise of rap, a children's song and a pop song as well as in the form of a documentary: The spirited, intelligent and tenacious grass-mud horses, who are loved by all, live in the 马勒戈壁 *mǎlè gēbì* 'Male Gebi desert' (again an extremely vulgar play on words),[vi] which is a place where they flourish. They were forced to defend themselves when the destructive river crabs laid claim to the whole of the grassland that the *cǎonímǎs* depend on survival. A bitter struggle ensues between *caonima* (alias the web users) and river crabs (alias censorship), which culminated in a happy ending for the victorious *caonimas*.

The protest wave of creative language use on the Chinese Internet has produced many other mythical creatures, such as the 法克鱿 *fǎkè yóu* 'French-Croatian octopus', the 吉跋猫 *jíbá māo* 'Jiba cat' and the 达菲鸡 *dáfēi jī* 'Dafei hen', all of them obscene puns which have become widely used Internet memes and a source of great amusement to the Internet community[vii]. Despite their subversive beginnings, some of the terms have become so well known that they have already been included in the *Oxford Chinese Dictionary* (Kleeman and Yu 2010).

Linguistic constraints and historical usage of word play

Language games, defined by Davis (1993) as 'a widespread language play phenomenon in which phonological forms of words are systematically altered so as to disguise what they are' can be used in Chinese just like in other languages. Wiener (2011), however, claimed that, due to its linguistic structure and its writing system, the Chinese language is especially suited for word plays and has a long history of all kinds of different employments of puns and other creative uses of language. The syllable structure of Chinese is particularly simple, consisting only of CVX (Consonant-Vowel-Coda) (Duanmu 2000). Disregarding the tonal differences, the Chinese language has an enormous amount of homophones and the web as a text-based medium seems to profit from this for the coining of word plays and subversive puns. Wiener listed three possible constraints on language games played with puns on the web: (1) a change in the orthographic representation (an avoidance strategy against censorship), (2) preservation of the syllable and (3) preservation of tone if possible. In order to figure out the actual linguistic constraints subversive web puns are subjected to, Wiener (2011) employed Optimality Theory and establishes a number of ranked constraints, including semantic and syntactic ones. One of the results of this analysis is the confirmation that tone does not play a determining role in the selection of a near-homophonous syllable for the pun; the segment alone suffices for the lexical activation of the association. The previously mentioned cases of *hexie* and *caonima* serve as good examples. Although this fact seems to support the hypothesis that Internet puns are more a written than a spoken phenomenon, Wiener also pointed out that these puns also work when written in *pinyin*. A possible explanation is that, contrary to common assumption, the C, V and X segments (but not tone), are the most salient elements in modelling phonological neighbourhoods for Mandarin Chinese, as shown in a recent study by Neergaard and Huang (2016). The employment of homophones and other linguistic means to transport hidden meanings has a long tradition in Chinese history, and this linguistic strategy is already attested in Classical Chinese. In an article on sexual sympathetic magic in Han period China, Bodde (1964) discussed the meaning of an extremely infrequent term referring to sexual intercourse in the 春秋繁露 *chūnqiū fánlù* 'Chunqiu Fanlu' (2nd c. bce) which can be explained by assuming the employment of homophonous puns in the context in which this term occurs.

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四時皆以庚子之日令吏民夫婦皆偶處。
sī shí jiē yǐ gēngzǐ zhī rì líng lì mín fū fù jiē ǒu chǔ
Four season all YI *gengzi* GEN day make order official people
fū fù jiē ǒu chǔ
husband wife all pairwise dwell
'In all of the four seasons, on the *keng-tzu* days, all husbands and wives among officials and commoners are ordered to cohabit'. (tr. Bodde 1964)

The term *ǒu chǔ* is extremely infrequent[viii], but, according to the context and an early commentary, it can only be interpreted as a euphemism for sexual intercourse. Bodde supported this interpretation by the fact that Dong Zhongshu, the author of the *Chunqiu fanlu*, deliberately chose the day *gengzi* as the special recurrent day in the sexagenary cycle for this activity. He proposed that 庚 *gēng* 'name of the seventh cyclical stem' may refer to the homophonous 更 *gēng* 'again' or 'change' and 子 *zǐ* 'name of the first cyclical branch' to the near-homophonous word 孳 *zī* 'engender' (Karlgren *Grammata Serica Recensa* 966k also translates this expression with 'copulate'). Following the meaning of the two (near) homophonous words, Bodde interpreted the cyclical date as a punning phrase for 'again to engender: may we again engender', employed to support the reading of the infrequent phrase *ǒu chǔ*. Bodde pondered other possible interpretations and especially pointed to the fact that this phrase has deliberately been chosen by a scholar in order to allude to hidden meanings representing a complex philosophical worldview by profiting from the great range of (near) homophonous words already existent in Han period Chinese. Examples for the employment of puns, which could be interpreted as political criticism, were discussed in Lu (1995), where he also analyzed the employment of puns in 讖 *chèn* prophecy. Finally, Führer (2006) discussed examples of yet another word game: the use of 析字 *xīzì* 'parsing characters' as political criticism in Song period China.

Last, but not the least, linguistic puns are also commonly used in literature. The famous couplet by Tu Fu mentioned earlier, 露從今夜白，月是故鄉明 *lù cóng jīn yè bái, yuè shì gù xiāng míng*, is in fact a literary pun aided by the breaking up of two disyllabic words 白露 *báilù* (one of the 24 solar terms in calendar) and 明月 *míngyuè* 'bright moon'. Hence, in addition to the original meaning '(We) start the *báilù* solar term tonight, and the moon (that we watch) is the same bright moon over (our) hometown'; it has the suggestive (though not expressed) meaning of 'dews will turn white tonight and the moon is brighter at home'. And in fact, the most quoted part of the couplet nowadays is the later half and it has been ascribed the non-intended pun meaning (with further extension) of the nostalgic sentiment that everything is better in one's hometown/country.

Daily use of linguistic puns and code-switching puns

Given the long history and significant usage of puns in Chinese, it should not be surprising that the use of puns was neither invented by the Internet nor necessitated by censorship. It is simply language play that is used daily and appreciated by Chinese speakers. Puns are so pervasive that even code-switching puns involving either numerals or foreign languages are commonly used. The following examples are taken from Taiwan, Hong Kong and China[ix]

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First, the use of puns is one of the most effective linguistic devices to catch attention and hence is often used in branding. 可口可乐 *kěkǒu kělè* 'coke cola' is a brand shared by Greater China and is built on the pun that is both delicious (可口 *kěkǒu*) and enjoyable (可乐 *kělè*). Similarly, the successful neologism 韩流 *hánliú* 'Korean wave' is a paronomasia on the homophonic 寒流 'cold front'. In Hong Kong, the title of a popular free daily newspaper 晴报 *ceng4bou3/qíngbào* 'Sky Post, lit. "Sunny_Paper" ' relies on (near)-homophony (in Cantonese and Mandarin) with 情报 *cing4bou3/qíngbào* 'information'. Hong Kong also gives us an example where linguistic play relies both on homophony and on an inferred omitted character. 八达通 *baat3daat6tung1/bādátōng* 'octopus card' plays both on the word 发达 *faat3daat6/ fādá* 'to prosper' and the *chengyu* idiom 四通八达 *sìtōngbādá* 'connected to all directions, convenient'. A different way to form a composite pun is to combine two different homophones, as exemplified by a name of a developed property in China 澳林观邸 *àolínguàndǐ*. The first half is a homophone of 奥林 *àolín* 'Olympic park', where the property is located, by replacing the first character with allophonic 澳 which is an abbreviation of Australia, hence conveying the global flavour of a more desirable living standard. The second part is homophonic with 官邸 *guàndǐ* 'the official residence (of a national leader)'. In addition, the mapping of puns does not have to follow homomorphism, as shown by the satiric term 吹台青 *chuītáiqīng* which is a paronomasia of 崔苔菁 *cuītáiqīng* 'Louise Tsuei', the name of a mega pop diva of the 80s. Yet its intended meaning has three parts standing for the three requirements for being groomed for a political career in Taiwan at that time in the context of KMT's effort to become localized: being loquacious 吹 *chuī*, being Taiwanese 台 *tái* and being young 青 *qīng*.

One final way to create puns is to take advantage of possible segmentation ambiguity in a sentence. It is interesting to note that this linguistic device is used almost exclusively in Taiwan. Examples include the name of a wind music programme on a classical radio station <管,他是什么声音> *guǎn, tā shì shénme shēngyīn* 'Wind instrument, what sound does it have?'. The title is a deliberate pun on the familiar expression 管他是什么声音 'Who cares what the sound is!' with a pause to segment the first character 管 *guǎn* 'wind instrument'. Similarly, the title of a popular variety show 国光帮帮忙 *guó guāng bāng bāng máng* takes advantage of the possible segmentation ambiguity before or after the first 帮 *bāng* to create the intended meaning 国光帮＋帮帮忙 *guó guāng bāng + bāng bāng máng* 'The Guoguanger's (i.e. those who graduated from the Guoguang drama school) do a favor'. The tension required by the correct reading of two words competing to use the same character, as well as the completion from the non-intended readings, makes the title catchy.[x] This 'novel' device in fact leverages existing linguistic characteristics of Chinese, including segmentation ambiguity and telescopic compounds (Huang et al. 2017) formed with haplology (Chao 1968).

Lastly, code-switching puns can involve both numerals and other languages. The Cantonese puns using the numbers 8 *baat3* to stand for 发 *faat3* is well-documented and was given as an example previously. There are recent trends, however, that use strings of numbers (especially dates). For instance, the recent big rush to get married on January 4, 2013, was based on the observation that the sequence of number 201314 *èlíngyīsānyīsì* is near homophonous to 爱你一生一世

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àinǐyīshēngyīshì '(Will) love you (my) whole life!' In addition, a near homophonic relation can be constructed between words from other languages and Chinese. The term 'fun 假 *jià*' or other similar instantiations are now used routinely in place of 放假 *fàngjià* 'to take holidays' especially in ads for leisure and vacation activities. Finally, a pun can also be played on foreign words, especially if the expression is already translated. For instance, 夏木漱石 *xiàmùshùshí* 'summer trees, river gurgling over stones' was a popular name for property developments in the last decade and was in fact a pun on the name of one of the best known Japanese authors 夏目漱石 Natsume Soseki (exact homophone in the Chinese pronunciation *xiàmùshùshî*).

Linguistic puns and visual art

Rebus is known as a device of allusion using a picture to represent a word or part of a word. Hence, it typically refers to mixed writing involving pictograms. Chinese scholars, however, borrowed this term to refer to a painting constructed to represent a well-known expression (Bai 1999)[xi]. This use of rebus is essentially another device of language arts as it relies crucially on homophones. Much of this has been conventionalized as part of Chinese cultural heritage. For instance, one cannot successfully interpret Chinese paintings without knowing that a bat (蝠 *fú*) stands for good fortune (福 *fú*), an orange (桔 *jié*) stands for good omen (吉 *jí*) and a monkey (猴 *hóu*) riding on a horse (马 *mǎ*) stands for 马上封侯 *mǎshàngfēnghóu* 'to get appointed to a plum position immediately', originally and literally 'to win a fiefdom by fighting on a horse'. Bai (1999) maintained that the use of puns can be traced back to the Yuefu ballads of the Han period, and the employment of rebuses in painting was introduced in the Song period and became an omnipresent phenomenon in Chinese culture, predominantly connected to auspicious wishes. The example Bai (1999) used, given in (2), is from the famous anonymous Song fan 'Three Gibbons catching Egrets' collected at the Met, which is meant to be read as a text and as a pun for a congratulatory wish for success in all three levels of imperial exams in order to win an official appointment with salary.

a. 三猿得鹭
sān yuán dé lù
Three gibbon catch egret

b. 三元得禄
sānyuan dé lù
triple-first catch salaried-office

Both the term *sānyuán* for 'triple-first' and the motive of gibbons (or other monkeys) in paintings were introduced during the Song period. There are variations on the representation of the motive 禄 *lù* 'salaried official position' developed later, including the replacement of the 'egret' 鹭 *lù* by the homophonous 鹿 *lù* 'deer' (Bai 1999).[xii]

This tradition of relying on linguistic puns and rebuses to underline the motive and title of a piece of art is well adopted in modern times and in different media. For instance, the monkey-on-horse motif and other puns related to monkeys are represented in print, audial, visual and digital forms for most of the 2016 New Year arts, the most recent being the Year of the Monkey. This included references to 猴赛雷 *hóu sài léi* monkey_match_thunder 'amazing, super', a commendation

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derived from the Cantonese 好犀利 *hou2 sai1 lei6,* which in fact has nothing to do with monkeys. Similar strategies have been adopted in performance art by Ai Weiwei, as exemplified by his river crab installations and many photo/video series with *caonima* toys as props as discussed in the section on puns, the web and performance art.

Chinese language and literacy

Much of the tension (and subsequent humour) that results from the linguistic devices discussed previously relies on the fact that the written form of an innocuous statement may in fact be homophonous with a politically sensitive one. But in order to get the joke, speakers must first be literate. The educational systems of China, Hong Kong and Taiwan each approach this task differently, and the end results are different as well, as children in Hong Kong and Taiwan will learn traditional characters while children in China will learn simplified characters. The preferred reading direction for published materials also differs with Hong Kong and China using a horizontal, left-to-right format, while Taiwan uses a vertical, right-to-left format for elementary school textbooks.[xiii] In addition, the type of phonetic information that is provided in the pre-primary and primary school years also differs from region to region, as described in the following. This phonetic information is considered useful when children are learning how to read and pronounce Chinese characters, as characters themselves do not provide systematic phonological information.

Children in public schools in Taiwan will learn 国语 *guó yǔ* 'national language', which is the term used to refer to Standard Mandarin Chinese in Taiwan, upon entering primary school. Of course, they may speak Mandarin prior to entering primary school and their home languages may also include a Chinese dialect such as Southern Min, Hakka, or an Austronesian language. Upon entering first grade at the age of six years old, all children are taught a phonetic alphabet using Bopomofo (or 注音符号 *zhùyīnfúhào*), which is a phonetic information system based on symbols. This system has 37 symbols to represent the syllable onset and rhyme for Chinese characters, with four to five diacritics to represent the tonal information. (The fifth diacritic is sometimes used for the neutral tone). Children in Taiwan are, in fact, often exposed to the Bopomofo system much earlier in pre-school and in board books and picture books that are read to them, as all reading material published for young children in Taiwan (board books, picture books, easy readers, chapter books and middle grade novels) have the Bopomofo for each character written in alignment (in smaller font) next to the traditional character itself (to the right-hand side of the character). This system is also adopted as an input system to type Chinese characters.

In China, children are taught in Putonghua (普通话 *pǔtōnghuà* or the 'common language', which is the term to refer to Standard Mandarin Chinese in China) and the pinyin Romanization system is used to teach the correct pronunciation of each character. This system uses the Roman alphabet to represent the syllable onset and rhyme and has four diacritics to represent the tones. One of these diacritics is placed above the main vowel in the syllable. The pinyin information is placed in smaller font above the simplified characters that are used in China and are read from left to right. Pinyin is taught only in the first and second grades in elementary school and there is a special set of books known as 'pinyin readers' which are books specifically designed for children in the first and second grade who are learning pinyin. In contrast with the use of Bopomofo in Taiwan, pinyin is not included on board books, picture books, easy readers, or chapter books. However, it is the

input system that students use later when they learn to type, and as such, it is retained well into adulthood.

The linguistic situation in Hong Kong differs from that of China and Taiwan in that the latter two teach students in first grade through the final year of senior high school in Putonghua/Mandarin Chinese. While English may be taught in schools in Taiwan and China, for most students it is considered a foreign language. In Hong Kong, however, secondary students are expected to become fluent in speaking Cantonese, English and Putonghua and be able to read and write in English and Chinese (using traditional characters). Students learn to write Chinese characters and to speak Cantonese without the aid of any form of phonetic system and are introduced to the pinyin system when they start to learn Putonghua. Thus, board books, picture books and easy readers do not contain any phonetic information alongside the traditional Chinese characters that are used in Hong Kong, unless it is pinyin information provided to aid the student in learning Putonghua.

The reliance on Chinese characters for reading materials in picture books in China and Hong Kong has created a specific challenge for pre-schoolers as they are not exposed to a phonetic scaffolding until the first grade in China and are completely without access to a phonetic system in learning to read in Cantonese throughout their entire schooling in Hong Kong.

Another issue that arises in the case of Hong Kong (as no phonetic system is used) is that when characters are first introduced to children, the ones that have fewer strokes are introduced first, so as to facilitate the teaching of writing. Since these low-stroke characters are often not the highest in frequency or the most common concepts that young children will encounter, it is challenging to write texts for pre-schoolers in a way that would allow them to begin to learn how to read at an early age.

This differs from the situation in Taiwan, as the use of Bopomofo facilitates the process of learning to read for pre-schoolers, and many children enter primary school already able to decode Bopomofo, which facilitates their transition to reading characters. However, while it may be useful to consider the use of pinyin in China and a phonetic system in Hong Kong in picture books to facilitate both reading by young readers and transitioning them more easily to character reading (see Huang and Ahrens 2012a, 2012b as an example of a picture book with pinyin), it can also be argued that waiting to teach children to read until primary school has benefits as well, as most children are developmentally ready to read by the age of six.

It is also important to note that adult readers do not usually rely on either Bopomofo or pinyin when reading or writing. Hence, in terms of writing pre-school readers, an additional challenge for Chinese children's book writers is that they are both writing and reading their written text in a different orthography than their readership. This challenge means that particular steps need to be taken to ensure that the texts are easy to read aloud, ensuring that the child's linguistic capacities are stimulated through the use of repetition, rhyme and other linguistically engaging literary devices.

Although the three regions differ in the systems that they use to promote literacy, educators in all areas are committed to facilitating reading acquisition. Various educational units have worked to provide graded character and word lists for local writers to use when creating textbooks, so as to ensure a graded progression in language learning. In addition, the number and variety of books

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written and illustrated by local creators for children of all ages has increased dramatically over the past two decades, and there has been a concomitant increase in the perceived value of writing and illustrating for children with awards such as the 信誼幼兒文學獎 *xìnyì yòuér wénxué jiǎng* Hsin-Yi Children's Literature Award and 丰子恺儿童图画书奖 *fēng zǐkǎi értóng túhuàshū jiǎng* Feng Zikai Children's Picture Book Award having a prominent impact in the field. As high literacy rates and a love of reading are paramount to understanding and helping to create a better world, concerted efforts by writers, illustrators, publishers, educators, and linguists are needed in order to facilitate and enhance the reading experience of children and teens in Chinese and to further their appreciation of Chinese language arts.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have discussed a number of different genres and linguistic devices used by language arts creators. We have explored how the effective manipulation of form-meaning pairs (by shifting either form or meaning while maintaining the near-identity of the other side of the double) underlies word play in Chinese and has proven to be robust in new media. We also showed that puns across different information levels, including extra linguistics images, are the most frequently used and most powerful devices for language arts in Chinese. The effective usage of puns across different media spans over a thousand years from Song painting to contemporary digital media and performance art. Tension exists between the use of the vernacular and/or familiar dialectal expressions targeting a small audience with deeper empathy and the use of formal common language targeting a larger audience but lacking the same depth of empathy. Lastly, the character-based common orthography is a shared common ground in all areas of the language arts due to concerted efforts to ensure that children in Hong Kong, China, and Taiwan gain strong literacy skills during their primary school years. In sum, regardless of the linguistic differences in spoken language, the written word unifies the language and hence has became one of the most effective vehicles for the dissemination of the Chinese language arts.

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[i] While it is generally acknowledged that the key or mode has a musical value, it is in fact not clear at all that keys indicated a musical key. Keys could also function as larger categories under which tunes were organized, and playwrights would follow the convention of selecting tunes that were included under the same key to be used in the same act.

[ii] The full text as well as additional supporting data linked to the linguistic background and other related (multimedia) resources of *Lychee Mirror* 荔镜记 can be found at http://cls.lib.ntu.edu.tw/LM/ (Lo et al. 羅鳳珠等 2002). We will return to the issue of how digital humanities affect Chinese language arts in the conclusion.

[iii] An 'Internet meme' is an idea that spreads via the Internet. It is derived from the term 'meme', which Richard Dawkins coined to describe the spread of ideas and cultural phenomena (Dawkins 2001: 309f).

[iv] "Fuck your mother!" *cào nǐ mā* 肏你妈.

[v] Increasing interest in the study of these words led to the compilation of the 'Grass-Mud Horse Lexicon' in 2010 by the China Digital Times (CDT 2010) team at the University of California Berkeley (Wiener 2011).

[vi] An euphemistic corruption of *mālegebī* 'your mom's vagina', a somewhat vulgar but highly colloquial northern Chinese curse word/interjectional filler often used by male labourers or military men.

[vii] They originate respectively as euphemisms for 'fuck you', 'male pubic hair' (an expression referring to frivolous talks or things) and 'male masturbation'. The last is interestingly a euphemism of a euphemism of another euphemism. It is derived from the euphemism 打飞机 *dǎ fēijī* 'to hit an airplane', which is itself likely derived from another euphemism of describing male masturbation as shooting an anti-aircraft gun.

[viii] It is, for instance, not attested in any of the Classical and Mediaeval texts stored in the Scriptca Sinica historical textual database at Academia Sinica.

[ix] A general observation, although without quantified data, is that such puns are used most pervasively in all contexts in Taiwan, while such usages are most dominant on the web in China, with usages in Hong Kong falling somewhere in between.

[x] That is, the readings involve simple segmentation, but without competing for the same word 国光 帮＋帮忙 *guó guāng bāng + bāng máng* 'The Guoguanger helps' and 国光＋帮帮忙 *guó guāng + bāng bāng máng* 'Guoguang, please do (us) a favor!'

[xi] Bai (1999) mistakenly transcribed the intended pun as 三元得路 without any supporting evidence. Recent New York Metropolitan Museum exhibits showed the correct 三元得祿. 祿 is an 'official position with guaranteed high salary', which is a common goal of happiness in old China and its associate icon of a deer or egret are both deeply engraved in Chinese cultural heritage.

[xiii] Note that picture books and other books for children published in Taiwan may also use the horizontal, right-to-left format.

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