

# Code Switching and Language Games in Contemporary China; or, Convergence and Identity Construction on WeChat

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China has been described by some scholars as an undifferentiated whole, held together by a unified culture and language. Jared Diamond, for example, claimed that when challenged by European powers in the nineteenth century, China “lost” because it was encumbered by its “single writing system” and “substantial cultural unity.”<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, when the linguist John McWhorter described China, he wrestled with how to describe a place where people speak a range of mutually unintelligible codes: “What are called the dialects of Chinese are as different from one another as are the Romance languages, and speakers of one must learn the others as foreign tongues.” Yet because Chinese is written using “symbols” and not an alphabet, McWhorter argued, this “means that all of the Chinese varieties can be written with the same script.” This feature of written language, combined with the “unifying effect of Chinese culture,” means that Chinese varieties should be counted as dialects and not distinct languages.<sup>2</sup> A vision of China as a “unified whole,” however, may look different when considering everyday speaking practices. When meeting someone from China for the first time, it is commonplace to ask: Where are you from? What is your hometown? What “*fangyan* is spoken there”?<sup>3</sup> This can then lead to an interesting discussion about differences between how words and phrases are uttered in that person’s *fangyan*

(dialect/local language) and how they are pronounced in Standard Chinese (also called Mandarin or *putonghua*). The picture that emerges from a local point of view is that China is not a unified whole but an amazingly diverse patchwork of regional dialects, local language norms, and overlapping cultures.

Beginning from this understanding of the rich complexity of languages, this chapter examines how China is both unified and diverse, and how the languages used within China are both being brought together and diversified in new ways as they mix and evolve in the new world of communication convergence. To unpack this topic, we look at online communication shared among China's youth, members of the so-called post-1980s generation born after the implementation of the one-child policy.<sup>4</sup> Most are well educated, have ready access to media, and, as we demonstrate, use a variety of linguistic forms to communicate online, notably when using WeChat, China's most popular smartphone application.<sup>5</sup> The context for this study is Macao and those who interact regularly with people in the adjacent city of Zhuhai. This is a rapidly modernizing region of China where Cantonese is the most commonly spoken *fangyan* and, similar to how youth in Shanghai use mixed online communication,<sup>6</sup> youth of this region mix Cantonese with Standard Chinese, English, and other representational (including especially visual) forms, thus making for a remarkably rich stew of communicative practices.

Before proceeding we must first address the question: What is a Chinese *fangyan*? In Chinese, *fang* 方 is the character for place, as in *difang* 地方, and *yan* 言 is the character for language, as in *yuyan* 语言. The two characters, *fang* 方 and *yan* 言, when combined, may be understood as the language (*yuyan*) of a place (*difang*). In a comprehensive study of the Chinese language, Norman (1988) claimed that "there are literally scores of mutually non-intelligible varieties of Chinese . . . [and] [n]o comprehensive dialect survey for the whole of China has ever been carried out."<sup>7</sup> This may be due not only to China's size and population, but also because China is a linguistically rich and diverse place, where regional differences abound. Take, for instance, the common Chinese greeting, "Have you eaten yet?" In Standard Chinese (Mandarin) it is pronounced as "Ni chi bao le mei?" Yet in Hoklo (also known as Taiwanese) it is "Li jia ba boe?" and in Cantonese "Lei [or nei] sik bao mei?" Likewise, the phrase "Have you eaten your rice yet?" in Mandarin is "Ni chi fan le mei?" in Shanghainese "Nong chet vah leh va?" and Hunanese "N chah fan le mou?"<sup>8</sup> These local ways of speaking index regional variations that may map onto differences of culture and language. Considered within this book about communication and convergence in the contemporary China, then, our

chapter dives to the very foundation of human understanding by asking: How are daily communication practices in contemporary China enriched, complicated, and rendered more cosmopolitan as youth in Macao play with representation on WeChat? As these online communication practices evolve, what kinds of code switching are taking place, and how does this network of language games in turn drive identity construction in contemporary China?

To frame our questions in a larger context, we wonder how such linguistically diverse communication practices can give rise to a single “imagined community.”<sup>9</sup> As noted above, scholars point to China’s writing system as a unifying symbolic system. Throughout the dynastic period, for example, “literary Chinese” was the written form used for official and most scholarly documents: “In the Qing dynasty, the ordinary written administrative language was a late form of literary Chinese.”<sup>10</sup> Learning to write literary Chinese was acquired through years of rigorous study, primarily by those who prepared to take examinations to join China’s bureaucracy.<sup>11</sup> Another feature of literary Chinese was that it could be read and pronounced in different ways.<sup>12</sup> Written messages could be communicated among people who pronounced characters differently, a convergence point that served to bridge linguistic differences. In the modern period, China’s official written and spoken language transformed dramatically. As the Qing Dynasty (1644–1912) came to an end, and as Western missionaries established schools across China, the purpose of education changed.<sup>13</sup> Instead of serving as the primary vehicle for training scholars in classical Chinese and Confucian texts to pass civil service examinations, a new, mixed Sino-Western curriculum promoted science, nationalism, and modernism. Then, following the establishment of the Republic of China (ROC) in 1912, the Chinese Nationalist (Kuomintang or KMT) government made efforts to create a national language based upon vernacular forms that could be used in modern media and education of the masses. Hence, in 1926, the already tottering Nationalist government sought to unify the nation by creating a National Language based upon Beijing’s *fangyan*.<sup>14</sup>

Following the end of war with Japan in 1945 and the removal of the KMT government to Taiwan in 1949, this National Language system, using standardized, traditional characters and a pronunciation system consisting of “Mandarin phonetic symbols,” was imposed on Taiwan.<sup>15</sup> In mainland China under the administration of the People’s Republic of China (PRC), scholars developed a separate simplified writing system and a Romanized pronunciation scheme, Pinyin, in 1955 named *putonghua*, or the “common language,” with the goals of overcoming illiteracy

and “nation-building.”<sup>16</sup> For the Communists, then, like the Nationalists before them, the struggle to unify China as a coherent postcolonial nation, an “imagined community” with a shared vision, hinged in no small part on bringing the culture’s many *fangyan* into one linguistic camp: a strong and unified China, Mao believed, needed one language and one writing system, not a melange of local customs that hindered communication.

Despite Mao’s efforts to create a unified Chinese language, today’s Standard Chinese consists of two forms that differ in a number of ways: one difference is the use of traditional (in Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Macao) or simplified characters (in most of the mainland); a second difference is that hundreds of words and phrases are both spelled and pronounced differently. For instance, the way to call something “authentic” in Taiwan is *daodi*; in China this same word is *didao*. The verb “to copy” in Taiwan is *dayin*; in China this verb is *fuyin*. Yet despite differences in vocabulary and differences in pronunciation, these two versions of Standard Chinese are similar and usually mutually intelligible—hence the almost daily feature of Chinese life where friends check each other’s pronunciation to make sure they are understanding each other.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, as Standard Chinese has been adopted for use in formal education and promoted via media, it has spread and is now spoken and/or written across all regions of greater China. The use of Standard Chinese is perhaps greatest among China’s post-1980s generation youth and has thus become the lingua franca of greater China.<sup>18</sup> But does this mean that the rise of Standard Chinese is signaling the end of China’s nonstandard *fangyan*? Does the age of communication convergence mean that Mao’s dream of a unified nation held together by a unified language is finally coming true?

To answer this question broadly is beyond the scope of this study. However, it is possible to answer it in part. First, consider where this study is situated, the Macao-Zhuhai region of the Pearl River Delta. This is one of the wealthiest parts of China, where new ideas and communication technologies are available and adopted readily, especially among youth.<sup>19</sup> Furthermore, Hong Kong and Macao—both special administrative regions of China—are places where Cantonese is the lingua franca, even for well-educated youth.<sup>20</sup>

Second as we shift our focus to messages shared in an online context, consider that China’s internet is a platform for the emergence of new and mixed linguistic forms.<sup>21</sup> Studies conducted in Hong Kong and in Shanghai show that new forms of online discourse and code switching have emerged, marked by the mixing of English, Standard Chinese, and a local *fangyan* (i.e., Cantonese or Shanghainese).<sup>22</sup>

As demonstrated below, we find youth in Macao/Zhuhai similarly using mixed linguistic forms and creatively incorporating other symbolic systems, such as emoji, as afforded by the social media app WeChat.<sup>23</sup>

In this backdrop of language mixing and communication convergence, we continue with a brief overview of the historical and modern development of written vernacular Cantonese, highlighting practices in both Hong Kong and Macao. Next, we present our findings and discuss implications for how WeChat serves as a platform for the ongoing flows and creation of new linguistic forms, code switching, and identity expressions.

## Written Vernacular Cantonese in Hong Kong

Snow, in a comprehensive study, examined vernacular Cantonese in Hong Kong, one of the most linguistically special places in the Chinese-speaking world. It is important to note that Hong Kong and Macao—which Snow failed to mention—are the only places in China where educators have the option to instruct schoolchildren in written Chinese through a spoken *fangyan*—Cantonese.<sup>24</sup> They are also places where a written vernacular Cantonese that incorporates nonstandard Chinese characters—that are not formally taught—are widely used; these occur in a variety of texts, both public and private, such as advertisements, newspapers and magazines, emails, text messages, and social media.

Written vernacular Cantonese has a history stretching back centuries: earliest written vernacular forms, including Cantonese and Southern Min (Taiwanese), were used in such folk performances as opera, songs, poems, or religious liturgies.<sup>25</sup> Prior to 1949, places like Hong Kong and Guangzhou experienced an active “dialect literature movement,” when the Communist Party—in an effort to spread literacy to the masses—encouraged the development and use of dialect forms in a variety of publications, such as newspapers, books, novels.<sup>26</sup> Following the establishment of the PRC, however, the dialect movement ceased in Guangzhou and other areas of China. Whereas in Mao’s China there were strengthened efforts to fortify Standardize Chinese into one language and writing system, in colonial Hong Kong written vernacular Cantonese did not cease, but grew in use.

Both before and after the handover to the PRC in 1997, Hong Kong was diglossic: Standard Chinese (and English) existed alongside spoken and written vernacular Cantonese. In contrast with nearby mainland cities such as Guangzhou, the

number of articles written in vernacular Cantonese, as opposed to standard Chinese, increased across time; this varied, however, according to the political leanings of a publication, with Cantonese appearing more often in popular and left-leaning publications than right-leaning conservative ones.<sup>27</sup> Cantonese was used prominently in magazines, comic books, “pocketbooks”—short works that could be read while riding on the bus or train—and advertising. Before 1997, vernacular Cantonese was a “low” code (i.e., informal communication, the uneducated and lower classes of people) and Standard Chinese a “high” code. However, after 1997 Cantonese gained prominence as a marker of Hong Kong identity, and was even promoted among academics, who produced Cantonese dictionaries and grammars. Hence, Cantonese, as a key element of a “Hong Kong identity,” has come to elicit the embedded dynamics of culture and communication; language and identity converge to further enrich Chinese diversity.

Written vernacular Cantonese differs from standard, Mandarin-based Chinese in two ways: syntax and the use of nonstandard characters. This is apparent in the example below.<sup>28</sup> Consider the sentence, “I give you a book.” In Standard Chinese, using traditional characters, it is written as

S	+V	+IO	+MW	+DO
我	給	你	一本	書
<i>Wo</i>	<i>gei</i>	<i>ni</i>	<i>yiben</i>	<i>shu</i>
I	give	you	one (+ measure word)	book

In this sentence, the syntax is Subject 我 + Verb 給 + Indirect Object 你 + Measure Word 一本 + Direct Object 書.

The same sentence written in Cantonese:

S	+V	+MW	+DO	+ IO
我	畀	一本	書	你
<i>Ngo</i>	<i>bei</i>	<i>yatbun</i>	<i>syu</i>	<i>nei (lei)</i>
I	give	one (+ measure word)	book	[to] you

There are two noteworthy differences. One is the second character in the sentence, the verb 畀 for “give,” pronounced *bei*. While it has the same meaning as the Standard Chinese character 給 (*gei*), it is both pronounced and written differently. This is an exclusively Cantonese character. The second difference is the syntax. Whereas

in Standard Chinese the indirect object precedes the direct object, in Cantonese the positions are reversed: the direct object precedes the indirect object.

## Macao's Vernacular Cantonese Practices

Starting in 1557, Macao was administered by a European power, Portugal. The Portuguese administrators paid little attention to Macao's educational system, resulting in what Bray and Koo call a "poly-centred collection of education systems."<sup>29</sup> After the handover to the PRC in 1999, Macao was granted a high degree of autonomy as one of China's two "Special Administrative Regions" (SAR). In addition to designing its own local currency and legal system, Macao has control over, and a distinct, language policy that includes two official languages: Portuguese and Chinese. Local law requires official communication in both languages. Schools provide instruction in one of these languages, although, importantly, "the law does not explicitly state which variety of Chinese (Cantonese and Putonghua) should be used as medium of instruction."<sup>30</sup> Most students attend schools where Cantonese is the primary language of instruction, and a minority offer instruction in Portuguese, Mandarin, or English—supplemented with Mandarin Chinese language instruction. Furthermore, the Macao government does not take an official stand on the use of simplified or traditional characters, with traditional characters favored in most schools and society at large.<sup>31</sup> While local media are influenced by the mainland's policies, they are not directly censored by Chinese authorities.<sup>32</sup> Local news broadcasts on "Macao TDM" (Teledifusão de Macau) are delivered primarily in Cantonese (there is also a Portuguese language channel); the internet is uncensored, and media produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan are available.

When looking at language practices in Macao, we find that Cantonese is the first and/or preferred language of most residents in Macao, with written vernacular Cantonese used regularly.<sup>33</sup> For instance, the characters for "taxi" are written as 的士, pronounced in Cantonese as "dik si"; an underground "car park" is written as 地庫 (*deifu*), and one often sees the possessive character written in nonstandard form as 嘅 (*ge*), not 的 (*de*), as it is in Standard Chinese. We see this nonstandard character in the image in figure 1. The phrase positioned directly above "Your Catering Professional" is written in vernacular Cantonese, 您嘅外賣專家, pronounced as "Nei ge ngoi maai zyun gaa." The second character, 嘅 (*ge*), is a possessive particle that is nonstandard.



FIGURE 1. Vernacular Cantonese in Commercial Signage

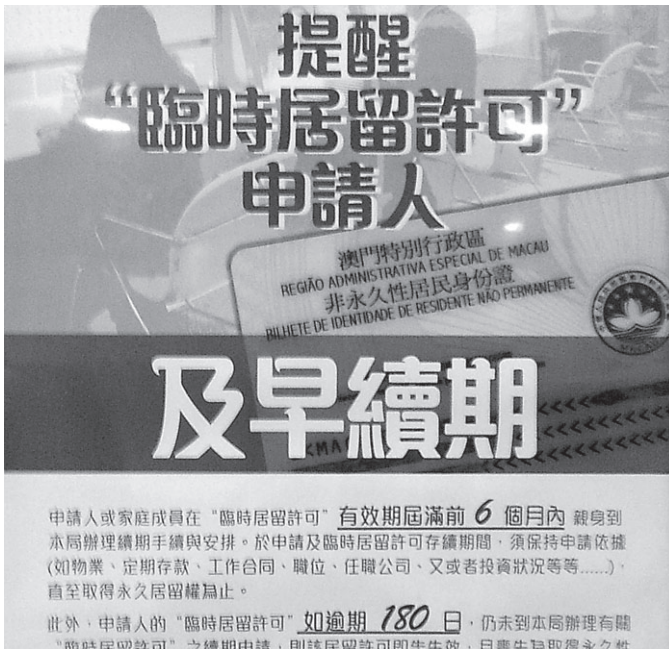


FIGURE 2. Vernacular Cantonese in Official Signage



While most official public signs are written in Standard Chinese, there are exceptions. The photograph in figure 2 was taken in December 2014 at a government office in Macao. Most of it is in Standard Chinese. However, the text displayed most prominently in the center is a vernacular Cantonese expression (using standard characters): 及早續期 *kap zou zuk kei*, or in English, “apply early.” In Standard Chinese this same phrase would be written as 提早續期 (*tizao xuqi*), as the standard phrase for “early” is *tizao*. Yet the Cantonese phrase here is 及早 (*kap zou*).

These are but two examples of vernacular Cantonese writing that are often seen in Macao. An analysis of newspapers, which is beyond the focus of this chapter, would also show that like Hong Kong, local Macao newspapers that cater to “popular” audiences (i.e., a tabloid, akin to the *New York Post* or *The Sun*) use more vernacular Cantonese writing.<sup>34</sup> In the backdrop of the Chinese government’s policies and Macao’s local laws, we highlight the prominent use of Cantonese while also noting that Portuguese, English, and Mandarin are foregrounded in the vernacular in different contexts. We now turn to online communication practices to explore the kinds of language mixing that showcase the ever-evolving world of communication convergence, and that are driving identity construction in contemporary China.

## Macao Youth’s Online Communication

Anecdotal evidence indicates that the use of vernacular Cantonese has increased among Macao’s youth, notably their online and social media communication. This is perhaps not surprising, when considering findings from studies of youth in other contexts. For instance, in a study of colloquial Arabic in Saudi Arabia, Azmi and Aljafari found that young people are most adept at reading colloquial Arabic, as they use it regularly in social media messages.<sup>35</sup> In China, where internet use and penetration is greatest among youth, the internet is a context where creative expression is most prolific, where online writing occurs that some may call “deviant,” and the social norms that happen in face-to-face communication, such as deference to elders or social superiors, are less likely to be observed among youth.<sup>36</sup>

The creativity of expression seen among China’s youth comes during a time of rapid growth of online communication, and most notably, the social media app WeChat (*Weixin* 微信) that was created in 2011. By 2018 there were an estimated one billion monthly active users on WeChat, with most in China, spurred in part

by WeChat's excellent design.<sup>37</sup> Unlike other social media apps like Facebook or Instagram, WeChat is not blocked by China's internet censors, making it readily available as a social media platform in China and Macao.<sup>38</sup> According to data collected by the Macao Association for Internet Research, WeChat ranks highest in usage as a social media app among mobile phone users in Macao. Data also show that 99 percent of fifteen- to twenty-four-year-olds and 97 percent of twenty-five to thirty-four-year-olds use the internet. Among all internet users, 92 percent use a cell phone daily, and the most popular app (78 percent) is WeChat.<sup>39</sup>

## Methods and Data Collection

This study began with a personal observation by the second author. She grew up in Zhuhai, a city adjacent to Macao. Qiu would often cross the border to visit her aunt and cousin who live in Macao. Then, after completing an undergraduate degree in China, she moved from Zhuhai to Macao and worked at a company for two years. During an initial period of adjustment she noticed differences in communicative practices, and how people would code-switch and code-mix.<sup>40</sup>

In Macao, Qiu noticed that people would often code-switch or mix Cantonese and English, whereas in Zhuhai people would mix Cantonese and Standard Chinese. Another difference was that when exchanging messages on WeChat, her colleagues and friends—most of whom were young like herself—told her she did not use enough emoji. These observations motivated this study.

Our data consist of two parts: (1) twenty-one WeChat screenshots—collected over a six-month period from 2014 to 2015, and (2) interviews about code-switching in WeChat messages. Qiu collected screenshots from people she knew personally, including friends and/or colleagues at the company in Macao where she worked prior to this study. Attention was paid to collecting messages that demonstrated the creative use of emoji, the mixing and appropriations of other languages, and repairs, such as when a word or phrase was misspelled. Twenty-one screenshots surfaced with one or more of these features.

For the second stage of research Qiu developed a list of questions for interviews with thirteen participants. Some were conducted individually and others with two or three participants jointly. Locations varied, with some conducted at the University of Macau, others at a hotel lobby, coffee shop, or restaurant. The initial questions of each interview probed demographic questions, such as age, occupation,

frequency of use of WeChat, years spent in Macao, and primary friendship groups; this was followed by open-ended questions about code switching or code mixing. Participants talked about their experiences in code switching on WeChat, how they used emoji, and the impact of code switching on everyday conversations and interpersonal relationships. For the last part, participants were presented with preselected screenshots and asked to comment on each. They were asked to guess the identity of the people who composed the messages (e.g., a local Macao person, or someone from mainland China) and whether they would post similar messages. They also made interpretive comments about images and texts that they were shown.

Participants ranged in age from twenty-two to thirty years old; they were informed that their messages were being used for this study, and provided written consent to use their messages. For the second phase of this study, Qiu conducted thirteen interviews with Cantonese-speaking young adults. All gave written consent; approximately half (six) were born and raised in Macao. The rest (seven) lived in Macao but grew up in Zhuhai or other parts of Guangdong province. All interviewees spoke Cantonese as their first language; they were also fluent or conversant in Mandarin (Standard Chinese) and English. Interviews were conducted in Cantonese and transcribed into Standard Chinese. The authors jointly analyzed transcripts. All personal identifying information has been removed to protect participants' identities.

From these data, we looked for emergent rules, interpretations, meanings, and identities. In the following section, we present, interpret, and comment on seven screenshots. We chose these because they display different types of code mixing involving different languages (e.g., Standard Chinese and Cantonese), mistakes, and/or the creative use of emoji or other images. In our discussion we draw upon the interpretive comments participants made about these screenshots during interviews.

## WeChat Screenshots: Language Mixing

This first excerpt is the shortest. It was a message exchanged with Qiu's cousin, a lifelong resident of Macao. The opening is a mix of vernacular Cantonese and English: 聽朝 10:30 去 body check (*teng ciu 10:30 heoi body check*; English translation: morning 10:30 go body check). Qiu replied, 好 *hou* (good). This is followed with a question, 在哪吃 (Where [go] eat?).



**FIGURE 3.** English-Cantonese-Chinese Language Mixing

Note the mixing of three codes: vernacular Cantonese, Standard Chinese, and English; singly they would be unintelligible to a monolingual speaker. The opening, 聽朝 (*teng ciu*) is vernacular Cantonese. The next phrase, “body check” is English; yet for the monolingual English speaker the meaning would be unclear: “body check” is a direct translation of the Cantonese term 體檢 (*tai gim*), or health checkup. Thus, the first message, translated into English, could be rendered as “[I] have to go to a checkup at 10:30 this morning.” The response, 好, means “good” or “okay.” The character 好 is the same in both Cantonese and Standard Chinese. However, the reply 在哪吃 is not Cantonese, but rather Standard Chinese. In Pinyin, pronounced as “zai nar chi,” it means, “Where [go] eat?” If it were written in vernacular Cantonese, it would read as 去邊度食 (*heoi bin dou sik*).

In a follow-up interview Qiu asked her cousin why she wrote 在哪吃 and not the Cantonese phrase, 去邊度食. Her cousin explained that it was because of the input method she used to write Chinese, Cangjie, and that she could write 在哪吃 with fewer keys than are required to write 去邊度食. Chinese characters can be typed on a phone or computer with a number of different methods. Most users in Macao use Cangjie, a system developed in Taiwan that is based upon “building” characters with the keyboard; the other is to use a phonetic system, such as Pinyin, or a Cantonese phonetic that is similar to Jyutping. Therefore, the choice of this phrase seems influenced more by how to input a character, or time-use efficiency, rather than a linguistic decision.

Qiu asked other participants to comment on this screenshot. All readily understood the meaning of the first two turns, as they understood vernacular Cantonese and the meaning of “body check.” However, they found the phrase 在哪吃 confusing. That is, while the meaning was clear, the identity of the speaker—whether

a “local” from Macao or an “outsider” from Guangdong—was not. Most thought this person was an “outside” person from another province of China, who had only recently learned to write in vernacular Cantonese. Thus, we see that in online communication the perceived identity of participants can blur, as messages are impacted by technology, character input behavior, and user choice.

## Cantonese-English Message

This next screenshot is similar to the first. It starts with vernacular Cantonese, marked by use of the character 唔, pronounced as “m,” meaning “no” or negation. 我可能去唔到啦, 要等11月份 (*Ngo ho nang heoi m dou laa, jiu dang 11 jyt ban*), literally translated as “I maybe cannot go, have to wait until November.” Then there is a code-switch and response in English, “I see.” The reply is in mixed



**FIGURE 4.** Cantonese-to-English Messages

English-Cantonese: “sorry” 呀. The final character 呀 (pronounced as “aa”), is a tag particle that comes at the end of an utterance and does not convey referential meaning. Instead, it changes the key of the utterance, making it sound like speech: final particles such as *aa* or *la* are common in everyday spoken Cantonese.<sup>41</sup> The closing utterance is in English: “Never mind.”

When this image was presented to interview participants, they said two things. One was that people usually follow the language of the preceding utterance. This we see from examining the order of languages/codes:

Turn 1: Cantonese

Turn 2: English

Turn 3: Mixed English/Cantonese

Turn 4: English

Another point is that the type of code-switching observed in these utterances also occurs in everyday speech. Participants who moved to Macao from nearby cities said that when they first arrived, they noticed how local Macao residents inserted English words and phrases into their speech. This impacted their own speaking practices. One interviewee commented:

After working for two years [in Macao], just as you say, I really started to unconsciously change. But when going back to Zhuhai, your friends who have never worked in Macao, and you’re chatting, you start to randomly add English. . . . Then they’ll say, “How come you always say so many English words?”

This participant was not aware how her speaking habits had changed until she went to Zhuhai and chatted with friends who had “never worked in Macao.” These friends noticed a linguistic mixing similar to that displayed in figure 4.

## Character Switch

Code switching (or mixing) may involve not only a switch from one language to another, but a character switch, as in the following. The opening two messages (by poster 1) are in vernacular Cantonese and written in *simplified* characters. 原来我记错左; 今个星期都系朝早去补 *Jyun lai ngo gei co zo; gam go sing kei dou hai*



**FIGURE 5.** Simplified-Traditional Chinese Character Switch

*ciu zou heoi bou* [Originally I remembered wrong. This week the tutoring class is in the morning]. The response is also in vernacular Cantonese, but in *traditional* Chinese characters: 死啦 咁你來 來得切去啊一家? *sei laa gam nei lai m lai dak cai heoi aa jat gaa* [Dead. Do you think you can make it this time?]. Following this switch, poster 1 responded, also in traditional characters: 黎唔切，所以今日唔洗去 *Lai m cit, so ji gam jat m sai heoi* [Can't make it. So today I won't go]. The chat closes with poster 2's response, again in traditional characters, 咁都得 *gam dou dak* [That's all right].

While Macao's official language policy is to use traditional characters, simplified characters are not sanctioned. In commercial districts that appeal to Chinese tourists, such as in and around casinos, many signs and business advertisements are written in simplified characters. Furthermore, people who cross the border from Macao to China for work and/or school are exposed to and use both kinds of characters. Furthermore, when inputting characters on a mobile phone, the user can easily switch between simplified and traditional character sets. Hence, this may explain how and why the messages we have been discussing, written in vernacular Cantonese, display a switch from simplified to traditional characters.

When interview participants commented on this screenshot they noticed the character switch, but did not find it remarkable. Rather, their attention was

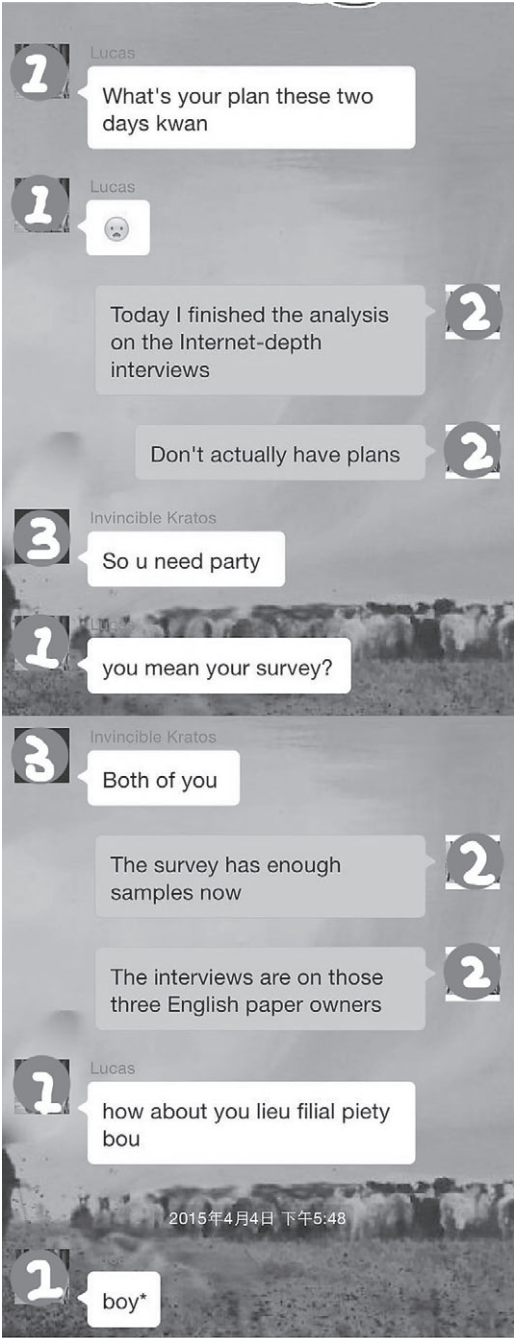
drawn to the use of the number 5, in the form of an emoji (discussed later): 來 5 來. The meaning of the phrase was clear, as the number 5, *m* in Cantonese, is pronounced the same as the word for no or a negation, also *m*. The phrase literally means “come not come?”; it is a way to formulate a question. The usual way to write the question, based upon spoken vernacular Cantonese, is 黎唔切 (*lai m cit*); this is how poster 1 replied. Why did poster 2 write the phrase as 來 5 來? The person who wrote this explained that she thought it was a “cute” and playful way to phrase the question. She also explained that it was easy to insert this emoji when typing on her phone.

## Message Repairs

As studies in conversation analysis and ethnomethodology demonstrate, during workplace interaction participants develop ad hoc rules for how to respond to each other, as “context is both a project and a product of the participants’ actions.”<sup>42</sup> Such rules may be created and/or invoked when an apparent rule violation occurs. The following is one example of institutional talk. The participants were three friends who worked at the same company in Macao. Participant 1 opened with a question in English, “What’s your plan these two days *kwan*”? Both participant 2 and participant 3 responded, using a style of English that may reflect an underlying Cantonese structure: “Don’t actually have plans,” dropping the implied initial pronoun “I” and the adjective “any.” Likewise, participant 3 responded, “So u need party,” a Cantonese-style construction, transforming the “to” infinitive “need [to] party” into a zero infinitive “need party.” This exchange of messages apparently flowed smoothly, even with such phrases as “The interviews are on those three English paper owners.” However, the last word of the final turn was marked as a mistake, when participant 1 wrote “bou.” He then self-corrected and wrote “boy\*,” showing that the word was misspelled and that he knew how to spell it correctly.

When participants viewed this excerpt, they discussed a number of strategies for addressing mistakes. One tool that a number of them mentioned is the ability to “recall” a problematic message. If a message is sent to people who are not relationally close, or if the message is a job-related task, they will be more careful with message construction, and read it before sending it out. But if they send out a poorly worded message, or one with an obvious mistake, such as in this example, they will





**FIGURE 6.** English Language Repair

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try to recall it. Or, another tactic, as in this message, was to repair the message with an asterisk, thereby marking the correction.<sup>43</sup> This we see in the last turn: “boy\*.” But, participants explained, if they are chatting with close friends, they usually do not correct mistakes such as misspellings, wrong characters, or inappropriate emoji. Instead mistakes may be overlooked or left unmarked, because friends would be more likely to understand the intent and meaning of such messages. Friends who want a clarification can ask for it, just as a repair could be made in face-to-face conversation.

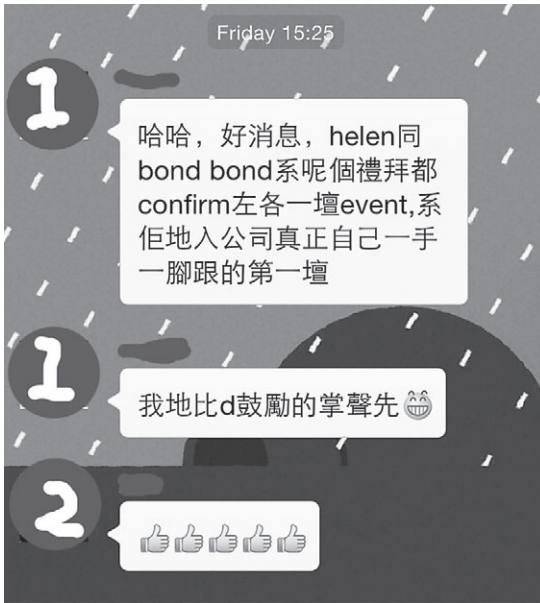
## Emoji, Rules, Generational Differences

Perhaps one of the most interesting features of WeChat messages is the use of emoji and stickers. In early text-based computer-mediated communication, users would “accent” messages with pictorial images called “emoticons,” such as the well-known smiley face :).<sup>44</sup> With the development of online technologies, especially the smartphone, a greater array of “emotion” accents have been created, most notably in Japan, where such images were first called “emoji.”<sup>45</sup>

Figure 7 is a short message shared between two colleagues at a company in Macao. It is comprised of mixed codes: vernacular Cantonese, English, and emoji. An English translation is provided in order to show meaning and word order.

- 1 Ha ha. Good news, helen and bond bond this week both did confirm to do one event, since [the time] they came into the company, it is for them the first real time that they have done one by themselves, using their own hands and feet.  
We give them a little encouragement with our applause
- 2 [Emoji indicating “Thumbs up”]

This is a series of complex, mixed-language messages; monolingual speakers of Cantonese and/or English would find them difficult to decipher. Note, for example, the second message: 我地比d. The first two characters, 我地 (*ngo dei*), are Cantonese for the plural pronoun “we.” Next is a combined form 比d, pronounced in Cantonese as “bei + d.” The character 比 in Standard Chinese means “to compare.” However, here it signifies the verb “to give,” based upon the Cantonese pronunciation of the character *bei*. In Standard Chinese this verb would be written as 給, and in the model Cantonese sentence shown above, this verb was written using



**FIGURE 7.** Emoji Rules and Cantonese Characters

the nonstandard character 畀. Likewise, the letter *d* is used for its sound qualities. The adjective meaning “a little” is pronounced “di” in Cantonese, but written as 點 in Standard Chinese.

This novel use of characters and Latin letters to represent vernacular Cantonese and English is common in messages shared among Macao’s young adults. Perhaps because they are ubiquitous, other interviewees did not comment on this aspect of the message. The emoji, however, were remarked upon and discussed by interview participants:

- H: My friend said [my] messages were “too serious.” So I forced myself to add emoji.
- H: If you add some relaxed expressions for them, . . . and they send you relaxed expressions, then you have a different language . . . and I feel there is better communication.
- I: If [the emoji] is big, then you need only one. But if it is small, normally I will always put three together in a row.

H’s friend said her messages were “too serious.” Emoji were added to change the key of the message, to make it seem “relaxed” and less serious. This pattern of

communication among youth who use WeChat is one that we have found elsewhere.<sup>46</sup> The emergent rule of putting three emoji together points to the emergence of a syntax that bridges China's youth across regions and linguistic fangyan.

In another interview, a participant spoke about the differences between “language” (文字 *man zi*) and emoji:

Emoji is a picture. . . . And these pictures can express into language that feeling, that meaning that sometimes words cannot express. And sometimes you want to be vague; and sometimes words are a very explicit thing. And if you want to have a vague section of words, you can use these pictures that will allow for a vague expression of feeling. And it's also code switching, that lets you have different kinds of interpretations to come out.

For this participant, emoji and language, or written Chinese characters, were perceived differently. Written characters were sometimes believed to be “very explicit”—perhaps implicating the referential function of language to name things or actions. Emoji, however, were described as “vague” and conveyed feelings and emotions, much as would be communicated nonverbally in face-to-face interaction. This allowed for the possibility of a code switch, a change in mood, and opening the message to multiple interpretations.

Later in this same interview Qiu asked participants about perceived generational differences, if they used WeChat or other social media to communicate with their parents, and if they did, how their expressions and use of languages were similar or different. In response S said, “Every morning my mom gets up and plays on her iPad. Friends in her group will share new information. So she will slowly accept this, and she will also use these new expressions.” This participant's mother apparently was learning “new expressions” while using her iPad and communicating with friends—peers of the same age—giving evidence to technological and communicative convergence. D and E, however, responded differently:

D: If I send emoji to my mom, she doesn't understand what I'm sending her.

E: Yeah. I'm the same. She will say, “What are you sending [me]? Don't play these things with me!”

These young people said that their mothers did not readily adopt the use of emoji in messages. For D's and E's elders, the meaning of emoji was unclear. E's mother

saw it as a form of “play” and not suitable for conversation. Thus, while the emoji and new expressions were apparently adopted by some older folk, others did not adopt them; this indicates that language innovation may begin with younger people and then is adopted later by older folk.

## Superior-Subordinate

The message in figure 8 was shared between Qiu and the boss at her former company. It has both code mixing and a code switch from Cantonese to English. We also see emoji and a repair. Yet it differs from others in tone, arguably because, as a form of institutional talk, it involved an exchange of messages between a superior (boss) and subordinate (employee).<sup>47</sup>



**FIGURE 8.** Superior-Subordinate Messages

QIU: *Zou san aa Macy, ming tin soeng ng lei wui hai gung si maa*

[Good morning Macy, will you be at the company tomorrow morning?]

MACY: *ngo daai koi zung ng sin faan* [smiley face emoji]

[I will probably be back at noon (smiley face emoji)]

MACY: *Yiqi (jat chhai)* lunch?

[Together lunch?]

QIU: *Hou aa* [smiley face emoji]

Yes aa [smiley face emoji]

MACY: [winking face emoji] see u than

MACY: then

Qiu opened with a formal greeting, “Good morning Macy.” It was written not in Standard Chinese (早上好 *zaoshang hao*), but in Cantonese (早晨阿 Macy). This was followed by the request “Will you be at the company tomorrow morning?” While written in vernacular Cantonese, it did not include emoji, which may indicate a more formal tone. In reply, the boss answered the question, “I will probably be back at noon.” The adverb, probably (大概 *daai koi*), appears to be a hedge, indicating politeness. Yet the message was closed with the addition of a single, small emoji, a smiley face, softening the message. Macy then added a tag question, written in mixed Chinese-English, 一起 “lunch?” This indexed the conversational implication that Qiu wished to meet her boss for lunch. In the third turn, Qiu accepted the request, replying with a mixed-code message, 好阿 (*hou-aa*), where the final particle *aa* 阿 indexes both a Cantonese, colloquial expression, and a phatic expression of agreement.<sup>48</sup> The text is followed by an emoji, a smiley face, reciprocating her boss’s use of an Emoji.

For the final turn the boss switched from vernacular Cantonese and mixed Cantonese-English to English. The turn began with the “sly face” emoji, indicating agreement. This was followed by the English phrase “see u than.” The word “than,” however, was misspelled. Macy sent the word again with the corrected spelling, “then,” in a repair.

When reflecting upon these messages, Qiu commented:

Based on the whole conversation, we are more like friends than [people in a] working relationship, which is hugely different from the stereotype [of] conversation between superordinate and subordinate. The addition of emoji eases the tension

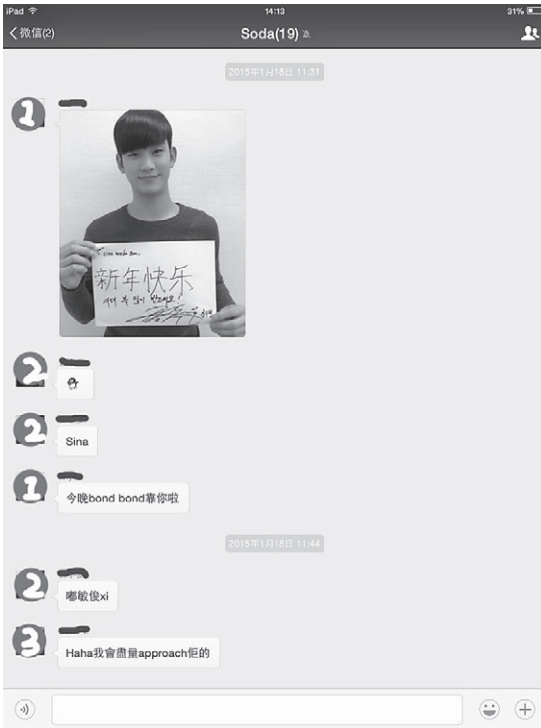
between each other during the communication. The emoji faces reflect senders' feelings, which makes emotions visible, [even though WeChat is] not face-to-face communication. For people with high-ranking position in workplace, [an] emoji makes them feel more approachable toward their employees.

The perception that WeChat is a platform that facilitates the lessening of social and power distance echoes what we found earlier: a person in a subordinate position, such as an employee or student, over the course of time may become less conscious of power and focus more on the content of a message and less on the social status of the sender.<sup>49</sup> These online practices may lessen relational and social distance.

## Mixing and Voicing

The last screenshot, figure 9, is arguably the most complex. It combines the creative use of emoji, Cantonese, English, Chinese (simplified and traditional characters), and the picture of a famous Korean actor. The occasion for this message was the upcoming sixth anniversary of Sina, a media company in Macao. The Korean actor, Kim Soo-hyun, was well known in Macao, as he was named a winner in the Fifteenth Huading Awards for his role in the Korean drama *My Destiny* (the award is based upon viewers' survey of the top one hundred television series broadcast in China). Kim Soo-hyun was contacted by Sina employees who attended the Huading Awards ceremony. He consented to having his picture taken while holding the sign. On the upper left-hand corner of the sign there appears in English "To Sina Weibo." Underneath, in large letters, is the handwritten message in simplified Chinese characters, 新年快乐 (*Xinnian kuaile*), or "Happy New Year." Beneath is the same phrase written in Korean Hangul. At the bottom is the actor's signature. The image was then posted to Weibo (China's version of Twitter).

An employee who saw the actor's picture resent it to colleagues at Sina. Poster 2 posted a penguin emoji, followed by "Sina"—the name of the company. Poster 1 replied, in colloquial Cantonese (marked by 啦 *la*), "今天 bond bond 靠你啦" ("Today bond bond is depending upon you *la*"). Poster 2 replied: "嘟敏俊 *xi*." The three characters 嘟敏俊 are Do Min Joon, the actor's screen name written in Chinese; poster 2 made the name sound more "Korean" by adding *xi*, Korean



**FIGURE 9.** Voicing and Ventriloquizing a New Year’s Greeting

for “Mr.” The message closed as poster 3, writing in Cantonese—marked by the Cantonese character 佢 *keoi* (third-person pronoun): “Haha 我會盡量 approach 佢的” (“I will do my best to approach his [fame/achievement]”).

- 1 *Korean actor Kim Soo-hyun*  
 新年快乐  
 Happy New Year
- 2 Penguin emoji
- 2 Sina [addressee, company in Macao]
- 1 今天 bond bond 靠你啦  
 Today bond bond is depending upon you la
- 2 哪敏俊 xi  
 Do Min Joon xi [Kim’s character on show, *My Destiny*]
- 3 Haha 我會盡量 approach 佢的  
 I will do my best to approach his [fame/achievement]

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This exchange shows a way to creatively insert images to create different personas. The three participants engaged with the Korean actor's picture, speaking for and through it. In the last turn, poster 3 responded to "him" by promising to work hard and "approach" his accomplishment. Here we see what Bakhtin would call "voicing," showing how language has the "taste" of a context and is populated by intentions.<sup>50</sup> That is, the participants animated and responded to the actor as though he were speaking to them, manipulating him like a puppet—a kind of discourse that Cooren and Sandler would call "ventriloquated."<sup>51</sup>

From this we see how WeChat users could do more than simply share propositional content. They creatively used a variety of linguistic forms—Cantonese, Standard Chinese, traditional and simplified characters, English, emoji—to create messages that are humorous, build social rapport, and cut across social barriers. In other words, while their spoken and written Cantonese may originate in the speech and writings of previous generations, they are creating new mixed forms, new vocabularies, and new rules. And this may lead to a new identity, one that is not limited to one side of the Macao-Zhuhai border, but in an online medium that can be shared across all of China, and beyond.

## Conclusion

We began this chapter with the observation that some scholars have failed to acknowledge China's linguistic diversity. In the modern period and since the fall of the Qing Dynasty, both the ROC and PRC governments have supported a single, national language (or common language, *putonghua*). Yet, as we have argued, the data presented illuminate a different and more diverse side of "China," one that uses a local *fangyan*, Cantonese, English, Mandarin, and emoji to create new message forms. These may symbolically index and construct imagined communities linked to a place (e.g., Hong Kong/Macau), or a generation (i.e., youth conversant in online communicative practices). We have shown how new communication technologies and platforms such as the app WeChat allow for the space and context where novel and creative communication practices can emerge and converge. The mixed, online communication codes developed by youth in the Macao-Zhuhai region incorporate a variety of languages and registers—including Standard Chinese, a *fangyan*, English, and other forms—a conclusion that coincides with earlier observations in Taiwan, Hong Kong, Shanghai, and other regions of China.<sup>52</sup>

We draw two implications from this study. The first is that online forms of communication, especially the kinds of short chats and messages shared on WeChat, may afford the creation of novel words and expressions. Macao's multilingual young adults communicate on their mobile phones using WeChat, with processes of code switching, code mixing, and a wide range of linguistic codes, including Cantonese, English, Standard Chinese, emoji, and even Korean. While some members of older generations found the creation and use of new words and expressions unintelligible, and/or too "playful" to count as serious communication, all these converging factors produced the unique cultural context for modes of expression that this generation of youth interpreted as lessening social distance and creating relational closeness.

A point of interest is how young adults are embracing the use of emoji. These representational and highly visualized symbols are used to accent messages, impart affect, and change the relational quality of exchanges. Perhaps one appeal of emoji is that they work socio-pragmatically as "nonreferential indexes" and derive their meaning by pointing to some dimension of interactional and cultural context.<sup>53</sup> That is, an Emoji symbol is attractive because it is "vague" and "open" to multiple interpretations, and not "limited" or "closed" in meaning, as Chinese characters might be perceived. While modes of communication increasingly converge on and between WeChat and other social media platforms, meanings cannot be fully closed; new mixed linguistic forms and terms, emoji, images, and others, facilitate greater polysemy just as in the offline world, where ritual objects can have multiple meanings.<sup>54</sup> And thus, online language games show us how languages come together and fragment apart at the same time, how China is complexly both unified and diverse, and how identity is continually evolving.

Our second implication is a critique of an argument made by McWhorter, who saw in Chinese culture the power to unify China's many unintelligible *fangyan*, or "dialects."<sup>55</sup> While it may be that dialect writing was severely sanctioned and in decline during the second half of the twentieth century, it has not died out entirely.<sup>56</sup> We find, and regularly encounter, vernacular Cantonese writing in both Hong Kong and Macao. Recent studies conducted both in Hong Kong and in Guangdong province indicate high regard for Cantonese.<sup>57</sup> With new communication technologies and online platforms, vernacular Cantonese is oftentimes used in an even more mixed manner as young adults create new characters, expressions, and forms, during diglossic situations.<sup>58</sup> This may foretell of possible convergences in the communicative practices of youth across greater China, with the sharing of new

terms, expressions, and ways to embed emoji and images into their chats. At the same time, we do not foresee dialect forms of writing and speaking being erased by standard *putonghua*.<sup>59</sup> Rather, we argue that Cantonese and other nonstandard varieties will continue on, albeit in supplemental new forms, for instance, their use by youth to highlight or animate their voices and intentions.

We argue that a better way of understanding the appearance of a unified cultural China is to see it as the imposition of the Party, state, and government—or in the premodern period, the empire. When the power of the state was strong in the twentieth century and mass media (e.g., newspapers, radio, television) grew to reach all parts of China, there was a movement toward greater linguistic and cultural unity. This arguably is true of China's post-1980s generation, who were educated in *putonghua* and standard written Chinese. However, movement toward a cultural standard is perhaps countered by the development of new and evolving forms of communication, namely via social media and online communication. Converging factors produce this unique and culturally diverse context for more open modes of expression and inclusiveness, yet they also empower Chinese *fangyan* to develop in alternative and nonunitary fashion. This is not unique to Macao and has been observed in the online communication of youth in other regions of China.<sup>60</sup>

Young people, who are ready adopters of new technologies and the generation most likely to participate in and create novel linguistic forms, are finding avenues along the communication supply chain to develop and express new voices. This does not necessarily mean that all will write or speak using the same vernacular *fangyan* of previous generations, or that a particular *fangyan* will spread across China. Rather, young people are incorporating a mix of words, images, codes, and texts that they understand. Online platforms and new technological tools provide them with more access and power to construct new iterations and unique identity expressions that may in turn be shared globally.

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