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Title

Language, Technology, and Social Media in China

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Introduction

This chapter explores new language use and practices brought by China's social media in the unique media environment shaped by language policies, technological innovations, and the social and political context of China. The rapid advancement of the internet and social media technologies has brought a significant impact on online language policies and practices, giving rise to more dynamic and evolving online policies and various innovative language phenomena. In China, digital and social media have evolved into a distinctive ecology of mediated communication and language practice in which language, culture, and technologies – together with government policies around social media – interact to create distinctive discursive and linguistic practices across a range of interactional contexts. Meanwhile, China's online environment involves strict and multi-layered censorship that monitors digital content, thus creating boundaries around what it defines to be sensitive political and social topics, as app developers and content producers compete to develop marketable and successful products for a large Chinese audience. It is this unique and evolving environment that is at the heart of the creativity and interplay between such forces that make China's social media unique and distinct.

Language policies generally refer to the decisions (in the forms of rules, regulations, and conventions) made by individuals, institutions and governing bodies regarding how languages are used, promoted, or restricted in various communicative situations, and for this study, communication on social media platforms. The general language policy regarding language varieties on China's social media is flexible, as it follows the government's policy of supporting the dominant role of Mandarin Chinese (i.e., Putonghua), while recognising the importance of Chinese dialects (e.g., Cantonese and Shanghainese) and ethnic minority languages (e.g., Manchurian and Mongolian).

It is within this unique political and cultural environment of Chinese languages and social media that China's social media have seen innovative language creation and practices including emojis and stickers (Huang, 2017; Zhu & Ren, 2022), internet memes (Nie, 2021; Wu & Fitzgerald, 2023; Ying & Blommaert, 2020), popular internet expressions (Ren, 2018; Ren & Guo, 2012), multilingualism and translanguaging (Wei and Hua, 2019; Zhang and Ren, 2020), as well as creating new languages such as 'Martian language', a coded language that mobilizes Chinese characters, Arabic numbers, emojis, English letters and sign symbols to communicate meanings (Lee, 2007). Such relatively flexible language policy that is intertwined with China's online censorship stimulates the creativity of users who use language and other semiotic systems, such as emojis, images, and hyperlinks as a pool of resources and tools to perform social actions such as identity building (Deng & Zhan; Teng & Chan, 2022), fun making (Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021a; Zhang and Cassany, 2019), and engaging with platform censorship (Wu, 2024; Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021b).

With this context in mind, in this chapter we examine the creativity in language practices in China's dynamic internet culture, where language and content policy intersect and shape social media user engagement. It is this confluence and intersection from which we consider and explore the linguistic and technological affordances of China's social media and the way language policies, real or imagined, have shaped the communicative and linguistic context and creative possibilities that characterise China's social media.

We begin the discussion with a brief history of the development of China's language policies – with special attention paid to how Chinese dialects (also called *fangyan*) – are sanctioned or promoted. This is followed by a review of studies of language use and practices on China's

social media. Last, we use a case study to demonstrate creativity and engagement with China's social media platforms.

1.1 From Paper to the Digital: Language Policy and Technology.

Prior to 1949 when the People's Republic of China was established, China's linguistic landscape was diverse: a majority of the population was illiterate (Jowett, 1989), and the promotion of a standardised, national language – established by the Nationalist government in 1926 (Li, 2004) – was not yet a high priority. Some Communist leaders advocated for the development and use of local vernacular writing with the aim of 'massification' (*dazhonghua*), meaning that by promoting written scripts as close as possible to spoken forms, literacy would spread and the educated could better 'identify with the life of the common people' (Snow, 2004, p. 104). This campaign was dropped after 1949, however, and in 1955 the national standard language of 'Putonghua' (Mandarin Chinese) was established (Li, 2004), and in 1958 *Hanyu Pinyin* was adopted for use in schools and literacy campaigns (Wang & Andrews, 2021). Attempts at promoting dialect-based scripts continued in some areas – notably where a local vernacular differed greatly from Putonghua. For instance, Guangdong's political leaders initially resisted using Pinyin for instruction, and claimed that a 'dialect-based pinyin' (based upon spoken Cantonese) was 'Guangdong's "magic weapon" … in the fight against illiteracy' (Peterson, 1994, p. 933). While this was soon dropped, many schools across China where Putonghua was not widely spoken, continued to offer instruction in minority and non-standard vernaculars (Lam, 2005). A change, however, came with the adoption of a revised national language law in 2000.

1.2 National Common Language and Writing Law

The 'National Common Language and Writing Law' established in 2000, 'sought to promote standardisation' and greater use of the 'national common language and [written] characters]' (Wang & King, 2022, p. 2). While the law states that 'all ethnic groups in China have the freedom to use and develop their own spoken and written varieties' (p. 2), support for such efforts is unclear. Instead, the law establishes principles and practices for promoting the use of standard Putonghua across the nation. We describe the law's key provisions in the following.

First is a statement of principle, that citizens 'have the right' to use Putonghua in speaking and writing (*Zhonghua Renmin*, 2000, authors' translation). This is then connected with the claim that a common language is 'conducive' to 'safeguarding national sovereignty and national dignity'. In other words, Putonghua is more than a language and tool for fostering efficient communication across the nation: it is a sign and symbol of a unified nation. Second, the law explicitly names the categories of persons who are to use spoken and written in Putonghua in their work and official duties: government officials, teachers (including primary school), news anchors, television variety show hosts, and actors in film and television. Third, the law creates a mechanism and management system for promoting Putonghua, namely 'Mandarin proficiency' tests and 'national grade standards' that must be met. Fourth, the use of spoken and written Putonghua is mandated for a range of media and situations: radio, film and television, signage, advertising, goods sold within the country, the names of enterprises and institutions, and information technology products and processes. Finally, the law delimits exceptional circumstances when dialects (nonstandard vernaculars) and other variants (e.g., foreign languages, traditional characters) may be used: situations when state agency staff 'really need to use' them when performing their duties, radio and television programming approved by provincial departments, when necessary for publishing

and research, when approved for special circumstances, cultural relics and sites, and finally, artistic performances, including opera, film, television and other art forms.

What is not mentioned in the 2000 language law is the use of Putonghua or other variants in digital and social media. This is understandable, because at the time the Internet was a new technology accessible to only a few, and today's major digital media platforms, such as *Google* and *Baidu*, had just been launched, while social media platforms, such as *Facebook*, *WeChat*, *Weibo*, and *TikTok* (*Douyin* in China) had not yet been invented. That is, while the law explicitly states how Putonghua and nonstandard forms can be used in face-to-face and 'traditional' media such as film and television, nothing is written about their use on the social media platforms that would come to dominate China today. The policy on written and mediated forms of language for traditional media and mediated forms of communication was left as it was when digital media emerged and this gap has continued where no explicit language policy has been established. This of course does not mean that there is no language policy for or applied to digital media, but that such policies are not made explicit and are only revealed through specific actions of censorship in response to content that is posted on social media platforms. This means that while the policy is always omnipresent, how it is specifically enacted is made visible only through instances or events which attract specific actions by those managing language policy and which then both reflects and instantiates the policy in action. Thus, when users actions attract a succeeding response it can be interpreted as a continuation of the policy standard or a new development of the policy. Therefore, the 2000 National Language Law can be applied to China's continually evolving digital media and platforms, without the need for an explicit update of the law. This lack of explicit policy, together with the creation of ever-new digital technologies, has created a digital space characterised by user and developer creativity where designers and users are engaged in pushing the technological

affordances of new apps and platforms, and where users creatively engage with the technology and other users.

1.3 The Internet and Social Media with Chinese Language Characteristics

In 2006, China surpassed the U.S. to become the country with the world's greatest number of Internet users (Ju et al., 2019a). This rapid proliferation and development of social media platforms has meant that by 2022 there are close to a billion users routinely engaged in communicative practices in the world's largest social media population and social media market. What makes this different from the development of similar technologies outside China, is the way China's social media technology and culture have evolved into a distinctive form of communication and practice in ways that are increasingly dissimilar from that of the social media platforms outside. From the early roll out of the Internet, to the now pervasive presence of social media, China's Internet culture continues to reflect the unique interplay of technological changes, language affordances (i.e., Chinese as a character-based script), software development, user-generated interactional practices, and government censorship. Indeed, social media platforms and apps have become a pervasive part of Chinese society and essential for day-to-day financial transactions and travel. It is this unique and evolving environment that is at the heart of the creativity that characterises China's internet culture and forms of user engagement, which in turn reflexively reflect the way language and language policy intersects and shapes social media engagement. Furthermore, it is the confluence and intersection of the linguistic and technological affordances of China's social media and the way language policies, real or imagined, that shape the communicative and linguistic context and creative possibilities, which characterise the development of China's social media technology and apps and platforms.

The rapidly evolving technological environment in China has become a powerhouse of digital innovation, with the development of new platforms and apps making social media and mobile technology an almost fully integrated and essential part of life (Craig et al., 2021; Yang and Wang, 2021). The integration of mobile technology in routine life means users can follow news and popular culture on *Weibo* (also known as *Sina Weibo*), exchange messages with friends on *WeChat*, purchase goods on *Taobao,* pay for purchases with *Alipay*, read travel and product reviews on *Xiaohongshu* (Little Red Book), follow live streaming broadcasts on *Lang Live*, and post and share short videos on *Douyin*, *Kwai (*known as *Kuaishou* within China*)*, and *Bilibili* (Huang et al., 2020). Indeed, one of the most prominent apps was *WeChat* that has evolved into an 'infrastructuralized' digital platform (Plantin and de Seta, 2019) with multiple functions and features of other digital apps consolidated into one platform that now dominates Chinese communication and day to day commerce. At the heart of *WeChat's* success is the decentralization of software development with the potentially limitless expansion of third-party apps and 'mini programs' that can be added to the platform as well as the centralization of data flows through China's official accounts. The continually expanding multiple functions of *WeChat* and the diverse communicative affordances of the platform is an illustration of the transformation and increasing divergence of China's social media ecology as it evolves within the Great Firewall (Ju and Sandel, 2018; Ju et al., 2019b; Liu, 2024; Sandel et al., 2019; Wu and Fitzgerald, 2021b).

While *WeChat* is a ubiquitous and essential platform for daily life in China, there continues to be a proliferation in the growth of new social media platforms and apps that vie for users' attention. Many of these incorporate innovative technologies, and in so doing, provide numerous new forms of communicative and language possibilities for creative forms of user engagement. Just as such major platforms as *WeChat* and *Weibo* are central to understanding the evolution and

context of China's digital revolution, it is important to understand how the emergent and evolving technological environment has become a dynamic space of innovation for new and diverse features, apps and platforms, as companies and designers vie for attention to become the 'next new thing'. This technological evolution is driven by the features and affordances of platforms that offer new forms of user engagement and user-generated content. Within this cornucopia of evolving and developing technologies, some emerging platforms and features have gained prominence which offer new forms of user engagement. These include *Bilibili*, *Danmu* (also called 'bullet screen' comments which roll across the screen), *DingTalk*, *Douyin* (*TikTok* outside China), and *Lang Live:* each provides particular technological features and affordances for users to creatively engage and produce content. While these platforms are featured less prominently in studies of China's social media, they are at the forefront of innovation, user engagement and language practices.

2. Review of Literature

2.1 Creative forms of online Language in China

The diversity of platforms, technological affordances, and forms of user engagement created by social media have created a unique digital environment that are described as a carnival atmosphere (Fitzgerald et al 2022). The development and evolution of this unique social media environment in turn fosters a wide range of innovative forms of language that challenge traditional language standards and norms for the purposes of creativity, efficient communication, playfulness and entertainment, or circumventing online censorship (Ren, 2018; Sun and Zhao, 2022; Wu and Fitzgerald 2021a; Zhang & Ren 2020). For example, Zhang et el. (2024) examined the creative use of parentheses for new meanings and functions on *Weibo*. The study identified four major types of trans-semiotic and translanguaging practices, including *trans-scenarios*, *trans-semiotizing for*

new punctuation marks, *trans-modality for stylizing emoticons*, and *conventionalizing parentheses for indicating speech acts*. The analysis showed that China's social media users creatively used parentheses in trans-semiotic and translanguaging practices that feature multi-functionality, transboundary communication, and playfulness. Likewise, Teng and Chan (2022) examined the innovative usage of collective colouring by using *danmu* technology, a popular user-generated commenting system for creating text and symbols that float across a screen, to perform social actions and interpersonal functions, enacting fan relations and expressing judgments and emotions. They argue that colours not only create cohesion among *danmu* comments, colours also work as contextualization cues that facilitate audience interpretation, cultural knowledge, the texts of the comments and contextual references provided by the audiovisual products.

As noted previously, China's online language policy is part of a larger mechanism of surveillance over information flow and the maintenance of social stability. Although China's social media allow content to be posted in different languages, censorship is even stricter on non-Chinese language content, as it suspected of spreading 'harmful' messages (Zhong, Wang, & Huang, 2017). Thus, China's censorship system known as the 'Great Fire Wall' is more likely to block websites in foreign languages (F. Yang, 2014). The integration of language policies into China's online censorship mechanism can serve to unify China's population through the promotion of simplified Chinese and maintain the dominance of the central government. Within this evolving context, China's users have come up with creative ways to cope with online censorship by mobilizing a pool of resources and tools including technological innovations, language and other semiotic systems such as emojis, images, and hyperlinks (Hassid, 2020; King et al., 2014; Wu, 2024; Wu & Fitzgerald, 2021a; F. Yang, 2014; Zhang et al., 2022).

For example, Ye and Zhao (2022) in their study of Sensitive Word Culture, explored users' perception of online censorship, and their discourse strategies – 'evading detection' and 'expanding interpretability' – to circumvent censorship. Broadly termed as recoding, e*vading detection* deploys images, emojis, special symbols or splitting words to evade algorithmic detection while *expanding interpretability* uses metaphors, puns, or homophones to create ambiguous meanings of the sensitive words. Interestingly, this study challenges some established understanding of users' negative perceptions of China's online censorship by showing that rather than seeing online censorship simply as government repression, many respondents viewed internet censorship as protection and subtle negotiation.

Focusing on Chinese users' creative engagement with online censorship, Wu (2024) examined the innovative strategies users adopted in an online relay campaign to keep a censored article alive on *WeChat* Public Accounts, one of the most widely used social platforms in China. Drawing upon (social) media discourse analysis, the analysis highlights three major forms of creative strategies including *textual reproductions*, *multi-semiotic and multimodal reproductions*, and *technically encoded forms*. The author also underscored platform censorship as a form of delegated censorship where the platform takes responsibility for monitoring and removing sensitive or perceived sensitive content.

2.2 Creativity and Non-standard Vernaculars

In a well-known book on the historical development of China's languages and *fangyan* (dialects), Norman claims: 'To the historical linguist Chinese is rather more like a language family than a single language made up of a number of regional forms' (1988, p. 187). These range from northern spoken varieties, such as Dongbei *fangyan* (Northeastern Mandarin), which is mutually intelligible

with Putonghua (Henry, 2021; Simmons, 2016), to southern varieties that are mutually unintelligible, such as Cantonese, that is spoken in Hong Kong and Guangdong Province (Mair, 1991). Therefore, ‘Chinese’ is not a singular language, but a ‘pluricentric’ language with multiple spoken and written forms (Kaltenegger, 2020a), categorised into seven major groups with approximately 2,000 dialects and subdialects (Kaltenegger, 2020b; Li, 2006) that are linked not only to individual and regional identities, but also for promoting business and state interests (Gao, 2015). *Fangyan* also afford a variety of creative and nonstandard forms (Sandel & Qiu, 2020). Some, such as *Dongbeihua* – spoken in Northeastern China – are associated with a distinct spacial and social identity, as someone who is ‘backward’ because they are from China’s rural and poorer regions (Henry, 2021, p. 20). They may also be associated with styles of comedic performance, such as Tianjin dialect’s use in ‘crosstalk’ comedy (Moser, 2018), and Dongbei, an ‘earthy’ dialect that has been popularized by the comedy skits of Zhao Benshan broadcast during the Spring Gala festival (Simmons, 2016). Finally, *fangyan* can be used as linguistic and semiotic resources for creativity in China’s digital media content (Zhang & Ren, 2022).

While there has been a proliferation of research on the language phenomenon in China’s social and digital media, it is only recently that attention has been paid to the analysis of nonstandard linguistic forms (e.g., Luqiu, 2017; Sandel & Qiu, 2020; Zhang, 2015; Zhang & Ren, 2022). For instance, Luqiu (2017) studied the use of Shanghai *fangyan* on Weibo and two other platforms. She found that one of the most popular sites on Weibo was ‘Pingji_Zhenji’, a site for sharing humorous videos dubbed in Shanghainese. This site was followed by many young people, including those who did not understand spoken Shanghainese, who could follow the dialogue by reading the subtitles, evident in the following comment: ‘At the beginning, I thought it was Japanese. The Shanghai dialect is so cool’ (p. 668). Similarly, Zhang (2015) studied daily weather

reports posted to a popular site on Weibo, ‘Shanghai Release’. She found messages that mixed Putonghua, English, and Shanghai *fangyan*—with a mixture of characters and romanization. In another study, Sandel and Qiu (2020) analysed messages posted in personal and group chats on *WeChat*. They found that users creatively mixed Putonghua, vernacular Cantonese (using Cantonese characters), English, and other languages, often for comedic effect.

Zhang and Ren (2022) studied the *danmu* or ‘bullet’ comments that users generate on the video-sharing platform, *Bilibili*. From a sample of the textual data from 159 videos, they found 1,779 instances of ‘dialect-infused expressions’ (p. 8) featuring five of China’s seven general dialect groups, including (in order of frequency): Northeastern Guanhua, Cantonese, Southwestern Guanhua (e.g., Yunnan and Sichuan), Min (e.g., Hokkien or Taiwanese), and Wu (e.g., Shanghai). Northeastern Guanhua’s popularity can be explained because of its mutual intelligibility with Putonghua, and its use as a ‘comedic’ *fangyan* in China’s mainland broadcasts (Simmons, 2016). The popularity of vernacular Cantonese—marked by the use of nonstandard, Cantonese-only characters and/or sound-substitute characters (Sandel & Qiu, 2020)—can be attributed to Hong Kong’s popular media market, and Cantonese’s *dissimilarity* with SC: it can be a tool for circumventing online censorship (Jiang & Vásquez, 2020).

It is from the study of the intersection of these contexts that we gain a greater understanding of the way language policy is implemented at different levels, and – as it evolves – adds further dimensions to understanding language policies and creative communication practices. With this in mind, we now examine a case study of the use of nonstandard vernaculars, or ‘dialects’ (*fangyan*) that illustrates the manifestation of language policies through forms of user engagement and forms of creativity that have received less attention by policy makers and researchers.

3. Methodology

To explore this topic, we conducted a study of short videos posted from 2022-2023 on two popular platforms in China, *Douyin* and *Weibo*; each used a fangyan and was identified as humorous – searched by using such hashtag terms as humour (*youmo*), funny (*gaoxiao*), *fangyan* and other nonstandard forms (e.g., Shanghainese). We also analysed videos from vloggers listed on Weibo's list of those 'most influential in the category of humour' (*youmo*) in 2021, and a list of the 'top 20 *fangyan* creators' on Douyin in 2021. Our aim was to identify a sample of *fangyan*-related content, to show how it is produced by popular humour vloggers across a range of *fangyan*. Therefore, the search was representative and not exhaustive as Zhang and Ren (2022) have demonstrated the phenomenon.

For a first level of analysis, we analysed the profile pages of each vlogger, viewed and downloaded their popular videos, noting those that use a nonstandard *fangyan*, and analysed the techniques and themes for creating humour. From a review of 34 vloggers, we found 21 posted at least one video with a nonstandard linguistic form. Next, 49 videos were selected for closer analysis, including (in alphabetical order): Cantonese, Changsha, Dalian, Dongbei, Guizhou, Hebei, Henan, Jiangpu, Jinzhou, Linyi, Minnan, Nanjing, Shandong (Qingdao & Jinan), Shanxi, Taiyuan, Tianjin, Weifang, Wenzhou, Yancheng, and Yunnan. These demonstrate a range of *fangyan*, including those mutually intelligible with Putonghua (e.g., Dongbei and Tianjin), and those which are not (e.g., Cantonese, Changsha, Minnan, and Yunnan). Analysis was conducted in the original *fangyan*, with excerpts translated into English by the first author, with assistance from the co-authors.

We then identified the techniques and themes used in these videos to create humorous content. This yielded the following three techniques (in order of frequency): *demonstrating* a

fangyan (24 videos), *ventriloquating* a *fangyan* (12), and *embedding* the *fangyan* in performance (13). In both demonstration and ventriloquation videos, the *fangyan* is 'elevated', meaning that it is brought to the viewer's attention as an 'object' that makes the video funny (see Cooren & Sandler, 2014). For the last, the *fangyan* is a feature of the video that is *embedded* in the performance and enhances the humour, but is not elevated or set apart. We describe each in turn.

First, demonstration includes videos in which words or phrases are spoken to 'demonstrate' or show how a *fangyan* sounds. For example, in one video, 'What Shandong people are eating now', as the vlogger speaks (off camera) in Shandong *fangyan*, food items are shown in turn, as he explains how each is pronounced. Second is ventriloquation: dubbing a person, animal, and/or character so that they speak in *fangyan*. For instance, one vlogger, Shaobaogu made a series of videos in Yunnan *fangyan*. One shows a mosquito biting a person's arm that is animated to 'speak' in Yunnan *fangyan*. A second video, 'If flight attendants spoke in Yunnan *fangyan*!' features two female flight attendants who 'speak' in dubbed Yunnan *fangyan*, instead of Putonghua. A third technique is to embed the *fangyan* in the vlogger's and/or characters' performance. For example, in one video a mother speaks off-camera to a father and daughter, while the daughter does her homework; all speak to each other in Weifang *fangyan*, meaning that the *fangyan* is a part of the video, and not an object brought to the viewer's attention. Likewise, in a video by 'Baiqiao is Crazy', the characters speak to each other in Dongbei *fangyan*, when shown in a skit picking up their son/grandson from school.

We next categorised the themes used across all videos and found the following: language games (19), silly exaggeration (12), family activities (12), advice giving (8), and Japanese anime (3). (Some videos were categorised as falling under two themes, resulting in a sum of 54.) Language games videos often used demonstration, or framing speech in another *fangyan* as a game

or contest. For instance, one video, ‘Putonghua (Mandarin) challenge 2.0’, is a ‘contest’ between male and female partners, to see who can pronounce words ‘correctly’, and not use an ‘incorrect’ Minnan-accented pronunciation (see Kubler, 1985). Silly exaggeration videos use pranks (e.g., calling people, pretending to lose a tooth), or rants about silly topics, such as the problem of being ‘Versailles’—someone who is a show-off and tries to look good or show their luxury items (Zuo, 2023), a video that we analyse below. Family activities include cooking, doing homework, or ventriloquating a family member, such as a grandmother (e.g., Hunijing below). Advice giving topics include health (e.g., COVID-19 health rules), relationships (e.g., girlfriend), and/or explaining how to act as a ‘Guangdong person’ who speaks Cantonese. Finally, several videos are based upon the Japanese anime series, *Ultraman*, who is voiced (ventriloquated) as doing heroic or funny acts.

The greater number of demonstration and language game videos may be explained by the format: it is arguably easier to make a video whereby the *fangyan* is the focal point of the humour, than to creatively use the *fangyan* in a performance. Likewise, ventriloquism may be easier because dubbing requires less skill than other techniques. Nevertheless, all can be used to create humorous content.

For a second and closer level of analysis, we identified videos from different regions of China and conducted a closer, multimodal semiotic and linguistic analysis. The first uses Tianjin dialect (northeast), which is mutually intelligible with Putonghua (Lin, 2008); the second uses Changsha dialect (central) which is not mutually intelligible (Tang & Heuven, 2008). Each also demonstrates different forms and features of analysis.

4. Data analysis

Bbeirabbit: Don’t be Versailles

The first video (1 minute and 27 seconds) released on *Weibo* on 16 June 2021, demonstrates the technique of *embeddedness* and the themes of *advice* giving and *silly* exaggeration. Entitled, ‘I beg everyone to release us? #Reject ‘looks anxiety’ Please don’t be Versailles#’; it was released by Bbeirabbit, a Chinese ‘*wanghong’* or internet celebrity who promotes beauty products (Sandel & Wang, 2022). Like other videos produced by this vlogger, it is shot in what appears to be a private space, with her face filling most of the screen. She looks directly into the camera, smiles, makes gestures with her hands (see Figure 1), and speaks dramatically and rapidly, in the style of a rant (Gabrielle, 2016). She projects the image of the ‘big sister’ who speaks honestly and openly, advising how not to be ‘Versailles’. She speaks in Tianjin fangyan, a linguistic form that is similar to Putonghua, but distinct in ways we explain below.

Screenshot of Bbeirabbit

Smiling, raised hands

Title:
I beg everyone to release us?
#Reject “looks anxiety” Please don’t be Versailles#

Figure 1. ‘Don’t be Versailles’

The term, ‘Versailles’, is an ‘internet term’ on China’s social media that describes the act of ‘self-praise’ (Zuo, 2023). Based upon the physical place, the Palace of Versailles—a symbol of ostentatious wealth—it is a metaphor for describing people who ‘humblebrag’ by frequently posting on social media about such things as their trips to Europe, purchases of luxury accessories, and the consumption of products, such as red wine and luxury cars. In other words, Bbeirabbit implores her followers not to be a show-off, as seen in the following.

> Maybe a lot of people will scold me for this video I am posting. But! I cannot hold it in! … I'm really mad ((prolonged))! I'm telling [you] the truth ((emphasis stressed)). … You are ((looks away, closes eyes, pauses, high pitch)) Are you Versailles? Do you still have looks anxiety, big sister? Which one of your photos is not meticulously made up, you meticulously put on makeup, beautiful makeup, a concave shape [of the face] ((head lowered, to show the best pose)). Then after taking the photo, and then, it is still p[hoto-shopped]? May I ask, that photo that you have photo-shopped, can you still call it ugly? No matter how ugly you are, you are still better [looking] than most ‘normal’ people, right? …
>
> Originally, I didn't have looks anxiety. But after I saw you, my looks anxiety increased. If you really want help to be released from looks anxiety ((claps hands)). Then I ask you to take your ugliest picture, take it out and show it to us for fun. Okay? Ah. Can you be a little more sincere? …
>
> So I beg of you, I beg of you ((fake crying)). Don’t post again. Really if I swipe one more [post/photo] it will cause looks anxiety. Can we all make an appeal for a moment? So

that this kind of Versailles people will stop posting, okay? This is really a pain, I feel. … I can visualize it that this evening, I tell you, that if you swipe ten posts, ten will all be against looks anxiety. ((Lifts up water bottle, drinks and swallows, puts the water bottle down)). Okay? Release us. Okay?

Pitched in the style of a rant, Bbeirabbit speaks against the ‘problem’ of ‘looks anxiety’ because of being ‘Versailles’. Such people apply makeup, move their head into a position to display the preferred ‘concave shape’, in order to take a selfie. They will then photo-shop the image, even if they are ‘better [looking] than most “normal people”’. For the solution, Bbeirabbit implores her followers to be ‘released’ from looks anxiety. Just for fun, ‘take your ugliest picture, take it out and show it to us for fun’. Be a ‘little more sincere’ by showing a picture of the self that is not most beautiful. If her followers do this, then Bbeirabbit hopes that when she swipes posts (on Weibo), nine out of ten will ‘be against looks anxiety’, meaning that she sees ‘ugly’ pictures and not the beautiful, photo-shopped pictures of people who awkwardly show-off and come across as ‘Versailles’. In other words, Bbeirabbit performs a ‘comedic rant vlog’ by using an emotional and cathartic appeal (Gabrielle, 2016).

Now we show how Tianjin fangyan can ‘enhance’ the humor in the video. First, Tianjin differs from Putonghua in its use of ‘tone sandhi’, or how the tone changes (Lin, 2008). For instance, in Putonghua the phrase ‘to really want’ (真想) is pronounced with a high flat, or first tone, followed by a low and slightly rising tone, zhēn xiǎng; in Tianjin, however, the first word is a high falling tone, zhèn xiǎng. A second difference is initial consonants. For instance, the word ugly 丑 is pronounced in Putonghua with an initial retroflex consonant (e.g., zh, ch, sh) as chǒu. But in Tianjin, the initials use a dental consonant (z, c, s), meaning that this word is

pronounced as cǒu. A third difference is final 'r' consonants known as '*erhuayin*'. Like in other northern fangyan (e.g., Beijing, Dongbei), speakers may replace the final consonant with an 'r' sound (Simmons, 2016). For example, the word 'fan' 粉丝, in Putonghua is pronounced as fěnsī (a loanword from English); in Tianjin it is fěr, meaning that 'nsi' is dropped and replaced with 'r'. Table 1 lists some of the features of Tianjin fangyan from this video, first showing the phrase in Putonghua, and second Tianjin:

Table 1 Bbeirabbit's Tianjin fangyan

Tone Changes Putonghua —> Tianjin	Apical consonant changes	*Erhuayin*
实话实说 —> 史话史硕 Shíhuà shíshuō —> shǐhuà shǐshuò Speaking honestly —> history big history	丑 chǒu —> cǒu ugly	粉丝—>粉儿 Fěnsī —> Fěr Fans or followers
刨根问底 —> 抛根问底儿 Páogēn wèn dǐ —> Pāo gēn wèn dǐer Get to the bottom —> Ask questions	晚上 —> 晚丧 wǎnshàng —> wǎnsàng Evening —> late funeral	
容貌焦虑 —> 绒毛脚绿 Róngmào jiāolǜ —> Róngmáo jiǎolǜ Appearance anxiety—> Fluffy green feet	说 —> 缩 shuō —> suō to say —> to shrink	照片—>照片儿 Zhàopiàn —> Zhào piā-er Picture/photo
过去了 —> 锅去了 Guòqùle —> Guō qùle It is past —> The pot is past	出来 —> 粗来 chūlái —> cūlái To come out —> roughly, crudely	
真想 —> 振想 Zhēn xiǎng —> Zhèn xiǎng Really want —> shaking want		

In addition to the sound differences shown in Table 1, when Putonghua speakers hear Tianjin, they may perceive different meanings. For example, by changing the tones in the phrase, 'speaking honestly', it sounds like, 'history big history'. Likewise, the phrase 'appearance anxiety'

sounds like ‘fluffy big feet’, and ‘really want’ sounds like ‘shaking want’. Other examples of these possible meaning changes are marked by underlining.

We do not claim that these alternative meanings are *necessarily* perceived by speakers of Putonghua. Instead, Tianjin fangyan can *imply* a second meaning, which may enhance the comedic effect. This demonstrates what a close analysis of a nonstandard vernacular can show and would be less apparent if the analysis used an English-language transcript only or were transcribed using Hanyu Pinyin and/or standard characters.

Hunijing: A filtered grandmother at 80

The second video for analysis was posted by *Hunijing* to Douyin on 17 May 2021. This eight-second video uses an ‘embedded’ technique on the theme of ‘family’, with Hunijing uttering in Changsha *fangyan*: ‘Grandma misses you. Will you come back for Chinese New Year [CNY]? Come back for dinner for Chinese New Year?’ (The video does not provide a subtitle.) The filter (Figure 2) creates an ‘80-year-old me’ that invokes the category of ‘grandmother’ in image and voice. The top shows Hunijing at age 80—with wrinkled skin with a clearly defined nose and cheek bones; the bottom shows her unfiltered and younger self. A female friend can also be seen and heard laughing, a mode that indexes humour.

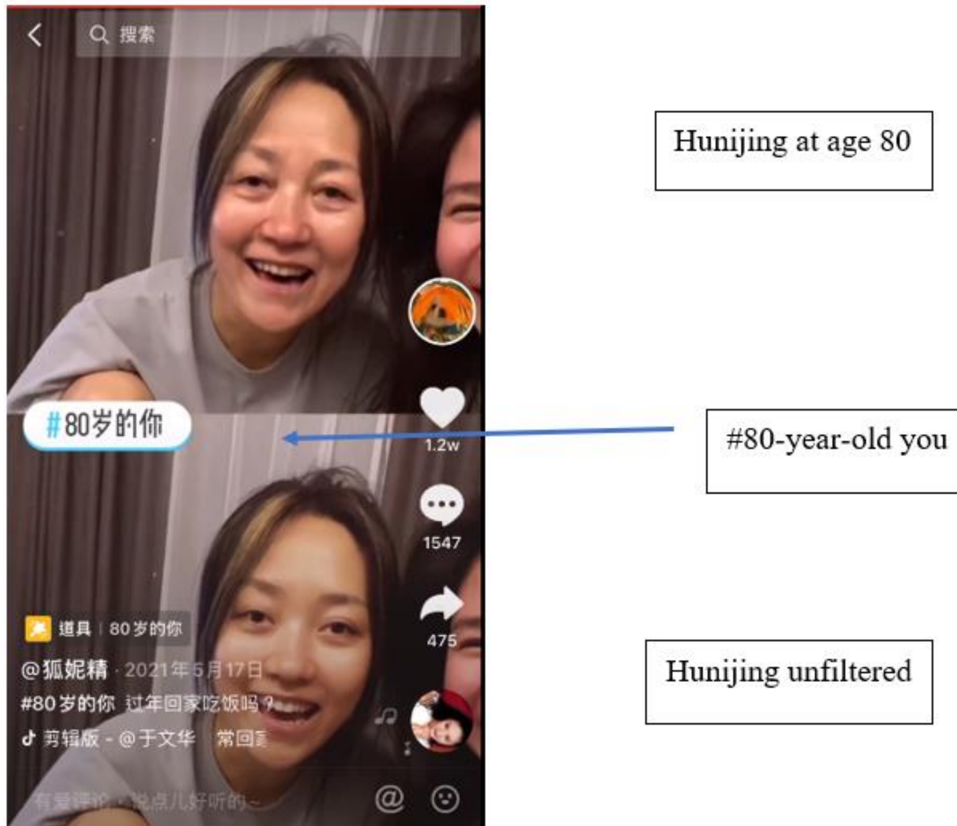

Figure 2. ‘80-year-old you’

We next show how Changsha *fangyan* differs from Putonghua (Table 2). First, words differ, such as in the initial utterance, ‘*Aijie*’ 娭毑, or Changsha for ‘Grandma’, that in Putonghua is either *nainai* 奶奶 (paternal grandmother), or *waipo* 外婆(maternal grandmother). Second, the tones and vocalic features differ as shown below. And third, the consonants and vowels differ. In Changsha, the word ‘misses’ (i.e., misses you) is pronounced as xiē, versus xiǎng in Putonghua. Changsha for Chinese New Year is Gūnǐ, versus Guònián. The verb-phrase ‘to return’ is fěilái vs huílái in Putonghua. And the verb-phrase ‘to eat’ a meal is chāt fǎn vs chī fàn in Putonghua. These show how Changsha and Putonghua differ and are not mutually intelligible (Lin, 2008).

Table 2. Changsha and Putonghua

Text:	娭毑	想	你，过年	回来	吧？过年	回来 恰	饭 吧？
Changsha:	Aǐjié	xiē	nī. Gūnǐ	fěilái	ba? Gūnǐ	fěilái chāt	fǎn ba?
Putonghua:	Nǎinai/Wàipó	xiǎng	nǐ, Guònián	huílái	ba? Guònián	huílái chī	fàn ba?
English:	Grandma	misses	you. CNY [will you]	return	ba? CNY	return eat	meal ba?

Examining the user-generated comments, one person wrote the text that is shown in Table 2: 'Grandma (*Aijie*) I also miss you. CNY [I] will necessarily come eat [with] you [rose emoji])'. Here we see two uses of nonstandard characters that can represent spoken Changsha. First is the word for grandma, *Aijie*. Second is the character 恰, pronounced as *qià*, which in Putonghua means 'just' or 'exactly'. But the character is not used for its meaning, but to approximate the Changsha sound of chāt, which means 'to eat', and shows how a respondent uses character-based linguistic semiotic resources to sound like a Changsha speaker.

Others commented on how the video reminded them of family members. One commented, 'HaHaHaHa, laughing to death so happy that you're like [my] big aunt, like [my] [*waipo* maternal] grandmother'. Another commented, 'Just like my [*nainai* paternal] grandma'. The first linked the sound of the voice with their maternal grandmother (*waipo*, 外婆); the second 'heard' their paternal grandmother (*nainai* 奶奶). These imply spoken Changsha and the plea to come home to celebrate the Chinese New Year were linked to family members. Yet, humour can also invoke a feeling of sadness, as shown in another comment (Figure 3, second comment): 'Wuwuwu [sound of crying] [I] understand that this is a funny video, but this intonation is too much like [my] grandpa. So it instantly makes me feel like crying oh'. That is, this respondent indicated a strong emotional response—an image of their grandfather—who perhaps passed away—and thus, felt like crying.

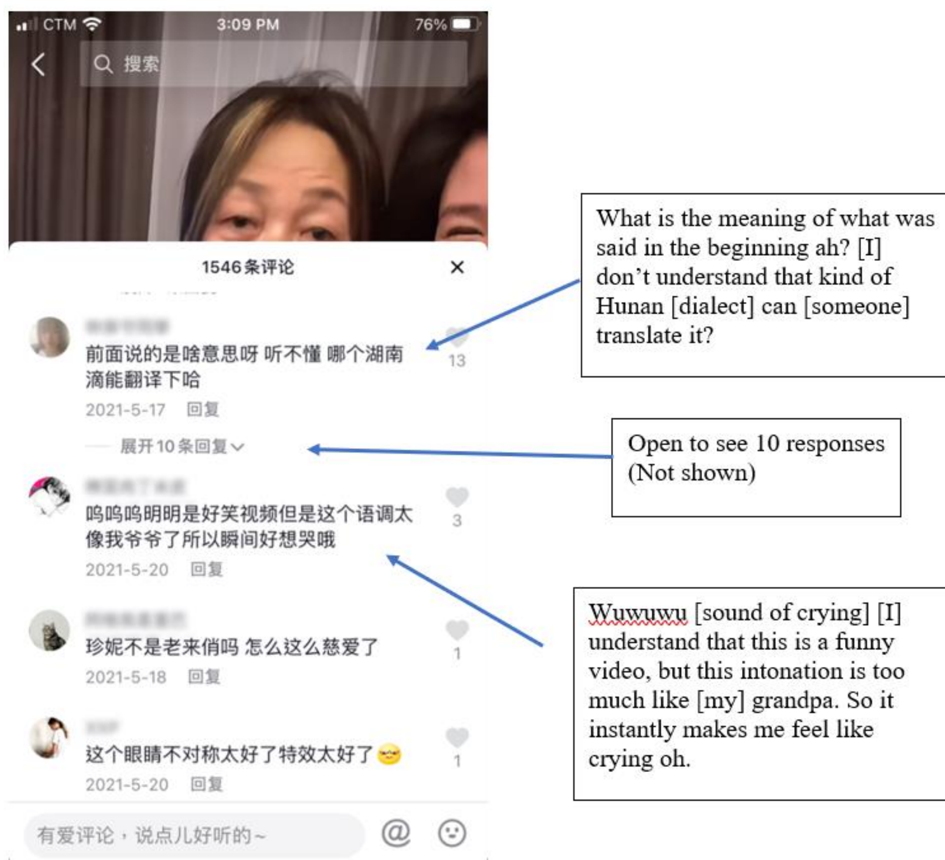

Figure 3. Hunijing Comments

Other comments indicate that some found spoken Changsha hard to understand without a subtitle (Figure 3, top comment). One wrote, ‘What is the meaning of what was said in the beginning ah? [I] don’t understand that kind of Hunan [*fangyan*] can [someone] translate it?’ Following this are ten responses (not shown). One wrote an approximation of what Hunijing said in Putonghua: ‘[Maternal] grandma [*waipo*] misses you, CNY come back *ba*? CNY come back to eat *ba*?’ That is, this commenter translated the Changsha word, *Aijie,* as *Waipo* (maternal grandma). However, others expressed uncertainty: ‘It’s not Hunan [*fangyan*]. But it probably [means] that *waipo* [maternal grandma] is also thinking of you …’ This was followed the comment, ‘*Aijie* misses you. Isn’t that Hunan [*fangyan*]?’ Then, the previous commenter who wrote, ‘It’s not Hunan’, responded: ‘I said that I’m not a Hunan [person]’. That is, when challenged, this person

clarified that they are not from Hunan province, ostensibly offering this as an excuse to explain why they are not sure of the veracity of the translation.

This analysis of comments shows how a nonstandard *fangyan* can be interpreted differently. Some with family members (e.g., grandparents) who presumably speak Changsha can understand Hunijing. The sound of her voice, and the plaintive call to ‘come back’ for CNY, can evoke an emotional response that is both positive (reminding them of a beloved grandmother) and negative (crying when thinking of a lost grandfather). Others who found these utterances hard to understand, however, also understood that the video was intended to be funny. That is, humour was communicated via other modes, including Hunijing’s filtered appearance, the sound and presence of the laughing female friend, and the plaintive call of a grandparent—speaking in a nonstandard vernacular—to ‘come back’.

5. Summary

The discussion in the chapter highlights how formal language policies in China that promote the national standard of Putonghua over non-standard dialects and other languages, were written before internet technology was developed, and, as these have not been publicly updated, lack specific policies regarding digital content. However, as our discussion highlights, this is not to say that language policies in relation to digital media do not exist, but rather, that these are not made explicit and only become visible through the engagement of users and those implementing policy around particular events. That is, studies demonstrate a range of creative practices – use of emoji and stickers, memes, coded language, translanguaging (e.g., Fitzgerald et al., 2022), that are both actions and responses to policies and platform censorship. In other words, China's digital environment is not sterile and unimaginative.

We then introduced and examined some data that illustrates this creative language environment and how nonstandard vernaculars, or Chinese dialects, can be used for constructing creative and humorous content. These examples, along with much of the literature referred to, show how, despite China's language policy that privileges the national standard of Putonghua across media and other contexts, content creators and users have become increasingly sophisticated and adept at creatively employing the digital resources at hand – text, images, video, voice, comments – to express themselves using nonstandard linguistic and textual forms. That is, a 'pluricentric' Chinese linguistic nation (Kaltenegger, 2020a) has created a carnival environment of creative content online. In other words, despite or because of the constraints of China's Great Firewall and censorship regime, the internet and particularly social media platforms have created a place of kaleidoscopic linguistic experimentation (Ying & Blommaert, 2023).

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