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Internet Memes in China: Cultural Image Macros of Code-Switching and Homonymy

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ABSTRACT

Since China joined the Internet in the late 1980s, production and consumption of online cultural merchandise has been proliferating and permeating every section of society, exemplified by Internet literature, animation, comic and game. Meanwhile, there has emerged a veritable kaleidoscope of memes in China's cyberspace, which are deployed on social media platforms to convey stances, emotions, humorousness, etc. Nonetheless, as a multi-faceted phenomenon, Internet memes fail to attain deserved academic scrutiny, so in this paper, I investigate one subcategory of memes in China's cyberspace, viz. cultural memes, focusing on image macros that dynamically integrate visual effects and textual information. The text of cultural image macros can be generated via Chinese-English code-switching in the form of alphabetic words that are either idiomatic or related to Internet buzzwords. Alternatively, cultural image macros in China can be generated via homonymy: the vast majority of homonyms are homophones, while a small proportion of them are homographs. The corresponding images in the memes pertain to the inserted English words or constituents that are substituted, thereby complementing the text and strengthening humorous effects.

Keywords: chinese internet, cultural memes, online buzzwords, image macros, popular culture.

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INTRODUCTION

Internet memes are comprised of specific forms, structures and contents. Based on contents, memes can be categorised into political memes and cultural memes, both of which can adopt the form of image macros or pure text. Memetic communication demonstrates initiation, creativity and participation of users, in which the emotional communication and expression are realised via communication-oriented meme symbols (Shifman, 2013: 122-123). In the visual era, communication combining texts, images and popular culture manifests a higher degree of transmissibility, because pictures contribute to the visual image structure of discourse, while concise slogans contribute to the comprehension and cognition of visual images simultaneously (Tang, 2016). Furthermore, the recreational effects generated by celebrities and cartoon characters convey the meaning of prototype narratives (Guo & Yang, 2019). In addition to their function in the cultural sphere, memes also serve as a novel form of political participation enabling opinions to be exchanged and negotiated, and they play a fundamental role in establishing universal values, embodied in three interwoven aspects, viz. persuasion or political advocacy, grassroots action, as well as modes of expression and public discussion (Burgess, 2008; Milner, 2012).

Contemporary China's cyberspace, which is featured by diversity, vibrancy and eventfulness, is a fertile breeding ground abounding with Internet memes, aka表情包 *biaoqing bao* (Lit. 'expression pack') in Chinese. Chinese netizens mingle innovation and popularisation of language and visual effects with meme cyber subculture (Guo & Yang, 2016; Liu, 2019; Wang, 2019).

METHOD

In this paper, I investigate one type of Chinese cultural memes exclusively, viz. image macros integrating both text and image formats. I adopt the method of content analysis, exploring cultural memes that are generated via code-switching or homonymy. Examples of cultural memes are cumulated from a range of social media platforms, exemplified by Weibo, a Twitter-like microblogging application, which is a leading interest-based social network and an ideological arena with approximately 573 million monthly active users in December 2021 (Han, 2016, 2019; Weibo, 2022).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

I postulate that in China, the creation and diffusion of cultural memes in virtual networks are inextricably intertwined with the emergence and subsequent proliferation of Internet buzzwords.

In China's cyberspace, punchy, provocative and symbolic Internet buzzwords exist in prodigious quantity and entail a topographic map of

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variegated and expeditiously changing cultural and political scenes (Zhou & Li, 2017). As an intriguing cultural phenomenon generated via purposive discursive practices with codes of thought, perception, appreciation and action in cultural and symbolic fields, Internet buzzwords capture and encode cultural implications of social events and corresponding public responses and convey profound technological resources (Meng, 2011). In social fields, Internet buzzwords demonstrate the social origins of symbolic systems and interconnections between social structures and symbolic practices. Internet buzzwords are either playfully expressive or to enable dispersed participation of public debates (Szablewicz, 2014), and hence are construed as a form of Internet-mediated political critique emphasising discursive integration and mutual constitution of communicative activity and subjectivity in the specific media ecology of China (Zeng & Wei, 2016). Moreover, Internet buzzwords are correlated with deeper socio-psychological structures in contemporary Chinese society regarding disillusionment and affective identification (Guo & Yang, 2019; Wang at el., 2015; Yuan, 2015).

Cultural image macros explored in this research involve code-switching or homonymy.

Code-switching denotes a process of bilingual speakers shifting from one linguistic code, viz. one language or dialect, to another, depending on social context or conversational setting (Chandler & Munday, 2020: 52; Morrison, 2010). Code-switching functions as a conversational strategy to illuminate social meanings in linguistic structures, manifested by situational switching that a change in linguistic form represents a converted social setting, as well as metaphorical switching triggered by a change in topical emphasis (Benson, 2001; Blom & Gumperz, 1972; Gumperz, 1977, 1982;). Code-switching occurs both orally and in writing. In electronic communication, the functions of code-switching pertain to quotation, addressee specification, reiteration, message qualification, clarification, emphasis, checking, emotion indication, availability, the principle of economy and free switching (Li, 1999, 2000; Montes-Alcalá, 2000, 2007; Nur & Maros, 2014).

In a Chinese context and under the circumstance that code-switching is restricted to the word/phrase level, I postulate that such language alternation can be referred to as alphabetic words. Defined as fully or partially romanised Chinese words, Chinese alphabetic words may either contain complete foreign morphemes or take a form of acronyms of Pinyin, the official romanisation system for standard Mandarin adopted in Mainland China (Ding et al., 2017; Hou & Teng, 2016; Su & Wu, 2013). The former category can be exemplified by alphabetic words such as 'hold住' *hold zhu* ('to hang in there'), while the latter can be exemplified by *lg* that stands for 老公 *laogong* ('hubby'). Some alphabetic words containing whole English morphemes may undergo folk-etymological reinterpretation of the original English expressions and be used in a disparate fashion, e.g. PK ('to compete')

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originated from a football terminology 'penalty kick' (Jing-Schmidt & Hsign, 2019).

In 2018, a slang expression 'skr' that is of a genesis in the US expeditiously rose in unprecedented popularity in China after a Canadian-Chinese pop star Kris Wu used it on season two of a hit reality show *The Rap of China*. Skr (initially skrt) was coined as an onomatopoeia of the sound of a vehicle's wheels skidding on asphalt, and it was used by rappers to wax eloquent and adapted later as an adjective depicting something completely ludicrous and ridiculous; yet within the Chinese hip-hop circle, skr has evolved into an adjective that adulates rappers for their skillful and talented performances. Similarly, since *The Rap of China* debuted in 2017, English hip-hop slang terminologies 'diss' and 'freestyle' went viral as Wu's trademark catchphrases and undoubtedly became words of the year in China (CGTN, 2018; Luo, 2018; Yin, 2018). Although having been imported into the young generation's lexicon as the hottest words in 2017, diss and freestyle have only inspired a limited number of memes and chat stickers, the reason of which, I posit, is that these buzzwords, especially the latter, are phonetically too complex to be embedded into Chinese discourse and their verbal/nominal nature also impedes Chinese netizens from unleashing their creativity in playing with them. Skr, however, serves as an embodiment of Chinese netizens' combination of a fecundity of imagination and a richness of innovative humour, reflected by myriads of memes pertaining to skr.

The versatility of skr can be illustrated by its substitution of three distinct elements: 1) 是个*shi ge* ('is/are'), as in '你莫不skr傻子吧' *ni mo bu skr shazi ba* ('Are you an idiot?'); 2) 死个*si ge* ('freaking'), as in '烦skr人' *fan skr ren* ('freaking annoying'); and 3) 死磕 *si ke* ('to fight to the death'), as in '和高温skr 到底' *he gaowen skr daodi* ('to fight scorching heat to the death') (Yin 2018).

Additionally, according to my observation, skr can also be employed to replace morphemes in idioms. For instance, in 适可而止*shi ke er zhi* ('to stop before overdoing') (Xinhua Idiom Dictionary, 2002: 637), *shi ke* is altered into skr, generating 'skr 而止' *skr er zhi* (in replace of *shi ke er zhi*). As can be seen from examples integrating both Chinese and English constituents, the process of inserting skr into Chinese expressions is code-switching. Apart from 'skr而止' *skr er zhi*, there is a range of other idioms derived from Chinese-English code-switching. It is noteworthy that 'idioms' in this paper exclusively denote traditional Chinese idiomatic expressions called成语*chengyu*, the vast majority of which consist of four characters. Since these idioms are regarded as words, code-switched idioms can be analysed as alphabetic words.

In China's cyberspace, cultural memes with texts comprising alphabetic words are pervasive. When an idiom is employed in Internet memes in a comical way, part of its morphemes is substituted by an English

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word through code-switching, and this code-switched idiom, or alphabetic word, constitutes an image macro with a picture related to the inserted English word.

For instance, the last two morphemes in the idiom**不得好死** *bu de hao si* ('to die with one's boots on') (Zdic.net, 2022a) bears a resemblance with the English word 'house' in pronunciation, so Chinese netizens coined a new alphabetic word '**不得**house' *bu de house* (Image (1)). The original idiom was coined as a curse with a literal meaning 'cannot get peaceful/mature death', yet after the process of code-switching, *bu de house* is used in a teasing way, especially when used together with a neologism**舔狗** *tian gou* ('beta orbiter') that literally means 'licking dog' and sometimes acts as self-mockery. In the image macro below, the text indicates a meaning that a beta orbiter will never get his foot in the door, and the image of the fictional character Spike, as a 'dog', lying on his collapsed kennel corresponds to the indication that he 'cannot get a house'.

Picture 1:

Another typical example is 'duck **不必**' *duck bu bi* derived from **大可不必***da ke bu bi* ('really unnecessary') (Zdic.net, 2022b) (Image (2)). In this idiom, the initial morphemes are substituted by an English word due to their similitude in terms of pronunciation: although the second morpheme *ke* in standard Mandarin does not sound identical to the English consonant *ck*, when pronouncing the word 'duck' with a Chinese accent, a lexical schwa (/ə/) tends to be added (Deterding, 2006; Guo & Nogita, 2013), rendering it similar to the Chinese expression *da ke*. Moreover, emotions conveyed by the meme are reinforced by the image of a question mark and a call duck exhibiting a puzzled look. It is notable that since the late 2010s, call ducks have become popular in China's pet market expeditiously and unexpectedly, leading to the consequence that a quotidian call duck can be sold at a price of 20,000 RMB (The Paper, 2020). Meanwhile, a multitude of memes pertaining to call ducks are created and go viral in the cyberspace, which, I propound, manifests the simultaneousness between the proliferation of concreate merchandise and that of their related virtual, cultural products.

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Picture 2:

There is a myriad of other cultural memes involving idioms as alphabetic words, such as 'book思议' *book si yi* derived from **不可思议***bu ke si yi* ('unbelievable; inexplicable') (Xinhua Idiom Dictionary, 2002: 69), '**深藏** blue' *shen cang blue* derived from **深藏不露***shen cang bu lou* ('to keep one's counsel') (Zdic.net, 2022c), 'Tony 带水' *tony dai shui* derived from **拖泥**带水 *tuo ni dai shui* ('to do things sloppily') (Xinhua Idiom Dictionary, 2002: 712), '**半**tour废' *ban tour fei* derived from **半途而废** *ban tu er fei* ('to cease halfway') (Xinhua Idiom Dictionary, 2002: 25-26), etc. In all image macros, visual effects are realised by means of images displaying the objects/animals denoted by the English words.

Nonetheless, cultural memes do not necessarily entail idioms, in that cultural image macros may be correlated with Internet buzzwords as well, such as three types of memes containing skr, as mentioned previously.

Another paradigm of a buzzword-related meme is '**臣妾**zombie**到啊**' *chenqie zombie dao a* (Image (3)), the original expression of which is **臣妾做不到啊** *chenqie zuo bu dao a* ('I am not able to do it'). The derivation of this expression is parallel to that of *skr er zhi*: the two medial morphemes *zuo* and *bu* are substituted by the English word *zombie* due to their similarity in pronunciation, generating *chenqie zombie dao a*. The original expression went viral after the broadcast of a period TV drama entitled *Legend of Zhen Huan* (**后**宫甄嬛传 *Hougong Zhen Huan Zhuan*); it is a quotation from a character, the empress, and *chenqie* 'this concubine' is a speaker self-referring term involving self-denigration as a strategy to express politeness in traditional Chinese culture (Chen, 2013; Gu, 1990, 1992; Kadar, 2007: 24, 2019a, 2019b). In this meme, both images of the character saying that line and a cartoon zombie are presented to complement the text, and the character's dolorous and tearful face forms a sharp contrast with the hilarious cartoon image, producing a humorous effect.

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Picture 3:

In terms of homonyms, they denote words that are spelt or pronounced in an identical manner yet have disparate meanings. Various meanings concerning homonymy are not correlated with each other or derived from those others, so they are regarded as different lexical units and the identical form is deemed inadvertent, which means there is lack of morphological connection (Matthews, 2014). That is to say, homonymy pertains to existence of more than one morphological specification sharing the same phonological and graphic form (Carstairs-McCarthy, 2010: 210-213; Vaneva, 2013).

Chinese is a non-alphabetical language (Norman, 1988; Wang, 1984), so its homonymous words are represented separately in the mental lexicon as those in alphabetical languages, and Chinese readers rely more on contextual information in the process of lexical ambiguity resolution, in contrast to their English-speaking counterparts who rely more on structural information for semantic interpretation (Guo et al., 2007; Lin & Ahrens, 2010; Lin & Chen, 2015; Shen & Li, 2016; Zhang et al., 2006).

Homonymous words appearing in Chinese Internet memes are predominantly constituted of homophones, while a small proportion of homonyms are homographs.

The expression **我的马鸭** *wode ma ya* ('my horse-duck') is the homophone of an interjection **我的妈呀***wode ma ya* ('my mum') (Image (4)). It can be seen that the last two characters have been replaced by another two; although these two sets of characters share the same pronunciation, their meanings are disparate. The interjection *wode ma ya* has been existing for long, whereas it recently rises in popularity owing to a social media influencer, **李佳琦** Li Jiaqi, China's 'Lipstick King' who is a male beauty blogger with approximately 40 million fans and used to generate more than $1.7 billion in sales on Alibaba's Singles Day through live-streaming (China Daily, 2018; Global Times, 2018; Huang, 2020; Li & Huang, 2020; Tan, 2021). Li's famous catchphrases, apart from 'Oh my God' and 'all girls', include *wode ma ya*, which

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has triggered the revival of this long-existing interjection. In the image macro below, the substitute constituent, viz. horse and duck, is represented by a horse with a photoshopped duck head.

Picture 4:

There is a variety of other Internet memes involving homophones demonstrated in the form of image macros, e.g. 夺笋 *duo sun* ('to snatch bamboo shoots') for 多损*duo sun* ('how mean') (Image (5)), 吃鲸 *chi jing* ('to eat whales') for 吃惊 *chi jing* ('surprised') and 笔芯 *bi xin* ('refill') for 比心 *bi xin* ('to make a finger heart'), all of which are complemented by images showing the specific objects/animals. The image macro of 失蒜*shi suan* ('to lose garlic') (Image (6)), which is the homophone of 失算 *shi suan* ('to misjudge'), is particularly witty: the seed on the back of Bulbasaur, a Pokémon species, is in a shape of garlic which is the homophone of 'to judge' in Mandarin, so the Pokémon character Bulbasaur losing its seed becomes 'misjudged' (and hence its depressed facial expression in the picture). This image macro was particularly widespread when the global gaming sensation Pokémon Go was popular in China in 2016.

Picture 5:

Picture 6:

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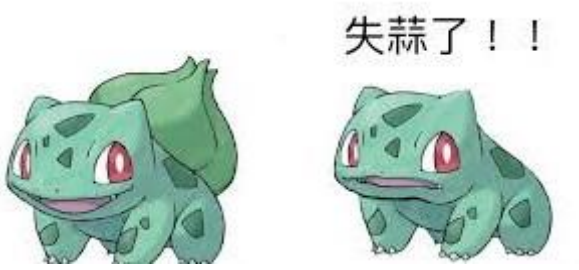

Analogously, another meme involving a homophone, viz. **耗子喂汁** *haozi wei zhi* ('mouse feeding juice') (Image (7)), was also coined by virtue of a hit video clip published by a kung fu practitioner 马保国 Ma Baoguo, which unexpectedly went viral on social media in November 2020. The intended idiom used by Ma is supposed to be **好自为之** *hao zi wei zhi* ('to behave oneself') (Zdic.net, 2022d), whereas due to his strong accent and hence mispronunciation of two tones, this idiom was deliberately converted into a 'mondegreen' (a mishearing or misinterpretation that generates a novel meaning) by netizens, so as to produce hilarity for an entertainment purpose. In the meme, the famous fictional character Jerry Mouse is feeding Tom Cat on some liquid, corresponding to the meaning of 'mouse feeding juice'. It is notable that an alternative version **耗子尾汁** *haozi wei zhi* ('mouse tail juice') is actually closer to Ma's pronunciation and is more widely used than 'mouse feeding juice' in textual form on the Internet, but since the former expression is difficult to be represented visually, memes predominantly deploy the latter.

Picture 7:

Now I would like to discuss an interesting meme that is constituted of two homonymy processes: one is homophony involving substitution of a character, parallel to the process in *shi suan*, while the other one involves

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homography. **就你**马离谱*jiu ni ma lipu* literally means 'your horse is the only ridiculous one' (Image (8)), yet the original intended expression is actually**就你你**妈离谱 *jiu ni ni ma lipu* ('you are the only ridiculous one'), in which **你妈** *ni ma*, literally means 'your mum', is an offensive infix-like word that can be inserted into phrases for emphasis or emotional stress. Owing to the fact that *ni* and *ni ma* are (partially) phonetically duplicated, one *ni* has been omitted through the process of haplology, and the expression thus becomes **就你**妈离谱 *jiu ni ma lipu* which is the homophone of**就你**马离谱*jiu ni ma lipu* ('your horse is the only ridiculous one'). The second homonymy process, however, is realised via homography. The polysemous expression **离谱** *lipu* is linked to two homographs, viz. an adjective 'ridiculous' and a verb phrase 'to leave the sheet music'. Since the latter sense of *lipu* is less common than the former, the visual aid is indispensable for the image macro to be construed: a horse is drawn separately, away from other animals that stay within the sheet music as musical notes, indicating that the horse, i.e. the addressee, is the only *lipu* one.

Picture 8:

Though being less frequent compared with their counterparts involving homophones, there are still abundant memes involving homographs. For instance, **你配**吗 *ni pei ma* is a rhetorical question 'Do you deserve?' that is commonly used in online trolling to express heavy sarcasm (Image (9)); but the verb *pei* also means 'to cut (keys)', so in a conversion between a key-cutter and a customer, the sentence could act as an interrogative question 'Do you want (some keys)?'. Since the latter function of *pei* is less common than the former meaning, a picture of a locksmith store with keys hanging in the background is employed in the image macro, thereby illuminating the dual interpretation. In the text, the second person pronoun *ni* has been replaced by its honorific equivalent **您** *nin*, so as to further reinforce the addresser's sarcasm.

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Picture 9:

It is worth mentioning that in memes involving homonymy, sometimes the substitute morphemes are not precise homographs or homophones of the original constituents, but only have similar pronunciations. The mismatch between substituting and substituted elements, probably due to dialects and accents, is deployed on purpose, aiming to achieve a sense of amusement. For instance, **火冒三丈** *huo mao san zhang* (Lit. 'fire rises up for three *zhang* (a length unit)') denoting one's fury (Xinhua Idiom Dictionary, 2002: 315-316) is intentionally written as **火冒三藏** *huo mao Sanzang* in a playful fashion (Image (10)), as Sanzang is the name of a protagonist in the illustrious masterpiece *Journey to the West* (**西游**记 *Xi You Ji*), and the image depicts the character with his hat on fire. As for **目瞪狗呆** *mu deng gou dai* (Image (11)), it is invented to indicate **目瞪口呆** *mu deng kou dai* (Lit. 'to have eyes and mouth wide open'), namely, 'to gape' (Xinhua Idiom Dictionary, 2002: 494). Due to the fact that *gou* 'dog' and *kou* 'mouth' are pronounced similarly, Chinese netizens substitute *kou* with *gou*, and create various versions of the image macro *mu deng gou dai*, the vast majority of which contain real or cartoon dogs with a shocking facial expression.

Picture 10:

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Picture 11:

It is worth mentioning that apart from code-switching and homonymy, text of Internet memes occasionally contains special symbols. For instance, an idiom 一派胡言*yi pai hu yan* ('complete nonsense') (Zdic.net, 2022e) is written as '一π胡言' *yi π hu yan* for humorous effect. In different versions of the meme, π is either shown as a symbol in the image or represented by a string of digits constituting this mathematical constant; in some versions, the image of π is indicated by a food item 'pie' due to the same pronunciation, which enriches the meme by adding an extra layer of wittiness (Image (12)).

Picture 12:

Additionally, Chinese text of Internet memes can be derived from transliteration of other languages, exemplified by 达咩 *damie* that is the transliteration of a Japanese expression だめ 'no good', as in Image (13).

Picture 13:

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CONCLUSION

In China's cyberspace, cultural memes in the form of image macros dynamically integrate visual effects and textual information, rendering the Internet memes comprehensible and hence transmissible. Chinese-English code-switching and homonymy are two pivotal strategies for the formation of text in image macros. For cultural memes entailing code-switching, or alphabetic words, they are correlated with idioms or Internet buzzwords, and the images are related to the inserted English words. In terms of homonyms appearing in memes, they are predominantly homophones consisting of discrepant Chinese characters, yet a small proportion of homonyms are homographs sharing the identical characters. Analogous to those in memes containing code-switched texts, images in memes containing homonymous words also illustrate constituents that are substituted, so as to facilitate comprehension and strengthen humorous and recreational effects.

Owing to space limitation, in this paper, I only investigate one type of memes, viz. cultural memes. Future research could focus on political memes in China's cyberspace.

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