

Swearwords reinterpreted

New variants and uses by young Chinese netizens on social media platforms

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Swearwords are common on the Internet nowadays. In addition to traditional forms and functions, new features and uses have been created as disguises and hedges, or even as deviants from insults. Focusing on the ‘new swearwords’ prevalent in Chinese social media, we identified the most commonly used novel swearwords developed and favoured by the young Chinese netizens, and analysed their linguistic features and uses on a Chinese social network site. We discovered that certain swearwords have undergone linguistic transformation to take up new grammatical and pragmatic functions. The invention and prevalence of these new swearwords raise interesting points on the roles played by the Internet and social media in bringing netizens together and in enabling them to create web content in their speech community.

Keywords: swearwords, social media, semantic change, discourse community, contemporary Chinese, solidarity

1. Introduction

Dad: *Hi. I am fairly new to Facebook. Mind accepting my friend request?*

Kid: *You made a Facebook? WTF!!*

Dad: *What does “WTF” mean?*

Kid: *Oh, it means “Welcome to Facebook”!*

(‘Welcome to Facebook, Dad!’ 2010)

This text message exchange between a dad and his kid contains notable sociolinguistic points. Astonished that his dad had joined Facebook, the kid blurted out

‘WTF’, which is the acronym of ‘what the fuck’. Though this usage may be a common practice of the young and seemingly unknown to dad, the kid realised the potential disaster immediately and rendered a harmless interpretation. The kid’s quick-witted remedy of a blunder raises an interesting point: generational variations in attitudes and uses of swearwords. It is also to be noted how the f-word takes on a disguise and thus helps the child get away with it.

The above exchange is a specimen of how traditional swearwords could occur with new meanings and usages in the digital age. Recent decades have seen an increasing body of research on swearing in world languages from a variety of perspectives, including the semantic, grammatical and/or affective dimensions of swearing (Adams 2005; Jay and Danks 1977; Vingerhoets et al. 2013), the pragmatic functions of swearing (Jay and Janschewitz 2008), its correlation with sociolinguistic variables such as gender and context (Bayard and Krishnappa 2001; Beers-Fägersten 2007), its relation to bilingualism and education (Dewaele 2004), its neurolinguistic or cognitive bases (Van Lancker and Cummings 1999), etc. While studies on swearing or swearwords in English are relatively abundant and multi-faceted, intercultural and interdisciplinary approaches to the study of swearing have been exemplified, yet are still called for, in research relevant to swearing in recent years (e.g. Goddard 2015; Ljung 2010). A number of studies have been conducted on swearwords in other languages such as French (Jaffe 2017), Italian (Di Cristodoro and McEnery 2017), Chinese (Li et al. 2018; Moore et al. 2010; Wang 2013) and Serbian (Halupka-Rešetar and Radić 2003) to enrich the literature of swearing research.

With the rise of Web 2.0 in the new media age, connections and interactions among different Internet users have been made possible (Gruber 2008, 54; O’Reilly 2010, 225). Netizens¹ have had more opportunities to participate in the creation and circulation of media content. Given the informal nature of social network interactions, the language used in such online platforms tends to be informal and involve unusual writing styles (Thelwall 2008, 4). In light of this, it is noted by an increasing number of scholars that swearing on new media platforms has taken on new roles through new linguistic features and functions. Words that contain profanity or swearwords would sometimes appear with a disguise, like *p.i.s.s.* for *piss*, in order to avoid censorship (Mogollón, Pinzón, and Rojas-Galeano 2016, 240). Swearing has also been found to be used in certain online contexts as a tool to enhance solidarity with readers and peers (Beers-Fägersten 2017; Dynel 2012).

1. A ‘netizen’ is defined as an active participant in the online community of the Internet (The online Merriam-Webster Dictionary, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/netizen>, accessed on September 5 2019).

Studies on Chinese swearwords have been receiving scholarly interest for decades, despite a relative paucity of ontological research.² Chen (1992) discussed the psychological mechanisms behind, and the cognitive values of, Chinese swearwords. Zhou (2000) provided an overview of traditional Chinese swearwords in terms of their categorisation, formation, and function. Delinzhuoga (2005) revealed the basic syllabic structures and semantic formations of the swearwords collected in the *Modern Chinese Dictionary* (2002 edition). As pointed out by some scholars, certain Chinese swearwords have always been written in disguised forms due to their taboo nature, such as using 鸟 (*niǎo*/bird) to refer to a man's private parts (Cao 2006). In recent years, with the popularity of new media, an increasing number of researchers have taken note of the new features revealed by non-traditional swearwords in online settings, including their sometimes idiosyncratic written forms and non-insult-oriented uses. For example, TMD is a phonetic abbreviation of the phrase 他妈的 (*tāmāde*/his mom's, clipped from 'his mom's private part'), and 你妹 (*nǐmèi*/your younger sister, a hedged substitute of 'fuck your mom'). Both examples can be traced to the archaic and most offensive swearing 禽他妈的屁 (*cào tāmāde bǐ*/fuck his mom's pussy), but no longer contains explicit referents of the action or the recipient. Shen (2016) termed such phenomenon 'newly emerging foul and abusive language in Chinese'. Jing-Schmidt and Hsieh (2019), in their review of Chinese neologisms, proposed that '[n]eologisms include not just new words, but also new constructional patterns, morphological patterns, and innovated parts of speech'. As our data include both new uses of traditional Chinese swearwords and new forms derived from them, we shall adopt the concept of Chinese neologisms for a working definition of 'new swearwords' in our present study, taking into account those swearwords that have been emerging in online domains.

This paper examines the repertoire of new swearwords favoured by young Chinese netizens situated in the 'local' as well as 'global' contexts, so as to investigate the emergence and functionality of the new swearing expressions. 'Local' contexts in this paper refer to the online text where a word of focus is used, and 'global' ones involve broader, non-linguistic factors such as social and cultural contexts in which a discourse is situated. In what follows, we begin with a classification of the new swearwords according to their semantic meanings. We will then explore what (new) linguistic features they exhibit and what (new) pragmatic

2. Related etymological studies are scarce, and swearwords are generally excluded from the majority of Chinese corpora available. It is extremely challenging, if not impossible, to track and confirm the exact time when a swearword appeared in literary works, on the Internet or in other media. Moreover, very few swearwords and their variants are collected in dictionaries (Jing-Schmidt 2019), most of which only include prototypical forms of traditional swearwords.

functions they perform in such online contexts. We intend to paint the new landscape of swearwords in Chinese, recreated by the young netizens for their use on online social media platforms. New forms and meanings have been given to old expressions, which assume new functions in various linguistic aspects. Thus, our study reinterprets and reimages Chinese swearwords flourishing in Chinese social media in the late 2010s.

2. Methodology

At the beginning of this study, we conducted interviews with 20 university students in China whose average age was 23.5, including 14 females and 6 males. We provided them with some typical new swearwords including 尼玛 (*nímǎ*/near homophones of ‘you’ and ‘mom’; your mom), 我草 (*wǒcǎo*/I and near homophone of ‘fuck’; I fuck), and 逗比 (*dòubǐ*/funny and near homophone of ‘pussy’; a riot), and asked them: (1) if they had seen this word, and if so, where; (2) if they knew what it means; (3) if they had used this word, and if so, where; (4) to give similar words, and as many as possible. Our interviews recorded the 26 most frequently used swearwords and variants by these young people (Appendix 1). All items are related to sex to varying degrees, and many were included in recent studies on new trends of foul language in Chinese (Li et al. 2018; Shen 2016). In general, our list contains representatives of the most commonly used swearwords in contemporary Chinese media. Furthermore, our informants named a few social networking sites such as Douban, Zhihu and WeChat as the places where they most often used or encountered such swearwords.

We then used the keywords identified above to retrieve and collect texts on a chosen social media called ‘Douban’. It is an epitome of popular Chinese social media frequented by young netizens aged between 18–35 (Yecies et al. 2016, 117). Douban welcomes posts on hobbies, films, books, music and the like, and consequently attracts large numbers of young netizens to publish posts and exchange ideas in self-organised social groups (Kong 2014). As of June 2017, it ranked fourth among all of the most frequently used social media apps in China (CNNIC 2017). Its phone app, Douban Moments, is one of the subordinate platforms of Douban,³ which is used daily to push 10–15 popular posts or articles based on its algorithm involving hit rates and readers’ ratings. This study selected Douban and Douban Moments as the major sources of research data due to their popularity among young adult readers and their diversity in content and reader groups. It

3. Douban Moments was suspended in August 2017 by its parent company as a business strategic move.

was expected that the number and use of swearwords and their variants would be high and diverse, which is most desirable for our focus of study.

For more comprehensive understanding of the keywords' use in discourse, information relating to the host posts was also retrieved and collected: category of content, pen name of post owner, date of posting, hyperlinks. Restricted by privacy setting, authors' genders and ages were neither explicitly known nor accessible. Our tool of data retrieval was a Chrome extension tool that analysed the host server and API to generate corresponding API. Due to the app's restriction on data mining, only posts up to May 2015 were retrievable. Constrained by the platform's regulation on the amount of information an external party is allowed to retrieve and download, this study collected posts published between May 2015 and December 2016.

3. Results

We collected 14,435 posts by 4,453 authors, covering 23 categories or themes that ranged from book reviews to gossips about beauty products and celebrities. Among the posts retrieved, we identified 3,162 tokens of targeted new swearwords. Frequency of occurrence for all targeted swearwords is listed in Appendix 1. Our analysis and discussion were centred around the words per se and also on the contexts in which they were situated.

3.1 Categorization of new swearwords

A quick glimpse of the new swearwords suggested that most items, to varying extents, are related to sex, which is a common theme in swearwords in world languages (Fernández 2008). Focusing on the actions/verb event involved in the words, we propose that our pool of new swearwords fall into three categories: recipient of sexual behaviour, type of sexual behaviour, and sexual organ. We attempted hypothetical deduction on the formation of these expressions based on their meaning and structure, due to a lack of relevant etymological studies (see Schuessler 2007). Despite this, the proposed composition methods suggest that the formation of the variants is anything but random, and that some patterns and methods are likely to be general across other swearwords.

From Tables 1 (a)–(c), it can be seen that our targeted items derive from sex-related roots, but have evolved into variants with varying degrees of connection with the original swearwords through processes like homophonic substitution, clipping or coinage. For example, 他妈的 (*tāmāde*/his mom's) and 你妈的 (*nīmāde*/your mom's) are among the more traditional forms, from which

Table 1. Classification of swearwords based on semantic referents**a.** Recipient of sexual behaviour

<i>Item</i>	<i>Compositions</i>	<i>Literal meaning</i>	<i>Actual meaning</i>
他妈的 tāmāde	Clipped from 禽他妈的屎 cào tāmāde bī 'fuck his mom's pussy'	his mom's	fuck/fucking
特么(的) tèmede	a near homophone of 他妈的	no literal meaning	freaking/ goddamn
TM/TMD tāmā/ tāmāde	Abbreviation of tāmā(de) 他妈的 'his mom's'	his mom(s)	fuck/fucking
你妈的 nīmāde	Clipped from 禽你妈的屎 cào nīmāde bī 'fuck your mom's pussy'	your mom's	fuck/fucking
尼玛 nīmǎ	a near homophone of nīmā 你妈 'your mom'	no literal meaning	freaking/ goddamn
你妹 nīmèi	a near homophone of, and close in meaning to, nīmā 你妈	your younger sister	my foot/my ass

b. Type of sexual behaviour

<i>Item</i>	<i>Compositions</i>	<i>Literal meaning</i>	<i>Actual meaning</i>
我操 wǒcāo	a near homophone of wǒcào 我禽 'I fuck'*	I grasp	fuck
我靠 wǒkào	Ditto	I lean	fuck
我擦 wǒcā	Ditto	I wipe	fuck
我草 wǒcǎo	Ditto	I grass	fuck
我 ⁺⁺ wǒcǎo	'++' is the radical of 草 cǎo 'grass'	I 'head of cǎo'	fuck
卧槽 wòcáo	a near homophone of wǒcào 我禽	crouching at a trough	fuck/holy shit
草泥马 cǎonímǎ	a near homophone of cǎonímā 禽你妈 'fuck your mom'	grass mud horse	fuck/damn

* Etymologically, the original written form of 'wǒcào' in Chinese is likely to be 我禽, the meaning of which is close to 'I fuck' in English. 我 is the singular first-person pronoun meaning 'I', and 禽 is the archaic verb meaning 'fuck'.

c. Sexual organs

<i>Item</i>	<i>Compositions</i>	<i>Literal meaning</i>	<i>Actual meaning</i>
装逼 zhuāngbī	装 zhuāng 'to pretend' + 逼 bī 'pussy'	to pretend pussy	to act ostentatiously
撕逼sībī	撕 sī 'to rip' + 逼 bī 'pussy'	to rip pussy	to have a catfight/to fall out with someone
二逼èrbī	二 (èr 'two', vernacular saying of 'stupid') + 逼 bī 'pussy'	stupid pussy	an asshole
煞笔shābǐ	a near homophone of 傻逼 shǎbī 'a sucker', 傻 'silly' + bī 'pussy'	stupid pussy	a sucker, a stupid person
逼格bīgé	bī (a homophone of 屌 bī, 'pussy') + gé (from 格调 gédiào, 'style/class')	pussy level	swag; style
逗比dòubǐ	逗 dòu 'funny' + 比 bǐ (a homophone of 屌 bī 'pussy')	funny pussy	a riot, a funny person
傻X shǎbǐ/shǎchā	The cross (chā) is a mask for 逼 bī in 傻逼 shǎbī	stupid X	a sucker, a stupid cunt
装X zhuāngbǐ/ zhuāngchā	The cross (chā) is a mask for 逼 bī in 装逼 zhuāngbī	to pretend X	to act ostentatiously
装B zhuāngbǐ	The Roman letter B substitutes 逼 bī in 装逼 zhuāngbī	to pretend B	to act ostentatiously
B格 bīgé	The Roman letter B substitutes 逼 bī in 逼格 bīgé	B style/ level	swag; style
装13 zhuāngshísān	13 is a horizontally dismantled B	to pretend thirteen	to act ostentatiously
low逼 lōubī	Code mixing of 'low' and '逼 bī'	low pussy	someone with poor taste

new forms (as shown in the sub-categories) are derived. Some variants still carry strong emotional forces, such as 我操 (*wócāo*/I fuck) and 你妈的 (*nǐmāde*/your mom's), while some are coined for stylistic references. The latter set constitutes new linguistic phenomena – reinterpretation of traditional swearwords. It is noted that many variants in our collection seem to alleviate the insulting force encoded in its original, like 比 (*bǐ*/compare) as a substitution of 屌 (*bī*/pussy) in 逗比 (*dòubǐ*/a riot). In some cases, the new swearword is plausibly the product of several processes. 煞笔 (*shābǐ*/a sucker) is a near homophone of 傻逼 (*shǎbǐ*/a

sucker), changing tones of the characters. Thus, the former form is actually a compound coinage of 傻 (*shǎ*/stupid) and 逼 (*bī*/pussy), which reads much weaker in the insulting force than its base 傻逼.

3.2 Code-mixing in the new swearwords

Another observation among the collection is the diverse forms and disguises these new swearwords take on. Some new variants adopt code-mixing to include unusual forms such as Roman letters, numerals, English words and even radicals of Chinese characters. The concept of ‘code’ is used here in its broad sense, which includes different writing systems of a single language, like Pinyin and radicals⁴ in Chinese. Previous research has also noted the emergence of such ‘hybridized orthography’ in Chinese online space (Lee 2002; 10, Lotherington and Xu 2004, 309). Creation of these swearwords employs approaches from two aspects: orthography and pronunciations. For instance, 我⁺⁺ (*wǒcào*/I ‘head of cǎo’) is coined from 我草 (*wǒcǎo*/I grass), where ⁺⁺ is the semantic radical of 草 and can be typed out by certain Chinese input methods.⁵ 我草 (*wǒcǎo*/I grass) is developed from 我操 (*wǒcāo*/I fuck). 操 (*cāo*) and 草 (*cǎo*/grass) are near homophones that derive from the swearword 禽 (*cào*/fuck) by changing the original tone into legitimate combination of tone and syllable in contemporary standard Chinese. 草 (*cǎo*/grass) is then replaced with its subcomponent, which is a further hedge of the original insulting connotation. These processes can be denoted as this: 我操 (*wǒcāo*/I fuck) → 我草 (*wǒcǎo*/I grass) → 我⁺⁺ (*wǒcào*/I ‘head of cǎo’). Another type of code-mixing involves Roman alphabets, i.e. the Pinyin form. For instance, ‘TMD’ is the acronym of the Pinyin form of the swearword *tāmāde* (他妈的/his mom’s). Sometimes ‘TMD’ is further clipped by dropping the ‘D’, as a correspondence to the shortened swearword *tāmā* (他妈/his mom). In most new swearwords, only one type of the disguise methods mentioned above is employed to substitute the original insulting key character(s).

There are also a group of the new swearwords that contain English words, like *low* 逼 (*lōubī*/low class). ‘Low’ is used literally to comment that the level or standard of a person (usually in terms of taste or abilities overall) is poor. Inter-

4. Pinyin is the official Romanization system of Standard Chinese in mainland China. A radical is a graphical component of a Chinese character, which is often a semantic/phonetic indicator. For example, 妈 ‘mom’ has a semantic radical on the left meaning ‘female’ and a phonetic radical on the right suggesting its pronunciation should be in the same rhyme as that of the character 马 ‘horse’.

5. ‘++’ can be typed out through a few input methods, usually by inputting ‘cao’ via Sogou Pinyin Method or via Pinyin Simplified method provided by an iOS or on Mac device.

estingly, the English word ‘low’ is used to form a derogatory word, but the use of English in Chinese presumes some knowledge in the foreign language, which is still an indication of prestige and education in China today (Gao 2009, 72). In contrast, understanding swearwords involving Pinyin scripts or numerals only requires a basic level of literacy from the writer/reader. As most contemporary young netizens have had secondary education and are equipped with basic English (Hu 2002), it is not surprising that code-mixing involving English is adopted in creating new swearwords, as it may be considered a symbol of coolness and of social prestige.

3.3 The new grammatical features of the swearwords

Traditional research proposes that swearwords are usually used as interjections in discourse (Ameka 1992). They usually carry an abusive or aggressive punch. Therefore, omission of a swearword does not affect the grammaticality of its host sentences. Our data suggest, however, that certain new variants of Chinese swearwords that are pervasive today have obtained more concrete grammatical features such as discourse-pragmatic functions as they underwent derivation and other changes while their semantic meanings have been bleached. For example, 你妹 (*nǐmèi*/your younger sister) could serve as a discourse marker that falsifies or rejects a presupposition in a previous statement by the speaker (or another interlocutor), or an assumption that could be inferred from the context. In (1) below, the author starts with a rhetorical question “You think it’s still early?”, defying the assumption made by “you” that the time is still early; in other words, the author is presupposing the time is not early for many people. The author then follows up with a rejection 早你妹 (“Early your.younger.sister!”), further affirming his or her own stance that it is already too late. 你妹 *nǐmèi* here apparently has nothing to do with its original semantic meaning or abusive referent, but rather a marker that signals strong denial of the statement that could be inferred from the context. In (2), “the agent would come out...and curse at every moment” sets up a scenario where the agent always refutes rumours for the celebrity. The author follows up with a grunt 辟你妹啊 “Refute your.younger.sister ah”, expressing his/her displeasure towards and rejection of such phenomenon in the previous account.

- (1) 早 你妹!
 Zǎo nǐmèi!
 early your.younger.sister
 “Early, hell no!”

你以为还早吗? 早你妹! 7点到教室, 你觉得很早么? 教室6点40有人开始巴拉巴拉读书背单词了.....你还巴拉巴拉念叨起的太早!

“You think it’s still early? Early, hell no! Arriving at the classroom at 7am, and you think it’s too early? At 6:40 there are already people reading books and memorizing words... and you keep on nagging it is too early!”

- (2) 辟 谣,, 辟 你妹 啊,
 pì yáo,..., pì nǐmèi ah,
 refute rumors,..., refute your.younger.sister SFP

“The agent came out and refuted rumors for her again. Refute, hell no!”

经纪人总是会第一时间出来辟谣，真是分分钟就想爆粗口，辟你妹啊，就不能来个假戏真做，来点意外惊喜吗？

“The agent would come out in first time to refute rumors, and that makes one want to curse at every moment. Refute, hell no! Can’t the play be real? Surprise us!”

Another swearword that has acquired new features is 逼 (*bī/pussy*), which shows up in the variants we gathered (Table 1-c). 逼 is likely to be derived from its taboo origin 屌 (*bī/pussy*), which is homophonic and refers to female’s private part. This original referent is still somewhat retained in certain variants like 撕逼 (*sībī/rip pussy*). The new referent in the variants could range from a cat fight (Example (3)) to a falling-out in general (Example (4)).

- (3) 我 要 和 室友 撕逼!

Wǒ yào hé shìyǒu sībī!

I have to with roommate rip.pussy

“I really have to have a catfight with my roommate!”

- (4) 在 职场, 每 天 都 上 演 着 无 数 的 撕 逼 故 事。

Zài zhíchǎng, měitiān dōu shàngyǎn zhe wúshù de sībī gùshì.

at work.place every.day all display ZHE numerous DE rip.pussy story

“In the workplace, numerous falling-out stories happen every day.”

In most new variants, however, the original abusive referent in 逼 is weakened and even bleached, in which it is granted new referential meanings. This could be seen in the following variants (Table 1-c): 装逼 (*zhuāngbī/to act ostentatiously*), 二逼 (*èrbī/a stupid person*), 逼格 (*bīgé/swag*), and variants that contain its near homophones 比 (*bǐ/compare*) or 笔 (*bǐ/pen*) such as 煞笔 (*shābǐ/a stupid person*), 逗比 (*dòubǐ/a riot*). As in Example (5), 装逼 means acting in a pretentious and ostentatious manner and has a teasing and slightly sarcastic undertone. The meaning of the original swearword 逼 has been extended in this new variant. 装逼 is derogatory and somewhat vulgar, but not a swearword any more. So the original abusiveness in 逼 has faded and its insulting force considerably softened. In other new swearwords, 逼 is further extended to neutral or positive references. For example, 逼格 (*bīgé/swag*) is a simplified form of 装逼的格调 (*zhuāngbī de*

gédiào/the level of someone's swag). It appears with a mild commendatory sense in Example (6).

- (5) 别人 说 我 喜欢 某 些 电影 就是 装逼 行为。
 Bírén shuō wǒ xǐhuān mǒu xiē diànyǐng jiùshì zhuāngbī xíngwéi.

others say I favor certain CL film is pretend.pussy act

"Others say I am being a show-off just because I favor certain films."

好片子就是好看的片子，虽然它太不闷了或者太闷了。

我厌恶对另类导演的趋之若鹜，也厌恶别人说我喜欢某些电影就是装逼行为。

看电影就是看电影。

"Good films are always good films, though they could be too entertaining or too boring.

I hate it when people are going after a director just for his idiosyncrasy, and also hate it when others say I am being a show-off just because I favor certain films.

Going to theatres for films is nothing more than seeing films."

- (6) 并不是 系 一条 BV 的 皮带 就是 有 逼格 了,
 Bìng bù shì jì yī tiáo de pídài jiùshì yǒu bīgé le,

not ... wear a Bottega Veneta DE belt is have pussy.level LE

"It doesn't mean... wearing a Bottega Veneta belt makes you classy."

怎么说呢，对于提升逼格这件事儿听着挺虚。其实不然，不外乎是通过一些物件来彰显自己是一个有品位、有情怀、有追求的男人。当然，并不是你去背一个LV的包，系一条BV的皮带就是有逼格了，这特么叫土豪，和逼格无关，和情怀无关。

"How shall I put it – to level up one's style may sound so abstract, but it is not so. You can use accessories to show that you are a man with taste, heart, and ambition. But, of course, it doesn't mean that carrying a Louis Vuitton bag or wearing a Bottega Veneta belt makes you classy. That says nothing but you're a nouveau riche, which has nothing to do with being cool or one's heart."

Some variant of 逼 (*bī*/pussy), such as 比 (*bǐ*/compare) used in Example (7), even shows a significant change in lexical meaning from the abusive origin. 比 started as a homophonic substitute of 逼 in swearwords, and carried abusive referent. In Example (7), 比 has shaken off the original meaning but acquired new referent, a common person or nobody. Compounding with the adjective 逗 meaning 'funny', 逗比 (*dòubǐ*/funny pussy) refers a hilarious person, or a riot, especially one from the grass root. In this specific context, "being a 逗比" is also a kind of lifestyle or personality which the author finds "charming". Here 逼/比 is completely bleached in terms of swearing functions: turning from its original abusive referent to a neutral and even positive one, by taking on a new lexical meaning.

- (7) 逗比 也 可以 理解 是 一种 生活 态度
 Dòubǐ yě kěyǐ lijiě shì yīzhǒng shēnghuó tàidù
 Funny.pussy also can understand be a kind of life attitude
 “Being a riot can also be understood as an attitude towards life.”

逗比也可以理解是一种生活态度

或者是一种人格特性

有时候也会拥有独特的魅力吧

“Being a riot can also be understood as an attitude towards life

or a type of personality

Sometimes such a person may have a unique kind of charm”

In similar fashion, 逼 has been used to form more compound nouns with derogatory references. For example, 丧逼 (*sàngbī*/depressing pussy), as shown in Example (8). 丧 means death or deprivation, infelicity or frustration. It is noted that a culture of 丧 began to emerge on new media in China (Lin 2017), where the character 丧 has come to refer to a negative and let-things-drift attitude towards life. Following this trend, 丧逼 is formed to refer to ordinary people who are often depressed or decadent to the extent that they seem to have lost the purpose in life.

- (8) 我 有 几 位 吃 完 火 锅 就 难 过 的 丧 逼 朋 友。
 Wǒ yǒu jǐ wèi chī wán huǒguō jiù nánguò de sàngbī péngyǒu.
 I have several CL eat finish hot pot then sad DE depressing.pussy friend
 “I have a few whiny friends who become melancholy upon finishing their hot pot meals.”

我有几位吃完火锅就难过的丧逼朋友。

我们这群丧逼朋友的主要特点，一是穷，二是多愁善感，三是文艺青年，酷爱粤语歌。粤语歌爱好者们貌似人生路都挺坎坷的。或者说，坎坷的人在粤语歌中比较能得到安慰。

“I have a few whiny friends who become melancholy every time they had hot pot meals.

These whiny friends have some features in common: poor, sentimental, self-claimed artsy youths who are crazy about Cantonese songs. It seems most Cantonese song lovers have experienced too many downs in life. Or rather, a person who has gone through too many downs finds more solace in Cantonese songs.”

Examples (7) and (8) are evidences that 逼 has been confirmed with new lexical meaning extended and distinct from the original one. It can refer to a specific kind of person, especially one who is average and of certain grass-root characteristics

(no matter pleasant or upsetting). But, it should be noted that the new meaning does not stand alone by itself, but is best manifested in compound nouns.

The above Examples (3–8) and analyses demonstrate that some new swearwords such as 你妹 (*nǐmèi*/your younger sister) and 逼 (*bī*/pussy) have undergone semantic change to acquire new grammatical features. Their original concrete and abusive referential meanings appear to be lost or bleached in the process. In contemporary Chinese netizens' vocabulary, these words are granted additional concrete and extended meanings to form new variants to be used in more contexts and lexical items (Brinton and Traugott 2005, 108). We could see that, for example, 你妹 serves as a marker that provides denial of a presupposition when it is used post-focally. This adds functional flexibility to this new swearwords, though the new grammatical feature retains a clear connection to its original function as swear. The other swearword 逼 (*bī*) represents more significant changes in lexical meanings: two new generic meanings are developed including class/style and a common person. Each new meaning is neutral and can participate in creating new compounds, which adds to the productivity of the word 逼. It is expected that many more different kinds of '–逼' might be created by netizens in the future.

These changes of swearwords are made possible through the reinterpretation and innovative uses by young netizens, as well as on the Internet platform that enables and increases the appearance of new variants and token frequencies. During the process of change, the original insulting force of the traditional swearwords like 逼/屌 (*bī*/pussy) has been greatly alleviated in wide acceptance and adaptation on new social media, which has in turn further boosted frequency of occurrence and enlarge range of use.

3.5 The new social functions of the swearwords

Aside from traditional pragmatic functions, the sex-related swearwords and their variants could also contribute to identity construction and solidarity enhancement on social media networks. Douban Moments, the major source of our data, was oriented towards urban youngsters who have received a certain degree of education and are fond of sharing and discussions about books, films, music and the like. The app selected and pushed popular or featured articles daily, and these could be taken as representations of the unique kind of discourse and culture of this social community. Our data revealed that from 2015 to the end of 2016, nearly one out of four popular authors or one out of six featured articles had used sex-related swearwords. In light of this, we could say this style of discourse was widely recognised, and at the same time conventionalised, by the mainstream users of Douban Moments, who mainly were young Chinese people. Swales (1990) defined

that members of a discourse community share goals in common or are governed by certain beliefs and conventions, which are manifested by certain ways of talking and getting things done. Following this direction, these young netizens should be regarded as forming a particular discourse community. Use of swearwords, as proposed by Stapleton (2003, 2010), could be understood then as a community practice in terms of enhancing identity construction within a group by marking in-/out-group boundaries and affirming members' identities, which are hard to realise through other means. When using swearwords, both the speaker (or writer) and the audience display their group membership. The swearwords and their hit rates involved in our study to some extent reflect users' sense of identity, which in turn facilitates their identity construction in this online community by using sex-related swearwords in their posts or comments, or by being frequent audience members who consumed this style of talk.

Simultaneously, swearword uses could create or enhance the solidarity among different members and reduce their social distance (Dynel 2012, 38). The use of sex-related swearwords on social networks like Douban could be in some ways seen as a subculture that prevails in this specific kind of community, whose members recognise and support the words' use. Albeit rude and impolite behaviour in traditional views, swearword usage could be taken as an in-group polite act in certain contexts on social media. By using them in vernacular conversations online, strangers on a virtual platform would have the potential to narrow their social distance and thus to increase solidarity.

Such 'reciprocal' effect could to varying extents be seen in other swearwords and their variants in our study. For instance, 尼玛 *nímǎ* is a near homophone but non-lexical variant of 你妈 (*nǐmā*/your mom's), which was clipped from 你妈的屄 (*cào nǐmāde bī*/fuck your mom's pussy). However, as reflected in Example (9), it is used in the sense of a marker where the original abusive referent is bleached.

- (9) 这 尼玛 是个坑 好 嘛 跳 进去 你 怕 了 嘛!
 Zhè nímǎ shì gè kēng hǎo ma tiào jìnqù nǐ pà le ma!
 this NIMA is a pit great SFP jump inside you scared LE SFP
 "This is a **freaking** deep pit okay, getting into it does make one scared!"

这时候就要海淘满足求知欲满足用最少的钱买海外商品提高姿势水平的急切的心对不对!!

准备好说爱我了嘛!

先说各位小仙女的心头爱———

美妆

这尼玛是个坑好嘛跳进去你怕了嘛!

“This is exactly when you should start overseas online shopping, satisfy your curiosity and purchase foreign products at the lowest price possible!

Now, get ready to show your gratitude for me!

First let me start with everyone’s beloved – cosmetics

This is a freaking deep pit okay, and getting into it is scary right?”

(The post author then continued to recommend her favourite products and recount her user experiences.)

Example (10) is part of a popular post regarding purchasing cosmetic products from online stores. The author described shopping cosmetics products on overseas websites is very appealing but with consequences. Online overseas shopping is then like “a freaking deep pit”: a person can never get out of it once s/he starts. The author goes on to provide a list of cosmetic products she finds to be of great value for money. It is not surprising that the author inserts the swearword 尼玛 *nímǎ* as well as other words with negative connotation like “freaking”, “pit” and “scary” when sharing her experiences. Such slangy language suggests that the author is not trying to pose as a lofty expert, but a next-door neighbour who is eager to share. As an ordinary person like most her audience, she gets excited when talking about her passion, and empathizes with her readers’ dilemma. In such a way, the author constructs her identity as a lover of and an old hand in overseas online shopping in this group. The post’s popularity can be seen in the replies that followed, as listed below.

- Reply 1: I don’t know how to make online overseas purchase. Please give advice (face with tears of joy emoji)
- Reply 2: Where to make online overseas purchase?
- Reply 3: How to make online overseas purchase -_-#
- Reply 4: Don’t know how to make online overseas purchase. Feels so sad
 ㄣ (ノ▽ノ) ㄣ
- Reply 5: A lot of useful tips in this post. But for now I only know how to make purchases on US websites.
- Reply 6: What the author said makes sense.

A look at the comments under this post could contribute to a better understanding of the solidarity that the author gets to enhance through her language use. While the author has made a few heartfelt recommendations of what products to get on overseas websites, in most of the replies, readers are sharing their frustration from not knowing how to make online overseas purchases, or are inviting the author to give them advice on how to do this. Some people agree with the author’s opinions in the post (Reply 6), or affirm the value of this post (Reply 5). All of the

comments are friendly in tone, and none of the commenters seem to be offended by the swearword usage. This is particularly manifested by the use of emoticons and emojis in the comments (Replies 1, 3, 4). Instead of netizens questioning the author's authority or attacking the author for being a show-off with foul language, this post reveals how the author constructs her identity and establishes solidarity with other netizens through moderate swearword usage in an online post. Simultaneously, the participants in the comment section also construct their identity and show rapport to the author by recognising such language use. Since this post was so popular, it was tweeted by the Douban Moments app to a wide audience based on its algorithm. Among the thousands of readers this article reached, none of them seemed to have had such a serious problem with this author's language use to the extent of leaving a bitter comment under the post.

In the instance above, the author displays her empathy and constructs her identity online with the enhancement by swearwords. Such use serves two goals: expressing strong personal emotions and opinions, and delivering one's desire to seek resonance among other netizens. In such a context, the swearwords are not used abusively or to attack someone, but to show the authors' belonging to the same speech community as readers. This approach is actually a tool for building connection and communication, with the aim of gaining support and establishing solidarity among readers.

4. The youth, the Internet and beyond

From the analyses above, it could be seen that the swearwords in our study have turned into commonplace sayings among young people, especially those who frequent social media. Their practices, however, contain innovative interpretation of the traditional swearwords' abusive forces. Through frequent reinterpretation and fast spread via the Internet and phone apps, some swearwords have even softened, bleached to neutral, and some been granted positive connotations. Some have even lexicalised to participate in the formation of new words in Chinese. These changes are largely attributed to the popularity of the Internet and social media among young Chinese people. Since Web 2.0 enables netizens to create web content and thus virtually brings its users closer, it also gives rise to testing grounds and platforms for the creative use of languages. Therefore, we propose that the Internet has accelerated the circulation of swearwords and expanded their range of use, which in turn enables larger groups of netizens to create new forms and functions to accommodate wider applications.

The speaker's attitudes and emotions are encoded in the use of swearwords (Moore et al. 2010). Young people's use of swearwords in online communication

could be regarded as part of their attempt to redefine social taboos and conventions, which is also a feature of the vernacular characteristics of online interaction. These new language phenomena may have prompted young people to rethink linguistic and social conventions to the extent that they reinterpret and recreate norms for their own uses. Actually, research has shown that every generation of young people tend to have their own unique way of talking that may change the language in general (Eckert 1997). For example, saying 'bad' for 'cool' in English has been around since its first use in 1960s. As the millennials grow up in the web age, they have both linguistic resources and the Internet at their disposal in creating their kind of unconventional linguistic forms, such as the new swearwords to reflect their understanding of their identity and times.

A glimpse at the rapidly changing Chinese society would also contribute to a better understanding of the growing use of new swearwords by the young netizens. In recent decades, China has been exposed to unprecedented globalisation forces, including 'global knowledge transfer, information sharing and cultural learning', which has had strong impacts on China's modernisation (Faure and Fang 2008, 194). Simultaneously, China's millennial generation has been responding to these challenges in its own ways and leading to some social changes, challenging the older generation's cultural values (Moore 2005). There has been a growing need for self-expression and individualisation among Chinese youth (Faure and Fang 2008, 198). To establish and display their identity of being 'cool' and 'relatable' in the new age, young people resort to their rich creativity in language use to break away from conventional taboos. These creative changes, rebelling and inappropriate in the eyes of the older generation and authorities, catch on quickly among youngsters and prevail on the Internet.

5. Conclusion and implications

Our study set out to garner data and evidence to enrich the current body of literature on swearing. We collected and analysed the frequently used 'new swearwords' in Chinese social media. We then examined new variants' formation and classification, and analysed their functions in online communities. It is found that most new swearwords of focus have taken on new grammatical and pragmatic features compared with their linguistic origins. Some are undergoing semantic change, shaking off the original abusiveness to absorb new referential meanings. These swearwords are not only semantically bleached but also transformed into productive morphemes with neutral to positive connotation. Moreover, in social media platforms, all new swearwords contribute to identity construction and solidarity enhancement within the speech community on the

web. We propose a ‘reciprocal’ relationship between the new swearwords and Internet use: new variants and uses of swearwords among Chinese young netizens are catalysed by the vast popularity of the Internet and social media apps, which provide platforms and inspirations for the young users to fully display their linguistic and pragmatic creativity, which leads to more new forms and uses.

Our study also sheds light on the importance of studying swearwords in the age of new media. Linguistic novelty and pragmatic implications are thus investigated both inside given texts and in the broader social context in which they are situated. Our research approach is justified by the new forms and meanings that we discover, and by the reinterpretation of their functions on Chinese social media platforms. As swearing is a social taboo but also an intriguing linguistic phenomenon, its interpretation must also take consideration of psychological, cultural and social factors, as the latest research on Chinese neologisms has reiterated (Jing-Schmidt and Hsieh 2018).

The prevalence of swearwords and their variants in online spaces also raises questions regarding intercultural communication and second language learning. Some scholars have pointed out that novel language usage, as such, is especially intriguing to second or foreign language learners (Horan 2013; Register 1996). Learners might be easily exposed to ‘new swearwords’ in various online platforms and in instant messaging. The high frequency and wide application of such new forms may lead learners into the misconception that the swearwords are a cool tool for promoting peer solidarity. If they are eager to make use of such ‘cool words’ before realising their actual cultural and historical connotations, the learners are under the risk of insulting native speakers even when they mean no harm but are within-speech-community politeness (Scheu-Lottgen and Hernández-Campoy 1998, 391). Therefore, the socio-pragmatic aspects of swearing and swearword changes are of both scholarly and practical value. While our study has provided some insights from this angle, we hope there will be more in-depth studies on swearing from the perspectives of second language acquisition and cross-cultural communication in the future.

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Appendix 1. Frequency of occurrence of targeted swearwords (in Chinese and in Pinyin)

Swearword	Frequency	No. of authors	Swearword	Frequency	No. of authors
他妈的 tāmāde	454	200	你妈的 nǐmāde	72	41
逼格 bīgé	407	15	二逼 èrbī	56	43
装逼 zhuāngbī	366	17	草泥马 cǎonímǎ	50	42
特么(的) tème(de)	243	126	傻X shǎbī/shǎchā	25	24
我操 wǒcāo	213	199	我草 wǒcǎo	21	21
我靠 wǒkào	197	194	装B zhuāngbī	16	5
尼玛 nímǎ	182	98	装X zhuāngbī/ zhuāngchā	8	5
卧槽 wòcáo	180	164	B格 bīgé	7	6
我擦 wǒcā	159	152	煞笔 shābǐ	7	7
TM(TMD)	130	85	装13 zhuāngshísān	6	5
逗比 dòubǐ	123	14	我 ⁺⁺ wǒcǎo	4	4
你妹 nǐmèi	119	75	low逼 lōubī	2	2
撕逼 sībī	114	97	X你妈 cǎonímǎ	1	1

Appendix 2. Abbreviations used in the glosses of sentences (adopted from Li and Thompson 1989)

- ASP aspect marker
P possessive marker
Q question marker
CL classifier
SFP sentence final particle
DE a structural particle in Mandarin Chinese used for modifying nouns
LE a suffix in Mandarin Chinese to express perfectivity
ZHE a durative aspect marker in Mandarin Chinese to signal the ongoing nature of an event

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