

Cultural and Political Trend in China by Analysing its Words of the Year from 2013 to 2014

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This article reviews the “Words of the Year” in China in 2013 and 2014. It finds that government policy is the driving force behind the official list of newly coined words. Yet popular consciousness and topical events emerge as new words that express the mood of the ordinary people.

Ключевые слова: cultural, discourse, lexicon, political, mass media, newly coined words, tolerance

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Words of the Year have been attracting more and more attention in recent years, they increasingly serve as important indicators of cultural trends in various public spheres in today's dynamic society. Public feelings, public expectancy and state conditions may be evidenced and examined in these indicators. In China the government plays a prominent role in guiding cultural/political trends and shaping national mentality by strong control of all mass media. The analysis of China's Words of the Year from 2013 to 2014 should exemplify how the cultural/language trends in China are formulated by mixed and sometimes even confronting forces of both its people and its government.

The top three words of the Year 2013 in China determined by official media are as follows: Chinese Dream, guangpan and daobi.

Chinese Dream:

Before Chinese President Xi Jinping came to power in 2013, there was a huge difference between the image of China among its own population and abroad. Chinese themselves regarded China as an undeveloped country with little influence abroad while the international community thought China was already a giant power and perhaps only second to USA.

In November 2012 Xi Jinping, who then was the General Secretary of the Communist Party of China, first coined “Chinese Dream” in a speech at the National Museum of China. Since then, use of the phrase has become widespread in official announcements and has become routine party lexicon as the embodiment of the political ideology of the leadership under Xi Jinping. According to the party's theoretical journal Qiushi, the Chinese Dream is about Chinese prosperity, collective effort, socialism and national glory. It is quite understandable for people to build easy links between “Chinese Dream” and “American Dream”, though they are said to be different by nature.

The concept of the “Chinese Dream” indicates China is ready and confident in its role as an emerging great global power. And it is ready to arouse broad interest in a multi-polar world order through comparison of the ideologies of world powers, and clarifying the distinction between them.

Guangpan(光盘):

Guangpan is pinyin for Chinese characters. Pinyin indicates the pronunciation and intonation of Chinese characters. It is quite common for Chinese language that the same character can mean quite different things. Guangpan in standard Chinese language means the disk as “guang(光)” is “smooth or/and bright” and “pan(盘)” is “plate” or anything that looks like a plate. But in this context it means to “empty the plate” because “guang” here can also be a verb which means “to empty”. Such usage was common practice in ancient Chinese language but now it had fallen out of favour.

Now we can analyze both from the linguistic and the cultural point of view though they are closely related.

Previously the Chinese authority took “zero tolerance” attitude to such coined words and there is no chance for such words to be honored as “Word of the Year”. The reason for this policy is obvious, newly coined words are heavily culturally loaded with the mood of the people. Any that appeared and were perceived as detrimental to China’s social harmony by the government were suppressed. But, the newly coined “guangpan” just happened to fall into the favor of the government’s advocacy, so it was allowed to flourish.

Firstly it needs to be clarified that in the context of “Word of the Year” “guangpan” originally meant “wrap it up” when eating in a restaurant and there was food left on the plates, then it acquired a broader sense through increasing popularity and now it can also mean to empty the plate when eating at home.

Traditionally thrift was a national virtue in China but in recent decades it has faced great challenges and threats. For example, until very recently in China it was possible to arouse a sense of superiority or nobility if in a restaurant one ordered a lot but only ate a little, and then left much of the food on the plates. On the contrary, if one had asked the waiter to “wrap up” one’s leftovers during this time, it would have been regarded as mean and stingy behaviour. Obviously this was a perverted mentality and a serious violation of traditional Chinese values.

Now the new social trend is to show good manners and high morality which means to ask the waiter to “wrap it up”, and those who still leave a lot of food on the plate can even be judged by the other guests. The acceptance of “wrap it up” indicates a new trend in consumption in China and opinion advocated by the government to restore traditional Chinese values, and tolerance of newly coined words that advance such government policies is but a small price to pay.

Daobi(倒逼):

Daobi is pinyin for a word derived from an economic term which means reversed transmission of the pressure for easing monetary mechanism . “Dao” means “reversed” while “bi” means “force”. In finance it is a fully-fledged term but as a Word of the Year it is totally new lexicon for the Chinese general public.

There is deep political background behind the scene. The rule of China was historically a bureaucratic system. The nation had been in deep crisis of serious corruption which could be highly detrimental to both the nation and the Party itself, long before Xi came to power. Since Xi took office, there is something like a revolution in official circles. The nation has been stormed by an anti-corruption movement which it had never experienced since the birth of the Republic in 1949. In 2013 high officials were imprisoned or investigated, including a former member of the Politburo, the highest leadership in China. There was wide speculation that the nation is expecting even more prominent figures to be targeted, which was verified by following events.

In this case Daobi means that ordinary people can force government officials to make just and unbiased decisions, and also officials of lower ranks can force those of higher ranks to do the same thing. President Xi Jinping and Premier Li Keqiang have mentioned Daobi many times in their speeches, which is really unusual in the whole history of China. Daobi indicates a new political trend in China which wins the hearts of people. By introducing the financial term “Daobi” into political discourse Xi is expected to make a historical breakthrough in the fight against corruption in China.

Top Three Words of the Year 2014 by official media follows the same model which are: Rule of law, Shilian, and Beijing APEC.

Rule of Law:

For decades the Party has been advocating rule of law instead of rule by man but with little effect. Xi's determination and strategy show great achievements and give the people much hope. Rule of Law can be considered to be a continuation of “Chinese Dream” and Daobi which indicates the continuity and consistency in Xi's politics and it's also evidence that the Xi administration has survived all the uncertainties, challenges and threats and is strengthening its power.

Shilian (失联):

Shilian is pinyin for a new shortened Chinese word which means “go missing”. It's quite understandable that the whole world felt so sad about the disappearance of Malaysia Airlines flight MH370. China was especially shocked because the majority of the people on board the aircraft were Chinese. So shilian as the number two word of the year indicates China as a country showing deep concern for events outside its territory that have a direct impact on its people. Yet there is something of the greater significance, as it also indicated that government authorities were showing more tolerance for newly coined words, which can also be interpreted as more tolerance for its people.

Beijing APEC:

As the number three word of the year indicates how the nation is showing more and more interest in international affairs. And it is more and more aware of its increasing influence on the international community.

However, are these “official” top three words of the year really what the people are using in their daily life? The answer may be both “Yes” and “No”. For the state and official media it is obviously yes, but for the ordinary people it is no; there are words much more popular and topical, some of which are:

Tuhao (土豪):

Tuhao is pinyin for a Chinese word which means a local tyrant. But according to the common sense such people as a class disappeared for good since the foundation of the People's Republic of China in 1949. And it is mentioned perhaps only in historical books. Yet it is almost at the same time both surprising and natural to everyone that since 2012 such a word swept the whole territory in China like a long standing storm. In the new context it originally meant nouveau riche who are from a very common background but quickly becomes very rich, yet lack sophisticated manners. Now it also applies to a much larger population, anyone who is not so poor and occasionally shows off wealth can be labeled as Tuhao by people around them as it indicates their pursuit and longing for wealth.

Behind the scene it indicates that the Chinese are now taking a rather loose attitude towards the class issue, which was a very serious matter before the economic reform in China since 1970's. It should be noted that during the Cultural Revolution if you were labeled as Tuhao that for sure meant you would end your life in a prison or a labor camp.

Diaosi (屌丝)

“Diaosi” is pinyin for a coined word which means young men with humble birth, ordinary outlook who lives a poor life without any chance for a better future. It covers a large population as more and more young men are left with little choice under the prevailing economic conditions of high housing price, high living standards, while earning a poor salary with little chance for promotion in their chosen vocation. Diaosi indicates a serious social problem that is affecting large sections of ordinary young people in China who have no way out of their poor situation

Chinese Dama

Chinese Dama is a new term in China that has won international fame, it refers to a group of middle-aged Chinese women who rushed to purchase gold as an investment in the 2013 when the gold price plunged greatly, especially in April and October. Due to the unpredictability in the global gold market, the Chinese Dama’s blind investments in gold may risk a lot in a market that is constantly rising and falling. The Wall Street Journal quoted Dama directly and made it a new term for this specific group of people, who “panic purchase” things, and it may also refer to the “rush to purchase” phenomenon. And Dama also got their fame by bringing square dancing every corner in this world and even in places like the Red Square in Moscow and Louvre Museum. Behind the scene it shows the increasing confidence of Dama as previously they belonged to the very modest and very shy type of people. Yet they still lack of some basic elements. Still, Dama is yet another example of a newly coined word of the people creeping into the Chinese lexicon.

So, we can see that the trend from the Words of the Year in 2013 and 2014 in China shows the government is taking an upper hand in shaping public opinion by strong control of mass media. The tendency is strengthening as politics takes priority with the government advocating a positive image among the ordinary people. The rise of newly coined words by the people are selectively promoted by the government when they match the government policy, yet the voice of the ordinary people still finds its way into the new lexicon.

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Статья рассматривает «Слова года» в Китае за 2013-2014 года. Поясняется, что правительственная политика направлена на формирование официального списка неологизмов. Кроме того, общественное сознание и ключевые события находят отражение в новых словах, выражающих настроение обычного населения.

Ключевые слова: Культура, дискурс, лексический состав, политика, СМИ, неологизмы, толерантность.

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