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# The top 100 Chinese loanwords in English today

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Can one recognise the Chinese words used in English?

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## Introduction

On February 17, 2018, the China International Publishing Group (CIPG), an organization under the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) Central Committee, released a report on the most recognized Chinese words in the English-speaking world. The data for ‘A report on the awareness of Chinese discourse overseas’ (中国话语海外认知度调研报告) were obtained from two resources, i.e. (1) a number of articles selected from 50 mainstream media, and (2) questionnaires distributed in eight English-speaking countries, including the US, the UK, Australia, the Philippines, South Africa, Canada, Singapore, and India. It should be noted that the report only investigates the usage and understanding of Chinese words in their Pinyin forms (China Foreign Languages Publishing Administration, 2018).<sup>1</sup>

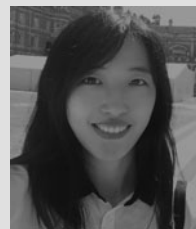
*Shaolin* ‘a style or school of Chinese martial arts’ tops the list, followed by *yinyang* ‘two opposite elements in Chinese philosophy’ and *yuan* ‘a Chinese unit of currency’. The rest of the top ten words in their Pinyin forms are: *gugong*, *nihao*, *wushu*, *qi*, *qigong*, *renminbi*, and *majiang*. Besides the ranking, the report also reveals some interesting facts about Chinese borrowings.

Borrowing is the process by which a language takes new linguistic materials from another language (Durkin, 2009: 132). The term *borrowing* can also be used to refer to the linguistic products of language contact. The language contact between Chinese and English has existed for a long time and the Chinese variety of English is an emerging field, with a number of studies having been conducted over the past several decades (e.g. Chan & Kwok, 1985; Yong & Campbell, 1995; Xu, 2010; Eaves, 2011; Bolton & Graddol, 2012; Fang, 2017). On the other hand, a limited number of Chinese borrowed words are

widely recognized by English speakers. Considering this, the present study looks up the 100 words on the so-called ‘most recognized wordlist’ in the *Oxford English Dictionary Online* (henceforth *OED Online*), the most authoritative and comprehensive dictionary of the English language.<sup>2</sup> The inclusion of a word in the *OED Online* can be regarded as having acceptance in the English lexicon, but not all the Chinese words on the list have been included in the *OED Online* yet. For those words that have already entered the *OED Online*, their headwords are not always in their Pinyin forms. In a few cases, other two dictionaries, namely the *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* and *Oxford Dictionary*, are also consulted. Based on these lexicographical data, in this study I investigate different aspects of Chinese borrowings reflected by the top 100 wordlist, including their variant types, naturalization approaches, and semantic distributions.

## Types of borrowing

Scholars distinguish types of borrowings differently. Fischer (2003) divides borrowings into



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three types, i.e. morphological, semantic, and socio-linguistic. Katamba's textbook (2004) recognizes two kinds of lexical borrowing, i.e. loanwords and loanshifts. Haugen suggests that loanshifts include 'loan translations' and 'semantic loans' (1950: 215). This study follows the typology and terminology employed by Haugen (1950) and Durkin (2009), and makes the following four divisions of lexical borrowing, i.e. (1) loanword, (2) loan translation, (3) semantic loan, and (4) loan-blend.

Nearly half of the words on the list have been included in the *OED*'s entries or sub-entries, and a large proportion of them are loanwords, naturalized by Pinyin and other romanization systems. It is noteworthy that two recent loans, namely *hukou* 'an official document certifying residence' and *daigou* 'a person outside China who buys consumer goods on behalf of people living in China', though they do not appear in the *OED Online*, have been included in *Oxford Dictionaries Online*.

Other types of lexical borrowing also contribute several words to the list, such as *Middle Kingdom*, *Spring Festival*, *firepot*, *silk road* for loan translations and *dragon*, *trigram*, *cadre* for semantic loans. Both types use existing English words to express the Chinese objects or concepts rather than transliterating the original Chinese expressions. In some cases, the ethnic tag 'Chinese' is added to indicate their Chinese origin as in *Chinese New Year*, *Chinese lantern*, and *Chinese wall*.<sup>3</sup>

Several long-established words and phrases are still used today like *acupuncture*, *Empress of Heaven*, and *Terracotta Warriors*, which give a veiled hint that the objects or concepts originally came from China. *Tofu*, now a household word in English, is an indirect borrowing via Japanese and reads *tōfu* (とうふ) in Japanese. There is only a slim chance that *tofu* will be superseded by its Pinyin form, *doufu*.

On the other hand, not all the items listed in the top 100 are Chinese-specific things, such as *peace*, *anti-corruption*, *party*, *harmony*, *innovation*, and *mushroom*. One reason for ranking them in the list is that they appear so frequently in the China-related news, especially in the past several years. For example, *online shopping* (*wanggou* 网购) and *high-speed rail* (*gaotie* 高铁), which are among China's 'Four New Great Inventions', were not invented by the Chinese at all.

## Romanization of Chinese words

As I have already mentioned, the report only reveals which Pinyin words are most recognized in the English-speaking world. As a result, we

cannot find those long-established Chinese loans that entered the English language a long time before the Pinyin system was created, such as *tea*, *chopstick*, *ketchup*, and *loquat*. Neither can we find many popular loanwords from Chinese dialects other than Mandarin, especially those from Cantonese including *bok choy*, *dim sum*, *hoisin*, *Hong Kong*, *wok*, and so on.

Considering the exclusion of the aforementioned Chinese loanwords, much of the top 100 list is made up of words that many English speakers might not recognize. To test this, the words on the list were looked up in the *OED Online*. Only 15 out of the top 100 have been included in the *OED Online* with their Pinyin forms as the headword. The 15 items are as follows:

*Shaolin*, *yin-yang*, *yuan*, *wushu*, *qi*, *qigong*, *renminbi*, *Pinyin*, *hongbao*, *guanxi*, *wuxia*, *jiaozi*, *putonghua*, *ganbei*, *ganbu*.

Wade-Giles was the prevalent romanization system of Chinese before Pinyin and has been gradually replaced by the latter since the 1950s. Though the Pinyin forms of several words are increasingly used in the English world, their Wade-Giles spellings are still adopted as the headword in the *OED Online*. Here are the seven items that are ranked in the top 100 list in their Wade-Giles forms:

*hutung*, *Kung-fu*, *T'ai Chi*, *tao*, *Kuan*, *yuan hsiao*, and *man t'ou*.

The romanization of headwords of Chinese origin in the *OED Online* is quite inconsistent since editing this large-scale dictionary is such a long-term project. Besides the words romanized by the Pinyin and Wade-Giles systems, *mah-jong*, *fum*, *Confucianism* 'from *Confucius*', and *goji* on the list exemplify unusual naturalization of their spellings.

## Duplication of borrowing

Different types of borrowing and variant spellings both cause some duplicated forms to express the same thing. Table 1 illustrates a collection of doublets which appear as headwords in the mainstream dictionaries. Words only found in quotations are not included.

Besides the examples listed in Table 1, several proper names also have different variants in English, though dictionaries like the *OED Online* normally avoid including these encyclopaedic entries. In Chinese, *ru* (儒, lit. 'soft') is the word

**Table 1: Duplications of words in the list of the 100 most recognized Chinese words**

Loanword (Pinyin spelling)	Loanword (non-Pinyin spelling)	Loan translation (literal)	Loan translation (loose)	Semantic loan	Indirect borrowing	Ethnic tag
wushu			martial art			
hongbao	ang pow	red packet	red envelope, lucky money			
	fum, fung-hwang, fêng huang			phoenix	ho-ho	
jiaozi					gyoza	
			bean curd		tofu	
ba gua				trigram		
	ang moh, kwai-lo, gweilo		foreign devil			
			Great Wall			Chinese Wall
	yuan hsiao		Lantern Festival		Bon	
		Middle Kingdom			China	
Huang He	Huang Ho	Yellow River				
		Spring Festival				Chinese New Year
		firepot	hotpot			
		silk road	silk route			
ganbu				cadre		

used to name the doctrine of the ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius, but *Ruism* is not as commonly used as *Confucianism* in the English-speaking world. Obviously, *Confucianism* is named after its founder, *Confucius*, which is markedly different from the present Pinyin form *Kongzi* (孔子) or *Kongfuzi* (孔夫子). According to the etymological note on *Confucian* in the *OED Online*, the Jesuit missionaries gave birth to the word *Confucius*:

*Confucius* is Latinized from the Chinese *K'ung Fū tsze*, meaning 'K'ung the (our, your) Master (or Philosopher)', *K'ung* being the surname of the great Chinese sage. A translation of three of the Chinese Classics, by four of the Roman Catholic missionaries, was published at Paris in 1687, under the title, *Confucius Sinarum Philosophus, sive Scientia Sinensis Latine exposita*. (Prof. J. Legge.)

The morpheme *zi* (子) in *Kongzi* (孔子), meaning 'master', is commonly used in a respectful term of address to a man. Besides *Kongzi*, there are several other *Zi*'s in ancient China, such as *Mengzi* (孟子), another great Confucian sage; *Laozi* (老子), the founder of Taoism and the author of *Tao Te Ching*; and *Sun Zi* (孙子), the author of *The Art of War*. These four *Zi*'s are all listed in the top 100 most recognized Chinese Pinyin-spelt words used in English. However, the Pinyin forms of the four *Zi*'s are less frequently used than other variants, which are well established in the English lexicon. To test this, here I conduct an experiment by comparing the frequencies of all variant forms in the Google Ngram Viewer (see Figures 1–4). According to the Google Corpus, the Latinised *Confucius* has been the dominant form throughout the past two centuries. In a similar vein, *Mencius*



Figure 1. Ngram of Kongzi variants

is far more prevalent than other variants; it was not until the 1990s that the Pinyin form *Lao Zi* or *Laozi* exceeded *Lao-tzu*, which was transcribed by the Wade-Giles system. In comparison, *Sun Tzu*, also a Wade-Giles transcription, is still the more common spelling than *Sun Zi* and his original name *Sun Wu*.

### Semantic fields

The report divides the 100 Chinese words into 11 subject categories (see Table 2). According to the semantic distribution shown in the table, a large proportion of the words on the list are related to traditional Chinese objects or concepts. For example, among the top 20, six are terms of Chinese martial arts, including *Shaolin*, *wushu*, *qigong*, *gongfu*, *taiji*, and *shifu*. Names for the traditional Chinese festivals and relevant things also contribute several terms to the list, such as *Qingming*, *Chongyang*, *Yuanxiao*, *Chunjie*, *Zhongqiu*, *hongbao*, *chunjie*, *chunyun*, and *denglong*. Food terms without doubt perform an important role among all selected

candidates on the list, from the well-known *jiaozi*, *doufu*, *huoguo*, *gouqi*, *mantou*, to a longer name of a dish like *gobao jiding*.

In Chinese culture, there is no clear boundary between religious and philosophical systems, so that several lexical items can fall into either the ‘Religion’ or ‘Philosophy’ category. The listed ancient Chinese philosophers have been discussed above, whose names are more commonly naturalized by non-Pinyin systems. Other words in this semantic category are religio-philosophical concepts like *yin-yang*, *qi*, *dao*, and *bagua* (or eight trigrams).

In terms of Chinese culture, merging a Chinese mythical creature into the English lexicon and Western culture is not easy to execute. The easiest way is to use an existing English word to name it, for example, *dragon* and *phoenix*. In Chinese and East Asian culture, a dragon is a propitious imaginary animal. In the past, a dragon was used as an imperial symbol of Chinese emperors. In the present day, the common parental expectation is to ‘hope the child to become a dragon/phoenix’ (望子成



Figure 2. Ngram of Mengzi variants

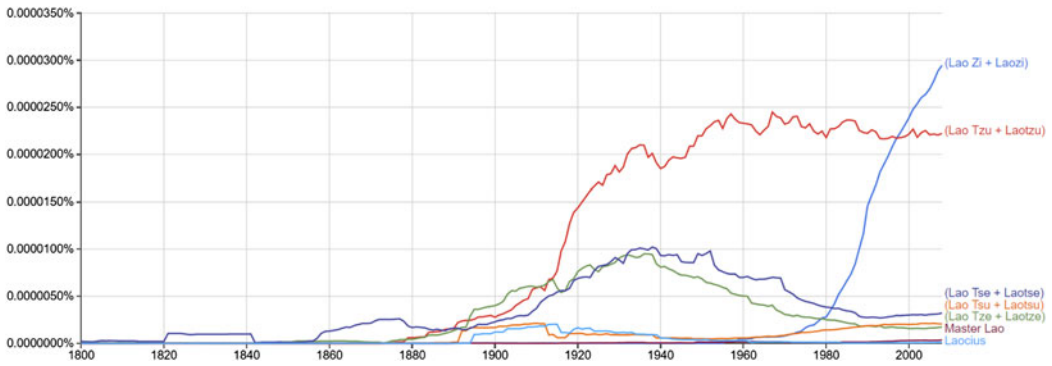


Figure 3. Ngram of *Laozi* variants

龙/望女成凤), an idiomatic Chinese expression. During the late half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, four Asian regions, namely South Korea, Singapore, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, were collectively called *Four Little Dragons* (四小龙) after their rapid industrial and economic growth. However, in Western culture a dragon is an evil monster. In many fairy tales, the dragon plays the part of the villain and is doomed to be killed by a prince or a knight. The story of Saint George slaying a dragon is now a legend, but the image of a dragon often appears when people in various countries celebrate Saint George's Day. *Like a dragon* can also be a figurative description of a 'fierce or violent person'. A popular British TV show is known as 'Dragons' Den', in which entrepreneurs pitch their business ideas to five potential investors, who are referred to as *dragons*. Considering the difference, the initials *Chinese* and *East Asian* are sometimes added before *dragon* when referring to the Chinese-specific creature. Dictionaries normally do not give a separate definition for the *Chinese dragon*, with one exception. The *Unabridged Merriam-Webster's Dictionary*

defines dragon as 'a beneficent supernatural creature in Chinese mythology connected with rain and floods.' Under one definition in the online *Oxford Dictionaries* we can find 'In European tradition the dragon is typically fire-breathing and tends to symbolize chaos or evil, whereas in East Asia it is usually a beneficent symbol of fertility, associated with water and the heavens.' Alternatively, *long* (龙), meaning 'dragon' in Chinese, is used in a few cases, though the headword for *long* in the *Unabridged Merriam-Webster* is in its Wade-Giles romanization *lung*.

In a similar vein, *phoenix* and several other romanized forms from Chinese are alternatively used to name a bird-like supernatural creature. Since most Chinese words average out at two characters in length, the Chinese phoenix is termed *feng huang* (凤凰) – *feng* for 'male phoenix' and *huang* for 'female phoenix'. Other variants include *fēng huang*, *fum hwang*, *fum hoam*, and *fung-hwang* (see also Table 2). The gender distinction between *feng* and *huang* does not apply when the former is paired with *long* 'dragon' and connotes



Figure 4. Ngram of *Sunzi* variants

**Table 2: Semantic categorization of the top 100 most recognized Chinese words**

Semantic fields	Count	Items
Wushu & Kungfu	7	<i>Shaolin, wushu, qigong, gongfu, taiji, shifu, wuxia</i>
Food	8	<i>jiaozi, mogu, doufu, huoguo, gouqi, mantou, jianbing, gongbao jiding</i>
Festivals & Customs	8	<i>Qingming, Chongyang, chunlian, Yuanxiao, Duanwu, Chunjie, Zhongqiu, denglong</i>
Chinese Culture	10	<i>majiang, long, feng, mazu, zhonghua, zhongguo, huaxia, cuju, maobi, zhenjiu</i>
Religion & Philosophy	10	<i>yin-yang, qi, Laozi, dao, bagua, Kongzi, Sunzi, Ru, Mengzi, zhongyong</i>
Natural & Cultural Attractions	10	<i>Gugong, hutong, Changjiang, Tiantan, Tiananmen, Changcheng, xionghou, Huanghe, jinsihou, bingmayong</i>
Governmental Institutions & Political Relationship	9	<i>hukou, guan, fantan, fanfu, gongchandang, lianghui, dang, ganbu, gongan</i>
Social Relationship & Social Governance	5	<i>hongbao, guanxi, maidan, laowai, ganbei</i>
Political Discourse	11	<i>heping, zhongguomeng, hexie, yidai yilu, zhen shi qin cheng, shisan wu, zhongguo gushi, mingyun gongtongti, sichou zhilu, zhongguo daolu, zhongguo shengyin</i>
Economics & Technology	15	<i>yuan, renminbi, dama, Chang'e, Yanghang, chunyun, chuanguangxin, tuhao, Wukong, daigou, zhifubao, zhongguo zhizao, xiaokang, wanggou, gaotie</i>
Common Expressions	7	<i>nihao, pinyin, xiexie, putonghua, mafan, dia, duibuqi</i>

femininity. As was mentioned above, in the past, *long* was used as the symbol of the Chinese emperor; *feng* represented their empresses. Thus, *feng* (also *fum*, *fung*) can appear alone without gender reference. Another variation of the Chinese phoenix is *ho-ho*, or more fully, *ho-ho bird*. Though the *OED Online* only mentions that *ho-ho* originates from Chinese, it may be an indirect borrowing via Japanese. The Japanese word for 'phoenix' borrows the Chinese characters but reads *hō-ō* (ほうおう), which sounds very similar to *ho-ho*.

On the list of the top 100 recognized Chinese Pinyin words, two legendary names, *Wukong* and *Chang'e*, are particularly noticeable since they are not included in the 'Chinese Culture' category but in the 'Economics & Technology' category instead. As an unwritten tradition in astronautics, spaceflight programs and crafts prefer to use mythological names such as *Apollo*, *Helios*, and *Ulysses*. China's Dark Matter Particle Explorer (DAMPE), launched in 2015, has the nickname '*Wukong*.' *Wukong* (悟空), also known as the *Monkey King*, is the main character in a great

classical novel, *Journey to the West* (西游记). Literally, *wu* means 'to understand' while *kong* refers to 'space', and thus the *Wukong* explorer carried out the mission of understanding space. Similarly, the ongoing Chinese Lunar Exploration Program (CLEP) since 2003 is named after the Chinese goddess of the moon, *Chang'e* (嫦娥), who is believed to reside on the moon. In legend, *Chang'e* is accompanied by a rabbit called *yutu* (玉兔, lit. 'jade rabbit'). In reality, the *Yutu* lunar rover landed on the moon with the *Chang'e* 3 lander in 2013.

Besides aeronautics, China also achieves significant breakthroughs in areas of everyday consumer products, public transport services and electronic payment platforms. Among all the innovations, four stand out and are collectively called the 'Four New Great Inventions' (新四大发明), including *high-speed rail* (高铁), *online shopping* (网购), *Alipay* (支付宝), and *dockless shared bicycles* (共享单车), and three of them are on the top 100 most recognized wordlist. However, according to the BBC's Reality Check verdict, 'China did not invent any of these technologies – but it has led

the way in their widescale implementation.’ (Jakhar, 2018). Although the so-called ‘Four New Great Inventions’ were not invented in China, they were reinforced by China’s cutting-edge technologies. People all over the globe are using these new Chinese-developed modernizations, no matter whether they are aware of it or not.

In a recent College English Test Band-6 (CET-6), a nationwide college-level English exam, students were asked to translate *gaotie* (高铁, lit. ‘high iron’), the Chinese word for *high-speed rail*, into English. *High-speed rail* or *high-speed train* is without doubt a standard answer. But for students who do not have a high level of proficiency in English, some Chinglish-like expressions are created, such as *tall subway*, *high way*, and even *high Fe* (because *Fe* is the symbol of the chemical element iron). After the test, how to express *gaotie* in English also triggered a heated discussion on the Internet. According to the *Guidelines for the Use of English in Public Service Areas* edited by the Standardization Administration of the People’s Republic of China (2017), the official English expression for *gaotie* is *G-series high-speed train*, as opposed to another type of Chinese rail transport *D-series high-speed train (dongche 动车)*. Interestingly, if the CET-6 examinees directly write the transliteration of the Chinese Pinyin form as *gaotie*, they lose marks in exams. This shows that *gaotie* has not been adopted by English like its Japanese counterpart *Shinkansen*. As the world’s first high-speed rail, *Shinkansen* (新幹線), also nicknamed *bullet train* because of its appearance and speed, has already been included in the *OED Online*. Another Japan-made train, *Azuma* (東), meaning ‘east’ in Japanese, has been operated by Virgin Trains East Coast (now LNER) since October 2017 and shortens the travel time between London and Edinburgh to four hours. Probably in the near future, *gaotie* will make its way to English like *Shinkansen* and *Azuma*, with more exports to different countries and more trains carrying the Chinese brand name *gaotie*.

## Concluding remarks

Although the top 100 list covers a representative sample of the Chinese words used in the English-speaking world, 100 is a fairly small sample size. Besides, the list only takes account of the usage of Chinese Pinyin forms, so the words that spread to the West before the Pinyin system was created are not included. As a result, the list does not contain many examples of well-established Chinese loanwords. On the positive side, the top

100 list covers a range of semantic categories of Chinese-specific things and concepts. These 100 Chinese words, to some extent, do reflect the acceptance of Chinese borrowing by English speakers and the English lexicon, with nearly half of them being included in the *OED Online* through different borrowing processes. Although not all the words on the list are frequently used in their Pinyin forms, in the foreseeable future, the Pinyin spelling may be more popular and more recognizable to English users. Furthermore, words on this list may provide a benchmark for dictionary editors when they are looking for lexical contributions from Chinese.

## Notes

- 1 The process of obtaining the top 100 words was as follows: firstly, the Pinyin forms of about 300 Chinese words were counted in 50 English-language media; then, the most frequently used 150 words were included in questionnaires which were circulated to over 1200 well-educated English speakers in the aforementioned eight countries; and the final list consists of the top 100 Chinese words used in English.
- 2 The data of the present study are extracted from the online version of the *OED Third Edition*, which is updated every three months.
- 3 The more common English name for *Chinese wall* should be the *Great Wall*.

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