

# Comparison between English Loanwords in Mandarin Chinese and Chinese Loanwords in English

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**Abstract**—Language is an organ in constant evolution and as such a diachronic approach should be taken when analyzing how speakers of a given languages use it in their everyday life. English and Chinese Mandarin have become two of the most spoken languages in the world and as such some sort of linguistic influence on one another must be expected to an extent. This paper should be taken as an introductory chapter of a very complex socio-linguistics topic that deserves to be researched in-depth to be fully understood. This paper highlights the most common English loanwords in modern Chinese and vice versa, briefly giving a summary on why two foreign languages so far apart has becoming interlacing and blending in the everyday speech.

**Index Terms**—Borrowed language, Chinese, English, linguistics, loanword, socio-linguistics.

## I. INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed how some of the words you use in your everyday life are somewhat odd and out of place? In the English language there are words like *rendezvous*, *opera*, *camouflage*, *balaclava* and many more that sound linguistically distant to English itself, but that are nonetheless used without thinking too much about them. This process is what linguists call language borrowing, a process where a word or phrase is borrowed from a language to another and becomes part of the latter; such words are called loanwords. Such words in the English language and the Chinese language, specifically Chinese Mandarin will be the main focus of the present research, and the different ways these two very linguistically distant languages have influenced each other in recent years. Using a diachronic approach to explain how the two languages have become interlaced, a sample of a few major cases of language borrowing in both of the language will be analyzed, focusing though on words that are mainly used in present times.

To gather data, beyond the existing literature on the topic, mainstream social media platforms of both English and Chinese have also been used, namely Twitter, WeChat, Weibo, Facebook and Urban Dictionary, as well as renowned multiple dictionaries, such as The Oxford English Dictionary and the Merriam-Webster, and the Contemporary Chinese Dictionary (现代汉语词典 - xiandai hanyu cidian). Other online resources have been used, mainly opensource etymology dictionaries for comparison of data, and word use statistics from Google Analytics.

The main purpose of this paper is to analyze those words that are still used in both modern English and modern Chinese,

so previous iterations will be mentioned only and therefore not analyzed. Finally, this study will try to understand this process of language borrowing on a less linguistics-only perspective but more on a cultural standpoint, making sure to investigate how cultures of both sides have been affected by this process, taking a sociolinguistics approach to the matter.

This paper is intended for whom has a knowledge of Chinese language or is familiar enough with it; nevertheless, footnotes on certain aspect of the Chinese culture and the romanization for all the characters in this research will be provided.

## II. LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF LANGUAGE BORROWING

Borrowed language and loanwords, are the two main linguistic terms that will play a very important role in this research. Borrowed language, or *language borrowing* is the phenomenon by which a word from one language is adapted for use in another [1], and the product of such process is a *loanword*. A loanword must not be mistaken for a foreign word that might be in use in a certain language, this distinction is very important, as loanwords and foreign words are two distinct separate categories of words.

### A. The Difference between Foreign Words and Loanwords

Foreign words are words that majority of a language speakers consider not to be part of their language, however a foreign word may be used by a small percentage of the population in their daily life. An example of these, are online gamers of non-English speaking countries who use English words blended in their mothertongue on a regular basis, within the range of their online community or with people who use the same lexicon [2].

Loanwords, in contrast are words coming from a foreign language that are fully blended in the other language. Loanwords are categorized by the way they become part of the receiving language as shown in Fig. 1, and each category presents different linguistic features according to the process of word-creation they have been subjected to. A clear example of loanword is the word *kayak* [3], which originated in the Eskimo language and have become part of the English language; the popular traveling agency company Kayak uses the word as well. This is just a small sample of how language borrowing does to language; more of this in chapter 3 and 4.

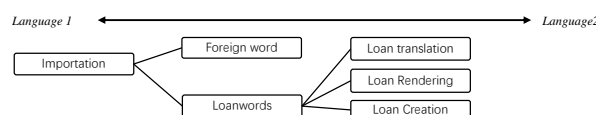


Fig. 1. Language borrowing process.

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### B. Loan Translation

There are different categories of loanwords. Loan translation is one of these categories. Loan translation refers to those words or phrases in a given language that have been literally translated from another one using pre-existent words to then combine them into a new one. The Italian word for skyscraper *grattaciello*, is a loanword coming directly from English. Both words follow the same linguistic process, *noun* + (*infinite verb* + *verb modifier* = *verbal noun*), the only difference being in Italian the order is flipped (*infinite verb* + *verb modifier* = *verbal noun*) + *noun*.

### C. Loan Rendering

Loan rendering are those loanwords that are partially composed by a literal translation of a foreign word plus a morphological affix belonging to the receiving language already. The Spanish word *chinero* (cupboard) comes from the word china<sup>1</sup>, meaning porcelain, is an example of this process; *foreign* + *local word modifier*.

### D. Loan Creation

When a language does not possess a specific term with a specific foreign word, a brand new word might be created to fill the gap, this process is known as Loan Creation. The English word brandy is a loan creation to fill the absence of a translation for the french word cognac[4]. Brandy and cognac do not have any linguistic similarity but the semantic meaning of the two words; as shown in Figure 2., the word brandy seems to come from brandy-wine, itself originated from brandewijn, a Dutch word meaning burnt wine. During the process of borrowing, the Dutch word brande has been phonetically modified to brandy, while wine has been translated literally. Over the year the second part of the word have dropped in favor of only using *brandy* instead.

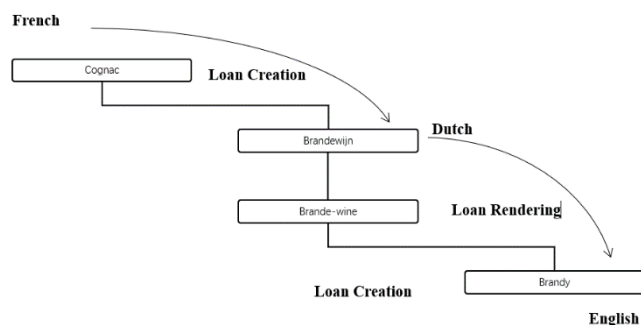


Fig. 2. Representation of the process of language borrowing from Cognac to Brandy.

## III. ENGLISH LOANWORDS IN CHINESE

The English language have become widely accessible everywhere in the world, therefore languages from every side of the globe have been borrowing from English on a certain extent; it's the case of Chinese Mandarin as well. English has received such a global attention in the last century that it is undeniable that it became part of the universally understood languages in the world. Not only that, history thought us that in the 19<sup>th</sup> century British colonialism brought more than a mere dominance over territories, but also culture and the

English language [5]. World War I and II brought many countries closer to America and when the fights had stopped countries from all around the globe started adopting certain Americanism in their culture and language. Another important fact to consider is of course that of globalization and the indisputable American monopoly on certain international trades and economies that had led people to a more widespread use of English everywhere in the world. The main purpose of this paper though, is to give an overall few of the latest influences English has had on modern Chinese, focusing mainly on those aspects of the everyday language that are in use today.

### A. Food and Drinks

Many foreign products are indeed untranslatable in Chinese; therefore, it is very likely to have loanwords when it comes to food. A few examples are 冰淇淋 (bingqilin), ice cream, literally frozen “*qilin*” a phonetic transliteration of cream; 吐司 (tusi), toast; 三明治 (sanmingzhi), sandwich; 披萨 (pisa), pizza, originally an Italian word but taken from English; 巧克力 (qiaokeli), Chocolate; 咖啡 (kafei), coffee; 可乐 (kele) cola and 可口可乐 (kekoukele) Coca-Cola; 起司 (qisi)/芝士 (zhishi) cheese. Most of these words, with the exception of 可口可乐 are mere transliteration of English words; 可口可乐 is a clever yet quite simple word play on the word *coca* 可口; 可口 mean tasty, delicious so the complete translation of Coca-Cola mean delicious cola.

### B. Transportation

In transportation there are also a few noticeable loanwords; such 摩托车 (motuoche), motorbike, 巴士 (bashi) bus, 速可达 (sukeda), scooter. Bus and scooter are transliteration, while motorbike is an example of loan rendering (see chapter 2). The morpheme *motor* is translated phonetically and becomes 摩托 (motuo), while the suffix *bike* instead of being translated phonetically gets substituted by the Chinese suffix 车 (che) that means vehicle, which specifies that a 摩托, a motor, is a type of vehicle. It is worth noting that as for 2021, the most common way of calling a scooter is 电瓶车 (dianpingche) which originally referred to any sort of electric vehicle, but has become a synonym of scooter.

### C. Clothing

For what matters clothes, there are many clothing items that uses foreign words, but the most noticeable are for sure 迷你裙 (mini qun), miniskirt; 比基尼 (bijini), bikini; T恤 (xu), T-shirt. In the case of miniskirt, the process involved is that of loan rendering, mini gets phonetically rewritten using Chinese characters to then add the character for skirt 群 (qun), acting as a morpheme. The word bikini does not carry any meaning, it's just a combination of Chinese characters that carry a similar phonological pronunciation; while T-shirt, retains the capital T and adds 恤 (xu), which sound similar to shirt. Originally 体恤衫 (tixushan) was used to translate the word T-shirt, with 体恤 being a phonetic transliteration and 衫 (shan) meaning garment, but with time it evolved into the

<sup>1</sup> Itself being an English loanword coming from the Chinese words 晋 (jin) or 秦 (qin).

simpler T恤.

#### D. Science

In the field of science, there are many examples of loanwords as well. Most notably 拓扑 (tuopu), topology; 逻辑 (luoji), logic; 趴/巴仙 (pa/baxian), percent; 泵 (beng), pump; 阀 (fa), valve; 法兰 (falan), flange; 夸克 (kuake), quark; 米 (mi), meter; 盎司 (angsi), ounce; 磅 (bang), pound; 吨 (dun), ton; 淋巴 (linba), lymph; 休克 (xiuke), shock; 维他命 (weitameng), vitamin; 基因 (jiyin), gene; as well as most chemical elements (that for the sake of briefness are not going to be mentioned). Most of the words in this category are indeed loan translations.

#### E. Art and Music

In the field of arts and music as well, most words are translated using the process of loan translation. Here a few examples: 马赛克 (masaike), Mosaic; 麦克风 (maikefeng), microphone; 萨克斯风 (sakesifeng), saxophone; 吉他 (jita), guitar; 咪 (mi), mic etc.

#### F. Other Instances

Without going too far from the main purpose of this paper, here another few examples of other English loanwords in Chinese just for reference to help us understand the extent of the usage of English words in modern Chinese. 卡 (ka), card; 杯葛 (beige), boycott; 幽浮 (youfu), UFO; 爹地 (diedi), daddy; 妈咪 (mami), mummy; 黑客 (heike), hacker; 拜拜 (baibai), bye-bye; 坦克 (tanke), tank; 声纳 (shengna), sonar; 马拉松 (malasong), marathon; 高尔夫球 (gaoerfuqiu), golf; 保龄球 (baolingqiu), bowling; 哈啰 (haluo), hello; 十卜 (shibo), support; 黑特 (heite), hate; 奈斯 (naisi), nice.

### IV. CHINESE LOANWORDS IN CHINESE

If someone was to ask a native speaker of English whether they think there are any words of Chinese origin in English, the answer might be “no”. In actuality, in the English language there is a surprisingly high number of loanwords coming from Chinese Mandarin, and also coming from Cantonese and other local Sino-languages as well. People from the Eastern side of the world have come flocking to the West for centuries, either for business, work or study [6]. Especially in the years after the Second World War, migration toward Europe and especially the United States of America were a common phenomenon [7]. Nowadays second and third generations of this migrants still carry the culture that their fathers and ancestors had brought along with them, creating a brew of different cultures within a certain society that enriches everyone who has the chance to learn about it. When migrants from China first moved to America and other countries, they have carried their language with them and being the number of migrants very large, it was of course a matter of time before language borrowing might have started happening. In today’s English there are so many words and saying that come from a culture that only 50 years ago was so far away from the West and Europe. As in previous chapters, this study is mainly only going to focus on specific loanwords

of Chinese Mandarin origin – therefore for the purpose of this paper those from dialects or other Sino-languages will be omitted – that are somewhat still used in modern English.

#### A. Chi

Chi, energy, coming from the Chinese word 气 (qi). This is mostly used in martial arts and fiction; it is a loan translation.

#### B. Chin chin

Chin Chin, a way of saying cheers or salute, now quite obsolete in English but still found in Indo-European language (*cin-cin* in Italian, *chin-chin* in Spanish), it is thought to be coming from the Chinese word 请 (qing), please. It is a loan creation, being the word 请 not used in this specific context, but might accompany a toast and to a non-Chinese speaker might sounds like *qing* means cheers.

#### C. Brainwash

The somewhat popular word *brainwash* is actually a loan render from Chinese 洗脑(xiniao); 洗 (xi), to wash, and 脑 (nao), mind, brain. It has been popularized during the Korean War when the term used by the Chinese was exposed to the American Army. Since then *brainwashing* has stuck and has become a part of the English language, and from there also transferred to other languages; e.g. *lavado de cerebro* in Spanish, *lavaggio del cervello* in Italian.

#### D. China

China, coming from 晋 (jin)/秦 (qin). Etymologists believe the word might have originated by the Persian *cin*, coming from either a loan translation of the name of the Jin Dynasty 晋 (jin), or the Qin Dynasty 秦 (qin). It is said Marco Polo has been the first one to import the term to Europe, then borrowed by other languages over time [8].

#### E. Fengshui

Feng Shui has become a very popular discipline in the western countries in the last few decades [9] and the word has also become part of the English lexicon. The word Fengshui come from Chinese 风水 (fengshui), literally air and water, referring to the harmony of balancing out surroundings to create positive energy. It is also called Chinese Geomancy, but the term Feng Shui is more widely used then the former. This is an example of complete language borrowing, having the word Feng Shui maintained both semantic and morphological characteristics (the official pinyin<sup>2</sup> of the word is also *fengshui*).

#### F. Foo Dog

Foo Dogs or Foo Lions are the characteristic stone lion guarding temple in China, at least in the English-speaking world! In Chinese stone lions are called – well – just that, 石狮子 (shishizi). The word *foo* seems to be loan translation based on the word 佛 (Fo), Buddha or the word 福 (fu), meaning good fortune, luck; It is not clear why the word *foo* have stuck in, nonetheless it has then had added the word dog at the end because stone lions where thought to be dogs in the West.

<sup>2</sup> Pinyin is the official Chinese romanization system of characters

### G. Gung-ho

Gung-ho, meaning zealous and hardworking, have become part of the English lexicon in 1930's as a butchered Americanization of 工合 (gonghe), the Chinese shortened word for Chinese Industrial Cooperation (CIC), 工业合作社 (gongyeheshe)[10], organizations established to promote industrial and economic development in China. Meaning-wise, the word was taken by the military to inspire soldiers to collaborate in harmony, just like the workers of the CIC.

"I was trying to build up the same sort of working spirit I had seen in China, where all the soldiers dedicated themselves to one idea and worked together to put that idea over. I told the boys about it again and again. I told them of the motto of the Chinese Cooperatives, Gung Ho. It means Work Together — Work in Harmony." [11] (Major Evans Carlson, 1943, United States Marine Corps on why he had chosen to use the word Gung-ho.)

Despite the noble intentions, the pronunciation of the word have been lost in the Americanization process, making it completely alien to speakers of Chinese when pronounced in English.

### H. Long Time no See

The American saying *long time no see* happens to not be American at all! The earliest appearance of the saying in print, have been in the Oxford English Dictionary that dates to 1901. Linguists believe the saying comes from either Chinese or from the English pidgin spoken by native Americans; what makes it more likely to be of Chinese origin, is the fact the in Chinese Mandarin there is such a saying, specifically 好久不见 (haojiu bujian), literally very + long time + no + meet.

### I. Tiger mom

The term tiger mom comes from Chinese Mandarin but not exactly from China; to be more precise not only from China. The first appearance of the term was in Battle Hymn of the Tiger Mother, by American author Amy Chua, of Chinese origins. Tiger mom refers to mothers who are very strict to their children, and are not afraid of resorting to psychological violence to push their children to "success". In 2014, Singapore television aired *Tiger Mum*, 虎妈来了 (huma laile, literally *Tiger mom is here* or *here comes the tiger mom*), a TV series on a very strict mother. The following year mainland China aired *Tiger Mom*, 虎妈猫爸 (huma maoba, *tiger mom and kitten dad*), another TV series where the main character is a very strict mother, in contrast to a very understanding father.

## V. FINDINGS

The present study aimed to gather information on loanwords used in English

### A. English loanwords in Mandarin Chinese

English loanwords in Mandarin Chinese, can be found in a plethora of instances, from food and drinks, to transportation, to clothing, to science, art and music. English loanwords are numerous and various in nature, being of different categories altogether, with new words being introduced extremely frequently. The most frequent type of loanwords found in this

study is transliteration, followed then by loan rendering, and finally by loan translation. This does not mean that there are not other instances of different types of loanwords, it only highlights the trend of loanword use in speakers of Chinese. English loanwords in Chinese appear to have developed as a result of the Americanization of the 1950's, including the export of American music, movies, books, art to the East; globalization and the opening of China of the 1980's and the consequential migration of workers towards the mainland, are two other impactful factors in the evolution of English loanwords in Chinese.

### B. Chinese Loanwords in English

Chinese loanwords in English are more frequent than what people think – for instance the phrase "long time no see" is very much rooted in American culture despite its very likely Chinese origin. Though despite being somewhat frequent, Chinese loanwords in English appear to be very specific, and rooted in culture, meaning that a particular cultural occurrence is directly linked to the birth and development of a specific loanword. While English loanwords are mainly transliteration of English words in Chinese integrated with the existing vocabulary, or substitutes of obsolete words, Chinese loanwords in English are very much new additions for a lack of words to convey very specific meanings. Fengshui did not exist in the west, so there was no need to have a word for such concept; tiger moms very just strict mothers; gung-ho's were just enthusiasts. Therefore, Chinese loanwords in English enrich the language to a cultural standpoint, giving access to native speakers to foreign concepts and meaning English did not have.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The assimilation of foreign words in both Chinese and English has had a great influence in both languages and cultures. Sharing part of a language is more than a linguistic process, it is also a matter of sharing identity and a whole culture. Language users do not realize how in their everyday life the speech used, and the language supposedly mastered, have both been influenced by "alien" agents. The English language itself is a conglomerate of different languages that have been fused together during history; this fusion also involved languages coming from as far as China. Migration, globalization, collaboration between China and the English-speaking countries have affected the English spoken today. The same process has happened in standard mandarin, where foreign elements coming from English have become the norm. Even on a greater extent, the scientific world that has been molded by Greek and Latin, now relies on English being the molding language of the Chinese scientific lexicon. These process of borrowing and assimilation have brought people from faraway places closer together and will keep on doing that as languages keep on evolving.

### CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

### AUTHOR CONTRIBUTIONS

The author conducted this research by himself, without

external help. All information and data were gathered and analyzed by the author.

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