

China Online: Netspeak and Wordplay Used by Over 700 Million Chinese Internet Users, by Veronique Michel. Tuttle Publishing, 2015. ISBN: 9780804844369

Veronique Michel, the author of *China Online: Netspeak and Wordplay Used by Over 700 Million Chinese Internet Users*, is a multilingual netizen who has worked in China and Japan for over 25 years. She therefore has an aptitude for using language to create bridges between peoples of divergent cultures. Her new book, *China Online*, showcases for English readers popular Internet sayings that reflect contemporary China's great social transformations as well as people's typical lifestyles and values. Her book sheds light on current events in China and, like a magic broom, clears a doorway to reveal the lives of modern-day Chinese. She compiles over 100 phrases plus some jokes and vernacular expressions used in present-day China in this 160-page volume. Michel intersperses English explanations with the traditional Chinese stories that contribute to the emergence of some of the Chinese sayings. In so doing, she also reveals the many forms of humor of contemporary Chinese netizens. She captures their ironic view of reality, their feeling of helplessness in the face of a rapidly changing country, their grievances towards society, and their optimistic ways of responding to their ever-changing world.

The strength of *China Online* lies in its content. The book is divided into two sections: Part One and Part Two. Part One focuses on the defining characteristics of young Chinese netizens and urban Chinese society. It begins with a broad overview of the Chinese educational system, the societal expectations placed on Chinese youth, and the relevance of examining online culture in order to understand the effect of rapid social changes on China's youth. It is important to note, as the author does in the introduction, the influence of China's rural to urban migration and the place of these youths within China's emergent middle class.

Part One also addresses common ways of viewing women, men, and modern-day couples. The first section of Part One includes fifty-six popular and contemporary Internet words and phrases related to young people in China today. Michel uses these to reveal the situations of today's Chinese youth and their attitudes towards life. At the same time, she explains the influence China's major social transformations have had on the values and cultural identities of the country's urban youth. The author focuses on the term "tribes" (族), and through various "tribes" presents the younger generation's values. For instance, by explaining such terms as the "corporate insect" (公司蛀虫) and the "pressure cooker" (高压锅) tribe, Michel depicts the stresses of modern life on young Chinese city-dwellers: long work hours, poor living conditions, heavy mental stress, and empty emotional lives. Michel explains the "luxury tribe" (辣奢族) to highlight young peoples' identification with and pursuit of materialism. The "strawberry tribe" (草莓族) represents a more fragile group within the youth population, who, due to their parents' long-term sheltering, cannot withstand any pressure or risk. The "thumb tribe" (拇指族) and the "couch potato tribe" (沙发土豆族) represent people addicted to using their smartphones to go online or to watching TV and who barely communicate face to face with other people in the real world—including their own parents. Of course, there is also a group charged with a deep sense of social responsibility. This tribe promotes environmental protection and is called the "low carbon footprint tribe" (低碳一族). Through these terms, the reader can get a feel

for the diverse values of modern Chinese youths—both positive and negative.

In the second and third sections of Part One, Michel introduces phrases related to “men” and “women”. For example, one term to describe a successful man is a “perfect man” (高富帅). Men who work hard to change their fate are called “herbivore men” (草食男), “phoenix men” (凤凰男), and “diligent bull men” (牛奋男). Of course, there are also the unsuccessful men including “the poor man” (屌丝). For “women”, Michel also presents many specific internet phrases. A man’s dream woman is called “the ‘37 °’ woman” (37度女人) after a magazine of the same name. This type of woman consists of ten degrees of wisdom, ten degrees of charm, ten degrees of charisma, and seven degrees of refinement; A nice-looking woman from a well-off family is called “the perfect woman”(白富美) or “the peacock woman” (孔雀女). A financially independent woman may be called a “carnivore woman” (食肉女) or a “manly woman” (女汉子). Women who are frugal are called “3 No’s women” (三不女人). These women refuse to define themselves by others’ standards, compete socially, or spend their time shopping. The author uses these internet terms to showcase positive and negative images of contemporary Chinese “men” and “women”. It is as if the reader can see directly into their modern city lives. This is by far the most comprehensive

collection of descriptions of these young netizens and their corresponding labels that I have read to date. This section of Part One, in particular, is the most comprehensive and logically structured in *China Online*, making it the most exciting part of the book.

The first section defines and explains the “tribes” of men and women and their cultural significance and features humorous statements that these types of people use to poke fun at themselves. For instance, the “poor man” (屌丝男) laughs at himself, saying, “Every time I’ve found the key to success, someone has changed the lock.” (每当我找到了成功的钥匙, 就有人把锁给换了。) Furthermore, the author collected the usage of various online jokes about different “tribes”, “men”, and “women” as well as comments members of one “tribe” might make about people who are not members of that tribe, enabling readers to enrich their knowledge of these “tribes” with a laugh. For example, Michel relates how one netizen directs a question towards a “manly woman” saying, “Does your family know just how pretty you are?” (你长这么漂亮, 你家里人知道吗?). As another example, a member of the “low carbon footprint tribe” writes online, “All the food you’ve wasted will block your road to heaven.” (你浪费的粮食都会堵在你去往天堂的路上).

In the fourth and last section of Part One, Michel explains terms related to modern-day couples. She summarizes popular online terminology for “spouses”, such as the “only-child couples” (独生子女), who struggle to meet the needs of their extended families. Spouses who are “half candy couples” (半糖夫妻), in reference to a popular song,

strive to build their relationships on trust and yet maintain their individual interests. Compared to the previous sections, this section is relatively bland, but it does introduce some words that Chinese learners typically don't know and teachers neglect to teach. These include an explanation of wedding festivities as “drinking the wine of happiness” (喝喜酒) and “naked weddings” (裸婚) in reference to civil service marriages where couples forego lavish expenditures.

The second part of this book centers on various types of humorous word play. These range from the use of Chinese characters to create images on the Internet to twisted meanings, from translations of foreign companies' names in Chinese to “magic numbers” for texting addicts and Internet users, from ads mixing Chinese and English to funny online stories, and so on. In the case of texting, the author provides clear explanations of the cultural significance of certain numbers. Michel also gives the pinyin for common text messages. The author offers many typical examples of commonly used phrases, complete with their double meanings. For example, “a graduate student” (研究生) may be twisted to mean “an expert on alcohol and tobacco” (烟酒生)。

China Online is not without flaws. The labeling of the content in Part One as “underground” and Part Two as “official” is slightly confusing. The author provides little information about the differences between the two types of content. It would be useful to have a more detailed

explanation of what those differences are, and how they might affect the use of the words and phrases in daily life. In fact, the expressions in the first part of the book, which is designated as “underground,” might be better defined as “slang” as these are simply new ways Chinese youth define themselves and others in the modern, online world. The term “official,” which the author translates as Putonghua (普通话) and uses to describe Part Two of the book, may lead to confusion. Referring to it as “official” seems to imply government endorsement. The word play described in this part of the book would be better characterized as “standard” or “established” phrases, as they are commonly used phrases based on existing Chinese expressions or stories. Redefining these terms would make it easier for readers to understand the differences between the first and second parts of the book.

From a structural point of view, Part One and Part Two are uneven in the amount of content presented. Part Two is much shorter than Part One and consists of approximately 56 pages, while Part One contains 88 pages. The first three sections of Part One, those concerning “tribes”, “men”, and “women”, provide thorough coverage of these topics. However, there is room to expand the fourth section on “couples”, which only consists of a simple listing of a few terms presented in five pages. It would also be helpful if the author explained that “tribes” and types of “men”, “women”, and “couples” overlap such that a person might identify with a particular “tribe” in addition to a “woman”, “man”, or “couple” label. It is difficult to understand this from the way these categories are presented in the book.

In comparison to Part One, which is logically organized into four parts, the structure of Part Two is less organized. The author skips between different types of word play but provides only a minimal level of explanation for each type. The result is that the content presented seems choppy and does not flow logically from one type of word play to another.

The author should also note which phrases originated offline and are now used online since many of the expressions in this book are not new coinages from the Internet. For example, the company names on pages 119–120 are not specific to online usage and were created by the companies themselves, not by China’s netizens. On pages 105–108, the underlying meanings of the numbers and words did not originate online but are actually derived from Chinese folk culture. These include the transformation of the characters for “bronchitis” (气管炎) into characters meaning a “henpecked husband” (妻管严). The phrase “beauty excites passion” (美丽动人) can be converted to “beauty freezes you” (美丽冻人). However, the reader should note the characters for “henpecked” as printed in the book (109) are incorrect (妻管炎) rather than (妻管严). Michel explains that the meaning of some phrases has changed over time. For example, the phrase, “a classless society” (无产阶级) can now be taken to mean “to be broke”. However, 无产阶级 should be translated as “proletariat” rather than “a classless society”. Having an overbearing mother-in-law (婆婆太多媳妇难当) now refers to having “too many bosses”. Although these examples are pertinent to understanding Chinese culture, the author could add more detail about their origins.

This book might be appropriate as additional reference material in a course on Chinese language or culture since it contains vocabulary that is less likely to appear in language textbooks. However, readers and teachers should be aware that there are some misattributions and errors in translation. For example, xue (学) “to learn” is explained

as meaning “to copy.” On page 23, “at thirty one must stand firm” (三十而立) would be better translated as “by thirty, a person should have established himself.” On page 34, the two characters for “zhu” (驻 and 蛀) should be switched and more explanation is needed in order for readers who do not have a high level of proficiency in Chinese to understand the humor of this joke. Additionally, some of the phrases presented actually originate in the west including “DINKEM” (Double Income No Kids with Excessive Mortgage) and “DINS” (Double Income No Sex...), and when I searched online, it was not possible to locate Chinese translations for these acronyms. There are some English translations that are not true to the meaning of the original Chinese. For example, “我能说真话吗” is translated as “Can I say bad words?” A more appropriate translation would be, “Can I tell you what I really want to say?” (Not just follow the official media voice.) On page 131, “摸死你” is translated as “I am dying to touch/caress you.” The author should explain this saying’s relationship to the stalking that is perceived to occur in online chat rooms, and it might be better described as expressing the desire to sexually harass someone. The presence of these errors may create confusion on the part of the reader. The next edition will, we hope, correct these errors.

China Online provides an interesting overview of China’s online culture, but there are areas where further explanation is necessary for the reader to understand the basic characteristics of the Chinese language. For example, the author provides a brief introduction to the pronunciation of Chinese and the use of tones through the example of the word “ma.” Given the differences between English and Chinese, and the author’s desire to make the content of the book accessible to beginning students of Chinese, it would have been helpful to have a more in-depth explanation of what tones are, the importance of tones in the Chinese language, and

how pinyin is pronounced. A reader who is not already familiar with these concepts may have difficulty understanding the pronunciations of phrases in the book despite the fact that the author provides both pinyin and Chinese characters for phrases in most instances throughout the book. An understanding of the Chinese tonal system and how to pronounce pinyin is necessary to understand many jokes in the book as native Chinese speakers often change the tones of words in humorous ways or use homophones written in different characters. If the author could add more example sentences and explanations of Chinese grammar throughout Parts One and Two, then it would be more helpful for language students.

In the second part of this book, the author only uses English to relate the jokes circulating amongst netizens. For example, on pages 141-148 the author tells a number of stories in English. On page 142, the author's description of women being like tofu and cucumbers until the age of 30 would benefit from an explanation of why this is humorous in Chinese as there is no English equivalent. In short, if she could also provide the Chinese original, and use the comparison of Chinese and English to present these jokes, it would allow people who understand Chinese to gain a deeper understanding of the humor within these funny stories.

This book is potentially useful for different types of readers who have an interest in learning Chinese and learning about Chinese culture. The author defines the target audience broadly to include students and China experts as well as novices, and marketing and communications specialists. The content is varied enough that it might appeal to a wide audience. Many foreign learners of Chinese may be interested in reading this book or may use it to learn online vocabulary as the phrases presented are typically not covered when learning Chinese in a classroom setting. Advanced students of Chinese language and culture may learn new vocabulary that will contribute to their understanding of China's online culture. The examples provided might also appeal to teachers of Chinese who rely on traditional textbooks that tend not to teach popular Internet words. In accomplishing the difficult task of collecting and categorizing these terms, Michel has created a potentially valuable supplemental teaching resource. *China Online* also provides a list of resources for

readers who would like to learn more about the topics introduced in the book.

In conclusion, I believe that this book successfully captures the particularities of modern Chinese youths, men, and women. Through online phrases, the author demonstrates the diverse values of modern Chinese citizens. The section on word play provides a brief introduction to a number of interesting concepts related to the creative use of language, including the repurposing of Chinese characters so that they acquire new meanings. The brief stories and comments on Chinese culture provide the reader with a starting point for understanding how China's major social transformations have put pressure on young people who then turn to humor as a way to express their frustration with modern life. Most of the sayings and expressions listed in Michel's book are as witty and fun as they are deeply meaningful, making them an ideal introduction to how young people think about modern life in China. In this sense, Michel's work encourages readers to develop a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and language. Such an understanding is important in an increasingly globalized world, and Michel helps to uncover a side of China infrequently seen: that of a creative and innovative spirit.

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