A Way With Words

A survey probes the popularity of Chinese words in English-speaking countries By Pan Xiaqiao

Recent years have witnessed the use of an increasing number of Chinese words in the English language. A study carried out by the Beijing-based Academy of Contemporary China and World Studies (ACCCWS) sheds light on how well Chinese expressions are recognized outside of China.

Researchers calculated the number of references to some 300 Chinese words in the online reports of 50 leading media outlets in the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, the Philippines, South Africa, Canada, Singapore and India. Based on the outcome of these calculations, they chose 150 words for a survey. The survey was conducted in the above countries among people over the age of 18 who had attained a higher education, with a total of 1,260 responses collected.

Pinyin popularity

In a report released on Feb. 17, ACCWS, a research institute affiliated with the China International Publishing Group (CIPG), revealed the most recognized Chinese words overseas. Its findings showed that Chinese words are increasingly used in their pinyin form, as native English-speakers develop a greater understanding of their associated concepts.

Pinyin is the commonly used system for Romanizing standard Chinese characters, and it is a unique form of the language. Compared with Chinese characters, pinyin boosts an advantage in its ability to facilitate the spread of Chinese culture around the world.

Globalized concepts

"Not only are we seeing a rise in words related to culture, but concepts from China's science and technology, economy and politics are also being absorbed into the pool of Chinese words used in other countries in the form of pinyin," said Wang Gang, vice president of CIPG.

The study reveals that since the 18th National Congress of the Communist Party of China in 2012, political phrases, such as zhongguo-women, the Chinese dream; yijia-yu, the Belt and Road Initiative; and min-gong-yang-xing-tong, a community with a shared future, are better recognized and understood in other countries, which implies greater recognition of China's direction.

All three phrases are key proposals made by Chinese President Xi Jinping. The Chinese dream of national rejuvenation is a commitment to bringing greater prosperity to the country and a better life to the Chinese people. The Belt and Road Initiative seeks to enhance connectivity along and beyond the routes of the ancient Silk Road, while a community with a shared future for mankind represents a vision of an open, inclusive, clean and beautiful world that enjoys lasting peace, universal security and common prosperity.

According to the report, words related to culture make up a majority of the 100 most recognized pinyin words, including traditional festivals such as the Spring Festival, and chongyong, the Double Ninth Festival. The former is China's holiday to cel- ebrate the Lunar New Year, while the latter falls on the ninth day of the ninth month in the lunar calendar and is a time for autumn excursions. It is also a day on which Chinese people pay respect to the elders as well as their ancestors.

Other popular culture-related words include xiaojing, the pinyin name of preemi- nent ancient philosopher Confucius; shashi, as in the Shaolin Temple of Chinese martial arts; and yungong, the pinyin spelling of the Forbidden City.

One particularly striking detail of the report is that some Chinese words that used to be translated into English are now being replaced by pinyin. The giant panda is now known not only by its English moniker but also as xiongmao, its Chinese name. Another example is jiaosi, long known as "dumplings" in the lexicon of English speakers, but nowadays the pinyin term is being favored by those overseas. The latest installment of the Oxford English Dictionary even includes jiaosi in its comprehensive record of the English vocabulary.

Globalization calls for enhanced cultural exchanges between China and other countries, but it should also act as a driving force of innovation for the English language. Although the pinyin phrase zhongguo-yu-wen-xue has been translated into English as "Chinese language," it is instantly recognizable to many around the world. In the past, this was a phrase characterized by mass manufacture and low-cost produc- tion, but today the phrase is taking on a new meaning, one built on innovation and cre- ativity, which is redefining "made in China" around the world.

"The world's languages are open to words born of Chinese economic and technolog- ical innovations. Not only should China keep contributing words to other languages, but it should also act as a front-runner in innovation for the good of the world," Yang Ping, deputy director of ACCWS, told Beijing Review.

"These exchanges are also necessitated by efforts to build a community with a shared future."

Zheng Yongnian, director of the East Asian Institute, National University of Singapore, said in an interview with China Central Television that China previously existed as a vague concept for many people around the world. But now that these coun- tries have more diverse forms of exchange with China, ranging from trade and invest- ment to tourism, learning Chinese and using the language have the potential to boost peo- ple's personal prospects. China has become a part of their everyday lives, he added.

The ACCWS survey also discovered that China's economic and technological develop- ment are enriching the world's glossaries. Fifteen associated words found a place on the top-100 list, with yuen and renminbi, terms for China's currency, in both the top 10 and the latest edition of the Oxford English Dictionary.

"This phenomenon is related to the ongo- ing internationalization of the renminbi, and it hints at the expanding global influence of the Chinese economy, with both terms—yuan and renminbi—now commonplace in the English-language media. To date, more than 60 countries and regions, including Singapore and Russia, have adopted the yuan as a foreign exchange reserve currency."

Linguistic innovations

New words such as zhufubao, the Chinese name of online payment service Alipay, and wanguo, online shopping, are particularly well recognized among younger generations outside of China, having become popular in part due to China's booming internet econ- omy built on a foundation of e-business and mobile payment.

Terminology from the world of science and technology, including Wukong and gaode—high-speed rail—are also featured on the list. Wukong is China's Dark Matter Particle Explorer. The satellite is named after the famous Chinese mythological figure Monkey King.

Although the pinyin phrase zhongguo-yu-wen-xue ranked 79th on the list, its English translation, "made in China," is instantly recognizable to many around the world. In the past, the phrase was a characterization of mass manufacturing and low-cost production, but today the phrase is taking on a new meaning, one built on innovation and creativity, which is redefining "made in China" around the world. "The world's languages are open to words born of Chinese economic and technological innovations. Not only should China keep contributing words to other languages, but it should also act as a front-runner in innovation for the good of the world," Yang Ping said.