Chinglish: an illustrated lecture

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Those of you who know China better than me may be rolling your eyes at the very mention of “Chinglish,” the combination of Chinese grammar and English vocabulary that leads to the remarkable signs posted in many parts of Asia. Chinglish has also been less charitably referred to as broken English, and my sense is that in some ways it has become an academically dirty subject. I think, however, that it would be a mistake to dismiss Chinglish as trivial too quickly, and I hope that a more sustained look at the “whats and whys” of this cultural phenomenon can lead to a few new insights. I can honestly say that nothing else has struck me so unawares in all my travels as my encounters with Chinglish during the 2009 Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar on History and Culture in China. The fact that it was so unexpected for me is only part of the reason why I think Chinglish deserves to be talked about more often, as I hope to demonstrate in this lecture.

To give some background, I do try to educate myself and have made it a point to learn as much as I can about other places and other cultures – an occupational necessity as I teach both Cultural Anthropology and Global Studies courses at St. Charles Community College. Admittedly, I come lately to both subjects as my doctoral training was in anthropological archaeology (and my expectations for the terracotta warriors in China were not disappointed, see Fig. 1). I have lived outside the United States for over a decade in many different countries, and have spent years studying three non-Indo-European languages: Arabic (Semitic), Swahili (Bantu), and Malagasy (Malayo-Polynesian), along with the more traditional high school and college Latin, French, and German. And yet, nothing in my background of culture and language studies prepared me for the sheer scale of Chinglish in China. Granted, before this year I had very little first-hand knowledge of Asia, and that was the primary reason I applied for the Fulbright-Hays program. But still, every day for five weeks in China I was repeatedly struck and surprised by Chinglish, and had to ask myself, “why didn’t I know about this beforehand?”

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1 This curriculum project is based on my experiences in the 2009 Fulbright-Hays Summer Seminar in China. This material was presented as a public lecture at St. Charles Community College in Cottleville, Missouri, on Sept. 16, 2009. Instead of creating an annotated PowerPoint I have chosen to create an essay to make it easier to follow my arguments concerning Chinglish. This content could easily be converted back into a PowerPoint presentation by simply copying and pasting the photographs included herein.
Figure 1. Kneeling archer displayed in the tomb of the terracotta warriors, near Xi’an, one of China’s archaeological treasures.

Upon further investigation, I have learned that there is a large and developed literature on Chinglish, much of it online, and much of it making fun of the quirky sayings and mistakes. Such a derogatory approach goes against the grain for my discipline. Anthropologists generally hold that ethnocentrism is both universal and necessary; everyone everywhere needs to believe that their culture’s way is the right and appropriate way of doing things. The fact that intellectually we know that everyone can’t be right highlights the arbitrariness of culture, but it can’t override the gut-level need to feel that we are doing things the right way. And because much of culture is arbitrary, the various forms it takes deserve respect and consideration within their own context. Anthropologists tend to believe that there is great wisdom and knowledge in everyday life, and that to dismiss cultural differences too quickly is a mistake that can hurt both ourselves and others. Thus, I hope that my approach to Chinglish is a respectful one, but some truths are unflattering and I will try not to shy away from those realities either.

I also realize that I should have expected Chinglish more than I did. The group that organized our trip, the National Committee on U.S. China Relations, did a wonderful job preparing us with an extensive reading list. One of my favorites was an article from *The Atlantic* by James Fallows, “Their Own Worst Enemy” (November 2008). Fallows takes as his subject the question of “How can official China possibly do such a clumsy and self-defeating job of presenting itself to the world?” His answer is that it’s a combination of ignorance about how the outside world views China as well as an ability for high level initiatives to be subverted on the local level. However, he opens his article with a few other long-standing mysteries, “At what point in Chinese culture did it become mandatory for business and political leaders to dye away every gray hair ...” and more relevant here, “How can corporations and government agencies invest huge sums producing annual reports and brochures and advertisements in English, yet manifestly never bother to ask a native English speaker whether they’ve made some howler-style mistake?” Fallows doesn’t attempt answers to these opening cultural questions, but he does provide a
great Chinglish example: a museum in Shanghai opened an exhibit on the Three Gorges Dam project under a banner proclaiming in six-foot-high letters: “THE THREE GEORGES.” I remember laughing and thinking I would love to have seen that banner, but what I didn’t realize at the time was that Chinglish is not just a few rare “howler-style” mistakes, but seems to be virtually everywhere on everything in developed China, or at least along the narrow path we took.

And so, despite my interests in the archaeology of China, my study of Chinglish began the evening we arrived in Beijing and checked into our first hotel. On the bedside table was a professionally printed plastic sign with the English words, “Don’t forget to report sound safety to your family.” Clearly, someone wanted me to do something, and in my jet-lagged state I read the sign twenty times wondering about “report sound safety.” I only then noticed the nearby phone and realized the sign must be a polite reminder to call home. If nothing else, Chinglish proves how much meaning can be found in an object’s context. In our next hotel in Xi’an the scale on the bathroom floor told me to “Please in the bathroom steelyard deal.” And I think I know what they meant, or in any case, I left the scale in the bathroom.

In many cases these friendly reminders were not necessarily wrong or broken English, it was just that their phrasing would strike native English speakers as unusual. In our third city of Chongqing we visited a school whose walls exhorted the students to “Please use the civilization and manner’s vocabulary” and warned them not to “apply and draw arbitrarily” (see Fig. 2). In each city and on each site visit, regardless of the topics we were meant to be studying, Chinglish would be staring me in the face. Perplexed, I started asking questions of people who have spent their lives living in and studying China.

Figure 2. Signs in a school hallway, Chongqing.

The first answer I received was from the scholar-escort accompanying our group through China, who argued that the Chinese language, culture, and written characters were too complex and different for easy and accurate translations. There’s obviously some truth to this, but my experiences with Semitic, Bantu, and Malayo-Polynesian languages tells me that it has to be more than just a different system of thought. I know I have made some unintentionally hilarious remarks in all of the foreign languages I have attempted to speak, but then, I am not a corporation. What is different is that in China these mistakes are professionally printed, seemingly without proofreading, in a way that does not happen in other countries. A second explanation came from another experienced “old China hand” connected with our group who said, simply put, that “they just don’t care.” This is clearly true, or else
Chinglish wouldn’t exist, but this line of thinking really just transforms the question into one of “why don’t they care?” Note that this line of thinking also assumes that Chinglish is a bad thing. Perhaps the Chinese do care, they care to have Chinglish around. This leads to a third explanation, this time from a young Chinese economist at my college, who suggests that Chinglish began during an insular period ignorant of the wider English speaking world, but has continued because the current generation finds them interesting and humorous just as outsiders do. My explanation for why Chinglish is so common will build on all three of these perspectives, but I also want to suggest that there are many different types of Chinglish, and thus we might expect different explanations for the different kinds. Some Chinglish clearly aims at poetry whereas others appear to be simply typos, but even here I would argue that there is a continuum from ignorance to genius. Consider the two pieces of Chinglish illustrated in Figure 3.

![Figure 3. Chinglish on signs and wine bottles.](image)

Clearly, “no load speaking” is a typo that a spell checker would not find. In addition, the Chinese (“Visitors Prohibited,” so I’m told) bears no relation to the English phrase or to loud speaking. Part of the joy of Chinglish seems to be that it can bring out the inner English teacher in all of us. “Surely,” I thought, “no one else has found this yet, or it would have been fixed by now.” Like all discoveries, it feels good to be the first, and Chinglish gives us that illusion. Thus I noticed for our Fulbright group that the Chinglish any one person found was usually more interesting to them than something first spotted by someone else, myself included. And so I know that one of the dangers for this essay is that finding Chinglish is more interesting than reading about it. Even for those who don’t spend their lives grading papers, written mistakes are jarring, and coming across one sends a small jolt to our brain. The joy of discovery and the jolt of the typo can also help explain the power and potential genius of Chinglish, as also seen in Figure 3 – Chinglish as marketing ploy. During the seminar in China, we drank a number of wonderful wines, but the “Graetwall” wine pictured here did not happen to be among those. In fact, this bottle was the only wine so bad that I ended up pouring it down the drain. The typo on this label attracted my attention, interested me, and convinced me to buy the bottle. Isn’t that the goal of a wine label, even when the wine’s palatable? I know that with such a label I shouldn’t have been surprised that the wine was so awful, but I’ll admit that in my curiosity I’m not always the smartest person around. Chinglish was fun and made my days more interesting, and that must help explain its existence at some level.
One of the important questions here is that of intentionality, as jokes have intelligence behind them and humor differs from ridicule. I thought the “Graetwall” label was good advertising, though to an admittedly small market segment, but did its creator feel the same? Basing my analysis on the Chinglish alone, it seems clear that many pieces of Chinglish are intentional. The Beijing Olympics were an unprecedented national project and billions of dollars were spent on the infrastructure projects involving many international architectural firms. So when signs are set up at the Olympic village stating, “The grass is smiling at you. Please detour,” it is a clear and knowing nod towards the Chinglish tradition, evoking a history of quirky and enjoyable English signs in China (though, in this case, typo-free and grammatically correct). Similarly, at a tourist restaurant set in a beautifully maintained lotus garden we discovered a sign pointing us towards the “Outerspace breeding scientific research facilities,” just past the greenhouses. Thoughts of an alien breeding program brought smiles to our faces and I believe it’s possible the restaurant owners are aware of those smiles, and have therefore not corrected the signs. Similar arguments could be made for many of the restaurant names we spotted during the trip, such as the restaurant and bar labeled “Free Amorous Feelings” (Fig. 4) or the fast food place labeled “Sweet Potato Workplace” both in Beijing.

![Figure 4. Restaurant/Bar in Beijing.](image)

Many Chinglish phrases display what I consider a keen ear for language, an attention to sound that shows conscious choice. For example, in Shanghai we entered the Pearl Tower past a large sign stating that they “Prohibit carrying dangerous germs, pests and other baleful biology.” I think “baleful biology” is a great, beautiful phrase, but it also reminds me of a student reaching for the thesaurus once too often. Confronted with a list of synonyms, the students chooses based on sound alone, or alliteration, and not based on knowledge of common usage. Given the security sensitivities of this sign near the metal detectors, it was clear that some of the mistakes were unintentional (as the very first rule listed was “No admittance for anyone who is drunk, insane and not properly dressed.” – giving the impression that 2 out of 3 ain’t bad.) The fact that many Chinglish items aspire towards the poetic (at least in their word choice) must relate to the Chinese civilization’s deep support for scholarship based on its Confucian roots. Even royalty were expected to work on their poetry, and one night we ate dinner
under a poster of a poem written by China’s de facto last emperor, Chairman Mao. Thus, it was somehow fitting that when I looked down at my plate I learned that my chopsticks were “virginal” (Fig. 5). Why settle for a five-cent English word when so many fancy ones are available?

Figure 5. Chopsticks sleeve in Shanghai.

The fact that Confucianism elevated scholars and poets above all others certainly influences the forms Chinglish takes, but other aspects of Chinese history play a role as well. Perhaps too much has been made of China’s isolationism and “Middle Kingdom mentality,” but it is still an important historical and cultural question as to how the “century of humiliation” came about, in which China suffered greatly at the hands of the emergent European powers. Similarly, more recent periods such as Mao’s Cultural Revolution were also independent, inward-looking movements that necessarily entailed a hesitancy to utilize or learn from foreigners. The lack of competent proof-readers, or even the idea that they are needed, must be related to the fact that a “closed” China opened in the late 20th century. This form of national chauvinism should sound familiar to us Americans, as our country has also gone through long periods where we felt little need to listen to or learn from others. And humor flows from that American experience as well: my high school Latin teacher loved to tell the story of the Arkansas town meeting where the principal tried to defend the introduction of Spanish language classes to the local schools, when one man in the audience stood up to proclaim that “by God, if English was good enough for Jesus, it’s good enough for us.” (Having grown up in central Missouri, we naturally ridiculed Arkansas.) Given China’s history in the 20th century, it’s easy to see how the Chinglish tradition could have emerged from ignorance, but then continued through simple inertia (or perhaps enjoyment as suggested by my colleague above). Once a practice is acceptable, why bother changing? However, the continued existence of Chinglish may also be related to a 21st century trend linked to hyper-capitalism: the lack of attention to detail, corner-cutting, and loss of quality control seen in scandals from melamine in pet food to lead paint in toys to tainted milk in China. And this obviously ties in with the second explanation suggested to me above, “they just don’t care.”

But what of that first explanation I received, that Chinese is characteristically unique in this regard? Spoken Chinese, even though a tonal language, is not a particularly difficult language to learn to
speak, at least according to two Peace Corps volunteers I met, since my few months of study give me no grounds on which to make such a claim. Both Americans claimed that the languages of their first two-year postings were more difficult to learn than Chinese, but that Chinese makes up for it in the difficulty of its written script. The Chinese characters are uniform across all of China such that even domestic movies are often subtitled for audiences who might be unfamiliar with one region’s dialect or accent. The characters can be uniform across dialects because they are not phonetic, each of the thousands of characters, or combination of characters, has a unique meaning. This uniformity of written signs, despite the fact that they are pronounced differently in different places, can only be maintained by an exacting attention to the precise shape of the characters. Why a similar care doesn’t translate to written English is part of the mystery of Chinglish. The free-spirited approach that is applied to public English in China reminds me that Americans were once more creative with English as well. After all, Mark Twain once remarked (echoing Ben Franklin) that “I don’t give a damn for a man that can only spell a word one way.” But written English has become more standardized and the rules aren’t as commonly broken these days. The Chinese, along with Mark Twain, might criticize our contemporary lack of freedom.

The fact that Chinese script is different in its complexity and overloaded with meaning was driven home to me at the very center of China, at the Hall of Central Harmony in the center of the Forbidden City. Just outside the hall a six-foot-high sign explains in English the board hanging over the emperor’s throne with four characters engraved on it. The explanatory English sign includes the following lines:

... hangs above the throne with an inscription written by Emperor Qianlong. The inscription reads: “Yun Zhi Jue Zhong,” meaning “The Way of Heaven is profound and mysterious and the way of mankind is difficult. Only if we make a precise and unified plan and follow the doctrine of the mean, can we rule the country well.”

I was only part way through the translation before I was thinking it must be a joke, “I know I’ve seen something like this on a sitcom or late-night comedy sketch.” But given its placement there’s no reason to doubt its authenticity. I have to admit that those are four weighty syllables to carry that much meaning. Among such heavy translations, a simple “the grass is smiling at you” looks right at home.

I started studying China because I feel it is an important piece for understanding our modern world, and Chinglish just happened to be a useful place for me to begin. I began studying East Africa years earlier for other reasons, but the two regions are also connected, especially commercially, and they have been ever since the Sultan of Malindi on the Kenyan coast sent a giraffe as a present to the Emperor of China in 1414 A.D. Thus I would like to consider one final possible piece of Chinglish from the Swahili coast, though I encountered this long before I knew anything about Chinglish. Many women in Eastern Africa wear a rectangular cloth called a kanga among the Swahili and lamboouani in Madagascar. These usually have a printed design that includes a short phrase or saying with local meaning, even though the textiles are imported from South or East Asia where they are produced. Kanga sayings are often difficult to translate, but most are humorous and creative when they can be comprehended. My favorite kanga saying of all time is also the only one I have encountered in English: the bottom of the skirt simply said, “Sending slogans as per our talk.” The image brought to mind is of a letter, or maybe even a telegram, consisting of a long column of Swahili aphorisms with this English sentence at the top of the list. I’ve always thought the person who decided to put that English phrase on a kanga was brilliantly clever. But again, to be a joke I was assuming that its inclusion was intentional. Now that I’ve been to China and seen the sheer volume of Chinglish, I’m not so sure anymore. China really does seem to have a different set of rules.
Discussion Questions and Student Assignments
for “Chinglish: an illustrated lecture”

1. The essay discusses three possible explanations for the prevalence of Chinglish in China, but doesn’t clearly rank them in order of importance. Which do you think is the most important reason and why?

2. During the Beijing Olympics, the Chinese government attempted to “clean-up” Chinglish around the different venues. Can you think of a cultural phenomenon in our society that is practiced locally but still seems to be something of an embarrassment to higher levels of government?

3. The author of this essay was struck by the common Chinglish found on signs in China, but he also observed that there was less graffiti on the walls than is common in the United States (though the sign in Figure 2 is reminding students not to write graffiti). Based on your perceptions of each culture and country, what do you think might explain that relative difference? (As an interesting side note, studies in the United States have shown that posting a “No Graffiti” sign on American bathroom stalls actually increases the amount of graffiti that will be produced.)

4. The essay mentions websites that compile and inventory examples of Chinglish. Use your favorite search engine to find some of those sites and look through the Chinglish examples posted there. In what ways are those websites similar to and different from the essay by Griffin that you’ve just read?

5. Looking at the much larger collection of Chinglish items posted to the web (as for example on the photo-sharing site Flickr), do you see any other possible explanations for this cultural phenomenon? Are there certain types of Chinglish that get posted more often than others, and if so, what makes that type the more interesting to native English speakers?