

The Lexicographic Treatment of Homophonic Neologisms in Chinese Dictionaries

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Abstract

Homophonic neologisms in Mandarin have increased swiftly in recent years, yet their inclusion in lexicographic works remains understudied. This research investigates the representation of homophonic neologisms in *Hànyǔ Xīncíyǔ Cídiǎn* (2000–2020) and compares the inclusion rate with two other most accessible Chinese dictionaries of neologisms *Hànyǔ Guóxué Hànyǔ Cídiǎn* (<https://www.hanyuguoxue.com>) and *Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn* (the 7th edition). It has been found that only a minimal proportion of homophonic neologisms are documented in these works, with the neologism dictionary itself exhibiting highest yet limited coverage. The results suggest that presumably the inherent characteristics of homophonic neologisms, such as their playful, context-dependent nature, may conflict with traditional lexicographic selection criteria. By tracing their semantic development in observable creation contexts and identifying systemic obstacles to dictionary inclusion, the study underscores the need for lexicographers to reconsider entry policies to better reflect contemporary linguistic creativity.

Keywords: homophonic neologism; Mandarin dictionaries; lexicographic principles

1. Background

The unprecedented increase of Chinese neologisms in recent decades, emerging as linguistic responses to societal transformations across Mandarin-speaking regions, has attracted significant research interest. Existing works prioritizes exploring these novel terms and their systematic categorization through multi-dimensional analytical frameworks examining etymological origins, morphological configurations, semantic evolution, and sociopragmatic functions. Diao Yanbin traced etymological sources (phonetic/semantic loans, dialect borrowings) (2015), Yang Xiaoping decoded morphological strategies (abbreviation, analogy) (2019), Shao Jingmin mapped semantic evolution trajectories (2016), while Zou Jiayan (2008), Wang Tiekun (2010), and Liu Chuqun (2020) respectively examined societal-domain specialization, media-platform distribution, and sociopragmatic functions like euphemism and identity marking. Homophonic neologisms occupy a distinct category, defined primarily by phonetic derivation yet semantically adaptable to diverse cultural interpretations. Current

research aims to analyze an intriguing discrepancy: while homophonic neologisms like *shénmǎ* (神马, literally 'mythical horse' for 什么 *shénme* “what”) and *bēijù* (杯具, literally 'cup set' for 悲剧 'tragedy') enjoy widespread usage, they remain conspicuously absent from most contemporary Chinese dictionaries, including specialized lexicons of new words.

Homophonic meaning extension has been a persistent linguistic phenomenon in Chinese, manifesting across both classical texts and folk traditions. The following poetic lines were composed by Liu Yuxi (772-842) of Tang Dynasty (618-907):

<i>dōngbiān</i>	<i>rìchū</i>	<i>xībiān</i>	<i>yǔ</i>	
东边	日出	西边	雨,	
east	sunrise	west	rain	
<i>dào shì wú</i>	<i>qíng</i>		<i>què yǒu</i>	<i>qíng</i>
道是 无	晴(情)		却 有	情
say without	clear weather (affection)		yet with	affection

The renowned homophonic lines seemed to have captured a sun shower: “*The sun shines in the east while rain falls in the west,*” thus “*it is rainless(有晴) and rainy (无晴) at once.*” Beneath their meteorological surface, however, these lines also whisper of love. Phonologically, the syllable *qíng* maps to at least two orthographically and semantically distinct logographs: 晴 “*clear weather*” and 情 “*tenderness*”, which nevertheless interact metaphorically in poetic discourse. The homophonic duality of *qíng* (weather/affection) creates a conceptual blending space in which anomalous meteorological descriptions serve as vehicle terms for target-domain affective states, thus the same lines covertly expresses:

“(She/He) claimed to be ruthless (无情), yet her/his actions betrayed tenderness (有情).”

The lines epitomize how classical Chinese poetry uses natural imagery, here, the sunny/rainy view to metaphorize human emotions.

Chinese homophonic wordplay, which condenses multiple semantic layers within a single phonetic unit, is particularly prevalent in two-part allegorical sayings (歇后语 *xiēhòuyǔ*):

<i>xián</i>	<i>cài</i>	<i>shāo</i>	<i>dòu fu</i>	<i>yǒu</i>	<i>yán (yán)</i>	<i>zài</i>	<i>xiān</i>
咸	菜	烧	豆腐	— 有	盐 (言)	在	先
salted vegetable	cook	tofu		with	salt (speech)	put	ahead of time

Unambiguous literal meaning of the first part: Stew salted vegetables with tofu

Double meaning of the latter part: a. salt “盐” has been added beforehand in the pickle; b. some words “言” of warning must be put in advance.

This culinary allegory references a specific preparation method where pickled vegetables

(thus pre-salted) are stewed with tofu. Unlike standard vegetable dishes that require salt to be added during cooking, this dish derives its seasoning entirely from the preserved vegetables' brine. The inherent salinity renders additional salt unnecessary, creating a literal manifestation of “having salt 盐 (*yán*) already present” - which phonetically parallels the idiom “having words 言 (*yán*) stated in advance.” This homophonic duality (盐 / 言 *yán*) facilitates a metaphorical interpretation wherein culinary preparation norms map onto communicative protocols. The phonetic equivalence constructs a conceptual bridge between:

- a. the culinary necessity of beforehand salting, and
- b. the sociolinguistic expectation that sensitive matters (particularly unpleasant truths) should be declared proactively, as a cultural script goes:

<i>chou huà</i>	<i>shuō</i>	<i>zài qiántou</i>
丑话	说	在前头
ugly words	utter	in advance

Let's get the unpleasant things (nonetheless utmost necessary) out of the way first.

By the same token, Chinese homophonic neologisms follow a systematic formation pattern: a single phonological unit (typically 1-2 syllables) maps to two or multiple distinct semantic domains, with at least one of these meanings being a novel semantic extension, e.g., *tǎngpíng* 躺平 and *tǎngqiāng* 躺枪. *Tǎngpíng* (躺平), literally 'lie flat', describe a stance of social disengagement, while *tǎngqiāng* (躺枪), meaning 'shot while lying down', metaphorically denotes becoming an innocent victim of external conflicts. Although these lexemes constitute a significant component of modern Chinese lexical innovation, scholarly inquiry into their properties remains underdeveloped. Existing findings have focused primarily on fragmentary semantic examinations of isolated cases and taxonomic identification, while neology compilations systematically document only a narrow range of such formations. Crucially, academic discourse frequently subsumes these phenomena under generic accounts of lexical developments, conflating them with conventional word-formation patterns (Diao, 2015; Tang, 2014; Chen, 2011). This analytical tendency obscures their distinctive cognitive architectures and sociolinguistic emergence pathways, which demand dedicated theoretical frameworks rather than assimilation into broader morphological narratives.

2. Neologism Lexicography and Procedures of research

This study investigates the disproportionate inclusion of homophonic neologisms in Mandarin dictionaries by analyzing both such terms and a representative selection of dictionaries, namely, *Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn* (2016), *Hànyǔ Xīncíyǔ Cídiǎn* (2000-

2020) (Hou, 2023), and the online Chinese lexicographic platform *Hànyǔ Guóxué Hànyǔ Cídiǎn*. The three lexical resources were chosen for their coverage of distinct dictionary genres and corpus-based methodologies, which supports a robust comparative analysis. Subsequent sections evaluate these reference works in terms of structural composition, distinctive features, and relevance to homophonic neologism research.

2.1 An overview of Lexicographical Resources

2.1.1 Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn (7th Edition) (现代汉语词典)

Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn, literally *The Contemporary Chinese Dictionary* (CCD), published by The Commercial Press since 1978, is China's authoritative prescriptive lexicon. The 7th edition (2016) systematically documents 69,400 standardized entries, adding 400+ neologisms (e.g., diǎnzàn “like 点赞,” èrwéimǎ “QR code 二维码”) and revising 100+ definitions. It prioritizes Modern Standard Chinese while selectively including dialects and technical terms.

CCD has been compiled under four core principles:

- Standardization: Aligns with national language policies, excluding transient slang.
- Practicality: Provides contextual examples and current usage.
- Scientific Rigor: Marks parts of speech, pinyin, and register.
- Dynamic Updates: Incorporates digital-era terms.

The CCD's rigorous inclusion criteria—prioritizing lexical items with high frequency of usage, semantic stability, and representation in authoritative corpora—establish it as a dependable reference for homophonic neologism research.

2.1.2 Hànyǔ Guóxué Hànyǔ Cídiǎn (汉语国学汉语词典)

Hànyǔ Guóxué Hànyǔ Cídiǎn (HGHC, 汉语国学汉语词典), (<https://www.hanyuguoxue.com/cidian/>) is a digital lexicographical resource developed by the Hànyǔ Guóxué Research Institute. Its latest edition (v3.2, 2022) comprises 410,000 lexical entries, making it the largest freely accessible Chinese lexical database by volume. The dictionary integrates pre-modern Chinese textual scholarship with modern corpus linguistics, documenting lexical evolution across three millennia of Chinese linguistic history.

HGHC is characterized by

- Dual-Purpose Design: Serves both academic research and public literacy

enhancement, targeting self-directed learners in digital environments.

- Historical Breadth: Covers lexical development from ancient to modern Chinese, though post-2010 neologisms remain underrepresented.
- Methodological Synergy: Combines traditional philological approaches with computational linguistics for systematic documentation.
- Accessibility: Freely available online, emphasizing user-friendly navigation for non-specialists.

While the dictionary excels in documenting historical lexical layers, its limited coverage of contemporary neologisms (particularly post-2010 terms) reduces its immediate utility for studying modern homophonic innovations. Representative undefined contemporary terms include: *gōngjǐcè* “supply-side 供给侧”, *qūkuàiliàn* “blockchain 区块链” and *guāngwǎng* “optical networking 光网”. However, its historical corpus provides a valuable comparative baseline for tracing semantic shifts in homophonous terms over time. Researchers may leverage its etymological annotations to analyze how homophonic neologisms emerge from or diverge from traditional lexical roots.

2.1.3 Hànyǔ Xīncíyǔ Cídiǎn(汉语新词语词典)

Hànyǔ Xīncíyǔ Cídiǎn (2000-2020) (HXC, 汉语新词语词典), literally Chinese Neologism Dictionary (2000–2020) is a specialized lexicographic work documenting 4,263 neologisms that emerged during China’s early 21st-century sociotechnical transformation (Hou, 2023). Its corpus-driven methodology systematically analyzes textual materials from four sociolinguistic registers:

- State media discourse (e.g., policy-related terminology)
- Internet subcultures (e.g., memes, slang)
- Technical publications (e.g., cutting-edge innovations)
- Commercial registers (e.g., marketing-driven lexicon)

The dictionary categorizes entries into three thematic strata: technological terminology (e.g., *qūkuài liàn* “blockchain 区块链” and *yúnguǐ* “skyrail 云轨”), socioeconomic constructs (e.g., *nèijǔǎn* “involution 内卷” and *tǎngpíng* “lie flat 躺平”) and lifestyle phenomena (e.g., *wǎnghóng* “internet celebrity 网红”, and *duòshǒudǎng* “compulsive shoppers 剁手党”). It also includes grammatical innovations, such as the affective particle *mémédā* “么么哒,” reflecting modern linguistic creativity.

Core characteristics of HXC include

- Corpus-Driven Methodology: Relies on systematically curated texts to ensure representativeness.
- Sociolinguistic Diversity: Captures lexical variation across media, technology, economics, and daily life.

- Temporal Specificity: Focuses exclusively on neologisms from 2000–2020, providing a diachronic snapshot.
- Thematic Organization: Structures entries by domain (technology, society, lifestyle) for analytical clarity.
- Cultural Sensitivity: Documents internet-driven terms (e.g., *tǎngpíng* “lie flat”) that reflect youth culture.

HXC has emerged as a focal point in current research owing to its systematic documentation of neologisms. Unlike conventional dictionaries, its specialized scope—exclusively devoted to Chinese neologisms from 2000 to 2020—renders it indispensable for studying lexical innovation. As phonological features are only secondary considerations, researchers leveraging HXC for homophonic studies must manually identify phonetic pairs.

Homophonic neologisms this research focus on fall into two primary categories: those manually identified in the HXC corpus and those absent from existing dictionaries. Homophony represents a widespread yet methodologically challenging phenomenon in modern Chinese lexicology. Although homophonic patterns permeate both lexical and syntactic layers of the language, the systematic identification of neologisms derived from homophony requires methodological frameworks that are not adequately integrated with current lexicographic practices. Crucially, phonological and phonetic linkages often serve merely as secondary criteria, thereby complicating the methodological consistency of homophonic word collection.

While the first group of words constitutes legitimate neologisms as they are officially included in dictionaries, the second group nevertheless remains consistent with the conceptual framework of homophonic new words. Multiple scholarly sources, including the compilers of the HXC corpus, confirm that these words are indeed neologisms originating from homophonic processes (Hou, 2023).

3. Neologisms Selected for This Research

Group I

pāiyíng (拍蝇) – Literally “to swat flies,” *pāiyíng* (拍蝇) metaphorizes punishing low-level corrupt officials (“flies”), paired with *dǎhǔ* (打虎, “hunting tigers” for powerful figures) in anti-corruption campaigns. Though its exact origin is undocumented, its

widespread use aligns with China's intensified anti-corruption efforts post-2012 under the CPC's 18th Central Committee. The phrase "打虎拍蝇" became a catchphrase in official media after 2013, though its conceptual roots predate this period. Gaining prominence in 2013–2014, the term reflected a focus on grassroots governance, with state media adopting it systematically. The vivid imagery (flies vs. tigers) distinguishes corruption scales, cementing its place in Chinese political discourse by 2013 as part of comprehensive anti-corruption efforts. (PLAD, 2018)

xìnxī jiǎnfáng (信息茧房)

The term **xìnxī jiǎnfáng (信息茧房)** "information cocoon" adapts Cass Sunstein's 2006 concept of self-reinforced information isolation, where personalized algorithms and selective consumption trap users in homogenous viewpoints. In China, it gained prominence during 2016–2018 with algorithm-driven platforms like Douyin/TikTok, highlighting concerns over:

- Algorithmic bias: Systems amplifying echo chambers by filtering dissenting views.
- Social fragmentation: Polarization from isolated information ecosystems.

The metaphor blends "信息" (information) with "茧房" (cocoon), critiquing digital intellectual stagnation while echoing Chinese idioms like *bìmén zàochē* ("working behind closed doors"). Unlike direct translations (e.g., "echo chamber"), it culturally localizes global discourse, resonating with China's focus on algorithmic governance and social cohesion.

gāodì (高地) – The term **gāodì (高地)**, literally "high ground," has evolved from a geographical term to a metaphorical neologism in contemporary Chinese discourse, symbolizing strategic or ideological dominance. Emerging around the 2010s, it signifies:

- Strategic advantage: Dominance in competitive domains (e.g., *zhànlǚ gāodì* "strategic high ground" in business/geopolitics). Example: This startup aims to capture the *gāodì* of the luxury EV market.
- Moral superiority: Claiming elevated ideological positions, akin to "moral high ground".
- Online humor: Users jest as *gāodì zhǔrén* ("master of the high ground") after debates.

Rooted in traditional concepts like *zhàn shān wéi wáng* ("claim a mountain as king"), it adapts physical elevation imagery to abstract dominance in modern contexts. Its versatility spans geopolitics, satire, and business, blending tradition with contemporary competitiveness.

hàomài (号脉) –The term **hàomài (号脉)**, literally "pulse diagnosis" in Traditional

Chinese Medicine (TCM), has evolved into a modern metaphor for problem-solving, blending ancient medical practice with contemporary discourse. Key extensions include:

- Cultural revival: Post-COVID-19 global interest in TCM revived its usage. Example: The physician hàomàied my pulse for insomnia treatment
- Metaphorical analysis: Assessing underlying dynamics, e.g., journalists hàomài public mood during elections or policymakers hàomài-ing youth unemployment.
- Digital adaptation: Humorous tech references like "hàomài-ing market sentiment via big data" or apps " hàomài-ing user preferences".

Rooted in 2,000-year-old TCM practices like "独取寸口" (focusing on wrist pulses), hàomài now bridges tradition and modernity, reflecting China's innovative cultural synthesis. Its versatility spans medicine, media, and tech, demonstrating cross-context adaptability. (PD,1999)

wādì (洼地) – The term wādì(洼地), traditionally describing low-lying geographical features, has evolved into a modern metaphor for undervalued markets or fields with growth potential. Its contemporary usage spans:

- Geographical/Environmental: Refers to flood-prone urban areas, e.g., "City planners must address the wādì problem in old districts".
- Economic metaphor: Denotes lagging sectors or regions, e.g., "The rural wādì needs investment to catch up" or "technology wādì" for underdeveloped hubs.

Unlike English terms like "lowland" or "backwater," wādì uniquely bridges physical and abstract contexts, forming an antonym pair with gāodì("high ground"). Its versatility reflects concerns about vulnerability—from natural disasters to economic disparities—while retaining topographical roots.

wéiguān (围观)—The term wéiguān (围观), literally "to encircle and observe," originally described physical crowd gatherings (e.g., "A traffic accident drew a large wéiguān crowd"). In the digital age, it evolved to denote online bystander behavior, such as netizens spectating viral scandals ("The celebrity scandal became a hot topic for wéiguān netizens").

Composed of 围 (surround) and 观 (watch), it captures collective observation, now amplified by platforms like Weibo and Douyin. While neutral as "observation," **wéiguān** often implies passivity or voyeurism, critiqued as "the dark side of **wéiguān** culture". Similar to English "rubbernecking" but emphasizing digital collectivity, it reflects tensions between societal engagement and moral indifference.

Its modern usage bridges offline crowds and online spectating, serving as a lens to analyze power dynamics and civic participation in China's internet era.

léi (雷) – Originally “thunder.” As a neologism, it signifies something shocking or cringeworthy. The character 雷 (léi) has evolved beyond its original meteorological meaning to acquire rich contemporary connotations. Originally, 雷 either denotes thunder or mine. The latest gained meaning of the character indicate something shocking or absurd, representing sudden, jarring disruptions (like thunder) (e.g., “That plot twist was 雷人!”). It is typically applied to scandals or viral absurdities.

rán (燃) – Originally a verb meaning “to burn.” As a neologism, it functions as an adjective signifying something thrilling or “lit,” extending fire's intensity metaphorically (e.g., zhè shǒu gē hǎo rán! 这首歌好燃! – “This song is so lit!”).

The character “燃” (rán) has undergone significant semantic expansion beyond its original meaning of “to burn.” With its left component 火 (huǒ, “fire”), the character 燃 (rán) directly indicates the character’s association with combustion and heat. Its right component “然” (rán) originally meant “correct” or “so,” but here it functions phonetically and semantically, reinforcing the idea of “ignition” or “state of burning”. “燃” is a later variant of “然,” specialized to emphasize fire-related meanings. Currently, the character 燃 has evolved to indicate both physical and metaphorical burning. Its main context lies in the emotive and societal, e.g. “太燃了!” “So hype!” reflects its adoption in digital communication.

bǎnzhuān (板砖) – Originally “brick.” As a neologism, it denotes harsh criticism, as if throwing verbal bricks. has evolved beyond its original construction-related meaning to acquire rich metaphorical and cultural connotations. The character 板 (bǎn) means “board” or “slab,” emphasizing flatness and rigidity. 砖 (zhuān) means “brick,” a hard, rectangular building material. Together, bǎnzhuān (板砖) refers to standard clay or concrete bricks used in construction.

In internet slang, “拍板砖” (pāi bǎnzhuān, “throwing bricks”) means harshly criticizing or attacking someone, often in online forums or comment sections. E.g., 他的观点一出, 立刻被网友拍板砖。 (“As soon as he voiced his opinion, netizens immediately ‘threw bricks’ at him.”) Like a brick, the criticism implied in bǎnzhuān is straightforward and forceful. It may lack sophistication but delivers impact. The neologism bǎnzhuān (板砖) often implies direct, unfiltered nature of online discourse, where criticism can be harsh and immediate.

bānzhuān (搬砖) – The term **bānzhuān** (搬砖), literally “to carry bricks,” originated from construction work but evolved into a popular Chinese internet slang term for tedious, repetitive labor, often used with self-deprecating humor. Example: “每天上班就是搬砖, 工资还低。” (“Going to work daily is just ‘carrying bricks,’ with low pay”).

It spans contexts:

- Work culture: Describes mundane jobs (blue/white-collar), e.g., "Tonight, I'll keep grinding for gold" (今晚继续搬砖刷金币) in gaming, mirroring real-world drudgery.
- Social critique: Highlights China's competitive job market, contrasting with *bǎnzhuān* ("lying flat")—while the latter rejects overwork, **bǎnzhuān** acknowledges grinding as unavoidable.

The term's humor and adaptability reflect youth frustrations with low wages and burnout.

chīxiàng (吃相) – Originally "eating manners." As a neologism, it criticizes greedy or undignified behavior driven by ravaging motives. 吃 (chī) is the Chinese character for "to eat" and 相 (xiàng) is about "appearance," and "manner". "吃相" (chīxiàng) literally means a person's behavior and demeanor while eating. In recent years, it is used to describe general social behavior in competitive situations, especially one's way of pursuing personal gains or their social conduct when seizing opportunities.

In describing how people conduct themselves when pursuing benefits, the expression has negative connotations of being greedy, impatient, or lacking decorum. Contexts of the neologism bear a judgmental tone to criticize overt selfishness or lack of dignity in pursuing gains in business, politics or any other social competition. Example: "这家公司的吃相太难看, 涨价还减量。" ("This company's behavior is too shameless—raising prices while reducing quality.")

jiāxì (加戏) –The term *jiāxì* (加戏), literally "to add scenes" in drama/film, has evolved into a popular Chinese neologism criticizing attention-seeking behavior. It describes:

- Exaggerated self-importance: *tā míng míng bú shì zhǔ jué, què yì zhí zài jiā xì* (她明明不是主角, 却一直在加戏) "She's not the main character but keeps stealing the spotlight".
- Unnecessary drama: Mocking influencers, e.g., *zhè gè wǎng hóng yòu zài jiā xì, míng míng méi rén guān xīn tā de rì cháng* (这个网红又在加戏, 明明没人关心她的日常) "This influencer is overacting again—nobody cares about her daily life".
- Social melodrama: *bié jiā xì le, zhè shì hěn jiǎn dān* (别加戏了, 这事很简单) "Stop overcomplicating things—it's simple".

Originating from unscripted theatrical additions, *jiāxì* now critiques real-life/online overacting, reflecting societal disdain for artificial theatrics. Its spread parallels China's social media boom, where performative behavior thrives.

kòngjiàng (空降) –The term **kòngjiàng (空降)**, literally "airborne drop," originally described military operations where troops/supplies were delivered by aircraft. As a neologism, it now metaphorically denotes:

- Sudden executive appointments: **xīn CEO shì dòng shì huì kōng jiàng de (新CEO是董事会空降的)** "The new CEO was parachuted in by the board—zero internal experience".
- Unexpected VIP arrivals: **qún lǐ tū rán kōng jiàng yí gè dà lǎo(群里突然空降一个大佬)** "A big shot suddenly dropped into the group chat".
- Internet spectacles: **dǐng liú míng xīng kōng jiàng fēn sī qún (顶流明星空降粉丝群)** "A top celebrity dropped into the fan group—chaos erupted!".

Composed of **空**(air) and **降**(descend), it extends beyond military use to critique abrupt corporate hires or viral online appearances. The term reflects cultural tensions around unearned authority and digital attention economies.

yāshào (压哨) –The term **yāshào (压哨)**, originally meaning "rearguard troops covering retreats," now primarily denotes last-second actions in sports and daily life. Composed of **压**(press) and **哨**(whistle), it evolved from military defense to describe:

- Buzzer-beating plays: Game-winning shots/goals right before period endings in basketball/soccer.
- Deadline heroics: **tā yā shào tí jiāo le lùn wén (他压哨提交了论文)** "He submitted his thesis at the buzzer—almost missed the deadline".

While implying extreme time pressure, **yāshào** carries positive "clutch" connotations, celebrating narrow victories. Its expansion into work/school contexts reflects cultural tensions between efficiency and last-minute triumphs.

zhòngqiāng (中枪) – Originally "to be shot." As a neologism, it denotes being unintentionally implicated. This term has a military origin and the two characters, **中** (**zhòng**) and **枪** (**qiāng**), mean "to be hit," "to suffer" and "gun,"/"firearm" respectively.

The literal translation of the term is being struck by a bullet in combat. It turns into a neologism denoting being unexpectedly affected by criticism or blame and can be used humorously to indicate feeling personally attacked and is often used to mock bad luck or absurd situations. E.g., **wǒ zhǐ shì lù guò, jié guǒ mò míng zhōng qiāng "我只是路过, 结果莫名中枪。"** ("I was just passing by, but somehow got 'shot' [blamed].") Its popularity underscores modern society's fascination with victimhood, irony, and online drama.

mǎshàngbàn(码上办) The term mǎshàngbàn (码上办) is a homophonic neologism playing on mǎshàngbàn (马上办, "handle immediately"). Combining 码(code/QR), 上(upon), and 办(process), it promotes instant digital services through code-scanning.

Originating as a government slogan, it enables contactless processing, e.g., yì qíng qī jiān , jiàn kāng mǎ shí xiàn' mǎ shàng bàn' (疫情期间, 健康码实现'码上办') "During the pandemic, health code services achieved 'instant handling by code'". Now adopted by businesses, it streamlines tasks like kuài dì' mǎ shàng bàn' , sǎo mǎ jí jì jiàn(快递码上办, 扫码即寄件) "Express delivery 'code service'—scan to ship immediately".

The term reflects China's push for digital governance and smartphone-era efficiency in banking, logistics, etc.

shénmǎ (神马)

Homophone of: shénme (什么, "what")

The term shénmǎ (神马) represents one of the most fascinating examples of Chinese internet slang evolution. It is comprised of 神(shén) "god/deity/magical" and 马 (mǎ) "horse", the literal translation is "divine horse" or "heavenly steed" (mythological reference). The latest extension to shénme (什么) "what" is mainly attributed to online typos and phonetic input errors (Pinyin: "shenma" for both). It is now commonly understood as a humorous placeholder for "what", both colloquially and on the internet. E.g., zhè shì shén mǎ qíng kuàng (这是神马情况?) "What is this situation?". It is popularized by post-90s/00s netizens and conveys lighthearted confusion or surprise. It is often paired with "浮云" (fúyún, "floating clouds") to form a meme indicating a philosophy of detachment. Its golden age is 2008-2015 (height of BBS and early social media) and would be considered "retro" now.

Group II

Homophonic neologisms not documented in HXC (2000–2020) (Hou, 2023) can be categorized thematically: (a) those reflecting price inflation, and (b) those denoting other novel sociocultural phenomena. The following examples demonstrate salient lexicalizations of economic surge semantics:

huǒjiàndàn 火箭蛋

Literal Breakdown: 火箭 (huǒjiàn): rocket + 蛋 (dàn): egg

Meaning: This term emerged during periods of rapidly increasing egg prices. It humorously compares the speed of the price hike to a rocket.

Translation Options:

Rocket eggs: This is the direct literal translation. It captures the wordplay but requires explanation for non-Chinese speakers to understand the context (soaring prices).

Rocketing egg prices: This conveys the core meaning (rapidly rising prices) more clearly than the pure literal translation. It's descriptive.

Skyrocketing eggs: Similar to “rocketing egg prices”, emphasizing the steep increase.

The phrase is homophonous to *huǒjiàndàn* 火箭弹 “rocket projectile”, naturally evoking the sense of steeply rising egg prices.

suànnǐhěn 蒜你狠

Literal Breakdown: 蒜 (suàn): Garlic + 你狠 (nǐ hěn): You are fierce/vicious/really something (a common phrase meaning “You're ruthless” or “You're really something” often used admiringly or exasperatedly).

Meaning: This term became popular when garlic prices spiked dramatically. It's a homophonic pun on 算你狠 (suànnǐhěn – “You're really something!” or “Darn you!”). It personifies garlic as being brutally expensive.

Translation Options:

“Garlic rage”: This captures the anger/frustration consumers felt about the high prices. It's evocative.

“You're really something, garlic!”: This tries to replicate the pun structure and meaning of the original phrase directly addressing garlic.

dòunǐwán 逗你玩

Literal Breakdown: 逗 (dòu): Bean (often referring to mung beans in this context) + 你玩 (nǐ wán): You play / Teasing you

Meaning: This term arose during periods of speculation and sharp price increases for beans (especially mung beans). It's a homophonic pun on the common phrase 逗你玩 (dòunǐwán – “Just teasing/kidding you” or “Just playing with you”). It implies the bean market (or speculators) are “playing” with consumers by driving prices up erratically.

Translation Options: “ean tease”: This is a very direct literal translation mirroring the pun structure (“逗” for bean, “你玩” for tease/play).

“Just teasing you, beans”: This replicates the structure of addressing the beans directly like the original pun (“逗你玩” vs. “逗你玩”).

“Bean folly”: These focus more on the market speculation aspect causing the price volatility.

fǔbùqǐ (豆腐)不起

Literal: “can't afford tofu”

Homophonic mechanism: 腐 fǔ (tofu) ↔ 付 fù (to pay)

The homophone in this innovation concerns fǔ 腐 (tofu) and fù 付 (to pay). It was intended as a pun to satire on unaffordable prices of tofu at the time.

Function: Pun satirizing unaffordable tofu prices.

gēnǐròu 鸽你肉

Literal: “pigeon meat price exceeds normal purchasing power”

Homophonic mechanism: 鸽 gē (pigeon) ↔ 割 gē (to cut) + 你肉 nǐròu (your flesh)

While the first Chinese character 鸽 indicates pigeon or dove, it is also homophonic to gē 割, which denotes to cut. The following characters nǐròu 你肉 actually collocate with the verb cut, meaning cut your flesh. The homophonic construction puns on the meat pigeon price inflation as if it is stabbing into the customer’s flesh.

Function: Satire on inflated pigeon prices evoking the metaphor “cutting your flesh”.

jiāngnǐjūn 姜你军

Literal: “exorbitant ginger price”

Homophonic mechanism: 姜 jiāng (ginger) ↔ 将 jiāng (general) + 将军 jiāngjūn (checkmate in Chinese chess)

The first character jiāng signifies ginger. It is homophonic to the Chinese chess terminology jiāng 将 or jiāngjū 将军, which denotes to checkmate.

Function: Satire framing ginger price spikes as if they were “checkmating consumers” or to corner them.

méichāofēng 煤超疯

Literal: “super-high coal price”

Homophonic mechanism: 疯 fēng (madness) ↔ 峰 fēng (peak)

The first character 煤 méi indicates coal. The combination introduces a syntactic construction to remark on the characteristics of coal price at the period. The homophone in this innovation is the last syllable fēng, which at once corresponds to the character 疯 indicating madness and the character 峰 meaning peak. All in all the construction can be explained as the coal price has gone mad and/or the coal price has reached record high.

Dual semantics: a) “coal price gone mad” b) “coal price hitting record peak”

miánhuāzhǎng 棉花掌

Literal: “cotton price inflation”

Homophonic mechanism: 掌 zhǎng (palm) ↔ 涨 zhǎng (price rise)

The double semantics goes to cotton on the one hand and the unique Chinese martial art Cotton Palm Technique. The homophonic pair is the syllable zhǎng, which can be transcribed as 掌 “palm” and 涨 “rise”. The construction thus means at once that the cotton price is soaring and the cotton price hits the consumers as if with the martial technique Mianhua Zhang (Cotton Palm Technique), leaving them in despair.

Cultural reference: Allusion to martial arts technique “Cotton Palm” (绵掌), implying cotton price hikes strike consumers like physical blows.

píngshénme 苹什么

Literal: “why are apple prices so high?”

Homophonic mechanism: 苹 píng (apple) ↔ 凭 píng (on what grounds) + 什么 shénme (what)

Structure: Reconfiguration of Mandarin colloquial phrase 凭什么 (píngshénme “by what right?”)

The double semantics goes to cotton on the one hand and the unique Chinese martial art Cotton Palm Technique. The homophonic pair is connected to the syllable *zhǎng*, which can be transcribed as 掌 and 涨. The construction thus means at once that the cotton price is soaring and the cotton price hits the consumers like the martial technique Mianhua Zhang (Cotton Palm Technique), leaving them astounded and in despair.

tánggāozōng 糖高宗

Literal: “soaring sugar price”

Homophonic mechanism: 糖 táng (sugar) ↔ 唐 Táng (imperial dynasty) + 高宗 gāozōng (emperor's title)

táng can be transcribed as 糖 “sugar” and 唐 “the Dynasty of Tang”. By this innovation, the rising price of sugar at a time is far beyond normal.

Function: Satirical elevation of sugar prices to “imperial” status.

xiāsǐnǐ 虾死你

Literal: “shrimp prices unprecedentedly high”

Homophonic mechanism: 虾 xiā (shrimp) ↔ 吓 xià (to scare)

The broad homophonic pair 虾 shrimp and 吓 to scare is working together towards the meaning of the neologism indicating the exorbitant price of the shrimps at a time.

Colloquial basis: Recasts the Mandarin idiom *xiàsǐnǐ* 吓死你 (“scare you to death”) as economic critique.

These neologisms emerge as sociolinguistic responses to speculation-induced price volatility in essential commodities, employing strategic phonological reconfiguration of established lexicon to encode economic shocks. The innovation mechanism operates through (a) systematic sound-patterning that metaphorizes abrupt inflationary pressures, and (b) semantic hybridization merging original denotations with emergent socioeconomic commentaries.

Homophonic neologisms beyond dictionary records and price inflation:

These examples are of multiple sources, but they are neither included in HXC (2000–2020) [Dictionary of Chinese Neologisms] (Hou, 2023) nor indicating price surge:

chūkǒuchéngzāng (出口成脏)

Literal: “a mouthful of filth when speaking”

Homophonic mimicry: Parodies the idiom *chūkǒuchéngzhāng* (出口成章, “eloquent

speech")

Usage: Satirizes vulgar language (e.g., online trolling).

yīyībùshě (依依不舍)

Literal: “unwilling to part with each garment”

Homophonic idiom: yīyībùshě (依依不舍, “reluctant to part”)

Commercial intent: Clothing brand name leveraging emotional attachment.

bēijù (杯具)

The literal meaning of bēijù (杯具) is tea cup set. A homophone of bēijù (悲剧) “tragedy”, the two Chinese characters now also mean tragedy. It is particularly used to convey personal, ironic misfortunes (e.g., jīn tiān yòu bēi jù le 今天又杯具了 “Today’s another cup-tastrophe”).

xǐjù (洗具)

The literal meaning of xǐjù (洗具) is washing utensils. A homophone of xǐjù (喜剧) “comedy”, the two-character word also denotes comedy now.

sāo nián (骚年)

Near-homophone of: shàonián (少年, “youth”)

Connotation: Playfully mocks youthful flamboyance (e.g., sāo nián, jiā yóu! 骚年加油 → “You got this, flamboyant youth!”).

mèizhǐ / hànzhǐ (妹纸/汉纸)

Near-homophones of: mèizi / hànzi (妹子/汉子, “girl/dude”)

Usage: Affectionate internet slang, common in Anime, Comics and Games.

fěnsī

fěnsī (粉丝) originally means vermicelli noodles. Recently it has gained the meaning of the English “fans”. E.g. Tā wèi le gěi ǒu xiàng dǎ bǎng, měi tiān áo yè zuò shù jù, zhēn shì tiě gǎn fēn sī! (她为了给偶像打榜, 每天熬夜做数据, 真是铁杆粉丝!) “She stays up late every night to generate data for her idol’s rankings—what a die-hard fan!”

biǎo (表)

biǎo is a phonetic contraction from búyào (不要) “don’t want”. E.g., biǎo zhuāng, nǐ míng míng hěn xiǎng yào! (biǎo 装, 你明明很想要!) “Stop pretending you don’t want it—you clearly do!”

4. The Lexicographic Gap and Discussions

HXC (2000-2020) contains the highest proportion of neologisms among comparable dictionaries, resulting in an elevated occurrence of homophonic entries. Notably, however, these homophonic entries constitute less than 1% of the dictionary’s total content. A systematic comparison reveals that only partial overlaps exist between the documented homophonic entries in this compilation and those in HGHC and CCD. For instance, while the term *hónghǎi* (红海) appears in all three dictionaries surveyed, *tiěgōngjī* (铁公机), *xiǎomùbiāo* (小目标), and *tiěgōngjī* (铁公基) are absent from both *Xiàndài Hànyǔ Cídiǎn* and HGHC. Furthermore, all three lexicons lack homophonic neologisms denoting sudden price surges – coinages like *yóunǐzhǎng* (油你涨, 'oil-driven inflation'), *dòunǐwán* (豆你玩, 'soybean market gambit'), and *jiàngnǐjūn* (姜你军, 'ginger price militarization'), despite their sociolinguistic salience.

Price surge neologisms exemplify terms often excluded by lexicographical criteria as compilers of HXC (2000-2020) has acknowledged the following principles in selecting entries:

- Originality: Must represent novel lexical creations
- Lexicity: Excludes proper nouns and event-specific terms
- Frequency: Requires demonstrable usage (with exceptional cases)
- Evolution: Recognizes technical/niche terms gaining mainstream traction
- Cultural vetting: Omits vulgar or socially disfavored terms (Hou, 2023)

Its systematic exclusion of structurally incompatible lexemes, notably inflationary coinages, reveals inherent framework constraints. Such expressions routinely bypass morphosyntactic norms through clausal extensions and contextual innovations, effectively circumventing standard lexicographic capture, as evidenced by lexical items including: *yóunǐzhǎng* (油你涨/由你涨, “oil-driven inflation”) and *dòunǐwán* (豆你玩/逗你玩 “soybean market gambit”), where exclamatory phrases such as *nǐzhǎng* 你涨 and *nǐwán* 你玩 evade standard recording assessment.

The low frequency of numerous excluded homophonic neologisms further compromises their lexicographic viability. The exceptional plasticity of inflationary word formations triggers distinct lexical creations for each price surge event, inherently inhibiting systematic lexicalization. Similarly, innovations emerging from singular events or individual experiences lack the recurrence required for neologism standardization. In such cases, the homophonic dimension becomes functionally marginal—serving merely as generative context rather than constituting essential criteria for neologism dictionary inclusion.

Original coinages frequently manifest multimodal heterogeneity—integrating pinyin abbreviations (e.g., *yyds* [永远的神, ‘eternal deity’]), character deformations (e.g.,

𣎵 méi—an ancient character denoting ‘plum’, reanalyzed through its components 呆 dāi [‘dull’], thus conveying ‘doubly dull’) and fortuitous phonemic appropriations (e.g., 氪金 kèjīn: a typo for 课金 [‘pay for transactions’], where 氪 kè [‘krypton’] accidentally replaced 课, yet kèjīn supplanted the original form and semantically specialized to ‘microtransactions’). The third case exemplifies homophonic neologisms derived from typos, such as jiǒng for 窘 (‘embarrassed’) and its homophone 囧. Internet users repurposed 囧—visually resembling a dismayed facial expression—to signify ‘gloom’ or ‘embarrassment’. This novel semantic layer wholly diverges from its classical meaning ‘bright’. Homophonic neologisms further arise from three multimodal sources: character-based constructs (e.g., 红海 hónghǎi [‘red sea’ → ‘highly competitive market’]), transliteration hybrids (e.g., 耐撕 nàisī [‘nice’ + ‘tear-resistant’ → ‘tenacious’]; 薅住 hāozhù [‘hold’ + ‘grab’ → ‘maintain control’]) and orthographic fusions (e.g., 芭比 Q bābǐqū [‘BBQ’ → ‘barbecue-like apocalypse’]).

Among the three dictionaries surveyed, HXC (2000-2020) demonstrated the most comprehensive coverage of multimodal neologisms. It included entries such as hold住/薅住 (hāozhù, a code-mixed phrase meaning “to maintain control”) and BBQ/芭比 Q (bābǐqū, originally “barbecue” but later metaphorized to mean “doomed” in online slang). However, the dictionary’s treatment of these terms exhibited two limitations, semantic incompleteness and orthographic marginalization. The entry for BBQ retained only its literal culinary meaning, omitting its metaphorical internet usage. But such neologisms were categorized under “lettered words” (字母词), segregated from standard character-based entries (Hou, 2023; Liu, 2002).

In contrast, the digital HGHC showed minimal engagement with contemporary neologisms. None of the aforementioned multimodal examples were documented. Archaic definitions prevailed, e.g., 囧 jiǒng was listed solely as “brightness,” ignoring its modern meme usage as an “awkward face” emoticon. It does not recognize repurposed characters like 𣎵 méi (historically a variant of 梅 “plum,” now meaning “double silliness”). The CCD (7th ed.) similarly adhered to conservative lexicographic principles, excluding these neologistic developments.

In a nutshell, lexicographic codification inherently homogenizes such innovations during dictionary inclusion, condensing multimodal elements—standard characters, crowdsourced adaptations, Pinyin, and symbols—into unified entries. Consequently, expressions exhibiting radical heterogeneity face systematic exclusion from neologism dictionaries.

5. Conclusion

Lexicographers typically include or exclude homophonic neologisms based on conventional criteria, favoring words from high-frequency semantic domains while overlooking unconventional formations. In Mandarin, however, homophonic innovations defy traditional constraints, acting as a dynamic force across grammatical and semantic structures. These wordplays operate at lexical, phrasal, and syntactic levels—even within niche domains (e.g., terms for price surges). Though dictionary definitions rarely capture homophonic creativity, such neologisms drive broader linguistic innovation in Chinese. While lexicography helps popularize new expressions, its institutional mediation often detaches them from their sociolinguistic roots, weakening the ecological accuracy of documentation. Lexical inclusion offers superficial validation; true selection reflects a neologism’s evolution and adherence to norms. Future research should explore the generative contexts of homophonic wordplay as a catalyst for polysemy.

6. Acknowledgements

We sincerely acknowledge our reviewers for their insightful comments and advice.

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