

The Chinese Have a Word *for It*

The Complete Guide to Chinese
Thought and Culture



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This extraordinary phenomenon came about because American businessman Joseph C. Babcock, who lived in Shanghai, introduced the game into the U.S. in 1920.

It quickly became such a fad that people all over the country bought Chinese robes to wear while they played the game, and some went to the extent of turning rooms in their homes into "*Majong* Rooms," redecorating them in Chinese motifs.

Some of the sets sold in the U.S. at that time cost as much as five hundred dollars (almost as much as a Model T Ford). But the craze was over by 1925.

During the heyday of the *majong* fad in the U.S., Babcock exported so many *majong* sets from China that the Chinese makers ran out of the cattle shin bones used to make them.

Babcock quickly arranged for several million shin bones to be exported to China from cattle slaughter houses in the U.S.

In China today when someone wants to get a *majong* game going they frequently use the colloquial phrase, "Let's build a Great Wall."

骂街

Ma Zhan / Ma Jie

(Mah Chahn / Mah Jee-eh)

"Fighting with Your Mouth"

When I first began visiting Hong Kong and Guangdong Province in Southeastern China in the 1950s I was repeatedly surprised and unnerved by what I perceived to be angry shouting matches between Cantonese speakers, including family members who were working together.

It wasn't long, however, before someone explained that it is necessary to speak louder than usual in order to communicate effectively in Cantonese because that language has nine different tonal levels that must be enunciated clearly to get the desired meaning across.

I also learned that all other Chinese languages are tonal as well (but with fewer tones), and require exceptionally precise, clear pronunciation

or they become unintelligible. Rather than being taken as exotic or sexy, speaking Chinese with an accent can get you nowhere or in trouble.

The tonal nature of China's languages, combined with the gregariousness of the Chinese, makes China a very noisy place. In restaurants and other public places the din is generally enough to drown out any conversation that is not virtually shouted.

There is one other common category of shouting in China that has nothing to do with the nature of the languages, however. It has to do with the propensity of the Chinese to engage in *ma zhan* (mah chahn) or *mouth fights*.

In pre-modern China harmony took precedence over virtually everything else. There were very strong cultural taboos as well as administrative laws against physical violence. Both parties in a physical fight were automatically guilty of disturbing the peace, and liable for severe punishments.

But the density of the population in China's urban areas, and the extreme pressure on the Chinese to follow a very detailed form of etiquette when interacting within one's *own* group resulted in a high level of repressed frustration that could be set off by a minor annoyance when it involved a stranger.

It therefore became common for people to vent their anger in prolonged and loud *ma zhan—verbal battles—*instead of coming to blows. Much of this verbal battling was for show—playing to the crowd—and ended when the parties felt they had gained or preserved “face.”

More serious confrontations between clans, warlords and other large groups that ended up in violent battles involving all sorts of deadly weapons were almost always preceded by long, loud verbal exchanges when the two groups came face to face. A number of individuals on each of the opposing sides took turns shouting accusations and insults in a formalized manner.

Both *ma zhan* and actual physical confrontations are becoming more common in China as the restraints imposed by the traditional culture continue to weaken, and competition for space and economic advancement heat up.

On the international front, this factor will most likely have a profound influence on the future behavior of Chinese businesspeople and diplomats, as they become less restrained in their actions and reactions.

Visitors in China today are more apt to witness a modernized version of *ma zhan* known as *ma jie* (mah jee-eh). *Jie* means *across the street*, so *ma jie* refers to people facing each other across a street and engaging in verbal battles—something that happens regularly in China's crowded cities.

Adjusting to the din of restaurants, tea shops and other public places, including streets, is one of the accommodations that foreigners visiting or living in China must make in order to feel comfortable and enjoy themselves.

乱

Luan

(Luu-enn)

"The Greatest Fear"

Throughout most of their history, the people of China were secure in the certitude that theirs was the greatest, the best, and the most enduring of all countries, and there were numerous valid reasons for such beliefs.

Geographically, the huge landmass of China was protected on the east by a great ocean, on the north by the harsh vastness of Siberia, on the west by the vast reaches of the Gobi Desert and the great barrier of the Himalayas, and on the south by the jungles and mountains of the upper Indo-China peninsula.

With more than four thousand years of minutely detailed history and a record of achievements that dwarfed all of the rest of the world combined, it was simply beyond Chinese comprehension that any other nation might have equal or greater claims to glory.

China's book of history is filled with the rise and fall of many dynasties, and marked by the violence of wars and practically every natural disaster known to man, but for most of this great expanse of time China was a land of peace and relative prosperity.

The main social, economic and political principle of China over these ages was, in fact, peace and harmony—not based on personal choice, but on a minutely structured and rigidly controlled system designed to prevent *luan* (luu-enn) or *disorder* and preserve the family, village, work unit and dynasty that existed at that time.

One of the most important facets of this control system was a stylized form of personal behavior that became so pervasive and culturally powerful that it took on the trappings of a cult.

Any behavior that was outside of a precisely sanctioned norm was regarded as a threat to society that could lead to widespread disorder and dire consequences for everyone.

Within this environment, the Chinese developed a pathological fear of *luan*, causing them to go to extra extremes to ensure that everyone upheld the highest standards of behavior.

This Chinese abhorrence of disorder has been put to the ultimate test time and again since they began to have regular intercourse with the outside