



Mandarin Swear Words Used by Chinese: A Descriptive Qualitative Study

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ABSTRACT

Swear words, while often considered taboo, have played a significant role in human communication. This study aimed to identify the Mandarin swear words used by Chinese speakers, analyze their forms, references, and functions. The research was conducted using a descriptive qualitative design. Primary data were collected through document analysis and interviews. The researcher acted as the main instrument, supported by document analysis sheets and interview guides. Three informants were selected based on predetermined criteria. The data were analyzed descriptively using the theory of Miles and Huberman (1984). The results of the study showed that there were 34 Mandarin swear words used by Chinese speakers. In terms of form, 13 were classified as words, consisting of 1 monomorphemic word and 12 polymorphemic words; 12 were phrases, and 9 were clauses. With regard to their references, five categories were identified: sex (5), excrement (2), animal names (2), mental illness (3), and personal background (5). Furthermore, five functions of Mandarin swear words were found: expressing emotion (8), drawing attention (5), social group identity (2), aggression (18), and regressive (1). These findings highlight the various ways in which swear words are employed in Mandarin, revealing their communicative purposes and sociolinguistic relevance.

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INTRODUCTION

Language serves as a fundamental tool for human communication, allowing individuals to convey ideas, emotions, and social intentions (Nasution & Tambunan, 2022). One linguistic form that carries intense emotional and cultural weight is swearing. Swear words are often taboo, emotionally charged, and potentially offensive (O'Driscoll, 2020; Beers Fagersten & Stapleton, 2017). McEney (2006)

emphasizes that these words are often seen as insulting, disrespectful, and indecent, which explains their regulation across different societies. Despite being socially discouraged, swearing persists in everyday language due to its expressive power, emotional release, and social bonding functions.

Swearing is deeply shaped by cultural and linguistic contexts. While English swear words often stem from bodily functions or profanity (Sukmaningrum & Hawa, 2022), in Asian cultures such as Vietnamese and Mandarin, they often involve family honor or other culturally significant themes (Nguyen, 1993; Murtadhoh & Arini, 2023). Studies by Setyaningtias et al. (2023), Tran (2024), and Li et al. (2020) reflect this variation, showing that swear words differ in structure, meaning, and function across languages and social settings. This cross-cultural diversity highlights that swearing is not a universal phenomenon, but one that is linguistically and culturally nuanced.

However, despite the richness of research in languages like English, Vietnamese, and even regional languages like Javanese and Balinese, focused studies on Mandarin swear words, especially in non-digital, everyday interactions, remain scarce. Zhao (2021) notes that most existing studies are limited to online discourse, overlooking swearing in face-to-face interactions, which may carry different motivations and expressions.

Given the widespread use of Mandarin and its unique tonal system that influences meaning (Li & Thompson, 1977), further investigation into how Mandarin speakers use swear words in daily life is essential. Moreover, while prior studies have categorized swear words by type or function, few have analyzed them comprehensively in terms of form, reference, and sociocultural function within Mandarin. Addressing this gap, the present study proposes a qualitative descriptive analysis integrating document analysis and semi-structured interviews with native Chinese speakers. This approach aims to offer a more holistic understanding of Mandarin swearing as a linguistic, emotional, and cultural phenomenon.

The novelty of this research lies in its focus on Mandarin swear words in everyday speech rather than online settings, and its integrated analysis of their form, references, and functions. This study is expected to contribute both to the field of linguistics and to cross-cultural communication by uncovering how swearing in Mandarin reflects deeper social values and emotional expressions.

METHOD

This study used a descriptive qualitative design to examine the forms, references, and functions of Mandarin Chinese swear words. Conducted in Lovina, North Bali, a popular tourist area with many Chinese visitors, the research involved three Mandarin-speaking informants selected through convenience sampling based on fluency in Mandarin and English, age (20–65), cultural knowledge, availability, and willingness to participate. Data were collected through document analysis and interviews, with the

researcher as the key instrument, supported by a document analysis sheet and an interview guide. Analysis followed Miles and Huberman's (1994) model: data reduction, display in tables, and conclusion drawing with verification. Trustworthiness was ensured through source and method triangulation, combining interview and document data to enhance accuracy and depth.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Results

1. The Mandarin Swear Words Used by Chinese

Table 1. Proportions of the Body of the Article

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning
1	<i>mā de</i>	damn!
2	<i>tā mā de</i>	damn it!, fucking hell
3	<i>nītāmāde</i>	damn you!
4	<i>shǎ bī</i>	stupid cunt, asshole
5	<i>èr bǎi wǔ</i>	idiot, stupid
6	<i>cào</i>	fuck!
7	<i>cào nǚ ma</i>	fuck your mother
8	<i>jiàn nǚ rén</i>	bitch
9	<i>bèn dàn</i>	idiot
10	<i>hún dàn</i>	bastard, asshole
11	<i>shǎquē</i>	fool, idiot
12	<i>jiàn rén</i>	slut, whore
13	<i>nǚ yǒu bìng a</i>	are you nuts?!
14	<i>wángbādàn</i>	son of a bitch, bastard
15	<i>bì zuǐ</i>	shut up!
16	<i>nǚ zhēn shì yíge feiwù</i>	you're loser
17	<i>nǚ shìge hunqiu</i>	you're a douchebag!
18	<i>gǔn kai!</i>	get lost!, go to hell!
19	<i>bié gēn wǒ huchě</i>	no fucking baloney
20	<i>qù nǐde</i>	screw you
21	<i>gǔn dan</i>	fuck off!
22	<i>fàng pì</i>	bullshit!
23	<i>ěr bi</i>	fucking idiot
24	<i>cào nǚ zǔzōng shíba dai</i>	fuck your ancestors
25	<i>gǒushǐ</i>	bullshit
26	<i>qù sǐ</i>	go to hell
27	<i>chòu bù yao lian</i>	shameless
28	<i>nǚ zhēn ta ma chǔn</i>	you're fucking stupid
29	<i>nǚ ge baichi</i>	you moron
30	<i>nǚ naozi yǒu bìng</i>	are you insane?
31	<i>nǚ qù sǐ ba</i>	go die!
32	<i>bì shang nǚ de chòu zuǐ</i>	shut your stinky mouth
33	<i>nǚ ge chǔnhuò</i>	you idiot
34	<i>nǚ gēi wǒ gǔn</i>	get lost

Based on Table 1, there are thirty-four (34) Mandarin swear words Used by Chinese and their meaning in English.

2. The Forms of Mandarin Swear Words Used by Chinese

A. The Swear Words in The Form of Word

In the form of words, this study found that swear words are classified as monomorphemic and polymorphemic.

Table 2. The Swear Words Used by Chinese in The Form of a Monomorphemic Word

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning
1	<i>cào</i>	fuck!

Based on table 2, there is only one (1) Mandarin swear word that is used by Chinese in form of Monomorphemic Word which is *cào*

Table 3. The Swear Words Used by Chinese in The Form of a Polymorphemic Word

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning	Morpheme
1	<i>mā de</i>	damn!	<i>ma + de</i>
2	<i>sha bi</i>	stupid cunt, dumbass	<i>sha + bi</i>
3	<i>èr bǎi wǔ</i>	stupid, idiot	<i>ēr + bai + wǔ</i>
4	<i>bèn dàn</i>	idiot	<i>ben + dan</i>
5	<i>hún dàn</i>	bastard, asshole	<i>hun + dan</i>
6	<i>shǎquē</i>	fool, idiot	<i>sha + quē</i>
7	<i>jiàn rén</i>	slut, whore	<i>jiàn + rén</i>
8	<i>wángbādàn</i>	son of bitch, bastard	<i>wangba + dan</i>
9	<i>gǔn dan</i>	fuck off!	<i>gǔn + dan</i>
10	<i>fàng pì</i>	bullshit	<i>fang + pì</i>
11	<i>ēr bi</i>	fucking idiot	<i>ēr + bi</i>
12	<i>gǒushǐ</i>	crap, bullshit	<i>gǒu + shǐ</i>

Based on table 3, there are twelve (12) Mandarin swear word that is used by Chinese in form of Monomorphemic Word which are *mā de, sha bi, èr bǎi wǔ, bèn dàn, hún dàn, shǎquē, jiàn rén, wángbādàn, gǔn dan, fàng pì, ēr bi, gǒushǐ*,

B. The Swear Words in The Form of Phrase

Table 4. The Swear Words Used by Chinese in The Form of Phrase

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning	Classification
1	<i>tā mā de</i>	Damn it!, Fucking hell	Noun phrase
2	<i>nǐtāmāde</i>	Damn you!	Noun phrase
3	<i>cào nǐ ma</i>	Fuck your mother	Noun phrase
4	<i>jiàn nǚ rén</i>	Bitch	Noun phrase
5	<i>cào nǐ zǔzōng shíba dai</i>	Fuck your ancestors	Noun phrase
6	<i>nǐ ge baichi</i>	You moron	Noun phrase
7	<i>nǐ ge chǔnhuò</i>	You idiot	Noun phrase

8	<i>bì zuǐ</i>	Shut up!	Verb phrase
9	<i>gǔn kai!</i>	Get lost! Or go to hell!	Verb phrase
10	<i>qù nǐde</i>	Screw you	Verb phrase
11	<i>qù sǐ</i>	Go to hell	Verb phrase
12	<i>chòu bù yao lian</i>	Shameless	Adjective phrase

Based on table 4, there are twelve (12) Mandarin swear word that is used by Chinese in form of Phrase which are *tā mā de, nǐtāmāde, cào nǐ ma, jiàn nǚ rén, cào nǐ zǔzōng shǐba dai, nǐ ge baichi, nǐ ge chǔnhuò, bì zuǐ, gǔn kai! qù nǐde, qù sǐ chòu bù yao lian*.

C. The Swear Words in The Form of Clause

In the form of words, this study found that swear words are classified as independent clause and dependent clause.

Table 5. The Swear Words Used by Chinese in The Form of Clause

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning	Classification
1	<i>nǐ yǒu bing a</i>	You are crazy	Independent Clause
2	<i>nǐ zhēn shì yige feiwù</i>	You're loser	Independent Clause
3	<i>nǐ shìge hunqiu</i>	You're a douchebag	Independent Clause
4	<i>bié gēn wǒ huchě</i>	No fucking baloney	Independent Clause
5	<i>nǐ zhēn ta ma chǔn</i>	You're fucking stupid	Independent Clause
6	<i>nǐ naozi yǒu bing</i>	Are you insane?	Independent Clause
7	<i>nǐ qù sǐ ba</i>	Go die!	Independent Clause
8	<i>bì shang nǐ de chòu zuǐ</i>	Shut your stinky mouth	Independent Clause
9	<i>nǐ gěi wǒ gǔn</i>	Get lost	Independent Clause

Based on table 5, this study only found the independent clause swear words, there are nine (9) Mandarin swear word that is used by Chinese in form of independent clause which are *nǐ yǒu bing a, nǐ zhēn shì yige feiwù, nǐ shìge hunqiu, bié gēn wǒ huchě, nǐ zhēn ta ma chǔn, nǐ naozi yǒu bing, nǐ qù sǐ ba, bì shang nǐ de chòu zuǐ, nǐ gěi wǒ gǔn*.

3. The References of Swear Words Used by Chinese

This section contains data of the reference of the mandarin swear words that which in terms of sex, excrement, animal names, mental illness, personal background. Those can be see in the table below.

Table 6. The References of Swear Words Used by Chinese

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning	Classification
1	<i>sha bi</i>	stupid cunt, asshole	Sex
2	<i>cào</i>	fuck!	Sex
3	<i>cào nǐ ma</i>	fuck your mother	Sex, Personal Background
4	<i>ēr bi</i>	fucking idiot	Sex,

5	<i>cào nǐ zǔzōng shíba dai</i>	fuck your ancestors	Sex, Personal Background
6	<i>fàng pì</i>	bullshit	Excrement
7	<i>gǒushǐ</i>	bullshit	Excrement, Animal Names
8	<i>wángbādàn</i>	son of bitch, bastard	Animal Names, Personal Background
9	<i>nǐ yǒu bìng a</i>	Are you nuts?	Mental Illness
10	<i>nǐ naozi yǒu bìng</i>	Are you insane?	Mental Illness
11	<i>nǐ ge baichi</i>	You moron	Mental Illness
12	<i>jiàn nǚ rén</i>	Bitch	Personal Background
13	<i>jiàn rén</i>	Slut, whore	Personal Background

Based on table 6, there are thirteen (13) swear words that can be included to the references of sex (*sha bi, cào, cào nǐ ma, ēr bi, cào nǐ zǔzōng shíba dai*), excrement (*fàng pì, gǒushǐ*), animal names (*wángbādàn, gǒushǐ*), mental illness (*nǐ yǒu bìng a, nǐ naozi yǒu bìng, nǐ ge baichi*), and personal background (*cào nǐ ma, jiàn nǚ rén, jiàn rén, wángbādàn cào nǐ zǔzōng shíba dai*).

4. The Function of Swear Words Used by Chinese

This study found five functions of swear words used by Chinese. These functions involve expressing emotion, drawing attention, social or group identity, aggressive, and regressive. The classification of the swear word in these categories can be seen in the table below.

Table 7. The Function of Swear Words Used by Chinese

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning	Function(s)
1	<i>mā de</i>	damn!	Expressing Emotion
2	<i>tā mā de</i>	damn it! fucking hell	Expressing Emotion
3	<i>nītāmāde</i>	damn you!	Expressing Emotion
4	<i>cào</i>	fuck!	Expressing Emotion
5	<i>nǐ yǒu bìng a</i>	are you nuts?	Expressing Emotion
6	<i>fàng pì</i>	bullshit	Expressing Emotion
7	<i>gǒushǐ</i>	bullshit	Expressing Emotion
8	<i>nǐ naozi yǒu bìng</i>	are you insane?	Expressing Emotion
9	<i>nǐ shìge hunqiu</i>	you're a douchebag!	Drawing Attention
10	<i>bié gēn wǒ huchě</i>	no fucking baloney	Drawing Attention
11	<i>chòu bù yao lian</i>	shameless	Drawing Attention
12	<i>nǐ zhēn ta ma chǔn</i>	you're fucking stupid	Drawing Attention
13	<i>nǐ ge baichi</i>	you moron	Drawing Attention
14	<i>èr bǎi wǔ</i>	idiot, stupid	Social/Group Identity
15	<i>ēr bi</i>	fucking idiot	Social/Group Identity
16	<i>sha bi</i>	stupid cunt, asshole	Aggression
17	<i>cào nǐ ma</i>	fuck your mother	Aggression
18	<i>jiàn nǚ rén</i>	bitch	Aggression
19	<i>bèn dàn</i>	idiot	Aggression
20	<i>hún dàn</i>	bastard, asshole	Aggression

No	List of Swear Words	Meaning	Function(s)
21	<i>jiàn rén</i>	slut, whore	Aggression
22	<i>wángbādàn</i>	son of bitch, bastard	Aggression
23	<i>bì zuǐ</i>	shut up!	Aggression
24	<i>nǐ zhēn shi yige feiwù</i>	you're a loser	Aggression
25	<i>gǔn kai!</i>	get lost or go to hell	Aggression
26	<i>qù nǐde</i>	screw you	Aggression
27	<i>gǔn dan</i>	fuck off	Aggression
28	<i>cào nǐ zǔzōng shíba dai</i>	fuck your ancestors	Aggression
29	<i>qù sǐ</i>	go to hell	Aggression
30	<i>nǐ qù sǐ ba</i>	go die!	Aggression
31	<i>bì shang nǐ de chòu zuǐ</i>	shut your stinky mouth	Aggression
32	<i>nǐ ge chǔnhuò</i>	you idiot	Aggression
33	<i>nǐ gěi wǒ gǔn</i>	get lost	Aggression
34	<i>shǎquē</i>	fool, idiot	Regressive

Based on table 7, there are eight (8) swear words that have a function to expressing emotion (*mā de, tā mā de, nǐtāmāde, cào, nǐ yǒu bìng a, fàng pì, gǒushǐ, nǐ naozi yǒu bìng*). There are five (5) swear words that have a function to drawing attention (*nǐ shìge hunqiu, bié gēn wǒ huchě, chòu bù yao lian, nǐ zhēn ta ma chǔn, nǐ ge baichi*). There are 2 (two) swear words that have a function for social/group identity (*èr bǎi w,ǔ ēr bǐ*). There are seventeen (17) swear words that have a function to aggression (*sha bi, cào nǐ ma, jiàn nǚ rén, bèn dàn, hún dàn, jiàn rén, wángbādàn, bì zuǐ, nǐ zhēn shi yige feiwù, gǔn kai,! qù nǐde, gǔn dan, cào nǐ zǔzōng shíba da,i qù sǐ, nǐ qù sǐ ba, bì shang nǐ de chòu zuǐ, nǐ ge chǔnhuò, nǐ gěi wǒ gǔn*). And there is only one (1) swear word that has a function for regressive (*shǎquē*).

Discussion

The This study identified 34 Chinese swear words and analyzed them based on form, function, and reference. Structurally, the words fall into four categories: one monomorphemic word, twelve polymorphemic words, twelve phrasal swear words, and nine clausal swear words, following Wijana & Rohmadi's (2007) framework. In terms of reference, the swear words align more closely with Hughes' (2006) classification, covering sex, excrement, animal names, mental illness, and personal background. No swear words relating to religion were found, and only partial alignment was noted with Wijana and Rohmadi's categories, as references like devils, objects, and professions did not appear in the data.

Functionally, the Chinese swear words in this study serve five main purposes: expressing emotion (8 words), drawing attention (5), signaling group identity (2), showing aggression (18), and expressing regression (1). These functions mostly align with Wang's (2013) framework, which includes emotion, emphasis, group identity, and aggression. They also partially align with the functions noted by Rothwell (1973) and

Bolton & Hullton (1997), especially regarding aggression and regression. Among these functions, aggression emerged as the most dominant, suggesting that Chinese swear words are often used to convey hostility or insult.

Compared to previous research on swear words in other languages like Balinese, Javanese, and Indonesian, this study found both similarities and differences. Common references across studies include animal terms, excrement, and personal background, though references to religion and supernatural terms were not found in the Chinese data. Some Chinese swear words lacked direct references and were classified as general swearing. Overall, the findings reflect both universal patterns in swearing across cultures and unique aspects of how Chinese speakers use and interpret swear words.

CONCLUSIONS

This study identified 34 commonly used Mandarin Chinese swear words and analyzed them based on form, reference, and function. The forms were categorized as monomorphemic, polymorphemic, phrases, and clauses, showing a dominance of multi-word expressions. In terms of reference, the swear words were linked to five main categories: sex, excrement, animal names, mental illness, and personal background, although some words were classified as general swearing with no specific reference. Functionally, the words served to express emotion, draw attention, social or group identity, showing aggression, or convey regression, with aggression being the most frequent function. The study highlights how Mandarin swear words reflect emotional and social dynamics but notably lack religious references, unlike in some other languages. It recommends future research explore regional dialects and cultural variations within China, as well as cross-linguistic comparisons, to gain a fuller understanding of how culture shapes the use of swear words.

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