

The Origin and Evolution of “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*)

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Abstract: The term “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) was initially a composite phrase in the Chinese language. Subsequent to its introduction, the Western concept of “carnival” allowed it to evolve into a complete vocabulary item. Nonetheless, the term “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) has undergone shifts in its part of speech, denotation, and cultural significance as used by the speakers. This paper delves into the origin and evolution of “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*), aiming to elucidate the ongoing interplay and transformation between language and culture.

Keywords: Language; Vocabulary; *kuanghuan*; Carnival; Corpus

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1. Introduction

Diachronic linguistic alterations stand testament to the ceaseless enrichment of culture. Whether one considers the interplay, referencing, and translation across diverse linguistic systems, or the evolution in the grammatical category, connotation, or affective nuance of a lexeme within a singular linguistic system, down to the metamorphosis of a term into a metaphor, all these signify the relentless expansion of language and its embedded culture.

Saussurean semiotics posits that conceptual clarity arises from contrasting notions of similar essence within a single linguistic system, the genealogical axis comparison. In this light, one might argue that without linguistic labeling, our grasp and differentiation of concepts would be impossible. Unlabeled concepts essentially equate to nonexistence, underscoring the pivotal role of language as a paramount conduit of culture.

The “linguistic turn” championed by Wittgenstein and his contemporaries accentuated the pivotal role of language within the tapestry of human culture. Language not only symbolizes culture but also embodies it. Indeed, linguistic representation might even be viewed as an entity surpassing cultural confines. One must fathom the intricacies of language before truly grasping culture. As Wittgenstein (1921) articulated in his *Logisch-Philosophische Abhandlung*: “Philosophical quandaries stem from misconstruing linguistic logic.” In his later works, his introduction of the “language-game” concept, intertwined with a tri-dimensional context, accentuated the multifaceted meanings engendered by language through its symbiotic relationship with human endeavors.

Such perspectives pave the path to a deeper appreciation of language. At its core, a word embodies the

most rudimentary semantic unit within language. Scrutinizing a word is emblematic of the larger quest to fathom linguistic meaning. This study harnesses “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) as a lens to explore its etymological evolution and shifts in connotation. In doing so, we endeavor to illuminate the myriad trajectories for the evolution of Chinese, as well as the metamorphoses in collective cognition and the cultural milieu as mirrored in linguistic usage^[1].

2. The meaning and various possibilities of “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*)

The term “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) is prominently prevalent. To ascertain its frequency, the author employed search engines and various corpora to compile word frequency statistics, as demonstrated in **Table 1** below.

Table 1. Statistics table of word frequency data used for the word “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*)

	Word frequency of “狂欢” (<i>kuanghuan</i>)
Google	90,900,000+
Baidu	100,000,000+
Beijing Language and Culture University Corpus Center (BCC) literature	868
BCC press	3404
Many fields in BCC	11361
BCC Weibo	8510
BCC science and technology	1505
BCC ancient Chinese	47
BCC chapter search	4625
Centre for Chinese Linguistics (CCL) modern Chinese	1892
CCL ancient Chinese	8

The term “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) is defined in the Modern Chinese Dictionary as “indulging in joy,” and is categorized as a verb. In the fifth edition of the Modern Chinese Dictionary^[2], it is exemplified as “狂欢之夜” (*kuanghuanzhiye*, translated as “carnival night”), while in both the sixth and seventh editions of the Modern Chinese Dictionary (Volume 1)^[3,4], the example given is “狂欢节” (*kuanghuanjie*, translated as “festival of carnival”). However, in everyday language, expressions like “一场狂欢” (*yichangkuanghuan*, a trip of carnival), “盛大的狂欢” (*shengdadekuanghuan*, grand carnival), and juxtapositions with festivals are common. This suggests that people often equate “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) with “carnival,” utilizing them as nouns. Furthermore, phrases like “狂欢的盛宴” (*kuanghuandeshengyan*, exultant feast) and “狂欢地饮酒” (*kuanghuandeyinjiu*, wild drinking) employ “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) either as an adjective or an adverb. The prevalent usage of these forms highlights the evolving and debated nature of the term “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) in terms of its grammatical category. Subsequent analyses will bifurcate into two focal points: tracing the etymological roots of “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*), and dissecting the multifaceted shifts in its grammatical category, connotation, and even its emotional nuances as evidenced in colloquial usage.

3. The source of “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*)

3.1. Tracing origins in Chinese

A search for the term “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) in both the BCC and CCL corpora reveals a minimal frequency of

usage in ancient Chinese. While the content is often repetitive, the cited classics differ. Additionally, the corpus statistics exhibit cumulative tendencies, accumulating some statistical frequencies. Notably, in most instances, “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) appears as two adjacent words rather than a unified phrase. To illustrate:

- (1) “更调鞍马狂欢赏，青春波浪芙蓉园。” (*gengdiaoanmakuanghuanshang, qingchunbolangfurongyuan*; from Complete Poetry of the Tang): Here, “狂” (*kuang*, signifying “extremely”) modifies “欢赏” (*huanshang*, pleasant tour).
- (2) “似闻州民喜公出，於日绕岸狂欢呼。” (*siwenzhouminxigongchu, yuriraoankuanghuanhu*; from Complete Poetry of the Song): Again, “狂” (*kuang*, signifying “extremely”) modifies “欢呼” (*huanhu*, cheering).
- (3) “高歌击节狂欢赏，共尽三春酒一杯。” (*gaogejijiekuanghuanshang, gongjinsanchunjiuyibei*; from Qingjiang Poetry Collection): “狂” (*kuang*, signifying “extremely”) modifies “欢赏” (*huanshang*, pleasant tour).

However, there are instances where “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) functions as a singular phrase, such as:

- (4) “算此情景，除非殢酒狂欢，恣歌沈醉，有谁知得。” (*suanciqingjing, chufeitijiukuanghuan, zigeshenzui, youshuizhide*; from Complete Poetry of the Song)

The earliest occurrence is in example (1), a poem by Du Fu from the Tang Dynasty. Yet, the first instance where “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) emerges as a unified phrase is in example (4). There is speculation over whether the term’s integration here was a lyrical choice or a genuine linguistic development. By the era of the Republic of China, “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) solidified its meaning in literature, typically connoting “extreme joy” or “intense pleasure,” as evidenced by:

- (5) “说罢，狂欢跳跃，竟兴奋得突然死去。” (*shuoba, kuanghuantiaoyue, jingxingfendeturansiqu*; from Ancient and Modern Times)
- (6) “圣上得此，不知又要怎样的狂欢。” (*shengshangdeci, buzhiyouyaozenyangdekuanghuan*; from History of Imperial Chambers in the Sui Dynasty)
- (7) “炀帝和月美，却各遂了心愿，狂欢了一宵。” (*yangdiheyuemei, quegesuilexinyuan, kuanghuanleyixiao*; from History of the Palace of the Sui Dynasty)

3.2. “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) from foreign sources

Modern associations frequently equate “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) with the English “carnival.” This association reflects in instances where behaviors akin to those during a carnival are termed “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*). The Modern Chinese Dictionary (sixth and seventh editions) ^[3,4] exemplifies “carnival” using “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*), underscoring the foreign origin of “carnival.”

In English, the term for the carnival festival is simply “carnival,” but in Hong Kong, it is translated as “嘉年华” (*jianianhua*). The sixth edition of the Modern Chinese Dictionary introduced the term “carnival,” defining it as a European folk celebration that has evolved into a broad entertainment event encompassing large amusements, and diverse cultural and artistic activities ^[3]. Historically tied to religious traditions, “carnival” derives from Latin, later interpreted as “carne levare” (to remove meat). Its cultural roots trace back to Christianity, specifically the Lenten fast. Carnival is essentially a day of indulgence before this fasting period. Traditionally, this festival boasts parades, dances, and other activities emphasizing indulgence and joy.

Such festivals are alien to Chinese traditions, which typically shun excessiveness. Thus, there is no direct Chinese counterpart for “carnival.” Nevertheless, ongoing cultural exchanges have facilitated the diffusion of word meanings across linguistic boundaries. Modern Chinese festivals increasingly incorporate elements reminiscent of the “carnival” or “嘉年华” (*jianianhua*). The term “carnival” has come to symbolize states of

joy and indulgence in contemporary Chinese.

4. Changes in “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*)

The term “carnival” is continually evolving in its grammatical category, meaning, and emotional nuance. While dictionaries denote “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) primarily as a verb, its everyday usage is far more versatile. Evidence suggests its frequent employment as a noun, adjective, or adverb. For instance, on Google, the search for “一场狂欢” (*yichangkuanghuan*, a trip of carnival) yields approximately 2,090,000 results, whereas on Baidu, it amasses around 12,600,000. Similarly, “狂欢的盛宴” (*kuanghuandeshengyan*, grand carnival) has around 706,000 hits on Google and 16,800,000 on Baidu. As an adverb, “狂欢地饮酒” (*kuanghuandeyinjiu*, wild drinking) results in about 170 hits on Google and a whopping 6,070,000 on Baidu. These statistics underscore the public’s multifaceted use of “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) that challenges its traditional classification as merely a verb.

The semantic evolution of “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) is equally intriguing. Initially, “狂” (*kuang*, extremely) and “欢” (*huan*, excitement) functioned as separate entities, with the former serving as a modifier for the latter. Over time, they amalgamated into a unified structure. During the Republic of China era, “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) often painted vivid scenes of hedonistic love in novels. As “狂欢节” (*kuanghuanjie*) emerged, representing the carnival in its entirety, “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) transcended its fragmented origins, adopting the broader connotation of a joyous celebration.

Bakhtin’s “Carnival Theory (Теория карнавала)” from the Soviet Union played a pivotal role in reshaping the concept. While Bakhtin himself never coined the term “Carnival Theory,” his seminal ideas drew inspiration from it. This theory, which burgeoned from literary criticism to cultural studies and remains relevant in communication studies, impacts the modern understanding of “carnival”.

Bakhtin’s “carnival” traces its roots to religious events like the European “Carnival,” the Greek Bacchanal, and the ancient Roman Saturnalia. His conceptualization of “carnival” encompasses more than mere indulgence; it also includes satirical elements challenging orthodoxy. In literature, “carnival” manifests in humorous folk texts that counter orthodox elegance. Under the “carnival” lens, these folk texts aim to undermine authoritative narratives. The state of “carnival” encourages the subversion of all established rationality and structures, imbuing it with a transformative essence^[5].

Emotionally, the Chinese “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) often juxtaposes with orthodoxy. Its connotations in the Chinese cultural milieu are intricate. While “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) can denote negative traits such as debauchery or arrogance, it can also convey romanticism, especially in literary contexts. As a noun, its positive undertones evoke vibrant and passionate gatherings. Conversely, when “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) mirrors societal cacophony or hints at mindless entertainment, its nuances lean toward negative, critiquing chaos. Over time, “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) has metamorphosed from a mere phrase to a potent social metaphor^[6,7].

5. Conclusion

The evolution of the term “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) in the Chinese lexicon is a testament to the dynamic nature of language. From its initial formation as a composite term, to assimilating foreign concepts, to its transformation through widespread cultural theory dissemination, and finally, its imbuing with deeper meaning via cultural critique, “狂欢” (*kuanghuan*) exemplifies the richness and vigor of the Chinese language. A single phrase, it encapsulates diverse origins, grammatical classifications, and emotional nuances. More profoundly, it embodies historical shifts, theoretical frameworks, societal metamorphoses, and evolving paradigms of thought. Yet, this

is just a snapshot in its linguistic journey; undoubtedly, the term will further evolve and enrich itself.

Such linguistic evolution underscores the profound power and influence of language. It is an illustration of how we can glimpse the expansive by delving into the granular, attesting to the overarching might of language. In a synchronic view, every concept garners its linguistic label, and as time progresses, these labels undergo transformation. Every shift is integrated into the linguistic tapestry, ensuring that in our pursuit of understanding language, we simultaneously unravel its intricate backdrop, bearing witness to cultural interplays and shifts in cognition.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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