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Pekinese Words and Expressions Equivalent of 'to die'

The word 'die' is certainly among the most frequently tabooed in all languages, and Modern Pekinese (hereafter abbreviated as MP) is not an exception. In fact, words and expressions replacing the verb *sǐ* 死 — 'to die' are very frequent in the vernacular speech of the capital of China. Being beyond the Modern Standard Chinese (hereafter abbreviated as MSC) norm such expressions are as a rule overlooked by MSC dictionaries as *Xiàndài Hànyǔ cídiǎn* 现代汉语词典 (hereafter abbreviated as XHC), which is most popular today.

Dictionaries of MP dialect words and expressions clearly show that this language is very rich in lexical units replacing the word 'die' which in its basic sense is often avoided. I think this may be of special interest for socio-linguistic reasons. Therefore below I present a brief discussion of the material I was able to collect.

There is only one MP dictionary in which all such words and expressions are in one entry. This small but valuable booklet was published in 1961 by Jīn Shòushēn,¹ an old Mandchu gentleman who was not a linguist himself but who knew Pekinese folklore and language very well. All these words and expressions are placed by him under *sǐ* 死 — 'to die' on pp. 153–155 of his *Bèijīnghuà yǔhuì* 北京话词汇 (hereafter abbreviated as BY). In most cases BY gives an explanation of a given expression, but rarely exemplifies its usage in phrases. There are altogether 26 words and expressions for 'to die' in BY and they constitute the basis of our comments.

The other dictionaries of MP are: 1) *Bèijīnghuà cíyǔ lìshì* 北京话词语例释 (hereafter abbreviated as BCL), published by Sòng Xiàocái and Mǎ Xīnhuá in 1982,² 2) *Lǎo Shě zuòpīnzhōngde Bèijīnghuà cíyǔ lìshì* 老舍作品中的北京话词语例释

¹ Jīn Shòushēn, 金受申 *Bèijīnghuà yǔhuì*, Comm. Press, Peking 1961.

² Sòng Xiàocái and Mǎ Xīnhuá, *Bèijīnghuà cíyǔ lìshì* 宋孝才 马欣华, Suzuki 1982.

语例释 (hereafter abbreviated as LS) by Yang Yuxiu, published in 1984,³ and 3) *Bèijīng fāngyán cídiǎn* 北京方言词典 (hereafter abbreviated as BFC) by Chén Gāng in 1985⁴. Occasionally *Súyǔ wǔqiān tiáo* 俗语五十条 (hereafter abbreviated as SWT) by Qiú Chóngbǐng⁵ was also used to check up our material.⁶

The last three MP dictionaries have the words and expressions for 'to die' scattered throughout the lexicon. They do not have any explanation, but in most cases their usage in the phrases is exemplified. These examples are mostly a little ambiguous, especially in the case of BFC where a major part of words and expressions is used in a phrase meaning 'he died long ago'. Therefore in all these cases it is impossible to understand the additional sense. This is closely connected with the lack of qualifiers in all the dictionaries except BFC. The latter regularly uses such qualifiers as *xuè* 讪 — 'joke, banter, tease', *miè* 蔑 — 'slight disdain', *ma* 骂 — 'curse', *wǎn* 婉 — 'gentle', etc., combined with a series of such qualifiers as *chēn* 陈 — 'obsolete, out-of-date, now rarely used' or *qí* 旗 — 'a word from Bannermen language which in some cases may be of Mandchu origin'.

More than twenty years separate the first of the above-mentioned dictionaries from those recently published. In fact, it is the LS which in some cases contains the oldest material, because it contains material from Lao She's works, even from his earliest works written in the 1930s. Thus the material could be arranged chronologically in two groups: the earliest consisting of LS and BY, and the latest consisting of BCL and BFC.

Altogether I found some 39 words and expressions for 'to die'. They are presented below in alphabetical order which seems the simplest in this case.

1. *chuàile* 踹了 — 'to kick', 'to die'. According to BY it is an abbreviation of *chuàituǐle* (see 2 below). The same information appears in BFC. BCL gives in the first place the meaning 'to destroy' 'to cut the ground from under sb's feet' and then only as the second meaning 'to die'. BFC gives the following example: *nà lǎo jiāhuo chuàile* 那家伙伏踹了 — 'this old guy died'.

2. *chuài tuǐle* 踹腿了 (BY), *chuàituǐr* 踹腿儿 or *chuaituǐ* 踹腿 (BFC) — 'to kick the legs > to die'. The example given in BCL seems to indicate that this expression is rather neutral: *yī qiāng dǎ zài nà xiǎozi tóushàng lǐshì jiù chuàituǐrle* 一枪打在那小子头上立时就踹腿儿了 — 'When the head of this boy was hit he immediately kicked his legs (i.e. died)'. BFC informs however that this expression has a sense of banter. The example found in BFC (*tā dāngshí jiù chuàituǐle*

³ Yang Yuxiu 杨玉秀 *Lǎo Shě zuòpīnzhōngde Bèijīnghuà cíyǔ lǐshì*, Peking University 1984.

⁴ Chen Gang, 陈刚 *Beijing fangyan cidian*, Comm. Press, Peking 1985.

⁵ Qiu Chongbing 邱崇炳, *Suyu wuqian tiao*, Shenxi Renmin Chupanshe 1983.

⁶ This article was written in 1986 and therefore I could not take into consideration the *Bèijīnghuà yǔcí huìshì* 北京话语汇释 published by Song Xiaocai and Ma Xinhua in 1987.

他当时就蹬腿了 — 'at that time he was dead') does not clearly indicate the additional sense.

3. *chuile* 吹了 — 'to blow off' — appears in BY with the meaning 'to die' and is considered as synonym of 8. Under *chuile* BCL and LS give only the meaning 'cancel, call off, hopeless, break down' (BCL) and 'suspended, discontinue, fail, boast, big talk' (LS). BFC gives the meaning 'to die' in the third place and notes that it has the sense of banter, but there is no example.

4. *chuidēng* 吹灯 — 'to blow off the lamp' > 'to die' (LS). This expression appears very often in Lao She's works, especially in his *Fang Zhenzhu* first published in 1952. BFC has this expression with the sense of banter, but without an example.

5. *chuidēng bálàle* 吹灯拔蜡了 — 'to blow off the lamp and to pluck up the candle' > 'to die' — (BY and BCL). This is a characteristic type of MP expressions structurally based on tautological repetitions.⁷ *Chuidēng* and *bálà* have virtually the same meaning. According to BCL the expression occurs mainly with the meaning of 'to die' as in: *nǐ hái dǎtīng tā ne, tā zǎo chuidēng bálàle* 你还打听他那他早就他早吹灯拔蜡了 — 'You are still asking about him, but he died long ago.' This expression may also have the meaning of 'there's no hope' as in BCL: *yàoshi yī xià xuě, jīntiān de qiú sài suàn chuidēng bálàle* 要是下雪今天的球赛算吹灯拔蜡了 — 'If it snows, there's no hope for today's football match.' I feel that in the last example the expression is used metaphorically.

6. *chuidēng bálà chuāi guōtái* 吹灯拔蜡端锅台了 — 'to blow off the lamp, to pluck up the candle and to cleanse the oven' > 'to finish day's activities' > 'to die' — is noted only in BCL as an enlarged version of 5. It is based on triple repetition and is also very characteristic of MP. It is possible that there is interference between *chuāi guōtái* and *chuitái* (see 8).

7. *chui guìle* 吹气了 — 'to blow' ?> 'to die' — is given without any explanation in BY. BFC gives also *chui guì* 吹气 'to die' with the sense of banter. There is no example.

8. *chuitái* 吹台 (BCL) or *chuitaile* 吹台了 (BY) — 'to break off' > 'to end the play' (as in the theatre) > 'to die' — as in: *nàge lǎojiāhuo zǎo chuitaile* 那个家伙早就吹台了 — 'that old guy died long ago'.

BCL notes that this expression may be used with the sense of 'there's no hope', but gives no example. BFC gives only *chuitái* — 'to die' with a sense of banter, but without examples.

9. *chui tiǎozile* 吹挑子了 (BY) — 'to blow (a kind of) trumpet' to end the play (as in the theatre) > 'to die'. BY notes that in older times at the very end of the play there was always a sound of a kind of trumpet called *tiǎozi*, written 挑子 or 钹子.

10. *dǎguà* 打卦 — 'to tell fortunes' > 'to die' — noted only in BFC with the following example: *nà rén dǎguàle hǎo jǐ nián le* 那人打卦了好几年了 — 'that man died some years ago.'

⁷ See my *On Some Modern Pekinese Idiomatic Expressions*, in: *From Code to Code*, Warsaw University 1987, pp. 111–122.

11. *dēngdeng* 蹬蹬 — ‘to die’ — is not clear in this meaning (is it connected with *cèngdēng* 蹭蹬 ‘be down on one’s luck’?). It is noted only in BFC and has an additional sense of joke, but the example given in this dictionary is not clear enough: *méi jǐ tiān tā jiù dēngdēng* 没几天他就蹬蹬了 — ‘he died a few days ago.’

12. *fānbár* 翻白眼儿 — ‘to turn over showing the white’ — is noted as meaning ‘to die’, but only when speaking of fish and frogs which being dead are floating on the surface of the water, their bellies up (BFC), for instance: *zhèxiē yú fānbárle* 这些鱼翻白眼儿了 — ‘these fish are dead.’

13. *fān bái yǎnrle* 翻白眼儿了 (BY) — ‘to show the white of the eyes’ > ‘to die’. The expression is used in MSC only with its basic meaning (XHC). According to BFC in MP the expression means also ‘to die’.

14. *gābēr* 嘎齁儿 — (curse) ‘to die’ — appears only in BFC without any explanation. BFC gives the following example: *zǎo gābērlē* 早嘎齁儿了 — ‘snuffed out long ago’. This dictionary notes also *gābērdē* 嘎齁儿的 with the meaning (curse) ‘damned’.

15. *gěrle* (BY and BCL) 膈儿了 — ‘to give the last sound’ (through the mouth) or something similar to ‘to sound his last’ > ‘to die’. BY treats this expression as an abbreviated form of 16. BFC notes *gěr* 膈儿 — ‘to die’ with the following example: *tā zǎo gěrle* 他早膈儿了 — ‘he died long ago’.

16. *gěrpilē* (BY, BCL and BFC) 膈儿屁了 — ‘to make the last blunder’ > ‘to die’. According to BY it is an abbreviation of 18.

17. *gěrpì lāngdāng* 膈儿屁凉当 (BFC) — ‘to die’ — is given without explanation. *Lāngdāng* is impressive. It is in MP added after nouns or numerals with the meaning ‘to hang down’, but *gěrpì* is a verb-object structure. I cannot see any satisfactory explanation.

18. *gěrpì zháoliáng* 膈儿屁着凉了 (BY and BCL). BY notes that this expression is not clear. He says that people using this expression raise the head as if imitating hiccup (or belching) and are clasping lips as if imitating breaking wind. Thus originally it might have meant ‘to make the last sound and to become cool’ > ‘to die’. The expression is often used as predicate: *Liú Sān gěrpì zháoliáng* 刘三膈儿屁着凉了 — ‘Liu San died’. This expression is also noted by BFC under *gerpi*.

19. *gěrpì zhāoliáng dà hāitáng* 膈儿屁招凉大海棠 is noted only by BFC under *gěrpì*. There is no satisfactory explanation of this expression. It may be understood as *gěrpì zhāoliáng* with added *dà hāitáng* — ‘great crabapple’ which has no sense at all, but it was used just for rhyme to make the saying similar to very popular (since Han-time) distichs consisting of 4 + 3 syllables.⁸

20. *guòqùle* 过去了 (BY) — ‘pass away’ > ‘to die’ — is often used in solemn situations. BY’s example is: *Lǐ Èr dàye zuótiān guòqùle* 李二大爷昨天过去了 — ‘Mister Li Er passed away yesterday’.

⁸ See my *Poésie populaire des Han Orientaux*, RO XLV/1, 1985, pp. 5-34.

21. *huíkèle* 回克了 (BY). Jin Shoushen says that *kè* means in Mandchu *qù* 去, therefore this expression has the same meaning as 22. I think that Jin Shoushen's explanation is not quite good. Professor Hú Míngyáng published in 1983 an interesting article about the pronunciation and usage of some chosen words in the dialect of Peking.⁹ One of the words discussed is *qù* which was pronounced [khə] by bannermen. Today, says Hú Míngyáng, this pronunciation is no more in use so that in order to make an inquiry he was obliged to ask old Mandchu. All the respondents were between 60 and 76 years old. All answers seem to indicate that this pronunciation was current in their families some 70–80 years ago. I suppose that this [khə] said instead of regular *qù* is not a Mandchu word, but simply an archaism of pronunciation like MSC [kei] instead of [tɕi], and that this archaism was preserved in the most conservative circles of Peking population. When the palatalisation of initial consonants occurred in the language of Peking [khỳ] > [khəy] > [khə] was preserved. This [khə] was noted 克 in the expression 21 which is the same as 22.

22. *huíqùle* 回去了 (BY) — 'to return' > 'to die'. There is no example.

23. *liàole* 撂了 (BY) — 'to put down' > 'to die' — is explained as an abbreviation of 25. BFC says only that it means 'to die' and he gives the following example: *tā liàole jì nián le* 他撂了几年了 — 'he died some years ago'.

24. *liàotiáo* 撂挑 (BFC) — 'to put down' > 'to die'. BFC has no explanation and gives the following example: *tā zǎo jiù liàotiáole* 他早就撂挑了 — 'he died long ago'.

25. *liàotiáo huòle* 撂挑货了 (BY) — 'to put down pork meat'? Jin Shoushen's explanation is not convincing. The author says that 'a dead man is only flesh and thus he is like pork in a shop'. This was strongly criticized by Sima Chuan in his review,¹⁰ but the reviewer did not propose any better explanation.

26. *liàotiāozile* 撂挑子了 (BY and BCL) — 'to put down the carrying pole' > 'to throw one's job' > 'to die'. In MSC this expression occurs only with the meaning 'to throw one's job'. BCL gives this meaning only for *liàotiāozi* and the meaning of 'to die' for *liàotiāozile* with the following example: *qùnián bā yuè tā jiù liàotiāozile* 去年八月他就撂挑子了 — 'he died last year in August'.

27. *Luótuo shàng chēle* 骆驼上车了 (BY) — 'the camel has mounted the car' > 'to die'. Jin Shoushen says that a camel can go by car only when dead and transported away. He considers the expression as an abbreviation of *luótuo shàng chē jiùshì zhèma jige lèrle* 骆驼上车就是这过乐儿乐 — 'what happiness when a camel mounts a car!', which is not used with the meaning of 'to die'.

⁹ Hú Míngyáng, *Guānyú Bèijīnghuà yǔyīn, cíhuìde wǔxiàng tiáochá* 关于北京话语音词汇的五项调查 "Chinese Linguistics" No. 1, 1983, pp. 82–90.

¹⁰ Símā Chuān 司马川, *Píng 'Bèijīnghuà yǔhuì'* 评北京话汇 in: *Zhōngguó yǔwén* 1962, 7, pp. 346–349.

28. *méi áoguòlai* 没熬过来 (BY) — ‘not to hold out’ > ‘to die’ — has a tone of compassion like in: *ài, shūfù dàodǐ méi áoguòlai a* 唉叔欠到底没熬着过来了 — ‘O, uncle has not finally held out’.

29. *rēng* 扔 (BFC) — ‘to throw’ > ‘to die’ — is used instead of *sǐ* when speaking of a death of a little child like in: *rēngle yige xiǎode* 扔了一个小的 — ‘a little one passed away’.

30. *shēntuǐ* 伸腿儿 — ‘to stretch the legs’ ‘to die’. BFC notes this as a second meaning and indicates that it has a sense of banter. His example is *tā zǎo shēntuǐrle* 他早伸腿儿了 — ‘he snuffed out long ago’.

31. *shēntuǐdèngyǎn* 伸腿儿瞪眼 or *shēntuǐdèngyǎnrle* 伸腿儿瞪眼儿了 (BY, BCL and BFC) — ‘to stretch the legs and to gaze at fixedly’ > ‘to die’. This expression is very similar to the typical Pekinese tautological expressions. The example is: *bù zhī shénma huí shè, méi duōdà gōngfu, tā jiù shēn tuǐ dèng yǎnrle* 不知怎么回事, 没多大功夫, 他就伸腿瞪眼儿了 — ‘I do not know what happened, not much time passed and he died.’ Let us remark that the expression *dèng yǎnrle* 瞪眼儿了 has in MSC and in MP only the meaning of ‘to stare at with anger’.

32. *tīng làlàgǔ jiàohuàn qù le* 听喇喇蛄叫唤去了 (BY and BCL) — ‘to go to listen the call of mole-crickets’ > ‘to die’ > ‘to be buried’.

33. *tīng qūqū jiàohuàn qù le* 听蛐蛐儿叫唤去了 (BY and BCL) — ‘to go to listen the call of mole-crickets’ > ‘to die’ > ‘to be buried’ — is another version of 32. Ji n Shoushen adds that only when buried one is able to hear the mole-crickets which are believed to live under the earth. SWT has a short version: *tīng qūqū jiào* with the same meaning.

34. *wǎjihā* 玩儿哈 (BFC) — ‘to die’ > Mandchu *wajihā* — ‘to end’. BFC gives the following example: *tā jikǒuqì shàngbùlai jiù wǎjihāle* 他一口气上不来就玩儿哈了 — ‘he could not say a word and died’.

35. *wándàn* 完蛋 (BCL) and *wandanle* 完蛋了 (BY) — ‘cannot be saved’ < ‘to die’. BCL has the following example: *zhètou lú běnlái jiù yǒubìng, ràng tā zhèma yidun dǎ hái bù wándàn* 这头驴本来就有病, 让他这么一顿还打不完蛋 — ‘this donkey was in fact very ill, thus being beaten in such a way how could it not die?’ This expression is used also in MP with the meaning of ‘to spoil something so that it cannot be brought back’ as in: *zhèma yilai yiqiè dou wándànle, hái shuō shénma ne* 这么一来, 儿瞪了, 还说什么呢 — ‘if it is so, all this is spoiled and what’s more to say?’

36. *wánrwán* 玩儿玩 (BCL and LS) or *wánrwánle* 玩儿玩了 (BY) — ‘to stop the play’ ‘to die’. The expression is noted also in XHC as having a tone of joke. BY, BCL and LS do not indicate this additional sense. This expression is often used in Lao She’s works, and it has no sense of joke there. According to BCL this expression has also the meaning of ‘hopeless, nothing can be done, fail’ as in: *diànchē yīkāi, wǒmen lāchēde quán wánrwán* 电车一开, 我们拉车的全玩儿玩 — ‘since the trams are introduced we rickshawmen are in a hopeless situation’.

37. *wūchéng* 烏程 (BY) or *wūchang* 无常 (BFC) — 'to die' — is a word used by Muslims and comes from their language. BFC has its standard example: *tā zǎo wūchangle* 他早无常了 — 'he died long ago'.

38. *yǎnrhóule* 眼儿猴了 (BY) or without *le* (BFC) meant originally something like 'to throw three dice'. It is a term used by gamblers, say BY and BFC. There are no examples.

39. *yànqì* 噎气 or 咽气 (BCL) — 'to swallow the breath' > 'to give the ghost' > 'to expire' > 'to die' — is an expression which appears already in *Hónglómèng*.

To end these remarks, let us say that all the above-presented words and expressions appear with the predicative function. They are often preceded by adverbial determination like *zǎo* — 'long ago' or *kuài* — 'soon' and may be preceded by negation (except 28).