
City of “*Yi Bi Diao Zao*”

By Bosi Hou

People often argue that the best way to learn a local dialect is to start with the slang words. I do agree on the statement to a large extent, as this is precisely how I got intrigued and begin to know one dialect. It is amazing how one single slang can often entail so much regionality and uniqueness. While slang words could be informal and potentially vulgar, they genuinely show the cultural identity of one person. Before I transferred to Pitt, I was a college student in Nanjing. Hearing three years of Nanjing Dialect, or *Nanjing Hua*, I certainly have picked up a variety of local slangs. However, there is never a second phrase like “*Yi Bi Diao Zao*” that entails so much “Nanjing-style” in the wording and has become the most identifiable and representative slang in the Nanjing area.

The meaning of “*Yi Bi Diao Zao*” varies. Usually, it is placed after an adjective or adverb, acting as an adverbial. People in Nanjing often use it to describe some great extent. An example could be: “The weather is hot like *Yi Bi Diao Zao!*”, or “This question is hard as *Yi Bi Diao Zao!*” In English context, the phrase could be simply replaced with the word “shit”, which is consistent with English grammar. Similar with the word “shit”, the relevant expression exhibits much colloquial and vulgarity, which is too informal to be shown in academic writing or speech speaking. Nonetheless, on an oral basis, Nanjing-ers use this phrase extensively. I could never forget the first time I encountered the phrase, which was my freshman year in Nanjing. I was in an Uber ride whose driver was a local Nanjing-er. When we were driving on an overpass in

downtown, the car got stuck because of the traffic in the rush hours. The driver, seeing the long queue in front of him, slammed the wheel hard and said out loud: “Eh! This damn road is jammed up as *Yi Bi Diao Zao*. Each and every morning!” Then he shifted the gear neutral and put his hands on the steering wheel waiting. I was a fairly new resident in Nanjing who knew little about the local dialect, but sensing his tone, I was pretty sure that he began to be impatient about the traffic, which kind of made me unsettling. I therefore asked,

“Sir, what does ‘*Yi Bi Diao Zao*’ mean? I never heard of this term before.”

Carefully, I threw out the question.

“Oh, I guess you are a freshman in college, eh?” He moved his hands away from the wheel and turned around, smiled, “It’s just expression we use, meaning something is extensive or extreme. But don’t worry about it eh! (the traffic) Should be clear in about fifteen minutes.” He spoke with genuinely strong Nanjing accent, whose tone is much different than Mandarin Chinese. I should admit that I was sort of scared by his voice at first, yet he showed much friendliness when he explained the language to me, which dispelled my misunderstanding.

That Uber drive was the first time I encountered that phrase, and interestingly, I started to hear such usage frequently after this experience. Turns out that it is not half as bad as the word sounds. Not only can I hear it from the locals, I also hear it from out-of-state students who study in Nanjing, myself included. It is simply a catchy and chill phrase that applies many occasions, so useful that once I slipped that phrase out of my mouth when I was in a group meeting, in my guidance counselor’s office. The

expressions on my guidance counselor's face was surely a thinker – she frowned and smirked, then said to me, “You literally just came to Nanjing for three months, and this is how long you pick THAT up.”

This representative catchphrase of Nanjing has already become many people's first impression on Nanjing dialect. Unfortunately, not everyone takes “*Yi Bi Diao Zao*” as a non-malicious expression. “They use ‘*Yi Bi*’ because they are ‘*Ye bi*’ (the savage) themselves.” One of my friends, who didn't go to college in Nanjing, dismissively left this comment after I tell her this local phrase. To be honest, her idea is not entirely wrong. Nanjing dialect is associated with its special geographical region. The city is located at the Jianghuai Plain, a battleground contested by all strategists throughout Chinese history. It was the ancient capital of ten dynasties across two thousand years. The local dialect was constantly changing and merging, and it ultimately evolved to its unique tones, which is much different than Mandarin Chinese. That is probably why people conceive Nanjing dialect as quirky, coarse, and even vulgar judged by their intuition.

For outsiders, they would assume that “*Yi Bi Diao Zao*” is a bad word, and Nanjing people simply use it to swear a lot. However, I believe it is more of a cultural expression. Just as Anzaldúa claimed in *How to Tame a Wild Tongue* that “Chicano Spanish sprang out of the Chicanos' need to identify ourselves as a distinct people” (Anzaldúa 55), so too, Nanjing-ers speak their local slangs to assert their regionality and culture. Anzaldúa takes pride in Chicano Spanish as the language representing her own cultural background. This is also true for people in Nanjing. Nanjing dialect was less of a “dialect” but actually the official language across the country. In the early Ming

Dynasty, when Nanjing was the capital of China, government officials were required to speak *Nanjing Hua* at court. Many foreigners at that time learned Chinese through *Nanjing Hua* instead of Mandarin. Today, *Nanjing Hua* does not prevail over the country, but the cultural sense of *Nanjing Hua* remains in Nanjing people. They are proud of their own language, and the phrase “*Yi Bi Diao Zao*” is a vivid example.

Also, while some people tend to keep their dialect to themselves, Nanjing-ers are very welcoming. They are not shy of sharing their language and culture to others. I still vividly remembered the conversation that I had with the Uber driver. After asking what the phrase actually mean, he then introduced me some other local expression. Apparently, in addition to the use of “*Yi Bi Diao Zao*”, putting “eh” at the front or end of one sentence is also a very Nanjing-style tone. “Eh, you see, our language is surely different than Mandarin, because we have different set of tones. Some out-of-state riders once told me that they think Nanjing people speak rudely – we so do NOT! This is how we talk eh!” He said and laughed. It seems that such misunderstanding does not bother him at all, which made me kind of guilty. Originally, I thought he, or any Nanjing-er, can get angry easily based on their tone of speaking. Such was clearly a biased pre-conceived notion.

I have left Nanjing for a year now, and it has been a long time since I heard “*Yi Bi Diao Zao*” from other people. Nevertheless, I still sometimes say this phrase myself. Every time I think of this phrase, I think of that Uber driver and all the Nanjing-ers who say “*Yi Bi Diao Zao*”. They use it in their daily conversations with their friends and family, and they are happy to introduce and share the language with others. I was one

of the lucky people who can share the usage of “*Yi Bi Diao Zao*”, and through that phrase I began to know about the city. It is a city of much characteristic, a characteristic like “*Yi Bi Diao Zao*”.

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