

# CHANGING HEGEMONIC DEFINITIONS THROUGH VLOGGING: DATTOISANGUY'S PERFORMANCE OF GENDERED HARDCORE ON *YOUTUBE*

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## Introduction

While current discourses about “Chinese” tend to focus solely on Chinese in the form of Mandarin, fewer people might know about *Hoisan-wa*, one of the languages linking together nearly all of the early Chinese immigrants in the US. Sometimes called Toishanese or Toisanese (“Toisan” being how 台山 is read in Standard Cantonese) or Taishanese (“Taishan” being how the same characters are read in Mandarin), we choose to call *Hoisan-wa* as such because this is how speakers of this language variety refer to their language.<sup>1</sup> A study by Szeto (2000) found that *Hoisan-wa* is around 30% mutually intelligible to speakers of Standard Cantonese, but this disregards the stigma nearly all *Hoisan-wa* speakers have felt in their lifetimes. It is not uncommon to hear *Hoisan-wa* speakers call themselves “Cantonese” speakers, qualified with a phrase to the effect of, “But I speak a rural form of Cantonese.” Research on *Hoisan-*

*wa*, however, has been customarily omitted and neglected in favor of other forms of Chinese. These other language varieties, including Standard Mandarin and Cantonese, have also shifted conversations about what “Chinese” is, as well as its value in the larger global economy and educational realms. The historical connections to Chinese American history and other social values of *Hoisan-wa* that is not related to economic or educational status are minimized and even erased in the larger discourses about “Chinese” (Kelleher, 2008; Leung, 2013; Wu & Leung, 2014; Wong & Xiao, 2013).

Negative ideologies stereotyping Hoisan speakers as “rural” and “uneducated” further perpetuate and diminish the perceived value of a multi-faceted language community within other varieties of Chinese. Indeed, as Figure 1 shows, the topography of Taishan is quite mountainous and green. In the past, the region’s economy revolved around agriculture and farming, and most residents who immigrated from this region to the US before 1965 were farmers with little to no education; this was especially the case for women. Rural geography should not, however, be the sole indicator used to define a group of people, especially when these ideologies travel with the many Hoisan-heritage members of the Chinese diaspora.

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<sup>1</sup> We will use the *Hoisan-wa* way of romanizing words and recognize that this choice breaks from traditional romanization schemes. We are choosing to make *Hoisan-wa* visible in this way and, in doing so, deemphasizing Cantonese and Mandarin. For standardized place locations in China only, we will maintain the Modern Standard Mandarin romanization (e.g., Taishan).

Interestingly enough, because of the long-term migration of Hoisan-heritage Chinese people (oftentimes just subsumed as part of an unmarked “Chinese” immigration history), there are actually more *Hoisan-wa* speakers outside of China than within China itself. Speaking to the relevance the Chinese diaspora, the *Hoisan-wa* television program *得閒傾偈* (*If [You] Have Time, [Let’s] Chat*) states, “Hoisan people are present everywhere in the world. *Hoisan-wa* is a miniature world language [小世界語], the only language whose roots connect to 92 different countries in the world.” Thus, this transnational migration history of Hoisan people and their far-reaching migration patterns serves as somewhat of a paradox, illustrating how (partial) erasure of a language and culture of a diaspora in the mainstream narrative constructs a language variety as being both a “miniature world language” and a “rural, uneducated language.” Thus it is crucial to understand how these socially constructed ideologies affect language users as well as to examine the ways in which users push back against these ideologies in contemporary ways, in this case on the internet.

While in previous work we have focused on the negative ideologies attached to *Hoisan-wa*, far less work has looked at how the younger generation of Hoisan heritage people view their heritage language and ethnolinguistic identities, particularly how these ideologies manifest online and in present-day, mass-mediated communication. In the context of the contemporary US, the discussion of the intersections of race and gender are especially important when considering the history of how Asian men

have been portrayed in the media. In his book, *Geisha of a Different Kind*, Han writes that Asian men, gay and straight, in American and in Asia, are presented as “having failed to be men in some pivotal way” (2015, p. 189). By being portrayed as less masculine, less competent, and less desirable, Asian men are used as tools to help white men assert their claims of masculinity. With the increasing popularity of social media outlets for racial minorities, hegemonic categories for race can, at the very least, be reconfigured through self-expression. *YouTube*, as a transnational space, allows for young people to construct their own scripts reclaiming their racialized, gendered, and personal identities.

This paper examines the ways in which the younger generation of Hoisan heritage Chinese Americans construct and express their cultural, gendered, and linguistic identities. Specifically, we look at the *YouTube* videos of one user, *dattoisanguy*, a young man (at the time of his videos, aged 24), who, in his own words, is a US-born *Hoisan-ngin* (Hoisan person) who speaks “perfect English” as well as *Hoisan-wa*, and how he utilizes the linguistic resources at his disposal to (re)voice and reimagine circulating discourses about language and culture. Through his videos, we also describe how he performs a “gendered hardcore” identity (Mendoza-Denton, 2011) while concomitantly celebrating his heritage language.

## Literature Review

This paper draws from the intersections of Asian American masculinities, media

technologies, and calibration of various linguistic repertoires. Like the Asian Americans in Bucholtz's (2004) and Chun's (2004) studies on the language use and identities of Asian American males in the US trying to carve out a space that does not minimize them as "forever foreigners" and unassimilable (Tuan, 1998) or nerds, dattoisanguy's linguistic repertoire involves using African American English to stake a claim to participation in an urban youth speech style that is both masculine and "cool"; these linguistic and semiotic cues also intersect with his code-switching into *Hoisan-wa*, culminating in a verbal performance of an identity highlighting Hoisan heritage and a Chinese American identity that is interactionally meaningful in a contemporary social world.

Previous studies have demonstrated how social media has allowed various ethnic and language groups to be able to retain their cultures through sharing various posts and feedback on the internet. According to various work on the use of *Facebook* and other social networking sites, (Johnson & Callahan, 2013; Shi, 2005), these online sites provide a safe and supranational space where users can share their collective shared attributes and express their belonging through creativity and humor. Chen and Leung's (2016) research on a *Facebook* site for Hoisan heritage speakers describe how, through praise and positive assessment of Hoisan speakers and Hoisan heritage, the *Facebook* group develops and cultivates a counter-hegemonic stance against mainstream ideologies about *Hoisan-wa* and its users. The importance of this *Facebook* group is evident in the way that *Hoisan-wa*

is treated by its members as a thriving language background that can be positively evaluated and shared through new means and media to both younger and older users alike across national boundaries. Here, *Hoisan-wa* is reclaimed in that its users are not reduced to mere caricatures of being rural, uneducated hillbillies; rather, knowledge and expertise of this language and cultural background are considered to be a valued resource among the group.

In terms of other minoritized identities, research on Asian American masculinities in the larger US context show how Asian American men are often seen as nerds or geeks, or the inverse of coolness when compared to the hegemonic masculine ideal (Huynh & Woo, 2014). Sociologist Michael Kimmel noted that the white, middle class, early middle-aged, heterosexual men are "the masculinity that sets the standard for other men, against which other men are measured and, more often than not, found wanting" (Kimmel, 2003, p. 61). In this regard, men of color are differently gendered than standards for white men, with Asian men often being hegemonically emasculated, and portrayed as sexually undesirable, a-sexual, submissive, or feminine (Han, 2015). As such, along with the reclamation of language and identity, this paper also seeks to examine the portrayal of the Asian American male in the contemporary online world, specifically, how one Asian American male calibrates his speech at times to align with African American speech styles to embody hypermasculinity over the desexualization and emasculation regimented by wider popular media. Other scholars have noted

the ways in which Asian American youth appropriate African American slang in schools as a way to leverage local linguistic capital and to align with and authenticate themselves as legitimate speakers (Reyes, 2005; Chuon & Hudley, 2010), and we find similar parallels in the *YouTube* videos we describe below.

Alongside the actual speech produced by the speaker, non-linguistic features like gestures are also integral in understanding the message and intent of the producer of the utterances. Multimodality theorists urge for the examination of multiple articulations, including gesture, intonation, pitch, and proximity, which are oftentimes lumped together under merely form or content (Kress & van Leeuwen, 2001). Gestures are also mapped onto various performances of discourse (Butler, 1999). For example, Taylor (2006) recounts the ways in which hardcore female *Everquest* gamers push back against the construction of the imagined gamer as a heterosexual white male through the use of gestures in tandem with voice quality. Kavetsky (2008) also similarly examines gendered language and male joking in *World of Warcraft*. Thus, incorporating the under-examined role of gestures as expressions of Asian American male masculinities will illuminate our understanding of dattoisanguy's bilingual language use on *YouTube*. We echo other scholars who view the medium of *YouTube* as a venue for self expression, in particular, an assertion of positive affect and alignment towards one's heritage language.

## Data

Data for this study come from six of dattoisanguy's *YouTube* videos (totaling 21 minutes) and an analysis of their corresponding comments ( $n = 432$ ). For this project, we specifically documented and transcribed each instance of a performed hardcore, masculine persona by dattoisanguy in his videos and noted each instance where he seemed to push back against gender, ethnic, or linguistic stereotypes in his *YouTube* monologues and how these videos were received in the comments section. Aligning with Mendoza-Denton's (2011) definition of hardcore, literally "hard of heart," we coded hardcore as any instance of qualities, styles, and stances of toughness and being tough for self-protection and self-preservation (p. 262). Each instance of code-switching, mention of Hoisan language or culture, and performance of hyper or ironic masculinities were also coded. Similar to Chun (2013), we define hyper masculinity as an overly aggressive or competitive stance, with raised pitch and/or displaying of a bare chest and gestures of bravado. We define ironic masculinity as the instance of dattoisanguy's self-reflective awareness of the racial incongruence to his masculine excess and conflicting values of his black embodiment (Chun, 2013, p. 593). Each video was double coded by both researchers through a process of open coding, initial memos, and focused coding (Emerson, Shaw & Fretz, 1995).

Using a multicompetence and symbolic competence framework, we view these videos and subsequent online interactions as

sites where *Hoisan-wa* speakers engage in the ability “to perform and construct various historicities in dialogue with others” (Kramsch & Whiteside, 2008, p. 665) and how humor and a gendered male “hardcore” persona serve as a way of moving beyond mere caricatures and negative ideologies of *Hoisan-wa* and its speakers to a linguistic display of nuanced competencies. That is to say, rather than viewing dattoisanguy’s language competence in terms of the range of vocabulary he is able to use, we take a broader scope in examining the ways which he is able to make use of more than just his linguistic knowledge – rather, taking the intersections of cultural, gendered ways of being and expressing himself – to perform a contemporary, Hoisan heritage, male personhood.

## Findings

Below we report the main findings from the data. First, we describe how dattoisanguy displays ironic and hyper masculinity through storytelling in his videos. Then we discuss his parodies of popular music videos through *Hoisan-wa* and English code-switching. Next, we describe the ways that his gestures signal gendered, “hardcore” identities. Lastly, we outline the types of feedback from viewers of these videos.

### *Displaying of Ironic and Hypermasculinities*

*YouTube* user dattoisanguy embodies both ironic and hyper masculinity through the use of profanity and explicit language. Gender researchers note that the

performance of (hyper)masculinity often entails outbursts of expletives or profanity as symbolic emblems of violence (Novek, 2014). Figure 2 illustrates the bilingual expletives that dattoisanguy utilizes in his videos.

One way in which dattoisanguy, in 21 minutes of content, there are 34 utterances of expletives. Out of the expletives uttered, 12 were said in *Hoisan-wa*. There is a core difference between the way dattoisanguy expresses profanities in English as opposed to *Hoisan-wa*: dattoisanguy censors himself mostly in *Hoisan-wa*. Occasionally when cursing in *Hoisan-wa*, dattoisanguy uses a bleeping noise to mask the word. There is a corresponding expletive bleeping subtitle that goes along with the audio beep (see Figure 3).

As Figure 2 illustrates, though dattoisanguy curses a good amount in both languages, what this observation brings awareness to are questions regarding self-created spectrums of profanity and censorship – what is too vulgar or inappropriate language – to dattoisanguy, a bilingual Asian-American male. Is there a scale of vulgarity to which one can adhere to in not just one language, but two? In this case, with the higher percentage and range of English profanities, it seems that swearing in English is more acceptable than swearing in *Hoisan-wa*. This might suggest the equating of the “hardcore” persona is skewed to more of an English-speaking, masculine persona and does not extend to a Chinese (American) masculine one.

The performance of ironic hyper masculinity (cf., Chun’s 2013 notion of ironic blackness) as contradictory of the

values of his masculine embodiment, wherein viewers collaboratively interpret the circulating ideologies of race and gender while watching dattoisanguy's video, challenges unitary readings of racialized and gendered embodiments for Asian-American males.

For example, in a video titled, "VLOG #3 Money Problems," dattoisanguy is talking about the ways in which money exchange happens between his aunt and himself, which snowballs into the obligation for his mom to return money to his aunt's own son. What is interesting about this particular exchange is use of the phrase "who wouldn't to come up on \$20" with accompaniment of hand gestures indicating "making it rain." To complement dattoisanguy's performance, an attire of backwards cap is juxtaposed with his surroundings of a Chinese calendar and a year of the monkey decoration usually hung up for Lunar New Year. The performance of ironic masculinity, that is, discussing cultural tropes of receiving money on Lunar New Year from one's aunt juxtaposed with gendered hardcore elements of using this money to "make it rain," situates dattoisanguy as conversant in both codes and competent in weaving through them seamlessly. One could say that his gendered hardcore performance is mere appropriation of African American language and culture, but his video's content and his accompanying embodiment of a contemporary Hoisan-heritage, Chinese American male analyzed together suggest a larger pushing back against how Asian American males are viewed in the larger hierarchy of racialized masculinities.

In another video, titled "VLOG #2 Drinking Da Soup!" dattoisanguy openly confronts food related and family tropes about Hoisan heritage people again when he talks about being forced to drink soup by his mom. In this video, he imitates his mother and intersperses his monologue with *Hoisan-wa* to reenact these conversations. Notably, when mimicking his mother and reenacting his responses, she is the assertive maternal figure telling him to drink soup, while he is the one avoiding her through indirect means by telling her he has to use the bathroom, or by telling her he just had soda. He is never as direct with her as he sounds speaking to his audience in the vlogs. Through these intertextual revoicings of his mother juxtaposed with his African American English phonology and speech styles, he delineates himself as a (somewhat) filial son facing constant scrutiny from his (monolingual) *Hoisan-wa* speaking mother who wants him to maintain "traditional" cultural values.

#### *Parodying of Popular Music Videos*

In addition to telling stories about his family experiences, dattoisanguy also parodies popular music videos and songs from Top 40 artists such as Train, Carly Rae Jepsen, and Drake. Dattoisanguy loosely translates the songs from English to Standard Cantonese and/or *Hoisan-wa*, recontextualizing these songs and adding humor to them by using his voice and experiences. In terms of appurtenances, the appearance of the backwards cap, a tank top, a jade charm, and the Chinese calendar also appear in several videos; these accessories

are both iconically recognizable as Chinese American as well as associated with various hip-hop personalities. Those familiar with Asian American *YouTube* video celebrities might also liken him to Chinese-American *YouTube* sensation KevJumba, who often uses a “hyperbolically masculine aggressively raised pitch and volume in [his] speech and the fanning of his bare chest with his shirt” (Chun, 2013, p. 600) in his performances.

In a video titled “Started from Ming Doi,” dattoisanguy is parodying Drake’s “Started from the Bottom,” but recontextualizing the song to suit his experiences as a Chinese American male. Ming Doi (明仔, literally “Little Boy Ming”) is dattoisanguy’s nickname. Through his cover, he speaks about living with his mom, and also addresses his audience directly about not uploading a video onto *YouTube* for a year by saying that it is “not [his] career.” He speaks with minimal affect while he is “rapping,” displaying ironic and hyper masculinities through a nonchalant attitude and gestures. While Drake speaks about actually rising from the bottom of a social or economic tier, dattoisanguy literally translates “started from the bottom” to a narrative about coming up the stairs because his home has no elevator.

As mentioned earlier, in his translated music videos, dattoisanguy will loosely translate popular songs into *Hoisan-wa* or Cantonese, but put his own spin to them. For example, in one lyric, which in Carly Rae Jepsen’s song goes, “But here’s my number/So call me maybe” is redubbed by dattoisanguy as “But here’s my number,”

said in English, but with a Chinese accent, followed by “Ah Ming Doi wun ni” (明在搵你) said in *Hoisan-wa* meaning “Ming is looking for you.” He bridges between pop culture and his own linguistic heritage. As we can see through dattoisanguy’s performances, he pushes *Hoisan-wa* into new domains (e.g., dating, rapping) and contributes to the modern linguistic resources available for the *Hoisan-wa* speaking community.

### *Gestures*

The gesture that appears the most often is the gesture in which dattoisanguy will move either one or both of his arms and hands down aggressively as if he were doing a “throwdown.” Through his various narrations of everyday life as a Hoisan heritage Chinese American male, he describes various Hoisan family tropes and highlights subjects such as food and money exchange within his culture while frequently using the “throwdown” gesture (See Figures 6-7)

In one video, dattoisanguy is sharing his experiences about being a Hoisan person in a restaurant, and how everyone is related to each other. In one instance, when he confronted with another relative he does not know personally, dattoisanguy says “I’m just trying to eat my shit!” showing his resistance to the interaction. Throughout the video the “throwdown” gesture is used, but each time the gesture would enlarge and escalate. Accompanying with this gesture is his demeanor of (feigned) anger and rising pitch and volume, which adds to an overarching demeanor of “anger” in his

*YouTube* performance. This is an ironic performance parodying masculinity, as dattoisanguy maintains a smile while speaking to his audience, indicating that, while his words and gestures are aggressive, he is being facetious.

### *Reactions to dattoisanguy's Videos*

In terms of audience response, Hoisan-speaking people are identifying with dattoisanguy's work and engaging through various social networks. One user quips, "I thought this guy was hilarious," and other users respond positively and/or add where they are from or how they might be related to dattoisanguy based on the details he gives about his ancestral home or family surname. Here, not only is the linguistic availability and usage of Hoisan-wa positively circulated and recontextualized, it motivates people to share their own experiences as well.

One user who goes by the name of Armor King responds to dattoisanguy's first vlog with, "yo man, your shit is on point. I don't know how many times my old man use to run that shit on me on that so-and-so knows you from this f'n place & somehow we're related through our last names. too funny! keep it up!" This user not only aligns himself with dattoisanguy's manner of speech by using profanity, he also lauds dattoisanguy for relatability and for making videos aimed at those who can claim Hoisan heritage. Another commenter on the same video characterizes dattoisanguy as "cute."

In dattoisanguy's most recently posted video, many of the comments call for dattoisanguy's return to *YouTube*. One user,

ChineseYoda1, writes, "bruh you gotta come back #ToisanPride," imploring dattoisanguy to create and post more videos. The positive feedback and appreciation from the viewers' community speaks to the amount of people who can identify with and even draw pride from dattoisanguy's videos.

Similar to Armor King's deploying of profanity as an emblem of hypermasculinity, ChineseYoda1's use of the term "bruh," a term defined by Urban Dictionary as being "Used by african Americans Males [sic] in everyday vocabulary or to greet one another" links this specific lexical item to the speech of a specific racialized and gendered persona.

### **Implications**

The data presented above demonstrate a re-envisioning of the way we view *Hoisan-wa* vis-à-vis online communication, expanding the domains of language use where *Hoisan-wa* is considered a resource, in this case, by a younger Hoisan-heritage man. This expansion of language use is part of a positive, counter-hegemonic affective stance that counters established negative ideologies about *Hoisan-wa*, serving as implementational spaces that can serve as wedges to pry open language ideologies (cf. Hornberger, 2005). The gendered and racialized performances by dattoisanguy contributes to a re-envisioning of how *Hoisan-wa* (and its users) are viewed online and how *Hoisan-wa* users can adopt language-as-resource view (cf. Ruiz, 1984) towards their heritage language in online spaces. Through the use of existing tropes of contemporary Chinese American life,

Hoisan heritage culture, and shared cultural memories, as well as popular English Top 40 music, dattoisanguy harnesses uniquely Chinese American linguistic and communicative repertoires.

User dattoisanguy's performances of masculinity also seem to re-envision hegemonic and stereotypical portrayals of the Asian-American male in media. By aligning himself to African American masculinities in the same way that *YouTube* sensation Kevjumba does (cf., (Chun, 2013), dattoisanguy moves beyond problematic caricatures that limit the scope of how Asian men are gendered. Through his gestures and code-switching, dattoisanguy circulates narratives that are both hyper and ironically masculine while at the same time humanizing to his audience. In sum, dattoisanguy's performances demonstrate his multicompetence as a Chinese American, Hoisan-heritage young man; the ways he deploys various language and gestures confront and push back against stereotypes of Asian American males and Hoisan heritage people. Further work exploring these rich intersections of various minoritized language, ethnic, and gendered identities online will help illuminate our understanding of how various communities creatively and skillfully push back against mainstream ideologies.

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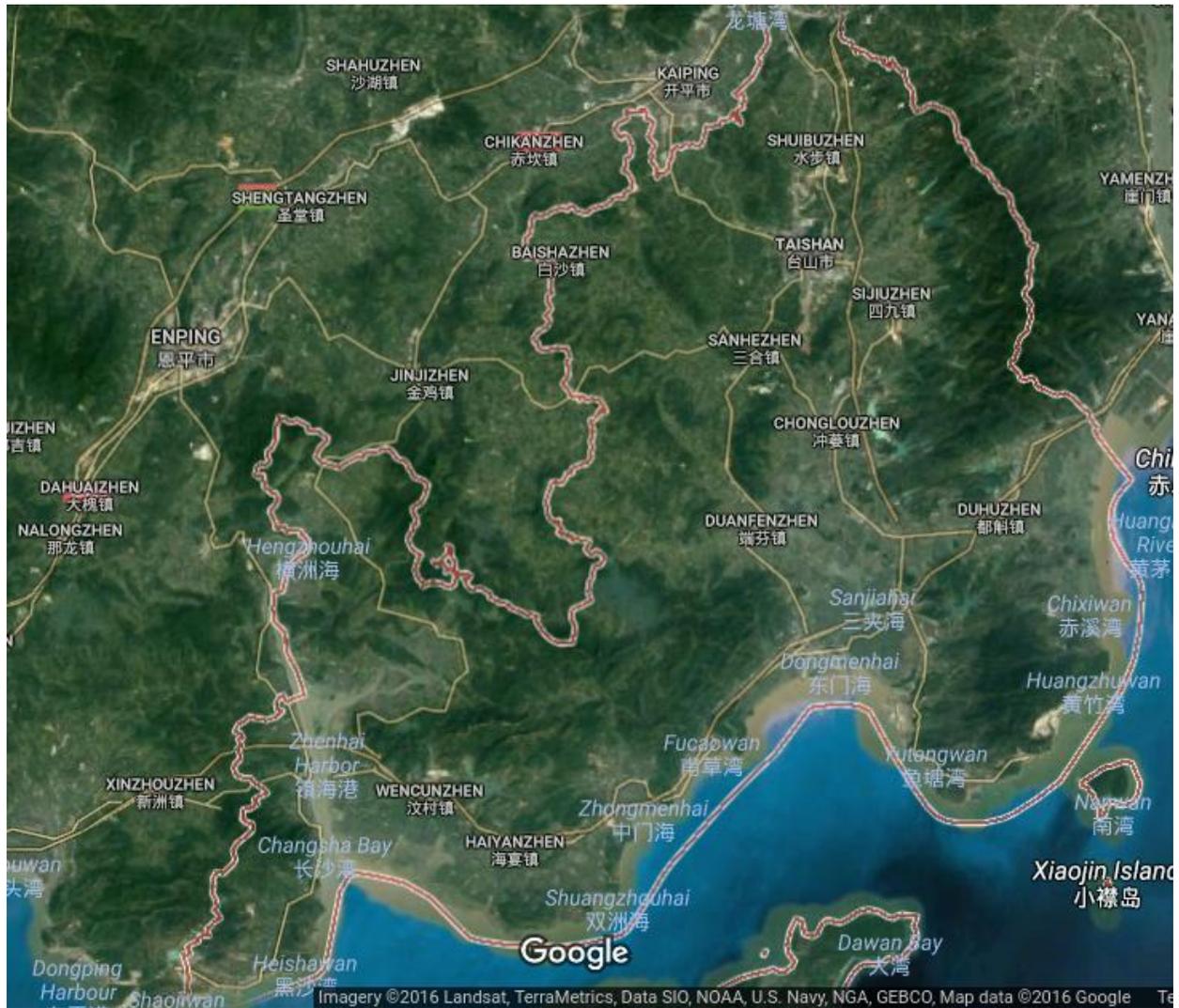


Figure 1: A topographic map of Hoisan and its surroundings. Adapted and retrieved from Google Maps (2016). Reprinted with permission.

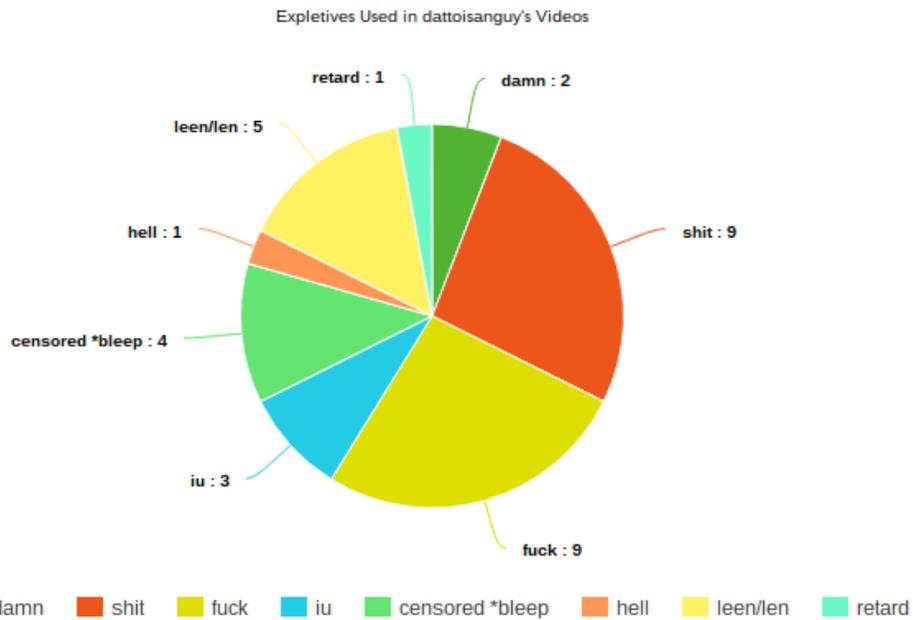


Figure 2: This chart illustrates all the expletives used by dattoisanguy in his videos in both Hoisan-wa and English.



Figure 3: Dattoisanguy using Hoisan profanity in his video “Driving by (Drive By - Train TOISAN cover)” and censoring himself. Adapted and retrieved from YouTube.com, Retrieved from [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1O\\_CB19J5k](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h1O_CB19J5k). Copyright [2012] by Google.com.

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Figure 4: Dattoisanguy talking about money and “making it rain.” Adapted from YouTube.com, Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hBUxYbmEhKs>. Copyright [2013] by Google.com. Reprinted with permission.



Figure 5: Dattoisanguy holding a bowl of imaginary soup in his reenactment of a conversation with his mother. Adapted from YouTube.com, Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OsRf3hFyaYI>. Copyright [2012] by Google.com. Reprinted with permission.



Figure 6. This figure illustrates dattoisanguy's illustration of a one-handed throwdown in his first vlog. Adapted from YouTube.com, Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mU8HmK6lfJ0>. Copyright [2012] by Google.com. Reprinted with permission.



Figure 7. Later on in the same video, a two-handed throwdown becoming more exaggerated and growing bigger in size. dattoisanguy's facial expressions become more animated as well. Adapted from YouTube.com, Retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mU8HmK6lfJ0>. Copyright [2012] by Google.com. Reprinted with permission.