From Dialect to Grapholect: Written Cantonese from a folkloristic Viewpoint

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Abstract
Written Cantonese used to prevail in Cantonese opera scripts, pop song lyrics, comic books and other forms of folk literature in the Cantonese dialect areas of southern China. With the economic boom of the 1980s and the export of culture to mainland China, Hong Kongers tend to take pride in their cultural identity and Cantonese is enjoying a resurgence. This paper discusses the spread of written Cantonese in the new media from the point of view of language rights as the right to diversity in post-industrial Hong Kong.

The new media and local patriotism: the rising status of written Cantonese in Hong Kong

Written Cantonese, or Cantonese transcribed in Chinese characters for the sake of communication (and not merely transliteration), is nothing new in Hong Kong. The earliest traceable documents in Cantonese are the Yue ou (Cantonese Folksongs) compiled in 1828 and the New Testament in Cantonese published in 1873 (Cheung, 1996). Written Cantonese can be recognized almost immediately by its locally invented Chinese characters which go with its distinct grammar and vocabulary. It used to prevail in Cantonese opera and traditional folk songs scripts, pop song lyrics, comic books, advertisement captions, popular newspapers and other forms of folk literature. Traditionally it appears in a text accompanied by standard Chinese either with or without quotation marks. In 1990's Hong Kong a new type of written Cantonese is advocated by popular newspapers, trendy magazines and political journals. Contrary to its traditional folkish image, the new written Cantonese is a virtual transcription of the spoken language of the local urban people, with a growing number of locally coined...
characters and even English sound equivalents written in roman letters (e.g. *wet* means to have fun). This paper intends to account for this contemporary linguistic phenomenon in terms of the new media and new technology, local cultural identity and political dissidence against the Chinese authority in the North from the viewpoint of a locally born folklorist trained in Germany, whose native language is Hakka.

Formal conflict between local languages/dialects and the standard language comes only when a vernacular language (usually of the ruling class in the political power center) is declared as the standard and propagated by all the modern technological means. In the past, as long as classical written Chinese (*wenyan 文言*) was maintained as the *lingua franca* of the educated population, the choice of standard language or local dialects was a matter of stylistics (or decorum) rather than systematic repression of one language by another. In this regard it is no surprise for us to see that most Cantonese opera lyrics are written in refined classical Chinese for the singing part, and in vernacular Cantonese for the spoken part.

In mainland China, the official promotion of Mandarin Chinese (or Putonghua, as the People's Republic of China calls it) as the common language for conversation among Chinese nationals started only in the 1940s. At the beginning of the 1920's, scholars led by Hu Shi 胡適 fostered a kind of written vernacular Chinese they called *baihua 白话* (plain language) for mass communication and education, but the spoken form was not determined. *Baihua* was supposedly not affiliated to any spoken language in China, though it was largely a refined form of spoken Pekingese used among the northern intellectuals. The promotion of a common spoken Chinese language, call it Mandarin or Putonghua, came after the establishment of the PRC government in the mainland and the Republic of China government in Taiwan. The Chinese in Hong Kong, a British Crown Colony with no official recognition of the use of Chinese until 1974, enjoyed freedom in their mother tongues. Cantonese and other Chinese dialects (Hakka, Fukienese, Shanghaiese, etc.) were spoken and the Chinese people in Hong Kong tended to write in a stricter form of *baihua* or a plainer form of classical Chinese. The cultural insecurity of an immigrant society where innovation in the Chinese language is not
officially validated helped to fossilise the formal usage of Chinese in Hong Kong in its imperial style, whereas the Chinese language on the mainland experienced revolutions both in its written form (i.e. simplified characters) and grammar. For the local people, classical Chinese is old but safe to use. Official documents and even public announcements in Chinese have been written and read in Hong Kong, until now, mostly in the grammar and vocabulary of plain classical Chinese which bears virtually no affiliation to any spoken dialect. Even some columnists persist in writing wenyan - rare enough in the Chinese speaking world. If not for the reasons mentioned below, Hong Kong would have continued to be a Sprachinsel for the preservation of wenyan.

With the economic boom of the 1980's and cultural exportation of mass entertainment products to mainland China, people in Hong Kong have tended to take pride in their cultural identity as the model city for the mainland. The economy and ideology of mainland China have failed to impose their cultural orthodoxy on Hong Kong people. On the other hand, Cantonese has gained status as a dialect typical to Hong Kong. The media and modern compulsory education tend to restrict the use of the other minority dialects to rural communities and family circles. Cantonese has became the predominant 'Hong Kong dialect' and written Cantonese is fighting its way upward: highbrow newspapers, TV subtitles, and government advertisement signboards are no longer shy of using locally coined Chinese characters even in the most conspicuous positions. The xiafang (descendance) of the official stand can be seen in the Cantonese rendering of the government anti-alcohol drivers slogan such as 'If you drink, you can't drive' as 酒精害人，開車前咪飲 (Jau jing hoi yahn, hoi che chihn mai yam). The anti-drug campaign slogan 'You only live once. Keep away from drugs' features a Cantonese version mixing Cantonese characters with English: 生命冇Take 2, 請小心演繹 (Sang mihng mouh Take 2, ching siu sam yin yik) (cf. Chin, 1996). These Cantonese slogans were printed on huge plates and hung the whole year long (1995-1996) in conspicuous places such as the entrance of 'the Cross-Harbour Tunnel.

Though Cantonese terms such as dim-sum and kung fu are already included in most English dictionaries, there is no Chinese dictionary dealing with Cantonese that has ever tried to lay down any principle or
standard form for written Cantonese. People simply take the characters to transcribe Cantonese as if they already existed. They are strictly folkloristic because they are neither formally standardised by the government nor by academic institutions. They are never taught in school. The use of the characters is based on mutual imitation and communicative consensus. In this regard it makes a perfect subject matter for folklore studies.

With the increase of close contacts with Mainland Chinese in business and daily life in the 1990’s, and to prepare for the handover of Hong Kong to China after 1 July 1997, fostering standard Chinese (or even the simplified Chinese characters of PRC) and Putonghua in Hong Kong became a main concern in the Government’s linguistic policy. However, the status of spoken Cantonese and the no longer clandestine use of written Cantonese remain officially undiscussed. The fear of linguistic imperialism from Peking sensed by some Chinese intellectuals in Hong Kong is not unfounded. The use of modern media (print and audiovisuals) in China and the populism of the ruling Communist Party has largely erased the boundary between the spoken Putonghua and the written baihua; Putonghua is baihua. Some Chinese teachers even argue that in order to write good Chinese today, students have to learn Putonghua. For the Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong, this is bad news: the safety buffer between the spoken and the written may simply disappear and the use of local dialect may come under fire from Chinese officials after 1997. Well before 1997 China’s officials claimed in Hong Kong and mainland China that Cantonese is a southern dialect and is not appropriate to be used publicly. A campaign to eradicate and fine Hong Kong advertising agents who use Cantonese characters in their signboards in Guangzhou has already been reported (Eastern Express, 28 March 1996, p.10). On the other hand, new Chinese characters like beng 甭 (no need), chen 抻 (to smooth) or qiu 犟 (die-hard) coined by the speakers of Pekingese dialects are spread nationwide with their prestigious dictionary status in contrast to the outlawed Cantonese counterparts. From the mid 1980’s more and more writers from northern China used vernacular dialects (e.g. Pekingese, Shandonghua 豎話, Shanxihua 莘話) to write short stories and novels which have been published in literary magazines nationwide. Liu Heng 劉俠 even took pride in naming his peasant novel with the vulgar
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Mandarin-related northern dialects are considered to be Chinese or even good Chinese, whereas written Cantonese is outlawed even in advertisements. The validation of colloquial expressions from the northern dialects as standard language items should present an equal invitation to other dialects, including Cantonese. But now we see that dialects from the North enjoy official endorsement while the southern ones receive political persecution.

Back to Hong Kong. Formerly because of cultural insecurity, the small immigrant population seldom displayed the pride or affection that many a Northern Chinese has for his/her particular patois. Just as the modern media and the open policy of the 1980s will help establish vernacular Putonghua as the basis of written Chinese in China, the further development and popularity of written Cantonese in Hong Kong is largely due to the wide spread of newspapers and television along with growing concern for democracy and civil rights. To have the folk's ears the media as well as the government have to communicate in the same way most local people do.

In the busy and fast-changing city, mass reading materials are short-lived print-outs. People read for instant information or for quick fun. The traditional reverence for the Chinese word, as expressed in the proverb (written in bamboos and silk, the message will reach afar and last long, is diminished). Market-oriented media have to keep their consumers abreast and know who their target readers are. To enhance effective communication and appeal to mass taste, the traditional concept of literary decorum is no longer observed. Today we see film subtitles in vernacular Cantonese just to intensify the notion of immediacy and intimacy.

Perhaps one should not forget that most Chinese journalists now write Chinese articles with word-processing softwares (e.g. Chinese Word) and newspaper type-setting is entirely computerised. With the user-friendly character-building functions of word-processing software, writers and technicians alike can coin new Cantonese characters in their 'blue-print versions' and let the market finalise them in due course. Characters like (lift/elevator), (tired), (grasp) and (press
with finger) came out this way. Newly coined Cantonese characters in beautiful graphics keep churning out from state-of-art printers. They appear just as authoritative as their standard Chinese rivals handed down for generations in official type. Apple Daily 蘋果日報 even supplies readers with their 'Chinese Hong Kong Characters for Apple Daily Web Page" to read their Web site in Cantonese. With this shareware readers keep abreast of new characters and the time needed to finalise the graphic form of a new character is much shortened. Readers can also download Cantonese characters without bothering to coin them at the first place. This is a typical case in which computers enhance local literacy and facilitate the cultural autonomy of dialect speakers.

**Popular appeal and political dissidence**

The confrontation of Cantonese with Mandarin is an age-old North-South conflict in China. The famous trickster figure in Cantonese folklore, Lun Man-tsui 倫文敟, was said to be a literary genius who gained first place in the royal examination in Peking in the Ming dynasty. With this poetic licence, he always turns vulgar Cantonese expressions into witty lines of poetry and outwits literatis from the North (Chen, 1970). By the same token we find Hong Kong middle-class writers, who gained their academic degrees in (predominantly) Anglo-American universities using local expressions, western slang or pidgin English to celebrate their new identity and ridicule the orthodox linguistic authority of the North. Their search for local identity is further hastened by the political tensions in Hong Kong. The perceived threat from the communists in Peking and the political isolation of the intellectuals after the announcement of the undemocratic Provisional Legislature in 1996 further fueled local patriotism and political dissidence. Some intellectuals as well as mass media bosses find it necessary to write in a distinctively local language to solicit local sympathy.

The rise of Taiwanese *(minnanhua)* 閩南話 in Taiwan amidst the predominance of the officially recognized Mandarin and the ideological fervour linked to spoken (and even written) Taiwanese during the rapid democratisation movement since the 1980's is another parallel. President
Li Teng-Hui 李登輝 delivered his thanksgiving speech on 23 March 1996, after winning the first democratic presidential election, both in Mandarin and Taiwanese, with the latter speech being far more elaborate and informative. The lip service paid to the orthodox language seemed to convince the audience of the president's local identity.

*Apple Daily*, founded in June 1995 and currently the most popular newspaper in Hong Kong, claimed a readership of 1,234,000 in 1996 (7th March, 1996, C12). The proprietor, Mr Lai Chi-ying 賴智英, whose editorials audaciously criticised the Chinese Premier Li Peng 李鹏, is seen as a man of courage by his readers. Most columnists in *Apple Daily* write in Cantonese, except for the news stories, whose headlines nevertheless began using Cantonese in 1996 (cf. 16th March, 1996, A17).

What sort of message does a Cantonese essay tell? The beloved columnist of *Apple Daily*, pseudonymed Fat Dragon of Portland Street 呱龍街肥龍, persists in writing in vulgar Cantonese to give daily insiders' tips to the brothels of Hong Kong. Allow me to translate one of his confessions as a pimp and let the text speak for itself:

In this brothel street I, Fat Dragon of Portland Street, has worked for years as a pimp but I can never save enough money to open a brothel of my own. I have a dream: to open a super-class brothel in Hong Kong with beautiful girls from all over the world in service. The guests won't mind spending a bit more for quality service and good girls. Alas! In so many years I still can't get enough money. My dream will never come true. 1997 comes, the communists will be boss and who know what will happen? We know too well about the communists. They just pick bootlickers to man the Preparatory Council. Hong Kong's hopeless. The pimps in Portland Street said we should have the fat Lai (Chi-Ying), Martin Lee, Szeto Wah, the robust (Lau) Chin-Shek and the spicy Emily (Lau) in the Preparatory Council. Then Hong Kong will have its future. My father's friend, who is a high-ranking cadre in China, urged my father to emigrate because the communists will make everyone suffer here...

If I get no freedom after 1997, I'll fight as a guerrilla on Lantau Island. Ha! Ha!
I cheated money with this diary. Excuse me, no insider tips for today. But 
big news tomorrow. (7th March, 1996, E15)²

Mad Dog Daily 瘋狗日報, a newspaper founded on 18 March 1996 by the former university journalism professor Wong Yuk-man 黃毓文, appeals to popular readership with its provocative anti-communist stand. News is reported with typical ‘advocacy journalism’: the reporters’ views are laid bare in the news story. The paper shows a growing tendency to use Cantonese in news stories. Within a month of publication, even the Governor’s speech had been translated and recorded verbatim in Cantonese (Mad Dog Daily, 20th April, 1996, A3). Mr Patten was then listing legal arguments in the Legislative Council against the Provisional Legislature after 1997. The coherence and eloquence of his speech seemed not to suffer any loss when it was recorded in written Cantonese.

It is also in this journal that we see the columnist and film actor Wong Chau Sheng 黃秋生 criticizing, in ultra vulgar Cantonese, Peking’s missile threat in the Taiwanese Strait in March this year before the Taiwanese presidential election as ‘occasional masturbation’ (daa hah feigei 打下飛機, literally: shooting the aeroplane) in the sea (Mad Dog Daily, 28th March, 1993, p.3). The vernacular language is increasingly politicised.

On the other side of the battlefield we see pro-Peking newspapers like Tai Kung Pao 大公報 begin to use written Cantonese, exclusively to fire at the Hong Kong democrats in its Political Forum page (cf. Tai Kung Pao, 24th April, 1996). If they cannot ban it, they have to use it.

Grapholect and para-literacy: A modern written Cantonese

The use of written Cantonese in former times, say before the 1980s, was often in quotation marks, showing its provisional and stigmatised status. Traditional self-taught scholars such as Yau Tung 龔東 or Lo Kam 魯金, both experts in local folklore, tended to put all Cantonese expressions in quotation marks (Cf. Yau, 1992: 4; Lo, 1991). To write
Cantonese in its own right depends on the writers' attitude rather than the subject matter. Writing Cantonese without quotation marks signifies the infiltration of the vernacular in formal discourse. Local popular consciousness finally overcomes the sense of cultural inferiority when the spoken is put down in words without quotation marks.

We may describe this process as the making of a "grapholect" (my coinage) with its codification (writing) and decodification (reading) completely in the hands of the folk. Never in Chinese history have the people been allowed such a high degree of freedom to divert from the imperial form of the written language and have it spread in the mass media. And now we have it in Hong Kong, a city well known for its freedom. In Chinese tradition, the word speaks for power. Every written character is a small arena, where different social sounds intercourse and compete for pre-eminence. Owing to its graphical nature, a Chinese character, once coined and appearing in printed form, could eventually secure its entry in the lexicon and survive through changes of time and space. The character may be pronounced differently by other dialect groups but its written forma and cultural reference are preserved. The characters *jiang* 江 (river) and *xi* 溪 (brook), which originated in southern dialects and attained their written form in the Han dynasty have now become standard Chinese (Zhou & You, 1986: 156). The Hakka word *tsun* (ditch) and its local written form 坪 is now known all through China thanks to China's first special economic zone, Shezhen 深圳. Before the 1980s, one could hardly imagine that this folk Hakka character would appear in the headlines of Ribin Ribao 人民日报 (People's Daily). We have yet to see if the local character *lip* 型 will one day be popular in other Chinese cities. The author has already heard northerners use this word in Hong Kong and pronounce it as *li*.

Early written Cantonese and today's written Cantonese speak for two forms of linguistic inadequacies. The use of Cantonese in early days was due to the inadequacy of the folk in understanding standard Chinese. After mastering standard Chinese, however, some Hong Kong people find standard Chinese inadequate to express local concerns. People who dismiss written Cantonese as vulgar and low-taste simply cannot cope with the changing situation. Today's written Cantonese is more and more a discourse of the free, urban and educated Chinese people in Hong Kong.
Former users of written Cantonese were humble and conservative. Modern users tend to be confident and radical. One devoted advocate of written Cantonese was the former university journalism professor Mr Wong Yuk-man, sole proprietor of Mad Dog Daily. His famous article 'Ten Political Prophecies' published in Surprise Weekly 午周 - a weekly founded on 17.05.1996 with all articles exclusively in Cantonese - used foul language, vulgarisms and English (e.g. exposure, okay, cycle) without translation (#1, p.28-32) 3.

In morphological terms, written Cantonese owes its graphical forms to standard Chinese characters, folk characters in Canton, local coinage, revival of dormant characters in archaic dictionaries and English sound equivalents in case the Chinese graphics fail to record the sound (Pang 1994: 212). Even standard Chinese Characters are simplified according to the Cantonese ear. For instance, the word 裤 (fu, trousers) is simplified as 裤 in Hong Kong, where Mandarin (limited by available sound equivalents) can only reduce the original character 裤 (ku) to 裤. In the high-rise city, lifts are indispensable. The English word "lift" is recently translated in Hong Kong with the coined character 電梯 or shengjiangji 升降機. Special Cantonese characters are used in street-side foodstalls and workers' restaurants to enhance fast-reading in the city. For instance, the simplification of 檸鴨湯 (ling ngaap tong, lemon duck soup) as 0 (Lo, 1991: 4). Characters like these are never taught in class, yet school-children read them and write them with little problem. This type of literacy may be called "para-literacy" (my coinage). Kids must first learn some standard Chinese characters in school together with some English before they venture to learn the popular forms all by themselves and at their own risk.

Language teachers in Hong Kong might condemn written Cantonese or use it as an excuse for the falling Chinese standard among kids. Perhaps they should face the fact that the Cantonese memos or diaries of these kids are fluent and lively. And they achieve this para-literacy entirely through self-learning.
Prospects of written Cantonese and language rights

Until now only popular and radical newspapers have been discussed. How is Cantonese used in the more resistant high-brow print media? A cohabitation of written Cantonese and standard Chinese, I would say. One paper, two systems. Highbrow newspapers like *Sing Tao Daily* 星島日報 use vernacular Cantonese only in quoting dialogue and on advertisement pages. In the serious print media today, colloquial Cantonese is often used in eye-catching titles preceding explanation in standard Chinese. Examples are government advertisements and the application brochures for services such as the Hang Seng Bank credit card (intended to be read by the middle class) or the Network of the English-language newspaper Hong Kong Standard, with Cantonese titles and content written in standard Chinese. An advertisement in the newsletter of the Professional Teachers' Union (#323, 20th May, 1996, p.8), 'Vaccination Against Hepatitis A' features cartoons in vernacular Cantonese and a medical text in standard Chinese. Even the bastion of linguistic purism of the Professional Teachers' Union has to give in.

A further example is the Christian teenagers' magazine *Breakthrough* 突破, which gave up its long-preserved linguistic purity this year. As the flock changes its language, so must the shepherd. Today the magazine will unabashedly use foul language and vernacular Cantonese even in its editorial page (e.g. #256, March 1996, p. 3).

In the literary circle, the senior local author Lau Yi-cheung 劉以鬯 put Cantonese in quotation marks when he wrote *Drunkard* 酒徒 in 1963. For example, in the phrase *Lou bin yauh yahn maah san yeh* 路邊有人賣「新鮮」 (people selling some "novel items" on the street-side) (Lau, 1963: 266). The earliest modern best-seller pulp fiction in Cantonese is Ah Foon's 小說 romance series about the life of a copywriter in a leading advertising agency, *The Weekly Diary of a Petty Man* 小男人周記 (cf. Chin, 1989). The award-winning poet and novelist Chung Wai-Man's romance series *Bed* 床 (1995- ) has been launched on the market and has gained a certain critical acclaim.
Perhaps the rise of Cantonese script in Hong Kong will present a challenge to the monolithic Chinese language since 1949. The fabrication of Putonghua and nationwide spread of simplified characters was a trait of rationalisation in the modernisation process. But as we now see some mainland Chinese shops have been using original Chinese characters (fantizi 繁體字) in advertisement plates, which Chinese officials find hard to wipe out. The new Cantonese script in Hong Kong represents a new need for diversity in the post-modern era. And this is indeed very Chinese. China was bilingual in the Qing dynasty with Manchu and Mandarin Chinese as official languages. The founder of the Republic of China, Dr. Sun Yat-sen 孫逸仙, spoke Cantonese in the provisional parliament in Nanking. And Chairman Mao 毛澤東, a native of Hunan, is said to have never spoken a word of Putonghua in party meetings. Perhaps we should not over-emphasize the need for monolithic linguicism for effective communication among the Chinese cultures, which will actually breed more antagonism than solidarity. The four official languages and myriad canton dialects of Switzerland do not seem to confuse the Swiss identity even in the time of an ever-expanding European Union. With multilingualism, the need for unity and the right to diversity are both secured.

Language rights mean the right to diverge, the right to be different. To call for these rights is a new concern in the post-industrial era, when people have survived the standardisation of industrial times and begin thinking of ways to make their society dynamic and human. The making of the grapholect of written Cantonese in Hong Kong, which involves para-literacy, is a typical movement in post-industrial Hong Kong, where some people feel it necessary to renew and further develop a written as well as a spoken language of their own, after they have acquired the common literacy. The author would view the imposition of Putonghua and Putonghua-derived baihua on Hong Kong as the standard to be a demonstration of the totalitarian power of communist China rather than serving the local community's good. The ideal of "one country, two systems", if it is to mean anything in the cultural development of China, should be conceived as the inception of the cultural diversification of China - in the South as well as in the North.
In Hong Kong, the future can only be answered in questions. Will written Cantonese be banned in Hong Kong after 1997, just like it is in mainland China now? Or will it enjoy official recognition and become a formal written language in Hong Kong? As a folklorist I favour the status quo: written Cantonese in the hands of the people.

Notes

1. Literally 'The Dog-Fucked (Goddamned) Grains'. See Liu (1993: 11). With some accent problems, the word ฤ(fuck!) was transcribed as Ɂ(ru, "enter") or as ʾ(ri, "sun") in Zhang Ailing's 張愛玲 novel Chidi zhi lian 赤地之戀 (‘Love on the Red Land’). See Zhang (1954: 71 & 95).

2. The original text reads:

emente

砵蘭街肥龍

肥龍老竇有個共產黨官X朋友﹝好似X廣東省, 屬於廳級﹞, 佢叫肥龍老竇有錢就移民, 共產黨唔會X香港人有好日子過。

In this article, Putonghua and Modern Standard Chinese are transcribed using the Pinyin system. Cantonese is transcribed using the Yale system. For reason of convenience, the tone marks have been omitted. (ed.)

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