

# LT5904 Language and Culture in Society

## Term Paper

**Student Name: Coco Leung Ka Wai**

**A study of the linguistic and cultural legacy of Hong Kong and the issue of language as a tool of empowerment or control**

### Introduction

It has been almost twenty years since Hong Kong was handed back from the British Government to the Chinese Government. This city has gone through a lot of changes after the transfer of sovereignty, and various different opinions have been heard from the various sectors of the society.

Hong Kong has long been described as a cosmopolitan city, for its function as an international trade and financial centre under the free trade policy, and for its bilingualism consisting of Chinese and English. This bilingualism is undoubtedly a legacy from the period when Hong Kong was still colonized by the British. However, there have been more and more voices suggesting that Hong Kong is losing this 'advantageous' legacy, partly because the proficiency and usage of English in Hong Kong started to diminish. As reported by *South China Morning Post* (2015), "Hong Kong has dropped in a global ranking on English proficiency for the second consecutive year, reviving concerns over English education becoming 'stratified' under the government policy of mother-tongue teaching." Although there are some criticisms against the reliability and representativeness of the research which the ranking is based on, the decline in ranking and the extensive use of 'Chinglish' in Hong Kong still convinced many people of the worsening English

proficiency. The issue was even debated at the Legislative Council, where the Education Bureau tried to maintain that “the English standards of Hong Kong Students are stable.” (LCQ4, 2015)

At the same time, Cantonese, the other official language of Hong Kong, which is also the native language of the majority here, is as well said to be under threat. A pro-Cantonese campaign was initiated in Guangdong and soon spread to Hong Kong. According to *Asia Times Online* (2010) and *Taipei Times* (2010), with an aim to preserving the native dialect of the vast majority of Hong Kong and to support their fellow Cantonese speakers in Guangdong, around 200 Hong Kong people participated in a peaceful demonstration on 1 August 2010. The protesters expressed their fear about the PRC’s language policies, especially the attempt to unify the Chinese language on a national level. They are afraid that the promotion of Putonghua and simplified Chinese characters will be harmful to the continued existence of Cantonese and traditional Chinese characters in Hong Kong.

After the long period of colonial governance, what legacy did the British leave to us? In this paper, I would like to discuss the linguistic and cultural legacy that Hong Kong people have inherited from the colonial times, and through the discussion we shall uncover the secret of language use and policy.

### **Historical Background of Hong Kong**

From 1842 to 1997, Hong Kong was a colony of Great Britain. This colonization started from the signing of the Treaty of Nanking in 1842 after the First Opium War, where the first part of Hong Kong - Hong Kong Island was ceded to the British (Bolton, 2011). Not long after, the Second Opium War began in 1857, and ended up with the further cession of Kowloon Peninsula in 1860 (Pennycook, 1998). Later, the Chinese Government entered into a 99-year lease of New Territories with the British, bringing the whole of Hong Kong, as we know it today, under British control since 1898. In the run-up to the end of the lease, the two Governments signed the Sino-British Joint Declaration in 1984 to agree on the return of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, subject to a maintenance of a high degree of autonomy in

governance and the same way of life, “including its capitalist economic system, its common-law legal system, its free press, its freedom of worship, its right of assembly, its academic freedom and its two official languages (Chinese and English)” for the next 50 years. Therefore, in 1997, the Basic Law which established the institution of “one country, two systems” was promulgated in concurrence with the handover of sovereignty (Flowerdew, 2011). And since then, Hong Kong has become ‘Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People’s Republic of China (HKSAR)’.

## **The Linguistic and Cultural Legacies**

### **Legal Language**

The most obvious, major linguistic legacy from colonial Hong Kong must be bilingualism. In fact, for over 130 years of the colonial period, English was the only official language in Hong Kong. Chinese has been added to be the other official language to be used in public administration only after the promulgation of the Official Languages Ordinance (Cap. 5) in 1974. But such bilingualism was for communication between the Government and the general public only. Back then, Chinese had not yet been adopted in law drafting in Hong Kong. It was when the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed that the need for legal bilingualism was raised (Department of Justice, 1998). According to LC Paper No. CB(2)1085/00-01(02), “the Official Languages Ordinance (Cap. 5) and Interpretation and General Clauses Ordinance (Cap. 1) were amended in 1989 to provide statutory preparation for enacting legislation in both Chinese and English”. To facilitate such change of legislative languages, the Bilingual Legislation Programme was implemented to carry out bilingual drafting of new ordinances and English-to-Chinese translation of existing ordinances. After that, the introduction of the Basic Law in 1997 again confirmed such bilingualism for post-colonial Hong Kong. Article 9 of Basic Law states that “In addition to the Chinese language, English may also be used as an official language by the executive authorities, legislature and judiciary of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.” Thereafter, in addition to the bilingual legislation, there has also been increasing use of Chinese in court proceedings, although English remains to be the dominant language in the Court of First Instance for Trials, the Court of

Appeal and the Court of Final Appeal as shown by the information provided in LC Paper No. CB(2)1353/11-12(01). In view of this distribution, Ng (2009) explained that, “Cantonese is used when witnesses are examined, but English remains the language of choice when law is debated.” This may give us some hints regarding the relative status of the two official languages in Hong Kong.

Although English and Chinese are equal in terms of legal status and effect, in practice they have different social status. Such hierarchy basically comes from the legal system we inherited from the British – the common law system, which is to be maintained for 50 years from 1997 in compliance with the Sino-British Joint Declaration. In LC Paper No. CB(2)1781/10-11(02), Department of Justice (DOJ) pointed out that, “of the numerous jurisdictions that practice common law, Hong Kong is the only Chinese speaking community”. Due to the doctrine of *stare decisis*, which requires the courts to be bound by the judgments of the precedents across all common law jurisdictions, it is practically impossible to neglect the importance of English in the legal domain, given that “even today, the vast majority of court documents and judgements are written in English, as are most legal reference books and case law records.” (Bolton, 2011). Moreover, all judges and lawyers in Hong Kong receive their professional training in English, so that there should be no doubt about their proficiency processing legal work in English, but not all of them can speak and write Chinese (Judiciary Administration, 2002). DOJ also revealed in the aforementioned LC Paper their difficulties in drafting legislations in Chinese and in recruitment of counsels who are literate in both Chinese and English at the early stage of legal bilingualism. In the recent years, DOJ has been making efforts to increase the use and ease of use of Chinese in legal proceedings, as well as to enhance the readability of both Chinese and English legislations through provision of legal terminology glossaries and Chinese reference materials, plain language drafting and training bilingual counsels. While such efforts are likely to be welcomed by the legal professionals and the general public of Hong Kong in light of the trend of plain legal language suggesting that law should be accessible and comprehensible to everyone in the society, whether these measures can help

to reduce the hierarchy between English and Chinese in the legal sector of Hong Kong, we shall see in the future.

Nevertheless, provided that Hong Kong has already been returned to China, and the 'bi-literate and trilingual' direction of language policy has since then been adopted by the HKSAR Government, we also should not ignore the importance of Putonghua. As to the legal status and use of Putonghua, the Judiciary Administration (2002) emphasized "the official language of Chinese in its spoken form usually refers to Cantonese but also includes Putonghua" partly because Legislative Council members can choose to speak in either English, Cantonese or Putonghua; and the oath of office was also taken by the HKSAR Government officials in Putonghua on 1 July 1997. Although there have been only limited cases where Putonghua was used by the judges, considering the more and more business relationships between Hong Kong and China after the execution of CEPA and the growth in population of Putonghua-speakers in Hong Kong in the recent decades, the possibility of increasing use of Putonghua in the legal sector certainly exists.

### **Language of the Civil Service**

English has long been a working language in the civil service in Hong Kong since 1842, as the positions in the Colonial Government were mostly filled up by the British. In fact, according to Luke and Richards (1982), "English was the only language of communication between the Government and the people as well as within the Government itself" until some riots in late 1960s raised concerns regarding the language gap between the colonial Government and the majority of the population who was not capable of communicating in English. The Government then enacted the Official Languages Ordinances (Cap. 5) in 1974 to formally introduce the use of Chinese into the governmental communication and started to recruit more non-English speaking people into the Government. In spite of these measures, as described by Luke and Richards (1982), most speeches were still delivered in English at the various councils in charge of civil affairs and all bills were printed in English, the Chinese version would only be offered for the bills which were "likely to rouse public interest".

Towards the end of colonial era, at the same time of putting forward the long-term objective of developing a civil service which is bi-literate (in Chinese and English) and trilingual (in Cantonese, Putonghua and English), the Government concurrently set forth the language requirements in respect of the Chinese proficiency in recruiting civil servants in 1995 (Panel on Public Service, 1998). The objective and the bilingual literacy requirement has remained to this day. In LC Paper No. CB(1)1911/09-10(03), the Civil Service Bureau expressed that efforts will be continuously made to maintain a bi-literate and trilingual civil service. It further explained the current practice that all written materials, verbal announcements and internet homepages which serve to provide information from the Government to the public, are available bilingually, while “bureaux and departments reply to correspondence or answer oral enquiries from members of the public in either Chinese or English, depending on the language used in the incoming correspondence or enquiries.” Since the return of sovereignty in 1997, a lot more bilingual local Chinese have entered the civil sector, the use of Chinese in the civil service should be promising. Nonetheless, despite the HKSAR Government’s promise to provide bi-literate and trilingual service, complaints regarding the official use of English began to occur. As reported by *South China Morning Post* (2015), “English-language journalists often complain about Chinese-only press releases and briefings”, especially “the practice of ministers writing Chinese-only blogs to float important policy ideas.”

### **Medium of Instruction**

Mother-tongue education has led to numerous debates in the community throughout the past four decades. Frederick Stewart is probably the first to propose a vernacular education in Hong Kong. As early as in 1860s, based on the beliefs that solid foundation in the first language is the prerequisite for effective learning of a second language; and that good proficiency in Chinese would be a necessity for the Hong Kong students to fit in their jobs after graduation, he suggested Hong Kong schools should teach in Chinese. However, due to the opposition of the Governor Hennessey and other officials, who suggested that the Government ought to focus on teaching English and

let the private organizations take care of teaching Chinese, Stewart's proposition could not get implemented, even if he already brought attention to the issues regarding the creation of a gap between the education level and social status of the Hong Kong people and a sheer pursuit of materialistic way of life, which could be harmful to the stability of colonial ruling of the community. In reviewing the education of the colonial Hong Kong, Pennycook (1998) commented on Stewart's proposition, "the ideal education, then, provided a vernacular education to the majority of the population in order to maintain social control and educate workers better able to work under colonial capitalism, and a bilingual education for a small elite. Stewart's policies, therefore, although apparently based on liberal educational ideals, suited the colonial administration better than the more extreme Anglicist or Orientalist policies advocated by others." Despite Pennycook's comments, throughout the over-a-century colonial period, this 'ideal education' was not adopted by the Colonial Government. Most of the resources and support from the Colonial Government were put into English-medium education, producing a group of westernized, English-speaking local elites (Lin, 2009). On the contrary, and ironically, to some extent the beliefs of Stewart have been embraced by the HKSAR Government after the decolonization.

Stepping into the last stage of British ruling, the Colonial Government issued a White Paper introducing a *laissez-faire* approach for the medium of instructions on the secondary schools in Hong Kong, in parallel with the promulgation of the Official Languages Ordinance (Cap. 5) in 1974. Under the *laissez-faire* MOI policy, while most of the primary schools were required to teach in Cantonese, the secondary schools were allowed to decide the MOI on their own (Bolton, 2011). Owing to the popular belief in the superiority of EMI schools and the promising future guaranteed by English-medium education in terms of higher education and career opportunities, many people preferred to send their children to EMI schools, which resulted in more than 90% of secondary students receiving EMI education in Hong Kong until the early 1990s (Lin, 2009). As stated in the *Report on Review of Medium of Instruction for Secondary Schools and Secondary School Places Allocation* published by Education Commission in 2005, "the EC recommended

repeatedly in its *EC Reports Nos. 1, 2, 4 and 6*, published in 1984, 1986, 1990 and 1996 respectively that the Government should actively promote mother-tongue teaching” and subsequently after the return of sovereignty over Hong Kong to China, the Government officially issued the *Guidance* in 1997 and put it into practice from 1998. The *Guidance* required that only secondary schools which could fulfill the three prescribed criteria, including “student ability, teacher capability and support measures”, were permitted to conduct their teaching in English. As a result, only around 25% of the secondary schools qualified as EMI schools and obtained approval to continue using English as their MOI, while the rest turned into CMI schools and had to conduct their teaching for junior levels in Chinese. In the *2005 Report*, the Education Commission also maintained that “mother-tongue teaching is bearing fruit” and proposed to continue such the bifurcation of schools.

Unfortunately, the recommendation of the Education Commission did not seem to be welcomed by the Hong Kong public. Lin (2009) summarized the negative responses to the enforcement of the *Guidance* from the various stakeholders, such as school principals, teachers, parents and students, and found out that their reasons of dissatisfaction can range from difficulties in recruiting students into CMI schools to increasing pressure on the teachers and students with less English proficiency. The most worrying of these should be the labelling effect caused by the bifurcation of schools. It was generally believed that EMI school graduates who are relatively more proficient in English will have a brighter future due to their better chance to be admitted for higher education and to enter multinational or professional companies afterwards, rendering CMI schools as inferior in public perception. To address the above public concerns, the HKSAR Government announced the plan to carry out a fine-tuning of the MOI policy from 2010, which aims to reduce the labelling effect and increase CMI students’ English proficiency through providing more flexibility on MOI arrangements and giving the primary and secondary students more exposure to English (Education Bureau, 2009). The effectiveness of the fine-tuning was questioned by Chan (2009) based on the argument that the labelling effect would not be eliminated but only be “relocated from the school level to the class level”. Fung and Ma (2012) also



shared the similar view, suggesting that the mother-tongue education and fine-tuning policy actually “intensified the inequality in terms of educational access, academic results, participation and life chances”.

### **Chinese Culture and Civic Education**

A cultural legacy from the colonized times, which may not be normally expected, is the teaching of Chinese Culture. While the Colonial Government was British run, it was this British Government which introduced the subject of Chinese Culture into the education curriculum of Hong Kong. During the 1910s, in view of the growth of nationalist sentiment in the Chinese schools in Hong Kong after the 1911 Revolution, the Government felt that the social and political stability of the colony was under threat of the political unrest in China. The first attempt made by the Government to remedy the situation, was the passage of the Education Ordinance in 1913. The main purpose of the Ordinance was to keep “all Chinese Schools under much closer supervision” through the legal requirement of school registration. The effect of strict monitoring did not immediately take place. The political unrest sustained into the 1920s, “massive 1925-26 strike and boycott of British goods” further deepened the worries of the Colonial Government. At this point, the Government started to be aware of the adverse consequences of the overwhelming focus on the “materialistic side of life” and the “more and more neglected” ethics of Confucian. It was believed that the insertion of Confucianism into the curriculum of the Chinese schools would be a solution to the threat of Nationalism in China, because the core values of Confucianism are “social hierarchy and subservience to patriarchal authority” (Pennycook, 1998). Although it has undergone different modifications throughout the decades, the subject of Chinese Culture has persisted in the curriculum of Hong Kong schools to this day.

The subject of Chinese Culture has become an interesting issue after 1997. Bolton (2011) quoted Carroll in his paper, “although Hong Kong has returned to China, it has not been de-colonized, it has been re-colonized with the metropole simply shifting from London to Beijing”. Considering the implementation of “one country, two systems”, this seems to be convincing. In

light of Hong Kong people's resistance to Hong Kong's return to Chinese sovereignty, as seen by the wave of emigration in the run-up to 1997, the subject of Chinese culture adopted by the Colonial Government as a tool of social control, is performing the same function again, but this time for the Chinese Government. The use of traditional Chinese moral values is compounded by the introduction of national education to hopefully establish the nationalism and recognition of national identity of the Hong Kong students (Man, 2013). Some suggested that, the promotion of Putonghua serves a similar function. Following the announcement of 'a bi-literate, trilingual' language policy, Putonghua was added to the curriculum of Hong Kong schools as a compulsory subject in 1998. Provided that the alleged objective is to "enable Hong Kong students to master the common spoken language of the Han nationality" (Education Bureau, 2015) in light of the closer political and economic relationship between China and Hong Kong under Chinese sovereignty, Bolton (2011) shared the view of Vines that, Chinese Government is worried about the sense of identity signaled by the use of Cantonese. Therefore, the promotion of Putonghua could be understood as a way to undermine the importance and influence of Cantonese, as well as the growing localism in Hong Kong. The effect of the national education and Putonghua is still unclear. The Pro-Cantonese Campaign in 2010 and the protest against national education in 2012 both revealed that resistance to the recognition of Chinese nationality among Hong Kong people still exists.

## **Conclusion**

Language can be a tool of individual empowerment to the extent that we can use language to better ourselves materially and intellectually. In the context of an international city like Hong Kong, a good command of English has always been one of the essential keys to academic and career success, given the status of English as a lingua franca in international communication. However, public opinions have been going on about the defects of our language policy on mother-tongue education. Fung & Ma (2012) suggested that, under the MOI streaming policy, "while one of the prerequisites for entry to university in Hong Kong was a pass in Use of English, students who studied in CMI schools constantly suffered a huge disadvantage", because

the policy fails to help CMI students to master the English language based on the statistics of HKALE in 2004. Zhang (2015) also shared his view regarding teaching method in *South China Morning Post*. He said, while China is starting to teach English through the use of literature so as to “inspire greater understanding and better command of the language”, Hong Kong is still having “courses on English for ‘special purposes’ - business English, English for science, English for media, and so on.” He further explained that, “such an ultra-utilitarian teaching method is preposterous, because, without a good foundation in its general usage, it does little to help one acquire a truly good command of English.”

Language could also well be a tool of social control. In 1910s, the Colonial Government started the censorship and depoliticization of the teaching materials and the introduction of Confucianism into the curriculum to counter the influence of political unrest in China. Through the controlled teaching of Confucianism and English, the Colonial Government shaped the population into a bilingual workforce with a command of English only sufficient to match their job needs. The typical characteristics of this workforce were the apolitical attitude and the docile personality, because they were mostly contented about their career and internalized the conservative Confucian values. The colonial government therefore could maintain the social stability and economic prosperity (Pennycook, 1998). Nowadays, in Hong Kong and Guangzhou, Chinese government is trying to reinforce the sense of national identity through the promotion of Putonghua. However, the “forceful imposition” instead triggered resentment of the Cantonese speakers due to the perception of disrespect to their native language and culture.

While the importance of Putonghua in Hong Kong is gradually increasing due to various political and economic factors, the value of English and Cantonese still cannot be neglected. The HKSAR Government needs to understand the importance and extent of influence of language planning to both the current and future generations of Hong Kong. They must pay careful attention to how to balance individual achievement of each citizen and social welfare of the city as a whole. They are expected to take into consideration the opinions of the

various stakeholders, including both the Chinese Government and the Hong Kong public. To ignore either side will certainly lead to even more conflicts between China and Hong Kong, harming the economic well-being and social stability of Hong Kong. (3939 words)

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