

Student Name: YIP Yi Yuk Vivian

Course: LT 5904 Language and Culture in Society

Assignment title: What is the linguistic and cultural legacy that Hong Kong people have inherited from colonial times? Is language a tool of empowerment or control, or both?

Introduction

Even though it has been more than 20 years since the retrocession of Hong Kong to Chinese sovereignty, the impact of the 150-year colonial rule is not entirely gone with the British withdrawal. From time to time, protesters waving colonial flags can still be seen at demonstrations and rallies to express their discontents and nostalgia for colonial Hong Kong, claiming that Hong Kong would be better off if it still remained a British colony. Indeed, many Hong Kong people gratefully see the last few decades of colonial rule as the glorious years. The British legacy to Hong Kong are, namely, an independent judiciary system, self-contained public housing, advanced medical and health care, social welfare, and especially, English education.

The medium of instruction has always been a recurrent controversial topic in the government and the community at large since colonial times. Today, people still intuitively attribute the financial and economic success of Hong Kong to the use of English as one of the official languages. It also seems natural that this assumption is based on the colonial experience, that English education in the old colonial days was very elitist, restricted to a small amount of people and that English proficiency was a guarantee for social mobility. English education nonetheless constitutes part of the citizens' identity, an important element which enables them to differentiate themselves from mainland Chinese. In brief, English is highly valued in an unquestionable way, to a point that it should be preserved as a linguistic legacy for the locals and their younger generation.

The colonial legacy is more than an English education. To borrow Honey's (1997) words – 'language is power', instead of making a factual description of the British colonial linguistic and cultural legacy, I would like to first examine how the positive colonial image and memories were constructed through English language. Then I would like to study how the entrenched assumptions of English education were constructed through education policies. In other words, we would like to investigate how the colonial discourse had constructed the colonial cultural legacy.

A colonial memory with development and prosperity

The colonial memories of Hong Kong people are still vivid two decades after the handover, and these memories are selectively and particularly associated with the economic prosperity from the 1970s to the 1990s. Here, the notion of 'colonial memory' refers to how the general public perceives and interprets the colonial past. Quoted by Pennycook (1998), Said (1978) suggested that the colonial discourse imposes a range of colonial values and practices on the colonised people so that colonialism becomes justified.

First of all, it starts with the idea of emptiness of the land found outside Europe. *Terra nullius* was the term used to describe the emptiness of the colonial land (Pennycook, 1998, p.102). Without exceptions, Hong Kong being not the most prosperous part of China in the 19th century was given a primitive image: a barren rock, or a fishing village at best, lightly populated and forgotten by the Chinese ruler. The emptiness of this piece of land serves purposefully as a justification for the British occupation. The image of such an underpopulated, ignored and forgotten territory by the Chinese rulers underpinned the idea that the British invasion was not doing much harm neither to the mother country nor the inhabitants there.

It becomes a common practice for the mass media to date the history of Hong Kong from 1842 when Hong Kong was ceded to Britain under the Treaty of Nanjing, which concluded the first opium war, as if the local history commenced only when the White men arrived, as if there was nothing worth mentioning before 1842. Archaeological findings, however, show that there were already human activities in Hong Kong in as early as 200 B.C. under the Imperial Chinese rule, which was 2000 years before the British colonization. The presumed emptiness and hence the absence of history in the colonial discourse imply that Hong Kong was transformed, from 'nothing' at the time the British arrived, to the modern metropolis it is today of 7 million inhabitants, all thanks to the colonial rule. That assumption is a commonly held belief among the people of Hong Kong because local history was not taught in the local schools, not to mention the pre-colonial part of it.

Social segregation – the discourse of Self and Other

Colonial discourse is characterized by the use of dichotomous notions to construct the differences between the Occident and the Orient, or in Said's theory of Self and Other (Pennycook, 1998, p.66).

Pennycook (1998) expands on Said's dichotomies to illustrate the construction of Self and Other in colonial discourse. The first one is the cultured and the natural. In spite of the fact that Chinese are so much older than the Europeans in terms of civilisation and culture, the successive changes that European society had gone through in the context of Enlightenment, Industrial Revolution and Imperialism in the 18th centuries gave the Europeans a sense of superiority. And this superiority had turned the European powers like British into an avid exploiter outside Europe in the name of a moral mission, a mission of civilisation. In fact, as Honson's (1902) critique of imperialism suggested, which Pennycook (1998) cited, colonialism was driven by the belief in the superiority of the White race and the inferiority of the coloured races. Worse still, many others in the research domain tried to underpin the concept of racial difference by establishing scientific theories based on brain size, intelligence and so on. For instance, Alston (1907), quoted by Pennycook (1998), ranked Chinese as the race second to Europeans, with Indians and the Negroes occupying the last two ranks. Notwithstanding the ancient civilisation of China and India, the moral mission of civilising the Asians through colonisation was justified simply based on this 'ranking'.

Another dichotomy is the cleanliness and dirt. In tropical and sub-tropical regions like India and Hong Kong, disease and epidemic were widespread. The British set prejudice on the hygiene conditions of the Orient by their colonial experience in India which they described as dirty and diseased. As a matter of fact, as Alatas (1977) suggested in Pennycook's (1998), the colonisers were actually to blame for the filthiness, as often it was the colonial projects like infrastructure building which contributed to the spread of diseases like malaria. The contrastive image of the filthy Orient and the healthy, clean Europe had an impact on the colonial mind. Like in most of the ancient colonies, separated districts by race can still be found. In sum, to create differences, the Orient was defined by what the Occident is not (Pennycook, 1998, p.94). The differences of Self and Other constructed by colonial discourse have created social segregation not only in colonial times, and are actually still observed in the present social situation.

In the case of Hong Kong, the discourse of Self and Other can be best observed in the social apartheid in colonial Hong Kong. Balakrishnan (2017) pointed out that the colonial government was indeed a direct British rule with senior officials recruited from the white race in Britain and the most important policy decisions were actually made by imperial civil servants in Britain. There was a lack of localization in government body, and the governors were aloof from the people they governed. Chan (1996) also suggested that the colonial expatriates 'seldom penetrated into or acculturated with the local Chinese community' (Chan 1996, p14). For example, the Peak was an exclusive European settlement off limits to the local Chinese. Separate schools were built for the children of the expatriates so they would not mix with the local children. In short, the idea of building their homes on the Peak and separating the children must stem from the constructed dichotomy of cleanliness and dirt. As Chan (1996) argued, it was a colony composed of two communities: with the European community enjoying distinct privileges and the local community being treated in discriminatory way, as second-class citizens.

Such colonial legacy of social segregation is still observed in postcolonial Hong Kong. The Mid-levels which is an area around the Peak remains a prestigious residential area where most of the expatriates prefer to dwell. Although more interactions can be seen between the East and West nowadays, the expatriates in Hong Kong do not really seek to acculturate with the local Chinese community. They seldom put their children into local schools, nor can they be bothered to communicate in the vernacular language with the locals, even though they have been living in Hong Kong for the better part of their lives. Moreover, the locals not only inherited the complex of being second-class when compared to the Europeans, but they also tend to have a new version of Self-and-Other discourse constructed to differentiate themselves from the immigrants of the mainland. Education policy implemented by the British is responsible for a large part in constructing this new version of Self-and-Other discourse.

The colonial education policy and language identity

The medium of instruction has always been the subject of recurring debate in the area of education policies. The common assumption, yet a totally erroneous

concept, shared by the general public is that English education was imposed by the British colonial government. Yet English education was never the original plan. According to the lessons learnt from the colonial experience in India and Malaya, the widespread English education led to the production of a group of discontented people, as Pennycook (1998) suggested, since these people would have problems in integrating into the native society (p.147) and would be unwilling to take menial jobs (p.173).

Due to the above reason, 'vernacular education' was indeed repeatedly stressed in the education reports of colonial Hong Kong. For example, Stewart, the headmaster of the Central School opened in 1862 put emphasis on 'strong support first to Chinese education'. Even among the colonisers, there was a debate on whether an Anglicist or Orientalist approach should be adopted.

For the Anglicists, like Governor Hennessy and Belilios, they thought that all subjects should be Anglicised and the local language should be abandoned (Pennycook, 1998, p.195-196). This mentality reflected that colonial discourse also had influence on the dominant group themselves, thinking that English was superior than the local language and that they were there to 'civilise' the Chinese with a Western liberal education. There was also a utilitarian value as they needed the Chinamen who spoke English to help open up the ports and trade. By spreading English, hopefully the friendly sentiments towards the British could be fostered as well.

Orientalists such as Stewart and Cecil Clementi focused more on the purpose of education as a governing tool. They believed that children inculcated only in European civilisation whilst cut away from the Confucian ethics would be bad in morals, becoming hence a people difficult to govern. The mission of civilising the Asians with European values gave way to the use of the Chinese values to civilise the Chinese people in Hong Kong, which was what Said (1978) called, and Pennycook (1998) quoted - Orientalism. But the practice of Orientalism actually exposed the hypocrisy of the so-called moral mission. With the orientalist approach, the colonised were supposed to be tamed to a docile and obedient populace who would never experience emancipation as the Europeans. The difference of Self and Other was reinforced in the Oriental discourse.

Nonetheless, the British observed the mercantile nature of Chinese people who treated English as the passport to prosperity. For the colonisers, the only ambition of the Chinese men was to find a good job and make money and profit through trading. The Chinese were so ready to abandon their local language and culture just for a smattering of English. Strong demand for English education from the parents made vernacular schools very unpopular. Though after Burney Report in 1935, vernacular education was finally implemented to a larger extent at primary level (Pennycook, 1998, p.215), in the post war period, laissez-faire strategy was adopted to meet the demand for English education. Schools could choose the medium of instruction they preferred to run the schools. In the last decades of the colonial rule, 90% of secondary schools claimed to be either Anglo-Chinese schools or English-medium schools. Such belief in the high market value of English is still shared by the majority of Hong Kong

people. Sad to say, the English fluency of average Hong Kong people, even among the so-called English-educated classes, has never been as good as they would like to believe. Being a British colony didn't mean the environment was conducive to English learning due to the social apartheid mentioned before.

Hong Kong people are still very defensive in regards to English education as such colonial legacy constitutes part of their identity which enables them to distinguish themselves from the Chinese from mainland. The Confucian ethics and moral values which were part of Orientalism also make the Hong Kong people feel more civilised when comparing to the mainland Chinese who had gone through Cultural Revolution. A new version of the discourse of Self and Other was unconsciously and socially forged under the new political environment.

Language – an illusion of empowerment

The assumption of English as a key to success and social mobility has been profoundly entrenched in Hong Kong people's minds because such assumption leads to an illusion of empowerment. If English education was superimposed as the key to success to Hong Kong, the achievement of native English proficiency became a tool of empowerment. Nonetheless, native English proficiency is only achievable for a small elite, to borrow Bourdieu's terms, those who possess the cultural capital (Pennycook, 2001, p82). For the majority of us, the poor quality of English education, not enough for entering the senior positions in the colonial government but sufficient for some negotiations in trade or in service sectors, does not truly guarantee the social mobility that people desired. Language is indeed an authentic control: the control of mind and attitude by all the desires for and assumptions about English.

Shortly after the return to Chinese sovereignty, the Education department announced in September 1997 a policy concerning the implementation of mother tongue education in the majority of secondary schools, with an exemption of around a hundred schools allowed to continue to be English medium schools. Such elitist education policy shocked the Hong Kong people, as if mother-tongue education was imposed by Beijing. This further reinforced the assumed high market value of English. The focus was indeed totally wrong as no one really cared about the true effectiveness and the learning outcome that can be brought by vernacular education. Despite the complaint about the poor quality of English education in Hong Kong, people still strived for it at the expense of intellectual development of our youngsters, as most of the time the learners spend all their energy in struggling with English rather than learning concepts and ideas in the best understandable way.

To conclude, the colonial discourse had constructed a positive perception of the colonial cultural legacy. With opium war and riots barely mentioned, the British reiterated the benefits of colonialism which eventually became the unquestioned facts. To demystify the benefits of colonialism, Carroll (2018) quoted the declassified files in Britain's National Archives, saying that social reforms were triggered by the 1967 riots and were implemented to help Britain hold on to Hong Kong for as long as possible. The British wanted to make Hong Kong such a different and better place from the rest of China that it would be difficult for PRC to rule. Moreover, as assumptions of the value of English language were constructed through a system of

discourse, language was used as a tool to construct attitudes and hence control people's mentality. This in itself is an example of how colonial discourse is used in a way that forever privileges the colonial legacy, which ironically is under-studied by its proud heirs.

Bibliography

Balakrishnan, N. (2017, June 14). Hong Kong is still paying the political price for British colonial rule. South China Morning Post. Retrieved from:

<http://www.scmp.com/comment/insight-opinion/article/2098258/hong-kong-stillpaying-political-price-british-colonial-rule>

Carroll, J. (2018, Jan,13). Who Gained the most from Hong Kong's colonial era: Britain, China or the city? South China Morning Post. Retrieved from:

<http://www.scmp.com/week-asia/geopolitics/article/2128066/who-gained-most-hongkongs-colonial-era-britain-china-or-city>

Chan, M. (1996). Hong Kong: Colonial legacy, transformation, and challenge. *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, 547, 11.

Pennycook, A. (1998). *English and the discourses of colonialism (The Politics of Language)*. London ; New York: Routledge.

Pennycook, A. (2001). *Critical applied linguistics : A critical introduction*. Mahwah, N.J.: L. Erlbaum.