

An analysis of the linguistic and cultural legacies of Hong Kong and the issue of language as a tool of empowerment or control

Hong Kong is well-known for its diglossia and being the international economic center. In the following sections, the influence of British colonization on post-colonial Hong Kong will be discussed. With colonial experience of Hong Kong, the question of language as a tool of empowerment or control will also be explored.

Through years of being a colony of Britain, Hong Kong has inherited various linguistic and cultural legacies from the colonial times. After the change of sovereignty, the most conspicuous legacy is bilingualism and the recognition by the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) of English as one of Hong Kong's official languages. English has its important status among government employees since most senior positions of civil services were filled up by British. Under the policy of "biliteracy" (Chinese and English) and "trilingualism" (Cantonese, Putonghua and English), the HKSAR government institutes the bilingual literacy requirement for civil servants and English continues to be used primarily in different situations. Meanwhile, legal bilingualism has been promoted with the dominant usage of English in higher courts and the important role of English is evident due to the common law system in the legal system of Hong Kong (Ng 2009). Apart from the continuation of the legal system from the colonial period, the education system derived from the British education system and political system are still in force in

Hong Kong. As far as the people of Hong Kong are concerned, the cultural legacies including religion and customs play a crucial role in daily life. Because of the impact of British colonialism, Christianity and Catholicism have become major religions in Hong Kong which is in sharp contrast with neighbouring cities in mainland China. Besides, Hong Kong people still celebrate western holidays such as Easter and Christmas which have been designated as public holidays by the HKSAR government.

The teaching of Chinese culture is another legacy inherited from colonial times. In the debate of whether to emphasize Chinese or English education, Ernst Johann Eitel, a German missionary and Inspector of Schools of the colonial Hong Kong government, argued the importance of education in public morality that people would build up a system of respecting the elderly, authority and morals (Pennycook 1998: 113). After the 1911 republican revolution, the colonial government paid great attention to regulating Chinese schools to forestall related social instability. They put the focus on teaching of Confucian values because of the 1925 strike and boycott on British goods. At that time, Governor Cecil Clementi supported the idea of encouraging the Confucianism and developed a curriculum teaching social hierarchy and respect for authority. With the teaching of Confucianism and English, the colonial government has successfully implemented social control and maintained social stability in Hong Kong. Even after few modifications on language education policy in post-colonial Hong Kong, the focus on traditional culture and values is still intact in the Chinese curriculum at the local schools (Pennycook 1998).

Language policy is undeniable as one of the linguistic and cultural legacies, through which the role of language is observed in the actual experiences in colonial as well as post-colonial Hong Kong. During the colonial times, English as the colonial discourse reflects the construction of power in Hong Kong. As Honey (1983: 25) suggests, learning Standard English is to open the opportunity for “social mobility” so that people may have upward mobility in the society. With better mastery of the dominant language as English in colonial Hong Kong, people will be acceptable into the mainstream of society which means better job and higher pay. Moreover, the education in English has been treated as the advancement in society, politics and economy by Hong Kong people. Thus, English as the dominant language in colonial Hong Kong played the role of empowerment to individuals. In recent decades of post-colonial Hong Kong, the role of language has gradually changed through the promotion of the language policy on biliteracy and trilingualism as well as the improving economic status of China. With this language policy, English, Cantonese and Putonghua are officially all legal languages and major shifts have taken place. For press conferences, publications and press releases by government, related documents are released in English as well as traditional and simplified Chinese. English is no longer the sole language for Hong Kong people which has economic value. Cantonese and Putonghua are becoming increasingly practical in today’s society. For trade, local business or tourism, Putonghua has gained a significant role. Cantonese is commonly used in political dialogues or debates in the government. English still has high prestige and is the dominant language in higher education, and English proficiency is

highly valued for the best paid jobs. Due to the fear of the usage of Putonghua as a tool of control by Chinese government, a number of Hong Kong people have debated and opposed Putonghua, but it has widely been accepted as second or third language to meet requirements in work. Thus, language as Putonghua is also a tool of empowerment in certain areas in post-colonial Hong Kong.

On the other hand, language is a tool of control for government in the period of colonization and decolonization. In the field of education, the medium of instruction has long become a controversial issue and the status of vernacular education has been heatedly debated. As the language policies are largely inherited from colonial times, the trend and orientation of language education policy decided by specific individuals will be illustrated so as to analyse the role of language as a way of control. Though Frederick Stewart, appointed as Inspector of Government School in 1862, supported the education in Chinese for “balanced bilingualism” (Pennycook 1998: 111) believing in the need for students to be educated in their first language education, the importance of mother tongue education as foundation to learn another language, as well as the mastery of Chinese to find useful employment in society, this proposition clearly has been in favor of the social control by the colonial government and enabled workers to work efficiently under “colonial capitalism” (ibid.: 112). This kind of education policy has not been literally put into practice by the colonial government while mostly accepted by the HKSAR government for setting “an elitist language selection policy” (Choi 2003: 673). Therefore, the good command of English “continues to function as a gatekeeper to positions of power and prestige” (Pennycook

1995: 40) in post-colonial Hong Kong. The politics of language has also been reinforced with English being used as a tool of controlling social stability and a discourse with utilitarian purpose.

Indeed, the “Green Paper” published by the colonial government in 1973 advocated Chinese as the medium of instruction (CMI) encountered strong opposition from not only parents but also the schools. So, in the 1974 “White Paper”, the colonial government recommended “a laissez-faire approach” (Bolton 2011: 8) such that the majority of primary schools used Cantonese as the language of instruction while most secondary schools used English for the same purpose at least in name. As a result of the social and economic prestige of English as the medium of instruction (EMI), parents were more willing to send their children to EMI schools and the education in English was considered as a ticket to higher education and better job opportunities. Hence, the duplicity of language both as an instrument of empowerment and control is well illustrated in the experience of Hong Kong.

In colonial times, English as the colonial discourse dominated most aspects in the period of colonization. The usage of English was a tool of empowerment to individuals at colonial times, and the language policy of combining Chinese and English works was a tool of social control. The goal for people to learn English is to fulfill the utilitarian and vocational needs in colonial Hong Kong. And this “need” has become more and more pronounced with business interests asserting their influence in the formation of language policy in post-colonial Hong Kong. After the resumption of Chinese sovereignty in 1997, the concern about Hong Kong’s advantage in English

being eroded with more emphasis increasingly being paid to Chinese learning has raised. Whether to keep this linguistic and cultural legacy of bilingualism is an issue that should be further discussed in terms of the role of language. By treating English as the tool of empowerment, Hong Kong people are the ones who believe in the priority of studying in EMI schools. Hong Kong people should realize that English was the language from colonial times. There is no doubt that people may have advantages with the mastery of English compared with those who do not. However, Chinese is the mother tongue of Hong Kong people which is the most effective tool for communication. The changes in status of languages in post-colonial Hong Kong indicate the relationship between language and power that the role of language will be shaped by power relations in society.

From the discussion mentioned above, Hong Kong people have inherited different linguistic and cultural legacies. The most outstanding one is the bilingualism in the civil service and the judicial system. Education system and political system are also legacies from colonial times. In addition, Hong Kong people have inherited legacies of religions and customs in their daily life. Concerning the issue of language as a tool of empowerment or control, legacies including the teaching of Confucianism and language policy have been analyzed. Language can be the tool of guaranteeing economic power for individuals and the way to maintain social control by social institutions. With momentous change from colonial times to post-colonial period, the status of language in Hong Kong has adjusted in accordance with the power relations in the society.

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