

12-18-2020

Construction of a Localist Hong Kong Identity using Cantonese

Asako M. Moody

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/horizons>



Part of the [Asian Studies Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Moody, Asako M. (2020) "Construction of a Localist Hong Kong Identity using Cantonese," *Horizons*: Vol. 5 : Iss. 1 , Article 23.

Available at: <https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/horizons/vol5/iss1/23>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Kahualike. It has been accepted for inclusion in Horizons by an authorized editor of Kahualike. For more information, please contact daniel20@hawaii.edu.

Construction of a Localist Hong Kong Identity using Cantonese

ASAKO M. MOODY

Ethnic Studies 301 (Ethnic Identity)

Mentor: Dr. Jonathan Okamura

This paper examines the Hong Kong population's attitude towards Cantonese, Putonghua and English after the 1997 handover to explain how a local identity is being constructed through Cantonese. This paper uses existing data from previous interviews conducted by linguists in Hong Kong researching Cantonese and Mainland Chinese immigrant students' attitudes towards these three languages to demonstrate the construction of a local Hong Kong identity. The students' responses suggest that the vernacular language, Cantonese, is a central component of Hong Kong culture and that the people of Hong Kong use Cantonese language resources to construct a localist identity that is unique from their recently acquired 'motherland,' the People's Republic of China. However, the construction of this identity also affects respectively their attitudes towards English as a globally superior and Putonghua as a culturally inferior language. The attitudes of Hong Kong locals to these three languages facilitate the construction of a unique identity that is reaffirmed through Cantonese slogans and songs in the 2019 protests against the extradition bill and universal suffrage. By affirming a local Hong Kong identity in Cantonese and English, the people of Hong Kong are advocating for their rights as a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China, namely universal suffrage, voicing opposition to the proposed extradition bill and police brutality.

Introduction

The population of Hong Kong's attitude towards Cantonese, Putonghua and English after the 1997 handover can explain how a local identity is being constructed and asserted through Cantonese. By asserting the vernacular language Cantonese as

a central component of Hong Kong culture, the people of Hong Kong construct a localist identity that is unique from their recently acquired 'motherland,' the People's Republic of China (PRC), where Mandarin/Putonghua dominates. However, the construction of this identity also entails an attitude or belief that English is a more prestigious language than Putonghua, despite the latter's legal status as the 'nationalist language' of



My name is Asako Moody and I am a BA student in World Comparison History. This is my final paper for ES 301: Ethnic Identity course. During the course, the protests in Hong Kong were escalating and catching worldwide attention. Growing up in Macau, a Special Administered Region just like Hong Kong, I wanted to discuss the unique ethnic identity that Hong Kong has that distinguishes itself from China. Instead of solely focusing on the protestors' advocations, I discuss the different attitudes toward Cantonese and Mandarin that Hong Kong locals have which significantly affects their construction of a local identity different from China. I hope that this paper sparks interests in the complexity of the Hong Kong protests and the ethnic identity of Hong Kong locals.

Horizons, Vol. 5, 2020, pp. 112–117

Copyright © 2020 by the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

the PRC (Gu and Tong 2011, 504). The attitudes of Hong Kong locals to these three languages facilitate the construction of a unique identity that was reaffirmed through Cantonese slogans and songs in the 2019 protests against the extradition bill and universal suffrage. By affirming a local Hong Kong identity in Cantonese and English, the people of Hong Kong are advocating for their rights as citizens of a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China, namely universal suffrage (pou syun 普選), voicing opposition to the proposed extradition bill and police brutality.

2019 Protests in Hong Kong

The protests in Hong Kong were originally sparked by the proposal of an extradition bill in April 2019. The extradition bill would allow foreign nationals wanted for crimes in territories such as Hong Kong, Taiwan and Macau to be sent out of country to Mainland China to face trial, even if the nations had no formal extradition treaty (BBC June 2019). The opponents of the bill believed that the bill would expose Hong Kong to “unfair trials and violent treatment,” while giving China greater influence over Hong Kong to target pro-democracy activists and journalists to face trial in China (BBC June 2019). Though the government responded that the bill intended to “plug the loopholes” that made Hong Kong a safe haven for criminals, opponents believed it would expose people in Hong Kong to China’s deeply flawed judicial system and further erode the judicial independence that was established in the Sino-British Joint Declaration signed in 1984 before Britain handed Hong Kong back over to China (BBC June 2019). The declaration stated Britain’s intention to return the colony of Hong Kong back to mainland China while holding China accountable for implementing a “high degree of autonomy except in foreign and refenced affairs” under its own Central People’s government (Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau 1984). In effect, Hong Kong as an SAR would be separate from the People’s Republic of China and a 1,200-person committee (in lieu of Hong Kong’s 7.2 million residents) is allowed to elect the Chief Executive (Lee and Sing 2019, 4). However, many of the members of the electing committee are rich investors who have immigrated from Mainland China, giving the local population a very small voice in the “democratic” elections (Lee and Sing 2019, 7).

In opposition to the extradition bill, the protests initially consisted of peaceful marches and demonstrations across popular areas in Hong Kong. However, as the violent clashes between protestors and police increased, the protests began to strongly advocate for the implementation of universal suffrage while condemning mainland China’s increased influence over Hong Kong. After a week of protests in April 2019, Hong Kong Chief Executive Carrie Lam said the bill would be suspended, however, demonstrations continued until the bill was

completely withdrawn (BBC November 2019). According to the protestors, the withdrawal of the extradition bill in November was all “too little, too late” and the Cantonese slogan, “Five demands, not one less!” (五大訴求 缺一不可) became a rallying cry among the protestors (BBC November 2019). The five demands reiterate the autonomy granted to Hong Kong by the Sino-British Joint Declaration and were as follows: “to withdraw the proposed extradition bill, for the protests not to be characterized as a riot, amnesty for arrested protestors, an independent inquiry into alleged police brutality, and the implementation of complete universal suffrage” (BBC November 2019).

Reiterating the five demands, another spearheading slogan of the protests in Hong Kong is “Restore Hong Kong, revolution of our times,” (光復香港 時代革命). The slogan advocates for a democratic Hong Kong with free jurisdiction and election rights, while uniting the advocacy under a powerful form of localism that would constitute a “revolution of our times” (Higgins 2019). However, another significant expression of this slogan is that it is read in the vernacular language of Hong Kong, Cantonese, rather than Putonghua (which is the commonly spoken language in China). The importance of reciting this slogan in Cantonese is emphasized by a spray-painted version of it outside of the legislative council (Higgins 2019). The text itself uses written traditional Chinese characters, “光復香港 時代革命” as opposed to simplified Chinese characters, “光复香港 时代革命,” which are commonly used in Mainland China. More significantly, the pinyin (Romanized spelling for transliterating Chinese) written on top of the text reads in Cantonese, “kwong fak Heung Kong si doi gak ming” as opposed to a Putonghua reading of the slogan which would be “guang fu Xiang Gang shi dai ge ming.” The decision made to spray paint the slogan in traditional Chinese with Cantonese pinyin asserts the localist pride of a Hong Kong local population by utilizing the vernacular language over the language of their national leaders.

Cantonese in Hong Kong

Though Cantonese is not a widely spoken language, it is central to the identity and pride of people in Hong Kong. According to the Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department, as of 2016, 88.9 percent of the Hong Kong population over the age of five were speaking Cantonese as their ‘usual language’ (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Census and Statistics Department 2017). Because Hong Kong was a British Colony until 1997 and, as such, had adopted English as the primary language of the educational and judiciary systems, Hong Kong is regarded as a bilingual society (Lai 2011). Even today, Hong Kong still has many education institutions that integrate Cantonese learning with English. However, after the handover of Hong Kong back to China, the influx of immigrants from mainland China, consequently increased the

proportional number of Putonghua speakers in Hong Kong up to 63.9 percent of the population aged six to sixty-five years-old having average, good or very good competence in speaking Putonghua by 2012 (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Census and Statistics Department 2014). Furthermore, a policy of ‘Biliteracy and Trilingualism’ implemented by the new Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) Government after the 1997 handover recognized Putonghua as an official language that would be taught as a core subject in the education curriculum from 1998 on (Lai 2007).

Academics such as Mee Ling Lai observe Hong Kong as an emerging trilingual society, based on the research of secondary and university students’ attitudes towards Cantonese, English and Putonghua (Lai 2007). Although Lai’s research highlights the overall positive attitudes towards Cantonese among Hong Kong locals who take pride in the language, it also suggests negative attitudes towards Putonghua as well as the racialization and stereotyping of Hong Kong’s mainland Chinese immigrants who are associated with the language. Her research is significant in not only illustrating the attitudes Hong Kong locals have towards the integration of languages in a trilingual setting, but also the clash in values and cultures that emerge from this interaction.

Lai’s study of university student’s attitudes towards Cantonese and Putonghua suggest that Cantonese and English are regarded more positively by local Hong Kong students and that this population sees them as prestigious languages in social mobility (Lai 2007). Lai suggests that one of the possible reasons for this positive outlook may be due to Hong Kong’s history as a British colony. Despite the fact that Cantonese is the vernacular language of Hong Kong, its origins come from the Guangdong province of China, and especially Guangzhou (aka ‘Canton’) City. Although Cantonese was once widely spoken throughout Guangdong, this changed after the People’s Republic of China declared Putonghua as the standard language in the 1950’s (Lai 2007, 237). Consequently, Cantonese went into decline in Guangdong, especially as a ‘standard language’. Conversely, Cantonese was standardized and given prestige status as a part of a Hong Kong local identity because it was not under the influence of the Chinese communist regime in standardizing language.

The pride in the role of Cantonese as a stabilizing factor of Hong Kong identity is further illustrated by an excerpt of an interview conducted by Mingyue Gu and Ho Tong in 2012 in research related to the dominant language used amongst university students in Hong Kong. In the article, a student expressed that “Hong Kong students take pride in being Hongkongese” and that “most of them want to stay and work in Hong Kong forever” (Gu and Tong 2012, 509). The localist pride from asserting the vernacular language is the main reason Cantonese remains a superior language among university discussions in Hong Kong despite China’s implementation of

teaching Putonghua as a core subject in schools. Furthermore, because pride in the Cantonese language emerges from being a Hong Kong local, Chinese immigrant wives of Hong Kong locals often have a more difficult time finding jobs in Hong Kong; employers do not want to hire them because of “their accented use of Cantonese as well as their lack of English language skills.” (Newendorp 2008, 153). The immigrant wives’ accented use of Cantonese implies to employers that the immigrants are less “developed,” less “modern,” and less “cosmopolitan” than the locals (Newendorp 2008, 152). Furthermore, the accented Cantonese serves as an obvious marker of cultural differences because Hong Kong Cantonese is not only spoken at a faster pace than Guangdong province Cantonese, but it also incorporates a number of English and Japanese loan words (Newendorp 2008, 152–3). The attitudes expressed by the employers is also a commonly held attitude by the younger population. Mingyue Gu’s study of secondary school students’ attitudes towards Putonghua and Cantonese suggested that “the minority status of Putonghua is rooted in ideological beliefs about the language’s limited utility or relevance to secondary students’ current needs, such as university entrance examinations” which are still conducted in Cantonese (2011, 526).

Putonghua in Hong Kong

Along with the perceived minority status of Putonghua as a language, the increased immigration of mainland Chinese who do not speak the vernacular language (i.e. Cantonese) has also solidified the racialization of mainland Chinese as “locusts” who are stealing Hong Kong’s resources (Lowe and Tsang 2017, 137). Though social scientists John Lowe and Eileen Yuk-ha Tsang (2017) focus on the bad habits of mainland Chinese (such as public defecation), they also note that loudly-spoken Putonghua is typically regarded by Hong Kong people as an undeniable marker of out-group identity. Using Putonghua as a marker of discrimination against mainland Chinese was also prevalent in Mingyue Gu’s interview with a secondary student from mainland China who said she felt discriminated against because she did not speak local Cantonese (Gu 2011). Instead, she spoke a different dialect of Cantonese from mainland China, and this gave her classmates the impression that she was “impolite and poor” and “not qualified to be a Honkongese” because her accent revealed her ties to mainland China (Gu 2011, 521).

Just as speaking Putonghua links many immigrant Chinese students to their respective hometowns in mainland China, speaking Cantonese, and especially ‘Hong Kong Cantonese’ reaffirms a Hong Kong local’s pride in being from Hong Kong. As one of the local Hong Kong interviewees remarked in Mee Ling Lai’s study, Cantonese is “very important. Our Hong Kong culture is mostly expressed through our language, like the names of food and the trendy colloquial expressions”

and Cantonese therefore, defines a cultural boundary between Hong Kong and mainland China (Lai 2011, 257). The use of Cantonese separates “Mainlanders and Hong Kongers... by a differing historical consciousnesses” of Hong Kong’s capitalist and urban environment that was separate from Communist China (Lowe and Tsang 2017, 156). In context of the protests, the use of Cantonese chants also reaffirms the autonomy that Hong Kong is entitled to under the Sino-British Joint Declaration. However, the different historical consciousness coupled with the large number of mainland immigrants that speak Putonghua has also encouraged “Sinophobic hostilities levelled against Mainlanders” that are identified and fortified by Hong Kong’s language attitudes (Lowe and Tsang 2017, 156). The construction of a new Sinophobic attitude amongst Hong Kong locals address the “fears and risks of unequal Others” from mainland China encroaching Hong Kong’s cultural identity and social mobility (Lowe and Tsang 2017, 156).

Interviews carried out by both Mee Ling Lai and Michelle Gu were done with secondary and university students who were born after the handover in 1997, who also make up a large portion of the protestors. The assertion of a localist identity in Hong Kong demonstrated in their respective studies show the effect that language attitudes amongst students has had in creating and mobilizing protests to express Cantonese pride as Hong Kong locals. However, the British colonization of Hong Kong has also had the profound impact of creating a localist identity in a Hong Kong that prides itself on a history of a bilingual system by incorporating English (Lai 2007). This presents another result that was suggested in research interviews: the students’ positive and prideful attitude towards English glorifies the history of Hong Kong as a British colony and a cosmopolitan center. Therefore, the protestors do not limit themselves to one language, but produce songs and slogans in Cantonese as well as English.

Cantonese and English Songs in the 2019 Protests

Fueled by the pride of asserting a Hong Kong localist identity for the future of Hong Kong, the protestors have a persistent attitude of Cantonese as the superior language with access to the most opportunities in Hong Kong for their own future. It could be said that the protestors’ use of their unique vernacular language, Cantonese, helped advocate demands such as implementing universal suffrage, a similarly unique right that Hong Kong is entitled to as a former British colony by the Sino-British Joint Declaration. One of the most prominent songs composed by the protestors is *Glory to Hong Kong* (願榮光歸香港). The song was written by university protestors, who uploaded a music video to YouTube, performing the song in the protective head gear and gas masks that protestors commonly wear. The song is considered a “national anthem of

Hong Kong” and the students are seen singing the song in Cantonese with lyrics written in traditional Chinese characters on the side of the video to advocate the reigning of freedom in Hong Kong as the “Revolution of our times” (Lanyon 2019).

Cantonese pop music similarly utilizes Cantonese in support of the protests. One example is the song *Add Oil* (加油 gaa yau) by Hong Kong DJ, singer and comedian Jan Lamb. The expression ‘add oil’ is a commonly used metaphor that refers to “injecting fuel into the tank” to move a vehicle forward; the phrase is often used as an expression of “encouragement, incitement or support” (Kao 2018). The origin of the phrase is believed to be from the Macau Grand Prix, which is also similarly administrated in the same way as Hong Kong, as a Special Administrative Region (SAR). Lamb asserts a local Hong Kong identity in this song by emphasizing this Cantonese phrase in support of the protests. Furthermore, Lamb’s utilization of this popular phrase with the upbeat rhythms of pop music became a point of encouragement for the protestors, especially in the face of brutal retaliation enacted by the Hong Kong police (Lanyon 2019).

Another genre of Cantonese songs that is being produced in support of a Hong Kong identity is metal and rock music. Similar to Jan Lamb’s use of ‘add oil,’ the song *One Voice* by a group of punk and hardcore bands captures the protestors’ frustration with police brutality. Not only does the song use a mixture of Cantonese and English, but the intense guitar riffs and drumming over a recording of a protesting crowd shouting “gaa yau” advocate a unified localist identity in the protests (James 2019). Addressing the unifying force of music on the protests in Hong Kong, many local bands have also composed songs and recorded music videos that express their feelings about the unrest and their support for the protests calling for the withdrawal of the proposed extradition bill and the implementation of universal suffrage (James 2019). As the guitarist for a newer Hong Kong metal group called ARKM, states, “underground music, such as metal (and) hardcore, has always been supportive and fighting for the right thing, helping those in need instead of promoting violence” (James 2019). One of the greatest oppositions to the protestors has been the police’s insistence that the use of deadly force is justified when officers feel threatened (Kuo 2019). For example, an eighteen year-old protestor was shot in the chest with a live round in November 2019 and the Hong Kong government police issued a statement that justified the shooting as a situation that was “life threatening” in which the police officer had to protect himself (Kuo 2019). However, a witness’ recording shows that the wounded protestor was unarmed and had no weapon himself. The song *Optophobia* released by local metal-core group Parallel Horizons also addresses a rising discontent with the police’s reaction to the protests. Using metaphors of blue and red lights representing the police, the song describes people who are afraid to “open their eyes and take a good hard look at the truth” of what the protestors are really advocating (James 2019).

Unlike the slogans and popular songs created by the protestors, the heavy metal songs are all performed in English. This draws attention to the language attitudes of Hong Kong locals towards English. Though Mee Ling Lai's study focused on student attitudes towards Putonghua in a Cantonese society, she did not disregard the bilingual post-colonial environment that Cantonese was solidified in, noting the overall positive attitudes locals have towards English (Lai 2011). The results of Lai's study showed that, although Cantonese serves as the strongest integrative force of language, English is actually ranked to have the strongest positive instrumental attitudes and is also a highly regarded language that adds to Hong Kong's identity as a "modern, western-influenced" society (Lai 2011, 250). This regard of English acknowledges the pride for the British colonial period that had given Hong Kong its special administrative status as well as other judiciary and democratic rights. Therefore, it is not surprising that Hong Kong locals do not regard Putonghua as highly as Cantonese or English as it serves little purpose to their localist identity and gives little acknowledgement to the history of Hong Kong as a British colony.

Conclusion

The affirmation of Cantonese and English in constructing a local Hong Kong identity does not advocate for an independence movement for Hong Kong to be separated from China. Instead, its unique status distinct from mainland China advocates political rights that have been granted to Hong Kong by their former British colonizer in the Sino-British Joint Declaration, an agreement that is yet to be implemented by the Beijing government. With the affirmation of Cantonese as the vernacular language of Hong Kong, protestors are able to advocate universal suffrage and defy police brutality by not only using Cantonese songs and slogans as a cultural unifier, but also affirming their pride in the rights that they should be given as a former British colony in English songs as well.

Works Cited

- BBC. 2019. "Hong Kong extradition protests: Government suspends bill." BBC News. June 15. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-48645342>. Accessed 13 December 2019.
- BBC. 2019. "The Hong Kong protests explained in 100 and 500 words." BBC News. November 28. <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-china-49317695>. Accessed 13 December 2019.
- Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau. 1984. Joint Declaration of the Government of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland and the Government of the People's Republic of China on the Question of

Hong Kong with Annexes. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region: Constitutional and Mainland Affairs Bureau. <https://www.cmab.gov.hk/en/issues/jd2.htm>. Accessed 13 December 2019.

- The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Census and Statistics Department. 2014. "Use of Language in Hong Kong in 2012." Hong Kong Monthly Digest of Statistics. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region: Census and Statistics Department. <https://www.statistics.gov.hk/pub/B71406FB2014XXXXB0100.pdf>. Accessed 13 December 2019.
- The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region Census and Statistics Department. 2017. Population Aged 5 and Over by Usual Spoken Language and Year. The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region: 2016 Population By-census Office. <https://www.bycensus2016.gov.hk/en/bc-mt.html?search=A107#>. Accessed 13 December 2019.
- Gu, Mingyue Michelle. 2011. "I am not Qualified to be a Hongkongese Because of my Accented Cantonese": Mainland Chinese Immigrant Students in Hong Kong." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*. 32 (6): 515-529.
- Gu, Mingyue Michelle and Ho Kin Tong. 2012. "Space, Scale and Languages: Identity Construction of Cross-Boundary Students in a Multilingual University in Hong Kong." *Language & Education: An International Journal*. 26 (6): 501-515.
- Higgins, Andrew. 2019. "'Retake Hong Kong': A Movement, a Slogan and an Identity Crisis." *The New York Times*. August 14. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/14/world/asia/hong-kong-protests-identity-china-edward-leung.html>. Accessed 13 December 2019.
- James, Lauren. 2019. "Songs of freedom: eight new protest songs from Hong Kong bands." *South China Morning Post*, October 25. <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/entertainment/article/3034501/songs-freedom-seven-new-protest-songs-hong-kong-bands>. Accessed 13 December 2019.
- Kao, Ernest. 2018. "'Add oil' entry in Oxford English Dictionary is just latest Cantonese phrase to hit mainstream." *South China Morning Post*. October 17. <https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/society/article/2169018/add-oil-entry-oxford-english-dictionary-just-latest-cantonese>. Accessed 13 December 2019.
- Kuo, Lily. 2019. "Hong Kong protests: man shot by police and burns victim in critical condition." *The Guardian*. November 11. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/11/hong-kong-police-shoot-demonstrator-during-morning-rush-hour>. Accessed 13 December 2019.
- Lai, Mee Ling. 2007. "Exploring Language Stereotypes in Post-colonial Hong Kong through the Matched-guise

- Test." *Journal of Asian Pacific Communication*, 17 (2): 225–244.
- Lai, Mee Ling. 2010. "Social Class and Language Attitudes in Hong Kong." *International Multilingual Research Journal*, 4 (2): 83–106.
- Lai, Mee Ling. 2011. "Cultural identity and language attitudes—into the second decade of postcolonial Hong Kong." *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*, 31 (3): 249–264.
- Lanyon, Charley. 2019. "Hong Kong protest songs: 7 anthems of the anti-extradition movement—do you hear the people sing?" *South China Morning Post*, September 12. <https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/arts-culture/article/3026843/hong-kong-protest-songs-7-anthems-anti-extradition-movement>. Accessed 13 December 2019.
- Lee, Ching Kwan, and Ming Sing, eds. 2019. "Take Back Our Future: An Eventful Sociology of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement." In *Take Back Our Future: An Eventful Sociology of the Hong Kong Umbrella Movement*, 1–33. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 2019.
- Lowe, John and Eileen Yuk-ha Tsang. 2017. "Disunited in ethnicity: the racialization of Chinese Mainlanders in Hong Kong." *Patterns of Prejudice*, 51 (2): 137–158.
- Newendorp, Nicole DeJong. 2008. *Uneasy Reunions: Immigration, Citizenship, and Family Life in Post-1997 Hong Kong*. Stanford, Calif: Stanford University Press.