

CHAN Lai-kuen

Writing in ‘In-Between-ness’

I am a Hong Kong writer and I write in Chinese, but which Chinese?

I speak Cantonese, and I write in Standard Modern Chinese. Standard Modern Chinese, with its lexicon and syntax very similar to spoken Mandarin Chinese, is the *lingua franca* among Mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, South East Asian Chinese and other Chinese communities in the world.

Speakers of Cantonese and Mandarin Chinese cannot understand each other if they have not acquired the other’s language (some call it dialect) in school or by active learning. Users of written Standard Modern Chinese, however, can understand each other in general, though there are subtle differences depending on the region of the writer. Although I acquired the skill of writing in Standard Modern Chinese in school as a child, that does not automatically mean that I have learnt *spoken* Mandarin Chinese—it wasn’t until I went to university that I learned the latter. Let me illustrate the differences of all of these linguistic forms with an example from a line of my poem:

1. The written form:

死去的貓在繁忙時間搭地鐵 (Dead cats take the subway at rush hour)

2. What it sounds in my head – that is, *written* standard modern Chinese *pronounced* in Cantonese:

Sei2 hui3 dik1 mau1 zoi6 faan4 mong4 si4 gaan3 daap3 dei6 tit3

3. What it would sound if the same is written out in *spoken* Cantonese

死咗嘅貓喺繁忙時間搭地鐵

Sei2 zuo2 ge3 mau1 hai2 faan4 mong4 si4 gaan3 daap3 dei6 tit3

4. What it would have sounded if read about in spoken Mandarin Chinese

Si qu de mao zai fan mang Shijian da di tie

When I wrote it in my head it sounded in Number Two above, and during poetry readings in Hong Kong, we also read it aloud with that pronunciation—that is to say, the poem is read in a literary way of pronouncing Cantonese that is different from our everyday speech. Usually we do not write in the spoken form (Number Three), not that we are ashamed of our own language, quite the contrary—many of us are proud of it—but as a tradition, we have learnt a specific form of writing *in* the form of Standard Modern Chinese *with* a Cantonese pronunciation. Therefore, it is less common for us to put in script the speech form of Cantonese. It might in fact be *slower* for a native Cantonese speaker to read such script,

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 11, 2019

Róbert Gál (Czech Republic), Samuel Menghsteab Zeughe (Eritrea),

Chan Lai-kuen (Hong Kong), Amira-Géhanne Khalfallah (Algeria)

For electronic texts, please visit: <http://iwp.uiowa.edu/archives/iowa-city-public-library-presentations>

For video archives, please visit: <https://www.icpl.org/video/series/international-writing-program>

because we are not trained to read in this form. For example, a professor can give a lecture on philosophy in spoken Cantonese, but it is unusual to transcribe the lecture directly as colloquial Cantonese for readers.

Does colloquial Cantonese have a place in Hong Kong literature? The answer is yes, it does. Poets and novelists have some pieces written in Cantonese which occasionally have the words of the colloquial mixed in their standard Chinese writings. For example, Mr. Tung Kai-cheung, an alumnus of the 2009 IWP Residency, has written part of a novel in the spoken form of Cantonese. Plays are commonly written entirely in the colloquial.

That said, even apart from deliberate attempts to add a few Cantonese words in a written piece for a localist or humorous effect that is characteristic in Hong Kong writing, the Standard Modern Chinese that I use in my writing may be different from that of writers from other regions in the Chinese speaking world. There are a couple examples of this difference from one of my poems, “Vendor of Pain”: I found myself using expressions closer to the more condensed form of classical Chinese or the earlier style of modern Chinese; for example 是否 (“is it”; more common standard Chinese: 是不是), and 抑或是 (“or”; this is occasionally used but not very common among Mandarin speakers: a common version is 或者是). Cantonese has a long and storied history in ancient China, so these classical expressions are well-incorporated and don't come across as archaic to Cantonese speakers.

While written Chinese, as pronounced in Cantonese, is also my native language on top of spoken Cantonese, for me there is always a veil of foreignness about it. My spoken-self completes a tiny ritual of switching to the literary-self before I can start writing. It gives me a sense of yearning: when I read my poetry aloud, it doesn't have the same intimacy as when I hear a reading in English (or any other language I know), languages that could sound like a direct speech or whisper from the writer to the reader. On the other hand, this linguistic transition from speaking to writing creates for me a distant planet that serves as a home for my literary self alone.

ICPL and the International Writing Program Panel Series, October 11, 2019

Róbert Gál (Czech Republic), Samuel Mengheteab Zeughe (Eritrea),

Chan Lai-kuen (Hong Kong), Amira-Géhanne Khalfallah (Algeria)

For electronic texts, please visit: <http://iwpl.uiowa.edu/archives/iowa-city-public-library-presentations>

For video archives, please visit: <https://www.icpl.org/video/series/international-writing-program>