

9/1/2023: LIVING ON LINGUISTIC FAULT LINES

As metaphor and as reality, in our ever-more-hybrid world, translation and polylinguality are now ubiquitous. Languages live side by side, commingle, influence each other. Do you too live, create, think, on a linguistic fault line?

1. Tammy Lai-Ming HO (HONG KONG)

Hong Kong has changed a lot since 1997, the year the city's sovereignty was "returned" to China. The changes were subtle at first but in recent years they have become increasingly obvious and now appear to be as irrevocable as they are tangible. One such development concerns language. The majority of Hong Kong's 7.4 million population speak Cantonese as a first language. Even though the city, as the linguist Lisa Lim writes, "hosts myriad communities, each with its own heritage languages", it is Cantonese that is the mother tongue for most people.

A constantly evolving language, Cantonese is unfortunately being stifled and side-lined institutionally in Hong Kong and there is a sense that it is "endangered". It is even being "squeezed out" in some Hong Kong schools (Chan, 2015), where Mandarin is considered "superior" and of more utilitarian value. The active devalorisation of Hong Kong's own language—essential to the city's identity and the expression of its people—carries a worrying echo of what has happened in recent decades in neighbouring Guangdong province, where younger people now prefer Mandarin to their parents' Cantonese.

Is Cantonese disappearing in Hong Kong? Fortunately, no, not yet, even though in the city's streets, you will hear more Mandarin than a decade or more ago; and at times you might have an uncanny feeling that you are in a distorted version of Hong Kong. Is Cantonese disappearing in Hong Kong writing? To answer this question, one must understand that for a long time, the standard written Chinese that Hong Kong writers use is based primarily on Mandarin. According to Dorothy Tse, a Hong Kong writer who was a resident on this very programme in 2011, "this written Chinese is neither Mandarin nor Cantonese. It is a language that one learns directly from printed matter, a language pronounced in Cantonese yet with a very different vocabulary and grammatical rules". She goes on to say, "So when we start to write, we are already being detached from our daily life; we are already somebody else." Indeed, the Hong Kong writer, if following conventional expectations to write in the kind of widely accepted standard written Chinese, experiences a sort of split personality and identity whenever they put words to paper.

As Cantonese faces greater challenges at the institutional level, in recent years Hong Kong writers have felt a greater urgency to incorporate Cantonese in their writing. There is even the publication of *Resonate*, a cultural and literary periodical that features pieces written in Cantonese. Its tagline reads: "a publication belonging to Hongkongers; we hope that wherever there is Cantonese, there is home."

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Tammy Lai-ming Ho (Hong Kong), Mary Rokonadravu (Fiji), Saba Hamzah
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This is not to say, however, that Hong Kong writers had never before used Cantonese in their writing. The writer Dung Kai-cheung, another former resident on this programme in 2009, is known for his skilled commingling of Modern Standard Chinese and Cantonese, such as colloquial expressions, in his work to reflect a distinct Hong Kong flavour or aura. I personally would like to see more creative and innovative Cantonese usage in Hong Kong writing and I expect this hybrid form of composition and resistance to flourish, despite the external factors that are at work to marginalise Cantonese at the official level in the city.

Even in Hong Kong *English* writing or Anglophone Hong Kong writing, there are texts that emphasise Cantonese elements or include Cantonese expressions as an integral part of their narrative. These tend to be recent publications, appearing, either by design or coincidence, close to the twentieth anniversary of the handover in 2017. In English, they demonstrate that Cantonese—or at least its aura and “language experience”, to use Dung Kai-cheung’s expression—need not be supplanted by the dominant strain of Chinese, but rather it can cross the linguistic border and even be enriched and fortified in so doing. The Hong Kong writer Wawa’s collection of poetry *Pei Pei the Monkey King* (2016), originally written in Chinese and published bilingually in Chinese and English with translation by her husband Henry Wei Leung, contains instances where Cantonese sentence-final particles (SFPs) such as ‘ah’ 啊 (35), ‘ba’ 吧 (35), ‘ne’ 呢 (35), ‘luh’ 了 (35, 69) and ‘la’ 啦 (73) are untranslated—their sounds being transliterated in the English version. What Wawa and Leung do is reappropriate familiar Cantonese voices for something distinctively Hong Kong in a different setting. Another example is Nicholas Wong’s poem “Human Design: Advice from a Pro-Beijing Lobbyist”,¹ which uses Cantonese expressions throughout the text. The reader who is well-versed in Cantonese will have lots of fun mentally translating these Chinese expressions rendered in English back to Cantonese sounds, bringing out the Cantonese-ness of the poem while reading. Those who do not know Cantonese, however, will miss out on the fundamental organising principle of the piece: playfulness and absurdity. The poem achieves the rare feat of making English sound Cantonese. In the past few years, there have been a number of more daring and “radical” approaches to highlight Cantonese in Hong Kong English writing.

Writers actively use Konglish, a hybrid of English and Cantonese, in their writing, or exploit the similarities of certain Cantonese pronunciations and English pronunciations to generate surprising outcomes and meanings that demand readers make associations between the two languages. There are also writers who unabashedly put Cantonese characters on the page without taking the trouble to translate them or provide explanations, thus creating defiantly multilingual works that are like beautiful tapestries of two or more writing scripts. I am in the process of researching these exciting new works, in addition to trying my hand at creating some myself.

Speaking of myself, I exist as both a writer and reader on a kind of linguistic fault line, which is perhaps embarrassing to admit. Although Cantonese is my mother tongue, it is now often alien to me, because I use it infrequently, due to my profession and personal life. And the longer I use it sparingly, I find, the more it eludes me. When it comes to writing, while I am very comfortable and enjoy translating from Chinese into English, I write very little in Chinese. Over time, English has taken over

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and become my first *written* language—both in my own writing and in my translating—filtered through self-translation. To some extent, I have lost my mother tongue, Cantonese, and to a larger extent, Chinese. I felt this sharply nearly ten years ago when I was invited by a Hong Kong magazine to write an article on Kazuo Ishiguro’s *The Buried Giant* and Chan Koonchung’s novel *The Fat Years*. I found myself drafting the piece in English, instead of Chinese; I ended up writing the whole article in English, which was later translated into Chinese by someone from the magazine.

I don’t know how many others have similar fraught relationships with their first language. This sense of disengagement with one’s mother tongue can be hugely inconvenient and at times heart-breaking. Relying on English, my second language, is not perfect either. A character in the Chinese author Fan Wu’s novel *Beautiful As Yesterday* says, “speaking English is like taking a bath with my clothes on”, a feeling that some readers who speak or write in a second language may find familiar. What Wu is describing in essence is a sense that there is a barrier between what we intend to say and what we actually say. Of course, everyone speaking and writing in any language, even their first tongue, has moments where there is a gap between what they intend and what they deliver. Indeed we all, to some extent, take baths with our clothes on. I end up feeling not at home, in a way, with the languages that live in my head. I am a writer in search of a home language and finding none. But I also must begin to appreciate the potential benefits of the distance, which can act as a catalyst for new writing. And perhaps, in addition to *spoken* language and *written* language, which have definite forms and can be heard and read, one can think about a third one, *thought* language, which is utterly personal and internal, and doesn’t have to be clearly defined. It’s a language that one holds dear and is unique to individuals, like a secret.

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