

# ASIA COLLOQUIA PAPERS

Vol. 07 No. 01 // 2017

## Should the Chinese Language be Taught in Putonghua? Contested Identities in Post-1997 Hong Kong

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Dr. Choi Po King**  
Professor Emeritus,  
Faculty of Education,  
Chinese University of Hong Kong

This talk by Po King Choi was the inaugural **Bernard H. K. Luk Memorial Lecture** organized by the York Centre for Asian Research on 27 April 2017. Bernard H. K. Luk (1946-2016) was a Professor of History at York University, Toronto and an internationally recognized authority on the history of Hong Kong.

Dr Choi's lecture explores the nationalist politics and debates around the medium of instruction of the Chinese language in Hong Kong. She analyzes the surprising levels of uptake of state policies that were implemented to promote the standardized national language, Putonghua (PTH) and maps out pedagogical perspectives about the efficacy of teaching and learning PTH. The talk also examines emergent forms of resistance to PTH standardization and the concomitant mobilization of a "Hong Kong identity" against fears of encroaching mainland ideological dominance. Drawing on interviews with teachers and student activists, her talk provides a sense of the experiences, sentiments and strategies of resistance on the ground. Choi's lecture makes pertinent connections between the politics of language education, post-Umbrella Movement forms of resistance and broader democratization movements in Hong Kong.

**Today I'm here to honour a very dear friend**, Professor Bernard Luk. Apart from being a dear friend, Bernard has also been my mentor ever since I began my doctoral studies, which was almost four decades ago. As I entered university teaching, and after, he generously backed me up in every sort of way. We shared a lot of common academic interests, and over the years, it almost became habitual for me to test out my hunches and hypotheses on him and, naturally, my research findings, which he always took great interest in and never failed to give thoughtful feedback.

As for the topic I chose to speak on today, the decision was made based on my assessment of audience interest, and also on access to relevant material. Yet, after I did my preliminary readings, and came up with the topic and abstract, I suddenly realized that this would be, and indeed is, a topic which Bernard would be most interested in. As most of us know, Bernard's link to Hong Kong was in no way weakened by his living on another continent. Indeed, it might even have been strengthened by it. And, what's more, language has been one of his passions, and its links to identity and allegiance all the more so. In fact, just before I flew out from Hong Kong, I re-discovered several paragraphs that were exactly on this topic in a chapter that he contributed to a book that I co-edited (Luk 2002, 183-185). That explains why, throughout these two or three months of preparation for today's talk, I keenly felt Bernard's presence. His unflinching support of even the smallest of my academic endeavours has not diminished, not the least by his physical passing.

Before I go into the details, let me say in brief what my presentation today is about. It's about two major things. The first one is the relationship between politics and language. As I talk about the debates on whether or not the Chinese national spoken language, Putonghua (PTH),<sup>1</sup> should be the medium of instruction for the Chinese language in Hong Kong, it will become clear that these touch on the tension between standardization versus pluralism as well as between domination versus equality in terms of linguistic and cultural rights. The former end of these two dyads is upheld by the state (or their spokespersons), which puts national integration and political domination on a high priority. The latter, i.e. pluralism and equality, are what those who identify more with Hong Kong and the Cantonese language hold dear.

The second theme that my story today deals with is the emergence of a Hong Kong identity, which one can almost call an 'ethnic' identity. Many years ago, when I wrote about the student movements back in the 1970s (Choi 1990a, 82), and the emergence of a thriving

Bernard's link to Hong Kong was in no way weakened by his living on another continent. Indeed, it might even have been strengthened by it. And, what's more, language has been one of his passions, and its links to identity and allegiance all the more so.

I realize that this identity has strengthened, or one can say hardened, to become some kind of ethnic identity as it involves a clear 'othering': 'us', the HongKongers, and 'them', the Mainlanders.

popular culture in the 1980s, I used the term "Hong Kong identity" (Choi 1990b, 558). Since the second decade of the twenty-first century, I realize that this identity has strengthened, or one can say hardened, to become some kind of ethnic identity as it involves a clear 'othering': 'us', the HongKongers, and 'them', the Mainlanders.

My talk will also have some implications for the democratic movement in Hong Kong, which, at this post-Umbrella Movement<sup>2</sup> juncture, seems to be in the doldrums. People are naturally interested to know 'what next'?

So, let me begin with a brief outline of the PTH policy in post-1997 Hong Kong. Back in 1996, the sixth report of the Education Commission, an advisory body on education policy in Hong Kong, made a vague mention about the need for further research into the relationship between PTH teaching and the Chinese language subject. In 1998, a year after the return of sovereignty, PTH was made a core subject for primary and junior secondary schools.<sup>3</sup> Nevertheless, it usually takes up only one teaching period per week, as it needs to compete with many other subjects in the teaching timetable. The more controversial policy, Putonghua Medium of Instruction for Chinese (PMIC), i.e., the use of PTH for the teaching of the Chinese language, has not been made mandatory and related documents up until now still mention this as only a "long term goal" (Hong Kong. Curriculum Development Council 2000, 7; Hong Kong. Standing Committee on Language Education and Research 2003, 36) as present research does not yet support greater effectiveness on its part. Schools in Hong Kong are left to decide whether to adopt PMIC.

The government gave a stronger boost to the PMIC in 2008, in the form of a four-year funding project to support PMIC, to which primary and secondary schools were invited to apply. This involved: help in forming support teams made up of local and mainland experts, development workshops, money for substitute teachers when the teachers took leave to join workshops, and local and mainland exchange activities. Each school would get support for three years, after which it had to pledge to continue with PMIC. During the three years, primary schools were required to maintain not less than three, and secondary schools not less than two, classes with PMIC (Hong Kong. Standing Committee on Language Education and Research 2010). Data collected by the Societas Linguistica Hongkongensis (SLH), a group formed to contest PMIC, shows a rapid rise in the number of schools adopting PMIC since 2008 (Societas Linguistica Hongkongensis n.d.). Mindful of the imposition of frequent and strict quality reviews imposed on schools since the 2000s

as part of the top-down Education Reform,<sup>4</sup> coupled with what was popularly known as the “killing off” (closing down) of poor-performing schools, one would appreciate why many schools found this funding project attractive. The attraction lay not only in the money that came in (though that was important too), but also in the hope that PMIC would convince parents to choose their schools. The perception, probably a correct one, that PMIC was more attractive to parents (but not to the younger generation from where the anti-PMIC activists come from), speaks of a wide gap between the generations. I will talk about this later.

Before I go into the opposing voices, let me briefly lay out the arguments for PMIC. I have gathered these from two major sources: (1) essays written by mainland scholars before 1997 offering advice on how PTH could be better promoted in Hong Kong, especially among the younger generation; and (2) debates in the Legislative Council (LegCo) between pro-government and opposition (pan-democratic) Council members, some before, but mostly after the opposition movement against PMIC began in earnest in 2014.

First, there is the ‘national integration’ theme: that Hong Kong has now ‘returned to the motherland’ so it is natural that its population should be able to master PTH, the national ‘common’ language, to facilitate communication with fellow nationals; not only this, but that the ability to speak fluent PTH also signifies patriotism or allegiance to one’s nation-state. Hence comments such as these were made by pro-government LegCo members in a debate on a motion urging the Special Administrative Region (SAR) government to promote PTH in 2002:

“[acquiring PTH] strengthens national self-respect” (Wong Yi Wang)<sup>5</sup>;

“[PTH will remedy the malaise] of us losing our roots, our Chinese roots, the roots of a great nation” (Chan Kam Lam);

“integrate into this big [national] family using PTH” (Chan Kam Lam) (Hong Kong. Legislative Council 2002, 2288, 2299).

A perceptive mainland scholar goes further to point out that the campaign since the late 1990s to further promote PTH on the mainland, with implications for Hong Kong, aims not only at facilitating communication, but also at establishing a linguistic hegemony in which PTH signifies a higher culture, and that the ability to speak standardized, fluent PTH denotes higher cultural accomplishments (Chen, Yongjie 2015, 51). Hence also the ubiquitous propaganda like “be a civilized person, speak PTH” (做文明人，講普通話) since the late 1980s in the Guangdong region (Chi 2015, 13).

The second argument for PMIC is that spoken PTH is closer to the written form of modern Chinese (People's Republic of China, State Council 1956), so it is more effective to teach the Chinese language in PTH because then students will be able to avoid Cantonese expressions in writing. This is the typical "writing as I speak" (我手寫我口) argument (Chen, Jian-min 1994; Jian 2002). Later I will report on the opposing views concerning this expounded by some Chinese teachers and youths who spearheaded the anti-PTHC movement.

The third argument, and one most often heard, is that PTH provides the speaker with better access to work and business opportunities (商機) now that China has opened up for foreign investment and free individual travel is permitted for mainland visitors. There are ample references to this in the LegCo discussion following the motion on urging the government to take steps to promote Putonghua usage, moved by the pro-government Councillor, Choy So Yuk, on 23 January 2002 (Hong Kong, Legislative Council 2002). This instrumental argument is most taken in by parents, and it explains why many schools adopted PMIC as a means to attract students in this age of the marketization of education.

The voices of dissent that first emerged in the mid to late 2000s were few and far between with essays and columns scattered in the printed media, written by educationists and policy or literary critics. The lone teacher-writer, Sy On Na, who was also my key informant in this study, wrote mostly about the mistaken belief that PMIC would facilitate Chinese-language learning. I'll go into this in greater detail later. Others wrote about the historical roots of Cantonese, which they thought conveyed the beauty of classical writings much better than PTH. They also criticized the vulgarity of 'Communist writings,' which PMIC would promote. Chan Wan, a university teacher and newspaper columnist, was most vocal on this point (e.g., Chan 2014). These writings were, in the words of scholar, Lai Kwok Wai (2016), "nativist" manifestations of a loyalty to an imagined, ancient cultural China. Naturally, these were taken as useful references when the younger generation later launched what I call the "internet offensives."

Drawing from my interviews with the founders of two groups, which launched these attacks as well as two other critics of PMIC, Sy, a teacher and policy critic, and SC (pseudonym), a university lecturer in Chinese, I will first try to place these PMIC protests in the political context in which they emerged. This would hopefully enable us to gain a thicker and more nuanced understanding of the social movements in Hong Kong at the moment.

These writings were, in the words of scholar, Lai Kwok Wai (2016), "nativist" manifestations of a loyalty to an imagined, ancient cultural China.

Let me start with the internet offensives. The SLH appeared in the form of a Facebook forum in the summer of 2013, launched by JO (pseudonym), a fresh secondary school graduate. First joining a discussion in a popular internet forum about the ‘strange’ phenomenon of Hong Kong kids talking in PTH on the streets, JO soon started a Facebook forum with fellow netizens who indicated their interest in the issue. As JO said, it was (and still is) a “keyboard battle” most of the time, but this involved a lot of hard work: searching for related education policy documents or official statements, research reports, essays and news-clips, digesting them and then uploading synopses, summaries, excerpts and graphs/charts on Facebook. Starting from the 2013-2014 school year, they also did a labour-intensive telephone survey on the topic of PMIC in primary and secondary schools as well as street and campus campaigns.<sup>6</sup> In JO’s words, they were not aiming at similar-minded netizens, but at convincing parents and teachers instead. As such, they had to present concrete evidence, which they had to learn to gather, including their survey results, academic articles and reports on PMIC.

The PMIC Student Concern Group (普教中學生關注組) was started a few months later in February 2014 by a 14- to 15-year-old teenager and a secondary 3 (equivalent to grade 9) student, Ken (pseudonym). Similar to SLH, this group also worked from Facebook, posting relevant articles, graphs/charts, news etcetera, but they also organized street campaigns and a seminar on the issue. For the young people of these two groups, their internet activities constituted a crash-course in researching and presentation.

For the young people of these two groups, their internet activities constituted a crash-course in researching and presentation.

Before I go further, allow me to make a short detour to lay out the political and social background in which this PMIC Movement emerged. It had, in fact, appeared between two major student movements: the 2012 Anti-National Education (ANE) Movement and the 2014 Umbrella Movement. I can’t go into details here, but suffice it to say that both movements, and, in particular, the Anti-National Education (ANE) Movement, were very youthful in character. Indeed, this latter movement was initiated and sustained by a teenage group, Scholarism, which was formed in May 2011. However other adult groups joined in later. One of the first conveners, Joshua Wong,<sup>7</sup> who later became world-famous through the Umbrella Movement, was only 15 at the time. His fellow colleagues were not much older. As for the Umbrella Movement, ‘Occupy Central’<sup>8</sup> had been mooted by academics and others in 2013. But it actually began with students breaking into the ‘Civic Square’ in the government headquarters on 26 September 2014, which then led

to the drawn-out occupation of the central business districts of Central, Mongkok and Causeway Bay, sparked off by the notorious 87 shots of tear gas fired at protestors on the late afternoon of 28 September. Throughout the two and half months of occupation, student and youth participation was highly visible.

The PMIC Movement we are talking about now was, of course, much smaller in scope. Yet, its links to these two more spectacular movements are undeniable. Of the two, the ANE Movement was more important to youths like JO and Ken. In their words, the ANE Movement, and their participation in it, opened up to them the possibility of students, even secondary students, taking part in political protests, and what's more, winning the battle.<sup>9</sup> Even for students who did not actually participate, or participated only marginally, their political consciousness was raised. JO recalled how he perceived his contemporaries felt then:

After that battle, young people felt that they had potential power in their hands, like holding a 'slay-dragon sword'. But they didn't know what to slash with it, until they turned to [the issue of] universal suffrage....Looking back, it was between the ANE and the Umbrella Movement that we identified this issue of language. We see language as our last line of defense....People were dejected after the Umbrella Movement, but we see the PMIC issue as an opening where we could launch our attack.

This summed up quite concisely how the PMIC Movement related to the political situation at that time.

Let me just take you through some of the highlights of the PMIC Movement. In February 2014, SLH members found a statement as they scrutinized the Education Bureau (EB) website (searching official sites to identify targets of attack is a tactic that they commonly employ to give momentum to the Movement), which stated that Cantonese was not an official language, and so students must learn Putonghua. Naming it the "official language storm," the SLH quickly launched protests. The EB quickly relented, removed that statement and came up with an apology. Another such target of attack was a rather disingenuous video clip in a Putonghua lesson on Education TV (a longstanding public television channel supplementing regular primary school lessons) in which a male, devilish character named "Cantonese" wanted to take over the world and was subsequently exterminated by a righteous and bright-looking female fighter named "Putonghua." SLH accused Education TV of demonizing Cantonese, and this clip, again, was deleted.

In their words, the ANE Movement, and their participation in it, opened up to them the possibility of students, even secondary students, taking part in political protests, and what's more, winning the battle.



Another action undertaken by SLH was the Educate with Conscience – Teach Chinese in Cantonese campaign in April 2015, which coincided with a LegCo debate over the amount of funds designated to support PMIC. This time, SLH had not spotted any mishap on the part of the EB. Rather, they put together the words of three school principals, widely known for their dedication to teaching poor marginalized children, who had said that they did not approve of teaching Chinese language in Putonghua. This campaign was a joint action in which SLH, the PMIC Student Concern Group (SCG), student unions of six local universities as well as the Hong Kong Progressive Teachers' Alliance (a breakaway group from the long-standing Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union, an important group in the pro-democracy camp<sup>10</sup>) took part.

Apart from these campaigns, the SCG also set up monthly 'street stations' in busy spots in town in order to reach out to the public, particularly parents and students, hoping to gain their support in rejecting the use of PTH in teaching Chinese. These continued for almost half a year, with breaks during examination times when the secondary student activists had to return to their school work. The SCG also organized a seminar on the issue in April 2015, and various speakers, including Sy, the teacher-activist, were invited. Ken also recalled the SCG's participation in the annual July 1 protest march in 2015.<sup>11</sup> This was a landmark in the sense that it was the first time the group joined this march in its own name and because about 10,000 Hong Kong dollars (approximately 1,750 Canadian dollars) were raised to cover their expenses. This must have seemed like a great fortune since they had had to finance the Movement with their pocket money.

Let it not be mistaken that these two student groups were the only voices of dissent against PMIC. There were also a handful of teachers and academics who supported PTH learning, but did not accept PMIC. I'll give a summary of the arguments of the opposing camp as a whole.

My informants, Sy and SC, being Chinese language teachers, drew from their language expertise as well as their teaching experience to explain the obstacles that PMIC brought to the learning of Chinese. Above all, they pointed to the fallacy of the writing-as-I-speak argument, often used as a defense for PMIC. Apart from the mistake of taking this phrase out of its historical context, those who advocate this argument disregard a major characteristic of the Chinese language, i.e., that it allows a distinctively bigger "latitude in the visual-sound link" (Joseph 2006, 29). As such, the Chinese written language can be taught effectively in any regional or even local dialect, as has been done throughout the



centuries. Even for northerners, whose dialect constitutes the basis of PTH as well as of written modern Chinese, there is still a considerable gap between the verbal and written forms. As such, it is entirely possible to teach or learn the written form in Cantonese, Shanghainese or Fujianese, or any other regional dialect. Sy, gathering from her classroom experience, said that using PTH to teach Chinese caused unnecessary distractions. PTH, being an alien tongue, draws too much attention on the part of the teachers and learners to pronunciation and colloquial northern Chinese expressions, thus sacrificing important aspects of language learning, such as recognition of characters and phrases, writing and literary appreciation. Even worse is that the use of an alien tongue in teaching one's first language inhibits deep-level thinking as well as classroom interaction. Tang, an academic in teacher education, for example, observed that in PMIC classrooms, students used "avoidance and imitation strategies in writing and speaking ... [and their written] sentences are thin in content and the cultivation of cognitive skills were impeded" (Tang 2008).

The above points can be placed under a general argument concerning the efficacy of language learning. We now go into a more subtle level and a broader argument, namely, the nature of the Chinese language itself. All of my four informants, drawn as they were from a wide age spectrum, pointed out rather passionately that PTH can in no way convey the richness and diversity of the Chinese language. Chinese, to them, is an age-old language that has evolved over more than two thousand years. The modern Chinese language, as it has evolved now, is merely a century old. What is more, the post-1949 Chinese language used on the mainland (and especially in official documents and communication) is, to my informants, unrefined, bordering on vulgarity. Here are the words of Ken, the teenager, who is a precocious reader of ancient Chinese classics such as *Tao Te Jing*:

All of my four informants, drawn as they were from a wide age spectrum, pointed out rather passionately that PTH can in no way convey the richness and diversity of the Chinese language.

PTH endangers the transmission of the Chinese language ... I have been very sensitive to "mainlandized language." I started to read at a very young age. So if you show me "mainlandized" writing, I'd feel disgusted. ... They are very clumsily written.

Indeed, an argument I discovered in an essay on the promotion of PTH in Hong Kong written by a mainland Chinese scholar, Chen Jian-min (1994), seemed to bear out the inelegance to which Ken referred. Commenting on the use of "dusty texts" (meaning outdated May Fourth literature that emerged in the first decades of the twentieth century) used in Hong Kong

language textbooks, Chen suggested that explanatory phrases in Hong Kong textbooks such as “負笈美國的冰心” [Bing Sin, bearing her box of books to the US] should be replaced by “留學美國的冰心” [Bing Sin, who studied in the US]. He is in fact saying that the rather poetic, metaphorical description that was traditionally used to describe going to a faraway place to study, should be replaced by a plain statement: that she had studied in the US (see Chen, Jian-min 1994, 28).

Back to a less subtle level, there is an obvious worry among the opponents of PMIC that it might facilitate ideological domination, which they have protested against earlier in the ANE Movement. Sy, the teacher and an avid education policy critic, chose to dwell on teaching efficacy when she argued in public against PMIC. But in our interview, she acknowledged that deep down, ideological infiltration and domination was what she feared the most.

... deep down, ideological infiltration and domination was what she feared most.

Lastly, it is important to point out that the Cantonese language has become an important basis of a Hong Kong identity, almost an ethnic identity differentiating *us* (HongKongers) from them (the Mainlanders). Ken, for example, worried about the “cultural abyss” he and his fellow HongKongers would descend into if Cantonese would fall out of use one day:

Language is not only a medium of communication: culture is embedded in language ... When the day comes when we have to express ourselves using a language that is not our own, we can only express very superficial things ... Then there will be a cultural abyss.

In my interview with SC, the university lecturer, he mentioned that he feared that the traditional Chinese characters used in Hong Kong might be replaced by simplified characters, together with PTH, both of which are officially used on the mainland.

The political situation is getting worse these days. I worry that we'd not be able to use (traditional) complex characters, and we'd lose our Cantonese language ... We'd lose our indigenous culture, and identify with theirs. Or, to have to undergo cultural affinity with *them*. (Emphasis added)

To Ken and SC, Cantonese and traditional characters have become a socio-linguistic marker of the people in Hong Kong, as opposed to those from the mainland.

Concerning this language-based identity, Sy made this astute observation about a sea change in people's attitude towards PTH, or

But after 1997, especially among the younger generation, resistance against the use of PTH grew, as it came to symbolize the political dominance of the Beijing government over Hong Kong.

*Kuo-yu*, as it is known in Taiwan and in older times in Hong Kong. She said that for those above their mid-30s, and especially among teachers of Chinese, *Kuo-yu* used to be an important channel to knowing things Chinese because of its rich literary corpus. But after 1997, especially among the younger generation, resistance against the use of PTH grew, as it came to symbolize the political dominance of the Beijing government over Hong Kong. One could view this growing resistance against PTH also in the context of disputes between HongKongers and Mainlanders that emerged since the early 2010s and are caused by: the influx of mainland mothers who came to have babies in Hong Kong hospitals (this was stopped by an administrative bar starting from 2013); parallel trading over the Hong Kong-Shenzhen border; massive purchase of baby formula by Mainlanders in Hong Kong (again relieved by the limit imposed by the SAR government on individual travelers in March 2013); and the free individual travel policy for mainland tourists, starting from 2003, which led to a great change in the landscape of retail business in Hong Kong. Such changes were deemed to be unwelcome by a significant portion of HongKongers, who found their daily lives being impeded, to a greater or lesser extent. Added to this, of course, is the perception that the spiralling estate prices were caused by mainland *dakuans* (multi-billionaires) snapping up estate property in Hong Kong. Then, the high-handed policies imposed on mainland dissidents, as well as the restrictions on development of universal suffrage in Hong Kong, do not help to allay the fears and enmity against the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) regime among the younger generation, to say the least.

But a surprising discovery of my preliminary research into the issue is that the PMIC controversy is about what constitutes a *Chinese* identity.

The PMIC controversy clearly goes beyond the consideration of the efficacy of teaching and learning Chinese. As we have seen, it touches ultimately on identity. On a surface level, it is about Hong Kong versus mainland Chinese identity. But a surprising discovery of my preliminary research into the issue is that the PMIC controversy is about what constitutes a *Chinese* identity. What is more, between my oldest informant, the teacher Sy (she is in her late forties), and my youngest one, Ken (17), there is a subtle yet tenuous thread of continuity in the form of a deep and passionate love for the Chinese language and for the Chinese culture as a whole. This is very well illustrated in the words of SC, the 35-year-old university lecturer in Chinese, a good calligrapher and an expert in historical Chinese phonology:

I am against HK independence ... I am a die-hard localist (本土膠). But I insist on my anti-HK independence stance because of my background as a Chinese major. I am rooted in the Chinese culture (中華文化). The more you make these young people

learn Chinese with PTH, which they find unfamiliar, alien and offensive, the more they'd react to it ... PTH is yours, not mine. You force me to identify with what's yours. That's bogus, and very shallow. But if you allow local dialects and regional cultures to survive, though they might differ, yet they come from the same source, this is a much deeper identity.

... is the CCP regime ready to acknowledge and accept this identity, one which allows, and indeed necessitates, a nuanced, cultural pluralism?

SC is talking about a much broader and deeper identity with a cultural China, rather than the narrow kind of patriotism constantly being promulgated by the officials of Beijing and the Hong Kong SAR. But the question is: is the CCP regime ready to acknowledge and accept this identity, one which allows, and indeed necessitates, a nuanced, cultural pluralism? Judging from how they view PTH, and their recent stepped-up efforts on its promotion over the whole of China and particularly among the recalcitrant Cantonese, the answer is, unfortunately, no.<sup>12</sup> Furthermore, the much more stringent academic and media censorship that one witnesses in these two to three years is very discouraging in this respect.<sup>13</sup>

## ENDNOTES

<sup>1</sup> Putonghua (PTH) was designated as the official “common language” (the literal meaning of the word) by the People’s Republic of China in the 1950s. It had evolved from the guoyu (national language) movement that emerged, first among a handful of educated elites in the late nineteenth century, and then taken up as a state project since the fall of the imperial dynasty and the founding of the modern Chinese state, the Republic of China, in the early twentieth century. PTH, as a spoken language, draws from the dialects in the northern regions, and is closer to the modern Chinese written language than the southern dialects, which, incidentally, are closer to the classical written language.

<sup>2</sup> The Umbrella Movement became internationally known as such from the early evening of 28 September 2014, when a decentralized, spontaneous occupation of three of the busiest areas in the territory started, and this lasted from two to two and a half months. The occupation was triggered by the use of tear gas by the Hong Kong police on protesters who had gathered to support a group of students under siege in the government headquarters. The students were calling for the rescindment of the earlier decision of the Standing Committee of the National People’s Congress, effectively the Chinese Central Government, to impose a stringent pre-screening of candidates for the election for the Chief Executive. With many protesters attempting to protect themselves from the police’s pepper spray and tear gas using only open umbrellas and cling film, the term “Umbrella Revolution” and later the “Umbrella Movement” soon circulated widely among the international media (see Ortmann, Stephan 2015; Lee, P. S., C. Y. So & L. Leung 2015)

<sup>3</sup> Primary school comprises grades 1 to 6 (normally 6 to 12 years old), and junior secondary school means Secondary 1 to 3 (normally 12 to 15 years old).

<sup>4</sup> The government carried out a series of top-down education reforms beginning in 2000. One of the main features of this official Education Reform was the introduction of marketization of education, whereby frequent school reviews were conducted and poor-performing schools were weeded out (see Choi, Po King 2005).

<sup>5</sup> For names, I write them in the Chinese way, i.e., surname followed by the first names.

<sup>6</sup> Their survey results were published, in entirety, in their online archive: (see Societas Linguistica Hongkongensis n.d).

<sup>7</sup> Joshua Wong and two fellow activists, Nathan Law and Alex Chow, were given a six-month jail sentence on 17 August 2017 for unlawful assembly (Wong and Law) and incitement to assemble unlawfully (Chow) for storming into what was unofficially termed the “Civic Square” in front of the Central Government Complex at Tamar on 25 September 2014. Their action triggered the 79-day Occupy sit-ins, known as the Umbrella Movement (or Revolution). For this offense, both Wong and Law had successfully completed their earlier community service sentences, but their harsher jail sentences were later handed down by the court of appeal. Wong remained in jail until he and Law were released on bail on 24 October 2017, having been granted leave to appeal the decisions by the Court of Final Appeal. However, his freedom was shortlived. Wong faced a sentence for another offense of contempt of court for obstructing the work of bailiffs acting on a court conjunction to clear the occupied areas in Mongkok during the Umbrella Movement in November 2014. He had pleaded guilty in the trial for this other offense on 13 October 2017, while he was still in prison. On 17 January 2018, he was sentenced to three months in jail and was immediately locked up again, the Court having refused to delay the implementation of his sentence.

<sup>8</sup> “Occupy Central” (i.e., the central business district in Hong Kong) first appeared in January 2013 in a newspaper column written by Benny Tai, a law professor, as an idea about a non-violent civil disobedience campaign as a possible way to pressurize the Chinese Central Government to grant Hong Kong true universal suffrage.

<sup>9</sup> On 8 September 2012, the Chief Executive, Leung Chun Ying, announced that the three-year deadline for schools offering the Moral and National Education subject was withdrawn. Schools were left to decide whether to offer it, and that within five years, the government would not insist on this being an independent school subject.

<sup>10</sup> A colossal work on the history of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers’ Union in its social-historical context, written in Chinese, was published posthumously by Professor Bernard Hung-Kay Luk (see Luk Hung-Kay 2016).

<sup>11</sup> Hong Kong was returned to China’s sovereignty on 1 July 1997. Alongside official commemorative activities, civic groups under the banner of Civil Human Rights Front started to organize protest activities and marches on the same day since that year. The protest reached a height in 2003, registering 500,000 participants under the banner of opposing the legislation of anti-subversion under Article 23 under the

Basic Law. Numbers fluctuated from that year, depending on the political and social situation. Until now, the July 1 march has become a kind of institutionalized opposition event, drawing on a wide spectrum of political and social concerns.

<sup>12</sup> See Chi (2015) for a good contextual description of the linguistic opposition movement in Guangzhou in 2010.

<sup>13</sup> At the time of writing, in the early months of 2017, for example, I got news about the suspension of drama productions and academic workshops organized by university departments on the mainland. Participants or organizers were invariably 'talked to' by officials, and the events had to be cancelled or put on hold.



**WORKS CITED**

- Chan Wan. 2014. *Learn Chinese in Cantonese, and Get More Spirited As You Go*. Hong Kong: Arcadia Press. (In Chinese)
- Chen, Jian-min. 1994. Putonghua in Hong Kong as I see it. *Construction of Language*, 3, 25-28. (In Chinese)
- Chen, Yongjie. 2015. Language Policy and Identity: Cantonese Culture and Cantonese People since the Economic Opening. *Thinking Hong Kong*, 6, 47-52. (In Chinese)
- Chi, Wai-tim. 2015. The Politics of Cantonese. *Cultural Studies @ Lingnan*, 46(5). (In Chinese)
- Choi, Po King. 1990a. A Search for Cultural Identity: The Students' Movement of the Early Seventies. In Antony Sweeting (ed.), *Differences and Identities: Educational Arguments in Late 20th Century Hong Kong*. Hong Kong: Faculty of Education, University of Hong Kong.
- Choi, Po King. 1990b. Popular Culture. In Richard Y. C. Wong and Joseph Y. S. Cheng (eds.), *The Other Hong Kong Report 1990*. Hong Kong: Chinese University Press.
- Choi, Po King. 2005. A critical evaluation of education reforms in Hong Kong – Counting our losses to economic rationalization. *International Studies in Sociology of Education*, 15(3), 237-256
- Hong Kong. Curriculum Development Council. 2000. *Learning To Learn: Consultation Document*. (In Chinese)
- Hong Kong. Legislative Council. 2002. *Official Record of Proceedings*, 23 January. (In Chinese)
- Hong Kong. Standing Committee on Language Education and Research. 2003. *Action Plan to Raise Language Standards in Hong Kong*.
- Hong Kong. Standing Committee on Language Education and Research. 2010. *Introduction to Project to Support Hong Kong Primary and Secondary Schools in Teaching Chinese Language Using Putonghua*. (In Chinese).
- Jian, Bo-hui. 2002. Considering the Issue of Putonghua in Hong Kong from

- Joseph, John E. 2006. *Language and Politics*. Edinburgh: University of Edinburgh Press.
- Lai, Kwok Wai. 2016. Cantonese: Between Hong-Kongness and Chinese-ness. In Cheung Siu Keung, Chan Ka Ming and Leung Kai Chi (eds.), *The Hong Kong Society and Culture Series*. Retrieved from [http://jcmotion.com.cuhk.edu.hk/eshop/index.php?route=product/product&product\\_id=250](http://jcmotion.com.cuhk.edu.hk/eshop/index.php?route=product/product&product_id=250). (In Chinese)
- Lee, and P. S., C. Y. So and L. Leung. 2015. Social media and Umbrella Movement: Insurgent public sphere information. *Chinese Journal of Communication*, 8(4), 356-375
- Luk, Hung-Kay. 2002. How to learn '2 written and 3 spoken languages' well. In P. K. Choi and K.M. Wong (eds.). *The Commoners' Critique of the Education Reforms*. Hong Kong: Stepforward Multi-media. (In Chinese)
- Luk, Hung-Kay. 2016. *As the Clouds Rise – A Hongkonger's History of the Hong Kong Professional Teachers' Union*. Hong Kong: City University Press
- Ortmann, Stephan. 2015. The Umbrella Movement and Hong Kong's protracted democratization process. *Asian Affairs* 46(1), 32-50
- People's Republic of China. State Council. 1956. Instructions on the Promotion of Putonghua. Retrieved from [http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe\\_66/200408/573.html](http://www.moe.edu.cn/publicfiles/business/htmlfiles/moe/moe_66/200408/573.html). (In Chinese)
- Societas Linguistica Hongkongensis. n.d. *Archive on Medium of Instruction for Chinese Language in Hong Kong Secondary and Primary Schools*. Hong Kong. Retrieved from <https://sites.google.com/site/hklangstudies/3-analysis>. (In Chinese)
- Tang, Shing-Fung. 2008. Reflections on the PMIC discussions. *Journal of Basic Education*, 17(2), 1-13.

Dr. Choi gave the inaugural Bernard H.K. Memorial Lecture in Hong Kong Studies on 27 April 2017 at York University in Toronto, Canada.

**Please cite this paper as:**

Choi, Po King (2017). "Should the Chinese Language be Taught in Putonghua? Contested Identities in Post-1997 Hong Kong". *Asia Colloquia Papers* 7(1). Toronto: York Centre for Asian Research. Available at: [www.yorku.ca/ycar](http://www.yorku.ca/ycar).

ISBN: 9781550146547

© CHOI Po King

**MORE ABOUT THE AUTHOR**

Dr Choi Po King was trained as a sociologist at the University of Hong Kong and completed her doctorate at the University of Oxford. Until her retirement in 2016, she taught at the Faculty of Education, Chinese University of Hong Kong, and, for six years, she was Director of CUHK's Gender Studies Programme. Her research interests and publications revolve around gender and education, masculinity studies, education policy, the history of the women's movement, as well as life histories of workers in Hong Kong. Her current projects include an ethnography of masculinities among teenage boys in Hong Kong. Her research interests overlap considerably with those of Professor Bernard H. K. Luk, in memory of whom this annual lecture was stabled. She also shares his passion over various social concerns, among them academic freedom, an issue which was very dear to him and which, unfortunately, is increasingly being undermined in Hong Kong.

## ABOUT YCAR

The **York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR)** was established in 2002 to promote research on Asia and Asian Diaspora at York University. The Centre brings together a community of Asian scholars at York and beyond and enhances the profile for Asian and Asian Diaspora research outside of York. York University has a strong contingent of Asia and Asian diaspora researchers. Its membership includes faculty and students from across the campus, including Liberal Arts & Professional Studies, Fine Arts, Environmental Studies, Education, Osgoode Law School and the Schulich School of Business. Geographically, YCAR is organized around four “legs”: East Asia, Southeast Asia, South Asia and Asian Diaspora.

As a research centre, YCAR's takes an expansive approach to Asian Studies, consistent with evolving ideas about the meaning and role of area studies in a globalizing world. The Centre organizes workshops, seminars and other research dissemination activities on topics like the history of Asian societies and their interconnections, political dimensions of transnationalism among immigrant communities in Canada, transnational religious networks, Asian environments, democratization and human rights in Asia, and Asian arts and performance. Our research activities and publications have enabled YCAR to form links with government bodies, community groups and business organizations as well as researchers around the world.

## ABOUT ASIA COLLOQUIA PAPERS

The Asia Colloquia Papers Series is published by the York Centre for Asian Research (YCAR) at York University, Toronto, Canada. The series aims to make available to wider audiences the content of selected lectures, seminars and other talks presented at or in association with YCAR. As such, the Asia Colloquia Papers have few or no footnotes. The Series is published in electronic text form and occasionally also as an audio or visual file. It is available on the York Centre for Asian Research web site at:

[www.yorku.ca/ycar](http://www.yorku.ca/ycar)

The views in the Asia Colloquia Papers Series are those of the author(s) alone and do not necessarily reflect those of YCAR or its members. The copyright for the paper content remains with the author(s). Anyone wishing to republish, reprint or reproduce any portion of the paper in any form, including in translation, may do so only with the author(s) expressed, prior, written permission. The copyright for the image of the papers remains with the York Centre for Asian Research and may not be reproduced in whole or in part in any form, including in translation, without the expressed, prior, written permission of the Centre.

For more information, please contact the York Centre for Asian Research at:

[ycar@yorku.ca](mailto:ycar@yorku.ca)