

Written Cantonese and Implications for Hong Kong

What is written Cantonese?

- ❖ Essentially, it is text which follows the norms of (spoken) Cantonese rather than the norms of the standard written Chinese (SWC).
- ❖ For written texts, the difference between these two norms lies mainly in vocabulary selection – i.e. using vocabulary which is distinctive to Cantonese.
 - Use of words distinctive to Cantonese, such as: 咁, 冇, 佢
 - Word usages distinctive to Cantonese, such as: 飲 – used as verb “to drink”; 話 – used as verb “to speak.”

What is a history of written Cantonese?

- ❖ Basically it is the story of how a Chinese vernacular – Cantonese – gradually established a role in the domain of written Chinese.
- ❖ Involves looking at:
 - What kinds of texts WC was used in?
 - By who, for who, and in what context?
 - The degree to which written language moved from a SWC norm to a Cantonese norm.

Wooden fish book (木魚書) texts.

- ❖ The story of written Cantonese begins in the Ming dynasty with texts printed in woodblock print books called wooden fish books.
 - Cheap books printed using carved woodblocks.
 - Contained a variety of popular texts intended for entertainment, including songs in genres such as 木魚歌, 南音, 龍舟, 粵謳.
 - Inexpensive – and could often be rented by those who did not have enough money to purchase.
 - Read mainly by lower class audiences; also especially by women.
- ❖ Sample Text: “The Traveler’s Autumn Regrets” 客途秋恨 (Southern Song 南音)
 - Written by educated merchant named Ye Tingrui 葉廷瑞 in early 1800s.
 - There is some unmistakable use of Cantonese vocabulary.
 - Line 5: 呢 = this. Distinctly Cantonese.
 - Line 6: 話 = to say. Usage distinctly Cantonese.
 - Line 15: 點 = how. Again, distinctly Cantonese.
 - However, basically a SWC text with occasional Cantonese intrusions.
 - The overall percentage of Cantonese is low – about 3% of total text.

1) 孤舟岑寂晚涼天。2) 斜倚蓬窗思悄然。3) 耳畔聽得秋聲桐葉落。4) 又只見平橋衰柳銷寒煙。5) 呢種情緒悲秋同宋玉。6) 況且客途抱恨，你話對誰言。7) 舊約難如潮有信。8) 新愁深似海無邊。9) 觸景更添情懊惱。10) 懷人愁對月華圓。11) 記得青樓邂逅中秋夜。12) 共你並肩攜手拜嬋娟。13) 我亦記不盡許多情與義。14) 總係纏綿相愛復相憐。15) 共你肝膽情投將兩月，點想同羣催趲整歸鞭。

1) A lone boat floats isolated on a cold night. 2) I think quietly, resting on the boat's window. 3) At my ear, I hear autumn sounds, the falling leaves of the paulownia tree. 4) I can only see the withering foliage of the willow by the quiet bridge, dissipating like the river's cold mists. 5) In this mood, I lament the passing of autumn, as in a

poem by Sung Juk.¹ 6) Even more does the traveler brood over regrets; with whom do you say I should share them? 7) An old agreement is not as reliable as the tide; 8) new woes are boundless and deep as the seas. 9) The scene before me arouses even more feelings of vexation. 10) I think of another as in melancholy I face a glorious round moon.

11) I remember meeting you by chance at the bordello on the night of the Mid-Autumn festival. 12) Shoulder to shoulder, hand in hand, we paid our respects to the moon. 13) I cannot even remember all our affection and devotion; 14) We were always bound together in mutual love and sympathy. 15) To you I offered my intimate affection for two months; how could I think of rushing to join the others in packing to return to my home?

The Dialect Literature Movement

- ❖ Leftist intellectuals started a movement in Hong Kong from 1947-49 promoting use texts written in dialect as propaganda for the revolution.
 - Texts mainly published in a few HK newspapers – *Zheng Bao* 正報, *Hua Shang Bao* 華商報, *Da Gong Bao* 大公報, even *Xingdao Ribao* 星島日報.
 - The movement had little influence and did not reach a large audience.
 - However it is of interest as an experiment in dialect writing that is quite faithful to a vernacular norm.
- ❖ Sample Text: What Should We Write? 寫乜嘢好呢? (excerpt)
 - Written by Hua Jia, a leading figure in the dialect literature movement. (Text from *Ta Kung Pao* 大公報, 9 March 1949, p.7.)
 - The percentage of distinctly Cantonese lexical items – 23% - is in the normal range for Cantonese.
 - There is no vocabulary that is markedly SWC.

1) 呢一排, 响報紙副刊同雜誌上, 都好少見方言文藝嘅作品發表, 因此, 少不免就有人會咁樣覺得: 方言文藝呢味嘢, 講下就得, 實行起來就唔係幾得. 2) 而家趁大公報嘅"方言文學"兩週刊要出版, 我想就呢個問題講幾句, 講得唔對, 請大家指教.

3) 近來少見廣東話 (或者其他嘅話) 寫嘅文章發表確係事實, 不過呢件嘢講起嚟有兩個原因: 4) 一個係以為寫親方言文藝就要寫龍舟木魚, 即係話要用廣州嘅民間形式來寫至得; 5) 另一個係以前喜歡寫方言文藝嘅人, 都有的唔知寫乜嘢好. 6) 呢兩個原則確係使到寫方言文藝嘅人頭痛, 就算我自己, 都曾經為呢件嘢想左好耐, 想來想去都想唔通, 想唔通就寫唔出, 寫唔出又點有得發表呢?

1) Recently in the newspaper supplement sections and magazines, I rarely see dialect literary works published. For this reason, it is somewhat unavoidable that people will think: It is okay to talk about this creature called dialect literature, but not okay to actually write it. 2) I now wish to take advantage of *Ta Kung Pao's* new bi-weekly "Dialect Literature" section to say a few words about this issue. If what I have to say is wrong, please give me your guidance.

3) The recent paucity of published articles written in Cantonese (or other dialects) is simply a fact. There are two reasons for this. 4) One is that many think that writing in dialect means writing dragon boat songs and wooden fish songs; that is to say, it

¹ Sung Juk (Song Yu 宋玉) was a poet of the Warring States period (cir. 300 BC).

means that one must write in Cantonese folk genres. 5) Another is that those who once liked writing literature in dialect don't really know what to write anymore. 6) These two issues are a real headache for those who write dialect literature. Even I have thought about these two things a long time without coming to an answer. With no answer, one doesn't write; if one doesn't write, how can there be anything to publish?

Saam kap dai 三及第 in Hong Kong newspapers.

- ❖ The real story line of written Cantonese continues in serialized fiction in HK newspapers, especially the mosquito press 小報 of the 1940s.
 - These were four-page newspapers, mainly containing serialized fiction (and not much news).
 - Quite popular – especially with working class readers.
 - Much of this written in a style called *saam kap dai* 三及第 which mixed Classical Chinese, Cantonese, and SWC.
 - Use of this style also often seen in a newspaper column genre called “strange discourses” 怪論, popular in HK newspapers from the 1950s into the 1990s, and especially associated with the columnist Saam So 三蘇 (高德雄).
- ❖ Sample Text: Wasted Youth 芳華虛度 (excerpt)
 - Written by Maan Hoeng 晚香. (Text from *Hung Lok* 紅綠, 10 August 1947, p.3.)
 - Cantonese vocabulary makes up only 11% of the total – less than half of percentage for dialect literature movement texts from the same period.
 - Example of Classical Chinese - line 1: 曰 = to say.
 - Example of markedly SWC usage - line 7: 的 = possessive.

1) 亞個後生仔入到來之後, 望見亞麗娥, 就好有禮咁鞠一個躬, 然後尊呼麗娥一聲小姐, 就曰: 2) "邊位係關麗娥小姐呢?" 3) 麗娥答之曰: "我就係嘞!" 4) 亞個後生仔聞言, 即從個袋處拈左一封信出來, 對麗娥曰: 5) "我地舖頭嘅司理有封信俾關小姐你喎!" 6) 言已, 雙手將信遞上, 然後又行左一個鞠躬禮方才告退. 7) 當亞後生仔遞亞封信上來時, 麗娥已一眼就[哨]倒亞的乃係亞華嘅字跡來, 個心立即有如火船開行時的機器郁動咁, 8) 揸信亞隻手亦自自然然咁震顫, 但因為心急想睇亞封信, 不暇再多加思索, 即刻用手拆開封信, 9) 亞封信被拆開之後, 信內露出則為一般商場慣用之紅線間行信紙, 益證明亞封信乃係亞華所發者無疑. 10) 麗娥再跟手翻開信肉來睇, 則第一個觸于眼簾者乃為一個"親"字, 繼觸于眼簾者, 則為一個"愛"字, 11) 麗娥一睇左呢兩個字, 當堂掩羞沉思, 神態如痴, 又悲又喜. 12) 悲者, 乃因自己當年貪圖富貴, 誤嫁表哥. 13) 喜者, 乃喜華哥餘情未斷, 舊情猶在, 不以已曾事過人為念.

1) After the young man entered and saw Lai Ngo, he very politely made a bow, respectfully addressed her as "Miss" and said: 2) "Which of you is 'Miss Gwaan Lai Ngo'?" 3) Lai Ngo answered "I am!" 4) The young man, on hearing her response, pulled a letter out of his bag and said to Lai Ngo: 5) "The manager of our store has a letter for you, Miss Gwaan!" 6) Having spoken, he presented the letter with both hands, then made another bow and left. 7) While the young man was passing the letter to her, Lai Ngo had already scanned it in one glance. The writing was A Waa's and her heart jumped like the engine on a steamship when it starts. 8) Holding the letter in

both hands, naturally she also trembled, but because she was eager to read the letter, without a second thought she immediately ripped it open. 9) After the envelope was opened, the red-lined letter paper normally used in business peeped out from the envelope, which further proved that there was no doubt that A Waa had sent the letter. 10) Lai Ngo pulled the letter out of the envelope to look, and the first word to meet her eyes was "dearest." The next word to catch her eye was "love." 11) As soon as Lai Ngo saw these two words, she tried to cover her embarrassment, but she was dazed, both sad and happy. 12) She was sad because, that fateful year, she had coveted wealth and made the mistake of marrying the wrong man. 13) She was happy because A Waa's affection had not died, and he did not hold her marriage to another man against her.

Transitional written Cantonese in Hong Kong newspapers.

- ❖ From the 1970s to 1990s, much of the increased use of written Cantonese occurred in newspapers and magazines.
 - Especially in the mass market newspapers – *Oriental Daily* 東方日報, *Tin Tin Daily* 天天日報, later *Apple Daily* 蘋果日報.
 - Shift from lower class association to mass/middle class association.
 - Increasing number of columns, ads using some WC.
 - Also *CITY Magazine* – written Cantonese in magazine targeting Yuppie class.
- ❖ During this period, many texts mix SWC and Cantonese norms.
 - SKD – as we have seen.
 - In some texts – SWC is used in narration and Cantonese in dialogue.
 - In some texts the mix seems rather random.
- ❖ Sample Text: Newspaper feature article.
 - Text from *Sing Pao Daily* 13 September 1989, p.32.
 - Quite a bit of Cantonese used – 20% of this excerpt.
 - Mainly in dialogue, but also in narration.
 - The norm seems shifts between SWC and Cantonese.
 - Use of words like *ta* 他 (he) and *de* 的 (possessive) much more typical of SWC than Cantonese.
 - Lines 5 and 7: Use of 尙 quite formal, almost archaic.

1) 彭健新加盟了亞視後, 不知多活躍, 又拍劇集, 又做主持, 此外, 他還要兼顧本身製作公司的工作及唱歌工作等, 總之, 就係忙啦.

2) "咁多嘢做, 掂唔掂呀? 咪到頭來周身刀無張利嗎?" 3) 健仔個人一向忍得, 癩得, 所以, 亦不怕潤他兩句. 4) "車, 有乜唔掂." 5) 健仔牙擦擦, 說 "這些工作也不致太難, 尙可應付, 我呢個人, 只有一樣嘢稍微難到我, 那便是跳舞及做司儀嘞!" 6) "咁就唔止一樣啦, 擺明已經係兩樣嘞, 不過, 睇嚟仲唔止, 你個樣呢?" 哈哈笑的盡情在糟質他. 7) 健仔那份膨脹的自信, 絲毫不受到打擊, 他還不知多神氣說 "我個樣雖然唔係太標青, 但尙幸也有一點觀眾緣, 哎吔, 呢點好重要! 起碼行到出嚟, 唔會被人噓先啦!"

8) 講回健仔話自己跳舞差, 呢點, 相信十個人十個人也不會反對他的說法. 9) 健仔更又拖埋溫拿的其他四位成員落水, 說 "其實在溫拿的五個人之中, 我算係跳得最叻嘅一個添囉."

- 1) Since Paang Gin went to work for Asia TV, he has really been active. He has both made TV series and acted as emcee, and has also had to supervise his own production company and work on his singing career. In short - he's busy!
- 2) "With so much to do, can you handle it? Don't wind up with an aching body and nothing to show for it!" 3) Ginny has always been able to tolerate a few bruises, so it's no problem to needle him with a couple of comments. 4) "Hey, why couldn't I handle it?" 5) Ginny boasted, "This work isn't too hard; I can cope with it. There is only one thing that is a bit of a problem for me - dancing and being an emcee!"
- 6) "That's not just one thing; it's obviously two. But I would say those aren't your only two problems. What about your looks?" I laughed, doing my best to give him a hard time. 7) Ginny's bloated self-confidence didn't even register the blow. He cockily said, "My looks aren't outstanding, but fortunately I have a little magic with the audience. Hey, this is important. At least when I walk out on the stage, I don't get booed right off!"
- 8) Speaking of Ginny's admission that his dancing is lousy, ten out of ten people wouldn't disagree with him. 9) Ginny then dragged the other four members of the Winners into the mud with him: "Actually, as dancers, of the five of us Winners, you could even count me as the best."

Pocketbooks and a consistently vernacular norm.

- ❖ In the late 1980s, Cantonese begins to appear in light paperback novels called pocketbooks 袋裝書.
 - Initially use of Cantonese limited to dialogue, as in Publications Holdings Limited 博益 books, some of which contained material that had earlier appeared in CITY.
 - First series to use Cantonese throughout a whole book was the successful *Diary of the Little Man* 小男人周記 series, based on a popular radio show.
- ❖ Sample Text:
 - Written by A Foon 阿寬 (陳慶佳). (Text from *Diary Of The Little Man #2* 小男人周記 #2, Hong Kong: Tomakazu Production House, 1988, pp.5-6.)
 - The percentage of Cantonese vocabulary – 36% - is consistent with vernacular Cantonese norms.

- 1) 各位朋友, 我係阿寬! 大家好嘛?
- 2) 呢兩個月以來, 我嘅體重急劇下降. 2) 好彩而家仲係冬天, 我唯有經常着嗰 D 濶身粗冷冷衫嚟掩飾我苗條嘅身型, 因為我條腰幼啲幾兩吋, 哦, 用公制即係四至五個 cm, 4) 為咗要 hold 住我個褲頭, 我唯有將個 call 機「攝」咗入裏面, D 褲僥倖唔駛改, 5) 不過我個 call 機係震動嚟, 每次有人 call 我, 我都有俾人「吱」嘅感覺!
- 6) 自從我揸住大古惑架 BENZ 190E 撞埋支電燈柱嗰度之後, 我就瞓咗响醫院成個月, 7) 我老婆阿 Ann 日日都有嚟睇我, 8) 初初佢可能諗住我死梗, 着埋啲全套黑, 全套白嗰亭衫嚟睇我, 一 set 咁, 可能諗住一旦我雙腳伸直, 佢就唔駛換衫, 9) 後尾見我有起色, 就略略「變」番啲啡色腰帶呀, 跟住就綠呀, 紅呀咁, 10) 佢上嚟好少講嘢, 躑居居咁坐响我床邊, 粒聲唔出望住我. 11) 好多時佢可能日頭做嘢做得好辛苦, 嚟到就「恰」眼瞓, 12) 終於有一次, 我見到佢瞓着咗, 索性抱咗佢上床, 讓咗張床俾佢瞓!

- 1) Ladies and gentlemen, my name is A Foon! How do you do?

2) For the last two months, my weight has been plummeting. 3) Fortunately, it is still winter. I usually wear those baggy thick-yarn sweaters to cover my slim figure, because my waist has lost an inch or two. Hey, that's four or five centimeters! 4) To hold up my pants, I have to stick my beeper inside the waistband, so luckily I don't need to have the pants altered. 5) However, my beeper is one of the vibration types, so whenever anyone calls me, it feels like I'm being tickled! 6) After I drove Slick's Benz 190E into the telephone pole, I slept in the hospital for a whole month. 7) My wife, Ann, came to see me every day. 8) At first, she probably thought I was a goner, so she wore all-black and all-white outfits when she came to see me. She probably figured that that way when my limbs went stiff, she wouldn't need to change clothes. 9) Later when she saw my color coming back, she started gradually changing back to brown belts, and then green or red. 10) When she came up, she said little; just sat blankly by the bed staring at me without making a sound. 11) Lots of the time she had probably worked hard during the day, so she would doze off. 12) One time I saw that she had fallen asleep, so I just dragged her up onto the bed and let her sleep there!

Implications for Hong Kong.

- I. Written Cantonese has a history.
 - A. This history is quite long – going back into the Ming Dynasty.
 - B. It shows a persistent, albeit gradual, pattern of increasing use and social role.
 - C. It also shows a pattern of increasing faithfulness to spoken Cantonese norms.
 - D. Its social status is also increasing, with a shift from lower class/low prestige associations to middle class/local identity associations.
- II. The changing social role of written Cantonese reflects identity patterns in HK.
 - A. Cantonese identity has long had both a strong national component and a strong local component.
 - B. The increasing use of written Cantonese parallels an increasing tendency among people in Hong Kong to emphasize Hong Kong identity.
 - C. However, I feel this reflects an adjustment in a complex balance of identities, not a simple switch from one to another.
- III. The growth of written Cantonese reflects the unusual challenges facing students in language education in Hong Kong.
 - A. Such a large gap between spoken and written language is relatively unusual. (In some ways, the language learning challenges faced by HK students are more like those faced by students in traditional than modern societies.)
 - B. The unusual nature of these challenges make it important for Hong Kong to be willing to invest more in language education than neighboring societies do.
 - C. The end result can be a basket of language skills that helps Hong Kong maintain a competitive edge.
- IV. From a sociolinguistic perspective, the expansion of written Cantonese seems to be a natural/normal phenomenon.
 - A. It represents a natural dynamic – the tendency of the languages of prosperous and powerful speech communities to spread into new domains.
- V. From a historical perspective, the development of written Cantonese fits into a broader pattern other vernaculars developing written forms.
 - A. The growth of written Cantonese is not an isolated phenomenon; rather it is one example of a broad and common pattern.