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## “I Want to be More Hong Kong Than a Hongkonger”: Language Ideologies and the Portrayal of Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong Film During the Transition

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# “I Want to be More Hong Kong Than a Hongkonger”: Language Ideologies and the Portrayal of Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong Film During the Transition

Charlene Peishan Chan

The years leading up to the political handover of Hong Kong to Mainland China surfaced issues regarding national identification and intergroup relations. These issues manifested in Hong Kong films of the time in the form of film characters' language ideologies. An analysis of six films reveals three themes: (1) the assumption of mutual intelligibility between Cantonese and Putonghua, (2) the importance of English towards one's Hong Kong identity, and (3) the expectation that Mainland immigrants use Cantonese as their primary language of communication in Hong Kong. The recurrence of these findings indicates their prevalence amongst native Hongkongers, even in a post-handover context.

## 1 Introduction

The handover of Hong Kong to the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1997 marked the end of 155 years of British colonial rule. Within this socio-political landscape came questions of identification and intergroup relations, both amongst native Hongkongers and Mainland Chinese (Tong et al. 1999, Brewer 1999). These manifest in the attitudes and ideologies that native Hongkongers have towards the three most widely used languages in Hong Kong: Cantonese, English, and Putonghua (a standard variety of Mandarin promoted in Mainland China by the Government).

This paper examines social identification and intergroup relations through the portrayal of Mainland Chinese in Hong Kong cinema during the transition period. This period began in 1984 with the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration and ended in 1997 with the official handover of Hong Kong to the PRC (The Government of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2007).

During this time, Hongkongers had to adapt to a new frame of reference for national identification. They were faced with the question of whether to retain their distinct identity or assimilate themselves into Mainland China (Chiu and Hong 1999, Tong et al. 1999, Hong Kong Transition Project 2007). This issue was salient given the divide between Hong Kong and the PRC on the social and economic fronts then: Hong Kong was beginning to make its mark on the global markets with its focus on economic advancement; it had adopted Western principles such as the rule of law and freedom of speech (Lai 2011). Meanwhile, Mainland China had only just started to open up its economy (Tisdell 2009), embarking on social and political reforms that caused unrest amongst citizens. These differing circumstances meant Hongkongers enjoyed a higher standard of living and a more cosmopolitan society, giving them a sense of superiority over their Mainland Chinese counterparts (Lai 2011).

This dynamic was mirrored in Hong Kong's popular culture at the time, especially in the media's portrayal of Mainland Chinese before the transition (Ma 2005). After the handover was announced in 1984, however, the stigmatisation of Mainland Chinese became less pronounced; they became represented more favourably (Mathews et al. 2008). The distinction between Hongkonger and Mainland Chinese gained fluidity as media producers sought to reflect the socio-political circumstances of their audience (Ma 2005), while some films attempted to convey the concerns and sometimes hostile attitudes of Hongkongers towards the handover (Mathews et al. 2008).

By analysing the attitudes and ideologies present in films produced during the transition, and film characters' usage of English, Cantonese, and Putonghua, this paper identifies and discusses three salient themes: (1) the assumption of mutual intelligibility between Cantonese and Putonghua, (2) the importance of English towards one's Hong Kong identity, and (3) the expectation that Mainland immigrants use Cantonese as their primary language of communication in Hong Kong. These are compared against a television serial set in a post-handover context, revealing some shifts in attitudes in the years since.

## 2 Hong Kong

### 2.1 Status of Languages in Hong Kong

In a 2016 census, 88.9% of Hong Kong's population named Cantonese — a Southern Chinese dialect originating in Guangzhou — their primary language, while 48.9% and 46.7% considered English and Putonghua additional languages, respectively (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2017:51).

### 2.1.1 Cantonese

Cantonese is spoken by 94.6% of people living in Hong Kong, whether as a primary language or otherwise (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2017:51). It is the preferred language of daily interaction and used in some formal institutions in the political and cultural domains (Gu 2011a). In September 1998, the Mother Tongue Education Policy was introduced, making Cantonese the official medium of instruction for most secondary schools nationwide (Lai 2010).<sup>1</sup> This was a change from before the handover, when schools had been free to conduct classes in English or Cantonese (Tsui et al. 1999).

Many native Hongkongers consider Cantonese an integral part of their national identity. This is partly due to the large volume of popular culture produced in the language (Lau, C. K. 1997, Lau, S. K. 1997). Lai (2011) found that Hong Kong students displayed a high integrative orientation towards Cantonese. Lambert (1963) defines one's orientation towards a language as integrative if one considers it an important part of being an in-group member. This suggests that many Hongkongers consider Cantonese proficiency necessary to being accepted as part of the local community.

### 2.1.2 English

English enjoys a prestigious status due to its use in legal and international business domains. Despite being tied to Hong Kong's colonial past, English now bolsters the city's cosmopolitan image and affords its speakers social and professional mobility (Gu 2011a, Wei 2007). Before the Mother Tongue Education Policy was introduced, English was the medium of instruction in 80% of secondary schools (Young et al. 1986:461). This figure subsequently fell by 70%, prompting fears that schools — and students — have become second-rate (Wei 2007:43, Tsui et al. 1999:196). Schools that continue to teach in English are viewed as providers of better quality education (Chiu and Hong 1999).

Lai's (2011) study revealed a high level of instrumental orientation towards English. One's orientation towards a language is instrumental if one considers the language to have "utilitarian value...such as getting ahead in one's occupation" (Lambert 1963:114). This is reflected in the growing percentage of Hongkongers with English proficiency: from 31.6% in 1991 (Bolton 2002:6) to 53.2% in 2016 (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2017:51), in spite of the new education policy.

The extent to which English has permeated the vernacular in Hong Kong is evident in the form of code-switching. Defined as "the juxtaposition of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or sub-systems, within the same exchange" (Gumperz 1977:1), code-switching can reveal implicit beliefs about social categories which are otherwise less forthcoming. In Hong Kong, code-switching occurs mostly between the grammatical systems of Cantonese and English (Lee 2012) and is sometimes used to associate oneself with being well-educated and possessing Western values (Luke 1998). Hongkongers who code-switch into English aim at, and are perceived as, being of a higher status.

### 2.1.3 Putonghua

While Putonghua is one of the most widely spoken languages in Hong Kong today (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 2017), its use was limited before the handover. Only 50% of primary and secondary schools taught Putonghua, though there was increasing demand for Putonghua classes amongst adult learners (Kwo 1989). In the mainstream media, Putonghua was restricted to only some channels (Li 1999). Nevertheless, the influx of Mainland refugees into Hong Kong in the 1960s (Fu 2000) meant a significant segment of the population had some exposure to Putonghua.

Putonghua gained currency after the introduction of the "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" policy in 1997, which established English and Chinese as official written languages, and Cantonese, English, and Putonghua as spoken languages (Lai 2011).<sup>2</sup> Despite this, some respondents in Lai's study associated Putonghua with lower social classes; others deemed it a form of linguistic capital in the coming years, suggesting a changing attitude towards Putonghua (Lai 2011).

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<sup>1</sup> In the Hong Kong media, as well as in many journal articles detailing the linguistic landscape of Hong Kong, the Cantonese dialect is often referred to as "Chinese". To avoid confusion with Putonghua (which is also often referred to as "Chinese"), this paper will use the term "Cantonese" when referring to the native language spoken by Hongkongers.

<sup>2</sup> Under the "Biliteracy and Trilingualism" policy, written Chinese refers to Standard Written Chinese, which is derived from the syntax and lexis of Putonghua and therefore differs slightly from Cantonese (Snow 2004). There is also a Vernacular Written Cantonese, however, which is ignored in this policy. It is used widely amongst Hongkongers in various mediums, ranging from advertising to some newspaper reports. Some Hong Kong films (see Section 6.2) also feature written Cantonese in their subtitles.

## 2.2 Language Accommodation and Choice in Hong Kong

A number of studies have examined language accommodation and choice in Hong Kong (Tong et al. 1999, Bond and Cheung 1984), building upon previous findings that language can signal in-group identity (Giles et al. 1976, Giles et al. 1977, Berg 1988). Accommodation can “index and achieve solidarity with or dissociation from a conversational partner reciprocally and dynamically” and reveals “underlying beliefs, attitudes and sociostructural conditions” (Giles et al. 1991:2). In the years leading up to the handover, a Hongkonger’s preference for English signalled a desire for independence; an inclination towards Putonghua indicated a preference for assimilation (Chiu and Hong 1999).

Tong et al. (1999) found that respondents who identified as Hongkongers tended to rate a Putonghua-speaking Mainland Chinese more favourably when he accommodated to the language of his interlocutor, a Cantonese-speaking Hongkonger. The converse was true when he maintained his use of Putonghua. They further rated the Hongkonger less favourably when he accommodated to Putonghua. Similarly, Bond and Cheung (1984) found that Cantonese, English, and Putonghua trilingual undergraduates skewed their survey responses depending on the language the experimenter used, taking a Western stance in response to a Putonghua-speaking experimenter.

Gu (2011a) observed how language choice created distance between interlocutors: by conversing with Mainland Chinese students in Putonghua, Hong Kong students aimed to exclude them from their Hong Kong peer groups, rather than achieve solidarity. She noted that students proficient in Cantonese and Putonghua were able to claim membership in both Mainland Chinese and Hong Kong groups, while factors beyond language choice — such as the acquisition of idiosyncratic norms and slang — were crucial for mobility between groups. These findings suggest that language choice is a site for the negotiation of group membership and identity.

## 2.3 History and Significance of Hong Kong Film

### 2.3.1 The Hong Kong Film Industry: From the 1920s to Today

Commercial film production in Hong Kong began in 1922 with the founding of Minxin Film Studio (Pang 2010). However, it did not flourish until 1933, when the first Cantonese sound film *Platinum Dragon* found success beyond the city’s borders (Fonoroff 1988). Hong Kong’s kung fu films further filled a gap in the market when the PRC prohibited the production of martial arts and supernatural films in 1931 (Desser 2000).

The mid-1930s saw a community of Shanghaiese move to Hong Kong to find work and escape the war and communist revolution (Fu 2000). Amongst them was Run Shaw, who later founded the successful Shaw Brothers Studio (Fu 2000). These developments propelled the Hong Kong film industry to surpass its PRC counterpart, doubling their production of films between the 1930s and 1980s (Cheng et al. 1984, cited in Fonoroff 1988:298), and raising the popularity of Hong Kong cinema worldwide (Desser 2000).

Taiwan emerged as a potential rival film industry to Hong Kong in the 1960s, especially in the martial arts genre (Zhang 2004). Bolstered by viewers who sought distraction from the socio-economic reforms of their time (Lu 1998, cited in Zhang 2004:141), interest in Taiwanese film nonetheless diminished by the 1970s following the rise of its television industry (Zhang 2004:142). This allowed the import of foreign, especially Hong Kong, films to increase steadily from then (Zhang 2004).

The transition saw a number of distinctive features emerge from Hong Kong film, which served as social commentaries on the prevailing state of affairs. Many storylines showcased issues of identity and ethnicity (Lu 2000): narratives about displacement, immigration, and marriage alluded to the relationship between Hong Kong and Mainland China, and even action films like *A Better Tomorrow* (1986) referenced the handover through their portrayal of travel to Mandarin-speaking locations.

Today, the Hong Kong film industry is widely accepted as one of the most influential globally (Rosen 2003, Morris 2004). Its impact on Hollywood is evident in the style and direction of some action films (Castillo 2002, Morris 2004), and Hong Kong directors such as John Woo, Tsui Hark, and Wong Kar Wai are finding success in the American film industry (Morris 2004). The global audience of Hong Kong films makes it a key medium through which ideologies may be disseminated.

### 2.3.2 The Language of Hong Kong Cinema

There has long been tension in Hong Kong cinema between films targeted at local and international audiences: the making of Putonghua films in a largely Cantonese-speaking society is seen as an attempt to corner a larger global market. This tension is reflected in the language shifts occurring throughout the history of Hong Kong cinema. Before the 1960s, most films produced in Hong Kong were made in Cantonese. Later, the bigger budgets and sophisticated production technology of the Shaw Brothers Studio, coupled with the death of Cathay founder Dato Loke Wan Tho, one of Shaw’s strongest competitors, helped to bring Mandarin film to prominence (Fu 2000).

It was not until the 1970s and 1980s that Cantonese cinema experienced a revival (Fu 2000). Cantonese filmmakers started making movies that appealed to the youth, and together with the socio-political conditions of the impending handover, this gave Cantonese films a much-needed boost (Fu 2000).

## 2.4 Language Ideologies in Film and Television

Media ideologies are significant due to the impact they have on viewers' experiential reality. Ma (2005) suggests that mass media helps viewers enhance and build their sense of cultural identity, especially if the content is consistent with their social and political reality, as in the case of Hong Kong. Mass media can also classify and construct emotional barriers between different identities, resulting in "the uneven distribution of meaning (interpretation) and thus exert an ideological influence" (Ma 2005:13). Inoue (2003) similarly asserts that it is the portrayal of Japanese women speaking "women's language" — and not their actual speech — that influences their experiential reality.

While studies of language ideologies in Hong Kong cinema are scarce in the existing literature, the following outline of international film industries forms a basis for Hong Kong's to be compared and understood.

### 2.4.1 Bollywood

Bollywood films (of the Mumbai film industry) are notable for the variety of Indian languages they contain, each of which can index particular identities (Vaish 2011). While Hindustani is primarily used (Ganti 2013),<sup>3</sup> code-switching from English to Hindi often communicates solidarity and closeness (Lösch 2007), and pure Hindi can signal one's nationalist outlook (Vaish 2011). Urdu has undergone a shift in the identity it indexes: used mainly by antagonists in the past, it now expresses strong emotion between characters (Vaish 2011).

Kachru's (2006) examination of Indian languages in Bollywood film music — relevant as Bollywood movies often feature large segments of singing — revealed a trend towards English code-switching. This indexes upper class characters as Westernised and highly-educated Non-Resident Indians (NRIs) with no sense of traditional Indian values. Comparatively, lower class characters who code-switch demonstrate an aspiration towards improved social standings (Lösch 2007).

### 2.4.2 Hollywood

Hill's (1995) study of the American film industry found that Mock Spanish was used to poke fun at Mexican-Americans. While users of Mock Spanish felt it indexed them as cosmopolitan and friendly, and that it did not carry racist connotations, Hill argues that Mock Spanish is only understood when its audience associates it with negative stereotypes of Mexican-Americans (Hill 1998). It thus perpetuates the idea that the Spanish language, and therefore Mexican-Americans, are inferior (Hill 1995).

An investigation into animated films by Lippi-Green (1997) revealed that characters' identities were tied closely to their accent, rather than the language they used. Characters speaking foreign-accented English were more likely to be portrayed as villainous than those who spoke American or British English varieties. This suggests that accents take on negative or positive connotations, depending on the stereotypes associated with the ethnicities who speak them.

## 3 The Present Study

### 3.1 Overview of the Data

Six films and one television serial are analysed in this paper. The films — *Mr. Coconut* (合家歡) (1989), *Her Fatal Ways I-IV* (表姐, 你好嘢!) (1990, 1991, 1992, 1994), and *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (甜蜜蜜) (1996) — were produced and screened during the transition, set in the years prior to the handover, and contain references to the transition. They centre around characters who move from Mainland China to Hong Kong for a variety of reasons and present the problems and prejudice they face.

The television serial *Inbound Troubles* (老表, 你好嘢!) (2013) is set in a post-handover context and details the experiences of main character Choi Sum, a Mainland Chinese who travels to Hong Kong from Guangdong. It

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<sup>3</sup> Hindustani and Urdu are used synonymously by some scholars to refer to the *lingua franca* of North India, while Hindi is sometimes considered a regional variety of Hindustani (Everaert 2010). Other scholars, however, argue that Hindustani consists of a mix of both Hindi and Urdu (Ganti 2013). For the purposes of this paper, the three varieties are considered separately, since they are seen to index different identities.

will be compared against the films to investigate possible shifts in Hongkongers' attitudes and ideologies since the handover.

### 3.2 Method

Linguistic profiles of the films' main characters were developed by tabulating the total number of lines they spoke, and sorting them by language (see Appendix). Speech was segmented into lines according to its corresponding line of subtitles, and lines containing code-switches were considered separately. Loanwords were considered part of the matrix language of the sentence, since they "show full linguistic integration, native-language synonym displacement, and widespread diffusion, even among recipient-language monolinguals" (Poplack 1993:256).

A total of 5,555 lines were analysed. This includes overlapping speech and very short utterances that fall within the lexicon of a particular language. On the other hand, it excludes non-verbal exclamations such as non-lexical backchannels and interjections, since they cannot be categorised conclusively into specific languages. The language backgrounds of Mainland Chinese characters were also investigated to determine possible exposure to Cantonese (Table 1).

**Table 1:** Language backgrounds of main characters

Film	Year(s) of Release	Character	Born	Cantonese-speaking Region?
<b>Mr. Coconut</b>	1989	Kwai Lam	Hainan	No
<b>Her Fatal Ways</b>	1990–1994	Cheng	Sichuan	No
		Sing	Sichuan	No
<b>Comrades: Almost a Love Story</b>	1996	Li Qiao	Guangzhou	Yes
		Xiao Jun	Tianjin	No
<b>Inbound Troubles</b>	2013	Choi Sum	Dongguan, Guangdong	Yes

Overall, almost all lines of Putonghua come from Mainland Chinese characters. Even so, their use of Putonghua is limited: they speak mostly Cantonese and some English. One exception is Cheng, the heroine of *Her Fatal Ways*, who uses progressively more English throughout the series.

Characters from Hong Kong and other countries speak mainly Cantonese. They use English as well, and to a slightly greater extent compared to Mainland Chinese characters. When these characters speak Putonghua, they mostly do so during initial encounters with Mainland Chinese characters. Subsequent interactions take place in Cantonese, rendering their use of Putonghua minimal.

## 4 Main Findings

### 4.1 Overview

The following points were found to be most salient and were recurrent themes throughout, and will be elaborated upon in subsequent sections:

- (1) Mutual intelligibility is generally assumed between Cantonese and Putonghua.
- (2) Being able to speak English is considered an important aspect of assimilating into Hong Kong society. Consequently, competent speakers of English are often portrayed as having higher social statuses.
- (3) Mainland Chinese immigrants who move to Hong Kong are expected to be able to converse in Cantonese. They are usually portrayed using Cantonese as their primary language of communication as soon as they arrive in Hong Kong.

### 4.2 Mutual Intelligibility: Cantonese and Putonghua

A recurring assumption is that Cantonese and Putonghua speakers understand each other even though they speak mutually unintelligible varieties of Chinese. In *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, Li Qiao is from Guangzhou and

is fluent in both Putonghua and Cantonese. Xiao Jun is from Tianjin and supposedly does not have any exposure to Cantonese (see Table 1). Yet, when Li Qiao responds to Xiao Jun in Cantonese at certain points of their conversations, he professes to understand her, suggesting the languages are mutually intelligible.

In the following scene from *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, Li Qiao and Xiao Jun speak after meeting each other for the first time. Xiao Jun speaks Putonghua, which is romanised using the Pinyin system with diacritics over the vowels. Li Qiao speaks Cantonese, romanised with the Jyutping system where tone numbers are used.

**Example 1:** *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996) (12:20)

Xiao Jun	zhè shì wǒ de diàn huà, hái yǒu wǒ de xìng míng. This is my phone number, and my name.
	wǒ zhǎo bú dào nǐ men jīng lǐ. I cannot find your manager.
Li Qiao	o. Okay.
Xiao Jun	bài tuō. xiè xie. Please. Thank you.
Li Qiao	nei5 ngaam1 ngaam1 ceot1 lai4 gaa3? Did you just come out [of China]?
Xiao Jun	duì a. ní zěn me zhī dao? That's right. How did you know?
Li Qiao	jat1 teng1 nei5 gwong2 dung1 waa6 zau6 zi1 laa1. gam2 si2. I can tell from listening to your Cantonese. It's not very good.  m4 sik1 gong2 jing1 man2 hou2 maa4 faan4 ge3 wo3 It is very inconvenient if you are not able to speak English.
Xiao Jun	wǒ zhī dao. dàn shì méi bàn fǎ a. I know. But I don't have a choice.
Li Qiao	nei5 zi1 m4 zi1 aa1, hoeng1 gong2 jau5 di1 hok6 haau6 le5 Did you know, there are some schools in Hong Kong  nei5 teng1 m4 teng1 dou3, ming4 m4 ming4 baak6? Can you hear and understand [me]?
Xiao Jun	tīng de míng bai. I understand.

It is worth noting here that Li Qiao speaks Putonghua in the later part of the conversation, marking her use of Cantonese in Example 1 as an intentional divergence from Xiao Jun. According to Sachdev et al. (2013), active

divergence can indicate a desire to distance oneself from the group to which the interlocutor belongs. One can infer that Li Qiao is keen to avoid being perceived as Mainland Chinese and to align herself with Hongkongers.

The assumption of mutual intelligibility is also apparent in a scene in *Her Fatal Ways IV*, when Cheng, John (a member of the Hong Kong police), and their supervisors discuss a rescue operation. The conversation takes place in Cantonese and Putonghua without accommodation from either side. Yet, they understand each other and come to an agreement about how to proceed.

The portrayal of mutual intelligibility between Cantonese and Putonghua in these films is not entirely rooted in reality. While the two languages share some aspects of grammatical structure (Matthews and Yip), they differ substantially in phonology and are mutually unintelligible (Erbaugh 1995). It is therefore not likely that interlocutors, each speaking only Putonghua or Cantonese, would be able to converse successfully with each other without first acquiring proficiency in the other language.

Scholars like Kozloff (2000) suggest pragmatic reasons for the portrayal of mutual intelligibility between Putonghua and Cantonese: doing so facilitates plot progression, allowing filmmakers to focus on the narrative instead of bridging the language gap. In *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, language divergence serves as an effective indicator of characters' attitudes, helping viewers assess the stances of each character easily.

### 4.3 English as a Marker of Hong Kong Identity

In *Her Fatal Ways IV*, Cheng narrates in Cantonese, "I want to be a real Hongkonger. I want to learn better English". This ideology — that English proficiency is considered a prerequisite for becoming a "real" Hongkonger — is reflected throughout the films in the form of correlation between the amount and proficiency of English spoken, and the degree to which a character is indexed as a Hongkonger. Mainland Chinese characters such as Kwai Lam (*Mr. Coconut*) generally speak little English, though his boss and sister-in-law, both native Hongkongers who live and work in the city, do.

The films further employ English proficiency to index their speakers as people from a higher social class. Kwai Lam's employer, for instance, speaks fluent English and is depicted as a wealthy businesswoman, while characters lacking English competency (such as Kwai Lam) are less affluent employees. In *Her Fatal Ways*, Cheng's increasing proficiency in English is matched by her promotions at work. She starts out as a non-English speaking security officer in the first film but has become the boss of a security company by the fourth, speaking 58 lines in English without code-switches. Her proficiency and use of English thus reflect her status and level of integration into Hong Kong society. One of her lines aptly sums up this point: "In Hong Kong, English is power, you know?"

An example from *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* sees Li Qiao telling Xiao Jun about the benefits of learning English towards his job-hunting efforts.

#### Example 2: *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996) (13:15)

Li Qiao	zhào wǒ kàn a, nǐ yīng gāi shì xué diǎn yīng wén cái hǎo. I think it would be beneficial to you if you learnt some English.
Xiao Jun	xué le yīng wén kě bu ké yì zài mài dāng láo gōng zuò ne? Will I be able to work at McDonald's after I learn English?
Li Qiao	xué huì yīng wén, zài shěn me dì fāng gōng zuò dōu ké yì. If you learn English, you can work anywhere.

This example illustrates a correlation between English proficiency and social mobility in Hong Kong, a finding consistent with a study by Gu (2011a). Li Qiao's comment — that learning English would allow Xiao Jun to work anywhere — reveals the prestige Hongkongers attach to English, and corroborates Li Qiao's desire to be perceived as part of the same in-group as Hongkongers. A study by Chen (2008) found that speaking whole sentences in English, instead of code-switching, was considered a marked choice in Hong Kong, as it indexed the speaker as one who had lived overseas, and not a "pure Hong Kong person" (Chen 2008:63). Even so, participants associated such speakers with high social statuses and expressed a desire to speak as fluently (Chen 2008).

A preference for English was further found to signal a desire for retaining a distinctive Hong Kong culture (Chiu and Hong 1999). Since Cantonese is also used in Guangdong, Mainland China, English may be viewed as being particular to Hong Kong in a way that Cantonese is not. English proficiency is therefore associated with being a Hongkonger, and by extension, characters who speak it are perceived as having a strong Hong Kong

identity. The language choice of film characters may thus be interpreted as a manifestation of Hongkongers' desire to have a separate identity from Mainland China.

#### 4.4 Primary Language of Communication in Hong Kong

In the films, Mainland Chinese characters who moved to Hong Kong were expected to have some proficiency in Cantonese, even if they did not come from Cantonese-speaking regions of China. Moreover, they were usually shown using Cantonese immediately upon their arrival, without having to first acquire the language. Such a portrayal is not representative of a Mainland Chinese immigrant's experience. To account for the Cantonese proficiency of Mainland Chinese characters, three strategies are typically employed.

The first is to not explain how a Mainland Chinese character acquired Cantonese. In *Mr. Coconut*, Kwai Lam arrives in Hong Kong from Hainan, a region in Mainland China where Cantonese is not generally spoken (see Table 1). However, he uses the language without difficulty and converses in Cantonese even with native Hainanese characters. Apart from a single line of Putonghua, Kwai Lam uses Cantonese throughout the film.

Kozloff (2000:81) uses the term "self-dubbing" to describe such a phenomenon: this happens when film characters speak the language most easily understood by the target audience, even if it is not realistically possible for the character to have acquired it. Meanwhile, other attributes such as accent and mannerisms are emphasised to highlight the character's difference (Kozloff 2000). In *Mr. Coconut*, Kwai Lam's habits like the use of a spittoon are contrasted with those of his Hong Kong in-laws, leading audience members to perceive him as Mainland Chinese. Viewers are not meant to take his language practices as representing linguistic reality, but to judge him as foreign nonetheless.

Other Hong Kong films have utilised self-dubbing, including action comedy *Kung Fu Hustle* (2004), martial arts film *Drunken Master III* (1994), and action comedy *The Three Swordsmen* (1994). They are set in the non-Cantonese-speaking regions of Shanghai, Manchuria, and central China, respectively. Nevertheless, almost all their characters speak the language. The use of self-dubbing is said to convey disregard for cultural diversity (Kozloff 2000), erasing linguistic differences between groups, and attempting to speak on their behalf (Shochat and Stam 1985). When Hong Kong filmmakers employ self-dubbing, they negate the linguistic diversity provided by Mainland Chinese characters, and reveal an underlying attitude: that immigrants into Hong Kong should speak in the language that native Hongkongers use.

A second strategy provides some explanation for a Mainland Chinese character's proficiency in Cantonese. In *Her Fatal Ways*, both Cheng and Sing are from the non-Cantonese-speaking region of Sichuan. However, viewers are informed that Cheng's mother hails from Guangdong, allowing them to infer that the characters' family backgrounds have enabled their proficiency in Cantonese. Likewise, in *Comrades: Almost a Love Story*, Li Qiao's Cantonese proficiency is attributed to exposure to the language in her hometown of Guangzhou.

The third strategy can be considered the most realistic, as these films portray the barriers faced by Mainland Chinese when they move to Hong Kong with no Cantonese proficiency. *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* highlights the problems Xiao Jun faces as a native of Tianjin, a non-Cantonese-speaking region of China. Apart from his struggles in completing daily tasks, the film also shows the process of him learning Cantonese — an issue largely ignored in other films.

Yet, even films that use this third strategy take for granted that Mainland Chinese characters will eventually acquire Cantonese. As Example 2 illustrates, the fact that Li Qiao encourages Xiao Jun to learn English — even though he cannot speak Cantonese either — suggests that learning the language is an assumed course of action. Li Qiao even helps Xiao Jun sign up for English lessons, while the acquisition of Cantonese is supposedly left to him to achieve on his own.

These examples demonstrate that in Hong Kong film, Cantonese proficiency is assumed amongst Mainland Chinese who move to Hong Kong. Furthermore, these characters are shown using the language as their main language of communication immediately upon their arrival in films that employ the first and second strategies. Where Mainland Chinese characters are not already able to speak Cantonese, they are expected to learn it, highlighting a recurring and underlying language ideology held by Hongkongers: that proficiency in Cantonese is needed in order for one to assimilate into Hong Kong society.

## 5 Beyond the Transition

Produced by Hong Kong broadcaster Television Broadcasts Limited, the television serial *Inbound Troubles* (2013) will be compared against the films analysed in Section 4 to investigate possible shifts in language ideology amongst Hongkongers since the handover.

A salient issue raised in *Inbound Troubles* is one of accent. The serial focuses on the Mainland Chinese character Choi Sum, who travels to Hong Kong for a singing competition. His accented Cantonese becomes a source of discrimination against him: he is unfairly issued fines by the police, and in Example 3, prematurely

eliminated from the competition by a judge, who tells him to improve his Cantonese before making another attempt.

**Example 3:** *Inbound Troubles* (2013) (Episode 1, 31:00)

- Judge            ngo5 zang6 nei5 saam1 go3 zi6, zau6 hai6: “mei6 gau3 baan1”.  
I’ll gift you three words, they are: “not good enough”.
- faan1 heoi3 lin6 hou2 di1 gwong2 dung1 waa2 sin1  
Go back and practise your Cantonese first.
- mou5 bei2 jan4 siu3 aa6.  
Don’t make a fool of yourself.
- ngo5 dei6 m4 hai6 syun2 siu2 cau2 a, zi1 mou5?  
We are not here to seek a clown, do you understand?

Speaking accented Cantonese is thus portrayed as a reason for ridicule and a barrier to acceptance by local Hongkongers — a point reinforced in the serial’s closing scenes, which reveal that Choi Sum establishes a restaurant chain in Mainland China and hint at his failure to assimilate into Hong Kong society.

In contrast, in *Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996), Xiao Jun speaks Cantonese with no noticeable accent despite being new to the language. This contradicts the findings of Gu (2011b), who noted that Mainland Chinese students — even those from Cantonese-speaking regions — spoke with accents that distinguished them from native Hongkongers. The representation of accent-related issues in *Inbound Troubles* is more approximate to the experiential reality of Mainland immigrants in Hong Kong and suggests the continued integrative orientation of Hongkongers towards Cantonese.

A second ideology that appears to have continued relevance is the importance of English proficiency towards a Hongkonger identity. In *Inbound Troubles*, native Hong Kong characters like Choi Sum’s great aunt Sophia and her friend Benjamin code-switch frequently from Cantonese into English, while Choi Sum and other Mainland Chinese characters do not. Example 4 (which has been condensed for brevity) shows a conversation between Sophia and Benjamin, who employ code-switches and short utterances in English.

**Example 4:** *Inbound Troubles* (2013) (Episode 7, 29:50)

- Benjamin        Sophia? nei5 ge2 min6 sik1 not so good.  
Sophia? You don’t look so good.
- Sophia            So are you.
- Benjamin        nei5 gau3 m4 gau3 fan3 aa6?  
[Did] you have enough sleep?
- Sophia            gang2 hai6 m4 gau3 laa1, nei5 le4?  
Of course not, you?
- Benjamin        Me too.
- Sophia            gam3 zing4 gaan1 dim2 soeng5 tong4 aa6?  
Then how [will we] attend class later?

Benjamin      ngo5 jau5 baan6 faat3, come on!  
I have a plan, come on!

Unlike the films, however, English proficiency in *Inbound Troubles* is not necessarily matched by high social standings. While Sophia and Benjamin are the most proficient users of English, they are portrayed as working class retirees. In contrast, Choi Sum and his father are wealthy individuals and business owners, despite their lack of English language skills. Apart from reflecting a changing socio-economic climate that has afforded Mainland Chinese greater economic stability and wealth relative to Hongkongers (Lai 2011), this suggests a shift in what English language competency indexes: whereas it previously marked one as having a high social status, it is now as much an attribute of the average Hongkonger. It suggests that English continues to be a language of prestige, such that proficiency in the language is desirable regardless of social class.

## 6 Discussion

Non-linguistic factors provide an additional level of analysis of the Mainland Chinese characters, and complement the linguistic attitudes discussed in the previous sections to reveal underlying ideologies that Hongkongers have. These will be examined in detail in the following sections.

### 6.1 Portrayal of Mainland Chinese Immigrants

After the handover was announced in 1984, the stigmatisation of Mainland Chinese in the Hong Kong media became less pervasive, and in some cases, favourable (Mathews et al. 2008). This is evident in the current analysis, where Mainland Chinese characters are portrayed as instrumental to helping Hongkongers overcome obstacles. In *Inbound Troubles*, Choi Sum serves as mediator for the conflicts that arise in his cousin's household; in *Mr. Coconut*, Kwai Lam sacrifices himself for his in-laws to achieve their goals; in *Her Fatal Ways*, Cheng and Sing play crucial roles that contribute to the capture of criminals.

Even so, media producers continue to attach negative stereotypes to these characters, suggesting their prevalence amongst Hongkongers. In the first episode of *Inbound Troubles*, an argument between Mainland Chinese and Hongkongers reveals stereotypes such as the former's disregard for the law and unhygienic practices. This is similarly demonstrated in *Mr. Coconut* with Kwai Lam's use of a spittoon. The stigma surrounding Mainland Chinese thus appears to be relatively unchanged since the transition and is evident in both linguistic and non-linguistic assessments of Hong Kong film. This supports the finding that Hongkongers increasingly do not see themselves as Chinese (Lai 2011), but rather as a community with a distinct identity.

### 6.2 Subtitles in Hong Kong Film

Subtitles can reveal ideologies about the languages featured in those films. As Kozloff (2000) explains, subtitles allow foreign language speech to retain its original essence, while enabling viewers to follow the film's storyline. Subtitles in Hong Kong films are usually printed in Standard Written Chinese. In *Her Fatal Ways IV*, however, subtitles mirror the language being spoken by the characters in the scene: vernacular Written Cantonese subtitles accompany spoken Cantonese, while Standard Written Chinese subtitles follow Putonghua speech. English subtitles are provided throughout.

This method of subtitling, especially in films foregrounding issues of group membership, may be read as an attempt to isolate members of different groups: without translated subtitles, viewers are prevented from understanding foreign language speaking characters, establishing an emotional distance between them (Kozloff 2000). They become more likely to perceive such characters as members of the out-group (Kozloff 2000). In this way, *Her Fatal Ways IV* emphasises the distinction between Cantonese and Putonghua, which are commonly portrayed as sharing one writing system. It prompts Hongkongers to perceive Putonghua-speaking Mainland Chinese as outsiders in Hong Kong.

### 6.3 Other Film Genres

The ideologies discussed in this paper are present across media of various genres screened during the transition. In the crime thriller *Long Arm of the Law* (省港旗兵) (1984), a group of Mainland Chinese thieves confront the Hong Kong police when they attempt to raid a jewellery store. Although the film focuses on organised crime in Hong Kong, the emphasis on the thieves' country of origin and their criminal offences suggests that many Hongkongers connect Mainland Chinese with negative images.

Furthermore, the thieves experience difficulties integrating into Hong Kong society: they face discrimination from law-enforcement officers and are marked as members of the out-group through their disregard for the law and cruelty towards innocent civilians. One of them also speaks accented Cantonese.

Meanwhile, native Hong Kong characters such as members of the police force are shown speaking English — a marker of Hong Kong identity in film. Taken together, the linguistic and non-linguistic practices of the Mainland Chinese thieves and Hong Kong police reinforce the distinction between the groups, encouraging the perception of in- and out-groupness amongst viewers.

A point of interest is the presence of British members in the police force, symbolising Hong Kong's colonial rulers who were still governing the city at the time of the film's production. These characters converse with Hongkongers in English and non-accented Cantonese, and are portrayed as belonging to the same in-group as Hongkongers despite being colonisers. Meanwhile, Mainland Chinese are depicted as the common "other" of both British and Hong Kong characters. A similar phenomenon takes place in *Her Fatal Ways IV*, indicating a preference by Hongkongers to have a distinct identity from Mainland China.

The prevalence of linguistic ideologies across media genres can have a greater influence on viewers than if they were present in only some types of films. As Ma (2005) suggested, the ideological impact of the mass media on consumers can be significant, especially if they reflect the socio-political circumstances of their audience. Given that the films illustrate conflicts between Hongkongers and Mainland Chinese, and were screened when the tension between the two were high, they are likely to reinforce existing ideologies about Mainland Chinese amongst native Hongkongers.

## 7 Conclusion

This paper has investigated how language in the Hong Kong media reflects intergroup relations between Hongkongers and Mainland Chinese. It has been demonstrated that the ideologies and attitudes held by Hongkongers towards Mainland immigrants were prevalent across media genres, and that some have persisted in a post-handover context. This suggests that they remain relevant to a great number of Hongkongers and may serve to influence consumers of Hong Kong media, bringing about a mutually reinforcing relationship between cinema and its audience.

Importantly, the comparison of *Inbound Troubles* (2013) against the films produced and screened during the transition reveals a shift in language attitudes: English language competency is no longer characteristic of someone with a high social status but has become an attribute of the average Hongkonger post-handover. Non-English-speaking Mainland characters may nonetheless be affluent individuals. Taken together with the portrayal of accented Cantonese in *Inbound Troubles* and non-linguistic factors such as the continued stigmatisation of Mainland characters, it suggests prevailing tension between the desires for a distinct identity and for assimilation within Hong Kong society at large. Given recent developments in the relations between Hong Kong and Mainland China, an investigation into the Hong Kong media of today could establish further, and more complex, shifts in language ideologies about both groups.

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## Appendix

This appendix contains the tabulated figures of the total number of lines spoken by main characters in each of the six films. The total number of lines are broken down according to language to reflect the linguistic profile of each character.

Lines which contain code-switches are counted separately from those which are spoken purely in one language. They are labelled to indicate the matrix language of the line, as well as the language in which the code-switch occurs. "Code-switch (C-E)", for instance, indicates that the matrix language is Cantonese (C), while the code-switch occurs in English (E). P is used to refer to Putonghua.

### *Mr. Coconut* (1989)

	<b>Kwai Lam</b>	<b>Wong Ka Fan</b>	<b>Boss</b>	<b>Ka Ling</b>
<b>Language</b>	<b>No. of lines spoken (%)</b>			
Cantonese	347 (99.7)	411 (100)	81 (94.2)	45 (97.8)
English			5 (5.8)	1 (2.2)
Putonghua	1 (0.3)			
<b>Total lines</b>	<b>348 (100)</b>	<b>411 (100)</b>	<b>86 (100)</b>	<b>46 (100)</b>

### *Her Fatal Ways* (1990)

	<b>Cheng</b>	<b>Sing</b>	<b>Wu</b>
<b>Language</b>	<b>No. of lines spoken (%)</b>		
Cantonese	362 (78.2)	53 (57.6)	285 (98.6)
English			1 (0.3)
Putonghua	70 (15.1)	37 (40.2)	3 (1.0)
Sichuanese	30 (6.5)	2 (2.2)	
Hokkien	1 (0.2)		
<b>Total lines</b>	<b>463 (100)</b>	<b>92 (100)</b>	<b>289 (100)</b>

### *Her Fatal Ways II* (1991)

	<b>Cheng</b>	<b>Sing</b>	<b>Hung</b>
<b>Language</b>	<b>No. of lines spoken (%)</b>		
Cantonese	679 (98.1)	102 (91.9)	213 (99.5)
English	2 (0.3)	1 (0.9)	1 (0.5)
Putonghua	10 (1.4)	4 (3.6)	
Code-switch (C-E)	1 (0.1)	4 (3.6)	
<b>Total lines</b>	<b>692 (100)</b>	<b>111 (100)</b>	<b>214 (100)</b>

*Her Fatal Ways III* (1992)

	<b>Cheng</b>	<b>Sing</b>	<b>Inspector Lui</b>
<b>Language</b>	<b>No. of lines spoken (%)</b>		
Cantonese	609 (80.6)	137 (90.1)	168 (97.1)
English	5 (0.7)	1 (0.7)	1 (0.6)
Putonghua	138 (18.3)	14 (9.2)	4 (2.3)
Code-switch (C-E)	4 (0.5)		
<b>Total lines</b>	<b>756 (100)</b>	<b>152 (100)</b>	<b>173 (100)</b>

*Her Fatal Ways IV* (1994)

	<b>Cheng</b>	<b>John</b>	<b>Sing</b>	<b>Oliver</b>
<b>Language</b>	<b>No. of lines spoken (%)</b>			
Cantonese	581 (89.5)	106 (48.8)	144 (94.7)	62 (88.6)
English	58 (8.9)	96 (44.2)	8 (5.3)	8 (11.4)
Putonghua	6 (0.9)	12 (5.5)		
Code-switch (E-C)	2 (0)	1 (0.5)		
Code-switch (C-E)	2 (0)	2 (0.9)		
Code-switch (P-E)				
<b>Total lines</b>	<b>649 (100)</b>	<b>217 (100)</b>	<b>152 (100)</b>	<b>70 (100)</b>

*Comrades: Almost a Love Story* (1996)

	<b>Li Qiao</b>	<b>Xiao Jun</b>
<b>Language</b>	<b>No. of lines spoken (%)</b>	
Cantonese	290 (89.8)	147 (47.3)
English	5 (1.5)	13 (4.2)
Putonghua	27 (8.4)	150 (48.2)
Code-switch (P-E)	1 (0.3)	
Code-switch (C-P)		1 (0.3)
<b>Total lines</b>	<b>323 (100)</b>	<b>311 (100)</b>