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Written Cantonese in Hong Kong Advertisements*¹

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1. Introduction²

It is common knowledge that while China has a large number of dialects, many not mutually understandable, they all share a common written form. Thus, a Chinese newspaper can be easily read by all Chinese speakers, regardless of their dialect and regardless of whether they can speak the national language. This is due to the fact that written Chinese uses ideograms which are read differently according to the dialect of the reader. If the Chinese were to adopt a phonetic script, as the Vietnamese have, to replace the characters, it would be necessary to create separate scripts as well for all of the various dialects, and the new written forms would be as mutually incomprehensible as the spoken forms. It should be added that the dialects are often so far divergent that they would be considered separate languages if it were not for the fact that China is a unified political entity, and for the unique fact also that they share the same written form. Indeed, the Chinese characters were used in the past to represent non Chinese languages such as Vietnamese and Korean, and they are still used in Japan to some extent. The closest analogy in European languages to a common script for different dialects or languages is the numeral system, where the numbers are written in the same way across Europe, but pronounced differently in the various languages.

The modern written script is based on Mandarin, and the spoken and written forms of that particular variety of Chinese are closely related. In other words, spoken Mandarin and written Mandarin are very similar, and since Mandarin is the official language of China and is the variety taught in schools, all Chinese can read it. However, there is a much wider difference between the spoken forms and the written forms based on Mandarin in other dialects. While the grammar and vocabulary are remarkably similar across the dialects, much more so than is the case with closely related European languages, such as Portuguese and Spanish, Dutch and German, there are still differences. It would be hard to imagine Dutch speakers reading a German script and pronouncing it as Dutch. This is however the case in China, where speakers of dialects read Mandarin texts in their own dialect. It sounds stilted but is quite understandable.

¹*I wish to thank the following for patiently answering my many questions concerning the Cantonese texts: Henry Chong, Shirley Leung, Li Xuliang, Brian Loh, and So Wai-Sang.

² Most of the introduction, apart from the first two paragraphs, is summarized from John Snow's ground breaking work *Cantonese as Written Language* (See References).

Of all the regional dialects, only one, Cantonese, has a written form of its own which is still in use. Written forms existed for some other dialects in the past as well but have largely died out. Don Snow (2004:33) writes (citing Allard and Landry 1994: 117), 'In regions where other dialects of Chinese were spoken, the vernacular often appeared to a greater or lesser extent in the printed forms of local operas, folk songs, and even some kinds of popular fiction. For example, elements of local vernacular can be found in the traditional folk literature of Guangdong's Hakka and Chaozhou dialect regions. However, before the twentieth century, it was the Wu dialects (吳) - the vernaculars of Shanghai, Ningbo, and Suzhou - which developed most as written languages.' He continues that the Wu dialect, which first appeared in literature in the Ming dynasty (1368-1644), became popular around the turn of the 20th century appearing in a number of novels; but the written form then declined and disappeared.

According to Snow (2004: 35-40), the only other Chinese dialect which has a written form is Taiwanese. However, the written language does not have a long history, having been developed by intellectuals in the twentieth century for nationalist and political reasons. There is no standardized form, and it is therefore difficult for writers and readers and it has not enjoyed commercial success.

The situation with written Cantonese is entirely different. It has roots going back 300 years or more, is fairly standardized, and at least in Hong Kong is widely used in certain restricted areas. In fact, this is the only place in China, apart from Macau, where non standard Chinese characters can be seen. The first publications in written Cantonese, so called wooden fish books, which contained the lyrics to popular songs, appeared in the late Ming, and were widely available and read until as late as the 1950s. In the nineteenth century, another type of song genre appeared: Cantonese love songs, which were widely published in newspapers and magazines and were later included in Cantonese operas. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, text books for teaching spoken and written Cantonese appeared for foreigners (especially missionaries) and for Chinese speakers of other dialects. Cantonese opera, whose golden period was between approximately 1920 to 1936, was important in the development of written Cantonese, since it enjoyed wide popularity among the lower classes and hundreds of scripts were published and read. However, over all, the use of written Cantonese was only acceptable in certain types of texts: those for light entertainment or for oral performance, and often for a lower class audience. Classical Chinese or *Baihua* (written Mandarin based on the spoken language) remained the language for most serious or formal uses.

For a few years after the second world war this situation was challenged by a group of writers in Hong Kong who participated in the Hong Kong Dialect Literature Movement. This was linked to the situation in China, where the communists were favourable to literature in local dialects as a means to reach the masses. However, after the establishment of the People's Republic in 1949, the government in Beijing started promoting the national language in the interest of unity and, both in China and Hong Kong, the Dialect Literature Movement came to an abrupt end. In Guangdong the use of written Cantonese was thenceforth restricted and after 1951 no longer appeared in newspapers. In *laissez-faire* Hong Kong, on the other hand, spoken Cantonese continued to be the *lingua franca* of the Chinese population and the written form enjoyed growth.

As mentioned above, written Cantonese has been reserved for certain specific domains, and indeed it has been considered vulgar and low class. In Hong Kong, school teachers make great

efforts to prevent students using it. The spoken language, on the other hand, does not suffer this discrimination, though it is considered by most speakers as merely a dialect, and many believe that it does not even have a grammar. It is very widely used, and since 1974 has official status in Hong Kong along with English, such that it is used by nearly all Chinese speakers in the Legislative Council. It is also taught in schools, in the sense that students learn how to pronounce standard Mandarin Chinese characters with Cantonese pronunciation. Most radio and television broadcasts in Hong Kong are also in Cantonese, and Cantonese pop music has a huge audience as do Cantonese movies (though in decline in recent years). It might be added that there are also Cantonese radio and television broadcasts in Guangzhou and Shenzhen, but apparently Cantonese is not allowed for news broadcasts. The spectacular economic growth of Hong Kong over the last 40 years has given added prestige to the spoken language. However, this prestige has only slowly influenced growth in the use of the written language. Beginning in the 1970s, Cantonese started to be used in publications for middle class audiences, and for younger readers. One genre where it appeared regularly was in “odd opinion” columns (short, lighthearted essays) in newspapers. Furthermore, scripts of radio, television, and film productions were written in Cantonese which increased the skill of writers of the language. From the 1970s to the present time, there has been a slow growth in the use of Cantonese in Hong Kong newspapers, though mainly in the mass market press starting with the defunct *Tin Tin Daily* in the 70s and 80s, to the present-day *Apple Daily*. The growth was paralleled in Hong Kong’s magazines, especially those aimed at the youth market, and those dealing with entertainment and pop culture. Paperback books known as “pocketbooks”, which made their appearance in the early 80s, were light in content, written entirely in Cantonese, and met with unusual market success. The most well-known of these was *Diary of the Little Man* by Chan Hing-Kai. A recent development which will help enhance the status of both spoken and written Cantonese is the increased attention that scholars have given to the language during the last decade, resulting in new grammar books, dictionaries, academic works, and conferences.

2. Written Cantonese in Advertisements

This paper examines one area where written Cantonese is now widely used: in advertising; specifically advertising in the MTR (Hong Kong’s Metro). This is one area where the audience is huge and where the impact on the language must be considerable. The adverts illustrate some of the differences between Cantonese and the national language, and show the various means by which Cantonese words for which there are no standard characters are written. The advertisements are also revealing in the sense that they are for products or services from some of the world’s leading brand name companies, and cannot but fail to enhance the status of Cantonese.

The text below is from a large and prominent series of twelve advertisements in Hong Kong’s Central MTR station, for AXA Insurance Retirement Investments. Half of the adverts were in English, the other half in Chinese.

- (1) “我 唔 想 7 0 歲 仲 要 趕 車 返 工”
 ngo5 **m4** soeng2 cat1 sap6 sei3 **zung6** jiu3 gon2 ce1 **faan1 gung1**³
 I not want seventy years still rush bus
 return work
 I don't want to still be rushing to work when I'm seventy

The second word *m4* (唔) is a negative marker in Cantonese, and is the equivalent of *bu4* (不) in Mandarin. The character used to represent it is non-standard, and it illustrates one of the mechanisms by which Cantonese syllables can be written, namely giving a new meaning to a character that already exists with the same or similar sound, a strategy named 'phonetic borrowing' by Don Snow. In this case, there is an existing standard character with the same tone as *m4*, namely *ng4* (吾) an archaic word which means 'I, me'. The radical for mouth (口) is added to the left of the standard character indicating that it is a Cantonese dialect word. Mandarin speakers although not familiar with the character would guess that it had the same pronunciation as 吾 i.e. *wu2* and could also guess from the context that it was a negative marker. It should be noted that the 'mouth' radical does not always indicate that the character represents a Cantonese word, since many standard characters are also classified under this same radical.

The seventh word *zung6* (仲) illustrates a second strategy by which a Cantonese word may be written, namely giving a new meaning to an existing standard character. In this case, the standard meaning of the character is 'in the middle, between two entities', but in Cantonese it also means 'still', which in Mandarin is a completely different word, *hai2* (還). The use of the character *zung6* illustrates another point, namely that Cantonese characters are not standardized. Often, *zung6* 'still' is represented by another character with the same sound and same tone, meaning 'heavy' (重).

The last two words *faan1 gung1* (返工), literally 'return work', are a Cantonese expression meaning 'to go to work' and are the equivalent of Mandarin *shang4 ban1*. In this case, the individual characters are standard with standard meanings, but in combination the meaning is not standard. In Mandarin, the expression actually means 'to do a piece of work again'.

It is sometimes possible, as in this sentence, to read the Cantonese characters with Mandarin pronunciation, but it may not be understandable to a non-Cantonese speaker (2).

- (2) wo3 **wu2** xiang3 qi1 shi2 sui4 **zhong4** yao4 gan3 che1 **fan1 gong1**

Standard Mandarin for the sentence would be as follows (3).

- (3) 我 不 想 7 0 歲 還 要 趕 車 返 工

³ Romanization for Cantonese is in *gyut ping*, the scheme used by the Linguistic Society of Hong Kong. Mandarin is romanized in *pinyin*, the standard system in China. For this paper, extensive use was made of the online Cantonese-Mandarin-English Dictionary, *CantoDict Project* (<http://www.cantonese.sheik.co.uk>) established in November, 2003. Another online dictionary for Mandarin with Cantonese pronunciations, *The MDBG Chinese-English Dictionary*, was also consulted (<http://www.xuezhongwen.net/chindict/chindict.php>) as was *Zhongwen zui xin ciyu cidian*, Zhonghua Shudian Gongsu, Hong Kong, 2008, ed Kang Shiyong, Liu Hairun and others, a dictionary of around 10,000 neologisms from the early 1990s to the present.

wo3 **bu4** xiang3 qi1 shi2 sui4 **hai2** yao4 gan3 che1 **shang4 ban1**

This would be the normal written form for Cantonese speakers also, since they speak Cantonese but read and write in Mandarin. However they would read out the Mandarin sentence using Cantonese pronunciation, even though it would sound very stilted in everyday spoken language (4):

(4) ngo5 **bat1** soeng2 cat1 sap6 seoi3 **waan4** jiu3 gon2 ce1 **seong5 baan1**

This text also illustrates that Cantonese speakers are not always sure whether a particular expression is in fact Cantonese and they seem to err on the side of caution, avoiding its use in writing if they are not sure. In this case several informants felt that *gon2 ce1* (趕車) ‘to rush by bus’ was a Cantonese expression whereas in fact it does also occur in everyday speech in Mandarin.

Finally, this advertisement is typical of adverts which contain Cantonese in that it also contains more formal text in Mandarin as well as English. However, it was unusual in that the same adverts were juxtaposed in English and Chinese. Many adverts in the MTR contained three languages, a few in Central Station in the main business area used just English (e.g. Qantas Airlines, Marks and Spencer), while most adverts were in Chinese, though nearly all contained some English to some extent.

The next advert was for Sony.

(5) Bravia 啲, 靚 多 啲
Bravia **di1**, **leng3** do1 **di1**
Bravia more, beautiful much more
More Bravia is much more beautiful

Di1(啲) is a Cantonese comparative suffix, similar to English, *-er*, and again is a phonetic borrowing. It is similar in sound to and has the same tone as the possessive marker *dik1* (的), and the radical for mouth indicates that the word is dialectal. It is sometimes also written as 'D', romanization being a third, though fairly uncommon way, that non-standard words can be written. *Leng3* (靚) is a Cantonese word meaning 'beautiful'.

The following text appears in the same advertisement and, as is often the case, reproduces oral language. Representation of actual speech, especially colloquial, in written Cantonese is more acceptable than using Cantonese characters in more formal texts.

(6) “你 上 電 視, 靚 好 多 啲”
nei5 soeng5 din6 si6, leng3 hou3 do1 wo4
you go up television, beautiful much more *wo4*
When you appear on television, you are much more beautiful

In this text, the Cantonese final particle *wo4* (啲) indicates surprise. The character is a phonetic borrowing based on any of several standard Chinese characters but with the radical replaced with the mouth radical.

The origin of the Cantonese character *leng3* ‘beautiful’ is unclear. It does not usually appear in Mandarin dictionaries with an equivalent sound and meaning, though it does appear with the pronunciation *jing4* ‘to paint the face’. I found it in just one dictionary, with the pronunciation *liang4*, and meaning ‘beautiful’, and an indication that it was dialectal. The character is also listed in the two recent online dictionaries mentioned in footnote 2, with the Mandarin pronunciation *liang4*, and with the meaning ‘beautiful, pretty’; as well as in a recently published dictionary of neologisms in Mandarin (Kang Shiyong, et. al. 2008). An informant from Shanghai said that northerners would not know the character and that it was not Mandarin. However, two other informants said they had heard the word used in Mandarin, and one of them, a Mandarin speaker who cannot speak Cantonese, wrote, “it is pronounced as ‘liang’ in Mandarin and it is a common character in Mandarin. It means ‘beautiful’ ... ‘liang’ is more common in writing because it is more poetic. A lot of parents used this character to name their daughters wishing them to be beautiful and have a good temperament after they grow up.” The other informant wrote, “It’s an ancient word used more commonly in old Chinese opera lyrics.”

It would appear that *leng3* is an archaic character which has survived in Cantonese but only has a very restricted use in Mandarin. Indeed, many dialect words once had written forms which have since died out in the standard language, and some scholars are now going back to ancient texts to rediscover the original characters. Making use of these archaic characters would represent a fourth way that Cantonese words could be written, though it is a strategy which has not been adopted. Interestingly, *liang4* has recently been exported back into standard Chinese and given new life by the younger generation in such expressions as *liang4 hao4* ‘a nice number for cars or cell phones’, *liang4 nü3* ‘a pretty girl’, *liang4 zhao4* ‘a nice photo’.

The following was an advertisement for the MTR, which uses Cantonese extensively in its advertisements and signs:

(7) 想 知 道 IFC 嘅 秘 密?
 soeng2zi1 dou6 IFC **ge3** bei3 mat6?
 want know IFC *ge* secret?
 Do you want to know IFC's secret?

即 刻 換 購 今 期 嘅 印 章 啦!
 zik1 hak1 wun6 kau3 gam1 kei4 **ge3** jan3 zoeng1 **laa1!**
 immediately exchange buy current *ge* seal *laa!*
 Please immediately redeem the current seal!

Ge3 (嘅), which occurs twice, is a Cantonese grammatical possessive marker, the equivalent of *de* (的) in Mandarin. The written character is a phonetic borrowing, similar in sound to *gei3* (既), ‘since, already’ in standard Chinese, with the addition of the mouth radical. The final particle *laa1* (啦), a particle expressing politeness, is also Cantonese, and the character is again a phonetic borrowing, identical in sound and tone to the character meaning ‘to pull’ (拉), with the addition of the mouth radical.

The next advertisement, again for the MTR, contains three Cantonese characters:

(8) 無 論 嘅 邊 道
 mou4 leon6 **hai2** **bin1** **dou6**

no matter at which place
It doesn't matter where you are

The preposition *hai2* (喺) 'at' is the Cantonese equivalent of Mandarin *zai4* (在), and the character is a phonetic loan. *Bin1 dou6* (邊道) is a Cantonese compound meaning 'which place, where', but in standard Chinese the written characters mean 'edge' and 'road', respectively, and are meaningless in combination. Another character meaning 'degree' in standard Chinese (度) is sometimes also used to represent *dou6* in this expression.

In the next advertisement for Ulferts furniture, most of the text is in Mandarin, while the speech quotes are in Cantonese, and the branding is in English:

(9) 咁 著 數,
gam3 **zoek6 sou3**
So advantageous

唔 好 俾 佢 停 呀"
m4 **hou2 bei2 keoi5** ting4 **aa3** (particle for emphasis or surprise)
not good allow him stop *aa3*
Don't let him stop

(10) “咪 執 輸”
mai5 zap1 syu1
do not miss out
Don't miss out on this opportunity

The character for *gam3* (咁) 'so' is a phonetic loan based on the standard Chinese character for 'sweet', pronounced *gam3* in Cantonese, with the addition of the mouth radical. *Zoek6 sou3* (著數) 'favourable' is a Cantonese compound using standard Chinese characters but with a non standard meaning. In Mandarin, 著 (*zhu4*) means 'to make known / to show / to prove / to write / outstanding', and 數 (*shu4*) means 'a number', but the two characters in combination are meaningless. In the second sentence, *m4 hou2* (唔好), literally 'not good' in Cantonese means 'do not'. The character for *m4* (唔) has been discussed above, while that for *hou2* (好) is a standard Chinese character. The third character *bei2* (俾) 'to allow, to let' means 'to cause, to enable' in Mandarin while the fourth character *keoi5* (佢) 'him', is a phonetic borrowing from the standard Chinese word for 'big, enormous' (巨) (*geoi6* in Cantonese) with the addition of the person radical. The standard word for 'he, she' in Mandarin is *ta1* (他). In the third sentence, the character for Cantonese *mai5* (咪) 'do not' is a phonetic loan from the standard Chinese character *mai5* (米) 'uncooked rice' with the addition of the mouth radical indicating that it is Cantonese. This modified character is by chance identical to the standard Chinese character which means 'a cat's meow' (*mail* in Cantonese, *mi1* in Mandarin) and also includes the mouth radical, but the latter indicates sound and not any dialectal origin.

The next advertisement was for Panadol:

- (11) 冇 晒 M 痛, Special Moment 一 日 都 唔 會 Miss!
mou5 saai3 M tung3, Special Moment jat1 jat6 dou1 **m4** wui5 Miss!
 There is not entirely M pain, Special Moment one day even not will Miss!
 The monthly pain disappears completely. You won't miss even a single day!

幾 時 都 咁 快 樂 啦!
gei2 si4 dou1 gam3 faai3 lok6 **laa1!**
 Always so happy *laa* (particle makes phrase more polite)
 You will always feel so happy!

Mou5 (冇) 'there is not, there is no' is Cantonese for Mandarin *mei2 you3* (沒有). The character illustrates the fifth though rarely used way that Cantonese sounds are represented in the written language, namely by the creation of a new character. However, such creations are nearly always based on pre-existing characters. In this particular case, an existing character *jau5* (有) 'there is, there are' has been modified by the deletion of two strokes. The second character *saai3* (晒) means 'entirely' in Cantonese in this context, and is a phonetic borrowing, the standard meaning being 'to dry in the sun' (also pronounced *saai3* in Cantonese). It is also sometimes written with the addition of the mouth radical (𠵼) to indicate that it is Cantonese. *M* does not represent a Chinese word, but it does show how capital letters are sometimes used in a specifically Chinese way to represent English words, in this case 'monthly, menstrual'. It is possibly used to avoid the use of the Chinese term in a rather conservative society, similar to the use of Latin in English for some sexual terms. The further use of the English word 'miss' is intended to give the impression that the advert is aimed at western educated open-minded people. The three words *gei2 si4 dou1* (幾時都) mean 'always' in Cantonese, but in Mandarin mean literally 'a few, how many', 'time', and 'all.'

In the next advert for the MTR, there are two Cantonese words, *ni1* (呢) 'this' and *me1* (咩) 'what':

- (12) 究 竟 呢 張 龍 床 有 咩 秘 密 呢?
 gau3 ging2 **ni1** zoeng1 lung4 cong4 jau5 **me1** bei3 mat6 ne1?
 in fact this *zoeng* (classifier) dragon/emperor bed has what secret *ne*
 In fact, what is the secret of this emperor's bed?

The character for *ni1* (呢) is a phonetic borrowing (*nei4* 'a Buddhist nun') with the addition of the mouth radical, while the character for *me1* (咩) 'what' has the same sound as the standard Chinese character meaning 'bleating of sheep'. The mouth radical in this case already exists in the original character indicating a sound. The final particle *ne1* (呢) is not Cantonese but it illustrates that a character can often be pronounced in more than one way. In this sentence, *ni1* 'this', and *ne1* are both written with the same character.

3. Conclusion

The above examples were drawn from about 50 advertisements or notices. In the sentences examined there were 293 characters of which 72 were Cantonese, i.e. approximately 25%. In

authentic informal Cantonese speech the percentage of Cantonese characters would be much higher than this, reaching 42% according to Ouyang (1993:80-82, cited by Snow, 2004:50). As to the overall use of Cantonese in advertisements in the MTR, these statistics only cover those sentences in which there were Cantonese characters, and such sentences sometimes only represented a small part of the whole advertisement. Moreover, the majority of advertisements did not have any Cantonese at all. In one station, for example, of 147 advertisements and notices (excluding 6 in only English), only 16 had some Cantonese (10.9%). However, there were enough such adverts throughout the MTR system to be quite noticeable, especially as they were often large, prominently positioned and promoted well-known brands (others not mentioned above were Nokia, the Hong Kong Banking Corporation, Wing Hang Bank, Hang Seng Bank, Hang Lung Bank, and the Hong Kong Jockey Club).

As to the grammatical categories of Cantonese in the adverts, about half of the words were of a purely functional nature: negators, particles, and the possessive marker *ge3* (嘅). Among the rest, the most common were adverbs. Verbs, nouns and adjectives were the lowest in frequency. It is well known that grammatical features in a language are the most resistant to change under the influence of other languages and this may be reflected in the Cantonese texts. However, it is also possible that the large percentage of Cantonese grammatical features may simply indicate that the texts do not portray actual authentic speech, as mentioned above, and that these features were simply added to more formal Mandarin texts to make them more vivid and colourful.

Hong Kong is the only area in China where a written form of a dialect is widely used and its growth over the last thirty years is an instructive example of how language change can occur. While it is still looked down on, it has nonetheless attained a much more acceptable status than several decades ago, and the fact that it is now used in the adverts of some of the world's most well known brands cannot but fail to give more prestige to the written form. In Guangdong Province, written Cantonese is not used in the mass media or in adverts, and this situation will probably not change in the future, due to the influx of Mandarin speakers. However, in Hong Kong, where the population is overwhelmingly Cantonese and is likely to remain so for many years, it is probable that written Cantonese will continue to be used. In addition, while Cantonese script may not ever become widely used in Guangdong, the influence of written Cantonese in Hong Kong on the mainland cannot be ruled out now that Cantonese speakers living in China can easily visit Hong Kong, and be exposed to the written form of their language.

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