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CHINESE IN HONG KONG: LANGUAGE, CULTURAL IDENTITIES AND REPRESENTATIONS

Introduction

The statistics show, that there is no single word for nationality, with which the majority of Hong Kong citizens can identify themselves. There are in fact two – 'Chinese' and 'Hongkonger', that make up all the diversity in between them. What usually is called a 'dual identity' is understood differently by many researchers. While ones bring out the legal terms, the others try to find particular reasons of the emergence of this duality. From our point of view, the cultural approach generalizes certain aspects of identity formation in Hong Kong, such as education, language and tourism. We consider culture to be the most effective means of the China's unification process – Hongkongers and Mainlanders have much in common culture-wise, but different political and social circumstances brought them apart in their lifestyles and values.

This article is an attempt of outlining the basic features of local Hong Kong identities in the post-Handover period, defining the key concepts in the cultural communication between Mainland China and Hong Kong as a part of a Greater China region. Moreover, we pursuit to analyze mutual images and perceptions of Mainland Chinese (or Mainlanders) and Hongkongers. We interpret the Deng's 'one country, two systems' motto in a wider cultural context, noting the most prominent discrepancies between both sides and determining the meaning of 'two systems' in the present times.

There is a constant emphasis on ideology by the decision-makers in the PRC, which leads to the policies and images in the country become increasingly intertwined. 'China's peaceful rise/development', 'China's Dream' and 'One Belt – One Road' are all a part of the country's general political strategy both internally and externally. Besides that, they create powerful imagery comparable to propaganda and their names resemble dynastic mottoes of the Imperial China. The PRC is using extensive means of soft power to create a positive image of itself. This strategy is also aimed at 'harmonizing' the internal image and representation of China and its people to consolidate the

ever-changing ‘after 80’s’ society. All of the factors taken into account in this paper are in the focus of the China’s soft power strategy but do not necessarily receive direct influence from the Mainland in Hong Kong. Specifically, education system reform that began in Hong Kong was undoubtedly created in the context of rapid popularization of Putonghua, but at the same time it inspired the Mainland China in creating similar school curriculums in the ethnic minority regions, where several languages or dialects are being used by locals.

Finally, we will compare the mutual images and perceptions of Mainlanders and Hongkongers in popular culture, namely in the movies. The way the ‘other’ and the ‘self’ are represented in there, gives a better outlook on the events of the corresponding period and on the causes of sometimes radical change of images in quite short terms. Perceptions of China abroad and most importantly among overseas Chinese (*huaqiao* or *huaren*) have been the focus of numerous studies conducted by Mainland experts in the fields of history, culture, psychology, linguistics etc. Those mentioned and referenced in this paper are just the tip of an iceberg, but are representative of the China’s interest in ‘keeping its face’ both outside and inside its borders.

Language situation, education and tourism: context of local identity emergence

Hong Kong is a linguistically diverse territory, with two official languages – English and Chinese (but not ‘Mandarin’ – it is not specified which variant of Chinese it is) as well as Yue, Min, Hakka Chinese. Although in reality a form of Chinese has always been a native language for most inhabitants of this region, it only became the other official language in 1974 after a series of demonstrations and petitions organized by Hongkongers, who demanded their language to be recognized equal to English. Later, ten years prior to the Handover in 1987 the Official Languages Ordinance that specified the status of English and Chinese languages, was amended to necessitate all the legislation to be enacted equally in both Chinese and English. Interestingly enough, the law does not elaborate what is meant by ‘Chinese language’, so it by default refers to any of the known dialects as well as the Standard Mandarin Chinese. But *de facto* it is understood that ‘Chinese’ used in Hong Kong is the Cantonese dialect of Yue Chinese. Still, official use of Putonghua is accepted and is not uncommon [Fung and Ma 2012, *11*].

This is one of the ways for Hongkongers to acknowledge their belonging to the Chinese civilization – through the language, more specifically through its nomination [Cui 2011, *71*]. Even though it is not quite the Chinese language that is used in the government of the PRC, and the language reform of simplifying the characters was not accepted in Hong Kong, it is still considered by the locals to be the 'Chinese' language. Furthermore, it is often speculated that Cantonese is the 'pure' version of Chinese, while Mandarin is contaminated by Manchurian and Mongolian loanwords. It is partially true: modern standard Cantonese pronunciation (for example, vowel length) is closer to Middle Chinese than modern Mandarin is. The main proof in this case is that Classical Chinese poetry sounds better when declaimed in the Cantonese Chinese variant. Many Hongkongers truly take pride in their native language and often jokingly compare simplified and traditional characters with reference to the Mainland's social, political and cultural issues[1].

Naturally, language plays an important role in constructing the local identity, and in the case of Hong Kong Cantonese language is not just a communication tool, but an integral part of self-identification. Of course, Cantonese is not exclusive to this region – it is also widely used in the Southern provinces of China with the number of speakers counting in tens of millions. What makes the language situation in Hong Kong so special, is the extensive use of English alongside with Cantonese and Putonghua, declared and propagated by the 'biliteracy and trilingualism policy' after the retrocession of 1997 [Evans 2013, *310*]. Facing many challenges in educational and social sphere, local authorities still managed to create a one of a kind trilingual environment by the 2010's.

Language policy of Hong Kong takes into account the everyday usage of languages in formal situations and in education. The recent reform of education system brought into light the importance of balanced presence of several languages (Cantonese, English and Mandarin) and the challenges that face the implementation of such a bold plan as achieving 'biliteral and trilingual' [Fang and Lu 2012, *86*; Fung and Ma 2012, *12*].

Before the Handover Hong Kong education was largely modeled on the British one, before that in the colonial period there were no big

[1] Hence the famous joke that mainland Chinese use character for love 爱, that does not have a 'heart' in it 愛.

institutions in the region, just village schools and very often children from well-off families were sent to Guangzhou or other larger cities to study. Historically education in Hong Kong was mostly for the elites, poorer people could not afford it. The attempts to expand the access to higher education had succeeded only in the early 1990's, when 18 % of enrolment ratio was achieved. The comprehensive education reform that started in the SAR in 1999 was created under the new necessities and challenges put on by the Handover [Cheng 2014, *87*]. Its impact and effectiveness can be fully assessed in the next few years, with the graduation of those students, who started their education after the reform was launched. However, even now it is clear that the local cultural background influences the pace and success of the reform greatly [Li 2010, *36*; Zheng and Xu 2011, *33*].

There are many issues the education system of Hong Kong is facing at the moment: emergence of private universities, matching university degrees to the needs of employers, a need of improved quality assurance etc. But what is more important in the context of figuring out the 'Chinese' identity in Hong Kong is how the Mainland students in the SAR universities develop better understanding and connection with the local culture and values, while retaining appreciation towards their native culture and language [Zheng and Xu 2011, *30*; Huang 2015, *261*; Yu 2015, *72*].

Tourism has been a great part of Hong Kong's economy since the 1980's. Millions of tourists come to visit SAR every month, and more than a half of them come from Mainland China[2]. The introduction of the Individual Visit Scheme in 2003 allowed Mainlanders from neighboring regions to visit Hong Kong and Macau on an individual basis. Prior to the Scheme only tourist groups and visa-holders could cross the border. The Scheme was implemented after an outbreak of SARS that resulted in a dip of the number of visitors. Launching the Individual Visit Scheme gave a boost to the local economy, attracting Mainlanders as well as foreigners. In the years following the Scheme was extended to cover major cities in the North and in Central China.

Both socially and economically this meant a big improvement in bilateral relations. Even now, more than 10 years later, Hongkongers

[2] 66,6 % in 2013 according to the Hong Kong Tourism Board http://www.traveldailynews.asia/news/article/54861/hong-kong-residents-support-less

still remember that it was the helping hand of the Mainland tourists, that helped the local businesses survive the slope after the SARS.

Travelling has become an important instrument of developing mutual understanding between the SAR and Mainland China: it introduces Mainlanders to culture, history and the modern lifestyle of Hongkongers. This helps to create relations based on understanding and respect. However, that is a long and tedious process that is facing many difficulties. The major one is the social tension created by cultural differences between Hongkongers and Mainlanders, particularly by the notorious misconduct of the latter [Jones 2015, *226*]. Many of the flaws in the behavior of tourists from the Mainland can be easily explained by different social norms. Speaking loudly in public places, not keeping distance and intervening personal space is not considered misbehavior by most mainlanders. It takes time to accept and accommodate to new rules of etiquette for anyone in a new environment, but what makes Mainlanders to be so inflexible and defensive when it comes to manners? Apparently, it is connected to the social construct of 'face' and losing it. When one is publicly criticized, he 'loses face' and a typically aggressive reaction from the mainland tourists is probably a means of defending oneself from this unwanted situation. Hopefully that may change with active interference from the China National Tourism Administration, which issued rhyme for the tourists to remind and educate them on good social conduct while travelling abroad and around the country too[3].

Tourism between the SAR and the Mainland China goes both ways – more and more Hongkongers nowadays visit Southern provinces of China and major places of attraction and historical interest throughout all the PRC. Hongkongers travel to Mainland for the same reasons – to see new places and to learn more, but also to visit relatives. Another new tendency amongst elder Hongkongers is to sell their property in the SAR and to move to Guangdong province where the life expenditures are much lower and the quality of life is comparable.

In general, the influence of tourism and education on the improvement of mutual representations and bilateral relations still needs to be researched, but a cursory analysis of the current situation suggests that they serve a positive factor, yet there are many new challenges

[3] http://news.cjn.cn/gnxw/201305/t2275156.htm

emerging on the way to acceptance and integration. We also argue, that the spreading of Putonghua in Hong Kong improves mutual images in cultural production (such as cinema and TV) and in the news media. However, many challenges still face the implementation of biliteracy and trilingualism policy in both Mainland China and Hong Kong.

Hongkongers identify themselves as Chinese when it comes to the cultural heritage and the thousands years of the civilization's history. Still, there are several factors that are often used as an explanation of why their cultural identities are so distinctive: British influence, official use of spoken Cantonese and traditional characters. The British influence on the life of locals was definitely great, it would not be a big stretch to claim, that Hong Kong as a city appeared under the rule of the British Empire, and the foundations for the future commerce and industry center of East Asia were set at the time. The cultural influence of British rule went both ways: introducing Western norms and practices on one hand, and making them unavailable for the Chinese on the other, which led to very low integration that eventually resulted in emergence of Chinese nationalist movements [Jones 2015, *209*].

The language situation in Hong Kong and some of its historical background is explored in more detail in the previous parts of this article. However, Cantonese also plays a great part in setting the cultural agenda – its distinctiveness from the Standard Mandarin Chinese and the considerable number of Cantonese speakers in the Southern provinces of China and among the *huaqiao* allow it to have a sense of a dissimilar community, separate from the Mainland. Interestingly enough, the locals just as the Mainlanders, use the word 'Chinese' (中文) to refer to the language they are commonly speaking, as opposed to Putonghua (普通话), or Mandarin language; while the 'Cantonese' (粤语、广东话) is used when it is necessary to specify that it is not the same 'Chinese' used in the Mainland. There is rarely any misunderstanding as which is meant by 'Chinese' in any given situation, as the two versions mentioned are quite distinctive when it comes to speech. Being written down, they can easily be told apart too – Hong Kong still uses the traditional (繁体) or the 'correct' (正体) form of characters. The fact that the word 'correct' is being used in this context is an evidence of cultural division on its own. In the recent years the number of signs in simplified characters has

grown in Hong Kong, making it more comfortable for the tourists and migrants from Mainland to navigate and leading to a strong disapproval from the locals, who consider it to be compliance to Beijing's superiority. Still even the harshest critics of this 'mainlandisation' process cannot argue with the fact, that the tourists and so called 'new migrants' are helping the local economy grow. Also some of the educational institutions allow simplified characters to be used in written assignments and examinations, which is reasonable due to the nature of character simplification – most of the new forms are derived from handwritten scripts.

Previous to the Handover Hongkongers used to be called *homo economicus*, with this nick-name stressing their more materialistic features. Although this does not comply well with many cultural phenomena that are strongly associated with Hong Kong in the PRC and abroad – Cantonese cinema and television, Cantopop music, Cantonese opera etc. These artistic media are deeply connected with and based on the traditional Chinese culture, nevertheless they have their own distinct features and history of development and preservation. These media survived the British rule and continue to exist in their separate forms after the reunification of 1997.

All these factors combined influenced the creation of the specific local cultural identity – Hong Kong Chinese or Chinese Hongkongers. The local Chinese are the same ethnicity as the mainlanders but consider themselves to be even more civilized, enlightened and more in touch with the traditional Chinese culture, so to say even 'more Chinese' than mainland Chinese. The 'correct' characters, the conservation of age-old traditions in the face of occupation and what is even more important – the continuity of the tradition under any circumstances are the corner stones of the local self-identification. They are mostly based on the contrast to the Mainland and need a more thorough further reviewing and analyzing in a proper research.

Apart from the aforementioned factors, we also would like to mention another one, which is sometimes referenced by Hongkongers in personal communication or commenting in social networks, discussion forums etc. as a private opinion: the Great Proletarian Culture Revolution of 1966–1976 divided Hong Kong and Mainland culturally. It is claimed that the Mainlanders, being devoid of Chinese culture and traditions for about a decade, lost touch with their roots,

almost 'betrayed' their heritage, while Hongkongers remained true to their civilization's values and thus have inherited the genuine 'chineseness' without breaking its continuity [Clarke 2002, *62*]. The Cultural Revolution that took place in Mainland China had a great impact on Hong Kong too, even though not directly. With the tragic consequences of the Cultural Revolution, many people fled to Hong Kong to look for shelter, coming in a new wave of Mainland immigrants.

Mutual representations and images

The relations between the SAR Hong Kong and Mainland PRC are quite complicated due to a number of reasons mentioned in the previous parts of this article. But still they are often described by both sides as 'blood relationship' [Xu and Xing 2013, *112*], and both sides as well use words like 'brothers' or 'compatriots' to describe the other one. Certainly the relations are too interlaced and problematic to be represented by just an idea of a close relative, or a friend. Looking at the history of these relations we can notice how the post-colonial Hong Kong has been developing its image of the Mainland and Mainlanders. At first the people from the Mainland were seen as uneducated, extremely poor and dangerous people, sometimes even as bandits, drug-dealers or plain cheap work-power, hence all the derogatory names given to them [Wang 2008, *50*]. But with time and with rapid economic and social development of the Mainland these images have considerably changed the tone and the attitude. For example the ironical 强国人, or the 'strong-country men', still has a sense of respect in it, despite the context in which it may be used. The other popular term 新移民, or the 'new immigrant' references the history of migration in Hong Kong and how the new wave of mainland migrants is different from all the previous ones, without specifying the difference however [Ran 2009, *11*].

Before going into more details about mutual images, it should be mentioned that there is a notion of 'double' or 'dual' identity used to refer to the people who live in Hong Kong. And there are two words that are most often used to describe this kind of identity – *shuangchong* 双重 and *eryuan* 二元, both having very similar meanings. Still, the *eryuan* is mostly used in brackets and literally means 'two origins', while *shuangchong* is closer to 'double layer'. These two words imply different meanings, with 'two origins' reflecting the naturally

compound state and 'double layer' has a sense of artificial complicatedness. The context of using these both terms usually differs too – the *eryuan* is almost always used within quotation marks, which gives it a sense of metaphorical usage [Shen 2014, *62*]. Further research on this matter would clear out how the Hongkongers and their identity is framed in the media and in overall social context.

The image of a mainlander has been widely used in Hong Kong movies since the 1970's and a number of Chinese researchers looked at how the stereotyping of the 'other' developed and changed in these several decades. In the earlier periods the Mainlanders are mostly pictured as negligent, poor and not too bright. However demeaning these images are, they were only used for contrast to how intelligent, good-looking and rich the main characters from Hong Kong were. Towards the most recent years, the otherness of the migrants in the movies is used as a tool to distinguish oneself and to define the imaginary borders of Hong Kong, while the actual borders are becoming non-existent [Xu and Huang 2015, *132*]. While in the 70's and the 80's the 'other Chinese' were pictured as bland and common, but stereotypical 阿灿 or 北姑. Stereotyping works in both ways here, and not with an open intent of demeaning the opposite side, but in an attempt to confirm the borders between 'us' and 'them' [Gu 2008, *5*; Shi and Gu 2007, *25*].

An interesting and radical change of images for female mainlanders in Hong Kong movies was described by Cao Juan and Zhang Peng [Cao and Zhang 2010, 2011]. According to their research, the female character from Mainland went from being 'a threat' in the early 1970's cinema to a romanticized 'angel' representation in the 2000's. However, the more recent movies they analyzed were filmed and produced in cooperation with Mainland China. Perhaps there may be some influence from the mainland counterparts on how the female characters are introduced.

The opposite image – a Hongkonger in Mainland movies were forming a bit earlier, with the first movies dating back to 1950's and 1960's [Cao and Zhang 2010, *10*]. But in the period of the Cultural Revolution there was not much knowledge about what Hong Kong actually is, and what kind of people live there, it was merely important to show this region as a land of criminals, foul morals and rival ideology. Obviously, very little effort was put into making any characters or

images believable, as this was not an objective. The start of Chinese economic reform ('Reform and Opening up') in the 1970's brought big financial investments from Hong Kong and a completely new image of it to the movies and popular culture in general. Up until the 90's, when the Chinese market started its own considerable growth, the Hongkongers were seen as rich, modern, enlightened but somewhat too materialistic and pragmatic, generally what is sometimes called *homo economicus*. Hong Kong had a dual image in the Mainland movies as well: a modern city of dreams and a dangerous city with materialistic and evil citizens [Xu 2008, *22*]. In the period immediately after the Handover, the official discourse of the reintegration was mostly similar in Hong Kong and in Mainland China. Not focusing on the differences between the 'two systems', the movies looked back at the past and contemplated about the future of the 'one country'. Gradually the 'other' Hongkonger image loses its distinct features, as the official PRC promotes the idea of a single, united country. Still, the image of a Hongkonger lacked depth and accuracy to begin with, being used as a cliché [Cao and Zhang 2010, *10*].

Still, for a great part the population of Hong Kong has been constructed of the people, who fled there from the Mainland in search of shelter or just better life. But the reasons for migration are different from the modern day migrants [Jones 2015, *240*]. And the analysis of imagining the Mainlanders as the 'other' in different cultural media, shows that it gives more insight into how the Hongkongers see themselves rather than making up a distinct image of a typical Mainlander.

Comparing mutual images in cinema and in the news media against the historical backdrop of SAR-PRC relations in the second half of the 20th century reflects the development of social and cultural interaction of both sides in the post-colonial period. Before the Handover, in the early 80's the future reintegration was already considered 'inevitable' and following the 1997 bilateral economic and cultural communication accelerated. This process is still sometimes perceived as a threat to the Hong Kong, it being smaller and becoming less influential with Mainland China's growth. What may be seen by Mainlanders as anti-PRC actions and ideas, are in fact not a sign of hostility but an evidence of an attempt to preserve the fragile lifestyle of the locals. And the development of the Mainlander's image in fiction movies goes along with this line – the 'other' Chinese are different from 'self' Hongkongers, but their distinctiveness is not antagonistic.

Summary

Having analyzed all the important features of identity formation and researching the mutual representations we can note that the PRC policy of popularizing Putonghua in the Greater China and abroad is definitely successful, especially in Hong Kong. The percentage of people who consider Standard Mandarin their native language, or at least one of them, has grown significantly through the last two decades. This is certainly not just a result of active endeavors of Confucius Institute and Hanban (even though their efforts do deserve to be appraised), but the economic situation in Hong Kong and all of the Southeast Asia also had their influence on the language situation in the region. The businesses and production sites moved from Hong Kong to Mainland China, through the city of Shenzhen and farther into Southern China and on. The Chinese market has become greater and more influential in the world, the PRC economy grew at enormous rates and that could not but have a considerable impact on Hong Kong, the economic and financial giant of the 1990's.

The policy of 'one country, two systems' on one hand was a start of integration Hong Kong in the PRC, on the other hand, China had to be accustomed to the newly returned territories and their people as well. And the 'two systems', of course, does not mean just the political systems, no matter what Deng Xiaoping actually meant by his motto – there are some more aspects in the differences between the Mainland China and Hong Kong. And one of those is purely linguistic – the people of Hong Kong did not use the same language as the people of the PRC's capital Beijing in the 1980's, nor did they speak Putonghua in 1997, and as of now, the majority of Hongkongers still consider Cantonese to be their native language. Despite numerous discussions on the relations between Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese, there are still different opinions on how the Cantonese should be classified – a language, a dialect, or a topolect. But whatever it is called, the fact that there is very little or no mutual intelligibility between speakers of Mandarin and Cantonese remains. Different pronunciation, vocabulary, some discrepancies in syntax and morphology are topped by the usage of traditional characters in Hong Kong. And the word 'traditional' here is the key to understanding what this writing system means for the Hongkongers themselves – as the mutual representation analysis shows, the use of simplified hanzi characters

is frowned upon by the people of Hong Kong, who view it almost as a betrayal of the traditional Chinese values. Language as a part of a common cultural heritage is not just a means of communication, it has a much greater symbolism and significance for the well-educated and cultured Hongkongers (as they very often tend see themselves, as opposed to the Mainlanders). The traditional characters are a historical evidence of belonging to the Great Chinese Empire and to its colossal cultural space. There is even no need to specify what the 'Great Chinese Empire' means, or when and where it existed, did it start with the Zhou dynasty or was it only under the Qing rule, this is merely a concept that is only based on the facts from the history but involves much wider meanings to it. The educational system makes sure that the students from a very young age do not take for granted the facts that the characters that they learn have an ancient legacy; the children are taught to appreciate the form and the meaning of classic poetry, the wisdom of the words of Confucius and Lao Zi. The education system in Mainland China, and in Hong Kong as well, receives a great deal of criticism from Western researchers for not letting enough creativity into the classroom. But undeniably, the approaches to teaching Chinese as a native language demand different attitudes and methods than teaching 'younger' languages.

Apart from purely linguistic point of view, there is still much resilience in the Hongkongers identities when it comes to the local cultural products, namely cinema, popular music and even fashion, which are not only highly appraised in Hong Kong itself, but also remain one of the main intangible exports into Mainland. If a young Chinese from the PRC knows a couple of words and phrases in Cantonese that is most often by virtue of said cultural products, which remain influential even now, in the days of the rise of entertainment industry in the PRC. We can even claim that the current identity of Hongkongers is mostly cultural, as their locality is very often based on their habits and social conventions.

Travelling and tourism on the other hand has both negative and positive outcomes on the creation of mutual perceptions and images. With the significant growth of numbers of tourists between the Mainland and Hong Kong, the interactions between the representatives of the 'two systems' are becoming more frequent and comprehensive than ever before. Development of touristic routes helps in ruining the

historical stereotypes set by political propaganda many decades ago. Unfortunately, the images of the Mainland travellers in Hong Kong are mostly negative, to the point of being even xenophobic at times. But just as the negative images and representations of the Mainlanders on the verge of the 1997 Handover, they will diffuse with time and more active mutual integration. How long the process may take, and how much effort from both sides it may need is still hard to say, but the use of soft power principles is essential in this case and can also become an effective strategy on the reintegration of Taiwan.

In conclusion, we need to say that the dual identity in Hong Kong is mostly defined by its cultural elements, including certain cultural products. The linguistic self-identification becomes less apparent and less relevant with the effective introduction of Putonghua and declining of English usage, however cultural products in Cantonese, such as cinema, popular music and literature, will remain an integral part of the local identities in the nearest future.

The concept of introducing, or even re-introducing, Chinese culture to China (or more exactly to Hong Kong as its essential part) is rather unusual and needs further research. A cultural approach to the 'one country, two systems' helps to understand better the social processes behind the cultural communication between the post-1997 Hong Kong and the Mainland China. There is much more in 'being Chinese' than bearing a passport or speaking Chinese. Clinging onto the cultural legacy and traditional values is fairly conservative, but it also establishes a priceless experience for the people inside and outside of the local community. The changes in mutual perceptions and representations show that the cultural and psychological distance between Mainland and Hong Kong has shortened and that the local identities are sharing now more common features than before. Dichotomizing the Chinese people in Hong Kong into 'Chinese' and 'Hongkongers' is not possible – deeply rooted in the same cultural space and value system, the identities of Mainlanders and Hongkongers are only divided by temporary circumstances.

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