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A Quest for Linguistic Authenticity: Cantonese and Putonghua in Postcolonial Hong Kong

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Wong, Andrew D

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**Editors**

Anna E. Jurgensen  
Hannah Sande  
Spencer Lamoureux  
Kenny Baclawski  
Alison Zerbe

Berkeley Linguistics Society  
Berkeley, CA, USA

Berkeley Linguistics Society  
University of California, Berkeley  
Department of Linguistics  
1203 Dwinelle Hall  
Berkeley, CA 94720-2650  
USA

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# Foreword

This monograph contains a number of the talks given at the 41st Annual Meeting of the Berkeley Linguistics Society, held in Berkeley, California, February 7-8, 2015. The conference included a General Session and the Special Session *Fieldwork Methodology*. The 41st Annual Meeting was planned and run by the second-year graduate students of the Department of Linguistics at the University of California, Berkeley: Kenny Baclawski, Anna Jurgensen, Spencer Lamoureux, Hannah Sande, and Alison Zerbe.

The original submissions of the papers in this volume were reviewed for style by Anna Jurgensen and Hannah Sande. Resubmitted papers were edited as necessary by Anna Jurgensen and Kenny Baclawski, and then compiled into the final monograph by Anna Jurgensen. The final monograph was reviewed by Spencer Lamoureux. The endeavor was supported by Alison Zerbe's management of the Berkeley Linguistic Society's funds for publications.

The BLS 41 Executive Committee  
July 2015



# **A Quest for Linguistic Authenticity: Cantonese and Putonghua in Postcolonial Hong Kong**

ANDREW D. WONG

*California State University, East Bay*

## **1 Introduction**

Authenticity has attracted increasing attention from sociolinguists and linguistic anthropologists (see, e.g., Lacoste et al. 2014, Wilce and Fenigsen 2015). The word *authentic* brings to mind something that is real, natural, and original. In sociolinguistics, the authentic (e.g., “authentic speaker,” “authentic language”) has traditionally been viewed as an object to be discovered. Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall have challenged this view in a series of articles (Bucholtz 2003, Bucholtz and Hall 2005). First, they argue that we should turn our attention from authenticity to authentication. This requires us to analyze authenticity as an outcome of linguistic practices and take a close look at the semiotic processes through which authenticity is produced. Second, since identity is a relational phenomenon, we ought to study authentication in tandem with denaturalization, which calls attention to the ways in which claims to the “inherent rightness of identities” (Bucholtz and Hall 2005:602) are subverted. Researchers (e.g., Jaffe 2009, Shenk 2007) have taken heed of these insights and used discourse data to examine the use of linguistic resources to assert or challenge claims to authenticity in social interaction. This case study takes a different approach: it analyzes metadiscursive data from print and social media to illuminate the popular use of linguistics in the authentication and denaturalization of identity.

In the last few years, many Hongkongers have clamored for the protection of Cantonese against the encroachment of Putonghua. Cantonese is the mother tongue of over 90% of the city’s population (Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department 2013). Since Hong Kong reverted to Chinese rule in 1997, Putonghua (also known as Mandarin), which is the official language of the People’s Republic of China, has become more prominent in Hong Kong society. Cantonese is genetically related to but not mutually intelligible with Putonghua. This study examines how a group of pro-Cantonese Hongkongers selectively draws on linguistic facts to construct a narrative that presents Cantonese as more authentically Chinese than Putonghua and Cantonese speakers as the true guardians of traditional Chinese culture. Through this case study, I hope to: (1) demonstrate the semiotic processes involved in the linguistic authentication and denaturalization of identity; and (2) shed light on how the on-going conflict between Hong Kong and mainland China is played out in the linguistic realm.

## **2 The Debate over the Official Status of Cantonese in Postcolonial Hong Kong**

This study takes a “language ideological debate” (Blommaert, ed. 1999) as its point of departure. In January 2014, Hong Kong’s Education Bureau, which is the government agency responsible for developing and implementing educational policies in the territory, posted on its website the claim that Cantonese was “not an official language” of Hong Kong. Many Hongkongers perceived this as a slight and began to demand the protection of their mother tongue. Using data from print and social media, this study investigates how pro-Cantonese

Hongkongers create a narrative of Cantonese superiority to delegitimize Putonghua speakers and the central government in Beijing.

Who are these pro-Cantonese Hongkongers? Since pseudonyms are often used, it is not easy to determine their identity. With a few exceptions, they do not seem to be well known to the public, nor do they appear to be linguists or sinologists. To be sure, pro-Cantonese Hongkongers are not a homogeneous group; not every one of them subscribes to this narrative (at least, not in its entirety). I decided to focus on this narrative because: (1) it has been widely circulated in print and social media; and (2) it serves as a prime example for illustrating the complexity of the linguistic authentication and denaturalization of identity.

This study draws on a large corpus of data from various sources. The corpus includes articles and readers' comments on several news websites:

<i>Apple Daily</i> (蘋果日報)	<a href="http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/">http://hk.apple.nextmedia.com/</a>
<i>Ming Pao</i> (明報)	<a href="http://www.mingpao.com/">http://www.mingpao.com/</a>
<i>South China Morning Post</i> (南華早報)	<a href="http://www.scmp.com">http://www.scmp.com</a>
<i>Hong Kong Economic Journal</i> (信報)	<a href="http://www.hkej.com">http://www.hkej.com</a>
<i>Am730</i>	<a href="http://www.am730.com.hk/">http://www.am730.com.hk/</a>
<i>House News</i> (主場新聞)	<a href="https://thehousenews.com/">https://thehousenews.com/</a>
<i>Passion Times</i> (熱血時報)	<a href="http://www.passiontimes.hk/">http://www.passiontimes.hk/</a>

The first four are major newspapers in Hong Kong. *Apple Daily* is a tabloid-style newspaper known for its anti-Beijing and pro-democracy stance. It is the second best-selling newspaper in Hong Kong. *Ming Pao* is widely regarded as the most credible Chinese newspaper, and the *South China Morning Post* is the leading English newspaper.

I also included in the corpus postings on several Facebook pages that are dedicated to language issues in Hong Kong:

港人講雅言 'Hongkongers Speak A-Yin':<sup>1</sup>

<https://www.facebook.com/cantonese.hongkongs.tradition>

香港語文運動 'Hong Kong Language Movement':

<https://www.facebook.com/HongKongLanguageMovement>

2014 香港人醒覺 '2014: Hongkongers, Wake Up!':

<https://www.facebook.com/hkwakeup>

普教中學生關注組 'Students Say No to the Use of Putonghua for Teaching Chinese':

<https://www.facebook.com/scholars.say.no.to.PMI>

Since some components of this narrative originated in a debate over the status of Cantonese in neighboring Guangzhou in 2010, I included several newspaper articles that were published before the debate in Hong Kong in 2014. Although not all the components are new, it

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<sup>1</sup> In this article, the Yale system (see Matthews and Yip 1994) is used for the romanization of Cantonese. For easier reading, tones are not indicated unless they are relevant to the discussion.

is interesting to see how these disparate elements have come together to form a coherent master narrative that underscores the superiority of Cantonese over Putonghua.

### 3 Locating the Origins of Cantonese and Putonghua in Time and Space

For many Chinese and non-Chinese people, Putonghua is synonymous with the Chinese language. After all, it is the standardized variety taught in Chinese classes all over the world. To counteract this belief, pro-Cantonese Hongkongers assert the authenticity of Cantonese by tracing its lineage to the Tang dynasty (618-907), and highlight the “corrupt” nature of Putonghua by locating its origin in the Qing dynasty (1644-1911) and portraying it as a “linguistic bastard” heavily influenced by the languages of “northern barbarians” who conquered China many years ago. In an article that explains why Cantonese is a “real language”, Alex Lo, who is a columnist for the *South China Morning Post*, claims that:

- (1) **Cantonese has a much longer and venerable lineage than Putonghua, a mix of the Han Chinese, Mongolian and Manchu languages from the Qing dynasty [1644-1911]....** Cantonese emerged as a recognisable language from the time of the An Lushan Revolt [755-763] during the Tang dynasty, when an exodus of refugees flooded the south.  
(Lo 2014; original quote in English)

On various news websites, pro-Cantonese netizens refer to Cantonese as part of “authentic Chinese civilization”, “the cultural essence of the Chinese race”, “the language of the Tang people or the Tang dynasty”, “the fossil of ancient Chinese”, and “*a-yin*” (雅言), which was the lingua franca used in educational, cultural, and diplomatic activities in the Zhou dynasty (1046 BC-256 BC) (Chen 1999:7):

- (2) Cantonese and traditional Chinese characters are part of **authentic Chinese civilization [華夏文化正宗]**. They are where the respect for Hong Kong culture resides.  
(Thunder 2014; original quote in standard written Chinese)<sup>2</sup>
- (3) Cantonese is *a-yin* [雅言]. It is the **cultural essence of the Chinese race [中華民族僅存的文化精髓]**.  
(Jik-Siu-Sing-Do 2014; original quote in standard written Chinese)
- (4) The whole world calls Cantonese “**the Tang language**” [唐話], **the language spoken by the Tang people** [唐人說的話]. It is the authentic Chinese culture brought here by the Tang people when they fled to Hong Kong and overseas communities to escape from the Manchu bastards of the Qing dynasty, who tried to kill them all.  
(Sung 2014; original quote in Cantonese and standard written Chinese)

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<sup>2</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine. Chinese words in the original quotes are in square brackets.

- (5) Cantonese is not only a regional language, but it is also **the fossil of ancient Chinese** [古漢語的化石]. In other words, Cantonese is the ancestor of mainland China's Putonghua. (Yeung 2014; original quote in standard written Chinese)

On the other hand, pro-Cantonese Hongkongers call into question the Chineseness of Putonghua by associating it with foreign invaders like the Manchus and the Mongols. They refer to Putonghua as *wu-yu* (胡語), Manchu, and “the language of Jina”:

- (6) We won't lose anything if we don't learn a **barbarian tongue** [胡語] like Putonghua. (Ng 2014; original quote in Cantonese)
- (7) The Shanghainese who want to learn their own Chinese language are said to want to gain “independence” from China. On the other hand, Northerners claim to be Chinese even though they speak **Manchu** [滿州話] rather than Chinese. (Mok 2014; original quote in standard written Chinese)
- (8) **The language of Jina** [支那話] isn't Chinese. It was imported from Manchuria [the homeland of the Manchus who ruled the Han Chinese in the Qing dynasty]. (England 2014; original quote in Cantonese)

*Wu-yu* (胡語) refers to the “barbarian tongue” of non-Chinese tribes in the north, and Manchu (滿州話) is the Altaic language spoken by the rulers of the Qing dynasty. *Jina* (支那) is a Japanese word that refers to China. Considered offensive by many Chinese people, this term is now sometimes used in Hong Kong to refer to mainland China and mainland Chinese people.

In essence, pro-Cantonese Hongkongers claim that Cantonese is more authentically Chinese than Putonghua because it is closer to the “original”. In this case, the “original” is not the variety of Chinese spoken in the Qing dynasty, the Yuan dynasty, or even the Han dynasty; rather, it is the literary standard of the Tang dynasty. Pro-Cantonese Hongkongers locate “authentic Chinese” in the Tang dynasty for various reasons. Not only is the Tang dynasty widely recognized as the golden age of Chinese poetry and a high point in Chinese civilization, but it also has a special place in the Cantonese imagination. The Cantonese call themselves “people of the Tang”, their cuisine “Tang food”, and their clothing “Tang clothes”. It was during the Tang dynasty that the mixture of natives and immigrants in the Guangdong area reached a critical mass of acculturation (Ramsey 1987:98).

#### 4 Cantonese and Tang Poetry

How do pro-Cantonese Hongkongers associate Cantonese with the Tang dynasty and Putonghua with the Qing dynasty? To construct this linguistic genealogy, they: (1) highlight archaic lexical and phonological features that are found in Cantonese but not in Putonghua; (2) gloss over areas in which Cantonese is actually less conservative than Putonghua; and (3) exaggerate the influence of Altaic languages on Putonghua and downplay the influence of Tai-Kadai languages and English on Cantonese.

First of all, pro-Cantonese Hongkongers call attention to the presence of archaic features in Cantonese. This can be illustrated by an image posted on the Facebook page “Students Say No to the Use of Putonghua for Teaching Chinese” on February 5, 2014 (<https://www.facebook.com/scholars.say.no.to.PMI/photos/a.601314826602128.1073741828.465613356838943/601332043267073/?type=1>). The image is entitled:

- (9) 香港有文化                    ‘Hong Kong has culture.’  
       粵語最古雅                    ‘Cantonese is the most ancient and elegant.’

The title consists of two lines that rhyme, which give it a poetic feel. This image highlights the ancient origins and literary nature of fourteen colloquial Cantonese expressions that are not found in Putonghua. Each expression is explained, and an example is given to show its use in a classical Chinese literary text. The Cantonese expression 幾(多), which is the first one in the third row, means “how many” or “how much”. Its Putonghua equivalent is 多少 (*duōshǎo*). The example in this case is:

- (10) 問君能有幾多愁        ‘Oh, ask me, **how much** sorrow can I bear?’

This is a line from 虞美人 ‘Beauty Yu’, a famous classical Chinese poem written in the 10<sup>th</sup> century. Even nowadays, students all over the Chinese-speaking world are required to learn this poem by heart.

The sound system of Cantonese attracts even more attention than its lexicon. Compared to Putonghua, Cantonese has more faithfully preserved: (1) Middle Chinese final consonants; and (2) Middle Chinese tonal categories (Bauer and Benedict 1997, Chan and Newman 1984:165-172). (Middle Chinese is the historical variety of Chinese that is phonologically recorded in 切韻, a rime dictionary first published in 601.) Cantonese retains all six Middle Chinese final consonants: *-k*, *-p*, *-t*, *-n*, *-m*, and *-ng*. Putonghua retains only two: *-n* and *-ng* (see Table 1).

Table 1: Cantonese and Putonghua Final Consonants

<i>Cantonese final consonants: -k, -p, -t, -n, -m, -ng (same six in Middle Chinese)</i>		<i>Putonghua final consonants: -n, -ng</i>		
<i>lik</i> <sub>9</sub>	unreleased stop	<i>lì</i>		‘power, energy’
<i>lip</i> <sub>9</sub>	unreleased stop	<i>liè</i>		‘to hunt’
<i>lit</i> <sub>9</sub>	unreleased stop	<i>liè</i>		‘cracked’
<i>lin</i> <sub>2</sub>	nasal	<i>liàn</i>	nasal	‘necklace’
<i>lim</i> <sub>2</sub>	nasal	<i>lián</i>	nasal	‘curtain’
<i>ling</i> <sub>4</sub>	nasal	<i>líng</i>	nasal	‘zero’

Cantonese has also more faithfully preserved the tonal categories of Middle Chinese. Middle Chinese had four tonal categories: “level,” “rising,” “going,” and “entering” (see Table



2). The “entering” category included only those syllables that ended with the stop final consonants *-p*, *-t*, and *-k*. Each of these four categories was further split into upper and lower registers. This was conditioned by the initial consonant: syllables with voiced obstruent initials were pronounced with a lower pitch than those with voiceless obstruent initials. Voicing was lost in the late Tang period (approximately 1,100-1,200 years ago). This produced eight tonal categories as the upper/lower register distinction became phonemic. Cantonese maintains these tone distinctions even though their acoustic properties have changed. It also developed an additional distinction in the entering category. It now has nine tones (see Table 3). Putonghua, on the other hand, has four tones (see Table 4).

Table 2: Middle Chinese Tones

	Level (平)	Rising (上)	Going (去)	Entering (入) ( <i>-p, -t, -k</i> )
<b>Upper (陰):</b> Voiceless Obstruent Initials	Upper Level	Upper Rising	Upper Going	Upper Entering
<b>Lower (陽):</b> Voiced Obstruent Initials	Lower Level	Lower Rising	Lower Going	Lower Entering

Table 3: Cantonese Tones

Tone Category	Tone Contour	Example	Meaning	
<b>High Level</b>	55	<i>si1</i>	‘poem’	Upper
<b>High Rising</b>	25	<i>si2</i>	‘history’	
<b>Mid Level</b>	33	<i>si3</i>	‘to try’	
<b>Low Falling</b>	21	<i>si4</i>	‘time’	Lower
<b>Low Rising</b>	23	<i>si5</i>	‘city, market’	
<b>Low Level</b>	22	<i>si6</i>	‘is/are/was/were’	
<b>High Level (Entering)</b>	55	<i>sik7</i>	‘to know’	Entering
<b>Mid Level (Entering)</b>	33	<i>sek8</i>	‘aluminum’	
<b>Low Level (Entering)</b>	22	<i>sik9</i>	‘to eat’	

Table 4: Putonghua Tones

Tone Category	Tone Contour	Example	Meaning
<b>High Level</b>	55	<i>shi1</i>	‘to lose’
<b>Rising</b>	35	<i>shi2</i>	‘ten’
<b>Falling Rising</b>	214	<i>shi3</i>	‘history’
<b>Falling</b>	51	<i>shi4</i>	‘city, market’

Pro-Cantonese Hongkongers take special pride in the nine tones of Cantonese. This is evident in a comic strip created by 阿塗 (A-Tou), an illustrator known for his efforts to use humor to promote Hong Kong culture. Entitled 粵語九聲訣 ‘Secret Manual of the Nine Tones of Cantonese’, this comic strip was published in the March 18, 2014 issue of the *Passion Times* (A-Tou 2014; <http://www.passiontimes.hk/article/03-18-2014/11264>). It draws on the genre of Chinese martial arts stories, which is hugely popular in Hong Kong. It depicts a rooster and a chick. The rooster is a kung-fu master, and the chick is his apprentice. In the first frame, the rooster asks his apprentice if he has memorized the nine tones. The rooster then gives his apprentice a secret manual that explains these features. The nine tones are presented as the ultimate kung-fu technique. They will help the chick protect Cantonese and promote world peace. There are six examples at the end. Each consists of nine words, which illustrate the nine tones consecutively.

Pro-Cantonese Hongkongers believe that since Cantonese preserves the final consonants and tonal categories of the literary standard of the Tang dynasty, Tang poems sound closer to the original when read in Cantonese than in Putonghua. Given the prominent place of Tang poetry in Chinese culture, this further supports the claim that Cantonese is more authentically Chinese than Putonghua. In an article that argues against the use of Putonghua for teaching Chinese, the author claims that “Tang poems sound much better when read in Cantonese than in Putonghua” because Cantonese still has the entering tones but Putonghua does not:

- (11) Tang poetry is an important part of Chinese literature. **Those who know Cantonese have a clear advantage when studying the tonal structure of Tang poems. On the other hand, Tang poems sound quite discordant when read in Putonghua because Putonghua does not have the entering tones.** Many parents in Hong Kong buy *300 Tang Poems* [the best-known anthology of Tang poems] for their children. They even buy Putonghua recordings of Tang poems and play them day and night, but few of them know that **Tang poems sound much better when read in Cantonese than in Putonghua.**

(Saan-Dei-Ma 2014; original quote in standard written Chinese)

This claim has some support from linguists (Newman and Raman 1999, Ramsey 1987:88), but it is important not to overstate it. Evidence that has been offered is often impressionistic and highly selective. Counter-examples can easily be found. Even if there is statistical evidence, we must not confuse tendencies with categorical statements. Claims like this are prone to the “hall of mirrors” effect (Wareing 1996; cited in Cameron 1998: 946): this happens when a modest claim becomes represented as more and more absolute when it is cited, discussed, and popularized over time.

By focusing on tonal categories and final consonants, pro-Cantonese Hongkongers are able to forge an ideological link between Cantonese and Tang poetry. However, they gloss over areas in which Cantonese is actually less conservative than Putonghua. Putonghua has kept the Middle Chinese three-way distinction in initial consonants, but Cantonese has not. The number of initial consonants was reduced from 36 in Middle Chinese to 20 in Cantonese, and this reduction was largely accomplished by the merging of the Middle Chinese retroflex, palatal, and dental fricated series (Chen and Newman 1987:172).

Table 5: Distinctions in Initial Consonants

	Cantonese		Putonghua	
“die”	<i>sei</i>	(alveolar)	<i>si</i>	(dental)
“stone”	<i>sek</i>	(alveolar)	<i>shi</i>	(retroflex)
“west”	<i>sai</i>	(alveolar)	<i>xi</i>	(palatal)

This example illustrates what Mary Bucholtz and Kira Hall (2005: 599) refer to as “adequation.” Cantonese and Middle Chinese are not identical, but in order for them to be positioned as alike, they must be understood as sufficiently similar. Differences are downplayed, and similarities are foregrounded.

## 5 Authenticity and Linguistic Purism

To underscore its “corrupt” nature, pro-Cantonese Hongkongers exaggerate the influence of non-Sinitic languages on Putonghua. This is best illustrated by an image entitled 普通話之前世今生 ‘The Past and Present of Putonghua’, which was posted on the Facebook page “2014: Hongkongers, Wake Up!” (<https://www.facebook.com/hkwakeup/photos/a.363025483838971.1073741829.3614488773299/65/371331046341748/?type=1>) on March 13, 2014. Putonghua is presented as the sum of three elements:

- northern Chinese patois (中國北方土話);
- the “poisonous sounds” of the Manchus’ and Mongols’ “barbarian languages” in the Yuan, Ming, and Qing dynasties (元明清三代 滿蒙蠻胡毒音); and
- stereotyped writing of the proletariat imported through contact with Russian literary forms in the Soviet era (工農兵機械八股 蘇俄文體接種).

These three elements produced Putonghua, which is described in this image as: “the deformed fetus of China (華夏畸胎), the bastard of Emperors Yan and Huang (炎黃雜種).” Emperors Yan and Huang were two of the legendary Chinese sovereigns in pre-dynastic times.

The claim that Putonghua is not Chinese is often merely asserted. Evidence for the similarities between Putonghua and Manchu is rarely offered. In a sense, Putonghua is characterized by the absence of certain archaic Chinese features rather than the presence of Manchu features. Pro-Cantonese Hongkongers attempt to explain this absence in terms of language contact. Although researchers (e.g., Coblin 2000, Hashimoto 1976, Wadley 1996) have demonstrated the influence of Altaic languages on Putonghua, pro-Cantonese Hongkongers have exaggerated it to the point that they actually call Putonghua an Altaic language (see (6), (7), and (8)).

With regard to Cantonese, researchers (e.g., Bauer 1996, Peyraube 1996, Yue-Hashimoto 1976) have shown that Tai-Kadai languages have left their imprint on its syntax, phonology, and morphology. It is also true that there are many English loanwords in Hong Kong Cantonese (see, e.g., Li 1996). While pro-Cantonese activists exaggerate the influence of Altaic languages on

Putonghua, they either downplay the influence of non-Sinitic languages on Cantonese or present such influence in a positive light. Chin Wan, who is a pro-autonomy advocate and associate professor of Chinese at Lingnan University in Hong Kong, distinguishes between the “good” influences on Cantonese and the “bad” influences on Putonghua:

- (12) Cantonese has drawn on three sources: the regional languages of southern nationalities in ancient times, the Chinese lingua franca [雅言] on the central plains in the Han and Tang dynasties, and loanwords from the West. **After thousands of years, the mixing of Chinese and regional languages produced the proper result [正果], which has become even livelier with new words borrowed from the West.** By contrast, the northern vernacular or the “Common Language” [Putonghua] promoted by Communist China incorporated the language of government officials in Jiangsu and Zhejiang in the Ming and Qing dynasties, the poisonous sounds of the Manchu and Mongolian languages, and writings translated from Russian during the Soviet era. **These three mixed with each other for only a few hundred years and in a disorderly fashion.** (Chin 2010; original quote in standard written Chinese)

This is quite a departure from how linguists generally view language-mixing. Linguistic features borrowed from other languages are often nativized after a long period of time, but why are they “better” than those that are borrowed more recently? What’s more, northern Chinese varieties have been in contact with Altaic languages for much longer than Cantonese has with English. It is also unclear how we can determine whether language-mixing proceeds in an “orderly” or “disorderly” fashion.

## 6 Understanding the Present through the Past

Pro-Cantonese Hongkongers associate Cantonese with the Tang dynasty and Putonghua with the Qing dynasty. Through these ideological links, the opposition between Cantonese and Putonghua produces a set of contrasting meanings: e.g., “authentic” vs. “inauthentic”, “pure” vs. “impure”, and “Chinese” vs. “not Chinese”. These contrasting meanings are then projected onto speakers and political entities (see Irvine and Gal’s (2000) discussion of “iconization” and “fractal recursion”).

Cantonese and Putonghua are taken as iconic representations of their speakers. The Chineseness of Putonghua speakers becomes suspect as a result of their “impure” speech. On several news websites, pro-Cantonese writers and readers refer to Putonghua speakers as “northern barbarians” (Ma 2014), “descendents of the Manchu barbarians” (Chan 2010), and even “neo-Manchus” (Chan 2014). (Recall that the Manchus were the non-Han Chinese rulers of the Qing dynasty.) By contrast, they regard Cantonese speakers as the rightful heirs of Chinese culture. In (13), a reader refers to migrants from the north as 蠻夷 (a term for non-Chinese tribes), and Hong Kong as “the last stronghold of defense for traditional Chinese culture”:

- (13) Guangzhou [Canton] residents, like Hongkongers, have long been unhappy with northern **barbarians**’ [蠻夷] invasion of the south. Beijing newspapers have recently referred to these **barbarians** [蠻夷] in Hong Kong as “new Hongkongers”.... Quite a few Guangzhou residents I have come into contact with overseas have told me that their city has gradually been taken over. I think Hong Kong **is the last stronghold of defense for traditional Chinese culture** [最後的華夏文化保衛戰要塞].  
(On 2014; original quote in Cantonese and standard written Chinese)

The Cantonese vs. Putonghua narrative takes on a decidedly nationalistic tone. In (14), Chip Tsao, who is a well-known writer and cultural critic, associate Cantonese with Chinese revolutionaries who fought against the Qing government, the most famous being Dr. Sun Yat-Sen, who is regarded by many as the father of modern China. In (15), Chin Wan, the cultural critic mentioned earlier, compares the Communist government with the Manchu rulers of the Qing dynasty. He believes that in both cases, “the barbaric has replaced the civilized”:

- (14) The Cantonese are known in history for being rebellious and starting trouble. **The usurpers Sun Yat-Sen, Wang Jingwei, and Hong Xiuquan, who fought against Qing China, were all Cantonese....** The Cantonese have been the scourge of China for this historical reason. China can never allow Cantonese and its culture to spread. If Cantonese is not destroyed, China will be destroyed by Cantonese and its speakers.  
(Tsao 2014; original quote in standard written Chinese)
- (15) Cantonese may no longer be taught in Chinese classes in traditional schools. Elegant language [雅言] is now considered vulgar. **The barbaric has replaced the civilized. Don’t you think this is ridiculous? It was like this during the time of the Manchus. The Chinese Communists have replaced the Manchus, but the situation has remained the same.** I am opposed to Communist China, not only because I enjoy my freedom, but also because I want to preserve the traditional ways of Chinese culture.  
(Chin 2010; original quote in standard written Chinese)

On the *Apple Daily* website, some readers even claim that the Hong Kong government is fighting for the return of the Qing dynasty (復興滿清) (Tso 2014), and a writer (Faan 2014) compares the language policies of Communist China to the Qing government’s policy of forcing all Chinese men to adopt the Manchu hairstyle as a sign of submission.

## 7 Conclusion

This study reveals authentication and denaturalization as relational processes that produce a web of intertextual links between the “authentic” (Cantonese), the “inauthentic” (Putonghua), and the “original” (the literary standard of the Tang dynasty):

**Cantonese** → *Chinese*  
*Tang dynasty (golden age of Chinese culture)*

<b>Cantonese speakers</b>	→	<i>Rightful heirs of traditional Chinese culture</i>
<b>Pro-Cantonese activists</b>	→	<i>Chinese revolutionaries who overthrew the Qing dynasty</i>
<b>Putonghua</b>	→	<i>Manchu Qing dynasty (a shameful period in which the Han Chinese were ruled by Manchu invaders)</i>
<b>Putonghua speakers</b>	→	<i>Northern barbarians</i>
<b>The Communist government</b>	→	<i>The Qing government</i>

Through these intertextual links, linguistic differences between Cantonese and Putonghua are imbued with ideological content, accorded social significance, and used to justify political ends. Pro-Cantonese Hongkongers align contemporary Hong Kong with imperial China at the end of the Qing period. By doing so, they use powerful imagery from the past to not only understand their present predicament, but also imagine a possible future. The Communist government is likened to Manchu invaders who came from the north to impose their rule on the Han Chinese. Cantonese speakers, like the revolutionaries who overthrew the Qing dynasty, must rise up to protect their culture, language, and homeland.

This study also demonstrates how the on-going conflict between Hong Kong and mainland China is played out in the linguistic realm. Bolton (2011) argues that in postcolonial Hong Kong, the relationship between Cantonese and Putonghua is far more contentious than the relationship between Chinese and English. As this preceding discussion shows, it is impossible to fully understand the tension between Cantonese and Putonghua without examining their respective relationship with Chinese. So what exactly is Chinese? Few would refute the close linguistic relationship between Putonghua and modern written Chinese. However, pro-Cantonese Hongkongers believe that modern written Chinese (現代漢語) is not coextensive with Chinese (中文); Classical Chinese (文言文) is an important part of the equation. The role of classical Chinese literature – particularly, Tang poetry – in Chinese culture cannot be overstated. Even nowadays, students in Hong Kong, mainland China, and Taiwan are required to learn Classical Chinese and recite Tang poetry. As we have seen, pro-Cantonese Hongkongers argue that Cantonese is more authentically Chinese than Putonghua because it is closer to the “original”. Cantonese speakers are, therefore, the true guardians of traditional Chinese culture. The dragon has long been used as a symbol of China. Ultimately, part of the Cantonese vs. Putonghua debate is about who can rightfully claim to be the descendants of the dragon (龍的傳人).

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