

The Literary Trajectory of Hong Kong: Language and Script from the Ming Dynasty to the Special Administrative Region

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Abstract. This paper comprehensively explores the written trajectory of the Hong Kong region from the Ming and Qing dynasties to the present, with a particular focus on the status and usage of traditional Chinese characters across different historical stages. The author reviews Hong Kong's history, analyzing the changes in language policy and its impact on character usage. The application of the "Bi-literacy and Tri-lingualism" policy in Hong Kong is discussed, along with an in-depth examination of the phenomenon of multilingual coexistence in Hong Kong society and its cultural significance. As an important region using traditional Chinese characters within the Chinese cultural sphere, Hong Kong has developed a unique phenomenon of written culture. With the continuous development of globalization and advancements in digital technology, the cultural inheritance and influence of traditional Chinese characters among the global Chinese community may further expand. However, traditional Chinese characters face challenges from simplified characters and other languages, particularly in the fields of education and technology. The author believes that the future development of traditional Chinese characters will rely on the support of cultural policies, the promotion of educational systems, and the new generation's recognition and inheritance of traditional culture. The aesthetic value and cultural symbolism of traditional Chinese characters will continue to play a key role in the context of globalization, injecting new vitality into the cultural inheritance of Hong Kong and other Chinese-speaking regions.

Keywords: Traditional Chinese characters, Simplified Chinese characters, Hong Kong, script

1. Introduction

The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, abbreviated as "HK," has historically been part of Chinese territory, including Hong Kong Island, Kowloon, the New Territories, and 262 surrounding islands. From 1842 to 1997, it was under British colonial rule. After World War II, Hong Kong experienced rapid economic and social development, rising to the status of one of the "Four Asian Tigers" and earning the nickname "Pearl of the East." On July 1, 1997, the Chinese government resumed sovereignty over Hong Kong, establishing the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, which implements basic national policies such as "one country, two systems," "Hong Kong people governing Hong Kong," and "high degree of autonomy." In terms of language education policy, it follows a "Bi-literacy and Tri-lingualism" approach. As a result, Hong Kong has seen a phenomenon of coexistence among multiple languages and scripts. According to visitor statistics from the Hong Kong Tourism Board over the past decade, mainland tourists are the backbone of Hong Kong's tourism industry; however, most have not personally experienced Hong Kong's cultural landscape.

Regarding the research on the written trajectory of Hong Kong, there have been some discussions in academia. However, most studies focus on the analysis of language policies and linguistic landscapes, such as the current usage and development trends of Cantonese, Mandarin, and English in Hong Kong [1-3]. Other studies concentrate on the changes in language during the colonial period and after the return to China [1,2,4]. Nevertheless, there is relatively little research on the coexistence and evolution of scripts, especially traditional Chinese characters and simplified characters. Although these studies provide valuable perspectives for understanding Hong Kong's linguistic culture, there remains a gap in specifically addressing the written trajectory, particularly concerning cultural inheritance and identity recognition.

In this context, this paper will take the written trajectory of Hong Kong as a starting point to explore the status and developmental process of traditional Chinese characters in Hong Kong. Through an analysis of Hong Kong's language policies, it aims to reveal the practical operations of the "Bi-literacy and Tri-lingualism" framework under the background of "one country, two systems" and "Hong Kong people governing Hong Kong." By adopting both historical and linguistic perspectives, this study attempts to fill the gap in academic research concerning the written aspects of Hong Kong, providing new pathways for thinking about cultural inheritance and development. It will also discuss the challenges and opportunities that traditional Chinese characters may face in various future contexts. The goal is to offer fresh insights into the details of historical and cultural studies in Hong Kong while alleviating misunderstandings between the two regions.

2. The historical development of Hong Kong

2.1. The historical evolution and development opportunities of Hong Kong

Hong Kong's history can be traced back to the Neolithic Age, initially relying on fishing for sustenance. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, due to its unique geographical position, Hong Kong gradually emerged in foreign trade. After the Opium War in 1841, the Qing government signed the Treaty of Nanking, ceding Hong Kong Island to Britain and marking the beginning of a colonial rule period. Under British rule, Hong Kong implemented a governor's governance system and British legal framework, with English becoming one of the official languages, promoting the prosperity of international trade and shipping.

In this period, Hong Kong had quickly turned into an international port and trading place. In the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, the rapid development of industrialization turned Hong Kong into a famous manufacturing center all over the world. In 1984, the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed which would pave the way for Hong Kong's reversion to China in 1997 and the "One Country, Two Systems" policy. In the period before the handover, when Hong Kong's economy changed from manufacturing to services, Hong Kong's position as an international financial center was even more consolidated.

2.2. Integration of Eastern and Western cultures

In the past century, not only has Hong Kong's economic landscape changed, but there has also been a profound integration of Chinese and Western cultures. The cultural foundation of Hong Kong remains firmly rooted in traditional Chinese culture, while simultaneously absorbing the essence of British and Western cultures, resulting in a unique "Hong Kong culture." This fusion is reflected in various aspects such as language, education, and lifestyle.

In terms of language and expression, Hong Kong implements a "Bi-literacy and Tri-lingualism" policy, which involves the simultaneous use of both Chinese and English scripts, as well as three spoken languages: Cantonese, Mandarin, and English. This policy not only safeguards the linguistic rights of Hong Kong residents but also facilitates communication and understanding among

individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds. In daily life, this policy is evident in various aspects: street names, shop signs, and the signage and announcements within the subway system all reflect the practical application of this bilingual and trilingual approach. For instance, public transport information is provided in both Chinese and English, ensuring accessibility for local residents as well as international visitors. The coexistence of these languages in everyday contexts underscores Hong Kong's unique cultural identity as a vibrant meeting point between East and West.

In terms of educational philosophy, Hong Kong's education system integrates Eastern and Western educational concepts and methods. It emphasizes not only the transmission of foundational knowledge but also the cultivation of innovative thinking and practical skills. English, as a second language, plays a significant role in Hong Kong's education system, providing strong support for students' future international competitiveness.

In terms of social culture, the West heavily influences various aspects of Hong Kong's culture. In the realm of cuisine, unique dining forms such as "ice houses" and "tea restaurants" incorporate Western dining elements. Hong Kong's holidays and entertainment activities also blend both Eastern and Western traditions with modern trends, showcasing an appealing and unique cultural charm. While maintaining traditional Chinese family values and social ethics, Hong Kong society has also absorbed Western values such as individualism and the spirit of the rule of law. This fusion of multicultural elements creates a society that embodies both the warmth and harmony of the East, as well as the rationality and efficiency of the West [1].

3. Hong Kong text: traditional -English-simplified Chinese mixed use

3.1. The early use of writing in Hong Kong

In addition to the changes in the economy in the past century, there has also been a collision and integration of Chinese culture and Western culture in Hong Kong. Hong Kong's culture is based on Chinese culture, while absorbing the nutrients of British and Western culture, forming a kind of "Hong Kong culture". This kind of integration is reflected in language, education and life.

In terms of language and expression, Hong Kong implements a policy of "Bi-literacy and Tri-lingualism". That is, in terms of script, both Chinese and English are used, and in terms of language, three languages are used: Cantonese, Mandarin and English. This policy protects the language rights of Hong Kong people and makes it possible for Hong Kong people to communicate and understand each other with people from different cultures. In life, this policy is reflected in: street names, shop signs, signs and announcements in subway trains, local residents and international tourists can use Chinese and English information to get public transportation information, and all use bilingual and trilingual. This practical situation shows that three languages are used in Hong Kong, which gives Hong Kong the cultural identification of being a bright meeting place between the East and the West.

In terms of educational ideas, Hong Kong education integrates Eastern and Western educational ideas and methods. It focuses on not only popular knowledge, but also innovative thinking and practical abilities. English as a second language also provides strong support for Hong Kong's education to cultivate international competitiveness.

In terms of social culture, the influence of the West is very important in Hong Kong's culture. In the field of food, unique dining forms such as "ice houses" and "tea restaurants" integrate Western dining. Hong Kong's holidays and entertainment activities integrate East and West, ancient and modern, and give people an attractive and unique flavor. While upholding traditional Chinese family values and social ethics, Hong Kong society also absorbs Western values such as individualism and the spirit of the rule of law. This kind of multicultural integration makes the Hong Kong society have the warmth and harmony of the East, and the rationality and efficiency of the West [1].

3.2. The dominance of English

In the early colonial period of Hong Kong, Mandarin and Cantonese used in daily life did not have legal status. Since the signing of the Treaty of Nanjing, English has risen to become the sole legal language in Hong Kong. Universities, government agencies, and even hospitals all use English as the standard language. Until the establishment of The Chinese University of Hong Kong (the merger of Chung Chi College, New Asia College, and United College), the difficulties faced by the people due to language restrictions were alleviated. In 1974, the government passed legislation to grant equal legal status to Chinese and English, and the status of Chinese and English began to equalize [5,6].

4. Differences in script usage

4.1. Impact of age on script choice

In Hong Kong, the habits of script usage exhibit significant differences across age groups. Younger individuals tend to favor simplified characters and English, a trend closely related to their exposure to mainland culture through the internet and cross-border e-commerce, as well as the overarching influences of globalization. Data shows that among the population aged 6 to 65, 20.4% believe they possess sufficient English writing skills [7]. Additionally, young people are more likely to use a mixed expression of simplified characters and English in social media and informal contexts.

In contrast, middle-aged and older adults tend to insist on using traditional Chinese characters. Among respondents aged 65 and above, 88.7% believe their Chinese writing skills are entirely sufficient [7]. Traditional Chinese characters carry their recognition of traditional culture, and especially in formal situations such as calligraphy and literary creation, middle-aged and older individuals still rely heavily on traditional Chinese characters. Moreover, while their proficiency in English is lower than that of younger people, they can still adapt when necessary.

However, in general, age has an impact on their choice of script. That is, the younger people are more likely to use simplified characters and English because they accept modern culture; on the contrary, middle-aged and old people use traditional characters to preserve traditional culture. In this way, it shows that Hong Kong is a complicated position in the collision between globalization and culture [8].

4.2. Language and discrimination

After Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, the Hong Kong government has been advocating the Bilingual and Trilingual policy. That is, discrimination against Putonghua (Mandarin) is not be tolerated. With the rapid development of network technology, online platforms have been playing an increasingly important role in enhancing cultural exchanges between Hong Kong and mainland China. But the online platforms have also become new breeding grounds for public opinions between the two places.

As early as 2013, an Hong Kong actor stirred a heated debate on Weibo. He wrote in traditional Chinese that "over half of the people writing Chinese are in China, and Chinese civilization has died on the mainland." People were divided into two camps: one believed that traditional Chinese characters should be used in mainland China and the other thought that the civilization of Chinese should be represented by simplified Chinese characters. The Hong Kong actor later gave an interview to Xinhua News Agency to clear up the misunderstanding. He said that people use simplified characters in their daily life, but this doesn't mean that traditional Chinese characters don't disappear. "Traditional Chinese characters are also the treasure of our Chinese culture. I think it's best to acknowledge the traditional Chinese characters and use simplified Chinese characters," he said.

With the current strengthening of internet regulations and the exchanges between the two places, we believe that these discriminatory phenomena will gradually weaken and disappear soon.

5. Current usage, impact, and future development trends of traditional Chinese characters

5.1. Current application

The usage of traditional Chinese characters today can be found mainly in Hong Kong, Macau and other regions in the Chinese cultural area. Hong Kong is one of the main areas where traditional Chinese characters are used. In Hong Kong, traditional Chinese characters dominate in education, government and legal documents, as well as in public spaces and commercial areas, such as street signs, advertisements and subway directions. In Macau, traditional Chinese characters are officially established as the script and have a prominent place in life, education and media. This shows that traditional Chinese characters in these areas are not outdated, but rather, they are making efforts to maintain their heritage while meeting the needs of modern society.

According to the 2021 census results in Hong Kong, 88.7% of respondents indicated that they have enough Chinese writing ability to live in their daily lives [7]. This shows that people in Hong Kong still accept and recognize traditional Chinese characters, and the proportion of middle-aged and older people is relatively high. Even if simplified characters have been popularized extensively in mainland China, the usage of traditional Chinese characters in Hong Kong society is not shaken. This is related to the historical background, culture and education of Hong Kong.

Furthermore, with the development of technology, the way to use traditional Chinese characters in modern digital environment has become more friendly. The input method and font display options of traditional Chinese characters are available on smartphones and computers. In the past, writing in traditional script was inconvenient. In addition, in Facebook and Instagram input support for traditional Chinese characters is also available. People from Hong Kong and other traditional Chinese areas can freely express themselves on social media.

Traditional Chinese characters are not only used in culture in Hong Kong and these regions but are also used in the daily life of the Chinese community all over the world through Facebook and Instagram.

5.2. Influence

As mentioned earlier, the role of traditional Chinese characters in the transmission of Chinese culture cannot be overlooked. They are not only a means of writing but also a carrier of culture and history. In some special fields, such as classical literature, religion, calligraphy, etc., traditional Chinese characters play an irreplaceable role. Most of the ancient classical literature of China were written in traditional Chinese characters. If changed into simplified Chinese characters, it would lose its historical atmosphere. From the perspective of beauty, the complexity of traditional Chinese characters reflects their symmetrical and pictographic characteristics in calligraphy. It gives some cultural connotations a more serious and elegant feeling. For example, couplets written in symmetrical traditional Chinese characters can better reflect the beauty of balance in text, which conforms to the traditional cultural pursuit of formal beauty. Therefore, in the fields of calligraphy, sculpture, classical literature, etc., traditional Chinese characters will continue to be revered and used, and traditional Chinese characters will also bring new vitality to artistic creation [8].

Traditional Chinese characters not only affect Chinese culture, but also affect other countries in the Chinese character cultural sphere. For example, kanji in Japan is from traditional Chinese characters. Although they have gone through hundreds of years of evolution and Japan has developed its own simplified form of writing Shinjitai, there are still many traditional Chinese characters in formal occasions. For example, in the field of studies or books about Chinese culture, traditional

Chinese characters are still used in couplets, sculptures, etc. In the field of sinology in Japan, traditional Chinese characters are still used in the annotation and translation of ancient books. Only in this way can they be more accurate in academic research. Therefore, traditional Chinese characters still have an important position in academic research and cannot be replaced [9].

Traditional Chinese characters also affect the academic field outside the Chinese culture sphere. In the field of Western sinology, traditional Chinese characters also play an important role. That is, Western sinologists use traditional Chinese characters to study Chinese classical literature and history. Many Westerners must learn traditional Chinese characters to understand the original book when studying Chinese history, philosophy, religion, etc. Therefore, traditional Chinese characters also become a kind of cultural existence that connects the traditional and modern and the East and West in the academic circle. It connects the past and present of Chinese culture, allowing scholars from different backgrounds to better understand the connotations contained in the ancient books, which is impossible in simplified Chinese characters.

5.3. Future development

With the popularisation of digital technology, it has become more convenient for people to use the traditional Chinese characters. Whenever we use a mobile phone or computer, we can conveniently type in the traditional Chinese characters without having to write them out by hand. For instance, the new smart input method such as Sogou Input and Google Pinyin not only let us input the traditional Chinese characters freely, but also automatically provide us with the predictive text, which makes the whole process much more convenient.

In addition, the popularisation of social media also creates more opportunities for us to use the traditional Chinese characters. Users in Hong Kong and other regions can communicate with the rest of the Chinese-speaking world through social media. They can share their traditional Chinese characters posts to reach a large audience around the world. Currently, the traditional Chinese characters version is also available for e-commerce platforms like Taobao and JD.com, allowing traditional Chinese users to shop comfortably worldwide.

In terms of policies, Hong Kong still uses the traditional Chinese characters as the standard font for official documents and education. The Government is continuing to promote the use of traditional Chinese characters in the education system. As traditional Chinese characters are inscribed in our cultural identity and heritage and will not fade away easily under the protection of Bi-literacy and Tri-lingualism policy, when we globalise the traditional Chinese characters, they will continue to play the role of bridging the culture of different regions to help people from all over the world to understand each other better.

6. Conclusion

As a society with Bi-literacy and Tri-lingualism, Hong Kong uses language and writing to reveal the complicated historical roots of the city.

In Hong Kong, Traditional Chinese Characters play an important role in teaching, traditional Chinese texts in school, Government official papers, and daily life. This shows Hong Kong's efforts in preserving traditional culture.

On the other side, popularising Mandarin and simplified characters help Hong Kong people to connect with Mainland China and other Chinese communities around the world. Meanwhile, English still remains as the lingua franca in the context of globalization.

In fact, many people fear that the popularity of Mandarin will affect the usage of Cantonese. However, statistics have shown that the two can live in harmony and bring more cultural diversity to Hong Kong.

No matter in the Chinese cultural sphere, Traditional Chinese Characters still have their cultural and academic values, and their cultural and academic values can be revealed by Calligraphy, classical literature and modern creation. In order to preserve the beauty of traditional Chinese characters, Traditional Chinese Characters will still be used as cultural symbols to promote the integration of traditional and modern, and to enrich the cultural identity of all Chinese people.

Using language and writing is not only to identify our own culture, but also as a bridge to connect the past and the future. Under the context of globalization, Hong Kong uses multi-language as an important model of cultural communication.

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