

# Evolution and Evaluation: A Study of the Universal Language in Hong Kong under the Background of Multiculturalism

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**Abstract:** Due to its unique geographical environment, history, politics, cultural background and other reasons, Hong Kong language and characters are unique. The language situation in Hong Kong is complex, but the HKSAR Government has always been based on the reality, planning for the future, and adopting diversified strategies on the basis of adhering to the statutory language to coordinate the language life in Hong Kong. The HKSAR Government has adopted a series of measures in the area of lingua franca education, with the aim of enhancing people's awareness and interest in different languages, promoting multicultural exchanges and understanding, and promoting Hong Kong's pluralistic and international development.

**Keywords:** Universal language; Hong Kong bi-literacy and tri-lingualism; Language policy and language planning; Language education.

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## 1. Question Raising and Research Significance

Hong Kong is a crossroads of culture and economy between China and the West, where different cultures interact and integrate with each other. The language of Hong Kong has a rich and diverse history, from the early Cantonese to the current multilingualism, which reflects the openness and inclusiveness of Hong Kong. Chinese and English are particularly complicated because of the complex relationship between the communities they belong to. In the era of British colonial rule, English was the official legal language of Hong Kong, and Hong Kong was an international city, and all external communication was based on English. However, the first language of most Hong Kong people was Cantonese, so the phenomenon of mixing Cantonese and English was extremely common in Hong Kong. After the return of Hong Kong, the language policy of "bi-literacy and tri-lingualism" is rooted in the special historical soil of Hong Kong, in line with the status of an international city, as a window to communicate with the mainland and the English-speaking world. As Professor Hui Chi-kwong of the University of Hong Kong said, "The greatest charm of Hong Kong's language and culture is that it is a bridge between Chinese and Western cultures. From Hong Kong, you can see the motherland and the whole world." [1]

At present, the official languages of Hong Kong are Chinese and English, and the language policy of the SAR Government is "bi-literacy and tri-lingualism", that is, the Chinese vernacular and English are used in writing, and the Cantonese, Putonghua and English are used in speaking. In the future, with the development of Hong Kong's economy and the process of internationalization, Hong Kong's language will also be more diversified and international.

## 2. The Current Situation of Language and Writing Development in Hong Kong

### 2.1. Research on the Language and Writing of Hong Kong

Language studies in Hong Kong cover a wide range of fields, including Chinese, English and Cantonese. The research contents include phonetics, grammar, vocabulary, pragmatics and so on. The study of Hong Kong characters mainly involves Chinese characters, pinyin characters and English, etc. Scholars have studied the font, font and pronunciation of Hong Kong characters, and discussed the characteristics and use of Hong Kong characters. At the same time, some scholars are concerned about the development and promotion of pinyin characters in Hong Kong, as well as the use and popularity of English in Hong Kong. In addition, scholars have conducted research on Hong Kong handwriting, exploring its historical, cultural and social context.

Among them, the scholar Youwei Shi conducted a detailed study on the phenomenon of "bi-literacy and tri-lingualism" in Hong Kong, pointing out that Hong Kong is a multilingual community. A multilingual is a person who can speak multiple codes. The language use of multilingual people is a kind of "multilingual life". Each multilingual person can use different kinds of languages and their proficiency level will be different, together, to form a multilingual community, that is, the "multilingual society" said in the "Perspective", then the multilingual phenomenon shown in the community has statistical value and cluster effect. Hong Kong is such a multilingual community and a multilingual society. In addition to the spoken language, the phenomenon of multilingualism also includes written language, that is, multilingualism. People generally refer to such linguistic life in Hong Kong as "bi-literacy and tri-lingualism" (two languages: Chinese, English; Three languages: Mandarin, Cantonese dialect, English). [2]

Scholar Xiaolin Tian wrote in "Hong Kong Language Life Research Collection" that there are more than a dozen

nationalities from all over the world living in Hong Kong, and Hong Kong society presents a phenomenon of multi-language culture. As the Cantonese dialect is still the predominant spoken language in Hong Kong, the Cantonese dialect is the predominant spoken language in Hong Kong; For historical reasons, the English language has always been the most valued official language in Hong Kong society. In terms of written language, it is accepted that the written Chinese language should be standardized, but Hong Kong Chinese is still a strong written language in Hong Kong society.[3] The research on Cantonese in Hong Kong is the most in-depth. Scholars have made a detailed study of the pronunciation, grammar and vocabulary of Hong Kong Cantonese by means of field investigation, recording and corpus.

## **2.2. Development of Language and Writing Education in Hong Kong**

The research on language education in Hong Kong covers multiple aspects, including educational policies, classroom teaching, learner motivation, and so on. Scholars have explored the characteristics and advantages and disadvantages of language education policies in Hong Kong through sorting and analyzing them. At the same time, some scholars have also paid attention to the methods and effectiveness of language classroom teaching in Hong Kong, as well as the impact of learner motivation on language learning. In addition, scholars have conducted research on the professional development of language teachers in Hong Kong and proposed corresponding suggestions and measures.

Observing the layout of Mandarin education in Hong Kong over the past decade, in order to implement the "bi-literacy and tri-lingualism" policy, each specific policy formulation revolves around the growth process of students, with clear goals and clear timeline. The two main steps roughly follow the development of society. In the implementation process, the first goal is to improve the level of Mandarin, so that Hong Kong people can communicate fluently in Mandarin; The second goal is to teach Chinese in Mandarin, moving from teaching language to language use in other fields, in order to improve the Chinese proficiency of Hong Kong people, that is, to achieve consistency in language and writing. As for Mandarin, it was only an elective course in 1986 and became a core subject in 199. Currently, almost all students from primary school to junior high school are learning Mandarin. Mandarin has also become a subject for the high school entrance examination since 2000.[4]

According to statistics, among many primary schools in Hong Kong, 65% use Chinese as the teaching language, 9% use English as the teaching language, and 26% prioritize bilingual teaching. Among primary schools that use Chinese as the teaching language, only 5% of them use Mandarin for teaching; Among primary schools that teach in both Chinese and English, 20% of them use Mandarin for teaching. Furthermore, it can be inferred that Mandarin teaching accounts for 25% and Cantonese teaching accounts for 66% in primary schools in Hong Kong. In fact, Chinese teaching in Hong Kong primary schools is mainly based on the "Cantonese dialect", and English has always been the dominant language of instruction. Mandarin has clearly not yet become one of the mainstream teaching languages.[5]

As an officially trilingual special administrative region of China and an economic powerhouse in Asia, Hong Kong has invested heavily in dual language schools that emphasize learning English alongside of Cantonese or Mandarin at all

levels of education. Little research has explored how learning and language use takes shape within these schools, particularly within early childhood educational contexts.[6]

Although Hong Kong was under the colonial rule of the British Empire for more than 100 years, ethnic exchanges have never been broken, and national identity has always been consistent. In addition, many Chinese languages use Chinese characters as written expression subjects, so Chinese characters have become a super connector of national identity. The beauty of Chinese characters lies in their strong ideography, which gives them multiple possibilities of pronunciation correspondence, which can be combined with any kind of phonetic system in different places to record the corresponding morphemes of different dialects. On this basis, general Chinese is a kind of written language with semi-decoupled background layer and surface layer.[7] In addition, some scholars paid attention to the education, popularization and use of English in Hong Kong, and discussed the characteristics and future development trend of English in Hong Kong.

## **2.3. Research in the field of intercultural communication and language contact**

Cross-cultural communication and language contact is another important area of language studies in Hong Kong. Through the study of cross-cultural communication in the multicultural context of Hong Kong, the scholars explored the interaction and influence of different languages and cultures. At the same time, some scholars have paid attention to the phenomenon of linguistic contact and exchange between different language users in Hong Kong, and explored its historical, cultural and social background. In addition, some scholars have studied the language use and acculturation of Hong Kong immigrants, and put forward corresponding policies and suggestions.

Geographically, Hong Kong not only has the characteristics of a border (cross-regional space) that backs the mainland and faces the South Ocean. As the earliest trade port in deep contact with the Western world, Hong Kong bears the brunt of standing at the meeting point of Eastern and Western cultures and has a cross-cultural perspective. Such cultural leap-over is not only reflected in the national culture's struggle against colonial culture, but also in the cultural struggle against colonial culture. It also exists in the cultural lineage of Hong Kong, with the cross-cultural color of the integration of Central Plains culture and Lingnan culture. The confrontation and integration between several cultures (civilizations) is also fully reflected in the written language of Hong Kong literature.[8] In short, the research on the common Chinese language in Hong Kong involves many fields and has distinct regional and cultural characteristics. Through in-depth research and discussion, it is helpful to further understand the current situation and development trend of Hong Kong's language and culture, and provide theoretical basis and practical guidance for the formulation of relevant policies.

### **3. The Current Development Status of The Universal Language in Hong Kong**

#### **3.1. The legal status of the universal language in Hong Kong**

Both Chinese and English are considered legal languages in Hong Kong. In legal and government documents, both Chinese and English must be used, especially in court and official documents. In fact, English is often seen as the more advantageous language because many Hong Kongers speak it fluently. In 1974, the Legislative Council of Hong Kong passed a law recognizing both Chinese and English as official languages, thus formally establishing the legal status of Chinese in Hong Kong. In order to cope with the situation, the Secretary of Education of Hong Kong officially divided Chinese into Chinese language and Chinese literature, and since then Chinese curriculum has become an official core subject, and in the early 1990s, it has become a core examination course for senior high schools.

With the return of Hong Kong to the motherland on July 1, 1997, language planning, as a major event in social life, has a new content in the new historical period. Article 9 of the Basic Law of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China stipulates that "in addition to the Chinese language, English may also be used as an official language by the executive authorities and legislature of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region." This indicates that both Chinese and English are the official languages of Hong Kong, with Chinese as the primary language and English as the secondary language. The new situation of language planning has its great significance. First of all, the new language plan expresses national feelings, which is conducive to strengthening the sense of national unity. Secondly, the new language planning improves the rate of social communication and ADAPTS to the needs of social science management. Hong Kong is Hong Kong for Hong Kong people, and the new plan of "attaching equal importance to China and the UK and giving priority to the Chinese language" is conducive to the implementation of "Hong Kong people ruling Hong Kong".[9]

#### **3.2. Current situation of the use of common spoken and written languages in Hong Kong**

In Hong Kong, Putonghua (Chinese Standard Language) is often regarded as the most universal language. Most Hong Kong people are able to use Mandarin for daily communication, especially with the mainland. In addition, Cantonese (the local dialect of Hong Kong) is also very popular, especially at local cultural and community events.

With the return of Hong Kong to the motherland, the exchanges between Hong Kong and the Mainland become more and more frequent, and more and more Hong Kong people realize the importance of Putonghua as a cross-regional communication tool. In recent years, the controversial "Universal Education in Hong Kong" (the use of Putonghua to teach Chinese in class, subverting the traditional behavior of Cantonese teaching) actually reflects the general trend of the application of Putonghua in Hong Kong. Although there are sometimes doubts and even opposition voices among local people, in general, Hong Kong people's attention to and mastery of Mandarin are greatly

improved, and Mandarin and Cantonese are also interpenetrating in this increasingly frequent contact and use.[10]

Written Chinese in Hong Kong is significantly influenced by both Cantonese and English. The standard written Chinese is based on Putonghua in terms of vocabulary and grammar, but the written Chinese used in Hong Kong is often influenced by both Cantonese and English, and has become a unique "Hong Kong Chinese", which is a modern written Chinese variant rooted in Hong Kong. "Hong Kong Chinese" is a style that closely resembles Cantonese in terms of vocabulary and grammar, and this variant is widely used in government documents and media reports.[11]

Hong Kong's close cultural and historical ties with the mainland have also had a significant impact on the city's language. With the rapid development of the mainland economy, the status of Mandarin in Hong Kong has gradually increased. Many Hong Kong people have begun to attach importance to the education and learning of Mandarin in order to find more opportunities in the mainland market.

#### **3.3. Policy and planning in the field of universal language education in Hong Kong**

The language education policy in Hong Kong has gone through many periods. During the British colonial rule (1842-1997), it had a profound influence on the language of Hong Kong. During this period, English was introduced and widely used, especially in official documents and education. This has made English one of Hong Kong's "official languages" and has led to its dominance in areas such as business, law and healthcare. To promote English and English education, the Government has set up English courses and examinations, such as the Hong Kong Certificate of English Language Education (HKCEE) and the General Diploma of Education (GCE). In addition, schools are encouraged to use English as the language of instruction and teachers are required to have a high level of English. Since the return of Hong Kong to the Motherland (1997 to present), Hong Kong has implemented a bilingual education policy, that is, Chinese and English are the official languages of Hong Kong. The government emphasizes the study and application of Chinese and requires schools to open Chinese courses to improve students' Chinese ability. At the same time, the government also attaches importance to English education and learning, and has set up various English tests and courses to help students better master the English skills needed for international exchanges.

Both Chinese and English are widely used in Hong Kong's education system. From primary school to university, students need to learn Chinese and English, and many schools teach other foreign languages. In addition, in order to adapt to the trend of globalization, Hong Kong schools have also strengthened the teaching of Mandarin in recent years. The policy of "two languages and three languages" has changed from "emphasis on English and light on Chinese" to "both Chinese and English", highlighting the direction of mainstream languages and vigorously promoting Mandarin, which is not only a language strategy, but also the product of a variety of comprehensive strategies such as politics, economy and culture. The reserve force for the sustainable development of Hong Kong needs education. Language education cannot be underestimated in promoting the self-identity of Hong Kong groups or individuals, in coordinating the overall language of Hong Kong, and in developing and

thriving the Hong Kong market. Strengthening and implementing the language education plan is actually a competitive advantage for strengthening and implementing the development of Hong Kong. [12]

The policy nature of language planning is strong, as it should be based on different national conditions, ethnic conditions, and community conditions, as well as administrative and professional interventions according to government intentions.[13]

The Report on the Language Life Status in the Greater Bay Area of Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao (2023) points out that language is a key medium for the interconnection and "paving the way" between the government and the people of Guangdong, Hong Kong, and Macao, as well as an important link for regional integration. Under the system of the "one country, two systems", the unique regional language characteristics of the Guangdong Hong Kong Macao region have been formed. The three regions need to further improve language policy planning, strengthen language and national identity, tap into language resource dividends, and do a good job in language ability and language service construction to better serve the construction and development of the Guangdong Hong Kong Macao Greater Bay Area.

In summary, Hong Kong's language and writing education policies have different characteristics and priorities in different periods. With the development of technology and the advancement of globalization, language education in Hong Kong will also become more diversified. Future language education will place greater emphasis on students' language application abilities, including oral expression, listening comprehension, reading comprehension, and writing ability. At the same time, language education will also place greater emphasis on cultivating cross-cultural communication skills to help students better adapt to the globalized society.

### **3.4. A study on the influence of social environment on universal language in Hong Kong**

The relationship between language learning and language environment is very complex. The development of the universal language in Hong Kong is mainly influenced by factors such as politics, economy, and demographic changes. In the social environment of Hong Kong, the diversity of languages is fully reflected. In addition to legal documents and government agencies, Chinese and English are also widely used in business, education, and cultural fields. On social media and the internet, Hong Kong people often use Cantonese for communication. In terms of population changes, with the development of the New Territories and the relocation of urban residents, the language environment in Hong Kong has also undergone changes. The usage rate of Mandarin and other dialects is gradually decreasing, while the use of Mandarin has significantly increased.

English has been the primary official language of Hong Kong since the era of the British Hong Kong government, and since Hong Kong's return to the Motherland in 1997, as a global business and financial trade center, English has remained the most important tool for cross-border and regional communication. Multilingualism is even more important to the prosperity of the Hong Kong market. The Hong Kong government can not only promote Chinese education and improve the standard of Putonghua, but also attach importance to the value of English and strictly check English education. Looking back at the changes before and

after the reunification of Hong Kong, it can be seen that at the beginning, the British colonial government in Hong Kong implemented the policy of language aggression of "valuing Britain over China" in order to force Hong Kong people to accept and absorb their language and culture, which certainly had a negative side to the development of Chinese culture. Only with the experience of widespread use of Chinese and English bilingualism, and the English-speaking business community in Hong Kong, an international metropolis, can the use of Chinese help Hong Kong and the mainland to eliminate language barriers and better leverage Hong Kong's advantages.[14]

In short, with the diversified development of Hong Kong society, more and more students are starting to learn other languages and cultures. To this end, the government and all sectors of society actively promote the development of multicultural education, encouraging students to understand and respect different cultures and languages. In the future, Hong Kong will continue to strive to improve the quality and language proficiency of its citizens, and promote cross-cultural communication and understanding. Overall, the development of the universal language in Hong Kong is characterized by diversity and complexity, and it will still be influenced by multiple factors such as politics, economy, and demographic changes in the future.

## **4. Experience in Promoting the Universal Language in Hong Kong**

### **4.1. Strengthen policy support, formulate relevant policies, guide and promote the popularization and use of universal language.**

The Hong Kong government has played an important role in promoting the universal language. The government guides and promotes the popularization and use of universal language by formulating relevant policies and regulations. For example, the government stipulates that schools must use Mandarin for teaching and encourages students to use Mandarin for communication within the school. In addition, the government also encourages various sectors of society to promote the use of universal language by providing funding and rewards.

### **4.2. Optimize the education system and clarify the support for universal language and writing education in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.**

Education is an important way to promote the popularization of a universal language. Firstly, the education community in Hong Kong actively promotes the teaching of universal language by improving teaching methods, writing textbooks, and other means to improve the quality of universal language teaching. Secondly, the education community also pays attention to cultivating students' language skills and equipping them with the ability to communicate in multiple languages. Once again, strengthen the digital construction of language education, utilize artificial intelligence technology to develop and apply language learning resources, promote online learning and distance education models, and enable more people to easily access high-quality language education resources. Finally,

promote the education and teaching of national language and writing, strengthen the cultivation and improvement of students' national language and writing abilities, and provide better education and employment opportunities for students.

### **4.3. Strengthen social participation and form synergy in promoting the development of universal language.**

Social participation is another important experience in promoting the universal language in Hong Kong. All sectors of society, including enterprises, media, and clubs, actively participate in promoting the universal language. For example, some companies may explicitly require job seekers to have the ability to speak Mandarin in their job advertisements, in order to encourage employees to use Mandarin. In addition, the media will also guide the public to use universal language through reporting and comments. In addition, the government encourages enterprises and institutions to provide language training services, providing diverse language training services for citizens, including courses in Cantonese, English, Mandarin, sign language, etc., to meet the needs of people of different ages and backgrounds, thereby promoting cross-cultural communication and understanding.

### **4.4. Strengthen cultural exchanges and create a social environment with linguistic and cultural diversity.**

Cultural exchange is an effective way to promote the promotion of a universal language. Hong Kong is a multicultural city, and cultural exchange between different ethnic groups helps promote the popularization and use of a universal language. For example, various cultural activities held in Hong Kong, such as concerts, dramas, etc., are performed and communicated in Mandarin or other universal language. This provides a good platform for promoting universal language.

In summary, the successful experience of promoting the universal language in Hong Kong lies in efforts in various aspects such as policy guidance, educational promotion, social participation, and cultural exchange. These experiences can provide reference and reference for promoting universal language in other regions. With China's increasing global influence, the development of the universal language in Hong Kong is also undergoing changes. In recent years, the Hong Kong government has begun to attach greater importance to the use of Chinese, encouraging citizens to learn and use Chinese. With the rise of the Chinese economy and the increasing frequency of communication between Hong Kong and the mainland, the use of Mandarin in Hong Kong will become more widespread and widespread. Meanwhile, due to Hong Kong's unique geographical location and historical background, English still dominates Hong Kong, and its language usage remains diverse, including more foreign language vocabulary and expressions. With the development of Hong Kong's economy and the process of internationalization, the universal language in Hong Kong will become more diverse and international.

## **Acknowledgment**

This research was financially supported by 2023 Jiangsu University Philosophy and Social Science Research Project "Research on the Identification of the CPC's National Language and Writing Policy from the Perspective of Building a Strong Consciousness of the Chinese National Community" (Grant NO. 2023SJSZ0246) .

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