

Popular Culture in Hong Kong After the National Security Law, 2020–2022

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Chapter 6

The Contest of Language: “Human Language” and the Virtue of Swearing

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6 The Contest of Language

“Human Language” and the Virtue of Swearing

Jau di je m gong dak 有啲嘢唔講得 **There Are Things That Cannot Be Said**

The implementation of the NSL led to a special sensitivity toward the use of language in Hong Kong. Whether it was the formal, high-sounding speech of government officials or the intemperate flamboyance of the local vernacular, how one spoke and the word choices one made came to have significance beyond what one actually said. More often than not, consciously or not, one’s speech was interpreted as a reflection of one’s political sentiments. This chapter is about the politics of language in the city—how government officials used rhetorical strategies to reassert order in the city, while Hongkongers embraced the local vernacular to express themselves and to assert local culture and identity.

Under the NSL, everything that could be construed as advocating anti-government sentiments or provoking hostility to the state and its disciplinary forces was banned. However, since there was little specificity in the law, and since meaning in language shifts according to the intention of the speaker or writer, not to mention the reception and interpretation of the audience or the reader, determining whether something was “legal” or permissible or not was often arbitrary and wilful. “*Hoenggong gaajau* 香港加油 Hong Kong add oil (roughly meaning ‘Go Hong Kong!’),” for example, was often used in 2019 by supporters of the political movement to spur each other on. “Add oil” is a common Hong Kong expression of encouragement so much so that it officially entered the Oxford English Dictionary in 2018. However, putting “Hong Kong” in front of “add oil” immediately provoked strong reactions from the authorities. In October 2021, participants of the annual Standard Chartered Hong Kong Marathon who had these words tattooed on exposed parts of their bodies or had clothing items with the phrase printed on them were asked by the police to cover up before they could run. Neither the name, “Hong Kong,” nor the expression, “add oil,” was illegal. However, put together, the phrase, “Hong Kong add oil,” hit a nerve.

On July 1, 2022, one of Hong Kong’s most famous actors and pop singers of the 1990s, Jacky Cheung, was interviewed on CCTV (China Central TV, China’s state-owned broadcaster) on his thoughts about the 25th Anniversary of Hong Kong’s return to China. He concluded his words with “Hong Kong add oil!” Cheung was

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popular in China and had always been considered politically acceptable. However, after his statement, a cyber army of Chinese “Little Pinks (*Siufanhung* 小粉紅—a term used to refer to ultranationalist netizens)” descended on him, criticizing him for being unpatriotic. His other crime was not having mentioned “*zougwok* 祖國 (fatherland)” once in the entire interview, meaning that he had not shown proper gratitude toward China for Hong Kong’s development in the past quarter century. The interview was taken down by CCTV within a day.¹

A whole list of common usages in Hong Kong likewise came under scrutiny after 2019. Many authority figures, self-appointed arbiters of correct thought, or other patriotic supporters of the NSL became keen interpreters of word use, deciphering supposedly veiled political meanings in seemingly innocuous expressions and everyday usages. *Dear Jane*, a popular rock band in Hong Kong, fell into the crosshairs of such patriots. Their popular 2020 song, “*Nganho sauleijyun* 銀河修理員 (Galactic Repairman),” was at the heart of a controversy. Two secondary school students got into trouble for performing the song at a school concert. Even though the students insisted they were only singing about the hardships caused by the pandemic, the school principal insisted that the lyrics of the song, specifically the words, “*lyunsai* 亂世 (troubled world),” “*lyunlau* 亂流 (turbulence),” and “*deoikong* 對抗 (struggle against),” had subversive intent. *Dear Jane* claimed that it was just a love song, a pledge from the singer to his loved one that he would protect her through all the hardships in life. It is a gift of love from the lead singer of the band to his wife. The lyrics of the song were written by Wyman Wong. The story in the song even takes place in space:

Aside from the pain, everything is still beautiful. Aside from some setbacks, there is still road ahead of us. Aside from feeling tired of the world, there are still some repairs we can do. The broken world makes one learn how to find reassurance within our hopelessness, to find relief in the horror around us. Being able to take care of you, the days are not so bad.

I’ll try my best to make it up to you. It’s hard to escape the troubles. Repairing this and that, we grow old together in this troubled world (*lyunsai* 亂世).

I repair the lights that have gone out along the way. I hope you are safe in the turbulence (*lyunlau* 亂流). True love comes in different shapes. Confronted with hundreds of holes and thousands of cracks, who can see through me, that this kind of strength is not strength? While the situation is rotten through, we can only continue with the struggle (*deoikong* 對抗). I’ll keep at it with all I have, so you could feel safe.

There are many things broken, waiting to be repaired. But you have me to protect and love you. I re sew what is torn. When the hole reappears, I’ll mend it again. But I might never finish repairing this broken world...²

The teenagers were punished for refusing to change the problem words of the song during their performance. The principal’s zealotry drew much derision and outrage from the general public. Many defiantly looped the song on streaming platforms, making “Galaxy Repairman” one of the most popular and awarded songs in 2020.

A former TVB artist, Cheung Ming Wai 張明偉 (reportedly fired over the incident), famously performed the song in front of the school to show support for the students.³ The song was banned and taken off all music platforms in China.

In his acceptance speech for an award for his lyrics, Wyman Wong, who had emigrated to Britain, intimated that pure love songs might no longer exist in Hong Kong under the NSL:

If you have been following my work, you would have noticed that in recent years, I have been focusing on writing love songs, and investigating the possibilities of love songs—how broad the subject of love songs can be; how great the message content of love songs can be. One day, as I was racking my brain to figure out how to write better, I suddenly became very nostalgic. I was very nostalgic for the old days when one could just write a simple love song...I was continuously being troubled by this way of thinking. However, a few days ago, I suddenly figured it out. I realized that though I had been writing for over thirty years, the lyrics I wrote in the first twenty odds years don't actually count. They are just arrangements to help me maintain my identity as a lyricist. As a human being, as a lyricist, my real and most important mission has just begun. That's why, in the future, no matter what did happen *doudai faatsang gwo sammosi* 到底發生過甚麼事, (What Happened?--title of *Dear Jane's* 2022 song with lyrics by Wong.) no matter where I am, I will continue to feel it an honor to write lyrics for the city I love.⁴

Wong's sentiment echoed those of another prominent lyricist, Siu Hak 小克, who explained,

there are a lot of things one can no longer say directly. We have become used to expressing and receiving in a circuitous way. There are no longer songs that are one hundred percent about love. All songs are linked up with the sentiments in society.⁵

Indeed, for many in Hong Kong, the anguish in these love songs was not so much about a lover's treachery, but other kinds of betrayal in society, the effects of which were felt in a deeply personal way.

At the end of 2022, it was rumored that the "restructured" government broadcaster, RTHK, had generated a list of singers and bands whose music would no longer be broadcasted by its radio stations, nor would they be invited to appear on its shows.⁶ RTHK denied this. However, one wonders about the absence of many popular bands at the 2022 music award show RTHK co-produced with TVB, including *Dear Jane* and *RubberBand*. *RubberBand's* song "Ciao," about Hong Kong's emigration wave after 2019, was arguably the biggest song of the year, topping both the Commercial Radio's Ultimate Song Chart and ViuTV's Chill Club chart, as well as those of the different streaming platforms. In March 2022, the rapper, Wolfe, described the new reality in his song, "*Jaudije mgongdak* 有啲嘢唔講得 (There are things that cannot be said)":

Hold on to what you believe in. If you are strong enough, you will be able to resist all temptations. Unless it is like...

There are things that cannot be said. That's why many rappers start writing love songs and talk about romance instead. There's something that cannot be said. There is too much that cannot be said. *We ain't taking drugs*. But we are feeling frazzled...(Words originally in English italicized.)⁷

The MV accompanying the song begins with the protagonist waking up in his cardboard camp under the highway. As he walks through Sham Shui Po, one of Hong Kong's poorest districts, the camera pans around, catching the images of the forlorn-looking characters on the street, mostly young men. On closer inspection, one realizes that all of them have had their mouths erased. Wolfe's song questions if there is still any use in trying to hold on to one's ideals if the cost to one's life is so high. However, whatever these travails are, the singer says he cannot mention them. The film also follows a little girl, who plays with the protagonist briefly. She is finally pulled away by her mother, who obviously disapproves of the young man. The girl too appears to have had her mouth erased.

Speaking Properly

Language has always been a complicated matter in Hong Kong. How one speaks reflects one's class background, education level, and now, political sympathies. During the colonial years in the city (1840–1997), English language proficiency was a measure of cultural sophistication and an indicator of social status and power. It was a way to distinguish the elites of the society from the masses. Even today, English language ability is a reminder for many, of Hong Kong's status as a former British colony, and a mark of Hongkongers' cultural distinction from the Chinese from the region. Since 1997, China's migration scheme has allowed 150 mainland persons to settle in Hong Kong each day on one-way permits, that is, on a permanent basis. Together with the economic integration with China, Putonghua (spoken Mandarin) has become more and more common in the city and recently replaced English as the language of commerce. Schools started to teach Putonghua under pressure from the government. To many Hongkongers, this new language in the city had become a sign of their subjection to another culture. Many began to worry about the threat to Hong Kong's unique Cantonese language culture. As a result, speaking Cantonese was more and more an ideological issue.⁸

The struggle to speak a foreign language can be symbolic of one's position of subordination. This is explored in the poem, "Fricatives," by Eric Yip. Yip wrote the poem in English, describing the issues associated with the difficulties of learning English as a second language in school in Hong Kong and equating this to his experience as a student in the United Kingdom in the aftermath of the 2019 protests. The poem is about the right to speak, to be heard, as well as finding one's place in an unfamiliar culture. The poem won the prestigious British National Poetry Award in 2021. The youngest recipient in the history of the award at the age of 19 at the time, Yip had recently arrived from Hong Kong to study Economics at

Cambridge University. The word “fricative,” a linguistic term to capture the sound of one pushing air through one’s lower lip against the upper teeth, is translated as “*mocaat* 摩擦,” in Chinese, literally meaning friction or conflict. The word holds a double meaning in this poem. It represents the linguistic difficulties Cantonese-speaking Hongkongers have in pronouncing certain English consonants, but it also alludes to the struggles of Hong Kong people in finding their voices in a culture different from theirs. Yip describes his poem as a kind of recent history of the city, especially, “Hong Kong’s journey from a colony to a battleground, to a site of exodus.”⁹ The battleground refers to the city’s many demonstrations and protests, while the “exodus” refers to Hong Kong’s biggest emigration wave since 1997, after the promulgation of the NSL. In terms of the city as a colony, Yip’s poem is as much about the city’s status before 1997, as after its absorption by mainland China. Both of these political masters are alien to the city. The nature of “fricatives” describes Hongkongers’ struggle with foreign languages, both spoken English and Putonghua. The performance of a fricative in speech captures the chafing, the inarticulateness, and the awkwardness one experiences when trying to pronounce words of a new tongue. The difficulty in speaking also reflects the larger challenges of surviving in a foreign culture, the experience of which can be both humiliating and frustrating, filled with *mocaat* (friction) and constraints.

Yip’s poem begins with the English-language teacher, Mrs. Lee, lecturing the narrator on the importance of enunciating fricatives correctly so that one can differentiate words like “three” and “free,” or “fought” and “thought.”¹⁰ Mrs. Lee tells a story of “three” men trying to escape from their imprisonment at Alcatraz, the notorious early twentieth century prison island in California. The attempt to seek freedom, however, ends up in death. Even had they successfully reached their destination, the nearby Angel Island, it is angelic in name only. It was an equally infamous immigration holding station for travelers from China in the early twentieth century. Similarly, as the freedom for which they had “fought” is futile, all that is left is a thought—a condition with which many in Hong Kong since 2019 could well understand. The poem thus connects the issue of language with many Hongkongers’ political experience.

The narrator is then taught the word “threshing”—how grains are beaten till their seeds spill out to become palatable rice. For many Cantonese speakers, the difference between the English vowels “e” and “a” is difficult to grasp. “To thresh” therefore becomes “to thrash.” To be able to enunciate “threshing of grains” properly is equated with the process of a “thrashing,” a beating to submission: “Fresh yellow grains beaten / till their seeds spill. That’s threshing. That’s / submission. You must learn to submit / before you can learn. You must be given / a voice you can speak. Nobody wants to listen / to a spectacled boy with a Hong Kong accent.”

The poet happens to be a “spectacled boy.” However, the most famous “spectacled boy with a Hong Kong accent” to whom those in power do not want to listen immediately brings to mind Joshua Wong, the young and very vocal activist, and the face of Hong Kong’s pro-democracy struggle. Wong began his political activism at age 15 along with Agnes Chow (see Introduction), leading the protest against the proposed institution of a “moral and national education” curriculum in Hong Kong

schools in 2011. He then took on a central role in the Umbrella Movement in 2014 before attempting to run for public office twice in 2020, both times disqualified by the government. He was finally put in jail in 2020 for “unauthorized protest” in 2019. The book he authored with Jason Ng, *Unfree Speech: The Threat to Global Democracy and Why We Must Act, Now* (WH Allen, 2020), was removed from public library shelves in Hong Kong.

The poet gestures toward Hong Kong’s famous protest icon, highlighting how political struggle has always been a part of the city’s legacy, referring to the earlier description of the city as a battleground. Some of the protestors paid with their lives for their political activism. Some got beaten up. Many would end up in jail and some “will have to leave this city.” Some, like the narrator, could go abroad to study, to learn to speak English properly to make their parents proud: “lucky enough to have to care how the tongue moves, the seven types of fricatives, the articulatory function of teeth sans survival.” However, like many who end up abroad, the narrator experiences another kind of defeat and humiliation—escaping from Alcatraz only to drown on his way to Angel Island. He speaks the unfamiliar language in a way that marks him as an outsider, often finding himself in a position of social and cultural submission, as he writes, using the image of a sexual encounter: “You will take a stranger’s cock in your mouth in the piss-slick stall of that dingy Cantonese restaurant you love and taste where you came from, what you were made of all along.” While enduring all kinds of indignity, the only comfort one finds is a simulated sense of home provided by the Cantonese restaurant. Even though the poet seems to be referring to life in the United Kingdom, one wonders if he is not also describing the general state of being Hongkongers, living in subjugation and alienation in a city that looks the same, but is no longer the home they know.

The poem ends by describing how the students who have been arrested are being released from prison after completing their sentences, demoralized, de-radicalized, and neutralized. Our narrator too learns to accept his place in society. This is reflected in his eventual stoic calm while eating in a Chinese restaurant: “*Just a tad more soy sauce please, thank you.* The television replays yesterday on repeat. The teapots are refilled. You spoon served rice into your mouth, this perfect rice. Steamed, perfect, white.” The proper way of “threshing” that Mrs. Lee wants the narrator to learn, or the “thrashing,” has by the end, produced perfect grains of white rice. He has learned to speak the language. Fricatives no longer pose danger of sparking conflict.

Yip’s poem is about learning to speak correctly. In Hong Kong’s new political environment, learning to speak correctly has a new connotation. Many young people are taught, literally with much thrashing, to stop using certain words, even innocuous ones like “*lyunsai* troubled world,” “*deoikong* struggle against,” or “*gaayau* add oil.” Yip’s poem brings to focus the experience of language in the present reality in the city.

How to express oneself safely in the age of the NSL is the subject of Lam Zik’s 林夕 poem, “*Wo cung hau ceot* 禍從口出 (Disaster issues from one’s mouth),” published in his regular column in *Ming Pao Weekly Magazine*.¹¹ Lam Zik is Hong

Kong's preeminent lyricist and writer and has been living in Taiwan since 2015. His name cannot be publicly mentioned in China, even to credit his work when songs with his lyrics are performed. In this poem, Lam Zik describes the new perils of speech, using the COVID pandemic as a metaphor. In February 2022, Hong Kong was in the grips of a serious wave of COVID infections. The city was under a strict mask mandate and stringent social restrictions. Large sections of the city were quarantined, and many residents were sent into isolation. The title of the poem captures the fear of the easy transmission of the virus through breath and saliva emitted during exchanges among people. At the same time, referencing the Chinese proverb, “*beng cung hau jab, wo cung hau ceot* 病從口入, 禍從口出 (Disease enters through the mouth; disaster exits from the mouth),” the poem gestures toward another kind of disaster that also emanates from one's mouth—speech. In this sense, Hong Kong is ravaged by more than one kind of malady. Reflecting this condition, each stanza of the poem begins with an exclamatory sound, represented by a character with a “口 mouth” radical:

噓 Heoi / Be careful/ Please be careful of the technique of your aspiration when you speak / You should know how many of these dreamlike bubbles escape through the gaps in the mask as you say the phrase “*siusam* (be careful)”/ floating in the air

啊 Aa / Be careful / Shouting might make you feel better / but you will have turned “be careful of the virus” into a virus. / Be careful with words / Try to avoid using explosive fricatives and sibilants / Fortunately, these do not include ‘*ngooini* (I love you)’

唉 Aai / for everyone's safety / learn sign language to transmit secrets / So those incompetent people won't be able to understand /

喔 O / Only the big people can speak in a loud voice / infecting the little people, resulting in what we see today / every breath and spray of saliva is from some big statements /

呸 Pei / They speak so loudly. They are so rude.

The poem opens by making references to the COVID pandemic and the necessity to cover one's mouth because of the danger of transmitting the virus through one's breath and spit. However, in the second section, the poem shifts its focus to specific kinds of verbalization, especially the iteration of words that contain explosive consonants. Cantonese is full of fricatives and sibilants; it would be impossible to speak properly without them. However, the poem suggests the solution is simply to forgo verbalized language, differentiating between lack of speech with lack of voice—the inability to speak aloud does not mean not speaking at all, nor unable to say what needs to be said. Lam Zik encourages speaking the truth but being smart in how one speaks it.

The band, “*Toufungmou dunggu* 土風舞冬菇 Dancing Mushroom,” demonstrated another way to circumvent the taboos under the NSL. In a version of their song, “*Sidoi. kuk* 時代·曲 *Fight for the Dawn* (The worst times version) (The

Chinese title literally means, ‘The Times. A Song’),” they simply skipped all the problematic words in their lyrics, humming through all the gaps:

Fire and smoke of the battle spreading**the whole city**
 lights flickering and changing**the light of dawn is near
 who***who*** Explain the truth
 who***who***the times ***
 *One can hear** receiving
 A generation carved into the tree rings

 still here ***
 **** ...¹²

By leaving all the gaps and holes through their song, Dancing Mushroom not only highlighted how absurd Hong Kong’s reality was but also how equally ludicrous and ineffectual the authorities’ ban on words was. Some things don’t have to be said out loud. However, this also means that the song was for a specific audience—those who could not or would not figure out the meaning of the song were not someone the band cared to communicate with anymore. A society filled with taboos is also an incomplete and divided society.

While Dancing Mushroom’s strategy was unusual, many singers did indeed become more circumspect in the lyrics of their songs, using careful strategies and images to sidestep certain words and phrases, adopting an attitude of “*ming zau ming* 明就明 (you’ll understand if you understand).” How audiences understood these works was often a projection of their own politics. However, this created a situation where, as in the case of the school principal and his reading of Dear Jane’s song, or the police banning the phrase, “Hong Kong add oil,” there was constant suspicion and over-interpretation of intentions.

What 7 You Say?

Not surprisingly, in such a climate of distrust and censorship, the Chinese translation of George Orwell’s *1984* was the tenth most borrowed book in 2020, according to the Hong Kong Public Library’s annual statistics. The original English edition occupied the ninth place.¹³ Orwell’s *1984* famously introduces, among notions of “doublethink” and “big brother,” the idea of “Newspeak,” a new kind of language designed to obfuscate.

To many in Hong Kong the Orwellian notion of “Newspeak” was embodied in the person of the city’s then Chief Executive, Carrie Lam. In an RTHK interview in 2022, for example, Lam insisted freedoms in Hong Kong had not changed after 2 years of the enactment of the NSL. She argued, “The government has no control over the media’s self-generated worries. It’s like the many who emigrated from the city, no longer wanting to invest in Hong Kong, or those who are too afraid to create or write—it’s all because of their subjective understanding of the NSL, using

the NSL as a ‘sacrificial lamb (*doizeoigoujoeng* 代罪羔羊).’¹⁴ This comment was made against the fact that all oppositional news media had, within one year, in 2021, been shut down and those in charge arrested and indicted. The city had fallen more than 60 places, to 148th among 180 locations, in the global press freedom ranking by 2022.¹⁵ There was only one Beijing-approved candidate running for the office of the Chief Executive in 2022, to be elected by a small group of representatives in what was called by the authorities, “Hong Kong-style democracy.”¹⁶ This kind of blatant assault on reality prompted the 2021 song, “*ngaamaa* 啱呀 (You’re Right),” from MC SH and the band, Tonick. Confronted with the absurdity of the new reality, resigned acceptance is the only way to respond to power:

You’re right; you’re right. Everything you say is right. That’s right; that’s right. If you are the one to say it, then it’s right. You’re right; you’re right...

Don’t think too much when speaking—that’s my attitude right now. Trying to speak *jan waa* 人話 (human speech) would just get you stabbed in your back. No need to follow the rules. That’s because having connections is king. No need for progress. Treat this as a dead-end.

The more I go on, the more excited I become. I think, I might be stepping on the line soon, but I don’t know where the line is, plus, they are all so petty. *It’s time to say goodbye*. It’s better that I keep it in a bit. Just sing something meaningless to let out some steam.

You’re right; you’re right. Everything you say is right ...¹⁷

Carrie Lam’s particular rhetorical practice was prescriptive, formal, and combative. One of Lam’s pat phrases, “*bit jau jungsam* 別有用心 (having ulterior motives),” was applied to a wide range of issues. Rather than addressing the use of excessive force by the police in the suppression of the protest in 2019, she accused those who raised the question as “having ulterior motives.” Rather than commenting on whether there were human rights violations in Hong Kong, she blamed foreign governments for having ulterior motives, trying to smear the Hong Kong government. In other words, instead of answering a question, she attacked the person asking the question. In the same way, she dismissed all public expressions of discontent as traitorous, demonstrating an extraordinary re-definition of the idea of civic discussion.

Corresponding with the Hong Kong government’s tightening control over the city under Lam was the rise of a new political language, a form of official way of speaking adopted from Beijing. These Carrie Lam-isms were straight out of the “Wolf Warrior Diplomacy” playbook, the combative verbal strategy commonly employed by Beijing’s diplomatic corps. The official rules of the game were never admitting mistakes, never apologizing, and aggressively denouncing criticisms:¹⁸

There are words and phrases that frequently appear in mainland China’s official statements and communications that have generally been recognized as common official usages in Chinese, such as “*sowai* 所謂 so-called,” “*ginkyut faandoei* 堅決反對 [resolutely] opposed,” “*batwui dakcing* 不會得逞 will not

succeed.” The Hong Kong chief executive had in the past only used these political idioms when attending Mainland Chinese official functions. However, a tally by the Chinese BBC News discovered that in recent years, especially since the beginning of the wave of protests in 2019, the Hong Kong government had been using this type of rhetoric more and more often in different situations.¹⁹

Lam’s responses to all the discontent in her tenure as Hong Kong’s Chief Executive seemed to be premised on two basic presumptions. First, those who deviated or held alternative ideas were deliberately attempting to cause chaos in society and sabotage the government. Second, those who held ideas contrary to the official agenda were all being manipulated by foreign governments that were motivated by their hatred for China. Officiousness passed for rationality. Like Lam, most other government officials also often used this strategy. Their prescriptive responses signaled to their interlocutors and audiences, especially those holding alternative views, that there was no room for discussion.

However, in this strange language regime, even a skillful practitioner like Lam occasionally slipped up. During a press conference in January 2022, in response to a reporter’s question about what the new Beijing directive, the “Dynamic Zero” COVID policy, meant, Lam used a classical Chinese idiom, saying she was not “*ci zok jung ze* 此作俑者 (the one who initiated it),” causing much snickering around the city. This phrase is the first part of a sentence from Mencius that ends with four other words, “*kei mou hau fu* 其無後乎 (will be without progeny),” and carries within it both a specific historical context and an entire allegorical world. The whole saying, in its original context, means that the one who initiated the use of burial figurines (i.e., rulers who carry out elaborate funereal rites without regard to the starving common people) will be without progeny (i.e., no one to carry on their family names—a travesty in the Chinese classical world). This saying is actually a curse leveled on those in positions of power for pushing excessive and exhausting public policies oblivious to the lives of the common people.

In using this phrase, Lam committed a stunning faux pas. She had probably just wanted to say she was not clear what the policy meant because she was not its designer. However, the effect was hostile and accusatory. Many wondered if she was secretly unhappy about Beijing’s orders, and this was a passive-aggressive way of expressing it. It could also have been a genuine mistake because classical Chinese is difficult, full of allusions, and seldom used in daily speech and writing. However, it was also well-known that Lam prided herself on her school record. She claimed to be first in her class every year, except for one year when she came in fourth, causing much bitterness. She retook her top position the next year. Given such childhood competitiveness and impressive school education, was it actually possible that she misused a classical phrase? Whether intentional or not, Lam had seemingly delivered a grave insult to Beijing. The Hong Kong media and KOLs gleefully speculated on the possible consequence of her misspeak. It is precisely because those in high offices had a propensity for using pretentious language and doublespeak that they were also more liable to become entangled in their own rhetoric, resulting in unexpected meanings. A week later, Hong Kong succumbed

to a severe city-wide COVID outbreak, rendering the “Dynamic Zero” policy meaningless.

Because of her image of impassivity and being in absolute control in her verbal armor, Lam provided another occasion for mirth at a press conference on February 4, 2020. The *Standard* reported:

Chief Executive Carrie Lam Cheng Yuet-ngor suspectedly swore in front of the camera on Friday afternoon, drawing attention from the entire city as well as the internet...talking about the work from home arrangements for civil servants at that time. However, she seemed to be in a hurry and suspectedly said, ‘Apart from supplying...uhh no f**k...Apart from providing emergent and necessary anti-pandemic services, all civil servants would be working at home’.²⁰

Whether or not she actually swore was beside the point. It was the idea that she might have betrayed, albeit accidentally, a hint of true emotion and humanity that amused the public. Beneath the façade of power, she turned out to be just as ordinary as everybody else. Her gaffes, however, did reveal how unnatural and difficult the new language was. Even the Chief Executive of the city slipped up from time to time.

Jan waa 人話 Human Speech

The use of formal, overly proper, ornate, or literary language is strategic. It is an assertion of orthodoxy or legitimacy and power. Kovalev describes the various campaigns to “cleanse” the Russian language in Putin’s Russia, such as the 2005 “Law on the Russian Language,” which forbids the use of foreign loan words, and the 2010 “Law on protection of children,” which bans the use of obscene language. These efforts, Kovalev explains, reveal the ideological importance of language in the “conceptual toolbox of nation building.”²¹

Linguistic purity is equated with state orthodoxy and control. Russia’s clean-language campaign is an attempt to create a world that is highly prescriptive: some things are inherently legitimate, and some are not, and these norms are determined in Moscow. According to Rann,

Although Putin himself has a penchant for crude expressions, he avoids obscenity and his time in power has featured repeated attempted crackdowns on public profanity, as a way of signaling both a commitment to ‘traditional values,’ and central control over freedom of expression. This is a refusal to countenance both how people really talk and what people might really think about their national identity.²²

Such campaigns against vulgarities, Rann also observes, often, by accident or design, coincided with Russia’s military aggression against Ukraine, demonstrating how behind the “prissiness” of the language of the ruler is an aggressive state agenda. During the various unsuccessful peace negotiations between Russia

and Ukraine since the beginning of Russia's invasion in 2022, while the former's formal use of language was an assertion of national power and legitimacy, the latter's liberal use of obscenities was a display of defiance.²³

The alien lexicon and officious formality in speech that Carrie Lam adopted in her capacity as Hong Kong's CEO, likewise, was meant to assert power and control rather than to communicate. The other side gave up listening and deliberately assumed language that violated social propriety to challenge this authority. This failure of communication was especially evident during a government press event to address the "7/21 Incident." On July 21, 2019, in the town of Yuen Long, close to the border with China, a group of more than 100 men wearing white t-shirts, without provocation, viciously attacked riders on Hong Kong's MTR underground railway with bamboo sticks and iron rods when the train stopped at the station. It was rumored that the "men-in-white" were thugs hired to beat up pro-democracy demonstrators returning home from their rally at the city center. The attackers indiscriminately beat up everyone, including children, the elderly, and journalists recording the event. A total of 24,000 calls were made to the police emergency hotline during the incident. However, it took the police 39 minutes to arrive, exactly one minute after all the white-shirted men had run away. The police made no arrests that night. The violence, but more so, the response of the police, shocked the whole city.

The "7/21 Incident" was never resolved. There had only been a dozen or so arrests associated with the attack. The police never gave a satisfactory explanation for their tardy response that evening and refused to apologize for their apparent dereliction of duty. Already accused of using excessive force in dealing with protestors, this incident only further convinced the public of the collusion among certain pro-establishment officials, the police, and organized crime.

When Carrie Lam was asked about the behavior of the police and the speculation that the thugs were hired by certain pro-Beijing factions in the government, she vaguely answered that any violent act would be considered a "terrorist attack" in civilized societies. This nebulous response prompted the then RTHK journalist, Nabela Qoser, to call out, "*gong jan waa* 講人話 (use human speech)!" (Qoser was subsequently fired from the broadcaster in 2020 and now resides in the United Kingdom.)

This demand for Lam to speak "*jan waa* (human speech)," arose from exasperation with her Beijing-style "newspeak." If the "official speak" is to deflect truth through overly formal and literary speech, *jan waa*, the diametrically opposite, is deliberately explicit and coarse. On November 11, 2019, the pop singer, Charmaine Fong, released her song, "*jan waa* 人話 (Talk2Me)," to immediate, viral success. The song's MV on YouTube was viewed about half a million times within two days, out of a population of 7.5 million in Hong Kong at the time. It was awarded, by popular vote, "My Favorite Song," on Commercial Radio's 2020 Ultimate Song Chart Award, despite being released less than two months before the vote. Fong also received awards for songwriting and lyrics for this song. On top of these, she attained the much-coveted Ultimate Song Chart Award for "My Favorite Female Singer" of the year. Aside from the "7/21 Incident," "Talk2Me" is also a response

to the various incidents of police violence during the protests and the government's steadfast refusal to criticize the police force or conduct investigations into possible police abuse of power. The government's response to all questions about the police was ambiguous and vague at best, and dismissive at worst. The lyrics in Fong's song, in contrast, are bold and confrontational:

Listening to you irritates me. Your special power is to pretend to be objective. The only thing I did wrong is to be blocked. Injustice and regression--this is our miserable fate.

Truth has long ago disappeared. You wrote the plot for this empty, perverted drama. Without communication, trust is lost. You like to use clever words to confuse the public. I've seen through you.

Tell me what 7 you say. You even put on such an attitude. Have you fucking finished?

Your most important point through the whole process is lack of proof. Going straight from the left ear out the right--the screams and cries.

Tell me what 7 you say

Your conscience has long ago been lost, your mouth, ear, and nose, painted black. If only the world, shrouded in gloom would become clear again one day.

You know, I know, they know. We all know. We are all baffled.

*Talk to me. Talk to me...*²⁴ (Words in italics originally in English.)

The song is accompanied by an MV that is a continuous loop of re-rendered news videos of scenes from both the Yuen Long attack and police use of force on protestors. The anger directed at the government's obfuscation and disingenuousness is palpable in the song, with the lyrics riddled with swear words and strong language.

There are several repetitions of the phrase, "what 7 you say" in the song. "7 *cat*" is the Cantonese word for the number seven, and is a homonym of the Cantonese swear word, "*cat* 柒," a vulgar term for penis, and used to represent a bad situation or an asinine person. The number 7 also has a popular association with Carrie Lam, aside from the fact that she was the target of much swearing in Hong Kong. She was elected Chief Executive in 2017 by 777 votes out of the 1194-member Election Committee appointed by Beijing. The unpopular Chief Executive was henceforth often unceremoniously referred to as "*cat po* 柒婆 (hag number 7)," a "fucking hag."

If "official speak" was overly punctilious and literary, *jan waa* was deliberately vulgar and direct. The term, "*jan waa*," repeated several times through Fong's song is used to contrast with the authorities' untruths and deflections. It is to indicate how government officials and authority figures are so detached from the reality of the regular citizens, their language so alien, their value system so different, and their lack of compassion when confronted with the images of brutality so shocking that it makes one question their membership in the human race. If the speaker of official language aims to assert power and control through disingenuousness, correctness of speech, and behavior, the speaker of "*jan waa*" pointedly displays

high emotions and avoids normative propriety. “*Jan waa*” became a measure of a speaker’s honesty and sincerity in contrast with the repressive formality and hence, hypocrisy of government officials. When confronted with a difficult situation, all the officials retreated behind their special language zone, abandoning any effort to communicate. Nabela Qoser’s call to Carrie Lam to speak “*jan waa*” brought into focus the huge divide between the authorities and their constituents.

The use of slang and swearing, usually the province of rappers, is unexpected in a Cantopop song by a popular mainstream singer. The fact that a song, full of expletives could become the most popular song of the year (though the radio edition is a cleaned-up version), was also unusual, indicating the amount of frustration and anger many people felt toward the government officials at the time, and their constant deliberate use of imprecise language to deflect and confuse. The greater issue behind the refusal to establish real communication was the erosion of the long-cherished value of transparency and accountability of the Hong Kong government.

Obscenities, as Lam demonstrated when she “misspoke,” have a leveling effect. In Russia, Kovalev argues, in a brief period in the early 1990s, there was a proliferation of the use of obscenities and vulgarities as an assertion of “freedom of speech.” This language was also immediately adopted by dissident and émigré writers as a language of protest. The use of obscene words is, as such, associated with the expression of political dissent.²⁵

As expressed in Charmaine Fong’s song, it is not merely the choice of words that makes *jan waa* the opposite of the official language. It is the expressiveness, uninhibitedness, irony, and playfulness that distinguish this kind of speech from the formal, humorless, and prescribed language of the latter. In the song, official speak is described as calculated, dishonest, and unfeeling. In contrast, the impetuousness associated with swearing demonstrates authenticity and from the heart. Speaking *jan waa* thus also implies that one is a genuine human being, with human emotions and empathy toward others, while the alternative represents a highly manipulated person who is divorced from real life. Blakemore argues that the Orwellian “new-speak” is an assault on humanity’s linguistic reality, which is an attack on our fundamental nature.²⁶

Language of Defiance

There has been much discussion about the importance of profanities in Hong Kong’s vernacular. All languages contain expletives. However, among the Chinese languages, Cantonese is notorious for being particularly laced with colorful idioms and swear words. Swearing, especially among younger Hongkongers, is not only a way to distinguish themselves from the attitudes and values of older people and the authorities but it is also to highlight the characteristics of Cantonese and to distinguish it, especially, from Putonghua. Many Hong Kong swear words are created by combining English words with Hong Kong Cantonese, or the Cantonese-ification of English sounds. Many of these words are created and popularized by Hong Kong

movies.²⁷ As a result, Hong Kong swear words are distinct from those of other Chinese languages, even Guangzhou's Cantonese, and are particular indicators of localness.

All films shown in Hong Kong have to be rated by the Office for Film, Newspaper, and Article Administration. (Since 2021, films have been subjected to the new Film Censorship Ordinance 392. Those deemed to endanger China's national security are banned from being shown in the city.) Films with profanities can only be released to a restricted audience, which will affect their box office income. To circumvent this, filmmakers became creative in hiding swear words in innocuous words and phrases. Many new swear words were created by using close homonymic substitutes for original profanities. Over time, these seemingly innocuous words replaced the original expletives. Thus, the very nature of profanities in recent Hong Kong vernacular is associated with defying censorship. The vibrant cinema of Hong Kong has in the past helped popularize many swear words in the language. In recent years, various online media, such as YouTube channels, and other social media platforms have been even more effective in the creation, transmission, and popularizing of new expressions. The uniqueness of Hong Kong's vernacular is a result of the city's flamboyant popular culture and its history of contrariness and defiance.

As the use of profanities becomes a form of local assertion and defiance, the attitude behind these usages also becomes a characteristic of the Hong Kong identity. The dominance of profanities in Hong Kong speech, argues Zan Jan Faai Daa 真人快打, has become the defining character of Hong Kong culture:

What I consider a dominant culture must contain three factors. First, it must be popular. Second, it must be accessible and easy to understand. Third, it must contain deep meaning. The moment these three factors are put together, it is already evident what Hong Kong's dominant culture is. That's right. It is swearing.

As he succinctly puts it in the subheading of the essay, "Profanities are the essence of Hong Kong culture. To defend Cantonese, we must first defend profanities."²⁸

In Hong Kong, language was used to distinguish those who self-professed to be pro-Beijing and pro-government from those who self-identified as Beijing's reluctant subjects. The contradictions between these two groups were reflected in the rift in Hong Kong's language culture, with the former embracing an overly correct and mannered speech, and the latter, a flippancy, and a flaunting of propriety. Of course, there has always been a formal and less formal register in any language, according to the social class of the speaker, audience, occasion, etc. However, the linguistic divide in Hong Kong has gone beyond these factors. Even though they continued to speak Cantonese, the ruling class of Hong Kong had adopted a whole set of vocabulary and prescriptive phrases that were distinct from customary local speech. To many, this further highlighted the cultural foreignness of the ruling power, reinforcing the idea among many that Hong Kong was in a new state of colonial subjection. To swear then suggests a refusal of identification with the state.

Notes

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