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

Shenyu Yan[1,a,*]

[1]*School of Language and Culture, Tianjin University of Technology, Tianjin, China*
a. shenyu021028@gmail.com
*corresponding author

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.

During this time, Hong Kong rapidly transformed into an international port and trading center. From the 1950s to the 1970s, the acceleration of industrialization made Hong Kong a renowned global manufacturing hub. In 1984, the Sino-British Joint Declaration was signed, laying the foundation for Hong Kong's return to China in 1997 and the implementation of the "One Country, Two Systems" policy. During the transitional period before the handover, Hong Kong's economic structure shifted from manufacturing to services, further solidifying its status as an international financial center.

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

Traditional Chinese characters are the traditional writing form that has been preserved throughout the evolution of Chinese characters, tracing back to the Qin and Han dynasties and even earlier forms such as oracle bone script and seal script. Over a long history, these characters have undergone various transformations, evolving from large seal script and small seal script to clerical script and regular script, ultimately resulting in the complex yet systematic writing form known as Traditional Chinese characters.

In the early days, Hong Kong primarily used Traditional Chinese characters, which were introduced from mainland China, particularly from Guangdong province. During the Ming and Qing dynasties, Confucian thought and the writing of Chinese characters held significant importance in society. As a carrier of culture and education, Traditional Chinese characters were widely used in official documents, the education system, and folk literature. With the social development during the Ming and Qing periods, the habit of using Traditional Chinese characters became deeply entrenched at various levels of society. Meanwhile, the advancement of printing technology and the publishing industry further facilitated the widespread dissemination of literature in Traditional Chinese characters. Many books, textbooks, religious classics, and local chronicles published in Guangdong were written in Traditional Chinese characters. These books entered Hong Kong through trade and immigration, further reinforcing the status of Traditional Chinese characters.

Therefore, as part of the Chinese character cultural sphere, Traditional Chinese characters have been continuously passed down as a carrier of culture and history in Hong Kong. They became the primary writing form used in the daily lives, commercial activities, and education of the Chinese community in Hong Kong at that time.

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.

Overall, age influences the script choices of Hong Kong residents. The younger generation tends to prefer simplified characters and English, reflecting their acceptance of modern culture, while middle-aged and older individuals maintain traditional culture through their use of traditional Chinese characters. This phenomenon highlights the complexity of Hong Kong's position in the interplay between globalization and cultural heritage [8].

4.2. Language and Discrimination

Since Hong Kong's return to China in 1997, the Hong Kong government has promoted a Bi-literacy and Trilingual policy, which means that discriminatory behavior against Mandarin is not officially recognized. With the development of network technology, online platforms have further promoted cultural exchanges between the two regions. However, the convenience of online platforms has also provided new channels for public opinion between the two places.

As early as 2013, a Hong Kong actor sparked intense discussions when he expressed on Weibo using traditional Chinese characters that "over half of the people writing Chinese are in China, and Chinese civilization has died on the mainland." This statement led to heated debates regarding the status of simplified and traditional Chinese characters in mainland China, as well as whether Chinese civilization should be represented by traditional Chinese characters. Later, the actor gave an interview to Xinhua News Agency, clarifying that it was a misunderstanding. He acknowledged that simplified characters were widely used in daily life but emphasized that traditional Chinese characters are also treasures of Chinese culture, and he believed that recognizing traditional Chinese characters while using simplified ones is an ideal approach.

However, with the current strengthening of internet regulation and the increasing exchanges between the two regions, discriminatory phenomena are expected to diminish over time and eventually disappear.

5. Current Usage, Impact, and Future Development Trends of Traditional Chinese Characters

5.1. Current Application

The usage of traditional Chinese characters today is primarily concentrated in Hong Kong, Macau, and other regions within the Chinese cultural sphere, with Hong Kong being one of the core areas for their application. In Hong Kong, traditional Chinese characters not only dominate the education system, government documents, and legal texts but are also widely used in public spaces and commercial sectors, such as street signs, advertisements, and subway directions. In Macau, traditional Chinese characters have been established as the standard script and maintain an important position in daily life, academia, and media. This situation highlights the ongoing relevance of traditional Chinese characters in these regions, reflecting a commitment to preserving cultural heritage while adapting to modern societal needs.

According to the 2021 census data from Hong Kong, 88.7% of respondents reported having sufficient Chinese writing skills to manage their daily lives [7]. This indicates that the recognition and acceptance of traditional Chinese characters remain high in Hong Kong, particularly among the middle-aged and older population. Even though simplified characters have been widely promoted in mainland China, the use of traditional Chinese characters in Hong Kong society remains stable. This phenomenon is closely linked to Hong Kong's unique historical background, cultural identity, and educational system.

In addition, with the advancement of technology, the use of traditional Chinese characters in modern digital environments has become more convenient. Input methods and font display options for traditional Chinese characters have become widely available on devices such as smartphones and computers, addressing the complexities of writing in traditional script in the past. Social media platforms like Facebook and Instagram also offer input support for traditional Chinese characters, allowing users in Hong Kong and other regions to express themselves freely in the digital space. Traditional Chinese characters are not only a part of the culture in Hong Kong and these regions but have also entered the daily use of the global Chinese community through these mediums.

5.2. Influence

The role of traditional Chinese characters in the transmission of Chinese culture is undeniable. It is not merely a form of writing but also a carrier of culture and history, particularly significant in areas such as classical literature, religious texts, and calligraphy. Many ancient Chinese classics, such as the "Dao De Jing" and "Analects," are written in traditional Chinese characters; using simplified characters would diminish their original historical and cultural ambiance. From an aesthetic perspective, the complexity of traditional Chinese characters reflects their symmetrical and pictographic qualities in calligraphy, imbuing certain cultural expressions with a more serious and elegant atmosphere. For instance, couplets written in symmetrical traditional Chinese characters better demonstrate the beauty of balance in text, aligning with the traditional cultural pursuit of formal beauty. Therefore, traditional Chinese characters will continue to be revered in fields such as calligraphy, sculpture, and classical literature, while also infusing modern artistic creations with new vitality [8].

Traditional Chinese characters not only influence Chinese culture but also have a profound impact on other countries within the Chinese character cultural sphere. For example, Japanese kanji are

derived from traditional Chinese characters. Although they have undergone several centuries of evolution, leading Japan to adopt simplified forms known as "Shinjitai", traditional Chinese characters are still retained in various formal contexts, especially in studies or publications related to Chinese culture. In fields such as Japanese sinology, traditional Chinese characters are frequently used in the annotation and translation of ancient texts to ensure academic accuracy. This practice underscores the continued relevance of traditional Chinese characters in scholarly work and their enduring significance in preserving the nuances of classical literature and historical documents [9].

Traditional Chinese characters have also influenced the academic world beyond the Chinese cultural sphere. In Western sinology, traditional Chinese characters serve as an important tool for the study of Chinese classical literature and history. Many Western scholars must rely on traditional Chinese characters to grasp the deeper meanings of original texts when researching Chinese history, philosophy, and religion. As a result, traditional Chinese characters have become a cultural bridge within the global academic community, linking the traditional with the modern and the East with the West. This connection facilitates a deeper understanding of Chinese culture and its rich historical context, allowing scholars from diverse backgrounds to appreciate the nuances embedded in classical texts that may be lost in simplified forms.

5.3. Future Development

With the widespread adoption of digital technology, the use of traditional Chinese characters has become increasingly convenient. On devices such as smartphones and computers, users can easily input traditional Chinese characters by selecting the appropriate input method, eliminating the cumbersome process of handwriting. For example, modern smart input methods like Sogou Input and Google Pinyin not only support traditional character input but also offer predictive text and automatic correction features, greatly enhancing the user experience.

Furthermore, the rise of social media has provided more opportunities for traditional Chinese characters to be showcased and used globally. Users in Hong Kong and other regions interact with the global Chinese community through social platforms, sharing content written in traditional Chinese characters, which extends the cultural influence of traditional script worldwide. At the same time, cross-border e-commerce platforms such as Taobao and JD.com offer interfaces in traditional Chinese characters, enabling traditional character users to engage more easily in global commercial activities.

From a policy perspective, traditional Chinese characters remain the standard font for official documents and education in Hong Kong. The government continues to promote traditional Chinese characters within the education system, preserving their status in cultural heritage under the protection of Bi-literacy and Tri-lingualism policies. In the context of globalization, traditional Chinese characters, as symbols of Chinese culture, will continue to play a bridging role in cultural exchanges, facilitating greater understanding and appreciation across different cultures.

6. Conclusion

Hong Kong, as a society characterized by Bi-literacy and Tri-lingualism, reflects a complex tapestry of historical and cultural heritage through its language and writing systems. Traditional Chinese characters continue to hold significant importance in Hong Kong, particularly in education, government documents, and daily life, showcasing the region's commitment to preserving traditional culture. At the same time, the promotion of Mandarin and simplified characters facilitates communication with mainland China and other global Chinese communities, while English maintains its critical role as an international lingua franca in the context of globalization.

Despite concerns that the rise of Mandarin might threaten Cantonese culture, data shows that the two can coexist harmoniously, enhancing Hong Kong's cultural diversity. Traditional Chinese

characters not only retain their cultural and academic influence within the Chinese cultural sphere but also express their aesthetic and cultural values through calligraphy, classical literature, and modern creations, continually revitalizing their significance. As cultural symbols, traditional Chinese characters will continue to play an essential role in promoting the integration of tradition and modernity while enriching the cultural identity of global Chinese communities.

Overall, the use of language and writing in Hong Kong is not only a reflection of cultural identity but also serves as a bridge that connects tradition with modern development. Through the coexistence of multiple languages, Hong Kong exemplifies a unique fusion of culture and language, providing an important model for cultural exchange in an increasingly globalized world.

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