

The Development of Hong Kong Anglophone Literature In the Age of Globalization

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Abstract

English has become the global *lingua franca* with various Asian varieties emerged from former colonies. However, tensions between the Standard and the so-called non-Standard forms remain. The British linguist and former Head of English at the University of Hong Kong, Professor Roy Harris, accused Hong Kong English as “the worst in the world”. It is the objective of this paper to discuss how this accusation, together with the preference towards the mother-tongue variety of English, becomes the major force of resistance in affecting the development of Anglophone literature in Hong Kong in the colonial era.

To achieve this aim, Edgar W. Schneider’s classification regarding the evolution of English in the colonized community is adopted in tracking the progress of Hong Kong Anglophone literature. Other than the core reason that English was used as a political tool during the colonial era, it is found out that the problematic definition of Hong Kong English due to the absence of systematic categorization discouraged the transmission and popularity of the literary genre.

As the replacement of decolonization by globalization has become inexorable, it is essential to institutionalize this new type of Anglophone writing in preserving its historical significance and literary values. More than

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20 years have passed since the end of the colonial period in Hong Kong. This research will present the recent achievement made by the academia in promoting Anglophone literature in Asia.

Keywords: Hong Kong Anglophone Literature, Standard English, non-native variety of English

1. Introduction

The British administration of Hong Kong during the 150 years of colonial rule gave rise to new and hybrid forms of language and culture in this tiny metropolitan that was once a small fishing port in southern China. In *Postcolonial English* (2007), Edgar W. Schneider classifies the evolution of English in the colonized community into different stages. In his classification, Phase 4 is known as “Endonormative stabilization” (Schneider 2007: 21). This phase is characterized by the appearance of new Englishes and literary creativity in the colonial language. Although imperialism and colonialization gave rise to the increase of English varieties in both the “Expanding Circle” and “Outer Circle”,² the legitimacy of these varieties in formal settings remained controversial. In his 1968 essay “The British heresy in TESL”, Clifford H. Prator demonstrated his conservative view towards the illegitimate and unintelligible natures of the second-language varieties of English. He suggested that “[t]he ultimate original model for all the learning of English that takes place in a second-language situation was indubitably a mother-tongue variety of English” (Prator, 2006: 129). This suggestion actually degrades language as a mere tool for instruction, rather than as an interface between culture and identity.

² Karchu's model

It has been 50 years since the publication of Prator's essay and English has undergone drastic changes due to technological advancement and globalization. Through negating Prator's argument with the help of more recent linguistic theories that *shed new light* on the linkage between language and *globalization*, this paper investigates the challenges faced by using a non-native variety of English in the world of literary creation. Specifically, the case of Hong Kong Anglophone Literature will be studied so as to find out if Hong Kong has reached Schneider's Phase 4 in terms of literary creativity. Besides, the major problems in defining Hong Kong Anglophone Literature will also be investigated.

To achieve the above aims, this paper is going to be divided into three parts. The first part is a brief introduction on the challenges faced by this genre. A discussion on several possible ways to define the genre in the aspects of its linguistic features, writers' identity and subject matter will then be made. The second part features an overview on the development of the genre in terms of its teaching in Hong Kong's tertiary institutions. The final part concludes the findings of the paper and gives forecasts on the future of this genre.

2. Challenges of Hong Kong Anglophone Literature

One of the major problems faced by Hong Kong Anglophone Literature is the absence of authoritative definition. This problem leads us back to Prator's conservative opinion on the illegitimate nature of those second-language varieties of English. Does it mean that users of second-language variety of English are deprived of literary creation? The Oxford linguist and former Head of English at the University of Hong Kong, Roy Harris (1931-2015), accused Hong Kong English as "the worst in the world" (Ingham 2003: 1).

If the British Empire was characterized by decolonialization in the second half of the 20th century, our world in the early 21st century must be labeled by globalization. According to Judith Brown, “the number of people under British rule outside the United Kingdom fell from seven hundred million to five million” during the period of decolonization from 1945 to 1965 and “three million of whom were in Hong Kong” (Brown 1998: 330). The English Language eventually became the sole hope for Britain to demonstrate her nation’s strength through cultural imperialism. It was under this mentality that the British model was regarded as ideal in formal or classroom settings. However, a country can never own a language, nor stop its number of varieties from growing naturally. Prator’s conservative attitude towards language varieties is no longer applicable in the globalized context. English has already become a global language with numerous varieties emerging. In order to make literary works a reflection of people’s multicultural experience, the choice of language or the variety of English being adopted could not be a selfish political consideration.

David Crystal suggested that the expansion of English started in 1950s and it then “spread[s] around the globe so extensively” (Crystal 2003: 71). This objective observation on the inexorable trend defeats some of the misconceptions which have previously been raised by Prator. Prator’s preference over “the original” mother-tongue variety is based on the perception that the variety is “an imitation” and “the imitation is generally quite imperfect” (Prator 2006: 129). This idea is invalid as some other standard varieties of English such as Standard American English, Australian English and New Zealand English are theoretically “imitations” of Standard British English. Does it mean that they are also “quite imperfect”? If this is the case, American literature, Australian literature and even New Zealand literature wouldn’t be in the present shape. It is obvious that Prator’s

conventional belief regarding the superiority of the mother-tongue variety is based on a biased assumption. Jennifer Jenkins is for the point of view that “if English is genuinely to become the language of ‘others’ ... then these ‘others’ have ... at least the same English language rights as those claimed by mother-tongue speakers” (Jenkins 2009: 50).³

Other than the legitimacy of Hong Kong English as a second-language variety of English, there is one other interesting observation in understanding the challenge faced by Hong Kong Anglophone literature in the aspect of language. While conservatives condemn the use of transliterated local phrases and Cantonese syntax as “non-native” features that violate the linguistic principles of Standard English, Andy Kirkpatrick notices that some notable Hong Kong writers such as Louise Ho and Agnes Lam are actually not writing in Hong Kong English. He mentions that “[w]hether they write in an English that can be classified as distinctively HKE is open to question” (Kirkpatrick 2007: 145).

3. Defining Hong Kong Anglophone Literature

With reference to the challenges aforesaid regarding the choice of Englishes, three possible ways can be used to define Hong Kong Anglophone Literature in the age of globalization:

First, Hong Kong Anglophone Literature can be defined in terms of its linguistic features. One must admit the fact that writers of Hong Kong Anglophone Literature may not be native speakers of English. Instead of focusing on whether they are capable of writing in Standard English, more attention should be paid on whether their works reflect the bicultural and

³ Jennifer Jenkins deliberately added quotations marks for “others” as an ironic usage.

bilingual aspects of their lives in Hong Kong. In short, the sense of hybridity that shapes their works should be the main focus. Ha Jin, the Chinese-American writer who insists to use a rather plain form of English in his Anglophone works, has also been criticised of writing in a “too poor and too simple” way (Ha Jin 2010: 466). However, he is for the viewpoint that “[o]ne unique glory English has is a body of literature created by writers to whom English is not given but an acquisition” (Ha Jin 2010: 461). As the replacement of decolonization by globalization becomes inexorable, it is essential to institutionalize this new type of writing in English in preserving both historical significance and literary values.

In an attempt to retain Chinese elements in his Anglophone writings, Ha Jin has often localised his English by means of transliteration. For example, in the short story “Broken”, he has translated a Chinese proverb directly as “an old bull wants to chew tender grass” (Ha Jin 2000: 72). The phrase is used to describe an old man who falls in love with a much younger woman. While the phrase is grammatically correct, it is definitely not a native phrase. Transliterated phrases are not uncommon among diaspora writers. In his essay entitled “Mid-Sentence”, the ex-Chairman of the Hong Kong Writers’ Circle Lawrence Gray decides to retain the Cantonese term *Mo lei tau* to refer to the sense of absurdity and nonsense found in the popular movies of the renowned Hong Kong film director and comic actor Stephen Chow (Gray 2008: 74). These two examples of localizing the English language imply the uniqueness of local culture and question the translatability of the source language. Words like “tidbits” or “delicatessen” may not be able to reflect the local delicacy as truly and as vivid as the word *dim sum*. English has been enriched and localized as it spreads to different parts of the world. The native users of English were also responsible for this process. Terms like “coolie” and “negro” were entries resulted from

the expansion of British colonies and were seen as the early signs of localization. They carry derogatory connotations and are considered as offensive by the signified targets. Still, they were used by the British freely and are now being used as examples to show how “local features” can become something globally known. As English users possessed the power of localizing English through creating new words in appropriating their new milieu of usage, other English users from the “Expanding Circle” and “Outer Circle” would undoubtedly share the same rights. Moreover, the rights should not be restricted to the creation of new lexical terms, but also the authority “to innovate without every difference from a standard native variety of English automatically being labeled as ‘wrong’” (Jenkins 2009: 50). Thus, such a variety should not be labelled as illegitimate so that the variety has potentials for further enrichment.

Counter-arguments related to the degree of intelligibility of using new varieties of English are always raised by speakers of the so called “Standard English”. From the linguistic perspective, “native” varieties of English are not necessarily more intelligible than “non-native” varieties. Kirkpatrick points that the “analysis of *lingua franca* Englishes are rare” (Kirkpatrick 2007: 155). If more studies could be conducted regarding the communicative strategies of various varieties of English, just like what the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN) has been working on, the problem can be moderated while institutionalized “non-native” model will have a higher chance of being recognized as the variety for literary creation.

Regarding organizations or projects that help with the promotion of Asian Anglophone writings, it is necessary to introduce the Hong Kong Anglophone writer David T.K. Wong. Wong was born in Hong Kong and raised under a very multicultural background. He is both a writer of short stories, novels and memoirs. He is the founder of “David T. K. Wong Fellowship in

Creative Writing” at the University of East Anglia in the United Kingdom. The Fellowship awards £26,000 to a successful candidate to write an English language fiction sets in the Far East. The recipient of the award could be a writer of any nationality, race or gender. The emphasis on using English to depict the Far East reflects the important role played by the English language in general, rather than a particular variety of the language in the region.

The second possible way of defining the genre of Hong Kong Anglophone Literature is by means of the writer’s identity. However, the issue of identity in Hong Kong is rather complicated. For instance, in calling for submissions to a new volume of Hong Kong short stories in English, the editor Marshall Moore paid special consideration over the special political situation in Hong Kong. Although he did not intend to publish a volume of Anglophone writings from expatriate writers or Hong Kong Chinese diaspora writers, he also believed that these two groups of writers could produce “a more persuasive contemporary fiction than a ‘native’ resident” (Moore 2014: 5). In the traditional sense, HongKongers are categorized as the Cantonese population who were born and raised in the community. Other than this group of people, a wider definition of Hong Kong writers should also include those who come to work, live or even study.

Another iconic Hong Kong Anglophone writer is Veronica Needa. Her case can truly demonstrate the problematic definition of Hong Kong writers. Needa is a Hong Kong born bilingual playwright with Eurasian parents. In her play *Face*, she explores her identity as “a white woman with a Chinese heart” in a hyperbolic way. Through including Cantonese phrases in the dialogues of the play, she demonstrates how bilingualism is one of the key elements of the city. Her approach is to state the Cantonese phrases first and then to provide its English explanation for audience with no Cantonese background (Needa 2005: 26). This play reflects the hybrid feature of Hong Kong Anglophone Literature.

The final possible approach in categorizing the genre is by means of the content of setting. Just as the Pulitzer Prize emphasizes the depiction of American spirit and lifestyle, Hong Kong Anglophone Literature should also place heavy emphasis on the depiction of Hong Kong identity, spirit, mentality and lifestyle. In researching the trend of Hong Kong's literary creativity in English, Kingsley Bolton observes "a literary culture with a much greater vitality than previously existed, or recognized, which has more promise for the future creativity of English locally" (Bolton 2002: 48).

Having introduced two representatives from the genres of fiction and drama, a Hong Kong Anglophone poet should be introduced next. Louise Lo is a renowned Hong Kong Anglophone poet. Before her retirement, she taught poetry in The Chinese University of Hong Kong. Many of her poems focus on political issues such as the 1997 turnover and protest against the government's Article 23 on national security.

To understand the reception of Hong Kong Anglophone Literature in the academia, a mini research has been carried out in January 2018 to find out the reception of this genre in Hong Kong. Among the nine universities investigated, only two of them have not offered any relevant courses in the area. Table 1 shows the list of relevant undergraduate courses offered in Hong Kong. Half of the universities that offer relevant courses in the area have adopted a comparative approach in analysing Hong Kong Anglophone Literature with Anglophone writings from other Asian countries. It is certain that the effort made by the academia in promoting the genre reflects the inexorability of globalization. Students from the English Department cannot be confined to a single variety of English Literature. Other than conventional classics written by Milton and Shakespeare, English majors are also trained to appreciate Anglophone literatures from other parts of the globe.

Introducing them to Hong Kong Anglophone Literature can surely boost learning initiation and a stronger sense of cultural identity.

Table 1: List of relevant undergraduate courses offered in Hong Kong

Institution (English Department)	Relevant Undergraduate Course
The University of Hong Kong	ENGL2097 Imagining Hong Kong (offered in 2015-2016)
The Chinese University of Hong Kong	ENGE3320 Hong Kong Literature in English
Hong Kong Baptist University	ENGL4046 Hong Kong Stories in English
City University of Hong Kong	EN2131 Asian Literature in English
The Hong Kong Polytechnic University	N.A.
Lingnan University	ENG3264 Asian Voices in English
The Education University of Hong Kong	N.A.
Shue Yan University	ENG183 Modern Asian Fiction
The Open University of Hong Kong	ENGLA206F Asian Writings in English

In terms of the availability of teaching resources in the area, three anthologies mark the milestone in the world of Hong Kong Anglophone Literature. The first one is entitled *Images on Water*. It is a collection of English poems written by some of the most notable Hong Kong Anglophone writers. This anthology gives people an impression that Hong Kong Anglophone Literature can only be popular among educated elites during the colonial period. Starting from the 21st century, there appeared a new image regarding Hong Kong Anglophone Literature. *City Voices* and *City Stage* are anthologies that capture the anxiety and questions raised in the community as

Hong Kong's sovereignty transferred from the British government to the Chinese government in 1997. Both anthologies have collected writings from university students so as to support new blood of the genre. Other than printed anthologies, authorities see the need to preserve the valuable assets of our city via digital means. *The Hong Kong English Literature Database* was launched in 2010. Now the database has around 100 titles of Hong Kong writings in English. Each title also contains an outline for elaboration.

4. Conclusion

The everlasting debate over the status of Hong Kong English cannot be stopped immediately unless people could forgo the established bias regarding the superiority of the “native” variety over the “non-native” variety. All varieties have their significance from both the linguistic, education and cultural perspectives. The productive aspect of Hong Kong Anglophone Literature proves that many Hong Kong writers can communicate in a variety of English that reflects their bilingual background in speaking to the world.

As China is rising up as a world power and the world has paid more attention to Chinese language, Chinese culture and literature, it is predicted that the future challenge faced by Hong Kong Anglophone Literature is whether it should be categorized as a sub-genre of Chinese literature or English literature. Let's hope that the future debate would arouse more attention towards the aesthetic value of the genre.

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