

Language as tool

The fate of cross-cultural communication in Hong Kong and East Asia

Introduction

This section is part one of a two-part series. It examines the negative aspects of some of the more important uses of the English language in Hong Kong and other parts of East Asia. It is not meant to provide an objective view of English language use; rather it is an attempt to show its hidden, negative side, so that better objectivity can later be achieved. An important use of English in East Asia not discussed in this section is information technology; this use will be treated in a separate section dedicated entirely to IT in Hong Kong.

The English language has many uses in East Asia, but few of them have very much to do with maintaining a bilingual community. If you have lived in East Asia, then you know what a heavy rain storm with high winds is like, so you should not be afraid of this one. Those of you who observe this storm from a distance may wish to take note.

Discussion and Explanation

Tool of transaction

An English-speaking overseas businessman or -woman looking for entertainment in an urban metropolis far removed from his or her homeland might seek, or be tricked into shacking up with, a sexual mate of his or her host country for an unforgettable, overseas, one-night stand. Neither of the two partners to this transaction would have to speak the other's language, because there would be an English-speaking bilingual pimp to seal the deal and bring the two sides together. Once in bed the dominant partner of either side would have his or her way, and an asymmetric exchange of pre-existing sexual habits influenced by the nature of the global sex-trade and the cultural traditions of each partner would occur. If the two sides were equally matched, a more bilateral exchange of cultural and personal habits would take place. In both cases the primary medium of the cross-cultural exchange would be corporeal, and in both cases a cultural and pecuniary transfer would take place. In the end the overseas businessman or -woman would return to his or her homeland with a memory and a story that he or she could then relate to others.

Of course, such encounters are only one of a large variety of different encounters that take place everyday the world over.

Whether one is scaling to the top of Mt. Everest, bathing nude in a Japanese hot spring, or merely ordering breakfast in any one of several hundred prominent international hotels; it is these hundreds of millions of small bits and pieces of cultural exchange that make the tourist and English language industries two of the world's fastest growing global industries. One could be

riding down the Amazon river on a crocodile safari, gazing up under a hot Hong Kong sun at the world's largest Buddha, bartering in broken English for a cheaply produced, but functional watch that bears a stolen trade mark in Tel Aviv, or attending the wedding ceremony for the daughter of a prominent government official as an honored guest in the Philippines. In each case the traveler walks or rides away with a memory or an artifact that he or she eventually discards, or alternatively preserves in his or her conceptual collage of worldly experience. The cultural and intellectual fabric that binds these bits and pieces of information together is that of the traveler, not that of the society or culture where the memory or artifact was first discovered. What of the traveler's collage is understood by others is that which they have also experienced or can recreate in their mind's eye based on cultural values shared in common with the traveler.

Moreover, no matter where it is encountered, each time the traveler runs across a bit of news from the same part of the world, where he or she has traveled, he or she renders judgment with regard to that news based largely on these collected bits and pieces of information. A previous, favorable, overseas experience is likely to lead to a subsequent favorable judgment; a previous, unfavorable experience to the opposite. In most cases the standard of judgment for the news is not that of the culture in which it arises, because the traveler has not, and could have not, assembled enough bits and pieces of information to know what that standard is. Certainly something was communicated, exchanged, and even understood, when he or she was last there, but the understanding was -- more likely than not -- obtained through a contextual prism very different from the one employed by those who inhabit the cultural context in which the traveler acquired his or her information. Reading books about the places one visits can certainly broaden one's understanding, but just how many books does one read about the places one has visited?

Those who can understand the news and interpret it properly for the traveler are those who know both the culture of the traveler and that of the society in which the news arises; or alternatively, those who have experienced sufficiently the cultures of several different societies, so as to be able to distinguish easily among what is common to many, unique to most, and shared by all societies. Certainly those who spend a good deal of time residing in international hotels probably have a good grasp of what others, who spend similar time in the same or other international hotels, are thinking. Their standard for judgment, however, is that of other wandering globalists and hosting local residents who desire their presence -- not the local residents, who must deal with the problems that globalists bring with them and their local hosts usher in. As these latter often pay little attention to the needs of their own society, the misunderstanding can be substantial.

Even those with more deeply rooted, multicultural experience find it difficult to offer proper explanations for foreign news events without good knowledge of the society in which the events take place. They can surmise and even guess right, but can never know with certainty, until others who know well the societies in which the events have taken place, confirm their judgment. Such interpretations also risk being falsely interpreted, if the interpreters are not familiar with the culture and system of values of their audience. Moreover, most third-party interpretations are provided in broad, over generalizing, brush strokes so as to hold the attention of general audiences, who would otherwise drown in a sea of

detail and nuance only truly appreciable by those who have spent many years in the cultures in which the events take place.

The facilitating role of the aforementioned bilingual pimp whose broken English makes the cultural exchange possible, although distasteful to some and perhaps even most, is both common and usual -- both in the tourism and international education industries. One trades experience and information for money across cultures, with the common understanding that both sides benefit. The stated goal is cross-cultural, mutual understanding, the underlying realized goal is far more often the experience of travel and all the excitement, service, diversion, and adventure that accompanies it. It is this shallow and entertaining exchange that broken English the world over services best, and it is this kind of English that universal language requirements encourage most. It does little to promote cross-cultural understanding, and in most cases is probably even detrimental, because it can be used by those who understand the limits of such knowledge to manipulate popular belief and effectuate malign political and economic goals.

Bounded institutionalism

Another important role of limited English is similar to that which mathematics plays in the world of science. It is a language that once understood can be used by anyone of any culture to move logically, not always swiftly, from an initial set of commonly believed axioms to irrefutable conclusions that yield positive, negative, zero, or undetermined values. One has only to accept the basic assumptions, entertain a testable hypothesis, and follow a set of logical rules. These rules can be expressed in any language and require neither a profound understanding of language in general nor the complexity of a single language in particular.

Expression is, of course, very different from comprehension, and one tires quickly listening to the same linguistic patterns, however logical and meaningful, repeated over and over again. Exceptions occur when the substance of the communication is vital and the receiver's attention is commanded by his or her desire to know the content of the message -- not the communication itself. People who use English in this way are air traffic controllers and airline pilots, computer software engineers, diplomats, and a whole host of other teeny, but important professional minorities, who depend on pre-established institutional and linguistic frameworks constructed and sustained by truly bilingual people who cater to the extra-institutional monolingual needs of their semi-bilingual users. These needs are, of course, not only substantial, but often ignored by the arrogance of those who use these institutional settings to achieve their goals.

At higher levels of language competence, comprehension is often limited, because words and expressions like democracy, love, free enterprise, Asian values, competition, nationalism, and race mean very different things to people living in different cultures. Each term contains for one an entire life time of contextual experience that someone from another culture may or may not share. Nevertheless, each person uses these terms with a firm conviction about what they mean, and many with the belief that they mean, or should mean, the same thing to everyone who participates in the same dialogue. Moreover, the higher one rises in our world's institutional pecking order, the more isolated one becomes from those whom the institutions are suppose to serve, and the more

pronounced the resulting distortion becomes. This is especially true of national organizations, whose jurisdictions cross domestic ethnic boundaries, and regional and international institutions whose authority crosses national political borders.

Scholars from different countries have written entire books on the meanings of these terms in their own local, national, and regional contexts. A careful reading of each in translation yields a different picture in most contexts; not because the translator has failed to understand the concept behind the words, rather because there is more than one concept for each -- the concept used by speakers of the target language and the one used by the culture of the author.

To the extent that employing such words and concepts repeatedly, in different contexts among the same people, can identify these conceptual discrepancies and remove them from the dialogue, institution building is very useful. Unfortunately, the problem reappears when those housed within these institutions seek to assert their authority outside of them.

Those who would profess scientific objectivity

The problem of bounded institutionalism is not limited to national and international political bodies exercising authority over local and foreign interests. Scholars of one country seeking to promote their scientific prowess abroad often apply assumptions that are valid only in their own society. This is especially true in the social sciences. Scholars often depend on literature written in their own language for knowledge about societies whose language and culture they are only partially familiar. As a result natural biases laden with same-culture prejudices gradually develop, are difficult to avoid, and are seldom overcome. Even studies carried out by foreign researchers in their target society are apt to err, if the researchers have not already lived in the target society for some time. This is because onsite experts often consult bilingual locals, who often know the scientific literature of their guest's culture better than that of their own. This tendency is especially common among scholars of less industrially advanced nations, who look to more advanced industrialized nations for the latest advances in scientific methodology and the opportunity to get published in world renown journals.

An important reason for inviting foreign researchers to one's own country is to receive invitations to visit the countries of their guests, or alternatively, to get published in the foreign journals on whose editorial boards their guests so often sit. As a result bilingual locals tend to flatter their guests by providing them with what they want to hear, rather than what they truly need to know in order to carry out objective research. Telling someone what you know about their own country, and showing only the good side of your own, makes for a very nice international, but not entirely factual, international exchange.

Scientific studies about the societies of others, that are rigorously carried out, but whose researchers enjoy only partial cross-cultural understanding, are apt to err in both their initial assumptions and the interpretation of their conclusions. The best way to know a foreign society is to learn its language and experience it directly. Such endeavor is costly. Not only are the outlays in time, effort, and money substantial, but there are local opportunities that one forgoes during one's absence. People at home are not idle while their overseas counterparts are collecting data and learning the languages and cultures of their target

societies. Thus, the political and social environments that exist when researchers leave for overseas are unlikely to be the same upon their return. As a result their prospects for certain appointments, determined just as much by whom one knows, as what one has achieved, are diminished.

This latter argument also applies to corporate executives who spend long periods overseas setting up manufacturing and assembly plants, establishing overseas branch offices, and researching foreign markets. In brief, much overseas investment is dictated not by what is best for the hosted firm and the hosting country, rather by the foreign agenda of the local firm's bilingual hosts and their overseas business counterparts. These latter cannot afford the time away from home learning the language and the culture of their hosts, and local governments in developing countries are often dominated by the special interests of local entrepreneurs, who provide local government with highly desired tax revenue. This is globalization at its likeliest and worst.

The language required under these circumstances requires little cultural insight on the part of the foreign investor and a less than sophisticated level of bilingual expertise on the part of the host. The bottom line is not cross-cultural understanding; it is profit and promotion. High margins that exploit structural differences in markets brought about by large differences in culture and local history permit high risk-taking on both sides. The obvious result is little consideration for the local population that does not serve the pocket book of the hosting entrepreneur.

Fortunately, globalization also brings many positive things, but these are the things most trumpeted in international news reports by those who overlook local interests, so we will not dwell on them here.

Conventions, publications, and invitations

The people who write technical papers often write in such broken English that what they write must be rewritten by a native speaker. Because the rewriter is often unfamiliar with the author's subject matter, the paper must be checked for accuracy and proofread. Often the proofreader is the original author, whose broken English is then reinserted into the final draft. When the paper is technical in nature a solid understanding of mathematics is often sufficient for the end-reader to blast his way through the poor English. As many technically inclined people are poor writers anyway, much of what would be unacceptable in less technical journals gets published as a result.

University professors who wish to publish in internationally acclaimed English language journals often attend international conferences conducted in English. Their attendance at these conferences has several objectives in addition to travel and a paid overseas vacation. Not only do they improve their chances of getting published, but they increase the likelihood of their being invited to teach and perform overseas research. Moreover, a well-written paper with multiple authors of little standing probably has a better chance of being published, than one written by a sole author of similar rank. This is especially true when the co-authors emanate from different countries and can provide international perspective that local author's alone are unable. Furthermore, papers presented and well-received at international conferences where referees from prestigious international journals are present have a better chance of being read and published, than those submitted with no personal appearance. In short,

charming people with bright ideas are more likely to find their way into well-known journals, than people with bright ideas, but no identifiable personality.

Professors without prior overseas experience are thus likely to find themselves at a disadvantage. For example, someone with good phonetic training but poor conversational ability will find it difficult to field questions and thus make a poor showing. Similar hurdles must be overcome by professors seeking invitations to teach overseas, as there are few institutions interested in hosting researchers, who have little conversational ability in the host country's language. The obvious exception to this occurs when the professor speaks a language that is in deficit at the host country's institution; in East Asia the usual candidates in this regard are native speakers of English. In this case language maintenance and acquisition on the part of the host institution appear to be far more important than cross-cultural exchange. In the end the foreign guest depends on his host institution to get around and mostly sees what his or her host institution wants him or her to see -- everything else comes in bits and pieces with no explanation.

Students, teachers, and textbooks

Grade school, college, and university textbooks employed in classrooms by bilingual speakers present still a different problem. Textbooks differ from technical papers in so far as they often assume little prior knowledge on the part of the reader. Thus, in order to stimulate the reader's interest and elicit understanding authors must provide examples that capture the reader's attention. What better examples are available than those drawn from the reader's own society and personal life-experiences? In other words, an author living in the United States writing for students living in the United States is unlikely to use examples that are well-suited for Hong Kong and other East Asian students.

East Asian grade school, college, and university teachers that depend on textbooks written in English by authors from other cultures short change their students in very much the same way that language teachers, who teach English using literary works taken from cultures with which they themselves are only partially familiar, fail to evoke student interest. The purpose of textbooks is to give students the opportunity to learn on their own -- namely, to acquire knowledge that they are unable to acquire in the classroom for any large number of reasons. Students confronted with examples drawn from a culture with which they are only poorly acquainted are likely to misinterpret what they read or fail to comprehend it altogether. Even if the author's examples are understood, maintaining a high level of interest is unlikely, because both the author's language and his culture are alien. Surely, it is better to pay a little more for localized, translated textbooks, than to have a larger selection of untranslated textbooks that go unread.

In Hong Kong, university professors are provided with little or no incentive to translate textbooks into their own language. This is because translation work is not considered original research, seldom find its way into internationally acclaimed journals, and fails to increase the world prestige of the institutions who support it. As a result teachers who rely on English language textbooks -- likely the vast majority of Hong Kong professors -- compensate by lecturing in Cantonese and using examples from their own society. Though students are better able to understand, their incentive to exercise those language skills

acquired in primary and secondary school diminishes. Not only is there less incentive to read, but students fail to acquire the English language listening skills appropriate for their field of study.

In contrast, professors, who lecture in English often do so, because it provides them with an opportunity to hone their English language presentation skills in an environment less intimidating than what they are likely to encounter while overseas before their peers. As the goal of the professor is to enhance his own skills, the incentive to provide students with local examples is not high. It takes time to develop and maintain quality teaching material -- time that few professors are willing to devote to their students while under pressure to publish. In such an environment only those students with the best English skills are likely to succeed. Students who are able to choose their professors are thus left with a tradeoff -- more English or better understanding. Those with good English will choose the former and those with bad English the latter. The end result is further polarization between those who know English and those who do not.

Tool of exclusion

Though Hong Kong children are required to jump many academic hurdles, the most difficult among these are probably the HKCEE and the HKALE.¹ These are competitive examinations whose primary function is to determine where a student ranks relative to his peers. One's success or failure on these examinations is not based on having achieved a certain level of knowledge, rather on one's ability to outperform everyone else. These are the floodgates to higher education that are opened and closed according to the number of vacant seats available at advanced level, local secondary and tertiary educational institutions.

In 1978 the number of candidates sitting for either of the HKCEE's two English language syllabi was 69,122; by 2002 that number had increased to 74,732 -- an 8 percent increase. The combined failure rates for both syllabi in 1978 and 2002 were 45.1 and 36.8 percent, respectively. Thus, between 1978 and 2002 there was a 24.5 percent increase in the number of students who passed.² Since the percentage increase in the number of passes more than tripled the percent increase in the number of students sitting for the examination, either Hong Kong educators were doing a much better job, or the academic hurdles that Hong Kong students had to jump were lowered. Certainly over the past quarter of a century improvements have been made in the way language is taught; notwithstanding, our previous examination of Hong Kong's educational priorities suggests strongly that many of these improvements never found their way into Hong Kong classrooms. Thus, it is unlikely that scientific and technological enhancement alone can account for the dramatic increase in the number of students allowed to pass. A close comparison of the way in which grades were allotted for Syllabus B in 1978 and 2001 provides further evidence that the

¹ HKCEE and HKALE are acronyms for the Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination and the Hong Kong Advanced Level Examination. The HKCEE is taken at the end of form V by about 80% of all students; the HKALE is taken at the end of form VII. Preparation for it generally requires two additional years of secondary school training. Passing the HKALE is required for entry into a local university.

² Number of passes in 1978 = $69,122 \times (1 - 0.451) = 37,948$. Number of passes in 2002 = $74,732 \times (1 - 0.368) = 47,231$. Percent increase in the number of successful candidates = $(47,231 - 37,948) / 37,948 = 24.5$ percent.

hurdles were simply lowered.³

Although the motivation for lowering these hurdles was likely to fill empty classrooms in an ever expanding tertiary sector, the motivation for maintaining the barrier after 1997 requires far greater explanation than that provided by the commonly recited myths of Hong Kong's educated elite.

Of the 64,832 day school candidates who sat for the HKCEE for the first time in 2002, 99.6 percent sat for either of the two English language syllabi.⁴ No other syllabus ranked higher in the number of candidates who sat for it. This phenomenal interest in sitting for the English language syllabi in a society composed of nearly 95 percent ethnic Chinese can best be explained by perceived, not necessarily true, need for the English language; governmental and commercial propaganda that reinforces this perception; artificially created structural incentives such as the HKCEE and HKALE; and high rates of examination failure resulting in examination retakes. For the moment let us concentrate on the last of these explanations.

In 2002 more than 55.5 percent of all HKCEE syllabi administered by the HKEAA demonstrated failure rates below that of the English language Syllabus B. Among these syllabi were included mathematics (one of Hong Kong's Big Three), economics, physics, biology, chemistry (50% of all subjects labeled College bound), and geography (an important subject area on the HKALE). Thus, if a student were able to pass as many of these crucial syllabi required for entry into any large number of senior secondary school programs, but not pass his English language syllabus, it is unlikely that he or she was admitted.⁵

Without entry into a senior secondary program one's chance of passing the HKALE is diminished, and entry into a Hong Kong university largely foreclosed. Being unable to enter a Hong Kong university is not the only consequence, however. For many children the English language determines whether they remain in school or enter directly into the local work force. For still others it represents an important parting of ways between long standing school friends. A careful look at the classified ad sections of local newspapers indicates that performance on both the HKCEE and HKALE can affect one's ability to find work. Many job openings are simply closed to Hong Kong workers who have not graduated from either form V or form VII. Indeed, so stressful is the preparation for the HKCEE and its English language component, many parents find it necessary to baby-sit their teen children just prior to the syllabi examinations.⁶

³ R. A. Stegemann. 2003 (October). Understanding the nature, cause, magnitude, and direction of English language attrition in Hong Kong society: Measurement and assessment. Appendix 1, figure 19 - HKCEE English syllabus B results [online document] (5 December 2003).

⁴ Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority. Hong Kong Certificate of Education Examination 2002. Table 5.1 - Patterns of subjects sat by day school first attempters. The HKCEE is divided into many syllabi; each syllabus examines one subject area. The English language subject area has two syllabi - Syllabus A and Syllabus B. Syllabus B is the more difficult of the two examinations. No student is allowed to sit for both syllabi during the same HKCEE examination period.

⁵ Senior secondary school program refers here to a large number of secondary school programs that provide form VI and VII level training.

⁶ It is common practice for parents to excuse themselves for non-work-related meetings on account of their children's exam preparation.

Both the HKCEE and the HKALE are administered by the HKEAA -- an independent arm of Hong Kong's Education and Manpower Bureau.⁷

Approximately 80% of all Hong Kong students between the ages of 16 and 18 sit for the HKCEE.⁸ In 2002 there were 122,098 candidates who sat for the examination. In 2001, only one year prior, 75,718 students were enrolled in secondary form V day school programs.⁹ As recent day school enrollment numbers do not change radically from year to year, this large off-year discrepancy between the number of HKCEE candidates and form V enrollment suggests a large number of repeat candidates.

In 2002 only 37 percent of all candidates who sat for the HKCEE passed the minimum requirements for entry into a senior secondary program. During the same year less than half of all candidates who sat for the HKALE met the requirements for entry into a Hong Kong university or other local tertiary institution.¹⁰ In fact, there are more students, who do not sit for either of these two examinations, than there are those who finally make it into a local university having passed both the HKCEE and HKALE. The competition is both severe and perverse.

This enormous filtering effect is clearly illustrated in Graphs 1c and 1d. Graph 1d is a pie chart indicating the average number of students for each of five key stages of primary and secondary school education. At the primary level there are two stages (P1-P3 and P4-P6) consisting of three years each; at the secondary level there are three key stages consisting of one three-year period (S1-S3) and two two-year periods (S4-S5) and (S6-S7). Each year corresponds to one form. For example, the 5th key stage consists of secondary forms VI and VII. What should be readily apparent is the disproportionate amount of the pie occupied by the the first three key stages -- somewhat over 75%. If equal numbers of students were allowed to pass each grade, these first nine years would account for less than 70% of the total pie. How the remaining portion of the pie is divided between key stages 4 and 5 is even more revealing; key stage five -- those who are permitted to prepare for entry into a Hong Kong university -- accounts for only about a third of all students enrolled in secondary school beyond form III. The bar chart provided in graph 1c provides actual numbers for each grade level of 2001 day school enrollment. Obviously, the

⁷ HKEAA is the acronym for the Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority. It operates as an independent arm of the Hong Kong Education and Manpower Bureau.

⁸ R. A. Stegemann. 2003 (October). Understanding the nature, cause, magnitude, and direction of English language attrition in Hong Kong society: Measurement and assessment. Appendix 1, Figure 1 - HKCEE School Candidates at ages 16, 17, and 18. [online document - pdf document 1.3MB] (5 December 2003).

⁹ Hong Kong Department of Education, Planning and Research Division, Statistics Section. (April) 2002. Enrollment Statistics 2001. Table 4.1 Classes, accommodation, enrollment, and repeaters in primary day schools by grade, 1992-2001, p. 81. Also, Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority. HKEAA Annual Report 2002. Appendix 6 - Examination statistics, p. 64. Note: Though secondary form V enrollment figures were unavailable for the year 2002, there is little reason to believe that they were very different from average annual enrollment for the preceding eight years. See Table 1b - Day School Enrollment by Grade Level (1992 - 2001).

¹⁰ Hong Kong Examinations and Assessment Authority. HKEAA Annual Report 2002. Appendix 6 - Examination statistics, p. 64. Of the 36,999 candidates who sat for the HKALE only 16,311 achieved the minimum requirements for entry into a Hong Kong tertiary institution. Dividing 16,311 by 36,999 yields 0.441 or 44.1%.

English language is not the only criterion for passage through this filter; certainly it is the most important.

Also obvious is that the English language has many practical uses; but so do many other subject areas. In a region of China composed of 95% ethnic Chinese, the vast majority of whom speak Cantonese as their mother tongue, it is difficult to comprehend why English should be given such a high priority. So let us not stop here.

Tool of allure and social discrimination

As a Western newcomer to East Asia one cannot help but wonder about the frequency with which one is confronted with one's own image on public display. Indeed, one is far more likely to confront the image of a still-life Westerner on a commercial billboard, placard, or magazine cover, than one is to meet a living Westerner in the street. How one explains this apparent contradiction in marketing demographics should certainly be of interest to anyone seeking to bridge the East-West cultural gap. Crucial here is that the Western image serves as an important tool of commercial exploitation for many East Asian and non-East Asian advertisers in East Asia, and that the English language is the language most frequently associated with Western images in the minds of East Asians.

The best evidence for this is, of course, the English words, phrases, and captions employed as decorative ornaments on the same billboards, placards, and magazine covers that display Western images, as well as those on the packaging of many manufactured products bearing either Western or East Asian trademarks and labels. Clothing, other bodily adornments, and hand-held accessories, on which it is more difficult or less appropriate to display images of Western others, are especially vulnerable to this latter form of exploitation.

The commercial intent of this use of English becomes obvious and even painful, when one tries, as a non-speaker of one's host country's language, to learn from the English advertising text important information about a manufacturer's product. For example, one knows that the product "leaves a beautiful sheen", but one cannot know whether the product is floor wax or shoe polish, unless there are other recognizable floor- or shoe-related products sold on the same shelf. One knows that the product has "a fragrant scent that will fill the room with the freshness of spring", but one cannot know whether the fragrance is that of roses, daffodils, or lilacs. One knows that the product is "effective and brings long-lasting relief", but what nonnative can know whether the relief is from nagging hemorrhoidal tissue or a similarly nagging runny nose? If you want to buy a dental product that guards against the buildup of plaque, how can you know that you are not buying an abrasive teeth-whitener, that probably does more to destroy your teeth than improve their appearance? After all, the pictures on the tubes of toothpaste, like many icons on a computer screen, are only truly understood after you have clicked -- in this case, have purchased -- at least once and discovered their true function. Even then one cannot always be sure.

Do you want to buy a product that is "biodegradable" or "contains no preservatives"? The chances of finding these words in English are nearly zero, as these and other product attributes important to consumers must be rendered in the local language to insure sale. What advertiser would waste scarce

advertising surface on a product's packaging simply to cater to the more important functional and moral needs of teeny foreign minorities who do not understand the local language of their host countries? Moreover, how many East Asians are ever examined about English language text that even relates to their daily lives? After all, English is the language of East Asia's elite -- those, who fight their way upward through the many layers of East Asia's English language educational hierarchy in order to obtain advanced social ranking. Indigenous commoners have their own language that the elite understand, and foreigners with money buy what they need in posh, upscale, commercial centers built just for them. Are Shakespeare and Poe not enough?

Hong Kong's also-rans

Although it is unlikely to get a Hong Konger to hold a door without your having to ask, it takes almost zero effort to get one to speak some form of English with you. You have only to ask someone in broken Cantonese about directions to a particular place, and if he or she does not reply to you in English his neighbor surely will. This is especially true, if the person you ask has trouble providing you with clear directions in Cantonese; or alternatively, you demonstrate the slightest lack of understanding about the directions he or she has given. If you want to identify the most confident speaker of English in an anonymous group of Hong Kongers, do the same but with a slightly elevated voice. If the confident speaker is within earshot of the conversation, you are almost guaranteed an answer in English -- not necessarily accurate or correct -- to your question. Try asking the Cantonese name of a Chinese fruit or vegetable while shopping in a local supermarket, and see if the clerk does not provide you first with its English name. If the clerk does not know the English name and kindly provides you with what you asked; just wait and see, if he or she does not then want to be taught how to call the same fruit or vegetable in English. Do not bother to provide the name in your mother tongue, if it is not English, because no one is interested.

Try to put yourself, for example, in the shoes of a Hong Kong woman who spent more than a decade learning a language that was supposed to one day provide her with a better job and access to greater knowledge, but who now works as a saleswoman in the vegetable section of a local supermarket or the menswear department of a local department store. Not only is the chance very small that she will meet a non-ethnic Chinese foreigner, who is not a teacher of English at a school in her neighborhood, but the likelihood that she will speak English with that foreigner is even smaller. Then too, most native English instructors are unlikely to purchase food that they do not already know and will probably have purchased their clothing before they arrived or while on vacation in their native homeland. In any case one does not have to be proficient in either Cantonese or English to read the numbers on a scale or in the digital window of a cash register.

What if the mother selling vegetables in the local supermarket has a child, who attends a school where one of the several native English teachers, who pass through her store several times a week, are teaching? Just like her mother some years before, the child will spend close to 20% of her classroom hours and an approximately equal percentage of her homework time studying English. Although the child's mother will surely want her child to obtain the job that she could not, the likelihood that her child will obtain it is little better than that of her mother's, if not worse. After all, the mother can now see where she has

ended up with similar effort. Nevertheless, the mother will push her child to learn English, because the school and many employers require it, and the mother wants her child to receive the highest level of education possible. Knowing that the child will have every bit as much difficulty as she in learning the language, she will encourage it whenever it is convenient to do so.

When the child sees that the mother never reads an English book, always buys a Cantonese-language magazine, and rarely watches an English language television program, the child soon realizes what a hypocrite her mother truly is, and will soon lose interest.

Now consider the Hong Kong mother standing before an elevator and speaking to her preschooler child in Cantonese. A male foreigner approaches from behind, and only after mother, child, and foreigner have entered into the elevator do the mother and child become aware of his presence. What so often occurs is that the mother's conversation suddenly turns to broken English. Why the abrupt change?

This instinctual we-they mapping of language, race, and appearance in the mind of East Asian parents is motivated by several factors. In a recent report published by the Hong Kong government's Standing Committee on Language Education and Research the three most popularly cited reasons among Hong Kong primary and secondary students for wanting to learn English were, in order of descending importance, to "find a good job in the future", "learn and acquire new knowledge", and "communicate and make friends with people from different countries or of different races".¹¹ These reasons and their ranking are obviously not the kind that primary and secondary students accidentally stumble upon while in pursuit of English at school; rather, they are the kind that children learn and recite in an effort to please parents and teachers, when they are very young. In any case the priorities are clear and match well those suggested by the other tools already mentioned above. What is particularly disturbing is the nature of international friendships that can arise from this prepubescent and preschool programming of race and language.¹²

Well, if learning English meant that all Hong Kongers would someday go abroad and live for several years in an English speaking country, then all would be good, because all Hong Kongers would learn what it is like to live in a foreign

¹¹ Standing Committee on Language Education and Research. 2003. Language education review: action plan to raise language standards in Hong Kong, January 2003. Chapter 3 - How do we get there? Section 1.0 - Students' attitude and motivation. Item 3.4 - Motivation for learning the English language [online document - pdf format]. This is a modified document for readers without Asian fonts. Bookmarks have also been added that were not included with the original document.

¹² The NET Scheme introduces Hong Kong children to trained native English speakers. These teachers are typically hired from abroad on short-term contracts. The scheme provides these teachers with an opportunity to experience a part of the world that they might otherwise only visit as a tourist on a brief overseas vacation. In return they provide Hong Kong students and teachers with an opportunity to converse with native English speakers, as well as exposure to different kinds of teaching techniques. As most of these teachers are imported from countries such as New Zealand, Canada, Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, their racial features are generally similar to what one finds on Hong Kong billboards, placards, and magazine covers. In effect, they reinforce the we-they mapping of race and language that engenders local racial discrimination. See EARTH's Viewpoint. The Swimmer: A failed communication. [online document]

country, and could return to their native land as enlightened world citizens, ready and able to accommodate their foreign guests as something more than money-toting investors and buyer-beware tourists. Obviously this is not what occurs. Rather, the majority of Hong Kongers never leave Hong Kong, or only leave it for brief vacation trips to an international hotel or resort area, where they can order their breakfast in English, if the items on the menu are not already written in Chinese anyway. Crucial is that they do not view their English language training as a lost decade or just another failed scholastic hurdle that once prevented them from attending a local university.

Thus, when Hong Kong advertisers provide Hong Kong's hapless polyglots with an opportunity to make use of their English as a decorative ornament on their clothing or a reminder of Hong Kong's international reputation as a gateway to East Asia, their self-esteem is lifted and their painful, educational past forgotten. When this same Hong Konger can then further assist a wayward foreigner back to his mother ship, what a feeling of joy and goodness it must bring. Not only has he helped a fellow human-being in distress, but he has also helped to preserve Hong Kong's image as a major East Asian tourist attraction!

Though exploitation is hardly something new to Hong Kongers, one cannot help but wonder, if they understand the true nature of their own exploitation. See Hong Kong's Window Dressers (pdf document - 40KB).

Emerging nations and the international arrivistes

Of course, the consolation prize that Hong Kong advertisers provide the majority of Hong Kongers is only the larger part of the story -- not necessarily its most crucial.

Economic incentive: Commercial access to the overseas markets of industrially advanced countries is an important key to economic growth, because it insures a steady inflow of capital with which to purchase machinery, technological know-how, energy, and other crucial raw material inputs necessary for industrial and commercial development. Equally important to development and growth is making one's domestic labor and capital markets sufficiently attractive to foreign investors, who bring this knowledge and technology with them. Resulting from this combined strategy domestically produced goods flow out of developing nations into more industrially advanced nations at bargain prices, and advanced foreign technology and scientific know-how that stimulate domestic industrial and commercial development and growth flow in. As there are many nations seeking entry into the markets of industrially advanced nations, the competition is considerable; only those who capture the attention of these nations' consumers are able to sell their goods. Moving in the reverse direction the competition is no less severe, as there are a limited number of global manufacturers on the one hand, and many nations -- both industrially less and more advanced -- seeking their capital, machinery, and technological know-how on the other.

Though eager to expand, large multinational corporations are constrained by local labor market conditions. In order to operate, maintain, adapt, organize, and even develop advanced technological inputs local workers must first be trained. Without the classroom discipline, study habits, basic knowledge, and work skills, so often acquired in primary and secondary school, few local workers are able to meet global corporate requirements. As large corporations tend to

sell in many markets, and hire local people to manage their local overseas operations, where they produce is much more a matter of pricing, convenience, security, location, and local macroeconomic conditions, than a firm understanding of the cultures and societies of the people whom they employ. Thus, national governments, who can provide overseas firms with a *ready-made* work force, significant tax incentives, guaranteed loans, physical protection, access to roads, harbors, and airports, and a friendly and amenable international social environment -- namely, upscale foreign ghettos -- are likely to succeed in attracting overseas investment. To what extent must *ready-made* include knowledge of the English language appears to be an unanswered question for which many local governments and workers only assume they know the answer.¹³

Political and ideological challenge: Though not the richest nation on a per capita basis, the United States is by far the world's wealthiest, and thus an important target for overseas investors and domestic manufacturers seeking large, penetrable, overseas markets for their exports. US technology is also highly competitive, and its tertiary schools are both well-endowed and very accessible.¹⁴ Moreover, as a former British colony the United States shares with many nations of the world, both industrially advanced and industrially less advanced nations, a common language and political heritage. Finally, as the heroic victor of the Cold War, the United States now wields enormous political and military power throughout the world. Donned with ties, credit cards, and brief cases, if not khaki uniforms, leather boots, and automatic weapons, US American business people, government officials, academicians, students, and soldiers cover the globe as ideological missionaries of human rights, political democracy, free enterprise, individual freedom, Christian theology, and of course the English language. In return, not a few aspiring students of economic growth and political power attend US universities to become learned in the ways of commercial exploitation. Because of its sophisticated financial markets, industrial size, commercial complexity, relative openness, and market discipline the economy of the United States also demonstrates extraordinary stability. As a result its currency remains the global standard for trade and investment.

Until President Bush declared war on world terror and invaded Iraq, no where in the world was the concentration of US armed forces outside the United States so large, as it is in East Asia. The United States has several tens of thousands of troops stationed in South Korea and a similar number based in Japan. It has bilateral defense treaties with South Korea, Japan, Taiwan, and even Singapore, and provides direct military assistance to the Philippines. From Singapore to Okinawa there is hardly an important port-of-call that does not regularly receive US warships. Not only do these ships patrol the shipping lanes so critical to the

¹³ Additional support for this point can be found in Alison and Koenraad Kuiper's article entitled "Constructing vocational aspirations linguistically" [1], *Globalization, Societies and Education*, vol. 1, no. 2, July 2003. Singapore: Taylor & Francis Asia Pacific. [online journal]. EARTH extends its gratitude to Koenraad Kuiper for sending a copy of their article.

¹⁴ As English is the working language at US institutions, as well as the predominant language of international academic exchange, these institutions are accessible to people from all over the world. As US universities are generally well-funded, open, and place few constraints on researchers, many people are also attracted to them. As a result, not only do top-ranked US institutions attract the domestic best from a large country, but also much of what is considered very good in the world at large. As a result entry into top-ranking US institutions is probably the most difficult in the world.

economic survival of the United States' Northeast Asian allies, but they engage in capture and search, as well as war maneuvers, with various navies of the region. Finally, it is far easier to count those East Asian governments that do not purchase US armaments than those that do. Australia regularly sides with the United States in political matters extending from Pyongyang to Yangon.

In short, it is difficult to live in East Asia without always seeing "America in your face". Add to this the British colonial legacy, and the Anglo-saxon political challenge is simply unavoidable. First it was the British and now it is the "Americans", and in the Middle East it is both at once and together.

The call of freedom: Let us put aside politics, human rights, democracy, and free enterprise for a moment and consider family life in the modern world. As there is hardly an urban teen and his or her parents, who do not find themselves caught in the contradiction between family and society, the constant drumbeat of personal freedom emanating from the United States is particularly seductive. On the one hand, youth feel bound to their parents who nurture and support them; on the other hand, these former are under constant pressure to prove themselves outside the family. This conflict of interests is no less burdensome for parents who invest so much in their children's future only to see them follow life-paths so very different from their own. In today's world professional career, social standing, intellectual interests, lifestyle, sexual proclivity, and even religious and political beliefs vary widely from one child to the next. Many of these differences cut squarely across family ties and weaken, what is by far, humanity's strongest social bond.

In East Asia many parents and teachers are additionally caught between national calls for rapid growth and development and a more immediate desire to enjoy a life beyond the daily drudgery of work that allows them to answer those calls. Life viewed by both them and their children on television, in books and magazines, at the cinema, and online can be phenomenally different from their own. Thus, when they see their children aspiring to the freer personal lifestyles of citizens of industrially advanced nations, many parents relent, if only tacitly, to their children's desires. Alternatively they drive their children so hard in the opposite direction, that these latter become torn, resentful, and fail. What neither parent, nor child appear to understand, is the social, cultural, historical context in which these images have been wrought.

Violent racial tension, single-parent families, urban ghettos, sporadic, but frequent acts of civil terror, drug busts, and a whole host of other socially unappealing events and data turn both parents and children away from modernization, and both seek ideological shelter in the wisdom of ancient traditions and philosophies. With all due respect, those who protect the old ways are often just as ignorant and afraid as those who seek shelter in them. As a result many look to those who have traveled and lived overseas for guidance. Unfortunately, these latter are often no more knowledgeable about modern society than the former, because the time they spent overseas was in search of language, technology, and Ph.D.s related to that technology -- namely, the causes of today's problems, not necessarily their solutions. Only when these same pernicious social effects begin to strike at home, do East Asian parents realize that East Asian values are not impervious to the social ills of modernization, and that technology, like money, is not a neutral player in the determination of human relationships, social organization, and our biological

and physical environments. Alas, emerging economies slowly, or not so slowly, join the ranks of industrially advanced nations as full-players, and their leaders are called upon to account for their hitherto unchallenged pursuit of power, wealth, and fame. Ironically, but not unforeseeably, the political means to bring these leaders to account are largely absent, and parents realize they have been duped, are verily trapped, and yearn with their children for positive social change. Unfortunately, all their leaders can offer is newer and better technology, taller buildings to inspire more awe and fealty, and further allusions to historical legacies that arose under archaic economic systems with little or no relevance in today's society.

So everyone pushes blindly forward to keep pace and never again be subjected to the technological advancement of others and the colonial exploitation that naturally resulted....

Although global problems often require local solutions, it is rare that local problems can be solved globally. No matter their origin, in order for ideas to manifest themselves locally, they must be applied in a way that is both understood and acceptable to those who are affected by them. In order to achieve this understanding the ideas must be disseminated in a language easily understood by everyone. With the exception of Hong Kong's international community -- those who depend directly on the English language for their livelihood -- the English language is ill-suited for this purpose. This is because, as a tool of exclusion and social filter, the English language has a built-in social dynamic, that moves contrary to local community. Better English means, better jobs, improved social status, and a general migration toward more affluent neighborhoods and social environments that can better afford the technologies required to cope with biological and social environmental degradation brought about by rapid economic development. Thus, where community is needed most, English is the least available and of little worth.

Tool of political and commercial deception

It is probably not a coincidence that the leader of the English language drive in Hong Kong is also the head of a successful local clothing store chain. This is because the English language in East Asia is often used in much the same way that clothing is worn -- a decorative cover of self-expression, collective solidarity, social role, personal aspiration, and deception. See Hong Kong's Window Dressers (pdf document - 40KB).

One has only to attend a local business conference where people from Hong Kong's international business community are likely to be in attendance. After a well-prepared speech given by a prominent Hong Kong government official in English, the guests turn to food, drink, and conversation. With the exception of the few foreign-looking businessmen and women in attendance and their local English-speaking counterparts, everyone else is speaking Cantonese. Alternatively, attend a public consultation conducted in English. Interpretation is provided from Cantonese into English, but not vice versa. Is this because no one in the audience, other than foreign-looking attendees are offered headphones at the entry? Should one be surprised that more than nine-tenths of the dialogue that follows the presentation is conducted in Cantonese? Can it be true that local attendees are so much better English listeners than they are speakers? Clearly, this is English for show. It is a way to dress-up a social function by making it appear international and thus socially upward and mobile.

If this is not convincing, attend a presentation given by Hong Kong's Department of Health to warn local residents about the hazards of atypical pneumonia (SARS). Once again foreign-looking attendees are provided with interpretation, but the presentation is given entirely in Cantonese. Is there not an implicit understanding that the majority of Hong Kongers do not have sufficient command of spoken English to be able to understand, and that commercial and political theatrics cannot be entertained when it comes to controlling and possibly eradicating a highly contagious and deadly disease?

Tool of escape and political diversion

Among the world's top tourism earners in 2000 only the British, Germans, Canadians, and Hong Kongers spent more on tourism than they earned -- nearly 60% more.¹⁵ (See graph 37b) What is perhaps less obvious is the number of Hong Kongers who are able to take advantage of this travel opportunity. Sixty percent of all Hong Kongers do not receive even 25 percent of Hong Kong's annual income from all economic activity. In contrast, over 40% of what Hong Kongers earn goes to only one out of every ten Hong Kong residents. (See graph 35a and table 35 for a more detailed picture.) Those who argue that learning English is necessary to satisfy Hong Kongers' penchant for travel might do well to consider just what proportion of Hong Kongers actually leaves Hong Kong on a regular basis.

Of course, the story does not end with who can afford both the time and money to travel, it also matters where one goes. Is it not likely that there are far many more Hong Kongers traveling to the mainland than such exotic places as London, England, New York City, or Paris, France? If Hong Kong's income distribution does not already provide convincing evidence, then consider what happens the world over, when travelers are confronted with the choice of making a long overseas trip to a distant land or a shorter overland journey to a neighboring country. Graphs 40b and 41 suggest strongly that the shorter journey is generally preferred. There are of course many reasons for this including vacation time, cost of travel, level of risk, and even physical hardship. If crossing the Great Pacific in economy-class seating is not one of the more convincing reasons for preferring a much shorter and more scenic economy-class train ride to the Chinese mainland, then nothing is likely to persuade you. Even when business-class seating is affordable, and one has the time for the long haul, the amount of English one requires to complete a successful journey varies with one's airlines, the targeted country or countries, one's overnight accommodations, traveling companions, and local itinerary. English is not always essential or even very useful, though you can find it in abundance along most major tourist routes.

Then too, brief escapes from the dull rhythms of daily routine, are not the only form of escape popular among Hong Kongers. Just prior to, and even after 1997, when Hong Kong's sovereignty exchanged hands, many Hong Kongers were concerned about their political, economic, and social fate. As a result many moved to Vancouver, Canada. Since then, many local Hong Kongers travel overseas to give birth to their children, so as to provide them with dual nationality. The current one-nation, two-systems arrangement enshrined in Hong Kong's Basic Law is a fifty-year contract at the end of which many Hong Kongers will likely face a dilemma similar to what their parents and

¹⁵ (HK\$12.5 billion - HK\$7.9 billion) / HK\$7.9 billion = 0.582 or 58.2%. See table 37b.

grandparents faced in 1997. Compelling every Hong Kong child to spend 20 percent of his formative years in pursuit of the English language can easily be perceived as an attempt on the part of government officials to insure that all Hong Kongers retain dual allegiance: one, *de jure* with the Chinese mainland, and the other, *de facto* with Hong Kong's Western trade partners. Thus, it is not just a matter of learning a language, that one may or may not use, to insure Hong Kong's economic future, but also a strategy to preserve a political and cultural mindset that differs from that of the mainland.

Of course, the political logic employed here is no better than the faulty cultural and economic logic already discussed above. If the goal is to inculcate Hong Kong children with virtues of political democracy and common law, then it would be much more effective to teach these in a language that is accessible to, and easily understood by everyone -- namely, Cantonese. But then, according to Hong Kong's democratic elite, Hong Kongers are not yet ready for democracy.¹⁶

Tool of record keeping and transcription

Of all the uses of the English language in East Asia this is probably the most frequent, tedious, important, and wasteful. It is important because good records are essential for good accounting, and without good accounting few businesses are able to survive. It is tedious and frequent, because what gets recorded is a large amount of information that changes much in substantive detail, but little in structure. Whether one is recording out-of-house transactions between sales people and customers, or in-house transactions between two employees, most transactions are structurally repetitive. In the end modern business is about providing a limited number of goods and services to large numbers of people based on well practiced routines by disciplined staff and/or work crews. Intellectually stimulating work that requires significant writing and elaborate presentation skills is largely reserved for managers, who have already honed routines similar to the ones of those they manage, or for professionals brought in from the outside who remain somewhat removed from the core of the business. Thus, most commercial, financial, and industrial exchanges are largely anticipated, and what gets recorded is almost always known in advance of the transaction -- only the number, amount, and pre-formatted descriptive detail change. This is business efficiency and boredom in its most rudimentary and essential form.

So what makes the English language in this regard so wasteful? Is it not the countless number of in-house and out-of-house transactions conducted between Chinese-ethnic Hong Kongers using English language formatted documents to record their transactions?

In order to obtain perspective with regard to this problem some general background information about Hong Kong industry is helpful.

Hong Kong's tourist industry

In 2001 Hong Kong played host to some 516,837 firms of varying size

¹⁶ See Understanding the nature, cause, magnitude, and direction of English language attrition in Hong Kong society, p.8, footnote #4 (pdf document - 1MB)

employing some 3,256,400 people.^{17,18} Of these half million firms only 1.2% were registered as foreign. If one adds government workers to the private sector total, and considers only the percentage of workers employed in the provision of business and consumer services, the resulting proportion exceeds 85% of Hong Kong's entire work force.¹⁹ Just who are the majority of these people serving, if not other Hong Kongers? Many would argue foreign visitors. Is it true? In 2001 about 13.7 million tourists visited Hong Kong²⁰ -- nearly twice as many people as there were Hong Kong residents during the same year!²¹ Notwithstanding, more than two thirds of these annual visitors were from the Chinese mainland or Taiwan.²² In 1997 their number accounted for only 38% of the total; thus there was a more than 75% increase in just four years.²³

Now set aside the origin of these tourists.

If the average visitor spent a week in Hong Kong during all of 2001, then Hong Kong's average foreign tourist population on any given day was about 3.9% of Hong Kong's total resident population -- a percent fraction slightly under Hong Kong's more permanent non-Chinese ethnic population.^{24, 25}

In 2001 Hong Kongers earned about HK\$64 billion in tourist revenue²⁶. As a proportion of Hong Kong's wholesale, retail, import, and export trades, including restaurants and hotels, this amount comes to a substantial 20%.²⁷ As a

¹⁷ Hong Kong SAR government. Companies registry. Key statistics. Local companies on register and overseas companies. [online document] (12 June 2003).

¹⁸ Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department. Hong Kong statistics. Hong Kong in figures. Labour. Employment distribution by industry sector. [online document] (12 June 2003).

¹⁹ Ibid. Hong Kong statistics. Hong Kong in figures. Number of civil servants. [online document] (13 June 2003).

²⁰ Tourism Highlights 2002. [online document - pdf format 200K]. (05 March 2003).

²¹ HK Census and Statistics Department. Demographic Statistics Section [electronic document] (6 June 2003). In 2001 the Hong Kong government counted 6,724,900 foreign and local Hong Kong residents.

²² Including Chinese seaman there were 6,825,000 visitors from the mainland and 2,429,000 from Taiwan -- approximately 67.4% of all visitors to Hong Kong. Source: Hong Kong Government. Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department. Hong Kong in figures. Transport, communication, and tourism. Visitor arrivals by country/territory of residence. [online document] (13 June 2003).

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ $(13,700,000 \text{ visitors}/365 \text{ days}) \times 7 \text{ days} / 6,724,900 \text{ Hong Kong residents} = 7 \text{ days} \times 0.0056 \text{ people/day} = 0.039 = 3.9\%$. Thus, a one day increase or decrease in the average length of stay of Hong Kong tourists adds or subtracts, respectively, about 0.56% to the proportion of Hong Kong residents that are tourists on any given day.

²⁵ In 2001 the non-Chinese ethnic population totaled 343,950. Depending on the figures used for all Hong Kong residents, the proportion of non-Chinese Hong Kongers comes to about 5.1%. Source: Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department. Hong Kong statistics. Frequently asked statistics. Main tables of the 2001 population census. Demographic and social characteristics. Population by ethnicity, 2001. [online document] (13 June 2003).

²⁶ The WTO reported US\$8.2 billion in tourism receipts for Hong Kong in 2001. Exchange rate adjustment: 7.989 HK\$/US\$. Source: World Tourism Organization. Tourism Highlights 2002. [online document - pdf format 200K] Table: World's Top 15 Tourism Earners. (05 March 2003).

²⁷ Ibid. In 2001 income generated from economic activities listed under the category Wholesale, retail, import/export trades, restaurants, hotels was approximately HK\$324.8 billion.

proportion of Hong Kong's entire regional economy (gross domestic product), however, it accounts for only 5%.²⁸

Tourism is a highly visible industry in Hong Kong, not because there are so many tourists; rather, because they are concentrated in highly visible locations, e.g.. on large, white, gleaming, passenger ships easily viewed from Hong Kong's many shorelines, and in popular tourist locations where Hong Kong's middle-managers and young professionals, together with Hong Kong's vibrant press corps, gather on weekends to hone their English skills and obtain leads for next week's stories, magazine articles, and film clips.

Yes, tourism is important to Hong Kong, but it is not nearly as important as those who promote the English language would have us believe.

On any given day the Chinese ethnic population of Hong Kong is about 94%.²⁹ Ignoring one's place of residence, work, school, and play, the chance of a native Chinese Hong Konger meeting someone with non-Chinese ethnicity is about 5.8%.³⁰ In a highly urban setting such as Hong Kong's the probability that one would both meet and talk is of course many times smaller. In brief, the use of English in Hong Kong society as a bridge between strangers, either domestic or foreign, is neither common nor likely. Surely among non-permanent residents English-use is far more likely, but as we have already seen, these residents represent only a tiny fraction of Hong Kong's total population, and many of them speak any one of a large variety of other languages while among their compatriots.

Hong Kong's trade industry

In 2001 Hong Kongers traded nearly three times what they produced. Of this trade only about 15% was in services.³¹ In 2000 62.6 percent of Hong Kong's imports came from the Chinese mainland, Taiwan, or Japan; 33 percent of all Hong Kong's exports went to Taiwan or the Chinese mainland; 41 percent of

²⁸ In 2001 Hong Kong's GDP was approximately HK\$1,216.4 billion. Source: Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department. Hong Kong statistics. National income and balance of payments. GDP by economic activity. [online document] (12 June 2003).

²⁹ Calculation: (non-Chinese Hong Kongers + non-Chinese visitors per day) / (all Hong Kongers + all visitors per day) = (343,950 + 85,745) / (6,724,900 + 263,219) = 0.061. In order to obtain the proportion of ethnic Chinese in Hong Kong on any given day subtract 0.061 from 1.00. This obtains 0.939 = 93.9%. Source: various previously footnoted resources.

³⁰ The chance of meeting is equal to the product of each population's proportionate representation in the total population on any given day. Thus, 0.939 X 0.061 = 0.058 or 5.8%.

³¹ Hong Kong's nominal trade volume in 2001 was HK\$3,542.8 billion. Its GDP also measured in current billions of Hong Kong dollars was HK\$1,279.0. $HK\$3,542.8 / HK\$1,279.0 = 2.8$. Trade volume in services was equal to HK\$512.9 billions. Accordingly, $HK\$512.9 / HK\$3,542.8 = 0.153 = 15.3\%$. 2001 trade volume was obtained by summing exports in goods and services with imports in goods and services. These values were obtained by multiplying their respective percentages times Hong Kong's current GDP for the same year. Sources: Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department. Hong Kong statistics. Hong Kong in figures. National income and balance of payments. Tables: GDP by Expenditure Component. Ratio of expenditure components to GDP at current market prices [online data] and Gross Domestic Product (GDP) [online data].

Hong Kong's re-exports went to either the Chinese mainland or Japan.³² Since 2000 these proportions have grown. It is unlikely that many Hong Kongers speak English with their mainland and Taiwanese counterparts, and it is equally unlikely that English is the only language spoken between Hong Kongers and Japanese. Moreover, as other East Asian economies rise in world and regional prominence their cultures and languages also take on new importance. Already by 2000 South Korean imports made up nearly 5 percent of Hong Kong's domestic imports.³³ More important, are East Asia's Chinese diaspora. As a wealthy minority population in Malaysia that has contributed significantly to the nation's commercial development, Chinese Malaysians have managed to guard their own cultural, linguistic, and social heritage, despite a major effort on the part of the Malaysian government to create a homogenous, Malay, national ethos. These diaspora form a crucial link between their respective countries and their Chinese counterparts, many of whom probably live in Hong Kong.

Of course, there are many other industries that make up the Hong Kong economy, each with its own special set of language needs. Is it not likely that in each of these the same story can be repeated many times over. What all Hong Kong industries share in common is free use of an oversupplied, overused, poor quality asset -- namely, secondary school English language certification.³⁴

Finally, what is generally recorded requires a limited vocabulary with few grammatical rules that do not require a decade of training to acquire. What requires more elaborate communication skills falls to a limited number of middle management or specially trained professionals. Moreover, with the exception of digitally recorded retail transactions, handwriting and keyboard entry is more likely to take place among employees within the same firm, than between customers and sales representatives in the market place. Just how much of this record keeping and transcription needs to be performed in English, and how much of it is performed in English because low grade, abundant English is made available free of charge by the Hong Kong government, is a question for which no one appears to have an answer.³⁵

³² In 2000 Hong Kong imported HK\$839 billion worth of goods from the Chinese mainland and Taiwan. In turn, it exported HK\$60 billion in its own exports and HK\$489 in re-exports to these same countries. Imports from Japan amounted to HK\$199 billion and re-exports to Japan totaled HK\$82 billion. During the same year Hong Kong's imports, domestic exports, and re-exports totaled HK\$1658, HK\$181, and HK\$1391, respectively. Source: Hong Kong Census and Statistics Department's Hong Kong in figures. Tables: External trade. Trade by main country/territory and National accounts and balance of payment accounts [online data] (12 January 2002). Unfortunately this data is no longer available online.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ See EARTH's own Hong Kong's Window Dressers [online document] and English or language: A case of severe market distortion [online document].

³⁵ There are many reasons why this question needs to be answered, including better cross-cultural understanding, greater market efficiency, improved balance between local and global social and economic interests, more political and commercial transparency, increased government accountability, and a whole host of other problems that are addressed in the many webpages and documents that serve as a basis for the HKLNA-Project website.