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"Kong Girl Phonetics":

Loose Cantonese Romanization

in the 2019 Hong Kong Protest Movement

by
Ruth Wetters

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"Kong Girl Phonetics":

Loose Cantonese Romanization in the 2019 Hong Kong Protest Movement

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ABSTRACT

Cantonese in Hong Kong occupies a specific cultural and political niche, informed by the unique context of the Hong Kong identity. During the 2019 Hong Kong protests, protesters used modified Cantonese online to evade detection and cement their identity as Hong Kongers. One way in which this was achieved is through a new online vernacular, dubbed "Kong girl phonetics" *Kong nui ping jam*. This vernacular borrows from grassroots romanization, English phonetics, number substitutions, and bilingualism in English and Cantonese to exclude all readers except young Hong Kong people, who show high bilingualism and high tech literacy and share the vocabulary of protesters. This essay explores aspects of this protest vernacular through non-comprehensive analysis of a thread on LIHKG (Lineage: Hong Kong Golden) *lin dang* 連黨 that is the first recorded example of "Kong girl speech."

Aspects of *Kong nui ping jam* identified here are: use of both Cantonese and English vocabulary, use of protest-specific vocabulary, loose romanization that does not correlate to any existing system, textspeak such as abbreviations, and number substitutions borrowed from both English and Cantonese. As well as *Kong nui ping jam*, another online vernacular is "Kongish," most visible on the "Kongish Daily" Facebook page, which has a mostly English vocabulary but borrows ending particles, difficult-to-translate vocabulary, and grammar structures from Cantonese, so that the sentence is legible in English but recognizably Cantonese in origin.

Young people are often the drivers of linguistic innovation as well as social and political activism, so it is not surprising that the Hong Kong protest movement has resulted in linguistic innovation. However, the new National Security Law in Hong Kong looks likely to curtail such freedom of expression, so potentially usage of such forums will decline as it becomes more dangerous for individuals to express anti-government sentiments online.

Keywords: Hong Kong, Cantonese, vernacular, online, protest

KONG GIRL PHONETICS

The official languages of Hong Kong are English and Chinese.[1] Although the government does not specify a particular form of Chinese, Cantonese is the language spoken by 88.9 percent of the population and is the language of government and education.[2] Cantonese is also the language of Macau, as well as the lingua franca of Guangzhou and much of southern China, and it is also common among diasporic communities all over the world, particularly in Southeast Asia. Today, there are approximately 68 million native speakers of Cantonese, of whom only 6.5 million live in Hong Kong.[3] Despite regional variation in tone and vocabulary, most Cantonese dialects are mutually intelligible.

The emphasis placed on English as a key subject in China means that both Mandarin and Cantonese speakers can be said to be generally familiar with English letters and phonetic pronunciations, but the two languages have diverged significantly in their experiences of romanization. The Hanyu Pinyin system was first published in 1958 in order to facilitate improvements in the Chinese literacy rate, but it was not until the explosion of modern information and communication technologies that it truly began to dominate.[4] In 2008, the Sogo Pinyin Input Method patented by Sohu accounted for 80 percent of all mobile input,[5] far outstripping Zhuyin and Cangjie, which predate Pinyin but do not use the Roman alphabet.

Conversely, a top-down standardized romanization system has never been taught for Cantonese, despite its being the medium of instruction in Hong Kong and Macau. There are two systems in general use in Western scholarship, both created by academics: Yale and Jyutping. The Hong Kong government uses neither, instead using a system (never officially published) created by the missionary John Chalmers in 1888, mainly for the purpose of naming roads and other public areas.[6] This lack of

1 https://www.gov.hk/en/about/abouthk/facts.htm

2 Ibid.

3 *Zhongguo yuyan ditu ji,* p. 125.

4 http://www.china.org.cn/english/news/242463.htm

5 Li, *The Language Situation in China*, p. 65.

6 Shin Kataoka and Cream Yin-Ping Lee, "A System without a System: Cantonese Romanization Used in Hong Kong Place

centralized guidance has contributed to a great diversity in Cantonese romanization: as well as Yale, Jyutping, and Cantonese Pinyin, romanization systems have also been developed by Sidney Lau, S. L. Wong, the government of Guangdong Province, and the government of Hong Kong SAR, adapted from the system of Rev. Yu Ping Chiu. Some are more similar to alternatives than others, but no two are the same.

Cantonese has long formed a key part of the Hong Kong culture and identity, which was called into question by the eruption of the 2019 Hong Kong protests. The protests were triggered by the introduction of a new extradition law that would allow suspects in Hong Kong to be sent to mainland China to be tried in a mainland court.[7] This was widely seen as a contravention of the "One Country, Two Systems" principle, and Hong Kong people rapidly organized to protest the law. Although many Hong Kong people participated, up to a quarter of the population by some estimates,[8] the movement was sustained and even led by young people, which became more marked as the police response became violent and the protests escalated. Many were now participating in illegal actions and faced possible arrest and conviction, significantly increasing the risk for those involved.

It is this that catalyzed the development of a specific online vernacular based on romanized Cantonese, described by users as *Kong nui ping jam* 港女拼音 ("Kong girl phonetics"[9]), or Martian language, due to its unintelligibility. The expression *Gong nui* 港女 (Hong Kong girl) is a popular term used online and in the press to refer to young women from Hong Kong, with negative connotations including perceived materialism and interest in foreign culture. In the on-line forum *Language Log,* Victor Mair posits that loose romanization here functions as a shibboleth, i.e., a specific custom that functions as a password limiting the size or makeup of a group.[10] In this case, protesters sought to exclude mainland Chinese Mandarin speakers, who were suspected of infiltrating the protests. Since Mandarin and Cantonese are in large part mutually legible, and since a lot of the organizing of the

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and Personal Names." *Hong Kong Journal of Applied Linguistics* 11, no. 1 (2008): 79–98.

7 https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/10/world/asia/hong-kong-extradition-bill.html

8 https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/aug/18/hong-kong-huge-rally-china-condemns-us-gross-interference

9 https://lihkg.com/thread/1478855/page/3

10 https://languagelog.ldc.upenn.edu/nll/?p=44034

protest took place online on forums such as LIHKG 連黨, there was a perceived need for an obscured form of written Cantonese. This essay will examine the structure and characteristics of written "Kong girl phonetics," through an analysis of the first documented use on LIHKG and the subsequent responses, assumed to be written by native Cantonese speakers.

On August 16, 2019, at 17:24, LIHKG user 衛生根 posted the following message, entitled "TAI DUC MING NGO KONG MUD YEA GEH, YUP LAI":

> LEI YUT GOR HAI 8.18 DA GA KAU TONG GE FONG SIK
>
> IF U WAI YI YAU GHOST, WRITE ON A PIECE OF PAPER
>
> "NEI GI NG GI NGO UP MUD 7 AH?"
>
> YU GWOR KUI TAI NG MING
>
> JAU GI KUI HAI YUN DING HAI GWAI LA
>
> TONG NGO TUI BAO KUI AH DIU!!!!!!![11]

Translated into English, the post reads:

> This is one way for us to communicate on 8.18 (the day of a planned protest); if you suspect there is a ghost present, write on a piece of paper, "Do you understand what the **** I'm saying?" If they cannot read it, then you will know whether they are a person or a ghost; help me ****ing spread this!

The Cantonese that has been romanized reads as follows:

> 呢一個係8.18大家交通嘅方式;
>
> IF U 懷疑有GHOST, WRITE ON A PIECE OF PAPER;

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11 https://lihkg.com/thread/1478855/page/1

"你知唔知我噏乜柒呀？"

如果佢睇唔明,就知佢係人定係鬼啦；同我推爆佢啊屌!!!!!!!

Clearly, the main function of this communication method is to obscure meaning and exclude all but young Hong Kong people. This is most obviously indicated by the post title, which reads "睇得明我講乜嘢嘅，入來" ("Those who can read what I'm saying, enter"). More features of Kong girl phonetics can be seen in the rest of the text. First, both English and Cantonese are used interchangeably: the poster uses "if" and "yu gwor" in the same post, despite their having the same meaning, and again with "ghost" and "kwei." The deliberate language switch adds no further meaning but serves to limit the audience to those who understand both English and Cantonese.

Some specialist vocabulary has been developed pertaining to the protests: the word *kwei* 鬼 (ghost) in this context is a word that acquired a new meaning in 2019. It is used by protesters to mean an infiltrator, either from the Hong Kong police or from mainland China, among widespread suspicions — later confirmed — that the protests were being infiltrated. In Cantonese, *kwei* already has the meaning of gangster or spy, as well as significant connotations not fully translated by the English word "ghost." Best-known is the Buddhist *Zhongyuan Jie* 中元節 (Hungry Ghost Festival), during which the spirits of the dead are believed to walk amongst the living. In 2019, the festival took place on August fourteenth, the day after protesters had surrounded a man during their blockade of Hong Kong International Airport who was believed to be a mainland spy.[12] This would therefore seem to be the origin of the term "ghost."

Next, this post is a good example of loose Cantonese romanization. Although the Hong Kong Education Bureau's curriculum uses Rev. Chiu's Cantonese Pinyin system, a strong emphasis is placed on literacy through character learning, so romanization is not especially stressed.[13] This, coupled with the need for romanization presented by communication technologies that use the QWERTY keyboard layout, has created an environment conducive to "Kong girl phonetics." First, in the aforementioned "yu gwor," there is a distinctive -or ending that doesn't exist in any official romanization system. It seems to

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12 https://hongkongfp.com/2019/08/13/breaking-chaos-hong-kong-riot-police-enter-airport-arrest-anti-govt-protesters/

13 https://www.edb.gov.hk/en/curriculum-development/kla/chi-edu/ncs-curriculum-documents.html

serve to lengthen the vowel and has the added advantage of looking less like the Mandarin *ruguo*. Interestingly, the "r" sound is based on British English phonetics, which is to say non-rhotic. This could serve as a further difference between Hong Kong people and mainland Chinese, who increasingly learn *Meiyu* 美語 (American English). Second, the negative *mh* has transferred to *ng*, which seems to have originated in Guangzhou and is sufficiently new not to have been noticed by scholarship.[14] Third, the vowel "a," as in *mat* 乜 (what) and *ap* 噏 (to say) has been transformed into a "u," representing the IPA /ɐ/, and creating "up" and "mud." Both "up" and "mud" are existing English words, which adds a layer of humor that will only be apparent to bilinguals. The use of "u" to represent /ɐ/ does not appear in any Cantonese romanization system, or either British or American English, suggesting it may be uniquely legible to bilingual English and Cantonese speakers. And finally, the use of 'gi' to represent /tsiː˥/ has to come from English phonetics, since no Cantonese romanization uses the "soft g." Most commonly it would be romanized to "zi" or "ji." Since "ji" and "gi" can sound similar in English and are often mixed up by learners, it could be that "gi" has been substituted here for "ji," which is likely to be known to Cantonese speakers as it is one of the most common words.

Finally, it is useful and interesting to look at abbreviations and substitutions specific to typed language. There are two obvious examples in this post: the English "u" and the Cantonese "7." Of course "u" means "you," and here, as in English, it serves as a marker of the casual register: the audience for the post is likely to be a group of young peers. It may also serve to exclude those with limited English exposure. The substitution of "7" for *chat* 柒 (literally meaning penis, but can mean dumb, stupid, rubbish, etc.), on the other hand, is purely Cantonese.

The response in the LIHKG thread was mixed. One poster commented: "Use English la Mars language too hard and waste time to decode. Fuck y'all LIHKG son English not very good meh?"[15] Although the comment is in English, the use of ending particles "la" and "meh" and the use of the word "son" which is a literal translation of *jai* 仔 (son or child, used in Cantonese as a general-purpose diminutive) nonetheless mark it out as distinctively Hong Kong English — however, this would not be

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14 Hugh Baker and Ho Pui-Kei. Complete Cantonese Beginner to Intermediate Course. Bilingual edition. Teach Yourself, 2015.

15 https://lihkg.com/thread/1478855/page/4

described as "Kong girl phonetics," but rather as "Kongish."[16] Another expressed the same sentiment in romanized Cantonese: "dllm fo sing man."[17] "Dllm" is a common abbreviation for *diu lei lo mo* 屌你老母 (literally **** your mother, used dismissively), and "fo sing man" 火星文 means Martian language. A third commenter pointed out the diversity in Hong Kong that has contributed to the need for English in the protests: "but ping yum dou ng hai gor gor hker tai duc ming ga wor ~ kui dei wa li d hai for sing mun" (but not all Hong Kongers can read phonetics either — they will say that these are Martian language). Note that again we see the substitution of "u" for "a," the function of "ng" as a negative, and the addition of an -r onto "o" endings. Additionally, the "d" representing *di* 啲 (some/plural) is Cantonese textspeak and is commonly used in typed informal communication.

Other users embraced the idea, trying to create even more opaque romanizations. In response to a post ending "kwong fuk hern gong, si doi kak ming" 光復香港，時代革命 (commonly translated as "liberate Hong Kong, revolution of our times," a popular protest slogan), another poster replied "KWONG FUK HEUNG KONG, TSZ DOI GUP MING."[18] Both diverge from existing romanization and are only intelligible because the context is obvious and the original is well known. For example, heung -> hern has to be a playful edit, as "hern," whilst being closer to a monolingual English speaker's approximation of *heung* 香, loses the glottal "g" at the end. The "tsz" syllable cannot qualify as a Cantonese syllable, since it has no final, so it can similarly be considered as in the spirit of play. These two, along with "gup," which has had its final changed, also show an effort to understand the extent to which the language can be changed without losing meaning: in this case, the slogan is so familiar that it can be changed significantly and remain recognizable, especially to those already involved in the protest movement.

One of the shortest messages was also one of the most effective: "w7u4?"[19] (What rubbish are you saying?) This combines Cantonese number substitution, English abbreviative textspeak, and a

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16 https://www.scmp.com/lifestyle/article/1903452/hongkongers-mix-english-and-cantonese-new-language-kongish

17 https://lihkg.com/thread/1478855/page/2

18 https://lihkg.com/thread/1478855/page/3

19 https://lihkg.com/thread/1478855/page/3

combination of the two: "4" is used here for its phonetic value, as it is pronounced *sei*, the same as the English word "say."

To summarize, the main characteristics of Kongish identified from this thread documenting its inception are: loose Cantonese romanization, specialist vocabulary, inclusion of English vocabulary, use of abbreviations, and number substitutions. Of the loose Cantonese romanization here, the most common features are the use of "u" to represent /ə/, the addition of a lengthening "r" after the "o" final, and the removal of tone markers. The specialist vocabulary I have identified here are the words *kwei* and *fo sing man*, as well as of course the incorporation of slogans specific to protest movements in Hong Kong. There are plentiful examples of English vocabulary, most commonly as single words in an otherwise Cantonese sentence. It is also common for Hong Kongers to use "Hong Kong English" to communicate online, which is mostly English but is interspersed with Cantonese particles and grammatical structures, and this would more accurately be called "Kongish" rather than *kong nui ping jam*. The abbreviations and substitutions I have included are dllm, w7u4, 7, and single letters standing for syllables with an /I/ final, such as d and p.

There is some debate about whether *kong nui ping jam* preserves Cantonese language and culture or contributes to its corruption. Some argue that it accelerates character loss, which is already a danger because of the increasing uptake of romanization in communication technology. However, linguistic prescriptivism is simply impractical at a time of globalization and technological advancement. The adaptation and creativity of Cantonese speakers in Hong Kong is impressive, and further documentation efforts would be helpful to linguists. Furthermore, the fact that young Hong Kongers are fully capable of typing in characters shows that the language is not being lost: even though their abstract recall abilities may be impaired, Cantonese speakers are keen to preserve the language, recognizing its significance as a marker of the unique Hong Kong culture.

After this paper was originally written, in April 2020, the introduction of the National Security Law, passed on June 30, has had a severe impact in Hong Kong. Protest slogans such as the one mentioned above have been banned, as has the unofficial anthem "Glory to Hong Kong," and any

content that can be construed as having "an intent such as secession or subversion."[20] These carry a potential charge of terrorism, with a maximum sentence of ten years' imprisonment. As a result, many young Hong Kongers have scrubbed their online presence, and conversations on LIHKG have already become significantly depoliticized. Off-line, brief protests have flared, but these are likely to become increasingly rare. It may be that Kong girl phonetics remains only a snapshot of Hong Kong in 2019, yet undoubtedly the language and culture of this resilient region will continue to evolve.

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20   https://hongkongfp.com/2020/07/01/hongkongers-waving-independence-flags-or-chanting-slogans-risk-arrest-under-national-security-law-report/

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