Teaching Hong Kong: Cantonese Humor as a Resource

Charles Lam and Raymond Pai

Abstract

This article discusses how humor contributes as a resource to the teaching of Hong Kong, both in the context of Cantonese language learners across the globe and for a wider audience who are interested in social and identity issues in "homeland" Hong Kong. We argue that humor is an effective resource in teaching Hong Kong since humorous texts in the broad sense are often nuanced and multi-layered, which are important qualities that match Hong Kong's (in)famous plurality and hybridity. Drawing on Shih Shu-mei's decentralized and pluricentric concept of Sinophone studies, this article argues that humorous texts help learners better appreciate the diversity and dynamicity in Hong Kong culture and Cantonese. In the context of heritage language learners, we show that humor and parody are excellent vehicles to allow students to connect with the target language in their own style, rather than tracing back to certain stereotypical yet imaginary roots of "homeland" that go against the psychological ownership of students' learning. In the Asian ("homeland") context, we illustrate the importance of comedy studies through a course in a popular education setting outside of universities. Through the course on humor studies and the stress on Cantonese language, aspects related to the Hong Kong identity are introduced while covering various topics, such as popular culture, parody, and the negotiation of the Hong Kong identity. This article shows how humor engages with the audience and enables dialogues and discussions on the otherwise divisive and abstract topic of identity, even in the local "homeland" context, in which speakers assume a relatively stable and homogeneous identity. We stress that learners' active engagement can be leveraged by the incorporation of both consumption and production (also known as "prosumption") of humorous content and learning materials that suit their own learning style and motivation, which is particularly significant for adult learners.

Introduction

Leung Ping-kwan 梁秉鈞 has famously asked the question, "Why is the Hong Kong story so difficult to tell?" (香港的故事，為甚麼這麼難說) (11). In this article, we show that humor is an effective response to Leung's question in the context of teaching the Hong Kong story. Why would one want to tell the Hong Kong story? Because it is an interesting story for many, not only Hongkongers or Cantonese speakers, to learn about postcolonialism, identity, or more broadly, languages and cultures. This article discusses two contexts where the Hong Kong story needs to be taught in a classroom setting. First, for learners of Cantonese in North America, Hong Kong is what motivates their learning to begin with. Many of these learners are interested in Hong Kong culture for personal reasons, such as popular culture (e.g., TV, film, and music), food, and history of the city. A significant portion of these learners are heritage speakers of Cantonese. Heritage speakers often acquire the heritage language at home as a minority language in society. In the case of Cantonese learning in Vancouver, teaching the Hong Kong story is more than academic or intellectual curiosity; it is also of "particular family relevance" (Fishman 81). The second context is the "homeland" context in Hong Kong, where Cantonese is the language used by the majority. There is an increasing interest in understanding Hong Kong society among the locals. The rapid social changes and development since the handover in 1997 have been reported to be followed by the identity crisis of Hongkongers (Leung and Lee 23; Mathews et al. xiii, 1), and subsequently the rise of a new local identity (Yew and Kwong 1088; Veg 323). As such, it is of particular interest for many locals to retrace the development of Hong Kong as a way to learn the history of the city outside of primary or secondary education.

Leung Ping-kwan has also asked, "How do we tell the Hong Kong story? The story is stuck in the throat, right at the lips. But it is elusive and morphing; it changes right when it is told." (怎樣說一個香港的故事？ 這故事哽在喉嚨，來到嘴邊，可是捉摸不定，變幻無窮，說出來又變化了)(14). Through a series of examples in films, language attitudes, theater, paintings, and multimedia performances, Leung has argued that the Hong Kong story is rich and multi-faceted, but the narrative can also be easily distracted. This article suggests that the equally multi-faceted genre of humor can be leveraged in teaching the Hong Kong story. The primary reason is the effectiveness of humor in engaging students in educational contexts. Humor is often considered an effective tool for motivating and engaging students (Banas et al. 129; Erdo du and Çakıroğlu 2; Garner 179). The secondary reason is that humorous texts often involve puns or

other kinds of double-voiced discourse, as well as intertextual relationships (Bakhtin 194). In the process of understanding these humorous texts or trying to come up with humorous examples in language learning, students become more aware of the contexts and references made in the jokes. In the form of a research question, we ask in this article, "How can we use humor to enhance the 'Teaching Hong Kong' endeavor?" To answer this question, we provide two distinct case studies that complement each other (Hong Kong vs. Vancouver), in the sense that (a) the learners are different (native speakers who are also very proficient in the culture where Cantonese is dominant vs. non-native speakers who are not proficient in the language or the culture) and (b) the cultural knowledge about Hong Kong and the Chinese-speaking world varies a lot.

Beyond the two education contexts outlined above, the Hong Kong story is also representative of the massive global displacement in the past decades. We argue the necessity of theoretical frameworks in designing the curriculum, in order to achieve intended course goals, even though students are not expected to learn about the theoretical framework. In both case studies, we emphasize the Hong Kong story told from a perspective that compares Hong Kong with all other societies that experience displacement and migration. International migration has become a significant issue in the past decades, as shown in Figure 1. In 2020, the 281 million international migrants will represent approximately 3.6% of the world population. This indicates that the issue of migration and displacement is not unique to Hong Kong, and hybridized identity should not be seen as a peripheral matter.
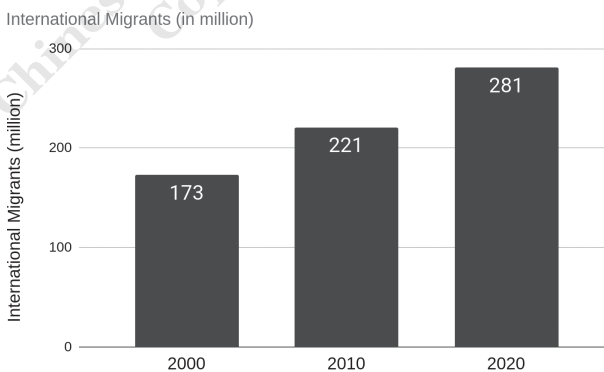

Figure 1. Numbers of International Migrants.
(Data source: Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations; visualized by the authors of this article)

To illustrate the significant presence of Cantonese speakers across the world, we show below the census data for Hong Kong and Vancouver. In 2021, 94.4% (n = 5,134,000) of Hong Kong residents aged 6 to 65 reported their language competence in Cantonese to be either "totally sufficient" or "sufficient" (Census and Statistics Department, Hong Kong Special Administrative Region 21). According to Statistics Canada, the total population of the Vancouver "Census Metropolitan Area" (CMA) was 2,642,825 in 2021. Among them, 150,665 residents (5.70%) of the Vancouver CMA reported that Cantonese was the "language spoken most often at home," and 47,595 (1.80%) reported that Cantonese was the "language spoken regularly at home." This represents that a total of 198,260 residents, or 7.50% of the Vancouver CMA population, are Cantonese speakers, which makes Cantonese the third most spoken immigrant or non-official language in the area, just slightly behind Mandarin and Punjabi. These numbers indicate the significant presence of Cantonese speakers in both areas and also the close tie between the Cantonese language and the city of Hong Kong. This article contributes to the discussion of how the Hong Kong story can be told through the use of humor, both in the context of Cantonese language learners across the globe and for a wider audience that is interested in social and identity issues in "homeland" Hong Kong. Humorous texts in the broad sense, including jokes, comedy films, stand-up performances, or even online humorous posts, are often nuanced and multi-layered, which are important qualities that match Hong Kong's (in)famous plurality and hybridity. We illustrate the importance of comedy studies through a course in a popular education setting outside of universities. Through the course on humor studies and the stress on Cantonese language, aspects related to the Hong Kong identity are introduced while covering various topics, such as popular culture, parody, and the negotiation of the Hong Kong identity. Teaching Hong Kong in the local context can therefore be greatly enhanced through the use of humor in Cantonese for its relatability and expressiveness.

In what follows, we first discuss the theoretical framework and outline how a pluralistic and anti-diasporic framework helps anchor the Hong Kong story from a more universal perspective. Then, we argue through two case studies how humor engages with the audience and enables dialogues and discussions on the otherwise divisive and abstract topic of identity, even in the local "homeland" context, in which speakers assume a relatively stable and homogeneous identity. Furthermore, we stress that the learners' active engagement can be leveraged by the incorporation of

both consumption and production, also known as "prosumption" (Beer and Burrows; Pai and Duff 188) of humorous content and learning materials that suit their own learning style and motivation, which is particularly significant for adult learners.

Diaspora and Anti-Diaspora of Hongkongers

The Hong Kong story is essentially a story of (post)colonialism. Without colonial history, the former fishing village might not have become a metropolitan and regional hub. It is fully predictable that the city exhibits some typical features of hybridity found in post-colonial communities (Bhabha 38, 107), where elements of different traditions and cultures can be observed. The view by Abbas that Hong Kong does not exhibit a monolithic, uniform identity, or that its identity is floating and ever-changing, has also been discussed by many (2, 4–5, 10). The Hong Kong story is inherently multi-faceted and should therefore be told as such. However, this grand narrative of "East meets West" has often assumed that Hong Kong is simply a mix of Chinese traditions and modern influences from English-speaking cultures. Consequently, cultural artifacts and the culture of Hong Kong are often seen as subgenres of Chinese culture. Cantonese is often treated as an addition to Mandarin Chinese in a marginalized position (Carrico 23; Kipnis 299), with the latter being regarded as the default and standard. As such, we observe that Hong Kong as a diasporic community is first and foremost understood as one with immigrants from various regions, both Chinese-speaking and non-Chinese-speaking. This is particularly true in the decades after World War II, in which migrants from the Mainland came and contributed to the rapidly developing Hong Kong. In addition, there is a secondary layer of diaspora of the cultural Hong Kong represented by the emigration to other parts of the world. Although the most discussed wave of emigration was in the late 1980s and 1990s, we consider this an ongoing process that should not be seen as a phenomenon exclusive to the pre-handover period. There is also a potential third layer of diaspora in the sense of the so-called "return migrants," spanning circular movements between Hong Kong as the homeland and the adopted countries (e.g. Yan et al.) after the initial waves of emigration.

In "What is Sinophone Studies?", Shih Shu-mei problematizes the notions of "Chineseness" and "Chinese diaspora" being assumed across all contexts uncritically. She also articulates clearly the diversity within the Sinophone populations and shows that it is a mistranslation to reduce all

these groups with distinct identities down to one monolithic group of Chinese, or *Zhongguoren* 中國人. Shih's criticism of the Chineseness narrative is equally valid in studying and teaching Cantonese. As a response, Shih proposes a broader notion of Sinophone, which is defined as a "network of places of cultural production outside China and on the margins of China and Chineseness" (*Visuality and Identity* 4). Subjects related to Sinitic languages or regions are not seen as inherently part of mainland China. This is directly related to the situation of Hong Kong and Cantonese, which are often seen as marginal. For individuals who are learning about the Hong Kong story or who are learning Cantonese outside of Asia, it is evident that such an assumption of Hong Kong being at the periphery is not helpful. With the misconception that one must first acquire knowledge of China or Chinese traditions, potential learners could be deterred from learning a language that truly connects them with their caretakers or grandparents. To teach the Hong Kong story, it is also inaccurate to assume the post-war development of Hong Kong since the 1950s to be parallel to that of mainland China. In particular, the popular culture and entertainment industries in Hong Kong are often products of interactions between the locals and their exposure to the rest of the world. In other words, the culture of Hong Kong should not be seen as a derived version of Chinese culture. In the teaching of the Hong Kong story, it is important to recognize this feature of the Hong Kong story that is not derived from cultural or political China.

The second type of marginalization can be seen within the community of Hongkongers. Given that Cantonese is a dominant language in everyday communications in Hong Kong, it can lead to the fallacy that any speaker of Cantonese must automatically be associated with Hong Kong. When a speaker does not reside in Hong Kong, they are often regarded as diasporic Hongkongers. The frequent use of "going back home" (*faan2 hoeng1 haa2* 返鄉下 in Cantonese) or "going back to Hong Kong" (*faan2 hoeng1 gong2* 返香港 in Cantonese) among Cantonese speakers clearly embodies the Hong Kong-centric view of Cantonese. In the context of teaching Cantonese outside of Chinese-speaking countries, it is important to keep in mind that the Hong Kong story is not necessary about the learners' own home. Speakers living outside of Hong Kong or Asia should not be automatically seen as "Hongkongers living abroad." Cantonese speakers and learners are not to be seen as one homogeneous group of "diasporic Chinese/ Hongkongers." Many heritage speakers of Cantonese living in North America have never been to what is dubbed the "homeland" Hong Kong or Southern China. To maintain an inclusive learning environment, which can

in turn better facilitate learning, it is important to acknowledge the different identities among speakers and language learners.

The notions of "mimicry" and "hybridity" proposed by Bhabha are highly relevant in the context of humor studies (86, 107). "Mimicry" refers to the "representation of a difference that is itself a process of disavowal" (122). That is, in the process of imitating and adopting the culture of their colonizers, the colonized population inevitably modifies the original and develops a novel, distinct artifact. For Hong Kong, this process is shown in the development of its unique variation of language (e.g., Hong Kong English and frequent code-mixing in everyday communication), as well as the adaptation of cultural forms to the local context. A prominent example is popular culture. Television, film, and pop music were all imported goods when they first emerged in Hong Kong society. An obvious adaptation is the use of Cantonese. Mimicry in a different sense can also be manifested by parodies and comedy materials, which make conscious connections between the referenced texts and humorous creations. Parodies and jokes are typically commented on as subversions of the grand narrative in humor studies (e.g., Gilbert; Kramer). By making fun of social phenomena, comedians often foreground and ridicule established power inequality. This is often done from the perspective of underprivileged populations. For example, Gilbert investigates the "marginal humor" of feminist/female stand-up comedians and how it engages the audience to reflect on gender issues (3–4, 137). Juni and Katz also illustrate how self-deprecating humor is effective as a self-defense mechanism through their study of Jewish humor (120). In the Hong Kong context, Charles Lam discusses a contemporary stand-up comedian's work that foregrounds the racial tensions and discrimination in the city (681). In other words, humor often serves a social function as a vehicle for the underprivileged to empower themselves by finding a voice and a narrative. This property makes the genre an important one in the telling of the Hong Kong story.

In addition to the social function of exposing and/or disrupting power relations, humorous texts as a genre often engages the audience with double-voicing, manifested in various forms of parody or double entendres in jokes. According to Mikhail Bakhtin, the double voices co-exist within the same discourse, where a new semantic intention is created (194). In the context of Hong Kong humor, double-voicing often occurs in the form of parody of novelty or foreign goods. What is seemingly a parody of imported culture can often reveal the newly created semantic intention that shows a self-conscious identity of Hongkongers as opposed to their colonizers or their neighbors in the Mainland. The hybridity of Hong

Kong was particularly clear in the 1970s, when the Hong Kong identity began to take shape (Lam and Leung 206). In the early years of Hong Kong television, the variety show *Enjoy Yourself Tonight* 歡樂今宵 (1967– 1994) and sketch comedy show *Hui Brothers Show* 雙星報喜 (1971–1972) were both initiated as local adaptations of existing television shows from Australia and the United States, respectively. In *Hui Brothers Show*, the novelty of overseas travel by the working class is one of the recurring themes. Jokes in this theme were often oriented to behaviors governing in modern society (e.g., comical punishment for stealing utensils on the airplane). In other words, popular comedic works can often be used as a lens to capture the zeitgeist of the era.

Under Shih's pluricentric view in "The Concept of the Sinophone," this article argues that humorous texts help learners better appreciate the diversity and dynamicity in Hong Kong culture and Cantonese. In the next section, we illustrate this with two parallel examples of courses related to teaching Hong Kong culture and Cantonese through humor. The two case studies are in drastically different contexts: from the content (Cantonese language vs. humor studies), course location (Vancouver vs. Hong Kong), student population (credit-bearing courses for enrolled university students vs. an online course for the general public), and further to Cantonese competence (beginning learners vs. native speakers). Rather than comparing how these students respond to humor, these case studies intend to showcase the range of humor in various contexts of "Teaching Hong Kong." The following sections discuss in detail the contents of these "use cases" of humor as a resource in order to demonstrate their wide range of applications in different teaching environments. For language learning, humor is an excellent vehicle that allows students to connect with the target language in their own style and potentially become "prosumers" in their own style and potentially become "prosumers" in their own style. In the local or "homeland" context of learning about the Hong Kong story, our example of a course on humor studies will demonstrate how humor connects language, collective memories, and identity.

Case Study 1: Heritage Speakers

In this case study, we showcase how language learners can benefit from the use of humor in their learning process. Specifically, our case concerns Cantonese learning as a heritage language in Canada. From a more traditional perspective, Jim Cummins defines heritage language (HL) as "language(s) other than the official languages or the aboriginal (indigenous

or 'First Nations') languages" (286). In addition, the term "heritage language" has been defined in various ways under different labels "to identify the non-dominant languages in a given social context" (Kelleher 1). Maria Polinsky and Olga Kagan define HL as the partially learned home language due to language shift and the characteristic switch to the dominant language by immigrants and their children (377). Jenna Cushing-Leubner offers a critical but global view of HL that it is situated within a hegemony of dominant languages which often threaten the language rights of speakers to access and learn their "ancestral/home language" (304). She offers a global perspective regarding HL as about maintaining and expanding languages and literacies in languages to which a person has a personal, familial, community, and/or ancestral tie. Every person in this broad view thus has languages in their family lineage of languages either maintained or subsumed by others that were made more dominant through the linguistic pressures of the nation-state and social adherence to ideologies of language preference, legitimacy, and power. As a result, HL education cannot be separated from the political and ideological contexts in which some languages are often supported, demanded, removed, and replaced through state-sanctioned language policies. In this sense, the purpose of HL education is to purposefully offer and expand the social repertoires of languages other than the dominant languages. At the same time, the realities of the need for and implementation of HL education are made complex by the political nature of language ideologies, language-in-education policies, and the politicization and racialization of languages and the communities that speak these languages and identify with the respective speech communities (Alim et al. 8). Thus, overall HL education cannot be disentangled from the dynamics of power, control, coercion, resistance, refusal, and self-determination (García 182; Bale 604–05). In this way, Tove Skutnabb-Kangas states that HL education is actually a conversation about language rights (xix–xxii, 567–78). James W. Tollefson notes that what make HL education fraught are the complexities brought by the realities of politicization and hegemonic power struggles that take place across different languages and their communities of speakers (43, 49–50). The impact of such language politicization through schooling can be observed in terms of which languages are offered as official world/foreign language electives in different institutions. The sociopolitical construction of HLs, speakers, and learning cannot be disentangled from the nation-building technologies of monoglossic ideology, linguistic hierarchies, and linguistic imperialism (Bale 182–84). Languages are therefore inhibited by way of institutional denial of natural plurilingual maintenance and

development, and societal languages and their speakers are formed into HLs and HL learners within this restrictive language environment. In fact, according to Guadalupe Valdés, any non-dominant language can become a HL, because HLs are any "non-societal and non-majority languages spoken by groups often known as linguistic minorities" (12). In these contexts, Cantonese is being taught in various educational settings as a "non-majority" heritage language, despite its speaking population not lacking in numbers among the global diaspora.

HL learners often have some inactive or tacit (latent) knowledge of their ancestral languages from home or from a limited amount of HL education in the form of coursework or after-school/weekend programs at a younger age. One example of a heritage Cantonese language school in Canada is Mon Keang School in Vancouver, British Columbia. It opened in Vancouver's Chinatown as one of the first Chinese schools in the city in 1925 at the Wongs' Benevolent Association building 黃氏宗親總會. The Chinese name of the school, Mon Keang 文强, literally means "language strong," which "illustrates the value overseas immigrants placed on the Chinese language and cultural education of their Canadian-born children. Chinese language was important to perpetuate Chinese culture, give Canadian-born children the skills required to function in a predominantly Chinese-speaking environment, and maintain intergenerational relationships within family and community" (Youth Collaborative for Chinatown). Mon Keang School closed in 2011 due to low enrollment and changing demographics in the city when learning Mandarin became more popular than Cantonese. The Saturday School in Chinatown originally ran in 2014 as a public program of Centre A and was taught by a Cantonese linguist as the language instructor. Up until 2019, the weekly basic Cantonese course was offered in the Wongs' Benevolent Association building two semesters a year with a class size of about 25. The response since its inception has been positive, and enrolment has been full with a running waitlist each semester. The weekly two-hour class begins with one hour of classroom instruction on pronunciation, vocabulary, listening, and speaking practice. The instruction is kept at a basic level due to the diverse student backgrounds and limited class time but is often filled with humorous role plays and laughter. It is then followed by experience or place-based instruction where the students are given tasks to complete in the Chinatown area or mini field trips in the neighborhood focusing on local culture and history (Gruenewald and Smith; Sobel 1–2).

In addition to the experiential and place-based learning approach to the Cantonese language, there are a number of theoretical and practical

second language learning benefits associated with student engagement with activities and texts involving pop culture both inside and outside of their Chinese classrooms (e.g., Duff; Duff & Zappa-Hollman; Fang; Fang and Duff; Pai). With respect to a theoretical rationale, the Douglas Fir Group listed five relevant aspects, namely language ideologies (standard vs. nonstandard usage) and identities, language encounters, learner agency, critical and substantive analyses of culture, discourse, and social issues, and finally linguistic role models (24–36; Fang 67; Fang and Duff 51). Pop culture also offers other semiotic forms than standard oral or written language and has the potential to familiarize students with important, current, vernacular grammatical and pragmatic uses of language, in particular humor, as well as the cultural content that it conveys. Pop culture can also be the source of powerful memes and images that then circulate virally when taken up and recirculated by enough people for both recreational and even politically subversive purposes. It can create immersive environments in the sense that the viewer or participant can feel very much present in the visual or literary worlds depicted, as well as being immersed in the target language. In some cases, it can give meaning to their lives through added enjoyment, information, and communal aspects of engaging with the same media (Fang and Duff 57–58; Murray 13–14).

Among the courses offered by a local university's Cantonese language program, the "Advanced Cantonese through Pop Culture" course was created in January 2016, with enrollment capped at 30 students per class. Since its inception, this has been a popular course, often with a waitlist for course registration by students with a Cantonese background. The course includes more traditional forms of Chinese pop culture media—that is, television, film, music, and comics—as well as emerging themes such as food culture, housing environment, localism, and internet culture. While Hong Kong is not the sole focus of these discussions, it is inevitable that many, if not most, of the materials come from or surround Hong Kong, given the large Cantonese-speaking population and its strong representation of popular culture in the Cantonese language. Humor as a genre is included in the curriculum, with comedy in the media and stand-up comedy performances featured in the past. The course learning objectives are to strengthen Cantonese language skills that can be applied to cultural contexts and critical digital media literacies. As the examples presented above indicate, we expect students to be agentive and act not just as consumers of pop culture media but also as producers of cultural content based on their life experiences and meanings, hence realizing the

concept of prosumers of pop culture described above. An ample example of a prosumer learning can be seen in student-created conversations or skits.[1] In many submissions, students intend to create humorous interactions, often revealing subtle knowledge of the Cantonese language or Hong Kong culture. This illustrates students' ability to not only produce intelligible Cantonese conversations at the linguistic level but also understand and reference subtleties in Hong Kong culture. Students also need to become pop culture analysts and critics. Class assignments consist of individual in-class presentations on a topic of the students' choice, a group presentation on a specialized topic in video form, a musical lyric writing assignment for a Cantopop (Cantonese pop) song, oral reports on guest lectures presented by various pop artists invited for class visits, and performance events, including a sold-out standup comedy performance by Vivek Mahbubani from Hong Kong as a required extracurricular activity. Student final group video projects often take the form of comedic skit performances engaging both students and the audience while showcasing their language skills and creativity.

Case Study 2: Teaching the Hong Kong Story through Cantonese Humor

The second case study describes a course in the adult education context in Hong Kong offered at the end of 2021. Unlike the learners of Cantonese language and culture described in the previous section, students in this course are already familiar with the local context of Hong Kong. In the HL learning literature, this is often dubbed the "homeland" context (Jo 26; Petrucci 276; Takamori 217). For homeland speakers (i.e., speakers who are born and raised in Hong Kong), the learning needs regarding the Hong Kong story are drastically different from those of heritage learners. Rather than learning the Hong Kong story as part of cultural and linguistic competence, learners in the homeland context are typically more interested in self-reflection and contextualized understanding of the Hong Kong story. As such, one motivation for a course on the Hong Kong story is to explore a theme that is overlooked and is able to provide insights beyond information. The development and evolution of humor in Hong Kong is therefore an ideal vehicle to tell the Hong Kong story from a new angle.

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[1]   The program has collected some interesting examples. With the consent of students, they are listed on the website: https://hksi.ubc.ca/student-projects/cnto-courses/.

Following the anti-diaspora framework, this course on humor aims to introduce the Hong Kong story in a manner that positions Hong Kong as part of the larger story of global development of the Cantonese-speaking and Chinese-speaking worlds, rather than a Hong Kong-centric story. This decision was made since the conceptualization of the course to allow for potential future development when the course is to be adapted to address non-Cantonese speakers or audiences that may not know the Hong Kong story thoroughly.

Hong Kong humor, despite its ubiquity, has not received as much attention as other vehicles of popular culture, such as Cantopop or films. With regard to humorous texts in Hong Kong, one line of research focuses on individual works but does not address the evolution of humor and its relation to the socio-cultural context. For example, Marjorie K. M. Chan provides a detailed description of how various linguistic devices can be used in Cantonese opera (55). Lam discusses how ethnic minorities challenge and negotiate their Hong Kong identity through the works of a local stand-up comedian (682). Another line of research deals with Chinese humor more generally (e.g., Rea, *The Age of Irreverence*; Davis and Chey, *Humour in Chinese Life and Letters, Humour in Chinese Life and Culture*). However, these accounts do not bear many implications for the humorous texts in Hong Kong because of the vast differences between the socio-cultural and historical contexts. Neither of these types of scholarly works addresses the needs of Hongkongers to learn about the Hong Kong story from the perspective of social development.

To tell the Hong Kong story to homeland speakers who are already familiar with individual humorous texts, we focus on the contextualization and connection to the social context. That is, by highlighting humorous works (often TV shows and films), we foreground the connections between the humorous texts as entertainment and the social context in which they are situated. The implementation of the course has been intended to be informed by as much academic research as possible (e.g., Lam, "Identities Are No Joke (Or Are They?)"; Lam and Leung, "Examining the Emergence of Hong Kong Identity"; Attardo, *The Linguistics of Humor*). However, given the limited published academic work, the course has also employed journalistic work. The connectedness between humor and the understanding of society has also been confirmed in recent research published after the humor course (e.g., Yeung and a special issue of the journal *Archiv Orientální*, "Comedies in East Asian Media: Laughing at Bitter Times"). Given the goal of enhancing our understanding of Hong Kong, the lessons in the six-week online course were arranged based on the topics rather than the chronological order:

1. What is Humor Studies?
2. Types of Jokes
3. What is Hong Kong Humor?
4. Social Functions of Jokes
5. Farce, Parody, and Hong Kong "Trendy Posts"
6. Philosophy of Humor

In the rest of this section, we demonstrate the connection between Hong Kong story and humor with the contents of the course. Through the framework of humor studies (from Attardo and Raskin), the course illustrates that Hong Kong humor is not to be seen as unique or opaque to audiences from other cultures and that many elements in Hong Kong humor can also be construed under a more general framework. This implementation allows the audience and students to see how the Hong Kong story can be better understood within a framework. In each of the lessons, examples from different time periods (e.g., Hong Kong humor in the 1970s vs. contemporary jokes) and cultures (jokes from Hong Kong and the United States) were cited to showcase the connection between jokes and the culture in which they are situated. For example, to illustrate how successful jokes often resonate with the concerns of the audience, humorous skits on housing issues in the 1970s (e.g., *Hui Brothers Show*) and online "trendy posts" (*ciu4 man4* 潮文 in Cantonese) were compared. The recurring themes in Hong Kong humor are also useful in demonstrating how the city lifestyle shapes our concerns.

More importantly, students are encouraged to find similarities in humorous texts between Hong Kong and other regions and cultures. In turn, it highlights that the Hong Kong story is more universal than one might assume. Hybridity is a notion frequently discussed in postcolonial studies, which can be abstract for some. Humorous texts in Hong Kong are effective in showcasing how hybridity is manifested in popular culture. In *A Chinese Odyssey Part Two-Cinderella* 西遊記大結局之仙履奇緣 (1995) which stars Stephen Chow, Law Kar-ying's character started singing an American doo-wop classic "Only You" (The Platters) in English and Cantonese in his attempt to recruit Stephen Chow's character to join the journey to obtain the Buddhist scriptures. The non-sequitur humor can be easily seen in its anachronism and mixing of Chinese and American cultures, where a Tang dynasty character sang an American pop song in modern English. This example is effective in that it foregrounds elements of hybridity and multiculturalism in the display of Hong Kong identity through humor. More broadly, this strategy has also been used in the course to illustrate different aspects of Hong Kong culture.

Another observation articulated in the course is that the Hong Kong identity has been constructed gradually over the decades through the participation and contribution of all Hongkongers living in the city, and such a process is reflected in the prominent forms of humor at different times. The lesson on the development of Hong Kong humor discussed the observation that audience participation has been increasing over the decades. In the early days, the audience had rather limited participation in the heyday of black-and-white movies in the 1950s. In the 1960s, television shows began to invite the live audience, as in *Enjoy Yourself Tonight* or *Hui Brothers Show*. Since the rise of the internet and various online forums, individual readers have also become content providers, as evidenced by humorous "trendy posts." This development shows the larger picture of decentralization and democratization in terms of audience participation.

The use of Cantonese is a clear marker of Hong Kong identity, which is highlighted through the choice of Cantonese as the medium of instruction in the course on humor. Despite its ubiquity in Hong Kong, Cantonese is rarely considered a language of academic discussion that has formal status. The course on humor studies therefore used Cantonese as the medium of instruction to stress the central position of Cantonese in the telling and understanding of the Hong Kong story. The decision is based on the notion of "linguistic justice" (Piller 1–8; Baker-Bell 5–6), through which discrimination against a specific language or linguistic variation is exposed and dismantled. In this case, Cantonese is treated as a language "worthy" of being used during academic and intellectual discussions, and humor in Hong Kong is part of the Hong Kong story that is worthy of intellectual discussions.

Implications and Concluding Remarks

In this article, we respond to Leung Ping-kwan's question, "Why is the Hong Kong story so hard to tell?" by arguing that humor is an effective tool in the education setting. Echoing Leung's view, we see the complex and pluralistic nature of the Hong Kong story as an opportunity that calls for multiple ways of storytelling. We further argue that humor is not only an interesting topic that engages the students, but also an excellent opportunity to allow for students' active learning in reflecting on issues beyond language learning, such as the learning of the Hong Kong culture and understanding social changes in Hong Kong.

To implement teaching with humorous materials, we emphasize the importance of a theoretical framework that anchors the choices and

decisions in teaching and learning practices. Between the different regions (North America vs. Asia) and different linguistic backgrounds of the students (heritage/non-native speakers vs. homeland native speakers), we stress in our two case studies that the learning materials should be adaptive and accommodating to an audience of different backgrounds, especially when the goal is to introduce the Hong Kong story. Otherwise, the assumption of a singular standard or norm (e.g., assuming that Hong Kong Cantonese is the only standard and correct variation or that non-Hong Kong variations of Cantonese are less valid) could result in a negative effect that discourages students from building ownership of their learning process. For teachers and advocates of Cantonese, this also means that a theoretical background offers more than abstract guidelines on paper. Rather, understanding that the Cantonese-speaking world is pluricentric and decentralized provides a better mental framework for learners of the Cantonese language and culture to see the connections between entertainment and the social context. For instance, the humor in *Hui Brothers Show* or Stephen Chow's movies (and its *mo-lei-tau* 無厘頭 humor) are excellent examples of the hybridity of Hong Kong as a result of exposure to different cultures, which further showcases why Hong Kong culture cannot be simplistically reduced to a sub-group of Chinese culture. Similarly, modern stand-up comedies that address local issues also constitute a rich source of materials that can be leveraged in the instruction of language and culture (Lam 693). We consider these strategies to be effective not only in teaching about Hong Kong but also in other pedagogical contexts. In short, the complexity of humor mirrors the complexity of the Hong Kong story, which makes humorous texts an excellent vehicle for telling the Hong Kong story.

This article also highlights the potential of humor in facilitating language learning of the Cantonese language, which is an important component of Hong Kong identity. This echoes previous studies that investigated the potential of humor to facilitate language acquisition in English and Spanish (Bell 192; Shively 46–48). In particular, we have discussed the role of prosumption in the case of Cantonese teaching in the North American context, and how language learners are more motivated to express themselves in the target language, Cantonese. In the process of creating their own humorous materials, these learners often need to first identify existing humorous texts for their reference, and then learn to use the right language (both grammatically and pragmatically) to express the intended jokes. Similar arguments have been made in studies on language learning (Lantolf 3; Pai and Duff 188), but the present study further

shows that the same principles apply for both HL learning and studying culture in the homeland context.

The other contribution of the present study is the creation of a safe environment for discussion, which comes from the exploratory nature of humor, in which heterogeneity and variations are often seen as the norm and more readily accepted. Humorous texts are often open to each individual's interpretation. Even when presented with exactly the same joke, different readers or students may naturally react differently. The benefit of employing humor in the classroom is more than the fun and engagement of participants. It is also a tool that enables dialogues, explorations, and discussions. Humor has been reported to be effective in opening discussions on taboo or divisive topics (Ziv 11–12). In a language classroom, this means students may assume different characters in jokes or word plays when they are exploring different uses of language. This is often shown in students' skits and videos, highlighting their ability as prosumers of the language. In the course on humor studies, we have discussed how students in the local "homeland" context can learn from the challenge of what is considered the homogeneous norm of identity. Given the frequent use of double voices and role shifts (i.e., a speaker switching and assuming a different "character" or the role of a different conversation partner, often used in reporting and re-enacting speeches), jokes are important in foregrounding different perspectives and views. Specifically, for issues like identity (e.g., characters playing the more marginalized Others) and homeland (e.g., comedy that challenges who belongs to the city or the speakerhood of Cantonese) that might be sensitive for some learners, comedy and humorous texts provide a safe space to explore heterogeneity and different variations of city identities or speakerhood of the language (Lam 694).

In conclusion, this article discusses the role of humor in the teaching of the Hong Kong story. The Hong Kong story is complex and multifaceted, which can at times be abstract and even divisive. Therefore, telling the Hong Kong story calls for particular attention from the audience. With two case studies, we argue that dialogues and discussions induced by humorous texts can facilitate fruitful understanding of issues surrounding identity and social change. Through humorous texts that are familiar to students and the incorporation of active learning and prosumption on the students' part, this article has shown how teachers can boost students' learning motivation and ownership.

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