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Pak Shing TSE

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Are we ready to unlearn?

Tse Pak-shing

This paper designates an attempt at the reflection on Heidegger's prose *What is Called Thinking* (1976) together with a real-life example to further illustrate his claims on thinking and learning. That means, as a Cultural Studies student, I would rather endeavor to borrow his insight to shed some light on the current context in Hong Kong than to burrow into the Heideggerian terminology. And that also means, the "reflection" will never be so conservative that I am going to echo more or less the same ideas proposed in his prose. It should be sometimes more and sometimes less. It all depends.

The first important claim made by Heidegger about learning is that "to learn means to make everything we do answer to whatever essentials address themselves to us at a given time".¹ This claim is empty unless the "given time" is well understood as this prose is highly contextual in which Heidegger did not conceal his ironic attitude toward science. But he was not against science. What he opposed was the extreme technological dimension of modern science. To put it another way, from my understanding (or misunderstanding), what he really defied was the instrumental and calculative rationality that modern technology advocates. That is why he praised the cabinetmaker for answering and responding to different kinds of wood, and revealing the hidden riches of its essence; but not a lumber mill chopping every pieces of wood standardized. It is very ideal of course. In fact dozens of things hinder our learning.

Here three questions raise. If to learn is to try our very best to respond to everything we encounter, 1) what is the major obstacle when we try to learn; 2) what is the purpose of learning and 3) how can I know I am learning? To answer the first question, we need to see what Heidegger's second claim stated. "We moderns can learn only if we always

¹ Heidegger, Martin (1976): *What Is Called Thinking?* , Jesse Glenn Gray (Translator, Introduction), Fred Derenburg Wieck (Translator), Harper Perennial, p.14.

unlearn at the same time”.² What a contradiction! But another similar sentence in the prose may hold a clue to understanding it: “we can learn thinking only if we radically unlearn what thinking has been traditionally”.³ So, what is the “tradition” he referred to? This contradictory statement again should be read in its context. Having known that Heidegger himself opposed the instrumental and calculative rationality, it is easy to realize what kind of traditional thought he wanted to dispose. It is the technological dimension of modern science which blocks our way to learn.

I am afraid, however, to leap to the conclusion above too simply. We still have two questions to go which may be a thorough answer to the first question: 2) what is the purpose of learning and 3) how can I know I am learning? The former one seems to be so apparent as Heidegger stated that “we are trying to learn thinking”.⁴ But with a closer look, Heidegger elaborated as follows “Only a being who can speak, that is, think.....And only when man speaks, does he think- not the other way round”.⁵ Obviously, Heidegger attached high importance to language on thinking but he was being so vague in this prose. How can we grasp a clearer picture of what Heidegger tried to talk about the relationship between language and thought?

Maybe we can go further to read his another prose *The Way to Language* (1959)⁶. The main argument in this prose is that it is not we who speak language; it is language that speaks us. In common sense, language is an instrument to indicate reality. But for Heidegger, *language* itself is already the reality and that is the *essence of language*. Again, in common sense, there is no such an essence of language as language itself is

² Heidegger, Martin (1976): *What Is Called Thinking?*, Jesse Glenn Gray (Translator, Introduction), Fred Dernburg Wieck (Translator), Harper Perennial, p.8.

³ Heidegger, Martin (1976): *What Is Called Thinking?*, Jesse Glenn Gray (Translator, Introduction), Fred Dernburg Wieck (Translator), Harper Perennial, p.8.

⁴ Heidegger, Martin (1976): *What Is Called Thinking?*, Jesse Glenn Gray (Translator, Introduction), Fred Dernburg Wieck (Translator), Harper Perennial, p.16.

⁵ Heidegger, Martin (1976): *What Is Called Thinking?*, Jesse Glenn Gray (Translator, Introduction), Fred Dernburg Wieck (Translator), Harper Perennial, p.16.

⁶ Heidegger, Martin (1959): *The Way to Language*, Peter Hertz (Translator), David Farrell Krell (Editor), “Basic Writings”, New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993, p.397-426.

forever changing, dynamic; sometimes we share its holistic view, and sometimes its fragmented characteristics; no beginning and no ending. What Heidegger referred to is not the linguistic dimension of language, but to the fundamental truth that on the very first day we encountered *language*. We are soaked in the sea of *language* once we were born, as it is, prior to our mind. We are possessed and oriented by language to the world we are living in. The revelation of truth is merely the revelation of *language*. In short, what drives our thought is the so called “tradition” in which language produces and circulates such instrumental and calculative rationality as language itself bears the strongest pedagogical effect.⁷ If I were right, an answer to questions 1) and 2) could be inferred that learning is to let thinking happen which entails self-reflection on the modern calculative rationality and language.

So, a most difficult question comes: 3) how can I know I am learning (to think)? It can be a biological or psychological suspect. I would like to confine such self-reflection to the aspect of language nonetheless. To facilitate the discussion and to answer question 3), I am going to illustrate Heidegger’s claim with a real-life example below.⁸ If I were to succeed, I might be able to grasp what “essential” he actually meant.

One puzzle I encountered recently is that my old friend and I had a discussion on the Occupy movement.⁹ He did not oppose the idea of the movement but what he worried about was that it may “marginalize” (邊緣化) Hong Kong which means it will be a strike to the economy. I am not going to discuss the movement here. What interests me was the wording my friend employed. The term “marginalize” confused me. I confess to my

⁷ One may say that we can be able to think through image, sound, gesture or any other possible media. But we cannot neglect such an overwhelming mediation power that language possesses as its naming function. It is in this sense Heidegger made a strong assertion that *language* speaks us.

⁸ It seems that this paper here deviates from the origin of borrowing Heidegger’s insight to have a better comprehension of Hong Kong’s situation, but, conversely, using a Hong Kong example to examine what Heidegger said. I do not intend to put them at a binary opposition but rather letting them be supplementary to each other.

⁹ Please refer to Appendix-1. It is our Whatsapp conversation capture.

paralysis in thinking when I came across this term. I know it is something bad to the economy but don't have a picture what it exactly depicts.

If I am here not to withdraw myself from the puzzle, how can I confront it? What questions should I ask? I think most of us heard the term before but I guess few of us know the discourse behind it and how it was articulated to be a pro-establishment reason to oppose the constitutional reform. If I take language for carrying its pedagogical effect in the broadest sense, and if I “unlearn” before learning, then I need to problematize the term “marginalize”. So, what does this term mean actually? Are we sure we really know what it refers to literally? Why can it be a reason to oppose a movement fighting for the constitutional reform?

First, here comes a fundamental question. Is “marginalization” a true notion? In other words, is Hong Kong's economy getting worse and playing a less important role because of China's manipulation? Here, I would like to show some figures. According to the official statistics of foreign investment released by People's Republic of China Ministry of Commerce (MOC), From January to December in 2013, the top three nations and regions with investment in China are as follows: Hong Kong (USD78.302b), Singapore (USD7.327b), Japan (USD7.064b).¹⁰ It is very exaggerating that the top one figure is ten times bigger than the second, thanks to Hong Kong as a foreign investor contributing so much to China. I don't want to quote any more figures in the main body of this paper, as I don't have any concept of economics and how MOC conducted the statistics. I attach some other different reports to show the status of Hong Kong in the economy of China for reference.¹¹ It is the Chinese government who released those statistics, but can we judge Hong Kong is playing an important role in the economy of China? I am not sure. Only one thing can be drawn to conclusion. There is no bare truth, only competition of discourses. To be honest, at least we can't imagine what “marginalization” is from those figures.

¹⁰ <http://english.mofcom.gov.cn/article/statistic/foreigninvestment/201402/20140200498911.shtml>

¹¹ Please refer to Appendix 2.

If “marginalization” is not a true notion, then why my friend voiced it out, unintentionally? Language bears its pedagogical effect and language speaks us. The mass media functions as such regime of truth. I begin to use the most direct key word “香港邊緣化” (marginalization of Hong Kong) to search relevant Chinese newspaper articles on Wiser Search dated from 1998 to 2013.¹² There is quite an interesting trend I got.¹³

From 1998 to 2001, there was no articles found. Started from 2002, there were around 10 pieces of articles about the issue of marginalization. But in 2006, there was a suddenly sharp increase- 186 pieces of article on marginalization around the year. What happened in this year? In 2006, there was the Fifth Plenum of the 16th Central Committee of the Communist Party of China in which the so called Guidelines of the Eleventh Five-Year Plan for National Economic and Social Development (「十一五」規劃) was approved and the famous slogan “Development is the absolute principle” (發展就是硬道理) was proposed from here onwards. It is the year our government announced to begin the high speed rail project in order to “enhance Hong Kong's role as the southern gateway to the Mainland”.

The general discourse of marginalization is alongside with the development plan and the role of Hong Kong to the mainland.¹⁴ Take a piece of article from Sun daily entitled 〈好鬥內耗香港有難〉, dated 28th December, 2006 as an example.¹⁵ The sentences underlined in this article sound like a threat rather than an opinion. That is as if Hong Kong refuses to co-operate with mainland, it will be marginalized both in terms of economy and politics. It is not amazing that the pro-establishment newspaper articulated

¹² One may concern the methodology of this finding: why don't use “Hong Kong's marginalization/ marginalization of Hong Kong” (香港的邊緣化) as a keyword to search? There are two reasons on this. First, it shows the same trend when I use “香港的邊緣化” as a keyword to search. Second, much more results can be found when using “香港邊緣化” as a keyword. This is not only a technique of searching but also the characteristic which Chinese language owns. Besides, I only focus on Chinese newspapers as they are the mainstream paper media in Hong Kong.

¹³ Please refer to Appendix 3.

¹⁴ Please refer to Appendix 4. There are so many pieces of articles. I only clip some of them as examples to show how similar they are.

¹⁵ Please refer to Appendix 5.

the concept of marginalization together with the disparity between the rich and the poor, political dispute, economic bubble etc. The writers who were for the marginalization tended to put all the negative collective feelings into this empty signifier and simply drew the conclusion that if we would do co-operate with the development of China, we would tackle all the acute and severe social problems.

I don't mean that I discovered the truth of "marginalization". No. Never. What I would like to point out is that if we take Heidegger's insight on language, we need to confess to being thrown into a world without bare facts. The discourse of "marginalization" inscribed in my friend's mind, even you and me. But why my friend succumbed to such discourse so easily enough though he was not against the Occupy movement? I guess my friend was not submitting to the "fact" so much as he was just taking it for granted. We take rational and calculative mind for granted as thinking itself, and that is what Heidegger referred to as "tradition". The experience of learning and thinking in our technological age are rendered as calculative rationality. While we take something for granted, we withdraw ourselves from learning. That is why Heidegger urged us to unlearn before we learn. To unlearn what? To unlearn the biases from language; to unlearn the economic calculation as a traditional perspective to read the context of Hong Kong.

The social world is already interpreted before we were born and is being interpreted as we actively participate in it. On one hand we all came from a tradition with fore-meanings or biases; on the other hand we keep on constituting and re-constituting those meanings within our tradition. By what? By language. It is language that facilitates our communication and at the same time that impedes so; it is we who are speaking and at the same time *language* which speaks us.

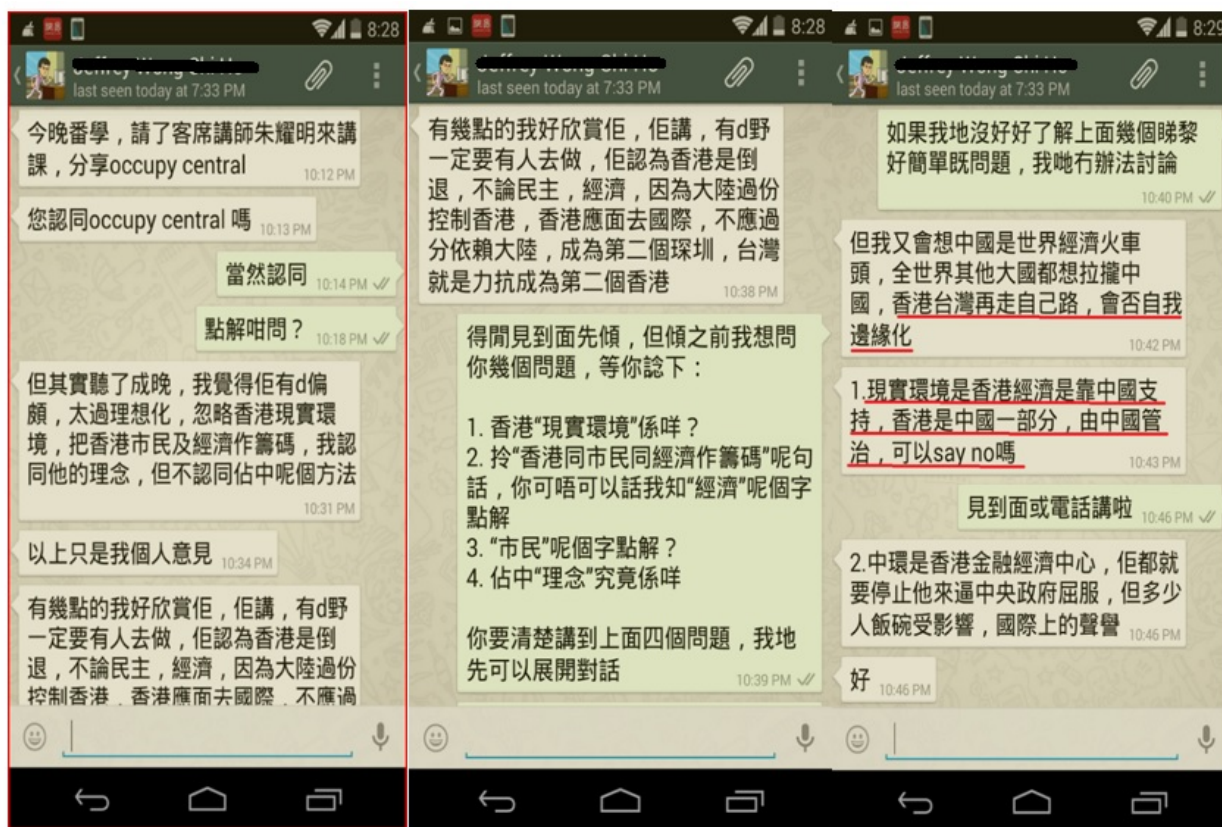
The last question: how can I know I am learning? When I am ready to unlearn and realize I am still not thinking. For Heidegger, thinking is not a cognitive action but a quality of

presence; in other words, thinking is not in the sense of epistemology but in that of ontology, i.e. being thoughtful. Being thoughtful is what he addressed as essential, and the essential that addresses itself to us, always. If we take Heidegger seriously, we should refresh our language to secure our being.

Reference

Heidegger, Martin: *Basic Writings*, David Farrell Krell (Editor), New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 1993.

Appendix 1



Appendix 2

表 7 2013 年一季度中国对主要贸易伙伴进出口情况

国家或地区	出口		进口		贸易差额 (亿美元)
	金额 (亿美元)	同比 (%)	金额 (亿美元)	同比 (%)	
全球	5088.7	18.4	4658.0	8.4	430.7
欧盟	759.9	1.1	484.2	-6.3	275.7
美国	769.0	6.8	386.4	20.1	382.6
东盟	526.5	28.0	476.0	4.2	50.5
中国香港	1056.0	74.2	42.7	19.6	1013.3
日本	349.1	-3.6	359.6	-16.6	-10.5
韩国	218.2	0.9	415.2	7.1	-197
中国台湾省	97.3	32.0	417.1	50.3	-319.8
澳大利亚	80.9	2.4	214.9	7.2	-134
俄罗斯	103.5	19.6	103.2	-19.7	0.3
南非	38.6	35.5	161.6	70.1	-123
印度	107.7	3.4	44.6	-27.8	63.1
巴西	74.8	3.7	87.4	-20.0	-12.6

資料來源：中華人民共和國商務部官方數據。中國對外貿易形勢報告（2013 年春季） <http://www.mofcom.gov.cn/article/gzyb/>

2009 年度中国 对外直接投资统计公报

2009 Statistical Bulletin of
China's Outward Foreign Direct Investment

中华人民共和国商务部
Ministry of Commerce of People's Republic of China
中华人民共和国国家统计局
National Bureau of Statistics of People's Republic of China
国家外汇管理局
State Administration of Foreign Exchange

表 3：2009 年中国对外直接投资流量在 1 亿美元以上的国家（地区）

单位：万美元

序号	国家（地区）	金额	序号	国家（地区）	金额
1	中国香港	3560057	17	印度尼西亚	22609
2	开曼群岛	536630	18	柬埔寨	21583
3	澳大利亚	243643	19	老挝	20324
4	卢森堡	227049	20	英国	19217
5	英属维尔京群岛	161205	21	德国	17921
6	新加坡	141425	22	尼日利亚	17186
7	美国	90874	23	吉尔吉斯斯坦	13691
8	加拿大	61313	24	埃及	13386
9	中国澳门	45634	25	伊朗	12483
10	缅甸	37670	26	土库曼斯坦	11968
11	俄罗斯联邦	34822	27	巴西	11627
12	土耳其	29326	28	委内瑞拉	11572
13	蒙古	27654	29	越南	11239
14	韩国	26512	30	赞比亚	11180
15	阿尔及利亚	22876	31	荷兰	10145
16	刚果(金)	22716		合计	5495537

6、对非洲投资下降幅度较大，但非金融类投资同比增长 55.4%。

2009 年,我对非洲直接投资 14.39 亿美元,同比下降 73.8%,若剔除上年特大项目(中国工商银行收购南非标准银行)因素,我对非洲的非金融类投资则较上年增长 55.4%。

7、从地区分布情况看,对欧洲、北美洲、拉丁美洲的投资较上年成倍增长。

表 6:2009 年末中国对外直接投资存量前二十位的国家(地区)

序号	国家(地区)	存量(亿美元)
1	中国香港	1644.99
2	英属维尔京群岛	150.61
3	开曼群岛	135.77
4	澳大利亚	58.63
5	新加坡	48.57
6	美国	33.38
7	卢森堡	24.84
8	南非	23.07
9	俄罗斯联邦	22.2
10	中国澳门	18.37
11	加拿大	16.7
12	哈萨克斯坦	15.16
13	巴基斯坦	14.58
14	蒙古	12.42
15	韩国	12.18
16	德国	10.82
17	英国	10.28
18	尼日利亚	10.26
19	缅甸	9.3
20	赞比亚	8.44

表 7: 2009 年末对外直接投资存量前十位的省市区

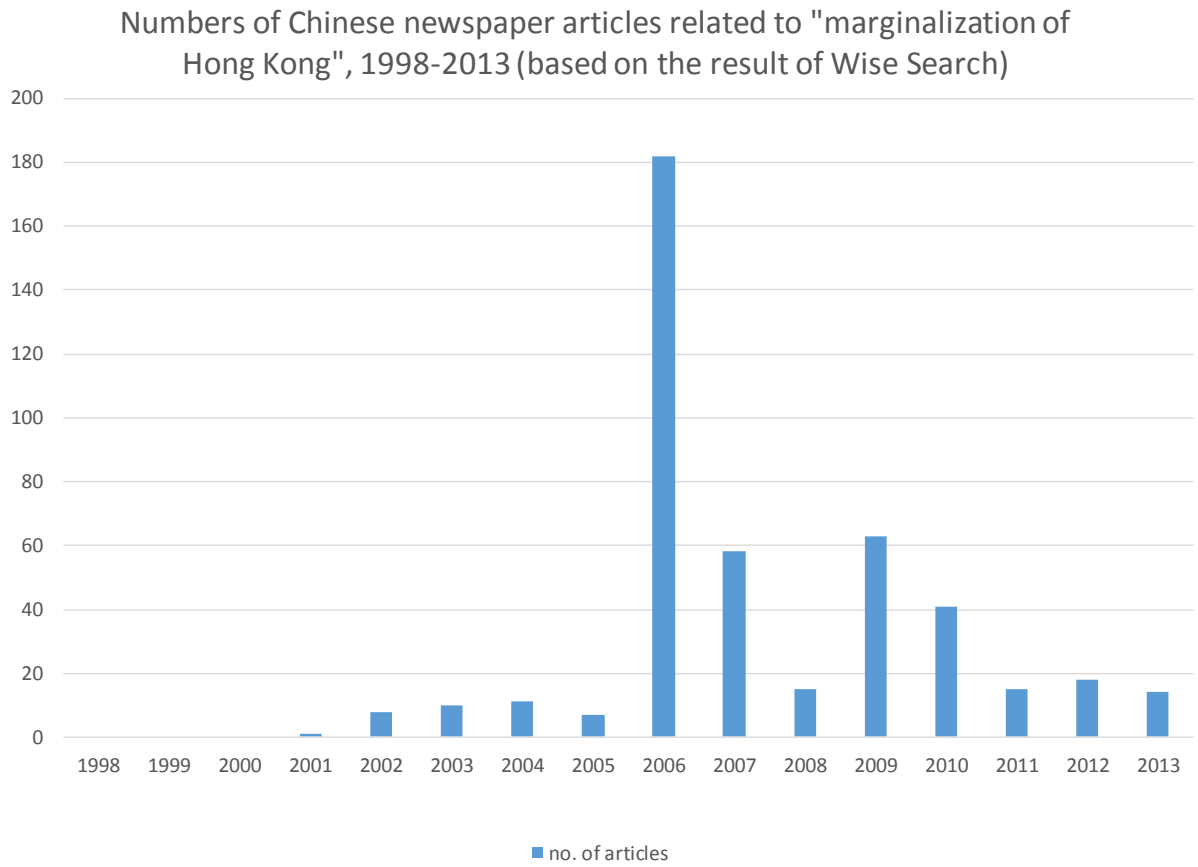
序号	省、市、区名称	存量(亿美元)
1	广东省	95.45
2	北京市	37.59
3	上海市	35.90
4	浙江省	29.59
5	山东省	26.23
6	江苏省	24.99
7	湖南省	20.48
8	福建省	15.88
9	辽宁省	14.92
10	黑龙江省	10.62

三、中国对主要经济体的直接投资

表 8: 中国对主要经济体投资情况表(单位:亿美元)

经济体名称	2009年流量			2009年末存量	
	金额	同比%	所占比重%	金额	所占比重%
中国香港	356.0	-7.9	63.0	1644.99	66.9
欧盟	29.66	535.1	5.3	62.77	2.6
美国	9.09	96.7	1.6	33.38	1.4
澳大利亚	24.36	28.8	4.3	58.63	2.4
俄罗斯联邦	3.48	-11.9	0.6	22.2	0.9
东南亚国家联盟	26.98	8.6	4.8	95.71	3.9
合计	449.57	1.4	79.6	1917.68	78.1

Appendix 3



(圖片由作者提供)

Appendix 4

日期	報章名稱	標題	與「邊緣化」相關段落
2006年3月 21日	文匯報	香港如何避免邊緣化	<p>實際上，不是十一五規劃要把<u>香港邊緣化</u>，而是香港若無法因應十一五規劃，就可能自我邊緣化。如何避免邊緣化，既需要改變心態，不能只顧自己利益，而不求雙贏共享；又需要調整政策，突破「積極不干預」樊籬，採取積極措施。在十一五規劃提出今後五年國家經濟社會發展的六大任務中，香港都可不同程度地扮演一定的積極角色，從而鞏固香港與內地互惠雙贏的關係，扭轉香港經濟孤島化和邊緣化的趨勢。</p>
2006年3月 23日	香港經濟 日報	十一五規劃研討會	<p>這論壇的正式名稱是「中國十一五規劃研討會——香港的角色」，於三月二十日早上開始，華潤大廈現場擠滿參加者，幾乎連企位也沒有！因許仕仁司長致詞時提及<u>香港邊緣化</u>，人大副委員長許嘉璐立即回應，說中國沒有邊</p>

			<p>緣化香港，把香港特區納入十一五規劃內，便是中央的苦心。內地的領導人演講時，大都能言善道，即時發揮，許</p> <p>副委員長講了一個小時，還像意猶未盡！</p>
2006年4月4日	香港商報	許司長的警告很合時	<p>香港仍為英國殖民地的時代，孫中山先生在《建國方略》中的第三個計劃，已提出把廣州建成為一個世界港口，亦</p> <p>稱為‘南方大港’，也就是把當時屬於英國殖民地的香港邊緣化，中國與外國進行貿易，無須依靠香港這個英國殖民地城市為中介，而是繞過香港，直接在廣州運作。現今香港已回歸，為中國一部分，稱為「中國香港」，中國政府沒有理由會把<u>香港邊緣化</u>。問題在於香港自己不爭氣，回歸後這麼多年，進展緩慢，像一頭埋首沙丘的駝鳥，仍</p> <p>懷緬過去香港站在南中國前鋒的舊夢，不去看看四周地區的發展。</p>
2006年5月27日	東方日報	購物天堂有危機 購物優惠在東方	<p>搞龍舟賽事，香港尚且不及澳門有板有眼，香港仲點有資格自稱旅遊中心？講到漁人碼頭，香港上世紀已經</p>

			<p>話要搞</p> <p>，依家澳門漁人碼頭已成為最新景點，香港十畫都未有一撇，如果<u>香港邊緣化</u>，究竟係誰之過？</p>
2006年6月29日	太陽報	加快經濟發展解決深層矛盾	<p>全國政協主席賈慶林出席特區政府歡迎晚宴，發表講話，特別提及<u>香港邊緣化</u>問題。他指出，只要加強經濟發展和</p> <p>改善民生，香港就可以避免邊緣化，並能解決深層次矛盾。其次是要促進和諧、識大體、顧大局，求同存異才能形</p> <p>成良好局面。</p>
2006年7月3日	文匯報	香港人才北上是一雙刃劍	<p>總體而言，香港人北上可有利於香港的經濟，也可有損於香港的經濟，此中並不一定有必然的標準，所謂水能載</p> <p>舟亦能覆舟，成敗得失，本無絕對。例如香港的製造業北上，直接帶走香港創匯的基礎和就業機會；香港管理人才</p> <p>北上，則可令香港原有的管理優勢流失，而且更會令更多強有力的競爭對手得益，並加深<u>香港邊緣化</u>；香港市民北</p> <p>上可影響香港的內部消費，從而造成香港酒樓和日常服務業的蕭條；香港</p>

			<p>資金北上，可能導致香港的經濟活動減少</p> <p>，而香港在內地的投資倘若得不到適當的保障，便可造成重大的資金流失，更將危及香港的經濟基礎。</p>
2006年8月30日	文匯報	<p>訪法無緣賞歌劇</p> <p>紅酒滿目僅淺嚐</p> <p>許仕仁太座 自爆</p> <p>曾中三重彩</p>	<p>話說前政務司司長陳方安生仍擔任港英政府經濟司時，許老爺正是副經濟司，而其工作亦集中於航權談判、空運協議等；再加上如今許老爺最喜歡談<u>香港邊緣化</u>，以及如何提升競爭力等問題，國泰這件盛事正是許老爺「瓣」，想不支持也難。</p>

Appendix 5

宋小莊：〈好鬥內耗香港有難〉，《太陽報》，2006年12月28日，A32

「政府還漠視香港邊緣化的危機。香港正在邊緣化，已是不爭之事實。現在討論是否邊緣化，意義不大。有意義的是研究香港為何會邊緣化。**鄭氏歸納的結論是「好爭，做龍頭」，可謂智者之言。**香港與內地，各有比較優勢。對香港缺乏比較優勢的領域，**香港要當「龍頭」，難免只能當「龍尾」，被邊緣化。**香港倒有兩個比較優勢，一個是發揮特別行政區的地位**促進國家的統一大業，一個是發揮單獨關稅區的角色提高香港對國家外貿的作用。**這是內地各省、市、自治區無法競爭的，才能避免邊緣化。可惜香港徒有雙重優勢，卻發揮不出來。」