

2018

## Too intimate to speak : regional cinemas and literatures

Victor FAN  
*King's College London*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://commons.ln.edu.hk/jmlc>

---

### Recommended Citation

Fan, V. (2018). Too intimate to speak: Regional cinemas and literatures. *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese*, 15(2), 47-71.

This Special Issue is brought to you for free and open access by the Centre for Humanities Research 人文學科研究中心 at Digital Commons @ Lingnan University. It has been accepted for inclusion in *Journal of Modern Literature in Chinese* 現代中文文學學報 by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Lingnan University.

## Too Intimate to Speak: Regional Cinemas and Literatures

Victor Fan

King's College London

ON MARCH 15, 2018, the Education Bureau (EDB) of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) published an article written by Mainland Chinese linguist Song Xinqiao 宋欣橋 on Hong Kong's linguistic policy. Based on the study of Li Yuming 李宇明, Song argues that as a *fangyan* 方言 (often translated as topolect, but literally means regional speech), Cantonese cannot be regarded as a *mutu* 母語 (usually translated as mother tongue, but literally means mother language). The basis of his argument is a nationalistic one:

What is a “mother language?” Even though we cannot define it accurately as a dictionary would do, we all have in mind a vernacular understanding: it refers to the language we learned from our mother when we were children. When we were little, we learned Cantonese from our mothers. Of course, our mother language must be Cantonese?! Nonetheless, in some families, parents would speak English with their children in order to raise their English proficiency. As Putonghua [standardized Mandarin] becomes increasingly important in Hong Kong society, some families begin to speak it with their children in their daily communication. Therefore, what exactly is our mother language? From a personal perspective, a mother language is indeed a matter of your own identity. However, the concept

of a “mother language” is often defined against a language spoken in a foreign nation or foreign country, that is, it refers to the national language. Since 1951, the Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization of the United Nations have called a “mother tongue” a “national language.” “A mother tongue not only belongs to an individual, but also to a nation”; “a mother tongue depends on one’s identification with the national language.”<sup>1</sup>

甚麼是「母語」？儘管我們不能像辭書那樣下個準確的定義，可我們心中都會有一個通俗的理解，就是指從小在母親那裏學來的語言。我們從小跟着母親說粵語，當然我們的母語是粵語了？！不過，有的家庭為了提高孩子的英語水平，父親母親從小也跟他們說英語。隨着香港社會對普通話的重視，也有一些家庭跟小孩子用普通話交流。那麼，到底甚麼是我們的母語呢？從個人角度來說，「母語」的確屬於你個人認同的問題。不過，「母語」這個概念通常是相對外族語或外國語而言的，是指本民族的語言。早在1951年聯合國教科文組織就把「母語」稱為「本族語」。「母語不僅屬於個人，也是屬於民族的」，「母語依賴於民族語言的認同，母語就是民族語」。

(Song 2018, 4:227; my English translation)

Song, therefore, argues that “calling Cantonese a ‘mother language’ does not correspond to the formal definition of a ‘mother language.’ It is because the word ‘language’ in the term ‘mother language’ refers to ... the language itself, not a regional variation of this language—regional speech” 把「粵語」稱作「母語」，不是嚴格意義上「母語」的含義。因為「母語」的「語」是 [……] 指一種語言，而不是指一種語言的地域變體——方言 (Song 2018, 4:227).

Being included as part of EDB’s anthology as a guideline for Hong

Kong's future linguistic policy, Song's essay is seen as the HKSAR government's effort to conform to the Thirteenth National People's Congress' resolution to instantiate national unity and authority (*yiguo* 一國) over Hong Kongers' right to exercise a social, economic, and administrative system different from that of the Mainland (*liangzhi* 兩制).

In this essay, I look back at a moment in Chinese literature and cinema, the 1930s and 1940s, when writers, filmmakers, and critics were driven by a series of political crises to conceptualize the relationship between “mother language” and “national language” from a very different perspective than Song's. I do so by scrutinizing film and literary criticisms from this period. A national language, literature, and cinema are not static, unified, and internally coherent entities that naturally subsume their regional counterparts under them. While Putonghua 普通話 (literally, common language) required—and still requires—an ongoing process of *putonghua* 普通化 (communalization), regional topolects, for the writers, filmmakers, and critics in the 1930s and 1940s, also went through a continuous sociohistorical process of *dazhonghua* 大眾化 (massification). Massification is not the same as popularization. It implies that language is, by definition, a speech-act, which actively calls a group of individuals into a critical mass (Agamben 2000 [2005], 29–32). In other words, the act of speaking this language actively constitutes a sense of belonging or even sociopolitical consciousness, whilst the language is in itself constituted by this sense of belonging.

In my discussion, I demonstrate that in the 1930s, regional speeches and cinemas were considered a liability based on an anxiety about their ability to stimulate the senses in a direct and corporeal manner. In this light, regional speeches were regarded as a threat not only to the constitution of the national language, but also to the nation-state's power to manage and control its subjects' bodies and sexualities. In the 1940s, however, such a liability became an asset in the eyes of leftwing literary critics, who promulgated the use of such linguistic power as a revolutionary instrument.

Both political positions, I argue, were driven by a presumption that political power—whether constitutional or revolutionary—is instantiated by a direct management or mobilization of the readers or moviegoers not as individual political subjects, but as bare or animal lives that either require state management or can exercise law-making violence to establish a new political order.

This debate on regional cinema and literature has been historically configured as an *objet petit a* that actively puts into question the ontological consistency of the nation-state, especially in a century during which the nation-state was conceptually, juridically, and sociopolitically *on the move*. Moreover, during this period, migrants from regions including Guangdong 廣東 (Kwangtung), Guangxi 廣西 (Kwangsi), Fujian 福建 (Hokkien), Shanghai 上海, and Beiping 北平 (Peking) moved to Hong Kong, who held mutually conflicting sociopolitical opinions. Yet, most of them settled down in Hong Kong, instead of staying in the Mainland or moving to Taiwan because their personal values did not necessarily conform to the official lines of either the Communist Party of China (CPC) or the Guomintang 國民黨 (Kuomintang, KMT, or Nationalist Party). In this intricate culturo-linguistic environment, Cantonese became not only a *technic* for communication among linguistically-diverse exiles, but also an instantiation of a *difference* between these exiles' sociopolitical position in Hong Kong and their Mainland counterparts (Anon 1948, 4).

### REVISITING MAY FOURTH

For generations, vernacularization of the Chinese language(s) has been understood as a dramatic switch from the *wenyan* 文言 (classical or literary style) to a standardized *baihua* 白話 (vernacular or plain-speech style) over the Xin wenhua yundong 新文化運動 (New culture movement). However, as Elisabeth Kaske (2008, 1–76) points out, the employment of regional verbal languages, infused with words and syntaxes from the standardized literary language of a given historical period, can be traced back to

works as early as the *Shi jing* 詩經 (*Book of songs*). For Kaske, the boundary between verbal and literary languages has always been nebulously defined. Even today, literary phrases (e.g., classical idioms) are borrowed freely in speech, whilst the standardized literary language today can contain expressions specific to a writer's regional tongue.

Between the 1890s and the 1920s, verbal languages, written in combination with their literary counterparts, became popularized among the educated classes largely due to the proliferation of lifestyle magazines for *guixiu* 閨秀 (ladies in boudoirs).<sup>2</sup> Such a hybridized writing style was legitimated by the Qing court in the 1900s. It was adopted in the government's new national education system and the entrance examinations of bureaucratic services (Kaske 2008, 77–151). During the same period, scholar and political thinker Liang Qichao 梁啟超 (1873–1929) promoted the *xin wenti* 新文體 (new literary style), which aimed to convey ideas in a down-to-earth manner. This style breaks down the strict boundary between poetry and prose and adopts vernacular phraseology and grammatical structures from European and Japanese languages (Liang 2003 [2004]; Yuan 1999, 481–82).

The syncretic use of both verbal and literary vocabulary and phraseology was common in popular culture both in Shanghai and Hong Kong during the Republican period (1911–49). For instance, in the *Yingxi zazhi* 影戲雜誌 (Motion picture review), an influential film magazine edited by screenwriter Gu Kenfu 顧肯夫 (circa 1890s–1932), the majority of the *xiqiao* 戲橋 (illustrated synopses) of Pathé and Hollywood films are writ-

---

2 One of these magazines is the *Nüzi shijie* 女子世界 (Women's world), published in Shanghai between 1904 and 1907, edited by Ding Chuwo 丁初我 (1871–1930). Another one is the *Funü shibao* 婦女時報 (*The women's eastern times*), founded in 1911 by Di Baoxian 狄保賢 (1872–1941). These magazines can be found in the *Chinese Women's Magazines in the Late Qing and Early Republican Period* server, [https://kjc-sv034.kjc.uni-heidelberg.de/frauenzeitschriften/public/nuezi\\_shijie/the\\_magazine.php?magazin\\_id=2](https://kjc-sv034.kjc.uni-heidelberg.de/frauenzeitschriften/public/nuezi_shijie/the_magazine.php?magazin_id=2), accessed October 31, 2018.

ten in this hybrid style (see, for example, Xie 1922, 15–16). In Hong Kong, such a practice can also be seen in film articles during the 1930s (see, for example, Kaimaila 1936, 22; Xiang 1935, 2–3). Interestingly, in Guangzhou 廣州 (Canton) and Hong Kong, articles in *xiaobao* 小報 (small newspapers), which published news and reviews of popular entertainment and erotic stories, employ such a writing style to convey pornographic messages. For instance, an advertisement for Hollywood film *Angkor* (directors uncredited, Mapel Pictures, 1935) states:

Men and beasts combat against each other, making your eyes turn  
and your heart loose a beat!

Voluptuous bodies of ladies are healthy and beautiful; their lo-  
tus-breasts pop up like peaks!

Native women are used to nudity; their physiques are in top shape;  
They bared their chests and exposed their breasts;

With neither clothes nor animal hide, without any shame or sur-  
prise!

A powerful tiger chases and attacks a beauty; their flesh and blood  
are admixed!

The monkey king picks men to torture, making your hair stand on  
its end!

A giant serpent strangles a white man, making your heart and liver  
tremble!

A poison snake coils up and spits out its juice, making all the sur-  
rounding plants wither!

Two muscular tigers combat against each other; their voices echo  
around the valley!

A two-hundred-pound crocodile: its tongue is more than a foot  
long!

人獸打成一片，目怵心悸！

士女豐姿健美，蓮乳呈峰！

土婦慣於裸體，體格健美，袒胸露乳，  
 無衣無褐，恬不為怪也！  
 猛虎追搏美女，血肉模糊！  
 猴王擇人蹂躪，毛指髮立！  
 巨蟒力纏白人，心驚膽裂！  
 毒蛇盤地噴氣，草木脫落！  
 二虎奮力相鬥，聲震山岳！  
 怪鰐重二百磅，舌長尺許！  
 (Anon 1936, 2.1; my English translation)

This advertisement is written in the format of a Cantonese *dayou shi* 打油詩 (*dajau si*; comparable to a doggerel).<sup>3</sup> At first glance, the poem seems to be written in a highly literary language, with classical idioms like *lianru chengfeng* 蓮乳呈峰 (*linjyu cingfung*; their lotus-breasts pop up like peaks), *tanxiong luru* 袒胸露乳 (*taanhung loujyu*; they bared their chests and exposed their breasts), or *zeren roulin* 擇人蹂躪 (*zaakjan jauleon*; picks men to torture). It is also filled with sexual metaphors, including a “powerful tiger chases and attacks a beauty,” a “giant serpent strangles a white man,” and a “poison snake coils up and spits out its juice.” Historically, however, these sexual imageries were used in the Cantonese *jianggu* 講古 (*gonggwu* or professional storytelling) on the street or on the radio (Zeng 2008, 81–98 and 158–66). These idioms were hardly euphemisms. Rather, they sounded so familiar to the male readers that they could immediately generate powerful schemata of the sexual imageries in their heads, which would have the power to stimulate their sensoria. In fact, since these stock phrases excite the lower body by etching a sexual image into the readers’ retinas, they are often considered as *disu* 低俗 (*daizuk*: vulgar—especially connected to the lower body).

As early as the 1930s, Norbert Elias (1939 [2003]) has warned that

---

3 Transliterations of Cantonese terms are based on the Jyutping 粵拼 system, which is now considered the standard academic method.



linguistic standardization, operated through the government, universities and educational institutions, respectable newspapers, radio, and cinema, involves a systematic cleansing of a language of vulgar references to the lower body. A language's ability to excite the body, however, is preserved in regional speeches. In the 1970s, scholar Lam Nin-tung 林年同 (1944–90) argues that regionalism—and its association with vulgarity—was hardly considered a liability in early twentieth-century Chinese literature:<sup>4</sup>

The New literary movement treated dialect literature seriously. When it first started, some writers wrote with [their own] northern dialects. Then soon, writers in other regions began to compose in their native languages. For example, Liu Fu [1891–1934] wrote folk songs in the dialect of the City of Jianguyin. Xu Zhimo [1897–1931] penned some of his poems with the language of the northern region of the Shaanxi Province. Lao She [1899–1966] composed his novels with the *tubai* [vernacular dialect] of old Beijing. In fact, Yu Dafu [1896–1945] had once used the dialects of the region south of the Yangtze River to write some of the dialogues in his short stories. Meanwhile, there are numerous examples of writers who used Cantonese as the linguistic medium of their works, including Fu Kung-mong [1911–77], Auyeung San [1908–2004], and Chan Chan-wan [1914–2002]. Such phenomenon could be traced back to the *xiaoci* (petite lyric) from the Song [960–1279] dynasty, the *xiaoshuo* [novel], the *xiqu* [theatrical songs] of the Yuan [1271–1368] and Ming [1368–1644] dynasties, and the *suqu* [vernacular melodies] sung in the *lidiao* [local neighborhood speeches] the Ming and Qing [1644–1911] dynasties.

---

4 For Cantonese names, I either use the English transliterations historically used by the writers and figures themselves or the Hong Kong government Cantonese Romanization system, which was widely accepted during the Republican period as the standard.

新文學運動很重視方言文學。開始的時候，有人用北方白話寫作，後來又推廣到各地方言。劉復用江陰方言寫民歌，徐志摩用陝北土語寫詩。老舍用舊京土白寫小說，郁達夫也用過江南方言寫小說對白。以華南方言創作者亦大不乏人，符公望，歐陽山，陳殘雲諸子，便極提倡過。這個現象，和宋人的小詞，元、明人的小說戲曲，明、清人的俗曲俚調的創作，是一個傳統下來的。

(Lam 1978, 2; my English translation)<sup>5</sup>

For Lam, the Cantonese language can stimulate a listener or reader's sensorium because it never went through standardization. Therefore, Cantonese in the 1930s was constituted by, and constitutive of, the masses. In this sense, Lam (1978, 3) calls Cantonese the *Huanan dazhong yu* 華南大眾語 (*Waanaam daaizung jyu*; language of the masses of South China), which has the power to *vocate* its users to develop a sense of in-group loyalty not through interpellation from above, but through intersubjective recognition.

#### CRISIS OF CANTONESE CINEMA

Historically, the debate on the sociopolitical and cultural legitimacy of Cantonese and other regional languages came to the fore around 1936, when Luo Gang 羅剛 (1901–77), Director of the Zhongyang dianying jiancha weiyuanhui 中央電影檢查委員會 (Central Film Censorship Committee), issued a ban on Cantonese and topolect cinemas. This ban can be traced back to 1932, when the Guoyu tuixing weiyuanhui 國語推行委員會 (National Language Committee) voted to observe Peking Mandarin as the *guoyu* 國語 (national language) (Fan 2015, 158; Yao 1998). As a result of this decision, the Zhongguo jiaoyu dianying xiehui 中國教育電影協會 (National Educational Cinematographic Society of

China or NECSC) recommended that all Chinese film productions were to be made in Mandarin (Xiao 1999, 184).

The implementation of the ban, however, proved to be difficult. Politically, the Kwangtung and Kwangsi provinces were a semiautonomous republic under the governorship of Hu Hanmin 胡漢民 (1879–1936), whereas Hong Kong was a British colony (Anon 1935b, 1017; Fan 2015, 159; Xiao 1999, 184–85). Culturally, in the 1930s, while a Mandarin film could be distributed in a few cities including Peking, Tianjin 天津 (Tientsin), and Shanghai, a Cantonese film could be marketed to many more industrialized cities in the south (including Shanghai, Canton, Hong Kong, and Macau), Southeast Asia, and the diasporic communities in Europe and North America. Between 1930 and 1936, not only that vibrant Cantonese film industries had already emerged in Hong Kong, Singapore, Malaya, and San Francisco, the two top Shanghai companies, the Star Motion Picture Company 明星電影公司 and the United Photoplay Service 聯華電影公司 (UPS) had established studios in Hong Kong to produce Cantonese films (Fan 2015, 157–58; Li and Zhao 2009, 141–66; Xiao 1999, 184–85).

However, when Hu died in 1936, Luo sent a delegation in May to Canton to prepare for an implementation of the ban. In response, producer Chiu Shu-sun 趙樹燊 (1904–87; Grandview 大觀 Studio), directors Chuk Ching-yin 竺清賢, Lee Fa 李化, Ko Lei-hen 高梨痕 (1890–1982), and Chan Kwan-chiu 陳君超 formed the Wanjiu Yuepian lianhe xiehui 挽救粵片聯合協會 (Waangau Jyutpin lyunhap hipwui or United Association for Rescuing the Cantonese Cinema). They travelled to Nanjing 南京 (Nanking) and Shanghai to meet representatives from the film industry and the ruling KMT. As a result, Luo agreed to postpone the ban for three years, whose implementation was eventually interrupted by the Sino-Japanese War (1937–45) (Fan 2015, 160–61; Lee 1937, 2–4; Xiao 1999, 186–90).

In his report to the *Ling xing* 伶星 [*Ling sing*] magazine, Lee argues

that the audience in the urban centers in South China, Southeast Asia, Europe, and North America normally preferred watching Hollywood films. In this light, Cantonese cinema, more so than its Mandarin counterpart, was able to attract these spectators to Chinese films and to the patriotic messages they sought to arouse. He also argues that for most of these spectators, Cantonese, not Mandarin, was the language of the masses (Lee 1937, 3). Interestingly, Li-fu Ch'en 陳立夫 (1900–2001), head of the NECSC, upon hearing Lee's argument, sided with the Cantonese filmmakers:

I still don't understand why we must ban the Cantonese film. Why don't we ban the English-language film? Honestly, in present-day China, we shouldn't simply make Mandarin films. We should also produce more topolect films, so that we can penetrate the root of the people. Moreover, we ought to dub all English-language films in topolects [...].

我總不明白何故須禁粵片，何以也不見禁英語片呢？查實，在中國這個時候，不特拍國語片，而各地方言片，也不妨多拍，以期深入民間去。而且，放映的英語片，最好也配上方言去[……]。

(Lee 1937, 3–4)

What Lee and Ch'en expressed in their Nanking meeting were opinions well-circulated in film magazines around that time (see Chik-san 1937; Ling-mui 1937). Linguists also pointed out that no KMT politicians and screen actors were able to speak standardized Mandarin. For them, banning the Cantonese film, an art form that had been economically effective in drawing the spectators away from Hollywood cinema, insinuated that the KMT was more eager to ostracize the Kwangtung region as *huawai zhi min* 化外之民 (people who stood outside civilization) than to keep colonialism under control (Anon 1937c). As Zhiwei Xiao (1999, 190) argues, the crisis of Cantonese cinema in 1936 was economically mo-

tivated, since Shanghai studio executives Lo Ming-yau 羅明佑 (1900–67; Star) and Zhou Jianyun 周劍雲 (UPS) openly criticized that Cantonese cinema threatened the financial stability of its Shanghai counterpart (Lee 1937, 3–4).

However, the major disapproval of Cantonese cinema was based on its vulgarity, which, in the eyes of a new generation of filmmakers, was incapable of conveying modern life and ideas. As early as 1935, Cantonese filmmakers led by Lo Duen 盧敦 (1911–2000) initiated the Dianying qingjie yundong 電影清潔運動 (Dinjing cinggit wandung; Film cleansing movement), which aims to “modernize” the Cantonese film and language in order to convey nationalism, morality, scientific knowledge, and Euro-American values of humanism (Anon 1935a, 1015; Luofu 1936, 24; Maausi 1935, 9). As Chik-san (1937) argues, Cantonese cinema should put its emphasis on its artistic value, so that it can become a vehicle for conveying *yishi* 意識 (consciousness or ideology; see Fan 2015, 50–51). The delegitimization of the Cantonese film and language was therefore motivated by what Michel Foucault (1976 [1990], 18) would call a biopolitical project: the elimination of spontaneous and vernacular discourses on the lower body on the one hand, and the proliferation of scientific discourses on sexuality on the other, so that the human body would be studied, indexed, documented, and analyzed as *knowledge* that was, and could only be, sanctioned by the political power. In other words, linguistic standardization facilitated—and still does—the appropriation of the body, whose management and execution would become an instantiation of state power.

**CANTONESE AS THE LANGUAGE OF DEFENSE; LANGUAGE OF REVOLUTION**  
KMT’s linguistic policy changed at the outbreak of the Sino-Japanese War. On Christmas day 1937, the Zhongyang dianying shezhichang 中央電影攝製廠 (Central Film Studio) in Chongqing 重慶 (Chungking) dispatched filmmakers Tsai Chu-sang 蔡楚生 (1906–68), Shen Xiling 沈西苓 (1904–40), and Situ Huimin 司徒慧敏 (1910–87) to initiate an

industrial reform in the Canton-Hong Kong region. Their aim was to turn Cantonese cinema into a form of *guofang dianying* 國防電影 (national defense cinema) (Anon 1937a; 1937b, 20–21; 1938). Even though whether there was indeed a South China national defense cinema or not is historically contestable, these filmmakers revisited Hong Kong in 1945 to promote the same idea, this time supported by the CPC.

In literature, the idea of a Huanan guofang wenxue 華南國防文學 (National defense literature of South China) was raised in 1947. According to Ching-wen 靜聞 (Chung Ching-wen 鍾敬文, 1903–2002; 1948 [2016], 2:257), this discussion was initiated by Lam Lok-kwan 林洛君 in Macanese newspaper *Journal Cheng Pou* 正報 (no. 8). In his article, Lam argues that in order to communalize the people in South China, literature must be first *difanghua* 地方化 (regionalized). This initiated a debate among Cantonese and Mainland authors including Lan Ling 藍玲, Ruzi Niu 孺子牛, Lam Ching 琳清, and Ah Chek 阿尺 not only in the *Cheng Pou*, but also in the supplement of the *Huaqiao ribao* 華僑日報 (*Overseas Chinese Daily News*), the *Wenyi zhoukan* 文藝週刊 (Art and Literature Weekly), the *Wenshi zhoukan* 文史週刊 (Literature and history weekly), and the *Qunzhong zhoukan* 群眾週刊 (Mass weekly).

Ching-wen (1948 [2016], 2:259–60) argues that regional speeches are best understood as the root of mass literature, which have the power to appeal to the listeners or readers' sensoria in times of labor, war, public assemblies, and romantic pursuits. Meanwhile, the concept of a *putonghua* has always been constructed out of a social contract among bureaucrats, academicians, and businesspeople. For Ching-wen, literatures based on Putonghua has been historically configured as an ideological apparatus of the ruling classes. Meanwhile, *zhengtong de wenxue* 正統的文學 (legitimate literatures) are always based on regional speeches, which enable the masses to inherit, narrate, and create their own stories with their own *cuye de yuyan* 粗野的語言 (brute languages). For him, the New culture movement, which sought to collapse *chuantong de wenxue guannian*, *fang-*

*fa he xingshi* 傳統文學觀念，方法和形式 (traditional literary concepts, methods, and forms), defined the *baihua* not only as the Peking topolect, but also as various regional languages.

For Ching-wen (1948 [2016], 2:262), in the Canton-Hong Kong regions, Mandarin was not a native language, but a *waiguo yu* 外國語 (foreign speech). He argues:

The language we commonly use in dialogues, lectures, and writing essays incline towards being intellectual. Once a certain content is communicated, the job is considered done. Therefore, for those needs (participating in a conversation or writing a theoretical essay), a language acquired as a common one (sometimes being learned within a short period of time) would normally do. But if we use this kind of language to compose a poem, tell a story, or write a play, we would be powerless. This kind of language is relatively poor and uninteresting.... The language that we understand most deeply and the one we can most lively and nuancedly employ is the kind of language rooted in our homeland, one that we acquired when we were little, one that has always been intricately related to our life experiences: what most scholars would call our mother tongue.

我們平常用以談話，講書或寫作論文的語言，是偏於智性的，只要能夠把一定內容傳達出來，大體就完事了。因此，對於那種需要（談話、寫理論文章等），普通學來的語言，（有時還是在很短時期中學會的），往往就可以勉強應付。如果要拿這種語言去做詩、講故事或寫作戲劇，就會顯出無力了。因為它是比較貧乏的，沒有情趣的。我們懂得最深微，用起來最靈便的，往往是那些從小學來的鄉土的語言，和自己的生活經驗有無限關聯的語言，即學者們所謂「母舌」（mother tongue）。

(Ching-wen 1948 [2016], 2:263; my translation).

Based on the ideas of Japanese socialist poet Moriyama Kei 森山啓 (1904–91), Ching-wen regards literature written in a regional speech as the bones, muscles, nerves, and skin of reality. In this sense, topolect literature can be considered a literature of the body. It is constituted by the physicality of life, and because of that, it constitutes life by means of its corporeality (Ching-wen 1948 [2016], 2:264). In other words, the vulgarity and physicality of the regional speech can be instrumentalized as a revolutionary drive that fights against the politicization of the body and corporealization of politics. This bare body is to be treated as a medium of expression, a mode of constructive violence that dismantles the law in order to imagine a new mode of existence.

During the same year, Mao Dun 茅盾 (1896–1981) was invited by his friends in Hong Kong to write about regional-speech literatures. For him, *baihua wenxue* 白話文學 (plain-speech literature) is fundamentally regional:

The term “plain-speech literature” has been coined for thirty years. Literary works written since “May-Fourth” has been known as “vernacular literature.” Alternatively, they have also been called *yuti wenxue* (verbal-style literature). Their meanings are not different. Yet, the term verbal-style does not designate plain-speech. What is plain-speech? It is the speech spoken by us. China is a large country. Different people from different regions speak many different kinds of speeches, to the extent that they cannot understand each other. These mutually different verbal languages are called “regional speeches.” In this sense, a “regional speech” is best understood as the “plain speech” of that region. A “plain speech” is inseparable from its “regional speech.” Any separation between these two would be theoretically inconceivable and practically impossible.

「白話文學」這名詞，已經成立了三十年。「五四」以來的新文學，通稱之為「白話文學」。或稱之為「語體文



學」，涵義並無二致，但「語體」一詞本身卻不是白話。什麼是「白話」？就是我們的口說的話。中國之大，各地人民口說的話，也就有多種多樣，甚至於不能互相通曉；這些各地的互不相同的口語，通稱為「方言」。照這樣看來，「方言」就是某一特定地區的「白話」，離開了「方言」的「白話」，在理論上是不通，在事實上是沒有的。  
(Mao 1947 [2016], 2:272; my translation)

For Mao Dun (1947 [2016], 2:274), Mandarin was standardized as an official written language based on the topolects spoken in the north. As a literary language, every writer must acquire it as though it were a foreign language in order to put it into practice. Between the Song 宋 (960–1279) and the Qing dynasties, literatures had been written in the Pinghua 平話 (Peking speech) or Wuyu 吳語 (Zhejiang 浙江 language). Historically, a national language referred to the language spoken in the nation-state's political center. Its elevation from being a regional speech to a national language instantiated the political power of that region. For Mao Dun, plain-speech literature *is* regional-speech literature. What has been known as plain-speech literature since May-Fourth is more properly understood as national-language literature, which is a stumbling block of literature's massification.

Mao Dun (1947 [2016], 2:276–77) argues that a language not only constitutes a mass, but it is also constituted by the mass in its process of becoming. He proposes calling regional speeches “languages of the masses.” Mao Dun's understanding of a massified/massifying language can be interpreted via the lens of Saussurian semiology (Saussure 1967 [2005], 141–260). For Mao Dun, a mass language's vocabulary, phraseology, and grammar are perpetually transformed in accordance with the lived experiences of those who speak them. Therefore, diachronically, existing words and idioms acquire new meanings as urbanization, rural reforms, and new political values produce new semiological differences in these linguistic

systems. Synchronically, the existing standardized literary language, once being employed by speakers and writers of different regions, are instantaneously massified and regionalized. In other words, new linguistic systems would emerge not simply as a result of individual speakers and writers documenting their spoken languages, but also through a process of negotiation between existing regional practices and the standardized literary “plain speech.” In addition, with the proliferation of regional languages, new *minjian xingshi* 民間形式 (folk forms) will gradually replace the ossified literary ones for the purpose of political massification (Mao 1947 [2016], 2:279–81).

Mao Dun inspired Ching-wen (1949 [2016], 2:282) to further historicize and conceptualize regional-speech literature. In his discussion, Ching-wen first constructs a genealogy of regional-speech literature since the Song dynasty (which would later on be summarized by Lam Nin-tung 1978, 2). Ching-wen points out that late-Qing philologist Wang Guowei 王國維 (1877–1927) argues that the *qu* 曲 (songs) of the Yuan 元 (1271–1368) dynasty employ vernacular or even vulgar idioms in their composition. Meanwhile, Liu Fu proposes:

When we need to write a dialogue spoken by a certain someone, we must use the speech and tonality of that certain someone. Otherwise, that speech would still be ours, not this certain someone’s [...]. When we write prose and poetry, what we cannot possibly get away from, and what we must employ to the highest level of sincerity and honesty, are the languages we learned when we were being held by our mothers on their knees. The only languages that could touch us deeply and could generate an extraordinary taste of intimacy are those languages we have once used to communicate with our mothers.

我們要寫誰某的話，就非用誰某的語言與聲調不可；不然，終於是我們的話。我們做文做詩，我們所擺脫不了，而且能於運用到最高等最真摯的一步的，便是我們抱在我

們母親膝上時所學的语言，同時能使我們受最深的感動，覺得比一切別種语言分外的親密有味的，也就是這種我們的母親說过的语言。

(qtd. Chin-wen 1949 [2016], 2:283)

Regional-speech literatures, for Ching-wen (1949 [2016], 2:283), were not simply propounded and supported by their practitioners, but also by writers of the standardized plain-speech, including Qu Qiubai 瞿秋白 (1899–1935) and Lu Xun 魯迅 (1881–1936). Lao She 老舍 (1899–1966) even criticizes many May-Fourth writers of using *jia guoyu* 假國語 (fake national language), a highly constructed language that is entirely disconnected from their characters and subjects' lived experiences. Thus, Lao She suggests the use of the vernacular speeches of Peking, with a vocabulary and grammatical structure originated from speakers who use them in life. Ching-wen (284) argues that the New culture movement was dominated by literary elites who despised the customs and cultures of the common people. It instantiated the unmarked authority of an academic institution established by the aristocracy.

Informed by Mao Zedong's 毛澤東 (1893–1976; 1942 [1991], 3:847–77) speech on art, literature, and cinema, Ching-wen (1949 [2016], 2:289–91) agrees with Mao Dun that art and literature can only be massified by employing the languages of the masses, so that the thoughts, affections and emotions, subject matters, and semiotic structures of a piece of literature is fully initiated from the linguistic systems of the masses themselves. These literatures no longer instantiate the unmarked authority of the aristocracy and of the colonial powers, whose creative styles, forms, and genres have been kept alive in standardized literatures. Instead, new forms, which are organically and democratically constituted by the masses, would convey a fully democratic and socialist ideology. Most important, regional-speech literatures would no longer be authored and authorized by a literary elite, but by the masses who occupy the lowest stratum of the so-

ciety, who intimately and directly document their lives by using their own languages.

The most popular and critically discussed Cantonese novel written during the 1930s and 1940s was *Xiaqiu zhuan* 蝦球傳 [*Haakau zyun*; The story of Ha Kau] by Wong Kuk-lau 黃谷柳 (1908–77) serialized between October 1947 and December 1948 in the *Huashang bao* 華商報 [*Hua Shang Daily*, edited by Hsia Yen 夏衍, 1900–95] (Chow 1948 [2016], 378–88; Wong 1947–48; Yu 1949 [2016], 362–77). Another novel more popularly known among filmmakers and moviegoers into the 1950s was *Renhai leihen* 人海淚痕 [*Janhoi leoihan*; Traces of tears in the human sea], a novel by Mong Wan 望雲 (Cheung Man-ping 張文炳 / 張叻冰, 1910–59) serialized in the *Dazhong bao* 大眾報 [*Dazung bou*; Mass post]. Hong Kong Cantonese film director Lee Tit 李鐵 (1913–97) adapted it into two films, *Renhai leihen* 人海淚痕 [*Janhoi leoihan*; Traces of Tears in the Human Sea, Grandview Studio 大觀, 1940] and *Weilou chunxiao* 危樓春曉 [*Ngailau ceonhiu*; In the Face of Demolition, Union Film Enterprise 中聯, 1953] respectively. The latter is regarded by film scholar Lam Nin-tung as the most exemplary work of its kind (Lam 1978, 3).

*Traces of Tears in the Human Sea* is written primarily in the standardized plain speech. The story is narrated by a poor intellectual Chow Ping 周平, who lives in a sublet unit within a large apartment in a tenement building. In the novel, he serves as an observer, who conveys the lives, aspirations, frustrations, and angers of other tenants from different socioeconomic classes. Mong Wan writes all the dialogues among Chow Ping and the educated tenants in the standardized speech, which also suggests that some of them are settlers from the Mainland. Meanwhile, Cantonese dialogues are reserved for working-class characters. For example, one evening, Chow Ping runs into a junior assistant of his friend Chiu Fai 趙輝, who is a unionized bus driver:

This *young man*, once having caught a glimpse of Chow Ping, asked,

*“Bro, is Chiu Fai here?”* Chow Ping said, *“Go upstairs, kid!”* He then turned around and cried out, aiming upstairs, “Brother Fai, someone’s looking for you!” Once he heard a response from Chiu Fai, the young man stopped bothering Chow Ping and he ascended the stairs of his own volition.... Little Kan [the young man] saw Chiu Fai and said, *“Brother Fai, taking a break from work today?”* Chiu Fai said, *“What’s up, Kan?”* Kan said, *“Lend me a tenner, won’t you?”* Chiu Fai said, *“You ain’t got your salary? Fuck! We got paid only two days ago!”*

(Italicized: in Cantonese)

那後生一見周平，問道：「大佬，趙輝喺唔喺處亞？」周平道：「上樓啦，細佬」。回頭又向樓上喊道：「輝哥，有人找你」！只聽樓上趙輝的應聲，那後生再不理會周平，逕自登樓而去.....。根仔見了趙輝道：「輝哥，今日你抖工呀？」趙輝道：「整乜野呀，根仔？」根仔道：「借住十千錢俾我得唔得呀？」趙輝道：「你有出糧咩？挑，正話出左糧兩日。」

(Mong 1960s, 32)

The standardized speech used in the narration is not the May-Fourth version of plain speech. Rather, it is written in the style of a Qing-dynasty vernacular novel, which uses primarily verbal forms, though most expressions are economized by literary idioms. Meanwhile, the Cantonese speeches are inflected by working-class phraseology and vocabulary, including *taungung* 抖工 (taking a break from work), *zing matye aa* 整乜野呀 (what’s up), *sapcin cin* 十千錢 (tenner; literally, ten-thousand mills), and *tiu/diu* 挑 (fuck). For native Cantonese speakers, these phrases call forth the image of not only two working-class men, but two laborers with sweaty bodies emanating the mechanical odor from the buses they drive, who use words that are intimately connected with their hands, stomachs, and lower bodies as a common denominator.

### TOO INTIMATE TO SPEAK

In this light, while a regional speech's corporeality and physical intimacy was seen by KMT's bureaucrats or even Cantonese intellectuals in the 1930s as a liability, Ching-wen and Mao Dun regarded these features as its revolutionary potential. In fact, Ching-wen and Mao Dun were not alone. Besides the authors and critics Ching-wen mentions in his articles, Hsia Yen (1948 [2016], 293–99) and Guo Muoruo 郭沫若 (1892–1978; 1948 [2016], 300–2) also supported the constitution of a Malay-Chinese language and literature.

Both the political right and the political left, however, held on to one assumption: that *speaking individuals* are not fully subjectivized and politicized citizens. Rather, they are always bare or animal lives. For the political right, those who spoke and wrote in a regional speech were considered a threat to the state's power to manage their biological bodies and their sexualities. Therefore, supporters of the political right believed that national identity, subjectivity, and agency must be instantiated by a unified and civilized national language. Their understanding of a nation-state is therefore a *polis* of bare lives that are centrally managed, organized, maintained, and educated by the party-state.

Meanwhile, for the political left, the languages of these bare lives and their intimate connections with their animal bodies could be instrumentalized to exercise revolutionary violence, so that a new political order could be established. Supporters of the political left envisioned the nation-state as a multi-focal, multi-lingual, and multi-cultural formation, where contesting sociopolitical opinions and culturo-linguistic values are negotiated. For them, the physical body, its corporeal functions, and its connection to labor, production, and the life-process itself, is best instantiated by speeches acquired from their mothers and used during the course of their work environment. Regional speeches are indeed the flesh, blood, and bones of the masses.

One way or another, the debate on regional speeches, literatures, and cinemas and the anxiety it generated were symptomatic of the uncertainty of the ontological consistency of the Chinese nation state during a century when China was *on the move*. Today, the current debate on whether Cantonese is to be considered the mother language of Hong Kongers of Cantonese descent is of course based on the same juridical logic. As long as biopolitics remains the principles of *politics*, this discourse between regional and national languages will continue. Perhaps Song Xinqiao's idea that Cantonese should not be considered a "mother language" is initiated from his Electra complex: the death drive to kill one's mother in order to consummate one's desire for the father substitute—the Law of the Land.

#### REFERENCES

- Agamben, Giorgio. 2000 [2005]. *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, translated by Patricia Dailey. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Anon. 1935a. "Dianying qingjie yundong" 電影清潔運動 [Film cleansing movement]. *Diansheng zhoukan* 電聲週刊 [Movietone] 4.45, 1015.
- . 1935b. "Guangzhou zhi dianying wenti" 廣州之電影問題 [On film censorship in Canton]. *Diansheng zhoukan* 電聲週刊 [Movietone] 4.47, 1017.
- . 1936. "Angkor." *Guohua bao* 國華報 [National flower post]. December 31. 2.1.
- . 1937a. "Cai Chusheng Shen Xiling lai Gang 蔡楚生沈西苓來港 Tsai Chu-sang and Shen Xiling visit Hong Kong." *Ling xing* 伶星 [*Ling sing*] 7.28, 18.
- . 1937b. "Cai Chusheng xiansheng fangwen 蔡楚生先生訪問 [An interview with Mr. Tsai Chu-sang]. *Ling xing* 伶星 [*Ling sing*] 7.28, 20–21
- . 1937c. "Yueyu pian shifou gai jin 粵語片是否該禁 [Should the Cantonese film be banned]?" *Yilin* 藝林 [*Art lane*] 7, n.p.
- . 1938. "Zenyang zucheng yizuo Huanan dianying de guofang baolei?" 怎樣組成一座華南電影的國防堡壘 [How to build a national cinematic fort to defend China?] *Yilin* 藝林 [*Art lane*] 28, n.p.
- . 1948. "Bifengtang li de anliu" 避風塘裏的暗流 [An undercurrent in a typhoon shelter]. *Wen Wei Pao* 文匯報. November 22. 4.
- Chik-san 仄臣. 1937. "Yueyu pian gexin yundong 粵語片革新運動 [Cantonese film reform movement]." *Yilin* 藝林 [*Art lane*] 11, n.p.

- Ching-wen 靜聞. 1948 [2016]. “Fangyan wenxue shilun 方言文學試論 [Literature in regional speeches: An attempted discussion].” In *Xianggang wenxue daxi: Pinglun juan er* 香港文學大系：評論卷二 [Anthology of Hong Kong literature: Criticism part 2], edited by Lam Man-suk 林曼叔, 2:257–71. Hong Kong: The Commercial Press.
- . 1949 [2016]. “Huanan fangyan wenxue yundong de xianzhuang he yiyi” 華南方言文學運動的現狀和意義 [The current conditions and implications of the South China region-speech literature movement]. In *Xianggang wenxue daxi: Pinglun juan er* 香港文學大系：評論卷二 [Anthology of Hong Kong literature: Criticism part 2], edited by Lam Man-suk 林曼叔, 2:282–92. Hong Kong: The Commercial Press.
- Chow Kong-ming 周鋼鳴 1948 [2016]. “Ping Xiaoqiu zhuan di yi er bu” 評蝦球傳第一二部 [On parts one and two of *The Story of Ha Kau*]. In *Xianggang wenxue daxi: Pinglun juan er* 香港文學大系：評論卷二 [Anthology of Hong Kong literature: Criticism part 2], edited by Lam Man-suk 林曼叔, 2:378–88. Hong Kong: The Commercial Press.
- Elias, Norbert. 1939 [2003]. *The Civilizing Process: Sociogenetic and Psychogenetic Investigations*, translated by Edmund Jephcott. Malden, MA.: Blackwell Publishing.
- Fan, Victor. 2015. *Cinema Approaching Reality: Locating Chinese Film Theory*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Foucault, Michel. 1976 [1990]. *The History of Sexuality. Volume 1: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley. New York: Vintage Books.
- Guo, Muoruo 郭沫若. 1948 [2016]. “Shenshu ‘Ma-Hua hua’ wenti de yijian [My opinions on ‘Malay-Sinicization’].” In *Xianggang wenxue daxi: Pinglun juan er* 香港文學大系：評論卷二 [Anthology of Hong Kong literature: Criticism part 2], edited by Lam Man-suk 林曼叔, 2:300–2. Hong Kong: The Commercial Press.
- Hsia, Yen 夏衍. 1948 [2016]. “‘Ma-Hua wenyi’ shilun” 「馬華文藝」試論 [“Malay-Chinese art and literature”: An attempted discussion]. In *Xianggang wenxue daxi: Pinglun juan er* 香港文學大系：評論卷二 [Anthology of Hong Kong literature: Criticism part 2], edited by Lam Man-suk 林曼叔, 2:293–99. Hong Kong: The Commercial Press.
- Kaimaila 開麥拉 1936. “Sunshi shiwan yuan: Tianliang, Bo’ai, Nuxing zhi guang, Shenglu, Mofan jiating dipian wubu 損失十萬餘元：《天良》、《博愛》、《女性之光》、《生路》、《模範家庭》底片五部 [A hundred-thousand-dollar loss: Plus five film negatives—*Heavenly conscience, Fraternity, Light of Women, Path of Life, and Model Family*].” *Chunse* 春色 [Spring beauty] 2:15, 22.
- Kaske, Elisabeth. 2008. *The Politics of Language in Chinese Education, 1895–1919*. Leiden: Brill.
- Lam Nin-tung 林年同. 1978. “Wushi niandai yueyu pian yanjiu zhong de jige wenti” 五十年代粵語片研究中的幾個問題 [Several questions on the study of Cantonese cine-



- ma in the 1950s]. *Da texie* 大特寫 [Close-up] 59, 2–5 and 47–51.
- Lee Fa 李化. 1937. “Shang Jing qiangjiu Yue pian lizhan Hu yingshang jingguo” 上京搶救粵片力戰滬影商經過 [The Nanking visit: how we fought against the Shanghai studio executives in order to save the Cantonese film]. *Ling xing* 伶星 [*Ling sing*] 203: 2–4.
- Li Yizhuang 李以莊 and Zhou Chengren 周承人. 2009. *Zaoqi Xianggang dianying shi: 1897–1945* 早期香港電影史：1897–1945 [History of early Hong Kong cinema: 1897–1945]. Shanghai: Shanghai renmin chubanshe.
- Li Yuming 李宇明. 2010. *Zhongguo yuyan guihua lun* 中國語言規劃論 [On the China's language policy]. Beijing: The Commercial Press.
- Liang Qichao 梁啟超. 2003 [2004]. *Liang Qichao jingidan wencun* 梁啟超經典文存 [Liang Qichao: Collection of classical essays], edited by Hong Zhigang 洪治綱. Shanghai: Shanghai daxue chubanshe.
- Ling-mui 嶺梅. 1937. “Jin Yueyu shengpian zhi wojian 禁粵語聲片之我見 [My opinions on the ban of the Cantonese sound film].” *Yilin* 藝林 [*Art lane*] 1, n.p.
- Luo Fu 羅孚. 1935. “Xianggang de dianying qingjie yundong 香港的電影清潔運動 [The film cleansing movement in Hong Kong].” *Lianhua huabao* 聯華畫報 [UPS pictorial] 6:12, 25.
- Maausi 貓士. 1935. “Suwei dianying qingjie yundong” 所謂電影清潔運動 [What is the film cleansing movement?]. *Youyou* 優游 [Journeying] 10, 9.
- Mao, Dun 茅盾. 1948 [2016]. “Zaitan ‘fangyan wenxue’ 再談「方言文學」 [On ‘regional-speech literatures’ again].” In *Xianggang wenxue daxi*. In *Xianggang wenxue daxi: Pinglun juan er* 香港文學大系：評論卷二 [Anthology of Hong Kong literature: Criticism part 2], edited by Lam Man-suk 林曼叔, 2:272–81. Hong Kong: The Commercial Press.
- Mao Zedong 毛澤東. 1942 [1991]. “Zai Yan’an weiyi zuotanhui shang de jianghua 在延安文藝座談會上的講話 [Speech at the conference on art and literature in Yan’an].” In *Mao Zedong xuanji* 毛澤東選集 [Anthology of selected works of Mao Zedong], 3:847–79. Beijing: Renmin chubanshe.
- Mong Wan 望雲. 1960s. *Renhai leihen* 人海淚痕 [Traces of tears in the human sea]. Hong Kong: Nantian chubanshe.
- Saussure, Ferdinand 1967 [2005]. *Cours de linguistique générale*. Paris: Payot.
- Song Xinqiao 宋欣橋. 2018. “Qianlun Xianggang Putonghua jiaoyu de xingzhi yu fazhan” 淺論香港普通話教育的性質與發展 [A preliminary discussion of the nature and development of Putonghua education in Hong Kong]. *Jisi guangyi* 集思廣益 [Collecting thoughts for the benefits of all]. Hong Kong: Education Bureau.
- Wong Kuk-lau 黃谷柳. 1947–48. *Xiaqiu zhuàn* 蝦球傳 [The story of Ha Kau]. Serialized in *Huashang bao* 華商報 [*Hua Shang Daily*]. October 1, 1947 to December 31, 1948.
- Xiang 香. 1935. “Bujingqi niantou: Guangzhou shi jinsui yulejie gaikuang 不景氣年頭：

- 廣州市今歲娛樂界概況 [A year of recession: Entertainment in Canton]. *Youyou*, October 8, 2–3.
- Xiao, Zhiwei. 1999. “Constructing a New National Culture: Film Censorship and the Issues of Cantonese Dialect, Superstition, and Sex in the Nanjing Decade.” In *Cinema and Urban Culture in Shanghai, 1922–1934*, edited by Yingjin Zhang, 183–99. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Xie Fu 絮夫. 1922. “Baoshi qi’an” 寶石奇案 [*Ruth of the Rockies*]. *Yingxi zazhi* 影戲雜誌 [Motion picture review] 1, 15–16.
- Yao Dehuai 姚德懷. 1998. “Guifan Putonghua’ yu ‘Dazhong Putonghua’” 「規範普通話」與「大眾普通話」 [“Regulated Putonghua” and “Mass Putonghua”]. *Yuwen jianshe tongxun* 語文建設通訊 [Language construction news] 57, 1–11.
- Yu Fung 于逢. 1949 [2016]. “Lun *Xiaqiu zhuan* de chuanguo daolu” 論「蝦球傳」的創作道路 [On the creative path of *The Story of Ha Kau*]. In *Xianggang wenxue daxi*. In *Xianggang wenxue daxi: Pinglun juan er* 香港文學大系：評論卷二 [Anthology of Hong Kong literature: Criticism part 2], edited by Lam Man-suk 林曼叔, 2:362–77. Hong Kong: The Commercial Press.
- Yuan Xingpei 袁行霈. 1999. *Zhongguo wenxue shi* 中國文學史 [History of Chinese literature]. Beijing: Gaodeng jiaoyu chubanshe.
- Zeng Zifan 曾子凡. 2008. *Xianggang Yueyu guanyong yanjiu* 香港粵語慣用研究 [A study of idiomatic expressions in Hong Kong]. Hong Kong: City University of Hong Kong Press.