

Linguistic Change in Hong Kong Chinese Newspapers: A Diachronic Press-Centered Study

Zhaoxun Song, Chungming Wong, Yuehan Luo

School of Communication, The Hang Seng University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAR, China
Email: howardsong@hsu.edu.hk

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Abstract

This study examines the linguistic evolution of Chinese-language newspapers in Hong Kong from the mid-nineteenth century to the eve of the 1997 handover. Rejecting a linear narrative of transition from Classical to vernacular Chinese, it argues that newspaper language developed through a long-term process of functional recombination, in which Classical Chinese, vernacular written Chinese, Cantonese, and English were continually reconfigured in response to changing communicative and institutional needs. Based on representative newspaper texts across periods and genres, the study identifies three major phases. In the founding period, Classical Chinese was adapted into an informational and argumentative medium for news. During the transitional period, hybrid forms such as *Saam Kap Dai* and mixed classical-vernacular writing emerged to mediate tensions between written authority and mass readership. From the 1970s onward, these practices became institutionalized, giving rise to Hong Kong-style Chinese as a stable written system marked by integrated Cantonese features, embedded English lexis, and strong register differentiation. Overall, the findings highlight the press as a norm-producing and mediating institution in a multilingual society, where language functions as a flexible resource for negotiating authority, accessibility, and local identity.

Keywords

Hong Kong, Chinese Newspapers, Classical Chinese, Vernacular Chinese, Cantonese

1. Introduction

Hong Kong occupies a distinctive position in the Chinese speaking world. As a former British colony and a major international city, it has long been character-

ized by sustained contact among different languages, cultures, and institutional traditions. This complex historical and sociolinguistic environment has shaped many domains of public communication, including the language of the mass media. Among these domains, the Chinese language newspaper press constitutes a particularly important yet still underexamined site for understanding how written Chinese operates in a multilingual and globally connected society.

For readers outside the Chinese speaking world, it is important to note that “Chinese” does not constitute a single, uniform written or spoken system. Modern Chinese writing has historically involved multiple layers, including Classical Chinese (文言), vernacular written Chinese (白话书面语), and regionally grounded spoken varieties such as Cantonese (粤语). In Hong Kong, these layers have co-existed alongside English, which has played a prominent role in administration, education, commerce, and public life. As a result, the Chinese language press in Hong Kong offers a unique window into how diverse linguistic resources are managed, combined, and stabilized in public written communication.

Studies of modern Chinese often frame linguistic change as a broad historical movement from Classical Chinese to vernacular Chinese. While this narrative captures an important dimension of twentieth century language reform, it does not adequately account for the diversity of written practices found in different social, regional, and institutional contexts. In Hong Kong, newspaper writing developed under conditions markedly different from those in Mainland China, including a commercial media system, a Cantonese speaking majority, and long-term exposure to English. These conditions raise fundamental questions about how written Chinese functions in practice when no single linguistic norm is uncontested or universally authoritative.

The Chinese language newspaper press is particularly significant because it occupies a central position between institutional authority and everyday readership. Newspapers must be intelligible to a broad audience, responsive to rapid social and economic change, and credible as public sources of information. Consequently, newspaper language reflects not only stylistic preference but also practical decisions about clarity, authority, efficiency, and audience engagement. From this perspective, the study of newspaper language is not merely a matter of descriptive linguistics; it provides insight into how written norms are formed, negotiated, and stabilized within specific historical and institutional settings.

Despite its importance, the language of Hong Kong’s Chinese language newspapers remains relatively unfamiliar to many international readers and is often treated only marginally in general accounts of modern Chinese. Existing discussions tend either to focus on spoken Cantonese or to subsume Hong Kong writing under broader categories of “modern Chinese,” without close attention to media practices. As a result, the press is frequently portrayed as a passive reflector of external language change rather than as an active participant in shaping written norms. A focused, diachronic examination of newspaper language can therefore help bridge this gap by illustrating how written Chinese develops through sus-

tained media practice in a multilingual environment.

Against this background, the present study examines the language of Hong Kong's Chinese language newspapers as a historically situated and institutionally shaped form of written communication. By analyzing newspaper texts across different periods and genres, the study investigates how multiple linguistic re-sources—Classical Chinese, vernacular written Chinese, Cantonese, and English—have been deployed, combined, and reorganized in press writing over time. Rather than treating linguistic change as a linear process of replacement, the study conceptualizes newspaper language development as a process of functional recombination, in which existing resources are selectively retained and repurposed in response to changing communicative demands and newsroom routines.

More broadly, this study seeks to contribute to international discussions of language, media, and multilingualism by offering a detailed case of how a major public writing system evolves under sustained language contact. By foregrounding the newspaper press as a norm producing institution, the analysis demonstrates how written Chinese in Hong Kong modernized not by converging on a single standardized form, but by developing an internally differentiated register system aligned with media genres, readership expectations, and institutional practice.

2. Literature Review

Research on the Chinese language of Hong Kong's Chinese language newspapers has generated rich descriptions of distinctive usage, yet it has only intermittently addressed how newspaper Chinese develops over time as an evolving written system. Much of the literature is organized around particular subsystems—syntax, lexicon, or hybrid style—rather than a diachronic reconstruction of press language change across historical periods and genres.

2.1. Hong Kong Written Chinese as a Regional Written Variety

A substantial body of scholarship treats Hong Kong written Chinese as a regional written variety shaped by sustained contact among Cantonese, English, and inherited written norms. Empirical studies document syntactic and discourse patterns that differ from Mainland Standard Written Chinese, including contact and translation by related changes, as well as shifts in word class and grammatical function that become conventional in local written usage (Shi & Chu, 1999). Other research identifies stable grammatical and discourse level features—such as connective usage, zero anaphora, and demonstrative distribution—and argues that these patterns constitute systematic local norms rather than sporadic deviation (Shi & Wang, 2006).

While this line of research provides detailed synchronic descriptions and useful typologies of linguistic sources (e.g., Cantonese transfer, Classical Chinese residue, and local innovation), it often treats Hong Kong written Chinese as an already-formed system. Questions concerning how these features emerge through newspaper practice over time, and how they become stabilized across genres, tend to receive limited attention (Shi, Wang, & Zhu, 2002).

2.2. Lexical Variation and Contact Induced Change in Newspaper Chinese

Another major strand of research focuses on lexical variation in Hong Kong Chinese, particularly English origin words, mixed forms, and region-specific expressions. Studies of Hong Kong Cantonese and related written practices highlight “Chinese-English mixing” (夹中夹英) and the emergence of locally conventionalized lexical items and meanings in public communication (Tang, 1997). Loanword typologies further demonstrate that Hong Kong exhibits distinctive borrowing patterns, including transliteration, hybrid formation, and mixed Chinese English expressions that circulate widely in newspapers and other media (Shao, 2000). Within this lexical tradition, the notion of “community specific words” (社区词) has been proposed to capture vocabulary rooted in local institutions and social practices, offering a valuable perspective on newspaper lexicon as an index of Hong Kong’s social and institutional environment (Tian, 1996). More recent work on contact induced change has extended this discussion by examining the acceptability and normalization of English influenced or “Europeanized” features in contemporary Hong Kong written Chinese (Liang, 2024). However, much of this research remains focused on vocabulary and constructions as discrete phenomena, with less attention to how lexical choices interact with broader newspaper registers or evolve through long term press usage.

2.3. Hybrid Press Styles and the Newspaper as a Norm-Producing Institution

Hybrid writing styles occupy a central position in scholarship on Hong Kong newspaper language. *Saam Kap Dai* (三及第), commonly described as a structured mixture of Classical Chinese, vernacular written Chinese, and Cantonese, has been examined in detail with respect to its historical sources, linguistic composition, and stylistic functions in Hong Kong print culture (Wong, 2001). Related research emphasizes that such hybridity is not random: different components tend to be functionally distributed, with Classical Chinese often associated with rhetorical authority, vernacular Chinese with narration and explanation, and Cantonese with immediacy and local color. A closely related phenomenon is mixed classical-vernacular writing (文白夹杂), especially visible in supplements and serialized writing, which is often interpreted as a pragmatic compromise between written prestige and reader accessibility.

At the same time, scholarships increasingly recognize newspapers as norm-producing institutions, in which press routines, genre conventions, and audience targeting contribute to the selection and stabilization of particular linguistic forms. Nevertheless, hybrid styles and contact induced features are frequently framed as transitional or exceptional, positioned between “traditional” and “modern” writing. As a result, their long-term role in shaping mainstream newspaper language norms is often acknowledged but not systematically traced within a comprehensive diachronic framework. Across these strands of research, a persistent gap re-

mains between detailed linguistic description and a historical account of how Chinese newspaper language in Hong Kong develops and consolidates over time.

2.4. Summary of Gaps and the Present Study's Positioning

Taken together, existing literature has made three major contributions: 1) it provides detailed descriptions of structural features of Hong Kong written Chinese, including contact related syntax and discourse conventions (Shi & Chu, 1999; Shi et al., 2002; Shi & Wang, 2006); 2) it documents lexical borrowing, code mixing, and community specific vocabulary relevant to newspaper language (Shao, 2000; Tang, 1997; Tian, 1996); and 3) it analyzes hybrid press styles such as *Saam Kap Dai* and mixed classical-vernacular writing as structured writing practices (Wong, 2001).

However, the central limitation remains: the Chinese language of Hong Kong newspapers has not been sufficiently reconstructed as an evolving system across historical time, integrating linguistic evidence with changing newspaper genres and institutional routines. The present study addresses this gap by treating the Chinese language press as a historically situated linguistic institution and by examining how different linguistic resources are deployed and reorganized across periods and genres in Hong Kong newspapers.

3. Research Questions and Methods

Because this study addresses an international readership that may not be fully familiar with distinctions within written Chinese, several key terms used throughout the paper require brief clarification.

Vernacular written Chinese (白话书面语) refers to a modern written form of Chinese that draws primarily on spoken Northern Mandarin syntax and lexicon, standardized through twentieth-century language reform and widely adopted in formal writing in Mainland China. In the present study, the term denotes a writing resource distinct from both Classical Chinese and Cantonese-based written forms, and it is treated as one component within Hong Kong newspaper language rather than as a uniform or uncontested norm.

Hong Kong-style Chinese (港式中文) is used to describe a locally stabilized written repertoire characteristic of Hong Kong's Chinese-language press, rather than a single homogeneous variety. It encompasses the systematic incorporation of Cantonese-derived expressions, English lexical items, and retained classical features into written Chinese. Importantly, the term does not imply deviation from an external or deficit-based standard, but refers to an institutionally established mode of writing shaped by press practices, readership expectations, and Hong Kong's multilingual environment.

The term *register system* is employed to emphasize that mature Hong Kong newspaper language functions through internally differentiated registers aligned with newspaper sections, genres, and communicative purposes. Rather than treating Hong Kong-style Chinese as a monolithic code, this study conceptualizes it as

a structured system in which different linguistic resources are selectively mobilized according to context—for example, compressed and authoritative forms in hard news, English-embedded terminology in financial reporting, and Cantonese-influenced expressions in entertainment and lifestyle sections.

These clarifications establish the conceptual basis for the analysis that follows and frame linguistic change in Hong Kong newspapers as a process of functional reorganization within an institutionally mediated written system, rather than as a linear shift between discrete language varieties.

3.1. Research Questions

This study addresses a focused and limited set of research questions concerning the Chinese language used in Hong Kong's Chinese language newspapers. Rather than pursuing multiple explanatory or ideological dimensions, the study concentrates on identifying and describing patterns of language use as they appear in newspaper texts across time.

The central research question is:

How has the Chinese language used in Hong Kong Chinese language newspapers changed over time as a form of written communication?

To support this central question, the study also considers one subsidiary question:

What linguistic resources—such as Classical Chinese, vernacular written Chinese, Cantonese, and English—are observable in Hong Kong newspaper texts from different periods, and how are they combined in press writing?

Together, these questions define the scope of the study as historical and descriptive, focusing on the observable characteristics of newspaper language without advancing broad claims about ideology, identity, or language policy beyond what the textual evidence allows.

3.2. Research Methods

To address the research questions outlined above, this study adopts a qualitative, historically informed approach based on close analysis of Chinese-language newspaper texts published in Hong Kong across different periods. The methodological aim is not to quantify linguistic change, but to reconstruct how newspaper language developed as a form of written communication through recurring press practices over time.

The primary data consist of Chinese-language newspaper texts drawn from major Hong Kong newspapers published from the mid-nineteenth to the late twentieth century. A substantial portion of the materials is accessed through the Old Hong Kong Newspapers Collection of the Hong Kong Public Libraries, an electronic database curated by the Hong Kong Central Library. This collection provides digitized images of historically significant newspapers and serves as a key archival resource for the study of local press language. The newspapers represented in the database span a broad temporal range—from early colonial publica-

tions such as *Hsia Erh Kuan Chen* (遐邇貫珍) and *Tsun Wan Yat Po* (循環日報) to mid- and late twentieth-century mass-circulation dailies, including *Wah Kiu Yat Po* (華僑日報), *Ta Kung Pao* (大公報, Hong Kong edition), and *Sing Tao Daily* (星島日報).

The selection of newspapers is guided by institutional continuity and historical significance rather than by circulation size or statistical representativeness. For each historical phase, the study focuses on publications that played a sustained role in shaping public discourse in Hong Kong and that exemplify established newsroom practices of their time. Early colonial newspapers are included because they represent the formative stage of Chinese newspaper writing under colonial conditions and document the earliest adaptation of Classical Chinese to news reporting. For the transitional period, mass-circulation dailies and their supplements are examined because they institutionalized hybrid writing practices across multiple genres. For the post-1970s period, leading commercial newspapers are selected because they reflect mature newsroom routines and stabilized language norms characteristic of late twentieth-century Hong Kong. This selection strategy allows the study to trace the evolution of newspaper language as an institutional practice across time, rather than to compare individual publications in isolation.

Texts examined in this study are drawn from a range of newspaper genres, including news reports, editorials, serialized fiction, commentary, and feature writing. This genre diversity makes it possible to capture internal variation within newspaper language and to examine how different linguistic resources are deployed in relation to communicative purpose, readership expectations, and newsroom conventions.

Text selection is guided by historical relevance and typicality rather than by statistical sampling. In this study, “representativeness” refers to texts that exemplify established and recurrent writing practices within particular historical periods and genres, rather than to frequency-based dominance. More specifically, texts were selected as “representative” or “typical” if they met the following criteria within each historical phase: 1) they exemplify recurrent linguistic patterns observable across multiple issues or years rather than idiosyncratic usage by a single author; 2) they are situated within established newspaper genres (e.g., news reporting, editorials, or supplements) that reflect routine newsroom practice; and 3) they illustrate salient communicative functions characteristic of the period, such as the use of adapted Classical Chinese for informational reporting in the founding period, the patterned mixing of registers in transitional-period commentary and supplements, or the routinized deployment of Cantonese and English resources in post-1970s news and specialized sections. Texts that were highly anomalous, stylistically experimental without broader attestation, or clearly unrepresentative of regular press usage were not included in the analytical sample.

3.2.1. Data Sources and Sampling

To further clarify the empirical basis of the study, the dataset can be specified more concretely in terms of newspapers, sampling periods, and overall scale.

For the founding period (1850s-1900s), the analysis draws primarily on *Hsia Erh Kuan Chen* and *Tsun Wan Yat Po*, accessed through the Old Hong Kong Newspapers Collection. Texts are sampled from multiple decades—especially the 1850s, 1870s, and 1890s—and include editorials, early news-style reports, and translated or informational essays. In total, several dozen texts from this phase were examined, providing a consistent basis for identifying how Classical Chinese was adapted to journalistic functions.

For the transitional period (1900s-1960s), the dataset centers on *Ta Kung Pao* and *Wah Kiu Yat Po*, with attention to both core news sections and newspaper supplements. Sampling spans the early to mid-twentieth century, with denser coverage in the interwar and postwar decades when hybrid styles such as *Saam Kap Dai* were most prominent. Materials from this phase comprise over one hundred texts, including news reporting, editorials, commentary, and serialized or feature writing, allowing for systematic observation of register mixing across genres.

For the maturity period (1970s-1997), the study draws on major commercial dailies including *Ming Pao* (明報), *Sing Tao Daily*, *Ta Kung Pao*, and *Wah Kiu Yat Po* (including its evening edition *Wah Kiu Man Po* (華僑晚報)). Texts are sampled from the 1970s through the early 1990s and cover a wide range of newspaper sections, including hard news, financial reporting, and lifestyle or entertainment features. This phase is represented by well over one hundred texts, reflecting the expanded genre differentiation and stabilized linguistic practices characteristic of late twentieth-century Hong Kong newspapers.

Taken together, the study examines several hundred texts across all three periods, drawn from multiple newspapers, years, and genres. While the dataset is not designed as a statistically balanced corpus, its breadth and internal diversity ensure that the analysis is grounded in recurrent and representative newspaper practices rather than isolated examples.

3.2.2. Analytical Rubric for Identifying Linguistic Resources

To enhance analytical transparency, the identification of linguistic resources in the data is guided by a consistent set of diagnostic criteria aligned with the distinctions employed in the analysis. Classical Chinese (文言) is identified by compact clause structure, reliance on canonical function words (e.g., 之, 其, 者, 也), limited overt marking of tense or aspect, and a preference for condensed, paratactic expression, often associated with evaluative or rhetorical framing in editorials. Vernacular written Chinese (白话书面语) is recognized through its alignment with modern standard written norms, including explicit syntactic marking, multi-clause sentence organization, and a lexicon consistent with twentieth-century standardization, typically used for exposition and narrative clarity. Cantonese features (粤语) are identified by the presence of regionally specific lexical items (e.g., 搵食, 即刻), sentence-final particles (e.g., 呀, 喇, 嘅), and discourse patterns reflecting spoken Cantonese, especially in expressions of stance, interpersonal alignment, and immediacy. English elements are identified as lexical insertions embedded within Chinese syntactic frames (e.g., profit, IPO), typically unmarked

typographically and functioning as technical or domain-specific terms, particularly in financial and business reporting.

These criteria are applied systematically across texts to identify recurrent patterns of register use. In cases of hybrid writing (e.g., *Saam Kap Dai* or mixed classical-vernacular prose), classification is based on the functional distribution of these features within the same text—for example, Classical Chinese for evaluative framing, vernacular written Chinese for explanation, and Cantonese for interpersonal or affective expression.

For clarity of presentation, each quoted example in the analysis indicates the newspaper source and approximate period where applicable, and English translations are the authors' own. However, it should be noted that some examples are constructed or minimally adapted to represent recurrent linguistic patterns identified across multiple texts rather than reproduced verbatim from a single documented article. This approach is adopted in order to highlight the defining characteristics of particular writing practices—such as Classical Chinese compression, vernacular exposition, or Cantonese immediacy—in a clear and analytically focused manner. Where examples are not directly traceable to a specific article, they are intended as synthetic but evidence-based illustrations grounded in repeated observations across the corpus, rather than as literal archival excerpts. This distinction is maintained to balance empirical fidelity with analytical clarity.

Because the study is qualitative and does not rely on a balanced corpus, it does not make claims about the relative frequency or statistical distribution of specific linguistic forms. Instead, it focuses on identifying stable and widely recognizable patterns of language use that become conventionalized through repeated newspaper practice. This approach is well suited to the study's central aim of reconstructing the historical development of Hong Kong newspaper Chinese as an institutionally mediated written system.

4. Research Results

The division of the analysis into three historical phases—founding (1850s-1900s), transitional (1900s-1960s), and maturity (1970s-1997)—is motivated by observable shifts in the dominant linguistic practices of Hong Kong's Chinese-language press rather than by purely chronological criteria. The late nineteenth century marks the establishment of Chinese newspaper writing under colonial conditions, characterized by the adaptation of Classical Chinese to news reporting. The early to mid-twentieth century corresponds to a period of intensified experimentation, during which hybrid forms such as *Saam Kap Dai* and mixed classical-vernacular writing became widespread across genres. From the 1970s onward, these hybrid practices became stabilized and institutionalized within mainstream journalism, accompanied by the routine incorporation of Cantonese and English elements and the emergence of clearly differentiated section-based registers. The breakpoints between these phases therefore reflect not fixed historical events, but transitions in the dominant organization and functional distribution of linguistic resources in newspaper writing.

4.1. Founding Period: Classical Chinese as Early Newspaper Prose (1850s-1900s)

4.1.1. Adapted Classical Chinese for News Reporting

Early Hong Kong Chinese newspapers were predominantly written in Classical Chinese, yet their linguistic form already diverged markedly from traditional literary prose. Instead of extended essays characterized by dense allusion and rhetorical ornamentation, early newspaper writing favored short, information dense clauses oriented toward factual reporting and explanation.

A representative headline-like sentence from early newspaper prose illustrates this adaptation:

「英船抵港，運貨甚繁，市面為之一變。」

(*Translation by authors. British ships arrived in the port; cargo transport became highly active, and market conditions changed accordingly.*)

In this example, classical vocabulary and syntactic structure are preserved, but the sentence is organized to convey an event-consequence relationship with maximum efficiency. Compared with traditional prose, it avoids literary embellishment and foregrounds factual sequence, reflecting the communicative priorities of news reporting.

At the lexical level, early newspapers relied heavily on semantic translation (意译) to introduce Western concepts. Terms such as 「燈塔」 (*lighthouse*) and 「火輪船」 (*steamship*) exemplify how unfamiliar objects were incorporated through transparent Chinese morphemes. This strategy enabled Classical Chinese to function as a modern informational code, capable of accommodating new knowledge without abandoning its structural core.

Syntactically, early newspaper Classical Chinese exhibits reduced parallelism and an increased use of explicit, reader oriented explanatory structures, as in:

「此事關商務，故不得不詳言之。」

(*Translation by authors. As this matter concerns commerce, it must therefore be explained in detail.*)

Such constructions signal a shift away from self-contained literary expression toward explicit explanation and audience orientation, anticipating later developments in newspaper prose and the gradual transformation of written Chinese into a medium of public communication.

4.1.2. The Formation of an Early “Newspaper Style”

Within the founding period, a distinct newspaper prose style (報章體) emerged, characterized by the combination of Classical Chinese with discursive and argumentative elements—a mode often described as the integration of parallel and plain prose (駢散結合). Rather than adhering strictly to ornate literary conventions, editorial writing in this period frequently alternates between compact evaluative statements and longer explanatory passages, reflecting the communicative demands of public commentary.

A representative example illustrates this emerging style:

「政令既出，民情未安，蓋因施行過急，未顧實情也。」

(*Translation by authors. Although the policy had already been issued, public sentiment remained unsettled, largely because its implementation was too hasty and failed to take actual conditions into account.*)

In this sentence, classical particles such as 「既」, 「蓋」, and 「也」 are retained, preserving the surface features of Classical Chinese. However, the internal organization of the sentence prioritizes logical sequencing and causal explanation rather than literary ornamentation. The argument unfolds step by step—policy issuance, public reaction, and causal diagnosis—guiding the reader through a process of public reasoning.

Notably, the authority of the text derives not from the citation of canonical sources or historical precedent, but from its explicit argumentative structure and appeal to observable social conditions. This marks an important departure from elite literary writing, where authority was traditionally grounded in classical learning and textual allusion.

The emergence of this newspaper style thus represents an early stage in the transformation of written Chinese from a medium of elite literary expression into a vehicle for public communication, policy discussion, and social explanation, laying the groundwork for later developments in modern newspaper language.

4.2. Transitional and Contested Period: Hybrid Writing and *Saam Kap Dai* (1900s-1960s)

4.2.1. *Saam Kap Dai* as a Layered Hybrid Register

The most salient linguistic development of the early twentieth century in Hong Kong newspapers is the rise of *Saam Kap Dai* (三及第), a hybrid writing style that combines Classical Chinese, vernacular written Chinese, and Cantonese within a single textual space. Newspaper texts from this period show that such mixing is systematic and patterned, rather than random or inconsistent.

A representative passage illustrates the layered use of registers:

「世風日下，誠可慨也。」(文言)

(*Translation by authors. Moral standards are in decline, this is truly cause for lament.*) (Classical Chinese)

「事情其實好簡單，大家只係想搵食。」(白话 + 粵語)

(*Translation by authors. The situation is actually quite simple—everyone is just trying to make a living.*) (Vernacular Chinese + Cantonese)

「咁樣搞法，邊個會服氣呢？」(粵語)

(*Translation by authors. If things are handled this way, who would possibly accept it?*) (Cantonese)

This example demonstrates a clear functional stratification of registers. The opening sentence, written in Classical Chinese, establishes an evaluative and moralizing frame. Its compact syntax and elevated tone convey authority and rhetorical distance, allowing the writer to cast contemporary social conditions in generalized, almost aphoristic terms.

The second sentence shifts into vernacular written Chinese infused with Cantonese elements. This register reduces abstraction and introduces pragmatic explanation, reframing the issue in concrete, everyday terms. Expressions such as 「搵食」 (*to make a living*) anchor the discourse in ordinary social experience and economic reality.

The final sentence moves fully into Cantonese, employing a rhetorical question to express stance and invite reader alignment. This register conveys immediacy, emotional engagement, and interpersonal positioning, features closely associated with spoken interaction in Hong Kong.

Taken together, these layers show that *Saam Kap Dai* operates as a structured hybrid system in which each register fulfills a distinct communicative function:

- Classical Chinese provides evaluative stance and moral framing;
- Vernacular written Chinese offers narrative clarity and explanation;
- Cantonese expresses immediacy, affect, and interpersonal alignment.

Rather than signaling linguistic instability, this patterned alternation reflects a deliberate writing strategy tailored to the communicative demands of mass readership. *Saam Kap Dai* thus represents an important stage in the development of Hong Kong newspaper language, demonstrating how multiple linguistic resources could be orchestrated within a single text to balance authority, accessibility, and local resonance.

4.2.2. Mixed Classical-Vernacular Writing

Alongside *Saam Kap Dai*, mixed classical-vernacular writing (文白夹杂) emerged as a stable compromise style in Hong Kong newspapers, particularly in serialized fiction and newspaper supplements. Rather than indicating incomplete modernization, this style reflects a deliberate functional allocation of registers within a single text.

A representative narrative-dialogue split is illustrated below:

「翌日清晨，雨後初晴，市肆漸開。」(文言叙述)

(*Translation by authors: At dawn the following morning, after the rain had cleared, the shops gradually opened.*)(*Classical Chinese narration*)

「他一見朋友，便說：『你嘢晚去咗邊度呀？』」(白话 + 粵語)

(*Translation by authors: As soon as he saw his friend, he said, “Where did you go last night?”*)(*Vernacular Chinese + Cantonese*)

In this example, Classical Chinese is used for third-person narration and scene-setting. Its compact syntax and elevated tone lend textual authority and narrative distance, allowing the writer to summarize events efficiently and establish a formal narrative frame. By contrast, dialogue shifts into vernacular Chinese and Cantonese-influenced forms, producing realism, immediacy, and social specificity. Colloquial elements such as 「嘢晚」 (*last night*) and the Cantonese sentence-final particle 「呀」 signal spoken interaction and situate the exchange firmly within everyday urban life.

This patterned alternation is systematic rather than random. It reflects a functional division of labor in which different registers are assigned distinct commu-

nicative roles: Classical Chinese for narration, backgrounding, and stylistic elevation; vernacular and Cantonese for interpersonal interaction and character voice. Such division allows writers to balance written prestige with reader accessibility, especially in genres that rely on sustained narrative engagement.

Importantly, mixed classical-vernacular writing in this sense should not be understood as a transitional or defective form. Its persistence and regularity in newspaper supplements indicate that it constituted a recognized and conventionalized writing practice, well suited to the communicative demands of serialized storytelling. The coexistence of registers within a single text thus represents a stable stylistic solution, anticipating later developments in Hong Kong newspaper language where multiple linguistic resources are systematically deployed according to genre and function.

4.2.3. Stylized Hybridity and Sam So Hong

In the postwar decades, hybrid newspaper writing reached a peak of stylistic refinement and self-conscious artistry in what is commonly known as Sam So Hong (三蘇腔). Sam So Hong refers to the highly stylized, self-aware, and masterful literary voice developed by the writer San Su (Ko Tak-hung) through his expert deployment of the “Three-in-One” (*Saam Kap Dai*) linguistic technique in postwar Hong Kong newspapers. Rather than functioning as a merely pragmatic mixture of linguistic resources, Sam So Hong represents a deliberately crafted mode of writing in which Classical Chinese, vernacular written Chinese, and Cantonese are strategically juxtaposed to generate irony, humor, and incisive social commentary.

A representative example illustrates this stylistic strategy:

「股市翻騰，眾生逐利，誠所謂『利字當頭』矣。
不過講到底，打工仔都係想穩穩陣陣過日子。」

(Translation by authors. The stock market surges and churns, all manner of people chase profit—truly a case of “profit above all else.”

But when all is said and done, working people are simply hoping to live their lives steadily and securely.)

In this passage, the opening sentence is framed in an elevated Classical Chinese register, employing compact phrasing and particles such as 矣 to convey moral evaluation and rhetorical distance. Expressions like 眾生逐利 and 利字當頭 invoke a quasi-classical moral universe, casting contemporary financial behavior in timeless, almost aphoristic terms. This classical framing lends the commentary an air of authority and detached judgment.

The second sentence, by contrast, abruptly shifts into a colloquial Cantonese register, featuring expressions such as 打工仔 (*working people*) and 穩穩陣陣 (*steadily, without risk*). This switch brings the discourse back to everyday experience, grounding abstract moral critique in the lived concerns of ordinary urban residents. The tonal contrast between elevated moral observation and down-to-earth pragmatism generates irony and reinforces a distinctive authorial voice.

What distinguishes Sam So Hong from earlier hybrid styles such as *Saam Kap Dai* is its degree of stylization and reflexivity. The writer is not simply alternating registers to accommodate different communicative needs; instead, register switching itself becomes a rhetorical device. Classical Chinese is mobilized to frame, distance, or satirize modern phenomena, while Cantonese is used to puncture that distance and reassert local perspective and emotional immediacy.

In this sense, hybridity in Sam So Hong functions as an aesthetic and expressive resource, rather than as a transitional or compensatory strategy. The style presupposes a readership capable of recognizing and appreciating register contrasts, and it relies on the shared linguistic competence of Hong Kong readers to produce meaning through juxtaposition. This marks an important moment in the development of Hong Kong newspaper language, where hybridization becomes not only normalized but also artistically exploited as a stable and recognizable mode of public writing.

4.3. Maturity Period: The Institutionalization of Hong Kong-Style Chinese (1970s-1997)

4.3.1. Normalized Use of Cantonese in Formal News Writing

From the 1970s onward, features derived from Cantonese increasingly appear as unmarked and routine elements of formal written news in Hong Kong. Unlike earlier periods, where spoken-language elements were often confined to dialogue, entertainment writing, or marked stylistic effects, Cantonese-based forms increasingly appear without quotation marks, glosses, or explanatory signals, even in hard-news reporting.

A representative example from news prose is as follows:

「市民反映，樓價高企，供樓壓力沉重。」

(*Translation by authors: Residents report that housing prices remain high and that the burden of mortgage repayment is heavy.*)

In this sentence, terms such as 「供樓」 (*mortgage repayment*) and 「高企」 (*remain at a high level*) are characteristic of Hong Kong usage. Although their semantic content is easily accessible to local readers, these expressions are closely associated with Cantonese-based lexical conventions rather than with Mainland Standard Written Chinese. Their appearance in formal reporting, without any form of marking or justification, indicates that they are widely accepted as standard written forms within the Hong Kong press.

The normalization of Cantonese influence is not limited to vocabulary. At the syntactic level, newspaper writing increasingly adopts sentence patterns aligned with Cantonese discourse organization. One prominent feature is topic-initial framing, in which a topical element is placed at the beginning of the sentence to set the discourse frame, followed by evaluative or descriptive predicates. In the example above, 「市民反映」 (*residents report*) establishes a topical source of evaluation before the main propositional content is presented.

Such structures reflect patterns common in spoken Cantonese and indicate a shift away from strictly standardized written norms toward locally grounded dis-

course preferences. Importantly, these features no longer function as stylistic deviation or colloquial coloring. Instead, they form part of a stable repertoire of formal news writing, especially in reporting on housing, labor, and everyday economic concerns.

The incorporation of Cantonese features into formal news thus represents a significant stage in the development of Hong Kong newspaper language. Cantonese is no longer confined to representing speech or local color; it becomes an integral structural resource for conveying evaluation, immediacy, and social relevance in public written communication. This normalization reflects both the dominance of Cantonese in everyday life and the role of newspapers as institutions that legitimize and stabilize locally meaningful linguistic practices.

4.3.2. Deep Embedding of English Lexical Items

Another defining feature of Hong Kong-style Chinese (港式中文) is the deep embedding of English lexical items within Chinese sentence structures, particularly in domains such as finance, business, and technology reporting. Unlike earlier periods, where foreign words were often translated, glossed, or typographically marked, English terms in this stage appear unmarked and fully integrated into routine newspaper prose.

Representative examples include:

「公司昨日公布 profit 大幅上升。」

(Translation by authors: The company announced yesterday that its profit increased substantially.)

「市場關注新 IPO 表現。」

(Translation by authors: The market is watching the performance of the new IPO.)

In these sentences, English words such as profit and IPO are embedded directly into Chinese syntactic frames. The surrounding grammar—word order, aspect marking, and clause structure—is entirely Chinese, while the English items function as content words occupying positions normally filled by Chinese nouns. This division of labor is systematic: Chinese provides the grammatical skeleton, whereas English supplies high precision technical meaning, especially for concepts associated with global finance and capital markets.

Crucially, these English lexical items are not treated as foreign intrusions. They are not enclosed in quotation marks, followed by explanations, or replaced by full Chinese equivalents. Instead, they are assumed to be immediately intelligible to the intended readership. This reflects both widespread English exposure among Hong Kong newspaper readers and the institutional norms of the press, where speed, efficiency, and alignment with global financial discourse are valued.

The phenomenon goes beyond simple borrowing. In many cases, English terms coexist with available Chinese translations by authors, yet the English form is preferred because it is shorter, more precise, or more closely aligned with international usage. As a result, embedded English items become part of a stable written repertoire, particularly in headlines and market reports where concision and tech-

nical accuracy are paramount.

The deep embedding of English thus represents a qualitative shift in newspaper language. Rather than alternating between Chinese and English as separate codes, Hong Kong-style Chinese integrates English lexemes seamlessly into Chinese structures. This pattern illustrates how language contact, mediated by the press, produces a hybrid but internally coherent written system suited to Hong Kong's role as a global financial center.

4.3.3. Register Differentiation across Newspaper Sections

In the maturity period, Hong Kong Chinese language newspapers exhibit a high degree of internal register differentiation, with distinct linguistic profiles systematically aligned with newspaper sections, genres, and target audiences. Rather than employing a uniform writing style across the publication, newspapers deploy different combinations of linguistic resources according to communicative purpose.

In hard news reporting, especially in headlines, language tends to be compressed, formal, and authoritative, favoring concise phrasing and evaluative weight:

「政府公布新措施，影響深遠。」

(Translation by authors: The government announced new measures, with far reaching implications.)

This headline style sentence is brief and information dense, projecting institutional authority. The structure foregrounds the action (“announced”) and its significance (“far reaching implications”) without elaboration, reflecting the expectations of objectivity and seriousness associated with front page news.

By contrast, financial and market sections display the highest density of embedded English lexical items, reflecting both the technical nature of the subject matter and Hong Kong's integration into global financial discourse:

「恒指午後反彈，bank 股表現突出。」

(Translation by authors: The Hang Seng Index rebounded in the afternoon, with bank stocks performing particularly strongly.)

Here, the English word “bank” is embedded directly into a Chinese syntactic frame, functioning as an unmarked modifier of 「股」 (stocks). This form is widely accepted in Hong Kong financial reporting and signals professional expertise, speed, and alignment with international market terminology. Such usage would be atypical in non financial sections, underscoring its register specific nature.

Taken together, these patterns demonstrate that Hong Kong-style Chinese (港式中文) is best understood not as a single homogeneous variety, but as a register system. Different sections of the same newspaper mobilize Classical Chinese derived concision, Cantonese immediacy, and English technical vocabulary in systematic and predictable ways, adjusting linguistic resources to genre conventions, audience expectations, and communicative goals. This internal differentiation is a defining feature of mature Hong Kong newspaper language and reflects the press's role in stabilizing and legitimizing multiple written norms within a single publication.

Taken together, the findings across the three historical phases—summarized in

Table 1—demonstrate that linguistic change in Hong Kong’s Chinese language newspapers proceeded through functional recombination rather than simple replacement. Across the founding, transitional, and maturity periods, classical forms were selectively repurposed, vernacular written forms and spoken language features were progressively incorporated into formal writing, and English developed into a stable and embedded lexical resource within newspaper discourse.

Table 1. Periodization and writing practices in Hong Kong Chinese language newspapers.

Period	Approx. time	Dominant writing practices	Main linguistic resources	Key orientation
Founding period	1850s to 1900s	Adapted classical newspaper prose; early editorial argumentation	Classical forms + semantic Translation	Public reporting, explanation, early public reasoning
Transitional & contested period	1900s-1960s	Hybridization; layered mixing; narrative-dialogue division	Classical + vernacular + Cantonese	Balancing authority and accessibility
Maturity period	1970s-1997	Institutionalized Hong Kong-style Chinese; strong internal differentiation	Multilingual repertoire with stable section-based norms	Register system; genre specialization

This process culminated in the emergence of Hong Kong-style Chinese as an institutionally stabilized written repertoire within the press. Shaped by newsroom practices, genre differentiation, audience segmentation, and local sociocultural conditions, this repertoire functions not as a single uniform style but as a register system. It illustrates how written Chinese can modernize under conditions of sustained language contact, not by converging on a single normative standard, but through the coordinated deployment of multiple linguistic resources across periods and newspaper sections.

While the linguistic patterns discussed in this study are directly observable in the newspaper texts, interpretations concerning newsroom routines, audience targeting, and institutional norm production are necessarily inferential. These interpretations are based on the systematic distribution of linguistic features across genres and time, and follow established approaches in press and media discourse studies that treat newspapers as structured institutional systems rather than collections of isolated texts. This distinction is maintained throughout the analysis to separate descriptive findings from interpretive claims.

5. Conclusion and Contributions

This study has examined the Chinese language of Hong Kong Chinese-language newspapers from the mid-nineteenth century to the eve of the 1997 handover, addressing a persistent gap in existing scholarship: the lack of a diachronic, press-centered account of how newspaper Chinese developed as a historically evolving written system. While earlier studies have provided detailed synchronic descriptions of contact-induced features, hybrid styles, and local lexical innovation, they

have less often reconstructed how these features emerged, interacted, and became stabilized through long-term newspaper practice.

The central finding of this study is that linguistic change in Hong Kong Chinese-language newspapers did not proceed through linear replacement—from Classical Chinese to vernacular Chinese—but through a sustained process of *functional recombination*. Across three historical phases, Classical Chinese, vernacular written Chinese, Cantonese, and English were selectively retained, repurposed, and reorganized in response to changing communicative demands, readership structures, and newsroom routines. Classical forms were adapted to serve informational reporting and public argumentation rather than abandoned; vernacular and spoken-language features were progressively incorporated into formal writing; and English developed into an embedded lexical resource, particularly in domains requiring technical precision and global alignment.

On this basis, the study makes three main contributions. First, it reconceptualizes linguistic change in Hong Kong Chinese-language newspapers as an institutionally mediated process of functional recombination rather than as a teleological shift toward a single written norm. Second, by reconstructing newspaper language diachronically across genres and historical periods, it moves beyond treating hybrid practices such as *Saam Kap Dai* or mixed classical-vernacular writing as transitional or exceptional, showing instead how they contributed to the formation of stable and recognizable press conventions. Third, the study advances the notion of Hong Kong-style Chinese (港式中文) as an internally differentiated *register system*, demonstrating how distinct linguistic resources are systematically aligned with newspaper sections, genres, and communicative purposes.

Together, these contributions foreground the Chinese-language press as a norm-producing institution in a multilingual society. Rather than merely reflecting external language change, newspapers actively shape written norms by routinizing particular linguistic choices and legitimizing locally meaningful forms of public writing. From this perspective, the modernization of written Chinese in Hong Kong is best understood not as convergence on a standardized vernacular, but as the coordinated deployment of multiple linguistic resources within an institutional context.

This study has one principal limitation: its qualitative, example-based analysis does not allow claims about frequency or statistical distribution. Future research could build on the framework developed here by employing large-scale corpus methods to test the robustness of the identified patterns, or by conducting comparative studies across Chinese-speaking regions and between Chinese- and English-language newspapers in Hong Kong. Such work would further clarify how press institutions mediate linguistic change under different sociopolitical and market conditions.

By situating linguistic change within the historical practices of the newspaper press, this study contributes to a more integrated understanding of modern written Chinese and offers an analytically transferable model for examining written

language development in other multilingual media environments.

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Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare that they have no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of this paper.

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