International engagement versus local commitment: Hong Kong academics in the humanities and social sciences writing for publication

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Abstract

It has been recognized that English as the language of international scholarship represents a more complex picture in the humanities and social sciences (HSS) than in science and engineering, with multilingual scholars in the HSS often negotiating international engagement and local commitment by publishing both in English and their first language. However, the tension in the negotiation is likely to grow with the continuous push toward the globalization of the academia which is having an enormous impact upon the academics in research universities. Following up on an earlier study with mainland Chinese HSS scholars (Flowerdew & Li, 2009), in the present interview-based study we aim to find out how their counterparts in Hong Kong perceive the implications of international publication versus local publication. The findings of the study indicate that the privilege attached to publishing in internationally indexed journals stands out as a leading factor orienting the Hong Kong scholars toward writing in English and employing various strategies to facilitate successful publication. However, there is also clear resistance toward this assessment-driven publication regime and some participants, apart from publishing mainly in English, also publish in Chinese for the purpose of serving their target audiences at the local/regional level. We end by calling for efforts to widen the regional impact of the existing locally-published journals and to enhance collaboration in developing regional databases that are competitive at the international level.

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1. Introduction

With English emerging as the language of international scholarship, the past decade has witnessed a rapidly building interest in the investigation into the scholarly life of academics who use English as an additional language (EAL) (e.g. Ammon, 2001; Belcher, 2007; Curry & Lillis, 2004; Ferguson, 2007; Flowerdew & Li, 2009; Li, 2006; Li & Flowerdew, 2007; Salager-Meyer, 2008; Uzuner, 2008). Among the themes revealed from this line of research

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studies, are, that politico-economic world order generally overlaps with the world order in terms of scholarly output, that the center and the periphery do not make a homogeneous group in themselves (study of the heterogeneity within the center and the periphery can perhaps be more revealing than following a notion of NES-NNES divide), and that English as the dominant medium of publication represents a more consistent picture at a global level in science and engineering than in the humanities and social sciences (HSS).

The contemporary trend of globalization of the academia has important implications in a broad perspective upon the issue of scholarly publication in English versus the local language. This trend is prominently manifested in the global efforts to internationalize higher education, to marketize the academy, and to privilege elite research universities (Altbach, 2004, 2009; Mok, 2006). These changes have a profound impact on the scholarly life of academics: The internationalization of the higher education sector has often meant an increasingly policy-explicit and assessment-driven requirement/expectation for the academics in general to publish in English, as well as the privileging of center-based journal databases such as SCI (Science Citation Index), SSCI (Social Science Citation Index), and A&HCI (Arts & Humanities Citation Index); while the marketization of the academy has meant not only closer ties between universities and business communities and enhancement of quality assurance of educational services provided by universities, but more directly bearing upon the scholarly life of the academics is the coupling of assessed academic performance with chances for promotion, provision of further funding for research, and index of accountability for efficient use of public money (Chan & Mok, 2001; Curry & Lillis, 2004; Mok, 2006; Mok & Lee, 2000; Postiglione, 1998, 2005). The elite research universities (relatively-few in developing countries), not surprisingly, would be on the very frontline of all these movements outlined here, and the center-based databases such as SCI, SSCI, and A&HCI have increasingly become the prestigious target spelt out in the assessment criteria at these universities for their academics.

According to Altbach (2009, p. 25), apart from a mandate to “function in the international languages of science and scholarship,” research universities also “have a responsibility to disseminate research and analysis in local languages” and these universities “play a key role in supporting and developing local languages.” To this comment we may find it necessary to distinguish between an EAL context which has no colonial history (such as mainland China) and one which has a colonial history (such as Hong Kong). In the former, while English is being established as the dominant language of publication in science, the local language certainly still prevails and is likely to continue to prevail in the HSS, despite subtle variations at the level of individual academics (Flowerdew & Li, 2009); in the case of the latter, where English makes much less of a language barrier than in the former, one may question how much space the overwhelming push toward the globalization of the academia as described above would leave for scholarship in the local language.

Previous research has revealed the necessity/intention to engage with (or contribute to) multiple discourse communities as a factor motivating multilingual academics to publish in their local language, if apart from publishing in English (e.g. Casanave, 1998, on Japanese scholars; and Curry & Lillis, 2004, on Eastern European scholars). In this case, the academics publish in their local language even when this counts little in assessment exercises and thus brings little benefits in terms of career advancement. The moral dimension underlying this act of publishing in the local language echoes Altbach’s (2009, p. 25) suggestion of a “responsibility” on the part of research universities “to disseminate research and analysis in local languages,” as cited above. Yet again, moral responsibility has to voluntarily emanate from the individual academics who are besieged in an assessment regime favoring publishing in center-based English-language journals.

In this study we want to find out, through the perspective of a group of Hong Kong HSS scholars situated in research universities, how choice between English or Chinese in publication is negotiated in a context of institutional and personal mandate. An outline of some recent developments in Hong Kong’s higher education, as to be presented below, will provide a background for the present study that seeks to push ahead an understanding of how a group of EAL academics position themselves in the contemporary academia.

2. The Hong Kong academia: international excellence and publishing in English/internationally indexed journals

Hong Kong distinguishes itself from other post-colonial regions and countries by its level of economic affluence and its significant status in the world’s financial market; while the Hong Kong academia, compared with that of any other EAL society, exhibits an impressively high level of international involvement. In a Carnegie Foundation-initiated survey of academics in 14 countries conducted in 1991–1992 (Altbach & Lewis, 1997), it was found that
Hong Kong, together with four other countries (Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, and Israel) reported “substantially higher levels of international involvement among the academics” (El-Khawas, 2002, p. 245). In the past two decades, the high level of international involvement among Hong Kong academics has only been further pushed up. The Hong Kong academia is materialistically privileged. It has “academic libraries that are second to none in terms of their collections, subscriptions to periodicals, and access to electronic resources” (Braine, 2005, p. 709). The Hong Kong academics themselves, a majority having overseas educational background, are advantageously positioned to participate in international involvement: a decade ago, 90 per cent of all doctorates held by Hong Kong academics were earned overseas (Welch, 1997); in the past decade, although the expansion of the higher education sector would mean that more students may be pursuing advanced degrees locally (Postiglione, 1998), it also means continuous growth of recruitment of staff with degrees earned from overseas.

A major driving force for up-scaling Hong Kong universities’ international profile has been the Research Assessment Exercises (RAEs) instituted by the University Grants Committee (UGC), which is in charge of the funding for the eight government-funded universities in Hong Kong.¹ In a recent UGC report of the results of the RAE conducted in 2006, it is observed that “all the eight UGC-funded higher education institutions in Hong Kong have made remarkable improvements to achieve international excellence (my emphasis) in research across a broad front of disciplines” (“Excellent results”). Roland Chin, Chairman of the Hong Kong Research Grants Council (RGC), has been quoted as saying that “academics in Hong Kong should engage more in ‘long-term and large-scale’ projects” (cited in Mok & Lee, 2000, p. 367) and that more budget should be put into strengthening academic research in Hong Kong, especially considering the “intensifying competition from neighbouring countries like Singapore and Malaysia” (cited in Tong, 2007). The goal of international excellence unanimously targeted at by Hong Kong universities is bound to an assessment scheme, where publishing in internationally indexed journals is a priority. As Mok and Lee (2000, pp. 367–8) observed:

The UGC admits that the exercises [RAEs] put weight on “academic” research in terms of articles published in international peer-reviewed journals. Assessment relies heavily on this kind of publication as the sole indicator of quality. Articles or research published in less well-known, regional and even local publications let alone papers presented in conferences are ignored.

Needless to say, local journals have a low profile in this picture. In May 2007, out of a total of 1,979 journals included in SSCI, only two journals are published in Hong Kong.² Meanwhile, in line with the global trend of the marketization of the academy, “Attention is paid to the marketability of research products and their power for revenue generation in HEIs [higher education institutions],” which has taken a toll on HSS disciplines (Mok & Lee, 2000, p. 370).

In terms of language use in the academia, the diglossic functional split between English and Cantonese (a spoken dialect of Chinese) has long been observed among Hong Kong academics, who tend to use English for scholarly publication and Cantonese for oral communication. When it comes to using English for scholarly publication, there seems to be some evidence of variation in competence among the academics. Research has reported an overall relatively high confidence level among Hong Kong academics in their ability to write for publication in English and yet has also described problems of Hong Kong scholars — as EAL authors — in writing for publication (Braine, 2005; Flowerdew, 2000). However, the existence of a large number of Chinese, locally-published academic and non-academic journals and magazines would indicate that probably many Hong Kong academics are also writing in Chinese. In addition, following the change of sovereignty in 1997 there has been increasing interchange between Hong Kong and Chinese mainland academics (Yang, 2003), and the exchange could potentially encourage more Chinese writing among Hong Kong scholars (e.g. for presentation/publication in the mainland), apart from a growing presence of mainland authors’ writings in the Chinese journals published in Hong Kong (Wu, Chan, & Jernudd, 2001).

What remains unknown is, between a policy-level privileging of English publications on the one hand, and the presence and possible development of local publications in Chinese, on the other, what are the attitudes of the Hong


¹ The RAE in Hong Kong is modeled on that in the UK though with significant differences (French, Massy, & Young, 2001). Up to the present four rounds of RAE have taken place, in 1993, 1996, 1999, and 2006 respectively.
² By May 2007, the two Hong Kong-based SSCI journals are China review — An interdisciplinary journal on Greater China (a semiannual published by the Chinese University of Hong Kong Press) and Transportmetrica (a tri-annual published by Hong Kong Society Transportation Studies Limited) (“Social Sciences Citation Index Journal List”).
Kong academics themselves toward the need and pressure for publishing in English versus a possibility of publishing in Chinese and what are their actual practices. The present study is designed to clarify this issue.

3. Methodology

The research was conducted at two UGC-funded research universities in Hong Kong, one comprehensive and the other polytechnic-oriented. Both universities, in their differentiable role statements, spelt out the following: “aims at being internationally competitive in its areas of research strength” (University Grants Committee, 2004). We chose these two universities as the site of the research because we have the most contacts at the two places. Conducting research at the two universities has also allowed me to include participants in a wide range of HSS disciplines, as the participants from the two universities are complementary in terms of their disciplines. In contacting potential participants, we started by viewing the webpages accessed through the link of “staff” found on the respective departments’ homepage at the two universities. In order to have as wide a spectrum of participants as possible, we took into consideration the potential participants’ disciplines, age, academic rank, as well as their level of research productivity (as seen in the publication list and information of research activities provided of the person at his/her homepage). We also included, where possible, some acquaintances in the potential pool due to convenient access. Emails were sent to the potential participants explaining the research purpose and inviting them to participate in the research by accepting an interview at a time of their convenience. Most of the academics contacted agreed to participate in the research. Table 1 summarizes the personal information of the 15 participants (coded as P1-P15), in terms of discipline, gender, age, and academic rank.

All the participants hold a PhD degree. Three of them, P2, P10, and P13, are already retired from the same university, but remain affiliated to the university in certain ways. The data to be presented in this paper were based on semi-structured interviews Yongyan conducted during May 2007-February 2008, with the 15 participants. In line with the research goal, the interview questions posed to the research participants were clustered around the following three key questions:

- Do you publish in English or Chinese, or both?
- How important do you think it is to publish in English and Chinese respectively, with respect to your discipline and your career?
- What are some of the opportunities and constraints for your publication efforts?

Given that the current research methodology literature tends to view interview responses as co-constructed through the interview interaction (Gubrium & Holstein, 2002; Silverman, 2002), care was taken to minimize any pipeline effect in the interview that might undermine the reliability of the interview data. Thus during the interviews Yongyan played

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Code</th>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Academic rank</th>
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<td>P1</td>
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<td>M</td>
<td>Mid-50s</td>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P2</td>
<td>Social science</td>
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<td>Mid-50s</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
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<td>Social science</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mid-50s</td>
<td>Professor</td>
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<td>P4</td>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
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<td>P5</td>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Professor</td>
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<td>P6</td>
<td>Social science</td>
<td>M</td>
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<td>Professor</td>
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<td>P7</td>
<td>Linguistics</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Early 30s</td>
<td>Assistant professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P8</td>
<td>Linguistics</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Associate professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P9</td>
<td>Translation studies</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Associate professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P10</td>
<td>Musicology</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Early 70s</td>
<td>Professor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>P11</td>
<td>Comparative literature</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mid-60s</td>
<td>Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>P12</td>
<td>Applied linguistics</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Early 40s</td>
<td>Assistant Professor</td>
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<tr>
<td>P13</td>
<td>History</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Early 60s</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
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<td>P14</td>
<td>English literature</td>
<td>F</td>
<td>Early 50s</td>
<td>Associate Professor</td>
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<td>P15</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>Mid-50s</td>
<td>Professor</td>
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the role of a facilitator, with the interviewees being encouraged to take control of the talk, within the overall framework of research and publication in their particular context. The language used for the interviews has been a compromise between Yongyan who speaks Mandarin Chinese as her native tongue and English as a second language, and the participants — where Cantonese is the native tongue for 11 and Mandarin Chinese for two (P8 who did PhD in the US but earlier degrees in mainland China, and P11 who received all his degrees in the mainland), and yet another (P10) considers both Mandarin Chinese and Cantonese his native tongue (by having immigrated from the mainland to Hong Kong as a teenager). Thus the interviews with the participants were conducted either mainly in English or mainly in Mandarin Chinese, as a result of on-site negotiation between the interviewer and the participants. It should be noted that all those Cantonese-L1 participants are also able to converse, generally with a lack of fluency, in Mandarin Chinese; in addition, except for two participants in linguistics (P7 and P8), all other participants seem to feel quite comfortable using English. Hence the interviews were mostly characterized by code-switching and code-mixing between English and Mandarin Chinese, as the topic under discussion at a certain point might urge the interviewer/interviewee to use either code (English or Mandarin Chinese) to facilitate meaning expression, regardless of the language that dominated a specific interview. The interviews, normally conducted in the participants’ offices and lasting about 40 minutes each, were all digitally recorded with the permission of the participants and later transcribed (and translated into English where necessary).

The interview data were analyzed through the procedures of analytic induction (Goetz & LeCompte, 1984) and constant comparison (Miles & Huberman, 1994). As this study is framed within the broader context of globalization of the academia and its implications for the academics in research universities, the analysis of the data focused upon identifying connections between the individual narrations and the broader picture. A number of factors have also shaped the data analysis (which began from the data collection and indeed, continued to the final draft of this paper). Firstly, by reference to our own previous research with mainland Chinese HSS scholars (Flowerdew & Li, 2009) and experience in the Hong Kong academia, we have expected to hear voice of “resistance” toward the assessment regime imposed from the top, we therefore paid particular attention to the forms of resistance that may be of particular implications to Hong Kong academics; and in connection to this, we explored the rich implications of publishing in Chinese among some of the participants. Secondly, we should point out that the participants themselves, during interviews as well as in response to my follow-up requests for clarification or elaboration of their viewpoints, through their own reflective and analytical perspectives, have helped me as the researcher to see things in a proper light. In what follows we will first focus on an overwhelming concern with the publication in English, where we aim to capture the participants’ motivations, strategies, and resistance; and then we describe how some participants publish in Chinese as a voluntary responsibility to make contributions toward their target local/regional discourse communities. This is then followed by a brief examination of the participants’ language proficiency in writing in Chinese and English respectively.

4. Publishing in English/internationally indexed journals

In their discussion of publishing in English/internationally indexed journals (or mainly SSCI journals, for most of the participants), the participants tend to refer to their motivations for doing so and the strategies they use, and, in many cases, also express criticism of the status quo.

4.1. Motivations

The participants’ motivations for publishing in English/internationally indexed journals can be summarized into three aspects of purposes, i.e. to accommodate the assessment criteria, to reach a wide readership, and to aim for a high standard.3

Assessment procedures are mandatory on all faculty members, who are expected to be active in research irrespective of their age and rank (Postiglione, 1998). Although the expectation on faculty members to publish in overseas-based internationally indexed journals is not always made explicit, it is well understood in general and is quickly assimilated by new faculty members. As P7, an early-career academic, put it:

3 The latter two echo Jermudd and Baldauf Jr.’s (1996, p. 11) findings in a survey of academics, where motivations for publishing in English have been broadly summarized as: to reach a specialist audience most of whom may reside overseas or in English-speaking countries, to reach the broadest possible readership, and to gain “prestige.”
When we colleagues chat with each other, it would come up — perhaps there’s some pressure around, within the department - so when we chat, we may say, ‘ah, which journal did you submit to?’ I’ll say I submitted to this journal. ‘This journal is not SSCI, you’d better be careful!’ they will say. They may have such advice to a relatively new colleague. (P7)

When the time comes to filing a research output report or a grant application, people are well aware of the importance of having internationally refereed journal articles to report. As P3 put it, they know which publications “really count.” The usual response to the need to publish in internationally refereed indexed journals is to accommodate to these assessment criteria, especially given that time is limited. As P5 observed:

Normally we pick the best journal, if possible, the top international journal. [...] With teaching, administration, book-writing — time is so limited — I did not avoid local journals deliberately, but really I don’t have the time, too many things to do. (P5)

For P4, another early-career academic (as P7), promotion was more of a real need than for established professors such as P5. P4 remarked: “If submitting to local journals leads to promotion and a salary rise, then I would do it” — with the implication that since local journals do not contribute toward that, overseas English journals are the preferred target.

In addition to trying to meet the assessment expectation, the preferred choice of overseas English journals is also driven by the prospect of reaching a wide readership. P5 again: “If you write one article, you have to consider where to submit so that it can reach a wide readership, with a high academic standard.” For P7, publishing in English journals is becoming increasingly necessary, both due to the assessment pressure and due to his enhanced awareness of the need to exchange with overseas peers:

I felt I should let more people know my thoughts, let overseas friends or those who are interested in the topic see my work. Publishing in overseas journals will make it easier for them to read my articles. (P7)

There is also general agreement among most of the participants that publishing in internationally indexed journals is an indication of a high standard of research as noted by P5 quoted above. P6 also said it is good for Hong Kong academics to get into the world’s best journals in their field because it indicates “our scholarship can reach the world’s first-class level.”

In relation to the aspects of motivations described above, the nature of the discipline is also a factor for one to be devoted to publishing in English. This is illustrated by the case of P12 and P14, in applied linguistics and English literature respectively (although for P12, there is an additional factor of not being able to write scholarly in Chinese, as to be noted later.) For P14, who always writes and publishes in English, “there is not necessarily an opposition between an international audience and a local audience.” The nature of the discipline or research topic as a factor influencing language choice in writing and publication has been reported elsewhere (e.g. Flowerdew & Li, 2009; Phillipson & Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999).

4.2. Strategies

The literature has revealed a range of strategies used by EAL scholarl writers at various stages of writing for publication (e.g. Burrough-Boenisch, 2003; Li, 2007; Li & Flowerdew, 2007). The strategies to be reported here as adopted by the participants concern the way they decide upon their subject matter and the way they position their research vis-à-vis the center framework. Three types of strategies can be summarized: researching issues in mainland China, adopting center frameworks for framing issues, and aiming to enrich center theories.

In describing how they decide upon their research topic, quite a few of the participants suggested that Hong Kong is not by itself of much interest to the international community. “Hong Kong is too small. They will not be interested if you write about Hong Kong,” as P3 put it. By contrast, mainland China is of considerable international interest: “Topics on the mainland are interesting, while too many people have already studied Hong Kong,” P5 said. Also to quote P2:

Hong Kong does not have a strong international attention. Anything that happens in Hong Kong is unique, I mean, no one will cite it. But if you do a study on mainland China, everybody is interested in reading what’s happening in mainland China; not a lot of people are interested in what’s happening in Hong Kong.
because their government may have trade with [mainland] China, they want to know more about [mainland] China. (P2)

Similar views were expressed by P3, P4, and P5, all of whom are in social sciences, suggesting that this issue may be discipline-specific to some extent.

A strategy emphasized by P4 (an early-career academic) is that in order to get published in center journals, one should be able to frame the research according to center theories. He cited as an example his approach in a recently submitted article reporting an anthropological study (conducted in mainland China). The point made by P4 conflates with the critical comments found in the literature that for peripheral scholars to be published in center journals, their study of “regional issues” need to be “framed by the perspectives of the Anglo-European ‘center’ theorists” (Canagarajah, 2002; Lin, 2005, p. 38).

If the above-named strategy sounds accommodationist, another early-career participant, P7, noted the importance of enriching center theories: “If you only present some new materials, you will not be published.” To get published in one of those center journals in his field, he must aim to enrich the theories in the center by explicating the unique linguistic structures found in Chinese dialects:

> Linguistics is in fact still quite oriented to Western languages. Yet some structures in the oriental languages are not found in Western languages - I very much emphasize this point. Something which is absent in Western language but is found in the Chinese dialects we’ve investigated — this can make up for their theory. In fact I think it is also our selling point. (P7)

It seems the three strategies described here can be interpreted as ways of circumventing the “straightjacket” situation that Braine (2005, p. 707) (citing Altbach, 1997) has characterized about Hong Kong scholars, a situation where the universities insist that faculty members publish in center-based internationally indexed journals, while such journals, “generally focus on their own national audiences and may not be interested in research from non-Western contexts.” Given that the latter two strategies are highlighted in particular by two early-career academics, it seems to indicate that practicing such strategies, from junior scholars’ point of view, may be significant for their legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger, 1991) in their target disciplinary community.

4.3. Resistance

We have seen that for the participants in the study publishing in English is both an assessment-driven requirement and often a voluntary commitment. However, voice of resistance — toward the privileging of center-based journals and toward the whole assessment regime, is also clear.

A number of participants expressed disapproval of the worship of center journals. P9, in a Chinese department, found it “ridiculous” that his colleagues are struggling to write in English in order to get published in “international” journals, when their work, bound to the Chinese culture and context, can be most effectively presented in Chinese. P10 also questioned the notion of “international”: “New York — the name itself is international — but not necessarily everything published in New York is of an international standard.” Similarly, for P15, in education, the current conception of what is “international” implies inequality and hegemony:

> In the UK and US, the local market is large enough to claim to be international, even though most of the articles [published there] in social sciences are basically about research in the local context. It is not a level playing field, indeed there’s a kind of hegemony, because of language, because of the size, the scale, of the research community. So people have to attach to your research community in order to claim they are internationally significant. (P15)

A few participants argued that internationally indexed journals are just not appropriate for HSS scholars. For P11, who has previously taught in the US, privileging publishing in internationally indexed journals is “idiotic,” and is to blindly extend across the board certain criteria adopted in science and engineering (e.g. where for instance, SCI publications are privileged). In fact, such indices as SSCI and A&HCI are not really taken seriously in the US where they are created, he noted:

> I think the idea of SSCI and A&HCI as a criterion is idiotic. It’s people who are in science and engineering calling the shots in the universities. […] I find that absurd. I have never heard of SSCI when I was at Harvard
or in California. People didn’t really care about it. I’ve never heard of that. It will be absurd to ask a Harvard professor how many publications you have in SSCI. (P11)

Similarly, P5 noted that the scholarship in HSS calls for means of evaluation different from those in science and engineering.

A lot of the time research in social sciences and humanities is on local issues and should therefore use local discourses and exchange among local colleagues. They [HSS scholars] should also write books, book chapters, policy reviews, and publish in professional journals - this is our duty as intellectuals. (P5)

P6 further pointed out that a single-minded concern with publishing in those indexed journals would obstruct disinterested pursuit of scholarship and limit academic vision, as “the scope of the research will become very narrow” and one “can achieve a very high level in research” but “has little learned knowledge.”

Being hard-pressed to publish and to publish particularly in the internationally indexed journals fills most of the participants with a bitter feeling. The bitter feeling was expressed by P5 as follows:

If you are no longer in the rat race, you can say anything you want to say. But if you’re in it, you have no way to escape from the evaluation yardstick. [...] The pressure comes all the way from the top, senior management, to the department head. [...] There’s not much you can do at the individual level. You may not agree with them, but in order to survive, and also to set a good example to your younger colleagues, you have to publish in good venues. It’s very difficult, but I don’t see how we can break out of this dilemma. (P5)

If P5 was referring to the dilemma of having to “publish in good venues,” three other participants acted out their resistance to the publication regime, by ignoring the publication requirement and focusing on teaching (P9), and by early retirement (P2 and P13). P2 was particularly sarcastic, asserting that “it [writing papers as the average academics do] is all a waste of time,” and the papers and a book or two he had previously published had all been “a waste of time.” He resented being “harassed,” or being pressurized explicitly or implicitly by the department/university to publish. Similarly, P13 retired early because part of her job was to push, or to “harass” — to use P2’s wording — her colleagues for regular publication. Since retirement, however, she has been fruitfully engaged in pursuing research projects that she truly loves and has been enjoying publishing (from her own interest and at her own pace) in both English and Chinese. P9, who has chosen to focus on teaching rather than research and publication, remarked that when he was pursuing study in the UK, it never occurred to him that back to Hong Kong he would be expected to publish at a rate that should enable him to regularly fill in a form of self-report indicating “recent important publications.”

5. Publishing in Chinese

It is clear that publishing in internationally indexed English journals (and to some extent, publishing English books — though this has not been much referred to by the participants in the study) is almost the default target that the participants aim at for assessment exercises. However, most of them do publish in Chinese. Of the 15 participants in the study, six (P1, P2, P4, P9, P12, P14) have published very little or hardly anything in Chinese: three (P1, P2, P12) declared themselves to be unable to do academic writing in Chinese; P14 writes in English because it suits her discipline (English literature); P4 (who apparently is quite assessment-accommodating) does not see much value in writing in Chinese; and P9 is against the publication regime altogether and therefore has chosen to concentrate on teaching. That leaves nine of the 15 participants who hold a positive attitude toward publishing in Chinese. It seems useful to take a view of a continuum to characterize the main target communities that the nine scholars voluntarily aim to contribute to, by their Chinese publications. Four levels of target communities of audience, from more specialized to more broad-based in nature, can be distinguished, as indicated in the following sub-headings. The notion of continuum here would also imply that there is no strict correspondence between any one scholar and a target community; instead, one may engage with multiple communities at the same time.

—There have been other Hong Kong scholars who share the critical views of the participants here on what they see as the blind adoption of Western criteria in assessing scholarship in the Hong Kong academy (e.g. Du, 2007; Ma, 2005). Ma (2005), a professor of communication, for instance, has argued that “using a generic and less popular social science index such as SSCI as the sole indicator for assessing the merit of a communication professor” is “biased” and “unfair.”
5.1. To participate in and help to shift the regional academic community

P7, a young linguist, apart from trying to get published in English, also writes in Chinese and submits papers to the relevant top journals in Taiwan, mainland China, and Hong Kong. P7 said he wants his work to be seen by both overseas and regional readers. P8, originally from mainland China, felt an obligation to publish in top mainland Chinese journals, because it would help to bring onto the mainland scene alternative theoretical and methodological perspectives in his field of linguistic studies:

I think there is an obligation [of writing for domestic journals]. The domestic [mainland Chinese] scene — I don’t mean it is necessarily lagging behind, but I hope at least the domestic scene will know about overseas research, then compare and see which is better or perhaps they can be complementary. (P8)

It seems of the two linguists, P7 and P8, the latter is a step further from his junior colleague’s goal to participate in the research conversation in the regional academic community, by aspiring to make a difference, in particular on the mainland research scene. This commitment to the regional academia is also clear with P11. Having received all his degrees in mainland China and renowned for his scholarship in literature and cultural studies, P11 published in Chinese in mainland China in the 1970s, in English in most of the following decade in the US, and then after he moved to Hong Kong in the late 1980s, he was “not only asked by friends and publishers to write in Chinese,” he himself also “felt it important to write in Chinese.” A book on comparative literature he recently wrote in Chinese was primarily aimed at graduate students in mainland China.

5.2. To inform the local readership and guide field practice

P3 pointed out that in addition to fulfilling what is required (i.e. publishing in English), he has also been doing things of his own interest, in particular by producing a number of guide books in Chinese for local social workers:

To me it doesn’t matter whether they are counted or not, but I’m still doing it. I’m happy to do it. And this earns me a reputation in the community. (P3)

P13 has been fruitfully running a few projects since her early retirement (referred to above). She felt it incumbent upon her to disseminate her research and thoughts to the local interested parties and field workers, so she also writes articles in Chinese, for local academic and non-academic readership. Indeed, she felt writing in Chinese allows her to more freely express personal feelings (e.g. using emotion-loaded phrases when describing the wretched living conditions of under-privileged social groups during a period of the colonial history of Hong Kong). Clearly both P3 and P13 derive great satisfaction from a collegial link to the local community of practice.

5.3. To influence policy-making

This as a motivation to write in Chinese is most explicitly expressed by P5, who specializes in social policies and has in recent years been studying the mainland social welfare system and has occasionally published in mainland journals. She hopes for her research to generate discussion and have an impact on policy-makers in the mainland:

Because I do policy research, I hope my research can give rise to discussion in the mainland. I hope to have some role at the policy level, so I hope to publish my writing in the mainland. (P5)

P15, in education, has published a few books in Chinese, and he also frequently writes in local newspapers on educational matters. Coupled with this is his illustrious list of experiences of serving on various consultancy committees at both the university and the government levels. In other words, he himself has been actively participating in policy-making in the local educational setting and his publications in Chinese would reflect what he tries to promote at the policy level.

5.4. To educate the average Chinese people

P6, in social science, started to write essays for local newspapers as early as the 1970s. He also edits two academic journals published in Hong Kong, one in Chinese and the other in English. He has a goal for his English journal to
become internationally influential; on his Chinese journal, though seriously concerned with its difficulty of survival, he emphasized its importance:

_You need to have some local stuff, some Chinese stuff to let others read, after all in Taiwan, Mainland andHong Kong many are reading Chinese, you should serve these people, you are Chinese._ (P6)

This notion of serving the Chinese people is also most distinct with P10, a musicologist by training (having retired from his university but certainly not from his commitment). P10, in his own words, has lived “out of the system” academically (he earned his living as an administrator, rather than an academic, during service at his university). For three decades he has opted to write music reviews and books/articles in musicology in Chinese for the Chinese audience, for he believed the English audience has no lack of music reviews; it is the Chinese audience in the whole Greater China region that needs more opportunities of music education and his music reviews (on both European and Chinese music), published in Hong Kong, mainland China, and Taiwan, can play a role. Meanwhile, with his research on Chinese music, he finds more academic colleagues in the mainland than in Hong Kong, which has also facilitated a need for him to publish in Chinese.

Taken as a whole, the nine participants publish in Chinese for the overall goal of serving the Chinese communities. By reaching a wide readership within and outside the academia at the local and regional levels, they see their work as likely to nurture the readership, stimulate discussion, and achieve an impact. However, except P10, the other eight participants still publish predominantly in English. As P5 and P8 admitted, because of the assessment pressure, they had to prioritize writing in English and they regretted not being able to find as much time as they would like for writing in Chinese. This feeling of regret resembles that voiced by a Slovakian scholar in a study by Curry and Lillis (2004). The scholar, who was obliged to produce higher-status publications in English rather than “doing more with applied publication [in Slovak], which could contribute to informing a wider public and influencing public decision-making processes,” remarked, “I am ashamed. We should do more.” (p. 680)

It should be emphasized that the nine participants do not see English and Chinese publication as mutually exclusive. As P6, editor of a locally-published English journal and a Chinese journal, aptly put, “one needs to walk on two legs.” In particular, it is worth noting that two senior participants, P10 and P11, both in the humanities, explicitly pointed out that Chinese scholarship has much to offer to the West. In the case of P10, he had a revised edition of a Chinese book of his recently translated by a sinologist into English (with himself writing a new chapter in English). He hopes the English version, to be published soon, will be a valuable reference for interested English readers. P11, also by reference to a translation project (on translating scholarly works by Chinese authors into English) for which he is consultant, remarked:

_I’m very much against the idea that only the West has theories to provide and China can only offer materials to be analyzed, I think that’s a sort of very neo-colonialist view._ (P11)

With their comments the two senior participants are in effect calling for re-dressing the status quo that marginalizes non-English scholarship. They believe translation (from Chinese to English) can help to reduce the gap between the center and the peripheral scholarship — a gap that has been widened by the center’s lack of access to and understanding of the peripheral scholarship (Salager-Meyer, 2008).

Finally, it is useful to single out the fact that three participants, P6, P10, and P15, have regularly published in local newspapers and magazines — popular media rather than academic journals — on broad social issues, informed by their own disciplinary perspectives. We consider this as having particular implications, as to be highlighted in the discussion later.

6. Writing in English or Chinese: the extent of language barrier

Of all the participants, P1, P2, and P12 pointed out they cannot write academically in Chinese at all and therefore they would not try to write in Chinese. P5, who does not publish in Hong Kong-based journals (for lack of time) and who does publish her mainland-based research in mainland journals occasionally (for hoping to have an impact on policy-making in the mainland, as noted earlier), admitted that she usually asks her graduate students from the mainland to check and edit her Chinese. All these four participants speak Cantonese (a spoken dialect of the Chinese language) as their mother tongue; but writing in Chinese academically is a different matter. Being able to write in Chinese scholarly requires training and immersion in the register of academic Chinese just as being able to do
scholarly writing in English would require proficiency in the register of academic English. All the four (P1, P2, P5, and P12) have had consistent English-medium education since young age through to the PhD level in addition to prolonged overseas experience. Except P5, the other three seem to feel content writing in English only (though P2, as noted, has opted for early retirement and stopped publishing altogether).

Of all the 15 participants, only P7, an early-career academic in Chinese linguistics, observed that trying to write in English has been difficult, as he had previously focused on Chinese reading and writing before becoming a university staff member. But he is strongly motivated to write well in English (apart from the need to meet the assessment requirement, he is eager to reach a wide audience, as reported above). Mentioning the “catalytic effect” of attending a conference in Europe where he met foreign linguists fluent in multiple languages, he commented:

_I think I perhaps will not be like them, but at least I should master Chinese and English well. It was a bit like hoping to emulate them or stay abreast with them._ (P7)

He usually shows his English drafts to his “mentor” (his PhD supervisor, based in another local university) who will correct his English. Talking of a recent experience of showing a draft to his mentor, P7 said:

_He asked me whether I had already asked someone else to correct it? I said no. He said that's good, you’ve made a lot of progress! And I felt very happy._ (P7)

Of the other participants, only P3 and P4, working in the same department, responded positively upon being asked whether they would sometimes use editorial service before submitting manuscripts. They referred to the same English-speaking language “corrector” (Burrough-Boenisch, 2003) who regularly edits manuscripts for their department.

7. Discussion

The findings of this study indicate that the privilege attached to the internationally indexed journals stands out as a leading factor orienting the Hong Kong academics toward writing and publishing in English, although the participants also want to publish in English in order to reach as wide a readership as possible and to demonstrate a high standard of their scholarship. Various strategies are adopted for the goal of successful publication in their target journals, including researching issues in mainland China, framing issues by center theories, and aiming to enrich center theories. However, a resistant attitude toward is also salient — it is resistance toward being pressurized to publish for assessment and toward what they see as the blind adoption of Western criteria or criteria more suitable for scientists and engineers than for scholars in the HSS. Meanwhile, some academics continue to publish in Chinese to serve the local/regional Chinese communities, if in most cases apart from publishing mainly in English.

The privilege attached at elite research universities to publishing in internationally indexed journals, as pointed out in the beginning of this paper, is a component of the internationalization of higher education in the trend of globalization of the academia. In non-Western settings the privilege implies a replication of Western criteria in evaluating scholarship. The case of both Hong Kong and mainland China (Flowerdew & Li, 2009) would illustrate this, where publishing in center-based English-language journals is often accorded a much higher status than local publication.

Within the English-dominant publication regime, nevertheless, it is particularly worth noting that a majority of the participants in the study also publish in Chinese, for the purpose of serving academic and non-academic Chinese communities at the local and regional levels. It seems it is these people who are fulfilling what Altbach (2009, p. 25) calls the “responsibility” of research universities “to disseminate research and analysis in local languages.” Three of the participants, P6, P10, and P15, in particular, have regularly published in local newspapers and magazines on social issues, each with insights derived from their disciplinary background.

In other words, the three participants (and perhaps to a lesser extent, the other six participants who publish Chinese articles mainly in academic journals) have played the role of public intellectuals, who have “a commitment not simply to a professional or private domain but to a public world — and a public language, the vernacular.” (Jacoby, 1987, p. 235) According to Altbach (2009, p. 22), being located in “a robust regime of academic freedom,” research university professors are “more likely than other academics to be ‘public intellectuals,’ engaged in civic discourse on topics of societal importance.” However, in contrast to this view of a research university being the most likely home-base of public intellectuals, it has also been proposed that the power field of a research university may in fact encourage negligence of “public obligations” on the part of the professoriate in general (Wolfe, 1997, p. 38). This latter
tendency, which brings more harm in the HSS than in the hard sciences (ibid.), has a range of manifestations: “the priority of publication over teaching,” spawing of journals “of no particular interest,” the move of academic disciplines in a direction that encourages “a withdrawal from a heterogeneous world of difference into a homogeneous one of insularity,” as well as the splitting of narrow disciplines into “even narrower subfields,” thus producing scholarship that is “self-referential” and only can be shared among a small specialized audience (ibid., pp. 38–39).

Clearly, these ills are what P6 pointed to when he commented on the consequence that preoccupation with publication in internationally indexed journals can lead to: “the scope of the research will become very narrow” and one “can achieve a very high level in research” but “has little learned knowledge.” P6 himself, by acting out the role of a public intellectual, was reacting against the ills of the academy as he saw.

A strategy commonly reported among the participants in social science is that they tend to choose to research issues in mainland China as they believe local issues in Hong Kong will not attract their target center-based journals (and the journal gatekeepers). Although this may reflect the academics’ effort to avoid parochialism, in a critical perspective one may wonder if this in effect marginalizes (Canagarajah, 2002; Salager-Meyer, 2008) their mainland colleagues: the latter generally cannot write for publication in English to achieve a level of visibility on the international scene that can be mutually beneficial to the center and the Chinese academia (Flowerdew & Li, 2009), while their Hong Kong counterparts, by reporting on mainland subject matters in center-based English journals, will “achieve recognition” (Salager-Meyer, 2008, p. 128). In addition, though the present study throws up evidence that some Hong Kong scholars may try to get published in mainland journals (e.g. P5 in social policies; P7 and P8 in linguistics), it has to be admitted that this probably only constitutes sporadic instances; in general, as has been noted by some (e.g. Xu, 2004), the relatively low credibility and visibility of mainland journals compared with overseas journals is a clear deterring factor for Hong Kong scholars to consider submitting to mainland journals. The scenarios would seem to reveal something of a gap between the Hong Kong academia and its mainland counterpart.

In terms of language proficiency, neither English nor Chinese poses a salient barrier for the participants who write in either or both of the languages. The few who cannot write academically in Chinese do not try to do so; while those who may need editorial support in Chinese or English have access to such support. Clearly, in terms of the English proficiency, the Hong Kong HSS academics make a stark contrast with their mainland counterparts for whom English is a major barrier (Flowerdew & Li, 2009). Nevertheless, it is useful to emphasize, in the light of the case of Hong Kong academics, that beyond the issue of language proficiency, choice of language for publication has a rich array of implications for EAL scholars, as the present study has tried to show.

8. Conclusion

Given that intellectuals “occupy a dominated position in the field of power” (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 125), it would seem that the normative course of action for the average academics to take, as indicated through the findings of this study, would be to accommodate the assessment regime that privileges international engagement over local commitment. However, the findings of the study also indicate that it is perhaps not too difficult to find voices and actions of resistance among the academics so positioned. Except for a minority who may choose to break up with the power structure altogether (e.g. retiring early as in the case of P2 and stopping publishing), the majority, perhaps especially those who are more established members in their disciplinary fields, as shown in the small sample of participants in the study, would manage to negotiate both international participation and engagement “in civic discourse on topics of societal importance” (Altbach, 2009, p. 22) at the local and regional levels.

The policy orientation toward English publication in the EAL academia has long-term consequences which tend to be overlooked. Above all, if English is not a neutral medium in the natural sciences (Ammon, 2006), it is even less so in the HSS — it has been suggested that using English as a medium of communication in the HSS implicates imposing experiences of English-speaking societies upon other societies, through the adoption of particular concepts as well as terminologies (de Swaan, 2001). In addition, publication in center-based journals is likely to encourage perpetuation.

5 Siu Sai-wo (Siu, 2009), chief editor of Sing Tao Daily (a major newspaper in Hong Kong), has recently (May 2009) commented on Hong Kong scholars avoiding “picking issues pertaining to Hong Kong as the subject of their research,” as a result of their assumption that doing so will create a barrier to publication in the internationally indexed journals. Siu called for starting a local academic journal to publish quality local research. Of course, there is no lack of locally-published academic journals in Hong Kong; the problem is perhaps for most academics, the assessment criteria that favor overseas publication are over-ruling.
of a “center-theory-periphery-application” pattern in knowledge-making (Lin, 2005, p. 39). In the case of Hong Kong, a great majority of research in the HSS is eventually published in English and most publications provide information on Hong Kong, mainland China, or Taiwan — in this scenario, the Hong Kong HSS scholars are not only prioritizing Western readership over local readership, but through providing information of these three places to satisfy Western’ interest, the HSS sector of the Hong Kong academia, as argued, is also relegating itself to an affiliate of the China Study Centers of the Anglo-American universities (Du, 2007). To redress the situation, as pointed out by Braine (2005, p. 714), “Hong Kong needs to free itself from the self-imposed dependence on Western criteria to measure its academic success.” The resistant attitude expressed by the participants in the study toward the current publication regime would also highlight the point.

In proposing ways to redress center-periphery dichotomy in scientific publishing, Salager-Meyer (2008, p. 129) called for the creation “at regional scales” of “private editorial bodies that would start up new regional high-quality refereed journals (online and/or paper-based) that would,” among others, “be included into the mainstream of world scientific communication in non-English-dominated international databases so as to be able to compete on the international market.” Salager-Meyer (2008) admitted this is “easier said than done” and has to rely on “concerted institutional and political backing.” In the context of Hong Kong — or rather, the Greater China region, the proposal of starting up of “new regional high-quality refereed journals” seems very relevant. However, alternative efforts may also be worthwhile — that is, to widen the regional impact of the existing locally-published journals (which have difficulty attracting high-quality submissions), and to enhance collaboration in the upgrading of the current mutually-exclusive local databases to pave the way for the growth of regional databases which could go on to claim an international status.6 Collaboration should not be restricted to cultivating robust journals and databases of course. The growing interchange and research collaboration between Hong Kong and mainland scholars (Yang, 2003) should reduce the gap between the Hong Kong academia and its mainland counterpart as referred to earlier.

Donald Tsang, the Chief Executive of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region, in his Policy Address 2007 announced the goal of developing Hong Kong into “the regional education hub.” From an alternative perspective, it may be less important which country or territory may become “the regional education hub” than the prospect that the Asia-Pacific region will make important contributions toward the goal of achieving equality and coalition in scholarly publishing on a global scale.

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6 In mainland China, CSSCI (Chinese Social Science Citation Index) has been influential (see Flowerdew & Li, 2009). In Hong Kong, the Hong Kong Index of Chinese Periodicals (HKInChiP) is a database currently holding 350 titles of Chinese and bilingual periodicals published in Hong Kong and it does not seem to be widely known. Joint efforts in the building of these databases should create opportunities for developing regional databases.


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