Putonghua-Language Radio Programming in Hong Kong: RTHK and the Putonghua Audience

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Abstract: Three months before the People’s Republic of China regained control over Hong Kong, the government-sponsored media service Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK) began offering Putonghua-language (Mandarin) programming. Since then, the channel has been broadcasting programs for three groups of people. These programs help Mainlanders assimilate to Hong Kong, help Cantonese-speaking Hong Kong people learn the language of the Mainland, and provide a means for overseas Chinese in Hong Kong to be exposed to the mother tongue and learn about what is happening in Mainland China. This paper examines the evolution of programming on RTHK through the first three years of operation. Putonghua Channel has experimented with various types of programs, using block programming/niche programming to meet the needs of RTHK’s varied audiences. RTHK’s Putonghua Channel is an example of government-sponsored public broadcasting that focused on language to deliver programming for the specific needs of specialized audiences.

Résumé: Trois mois avant que la République populaire de Chine a repris le contrôle de Hong Kong, Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), radiodiffuseur commandité par le gouvernement, a commencé à offrir des programmes en langue mandarine. Depuis, le poste a diffusé ses programmes en vue de rejoindre trois groupes de personnes principaux. Ces programmes aident les Chinois continentaux à s’assimiler au Hong Kong, les habitants de Hong Kong qui parlent cantonnais à apprendre le mandarin, et les Chinois d’outre-mer vivant à Hong Kong à apprendre leur langue maternelle et à se mettre au courant des actualités chinoises. Cet article examine l’évolution de la programmation de RTHK au cours de ses trois premières années en ondes. Le poste mandarin a fait l’essai de différentes sortes d’émissions, utilisant la programmation en bloc et celle de créneau pour rencontrer les besoins de ses divers auditeurs. Le canal mandarin de RTHK est un exemple d’un radiodiffuseur public commandité par le gouvernement qui met l’accent sur la langue pour présenter des émissions capables de rencontrer les besoins particuliers d’auditeurs spécialisés.

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On March 31, 1997, Hong Kong’s government-licensed radio broadcaster, Radio Television Hong Kong (RTHK), launched a Putonghua (Mandarin) language channel. As control of Hong Kong was changing from Britain to China, this action—three months before the official ceremony—clearly signaled changes in the political, economic, and social structures. At one level, it heralded the changing perception and status of the Putonghua language in Hong Kong, from the tongue of the poor and uneducated to the language of power and government. From a public broadcasting perspective, it marked the launch of an experimental radio channel that needed to find its core audience. Critics claimed the changeover was politically motivated. RTHK management said it was an economic decision to take the lowest rated of their seven channels and meet the new demand for Putonghua-language programming in Hong Kong.

The significance of this radio channel stems from how it has been used to change and unify an area that has long been separate from the rest of the country in terms of language, culture, income, and politics (Lee, 1991; Ma, 1999). The Putonghua channel has been and continues to be used to bridge the gap between the local Cantonese-speaking population and the Putonghua-speaking immigrants and government officials from mainland China. To better understand this process, three interrelated areas will be presented: first, the theoretical perspective noted by Huang (1993) that language reflects power and ideology; second, descriptions of the events, programming decisions, and practices that were carried out by Putonghua channel managers during the first three years of operation; and third, an explanation of how these events, decisions, and practices resulted in a public broadcaster identifying and serving the needs of its core audience.

Language as power and ideology
This radio channel owes its existence to the fact that language reflects power and ideology (Huang, 1993). Putonghua is one of the four primary influences on Hong Kong’s culture (Lee, 1991), but for a number of years leading up to 1997, Putonghua had been viewed by Hong Kong people as the language of the lower class, the poor, and the uneducated (Ma, 1999). This highlighted the significance of the hand-over ceremony on July 1st, 1997, because it was conducted in both English and Putonghua—but not Cantonese. The swearing-in ceremony of the judges, the legal council, and the executive council was conducted solely in Putonghua. This was a clear signal of the changing status of Putonghua to the Cantonese-speaking people.

As noted by Fisherman (1972), the more people who use a type of speech and their visibility in a society, the better chance this speech variety has of becoming the official language. Conversely, a speech variety spoken by a minority leads to perceptions of inferior social status and is referred to as “language condescension” (Huang, 1993, p. 156). Language condescension can be observed, for example, by the degree to which people are willing to learn each other’s language.

In the Chief Executive’s Policy Address of 1998, Tung Chee Hwa noted that Hong Kong’s language policy—“two written languages, and three oral languages”—encourages local citizens to be able to write in English and Chinese,
and speak English, Cantonese, and Putonghua. Hong Kong’s Assistant Director of Education, Leung Yat Ming, noted that by “studying … the common language of races [in China], students will have a growing feeling of identification with Chinese culture and belonging to our nation country” (Leung, 1997, p. 1).

The People’s Republic of China has promoted Putonghua throughout the various provinces in order to remove barriers caused by dialectical differences (Beijing Languages Institute, 1995). This goal to unite the various peoples and “bring about a further political, cultural, and economic development” applies to Hong Kong’s pluralistic society as well (p. 57). Therefore, the impetus to promote Putonghua comes from three linked ideas: (1) Putonghua is the official language of China, (2) Hong Kong has an interdependent relationship with China, and (3) the local culture of Hong Kong is Chinese culture.

Both Putonghua and Cantonese use the same written characters, but differ in the pronunciation of the characters (Beijing Languages Institute, 1995). For example, one can communicate with another fairly easily through written notes, suggesting that the languages are similar enough that learning the other can be accomplished with minimal training. The Hong Kong government now endorses Putonghua courses for civil servants, of which 6,000 attended in 1996 and 7,000 in 1997. The two largest groups of Hong Kong residents formally learning Putonghua are civil servants and students. The biggest private Putonghua school, Hong Kong Society, reported that 20,000 people have taken courses annually since 1992 (Y. F. Wong, personal communication, February 3, 1999). Many Hong Kong people now view Putonghua as a practical skill to enhance job opportunities.

**Public broadcasting**

Radio has been used as a tool “for nation building and the development of a common … culture” (Taylor, 1995-96, p. 183). In Europe, for example, radio is widely acknowledged as being chiefly a cultural medium (Kemppainen, 1998). As the only Hong Kong radio channel broadcasting in Putonghua, RTHK fills a unique space in the Hong Kong cultural landscape by discussing local issues through the “non-local” language. This is where RTHK is able to fulfill the traditional role of a public broadcasting operator, to serve those “left behind by commercial stations” (Kosof, 1993, p. 170). RTHK documents support this view that “the station’s overriding responsibility is to provide radio and television services that are distinctive and of high quality, and that are or might be at risk in the commercially funded sector of the market” (Radio Television Hong Kong, 1998, p. 6). As the sole provider of exclusively Putonghua-language radio, RTHK fills this niche.

**Languages of Hong Kong broadcast media**

**Television**

The most popular television programs in Hong Kong are broadcast on Cantonese-language channels TVB and ATV. Both also offer English language channels that are increasingly mixing in Putonghua programming. Furthermore,
Chinese Television Network and Chinese Entertainment Channel produce programs in Putonghua, but they are broadcast outside of Hong Kong. The signals of CCTV (China Central TV), TV Shenzhen, TV Guangdong, and TV Zhuhai can also be received in small areas of the New Territory of Hong Kong (Chan & Ma, 1996), but are functionally outside the Hong Kong television market.

Radio
Three broadcast companies (RTHK, Commercial Radio, Metro Broadcast) control the 13 radio channels licensed by the Broadcasting Authority (Howlett, 1998). RTHK operates seven channels, and the others operate three each. Besides Putonghua channel, eight of the channels are either entirely or partially Cantonese, with the rest being offered in English. Star Radio tried broadcasting in Putonghua from 1995-96, but closed down after one year; RTHK launched their effort the following year.

Putonghua channel: Preliminary research
Before the channel was launched in 1997, RTHK commissioned a survey to identify people’s attitude toward having a Putonghua radio channel. A City University of Hong Kong study interviewed over 600 adults and found adequate support for launching the service—45% in favour, 38% neutral, and only 17% opposed (City University of Hong Kong, 1996). Further, 80% of the interviewees were born in Hong Kong and 78.6% reported they wanted to hear programs broadcast in both Putonghua and Cantonese. This was used as evidence of general understanding of Putonghua and the desire to hear radio programs in either language.

When the channel was launched in 1997, the ex-Secretary for Broadcasting, Culture and Sport, T. H. Chau, stated that the target audience was “the new immigrants from mainland China … the mission of Putonghua Channel was to help them to adjust to the life of Hong Kong” (Lau, 1997, p. 8). Then-Head of Putonghua Channel, Benny Ngai, said there were three target groups. The largest group would be the local Hong Kong people who wanted to learn Putonghua, the second largest group were the immigrants from the mainland, and the third group would be Chinese-speaking visitors from abroad (Lau, 1997).

Programming 1997
With the target audience identified by the management of RTHK, Putonghua Channel composed its first program chart, emphasizing news, information, and culture (see Table 1). There were no programs devoted specifically to teaching Putonghua except two small segments—One-Minute Putonghua and Putonghua Fair (which was embedded in an evening program entitled Putonghua Roundabout). Otherwise, RTHK simply offered radio programs with announcers speaking Putonghua, leaving it up to the listeners to learn on their own. The focus was on information and cultural programs that were supposed to serve the second and third largest target groups (mainland immigrants and overseas Chinese, respectively).
Complaints and changes

Shortly after its launch, Putonghua channel received a small number of complaints about the programming (Lau, 1997). The station previously occupying that frequency (AM 621) was RTHK channel “Radio 7.” This Cantonese-language channel was colloquially referred to as “the traffic channel” because, in-between soft music selections, it focused on traffic news and stock market updates. People were used to hearing these reports and music in English, Cantonese, and Putonghua and were surprised to tune in to find full-time Putonghua programming (Lau, 1997).

RTHK management responded to the complaints and implemented the first series of program reforms in June 1997 — two weeks before the hand-over. With little fanfare or promotion, the channel increased the music and reduced the number of program blocks from eight to five (see Table 2). Cultural programming, news, and information were roughly halved from eleven to six hours per day. Music programming (the previously popular golden oldies format) was expanded from one hour to six. The target audience was mainly adults and young adults. In addition, stock market updates were reinstated and half-hourly financial news programming was added to the 12-hour broadcast day. This essentially ended the complaints about the new format.

Table 1: Putonghua Channel Programming (March 31, 1997 to June 14, 1997)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Program Type</th>
<th>Program Content</th>
<th>Target Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1000-1200</td>
<td>News &amp; Information</td>
<td>Sports, entertainment news, pop star interviews</td>
<td>Young Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200-1300</td>
<td>News &amp; Information</td>
<td>Reporting of events outside of Hong Kong</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1300-1500</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Lifestyles, emotional life, celebrity interviews</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1500-1600</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Interviews with writers, painters, artists, scholars, etc.</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600-1800</td>
<td>Culture (bilingual)</td>
<td>Culture, health, lifestyles, etc.</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800-1900</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Pop music</td>
<td>Youth</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1900-2000</td>
<td>News &amp; Information</td>
<td>Detailed news, and current affairs analysis</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2200</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Science, culture, campus life, events in China, etc.</td>
<td>Young Adults</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2: Putonghua Channel Program Chart (June 1997 to April 1998)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Program Type</th>
<th>Program Content</th>
<th>Target Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1000-1200</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Science, arts, culture, international events</td>
<td>Young Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200-1600</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Golden oldies</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600-1800</td>
<td>Culture (Bilingual)</td>
<td>Culture, health, lifestyles, etc.</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800-2000</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Pop music</td>
<td>Young Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2200</td>
<td>News &amp; Information</td>
<td>Detailed news, stock market, and current affairs analysis</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Two months later, A. C. Nielsen (1997) conducted a survey of overall radio listening in Hong Kong. Before this survey, the management of Putonghua Channel had only learned about audience needs from telephone calls and letters. The survey provided them with the first look at the demographic characteristics of their audience. Audience profiles on age, income, occupation, and place of listening were compiled. It suggested that the audience of Putonghua Channel tended to skew older, with the largest number of listeners in their mid-40s and above. Most listening took place in the home, reflecting the dependence on public transportation by Hong Kong people for commuting to and from work. In terms of occupation, the majority of the listeners were blue-collar workers, as well as a sizable number of housewives. Listeners of Putonghua channel also tended toward lower income, with a majority of the audience reportedly earning below H.K.$10,000 per month (around U.S.$1,290).

Overall, the ratings for Putonghua channel were small compared to the commercial competitors. The highest-rated show was a Cantonese and Putonghua bilingual program in the afternoon, called *Happy All Around*. This show aired from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m., and was simulcast on another channel, RTHK/Radio 5. The program broadcast from 12:00 noon to 4:00 p.m. in the afternoon, *Financial Plus*, secured the channels second-highest average rating. Third highest was *Putonghua Roundabout*, broadcast from 10:00 a.m. to 12:00 noon. The evening show *Putonghua News World* was the fourth highest.

The magazine program *Happy All Around* contained soft information segments on health, fashion, culture, celebrity interviews, and information for new immigrants. The target audience was primarily housewives, as was the music program *Financial Plus*, which broadcast golden oldies four hours each day.

**Programming 1998**

Radio programming in Hong Kong is not always ratings driven. Some channels will move programs around simply to “freshen” the overall sound. Ma (1999) notes the same approach can be found with RTHK television producers. Coinciding with the first anniversary of broadcast operations, station management announced a reshuffling of programs on April 1st, 1998. At the same time, they announced they received permission to increase the broadcast day from 12 to 16 hours (see Table 3).

Two Hong Kong Radio personalities, Pei pei and Joe Chan, hosted the extended hours of program from 10:00 p.m. to 2:00 a.m. Another financial program was created middays from 12:00 noon to 1:00 p.m., coinciding with the time break of the Stock Exchange Market in Hong Kong. These new programs were targeted toward individuals wanting advice on stock market transactions. By now, the Putonghua channel had built a distinct image linked to its programming on stocks and finance. Although its ratings were still dwarfed by its commercial counterparts, RTHK managers were satisfied enough to leave things pretty much alone for the rest of the year.
Programming 1999
Putonghua channel had its third program reshuffle on April 12th, 1999 (see Table 4). This time the big change was to switch the afternoon golden song program, *Financial Plus*, to the morning, and the original morning magazine type of program, *Putonghua Roundabout*, to the afternoon.

<table>
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<th>Time</th>
<th>Program Type</th>
<th>Program Content</th>
<th>Target Audience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1000-1200</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Science, arts, culture, China and international events, etc.</td>
<td>Young Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1200-1300</td>
<td>Business News</td>
<td>Stock buy and sell, and financial analysis</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1300-1600</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Golden songs</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1600-1800</td>
<td>Culture (Bilingual)</td>
<td>Culture, health, lifestyles, etc.</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1800-2000</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Pop music</td>
<td>Young Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2000-2200</td>
<td>News &amp; Information</td>
<td>Detailed news, current affairs, stock buy and sell, and financial analysis</td>
<td>Adults, Individual stock holders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2200-2400</td>
<td>Culture</td>
<td>Life in general</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>0000-0200</td>
<td>Music</td>
<td>Golden songs</td>
<td>Adults</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the Hong Kong radio market almost every station programs news and current affairs in the morning. *Financial Plus* was to counter-program music. *Putonghua Roundabout* was also turned into a music program with Putonghua-language teaching segments aimed at listeners interested in learning Putonghua. The financial program *621 Exchange Square* was moved to Hong Kong’s lunch hour (1:00-2:00 p.m.), and during the stock market’s break-time. This was hoped to generate more callers and bring more listeners to the show.

Programmers also announced a new slogan for Putonghua channel, which translated to English means “Golden Songs and Finance News at Any Minute.”
Half hour financial news programs are aired at the stock market’s opening and closing (10:30 a.m. and 4:30 p.m.), and brief segments analyze the stock market between programs.

Over time, the programming of Putonghua channel has changed its focus from news and information to finance and golden songs, all presented through the language of Putonghua. Music listeners and those interested in financial news and analysis are the target audience, as well as those wanting to learn the language.

The role of Putonghua channel for its audience
An important function of minority media is to help immigrants assimilate to a new culture or society. The purpose of the Putonghua channel was to help local people to learn Putonghua as well as assist immigrants to adjust to life in Hong Kong. By offering alternative programs in Putonghua, the channel succeeded in taking some audience share from other channels.

Assimilating new immigrants
In a larger sense, Putonghua channel helps new immigrants adjust and learn to fit into Hong Kong society. According to Hong Kong government figures, it takes immigrants from mainland China around seven years to assimilate to the new culture (Census and Statistics Department, 1998). Media can help or hurt this process. In the U.S., there are examples where ethnic or minority media insulated immigrants from the larger culture, leading to separatism (Schlesinger, 1992). Officially, the Hong Kong government permits 150 immigrants each day from mainland China. These immigrants come from a variety of regions, but mostly from neighbouring Guangdong province (Census and Statistics Department, 1998). Since the local language there is Cantonese, most of the immigrants probably speak Cantonese and will tune to Cantonese media to learn about Hong Kong.

The Head of Putonghua channel affirms that the listeners come primarily from both overseas and provinces outside of Guangdong (K. Cheung, personal communication, June 5, 1999). A significant number of immigrants (one-in-three, over 15,000 per year) come from non-Cantonese-speaking provinces (Census and Statistics Department, 1998). By producing programs about current affairs and the lifestyle in Hong Kong, Putonghua channel provides information to help this group assimilate. The content is about local information and events, so immigrants can learn about Hong Kong through the public and inclusive influence of Putonghua channel.

The circumstances whereby ethnic media create divisiveness usually is a consequence of immigrants receiving more information and entertainment from the home country than the host country (Tan, 1993). But, the programming of Putonghua channel emphasizes life in the Hong Kong region. From music to information, sports, entertainment, health, lifestyle, current affairs, and financial analysis—all are presented within the local context. The programs encourage assimilation through their content, even as the programs are delivered in the language of the immigrants.
From general to niche audience

Therefore, the overall programming approach has become more focused, rather than general. Each show tries to develop its own identity and establish its own “niche.” This mirrors the resurgence of public radio in Finland, where they specifically targeted “cultural affairs, young people’s programs, and news/regional programs” (Kemppainen, 1998, p. 135).

For example, the early morning three-hour show, Financial Plus, broadcasts golden oldies that are in Putonghua, Cantonese, and English. It appeals to both local listeners and new immigrants. More than half of the broadcast is devoted to the golden songs aimed at drawing in older listeners. In the afternoon, there is another music program delivered with Putonghua, called Putonghua Roundabout. This show plays more current (but soft) music and at the same time presents idioms, humours, and jokes, in addition to short international event reporting. The program from 4:00 to 6:00 p.m. in the afternoon is bilingual (Putonghua and Cantonese) on health, culture, and lifestyle. From 6:00 to 8:00 p.m. and from midnight to 2:00 a.m., more golden songs are broadcast. Throughout the day and night, brief financial segments are aired to attract people who are interested in stock trading. This kind of programming operates in tandem with the opening and closing of the stock exchange, with more detailed analysis presented in the evening program.

Community outreach efforts

To further establish the sense of community and bringing the various audience segments together, the channel staff routinely schedule events to promote the use of Putonghua. These events vary from seminars on personal and home financial planning to music concerts, for example:

- **Annual Hong Kong, Guangdong, and Macao Putonghua competition.** A joint project hosted by Putonghua channel, Guangdong radio station, Macao Broadcast Limited, and Foshan radio station (in Guangdong Province). Anyone from these Cantonese-language areas can participate in the competition. The top four receive large cash awards (H.K.$10,000). In 1999, over 7,000 people participated in the first round (over 1,500 from Hong Kong). The competition was broadcast on Putonghua language radio and television.

- **School Putonghua broadcast stations.** This project is held in junior and senior high schools in Hong Kong during the school year. In spring 1999, over 14 schools participated. The students were guided to produce and present programs on the air, attracting many other students to listen to the Putonghua channel.

- **Putonghua Ambassador project.** For this project, so-called “Putonghua Ambassadors” are appointed each year to visit government departments and test the Putonghua level of the staff. This project seeks to promote Putonghua in civil service departments. In the past
two years, the Putonghua Ambassadors have visited the Hong Kong Revenue Department and the Fire Department.

- **Millennium broadcast.** Over 20 radio stations worldwide agreed to participate in a project to simulcast millennium celebrations around the globe taking place on New Year’s Eve 1999. For the first time in history, Chinese radio stations from Beijing, Shanghai, Guangzhou, Taipei, Singapore, Los Angeles, and Vancouver conducted a joint broadcast program.

**Conclusion**

In the competitive Hong Kong radio market, RTHK maintains the theory and practice of a public broadcaster. Putonghua channel reaches out to the target segments identified earlier. Ratings data indicates that 60% of the audience of Putonghua channel have a monthly income under H.K.$10,000 (U.S.$1,290). A market-driven commercial station typically does not reach for the elderly, the poor, and those with low education and skill. But RTHK carries the mantle of social responsibility that enables it to walk a step ahead in meeting the needs of the society. A goal of the service is to help Hong Kong people learn Putonghua and enable new immigrants to learn things about Hong Kong. Learning Putonghua has become a priority for many Hong Kong people since Putonghua is now the official language. Whether Putonghua channel can maintain listenership will need to be watched. As Putonghua becomes more common in Hong Kong, inevitably the commercial stations will find ways to increase their own ratings with it as well.

Through the first two years of its broadcast life, Putonghua channel searched to find its market position and was able to attract a significant number of underserved listeners. It offered a variety of programs, and continues to assist new immigrants with their assimilation into the new society. For those born in Hong Kong, it provides unique programming for a niche market. This radio channel has helped promote the status and use of Putonghua among Cantonese speaking people, bringing the cultures of Hong Kong and mainland China closer together.

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