

Language Policy, Practice and Diglossia in Colonial and Post-Colonial Hong Kong

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Abstract:

The language policy in Hong Kong undergoes both colonization and decolonization at present. In colonial days, the language policy was diglossic or superposed bilingualism. English was treated as 'high' language, while Cantonese and Putongh (formerly known as Mandarin) were of the 'low' status. One of the major changes after the resumption of sovereignty in 1997 is the 'bi-literacy and trilingualism' language policy, to balance the status of English, Cantonese (a commonly spoken local language in Hong Kong) and Putonghua (the national spoken language in mainland China); this is in accordance with the 'mother tongue' education policy. This paper examines the language policy with certain politically-driven practices in education, the workplace as well as daily common and official life in pre-colonial and post-colonial Hong Kong; to view the intentions of the colonial government and the motives of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Government, as well as to examine the response of Hong Kong society to the language issues during the transition of political power.

Keywords:

language policy, diglossia, hegemony, medium of instruction, political transition, globalization and decolonization

Defining language policy, diglossia and hegemony

Language policy is all measures which influence the communicative flow in a society with a view to maintaining or altering its power structure (Brumme et al., 1993). It also covers a wider range of situations that involve language planning and language-in-education. It can be top-down through a governmental and national level or at an institutional level (Poon, 2000); it also can take the shape of official language legislation and discourse regulation. Therefore, language policy can be connected with language ideology, and serves to mystify a specific social group and symbolize its power (Schjerve et al., 2003). Poon (2000) proposes the model of language hierarchical order to clarify language policy and language planning.

Diglossia is a concept which contributes to the comprehension of the relationship between multilingualism and social power (Ferguson, 1959, Fishman, 1971). It commonly refers to various aspects of societal bi- and multilingualism, that is distribution and valorization of the respective languages. Ferguson (1959) writes that diglossia produces the hierarchical status of the language in society – which refers to a High Variety (high prestige) coexisting with a Low Variety (low prestige). Viewing the language's hierarchical phenomena, it is useful to relate hegemonic power to interpret the language alternation and conflict potentials which accompany diglossia in asymmetrical contact situation (Schjerve et al., 2003). Therefore, Vetter (2003) declares that hegemonic power can aim at directly influencing diglossic and polyglossic situations by means of which languages serve media of instruction in education.

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Language Policy in Colonial Days

Hong Kong is a unitary race society where 95% of the population is Chinese and 89.2% of them are Cantonese-speaking (2001 census). Geographically, it lies close to Canton, the provincial capital of Guangdong, mainland China, where Cantonese is spoken as a dialect. Historically, the inhabitants of Hong Kong form an immigration society in which the immigrants mainly came from mainland China, particularly from the Pearl River Delta – a Cantonese speaking region. Culturally, it inherits great Chinese traditions, and the social network is closely connected to mainland China. In spite of the sociolinguistic situation in Hong Kong, social communication is mainly Cantonese, but English is widely practiced as a prestige language in the workplace, and is used as a medium of education in schools. The reason of this status is the governing of Hong Kong by Britain for about 155 years. As for written communication, Cantonese is written in Modern Standard Chinese, but is slightly different from the simplified characters used in mainland China, or the traditional characters in Taiwan, due to the fact that Chinese culture in Hong Kong is influenced by the western culture. The English writing standard follows British English, but applies local pronunciation.

In the early British colonial period, there was no statutory provision for what constituted the official language of Hong Kong. However, language policy underwent late changes and English appears most likely to become the official language. Hong Kong was occupied by Britain after the two Opium Wars. Tsou (1996) traces back the early change of the language policy to the Treaty of Tientsin (also known as Tianjin) of 1842. Articles 50 and 51 of the Treaty reveal the establishment of the ‘diglossic’ situation in Hong Kong (Zhang, 2006). English was by practice the sole language used in executive, judicial and legislative branches of government during 1842 through 1974. The British colonial government increased the prestigious status of English to emphasize the use of English in all official affairs, whereas Chinese, meaning Cantonese, changed to an inferior language. Poon (2004) describes this language scene as ‘superposed bilingualism’.

Hong Kong gained the co-official Language Policy in 1974. The Official Language Ordinance declared the English and Chinese languages both as official languages, and with equality of use for communication between the Government or any public officer and members of the public. The enacting of the Ordinance came under immense public pressure; notably the 1967 riots that broke out when society demanded language rights, hence the Government had to acknowledge the lower status Chinese, namely Cantonese (Zhang, 2006). In spite of the legalization of the Chinese language, English still played supreme as the official language (Poon, 2004). English versions of government documents were considered definitive if arguments arose; it is still the only language of the high courts and it is the medium for intra-governmental written communication; its proficiency is a basic requirement for being recruited into the civil service. Moreover, English is the medium of instruction in education at secondary and tertiary levels, whereas Chinese is only widely used in non-official domains (Tsou, 1996).

In spite of that, the situation of Cantonese improved. As discussed above, Hong Kong is basically a Cantonese speaking society. It is widely used as a daily communication languages at homes, with friends, in the media, social and cultural activities; and the majority of nursing and elementary schools use it for mother-tongue education. On the other hand, while Hong Kong is a world economic centre, people there increase their confidence in their indigenous language and the local culture through the forms of Cantonese pop songs, films and soap operas; such media culture not only overflows in Hong Kong but is also carried over to mainland China and overseas Chinese communities (Poon, 2004).

Compared to Cantonese, Putonghua was a less popular language and was treated as an even lower class language than Cantonese. However, the attitude slightly changed during the economic and political development in mainland China in the 1990’s as immigrants, tourists, officials and businessmen flowed to Hong Kong. This had a huge impact on Hong Kong’s language situation. The workplace, especially in the business sector, slightly increased the demands for Putonghua. Poon (2004) indicates that this scene was ‘diglossia yielded to triglossia’ – meaning that English still played the ‘high’ language, while Cantonese and Putonghua both were the ‘low’ languages.

English is strongly considered a language worth learning; moreover it is a language of power and prestige which is a fact generally accepted by the society. On the social level,

English proficiency is considered a symbol of cultural intelligence. Education-wise, studying in the English secondary schools is respected by the society, because they are viewed as elite schools. In terms of economy related issues, mastering English brings more competitive advantages, for many workplaces require a certification of proficiency in English. In addition, Hong Kong is proud of the predominance of its English skills within the society – especially in comparison with other economic/financial centers in Asia (Yang, 2002).

Language-in-education policy itself is a bunch of language policies. Hong Kong had had a *laissez-faire* approach to language policy in school education in the early colonial days. Schools in Hong Kong were given the autonomy to select their own instructional medium and curriculums. There were two media of instruction respectively used in school education. The government-owned schools employing English as the tool of instruction were more elitist and aristocratic than the private schools which adapted Chinese as the medium of instruction, they were run by local Chinese and employed a basically vernacular education (Lai et al., 2003); in the early days, English was the sole official language. Institutionally, English-based colonial education, as Said claims, “subvert indigenous populations through a process of cultural alienation”. In the case of British colonial Hong Kong, to strengthen the diglossic status of English as the high language is part of a purpose to produce colonial cultural assimilations to facilitate colonial governance (Lai et al., 2003, Schjerve, 2003).

In 1978 the colonial government implemented nine-year compulsory education and the bilingual schools, formally known as Anglo-Chinese schools, gradually increased in numbers. On the one hand, English changed from a colonial language to an international language, and language skills were in great demand for the business sectors and the civil service. Thus, the colonial government made use of this opportunity to expand English secondary schools to meet general social needs. On the other hand, many Chinese middle schools changed to English or a mix-code medium of instruction pending acquisition of the full status (Poon, 2004) when the Sino-British Joint Declaration was proclaimed. This made Hong Kong resume that bilingual schools become mainstream education institutions in 1997.

The main features of bilingual education were that English was the medium of instruction in secondary and higher education, while Chinese was a teaching medium at nursery and primary levels, but only Chinese literature was taught in Chinese. In the universities only English or mix-code (combining English and Chinese) are used as media of instruction. For example, Hong Kong University takes English as its medium of instruction. Students and local teachers communicate in Cantonese on campus while switching to English immediately in the class room. But it is slightly different for Hong Kong Chinese University which is a representative of the mix-code. Subjects give a clear indication of languages; ‘C’, ‘M’, ‘E’ stand for Cantonese, Mandarin (Putonghua) and English courses, and the languages are kept at equal proportions within the curriculum. However, research achievements are mainly accounted for by English products (Yang, 2002).

For these reasons, it can be said that pre-1997 language policies were guided by a combination of practical and colonial political considerations. Although there was no language planning, Hong Kong did have a language policy (Poon, 2000). British colonial government carried out the diglossic language policy that institutionally sustains English as the high status, and consequently enhances power and influence on subordinate groups in terms of cultural assimilation as well as winning the consent of locals to maintain the power of governance. In Schjerve’s sense, hegemonic forces attempted to achieve alliances through concessions giving a diglossic order and power balance to lessen the social conflicts with subordinate groups (Schjerve et al., 2003). Colonial government redefined the status of Cantonese to be used as co-official language, for the central power aimed at retaining the stability of the society. However, the high status of English was unchangeable through institutional diglossia that was broadening to the wider societal level, and involving language policies in the workplace. The people in colonized Hong Kong were in pursuit of a high prestige, economic and valuable language that English is believed to be – as an international language rather than a colonial language in late colonial days.

Present-day language policy

Hong Kong society has been undergoing a transitional period of post-colonialism since the resumption of sovereignty in 1997. The altering language policy is linked to the transition of power, following Bourdieu's (1991) statement that language is a symbol of power. The Hong Kong Special Administrative Region (HKSAR) government actualized a new language policy of bi-literacy and trilingualism, that are, mastering written Chinese and English, and speaking fluent Cantonese (local language), Putonghua (national language and standard spoken language) and English. Lai (2003) indicates that it is starting to drive vernacularization. The government began to take steps to raise the status of Chinese as a high language in the society. Article 9 of The Basic Law of Hong Kong Special Administrative Region of the People's Republic of China demonstrates that the status of language has been shifting.

Article 9:

In addition to the Chinese language, English may also be used as an official language by the executive authorities, legislature and judiciary of the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region.

The new language policy reveals the new diglossic order (Fishman, 1980). According to the English version of Article 9, the status of English in Hong Kong is 'official language'; however, in the Article in the Chinese version, English is written as 'formal language' used for all official matters within all three branches of the government. Nevertheless, the Article blurs the definitions of Cantonese Chinese or Putonghua Chinese. Distinctly, English has been removed as the only language of authority (Yang, 2002), whereas Putonghua has become the legal and official language together with Cantonese and English in government or legal-related communications. Li Guoneng, the executive of the High Court, indicated that Putonghua or any Chinese dialects could be used in the judiciary, because Chinese is unclearly defined in the Basic Law (Mingpao, 2002).

Officially, English, Cantonese and Putonghua are all legal languages, but the status of the languages' use in official matters shifts. English has been stripped as the language of the ruling class, while Cantonese has taken the place of English as the regular and formal language in civic matters. In government, press conferences, publications and public news are released in English as well as traditional and simplified Chinese. Meanwhile civil servants are required to speak not only fluent English, but also Cantonese and Putonghua. All official websites of the HKSAR government display traditional and simplified Chinese characters as well as an English version; these are some examples that explain the official bi-literate and trilingual policy on the official level.

The new language policy has been extending into every fabric of the society. It has divided the workplace through the three languages in use. Although the use English has weakened in its legal scope, it still remains an active medium of communication in technology, commercial finance, and some professional jobs – such as school teachers, the civil service executives, engineers and lawyers, who all still require strict standards of English. This thus implies that people have to work hard on English proficiency to meet the requirements of highly valued jobs. Cantonese, one of official languages, is used in political dialogue and debate in the government as well as between different societies. In addition it is also widely practiced at home, with friends, in social and cultural activities, and the media, as well as in school education, because the government intends to import Cantonese as the medium of communication by imposing various language-related policies.

Reviving the status of Chinese is promoting decolonization in society (Lai et al., 2003). Putonghua has been gradually gaining more and more significant role in the social formation since the handover. It has acquired instrumental and transactional value in many sectors of the society – notably, trade and local business, hotel service and tourism. Putonghua has also been a subject taught in schools. Learning the national language is believed to help restore national identity (Thornborrow, 2004) and also help reintegrate with people in mainland China both culturally and socially. Unlike colonial days, societal attitudes towards Putonghua are more acceptable and TV and radio stations increase to broadcast Putonghua programs. Lai (2003) puts forward that Putonghua and Cantonese are in potential competition for the status of high language within the triglossic situation in Hong Kong. However, Hong Kong is lacking a Putonghua speaking community at the moment.

The language policy changes are concurrent with changes in language-in-education. The Hong Kong government issued 'the Firm Guidance' in April 1997, proposing to carry out the policy of a compulsory mother-tongue education (Cantonese as the medium of instruction) in secondary schools. The Hong Kong's education system succeeds the colonial education system by and large following the handover. Most of nursing education and primary schools are mother-tongue and English is taught as a subject, but the medium of instruction is reversed to English in secondary schools. The medium of instruction in higher education is English or mix-code to meet the British higher education system of the past. Nevertheless, the language-in-education policy, switching from English to Chinese medium of instruction has raised a controversial issue from the handover till now.

Apart from the medium of instruction in education, another change of language-in-education is Putonghua. It was introduced in schools as a compulsory language subject within the curriculum in 1998. Meanwhile, some young people aim, for added personal value, to learn Putonghua extracurricularly, because Putonghua has come to offer the economic and political advantages that speaking English once offered (Lai, et al., 2003). This government-led language policy, through the practice of official language and language-in-education, then broadening to the workplace and society, is apt to offer a balance between the statuses of Chinese and English.

After the resumption, the language situation is neither diglossia nor triglossia because the substance is altering. Chinese, Cantonese or Putonghua are not treated as 'low languages' any longer; besides, they have ascended to having economic and political value. As for English, it still holds its lofty stance as an international language but it has been wiped from its hegemonic position. Although Putonghua and Cantonese are potentially in competition for high language, under the 'one country, two systems' principle, the central government leadership will not interfere with the internal affairs of the HKSAR. The current socio-linguistic structure and the language policy of the HKSAR are respected by the Beijing central government. In the case of Putonghua, it intends to be imposed on the entire territory of Hong Kong unless the entire society calls for a different solution as necessary. (Lai et al., 2003)

Mother tongue education

Language-in-education policy is a concomitance with language policy in Hong Kong. The issue of the medium of instruction in secondary schools has turned into a key debate on education in general. The HKSAR government put forward the guidelines on the medium of instruction in secondary schools after the handover. Under the new policy, if schools continue to use English as the medium of instruction, it should be assessed if both students and teachers are capable of using English in class. As a result, there were only 114 schools which were granted exemptions, while three-quarters were changed to the Chinese-medium (Cantonese as a mother tongue) with the exception of English lessons (Hong Kong Department of Education, 1997). The sudden switch caused many controversial issues between the government and the society. Recently the government seems to have slowed down in vernacularizing and reconsidered the policy that different subjects are taught in different languages (South China Morning Post, 2006). Some educators suggest a two-mode teaching system in one school rather than just Chinese or English single-mode schools (Lai et al., 2003; Poon, 2004; South China Morning Post, 2006). It means science and technical courses are taught in English, while arts and history are taught in Chinese.

The main controversy surrounding mother-tongue education is the conflicting viewpoints among the government, individuals and the community. School education is an institution in which a certain kind of language is taught as the 'legitimate' language (Chan, 2002); hence which medium of instruction is adopted impacts on one's cultural identity as well as quality of education. The post-colonial government continued to use English as the medium of instruction in schools; since 1978 the British colonial belongings have been tried to be rooted in Hong Kongers. Upon the return to China in 1997, the government commenced to foster new citizenship and restore national identity through the language policy and language-in-education. That is the mother tongue of education in secondary schools. Technically speaking, in pedagogy, teaching in the mother tongue is much more efficient for students and students learn the second language better once they gain proficiency in their mother tongue first (Hong

Kong Education Commission, 1999; South China Morning Post, 12 Oct, 1998). The government and education organizations conducted many surveys and interviews before the policy was enacted; the results showed that educators, teachers, parents and students were supported in using Chinese as the medium of instruction (Ming Pao, 14 May 1999, Hong Kong Federation of Youth Groups, 1997, Hong Kong Education Commission, 1999). However, there is some divarication between government and people over the issue when it is performed.

Using Bourdieu's (1991) terminology again, language is a symbolic, social and cultural capital. Institutional language changes are related to many aspects in society, the material wealth gained, legitimate knowledge acquired and further education, networks relationships, prestige status, power and political advantage. Therefore, parents, students and community inherently worry about a language shift in the medium of instruction which can tamper with their interests. A recent survey indicates that only 16% of people in Hong Kong support the use of Chinese as the medium of instruction in most secondary schools (South China Morning Post, Dec 2006). For students, English is a symbol of economic power and intelligence in this multinational and multicultural city. Proficiency in English is the ticket to future success, as well as in obtaining advantages that help find a job or get a place at university. For parents, an English school is a symbol of reputation and pride (Chan, 2002; Lai et al., 2003). In colonial days, English schools were treated as the elites' education while the Chinese schools were prejudiced against as of low status, for they represent lesser social and economic capital. This thought has taken root in the society and cannot be reversed overnight (Lai et al., 2003). Moreover, parents are concerned about the policy of a Chinese medium of instruction, because some exempted schools using English as the medium of instruction still exist. In many parents' opinions, the opportunity is unequal to access English schooling, and it hurts their children's self-pride, as a result of losing motivation for the study.

As for the community, the changing medium of instruction in schools means changes in symbols of power, identity and social network for new generations in the community. Political and social advantages will be beneficial to people who are brought up in trilingual environments (Tung, 2001, Lai et al., 2003). The HKSAR government creates a more open society and socially inclusive institutions for the new trilingual generation by compulsory education. Their new social network tends to be close to local and national communities, compared to the former elites whose links to colonial power gradually fade out. Additionally, speaking English is important for Hong Kong to identify itself as an international commercial centre. Hence, the society raises the debate on whether education in mother tongue would sacrifice English standards so as to lose its unique position of competition with other commercial cities in the East, such as Shanghai and Singapore. The issue of mother-tongue education reveals that it is complicated to employ the local language together with the internationalized colonial language as the second language. It is a struggle of power between the old and the new symbolic forces as the social conditions and the environment are transformed.

Globalization and language practice

Hong Kong is a unique political, economic and cultural centre and an international harbor in East Asia. The language policy adopted after the handover shows the pragmatism featured in this global, international, decolonialized and multi-cultural city. Multilingualism is a human resource that is calculated into the competitive abilities of commercial centers (Lai et al., 2003; Zeng, 2006). Generally speaking, the colonial language is abandoned when a nation retakes its rule, replacing it with the national or local language – as was the case of Japanese in Korea (Crystal, 1997, pp. 174). However, considering the importance of English for Hong Kong's commercial status, the HKSAR government retains English as one of its official languages. English has become the common communicative global language for international affairs, conferences, organizations, trade and business. The Union of International Associations conducted a series of surveys that show that of the top 500 international organizations in the world (listed by alphabet), 85% choose English as their official language (Crystal, 1997, pp. 124). In terms of negotiations in a common language, such as English, this phenomenon can build confidence and credit that benefits international economic cooperation

(Yang, 2002). In the IT era, to obtain information in time is a basic necessity of commercial and international centers and English is an important tool in internet communications, modern information media and communicative technology. English as a global and internationalized language is more highly valued than the colonial legacy, therefore English as colonial hegemony has been transformed to de-colonization in Hong Kong (Fishman, 1976; Crystal, 1999; Zeng, 2006).

The HKSAR adopts Putonghua as not only an official national language but also a regional language. Native Putonghua speakers exceed in numbers all English speakers around the world. Despite being less widespread in the world than English, it is popularly used in East Asian countries, given the fact that Mainland China is a huge Putonghua community. Furthermore, the overseas Chinese communities such in Singapore, Malaysia and Indonesia control a number of large social networks and benefit economically from the advantages of using the language. Internally, although Putonghua speakers lack their community bases, the language has displayed its economic and political advantage in Hong Kong since the handover. Economically, China has been a great economic giant in East Asia and its economic ties with Hong Kong increase progressively. During the 1997's Asian financial crisis, China was subsidized with one billion US dollars to sustain the prosperity of Hong Kong. On the other hand, China possesses a big share of the trade balance to the world through entrepot trade from the mainland. Socially, thousands of tourists from mainland China rush into Hong Kong, fueling the booming local economy. The influence of the mainland China on the society increases and proliferates. Regionally speaking, Hong Kong and Shanghai are locked in an increasing public struggle to become the main Chinese financial centers (International Herald Tribune, 2007). Hong Kong understands that one of its advantages over Shanghai is that its society can master both English and Putonghua proficiently. While one more language gives competitive capital in the fight for being the international center, Zhou (2005) states that if the Putonghua community establishes itself, the predominance of a bilingual society helps Hong Kong to preponderate over Singapore, Shanghai and Taipei – to stand as the dominant commercial center of the region.

Hong Kong society is concerned about language utilities, but why not use English or Putonghua instead of Cantonese as the mother tongue in classroom education. Singapore uses English as the official and education language to upgrade its international competitiveness, and uses Putonghua only in general communication, such as in Guangzhou², to promote regional positions, as well as to diminish the hegemony of English in Hong Kong (Lai et al., 2003). The HKSAR government views the bi-literate and trilingual as well as the mother tongue education policies to balance the interests of national, local and diminishing post-colonial groups. Hong Kong is a unique place that links eastern and western cultures while having a particular political system adopted from mainland China. Maintaining the superiority of the indigenous culture and identity avoids assimilation through globalization or by the mainland. Therefore, the changing medium of instruction signifies both decolonization and multiculturalism.

Conclusion

Language policy in Hong Kong undergoes colonization and decolonization. In the colonial period, the language policy was diglossia or superposed bilingualism. British colonial government through hegemonic power institutionally maintained a diglossia language environment so as to make English a prestigious and high status language, possessing political and economic advantage; even if Hong Kong was to a large extent a Cantonese speaking community. English was used as the official language, the medium of instruction in universities and secondary schools. Cantonese was viewed as a low language, but was widely used in daily communication within the community, while the status of Putonghua was even lower than Cantonese, and was looked down on by the community. The diglossia yielded to triglossia in the 1990's, economic and political ties with the mainland China increased,

² Guangzhou is a southern economic city of the mainland, with a Cantonese speaking community. Putonghua use as medium of instruction, and Cantonese is treated as local dialect.

although English still held its 'high language' status, with both Cantonese and Putonghua retaining their 'low' status.

The triglossia situation lasted until the administrative handover from Britain to China in 1997. The HKSAR government enacted the new language policy, having had huge impact on 'bi-literacy and trilingualism' that was significant for Hong Kong in the process of decolonization and political transition. The new language policy inclines to a balance between Chinese and English. Both Cantonese and Putonghua have been exalted as 'high' status languages. Notably, Putonghua, a national language, has converted to the legal and official language together with Cantonese and English. English has been taken from its hegemonic status, and the political advantages have gradually faded. In the future, Putonghua may potentially compete with Cantonese, as economic and political ties with the mainland strengthen.

The bifurcation on mother tongue education between the government and the community unravels the complication of carrying out Cantonese together with internationalized English as the second language. The colonial legacy of English has deep roots in the society as have the symbolic, social and culture identities of the language, and as such, cannot be reversed suddenly.

Hong Kong pays attention to language utility and practicality. Bi-literacy and trilingualism language policies are by far more than purely linguistics issues; they are economy-related and political considerations. Hong Kong is fighting to be the commercial center of globalization, so considering its international, multilingual and multicultural role avails to keep the unique position of Hong Kong. Internationalized colonial English gains its competitive advantage on a global scale, while Putonghua continues to hold advantages in the East Asian region. Cantonese sustains its indigenous cultural identity and avoids the assimilation of globalization.

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Appendix:

Treaty of Tientsin of 1842

Article 50:

All official communications, addressed by the diplomat and consular agents of Her Majesty the Queen to the Chinese Authorities, shall, henceforth, be written in English. They will for the present be accompanied by a Chinese version, but it is understood that in the event of there being any difference of meaning between the English and Chinese texts the English government will hold the sense as expressed in the English text to be the correct sense. This provision is to apply to the treaty now negotiate, the Chinese text of which has been carefully corrected by the English original.

Article 51:

It is agreed, henceforward the character 'I' (barbarian) shall not be applied to the Government or subjects of Her Britannic Majesty in any Chinese official document issued by the Chinese authorities, either in the capital or in the provinces.