

Hong Kong children need a grounding in their native Cantonese, to open the door to their rich heritage, writes **William Wang**

# The first step

**W**ith the Chinese economy booming, the desire to learn the Chinese language is also accelerating. This desire

does not seem to be purely driven by the market, either. Every day new "foreign" faces appear on television conversing volubly with their Chinese hosts on a variety of subjects. Centres for the study of Confucian philosophy are sprouting up in the unlikeliest places all over the world. Against this surging tide, it came as quite a surprise to learn that some parents in Hong Kong are deliberately keeping their children from speaking the native language. While they speak to each other in Cantonese, they talk to their children only in English.

Perhaps some of them speak passable English, but my guess is that many of these well-intentioned but misguided parents may actually be stigmatising their children with bad linguistic habits that will be hard to correct later in a proper English class.

Perhaps, too, they think that it is easy for the children, immersed in an environment of Cantonese and Putonghua, to just pick up Chinese. But that is certainly a misapprehension. Being educated in a language, and its associated culture, is so much more than just being able to get along on the street.

These parents may think Cantonese is not refined enough, being a mere "dialect" rather than a "national language". However, we should remember that very often it is the regional language that reflects a rich and distinctive culture. National languages, by their very nature, are pruned of most local flavours, since they need to serve an entire country. As a result, Putonghua is bland, homogeneous, and much less interesting and much less colourful, a far cry from the regional speech of Beijing on which it is based.

Cantonese has a long history, dating back well over 2,000 years to the large armies that China's first emperor sent southwards to this region to quell ethnic wars. It is well known that the poems of the Tang dynasty, a priceless jewel of Chinese civilisation, sound much more authentic when read in Cantonese than in any other dialect. This is because Cantonese has better preserved many features of Tang dynasty speech.

As an illustration, take the exquisite poem *River Snow* by Liu Zongyuan. The three rhyme words in the poem are



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pronounced with different tones in Putonghua, which does not make sense as poetry, because matching tones are an essential element in Chinese poetry. However, in Cantonese, the three rhyme words are pronounced with the "entering tone" – much closer to how they sounded in the Tang dynasty.

Cantonese has also preserved numerous words that it has adopted from neighbouring languages. Indeed, many important place names in Hong Kong can be traced to these languages. All in all, Hong Kong Cantonese is a rich linguistic

tapestry in which the many cultural threads of southern China can be distinctly traced, including of course the many English words that it has assimilated in the last century.

Rather than unnaturally forcing children into an imperfect English mould, parents would do well to encourage pride in a civilisation that is once again attracting the attention of the world. Speaking the language is an all-important first step leading to literacy. A literate Chinese has access to not only written Cantonese and written Putonghua, but to a rich literature of over 2,000 years that is unrivalled anywhere else.

All this is not to diminish the obvious importance of English as an international language. English should certainly be a very early part of any school curriculum. The young child has remarkable resources for learning many languages simultaneously. But forcing English into the family prematurely is damaging in ways beyond losing the Chinese heritage. It

will surely tatter the bond between parent and child, who will be deprived of their most natural means of intimate interaction – for expressing tenderness, frustration, as well as the myriad nuances of emotional exchanges in everyday living. The child will grow up with no cultural roots, no ethnic identity, no world of his or her own.

Hong Kong as an international city offers exceptional opportunities for learning three languages and two scripts. Given suitable educational contexts, every child can master these linguistic skills in an appropriate order. However, parents should not be confused by these opportunities and misplace their priorities, thereby hurting the children rather than helping them. Top priority must be given to the total development of our children: emotionally, culturally and linguistically.

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**Greg Torode**

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## Rifts laid bare

Is there really room in the region for two superpowers – a young, bristling China and the lingering presence of Pax Americana? Across Southeast Asia, recent events suggest the answer is a cautious "yes" as nations large and small practise the ancient art of the hedge and seek to simultaneously improve relations with both. Nations may not want to contain China but they certainly don't want to be dominated by it, and have been pushing the United States to re-engage as a result.

In the rival capitals of Beijing and Washington, the answer is suddenly less clear. A glance at statements from officials in both suggests a clear belief that the region is big enough for both of them – both are prone to insisting that the security environment in the post-cold-war world need not be a zero-sum game in which any action offers a victory for one and defeat for the other.

Recent events, however, are providing a jarring sense that mutual mistrust in Washington and Beijing is growing. If officials in both capitals really do believe there will be plenty of room for each other, they fear the other is acting as if there can be only one.

Speeches from leading mainland envoys and military brass warn of a pervasive "cold-war mentality" and a US alliance structure that serves to limit China while providing the basis for ongoing interference in the internal affairs of other nations.

Theories on the rise and decline of great powers are given a regular workout in commentaries in the state press, particularly the desire of an "established hegemonic country" – the US – to contain a younger power on the rise. In a Xinhua commentary last week, Men Honghua, associate professor of the Institute of International Strategic Studies of the Central Party School, was quoted as saying the US would not stand idle and let China challenge its position.

"It has not ceased for even a moment encircling, pursuing, blocking and intercepting China's economy and attacking and oppressing China's rapid rise," Men said.

In Washington, meanwhile, there are fears that Beijing not only wants the US out of its direct sphere of influence in the long term but is increasingly prepared to push any short-term advantage to drive those ends.

Widespread talk of the decline of US power has both rattled Washington and empowered Beijing, it seems. Beijing's recent elevation of its claim to virtually the entire South China Sea to a "core interest" – code that makes the disputed area as sensitive as Taiwan and Tibet – is seen as one example.

"From what we can tell of their perspective, it is zero-sum ... they don't want us around," one senior administration official said last week.

"There is a tension and an impatience there that wasn't there a few years ago ... and maybe that is why we are seeing signs of premature overreach from Beijing."

It could be argued that, until recently, mistrust was largely theoretical. Recent months, however, have not only sharpened such divisions, but also exposed them.

US and Chinese officials have sparred at recent defence-related events such as the informal Shangri-La Dialogue in Singapore in June and the Asean regional security forum in Hanoi last month. The latter was particularly bruising for Beijing as 11 nations lined up behind the US to raise concerns about the South China Sea.

At the sharp end, we have seen high-profile military exercises by both the US and China across East Asia. Just a week after an unprecedented show of force by the People's Liberation Army in the South China Sea, Vietnamese officials were being courted on a US aircraft carrier in strategic waters off Danang.

But perhaps most worrying of all is the fact that a sense of mistrust and tension is building at a time when the two militaries have stopped talking to each other. Beijing put fledgling contacts on ice earlier this year following fresh US arms sales to Taiwan and a visit to the White House by the Dalai Lama.

Halting that mutual suspicion is going to be one of the defining issues of the months and years ahead. Easing that tension will be no easy task – but talking, at least, would be a start.

**Greg Torode is the Post's chief Asia correspondent**

## Voices: Hong Kong

# Octopus isn't the only predator out there

**Mike Rowse**

I don't suppose Prudence Chan Bik-wah is paying too much attention to the newspapers these days but, just in case she is, here are a few words in a more sympathetic tone than others she has been hearing lately.

First, let's be clear that the vast majority of Octopus card users are not in any danger of having their personal details passed on to others because they have never given the company any information. They, like me, have simply bought a card and used it as a terrifically efficient tool to facilitate everyday life. You can use it to travel by most forms of public transport, park in most car parks, and make purchases in supermarkets or convenience stores. And no one will know anything about you.

But a minority of users has signed up for some additional benefits such as eligibility for rewards. In the process they have provided information about themselves and also given a waiver about how that information could be used. It may have been in small letters, but a waiver there was and they signed it freely. There are no grounds for them to complain.

Second, Octopus has done no more or less than many – maybe most – other companies which provide some sort of added service. Do you have an oil company customer discount card, an airline loyalty card with special benefits, a supermarket points card providing cheaper prices, a hotel privilege card? If you do, chances are that the company which issued the card is also making use of the data to

pursue a commercial advantage. Wake up, people, that's what companies do. You get something; they get something. If you don't want them using your personal data, don't give them any and don't apply for the card. Or take the trouble to read the conditions thoroughly and opt out of the clauses authorising them to pass on your information to other parties. It's really that simple.

If all the facts ever come out, then it is likely we are dealing with many

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different companies and hundreds of millions of dollars, and the Octopus company's HK\$44 million will seem a drop in the ocean.

Third, it is inconceivable that the directors of the company did not know what was going on. Where did they think the millions were coming from? Let us put the question as clearly as we can: what did the directors know, and when did they know it?

What really sank the chief executive in the Octopus case was of course the apparent flip-flop on whether data was being sold. Technically in some cases it may not have been: the data was being shared, certainly, and when the use of it produced extra business, part of the benefit was passed back to

Octopus. It is arguable that, in strict legal terms, such an arrangement may not have constituted a "sale" as such. In any event, as the saga unfolded, even the company admitted that, in some cases, data was in effect sold.

Octopus is now engaged in a frantic crisis management exercise. Inevitably, the chief executive had to go because the case escalated to a cause célèbre and only a "human sacrifice" would appease the mob. She had the misfortune to be closest when the bomb went off. And the company's decision to give the HK\$44 million to the Community Chest was a stroke of genius.

We need to draw a couple of quick lessons: are the present rules on data privacy sufficient, or should they be strengthened, particularly in respect of "deemed consent" clauses in agreements. And, second, the directors of all the companies involved need a crash course in the principles underlying data privacy, not just the strict wording of the law.

Meanwhile, let's look on the bright side. With all these millions pouring into the Community Chest, we may have found a way to narrow the wealth gap, at least temporarily.

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## Voices: Australia

# How to get out of the woods and preserve trees

**Joseph Stiglitz**

Kevin Rudd, who was prime minister of Australia when the global financial crisis struck, put in place one of the best-designed Keynesian stimulus packages of any country. He realised it was important to act early, with money that would be spent quickly, but that there was a risk that the crisis would not be over soon. So the first part of the stimulus was cash grants, followed by investments, which would take longer to put in place.

Rudd's stimulus worked: Australia had the shortest and shallowest recession of the advanced industrial countries. But, ironically, attention has focused on the fact that some of the investment money was not spent as well as it might have been, and on the fiscal deficit that resulted.

Of course, we should strive to ensure money is spent as productively as possible, but humans, and human institutions, are fallible, and there are costs to ensuring that money is well spent; in a nutshell, it is wasteful to spend too much money preventing waste.

For an American, there is a certain amusement in Australian worries: their deficit as a percentage of GDP is less than half that of the US; their gross national debt is less than a third. Deficit fetishism never makes sense – the national debt is only one side of a country's balance sheet. Cutting back on high-return investments (like education and infrastructure) just to reduce the deficit is truly foolish, and especially so in the case of a country like Australia, whose debt is so low.

There is another irony: some of the same Australians who have criticised the deficits have also

criticised proposals to increase taxes on mines. Australia is lucky to have a rich endowment of natural resources. They belong to all the people. Yet, in all countries, mining companies try to get these resources for free – or for as little as possible.

Of course, mining companies need to get a fair return on their investments. But the iron-ore companies got a windfall gain as iron-ore prices soared. The increased profits are not a result of their mining prowess, but of China's huge demand for steel. There is no reason that mining companies should reap this reward for themselves. They should share the bonanza, and an appropriately designed mining tax is one way of ensuring that outcome.

Another issue playing out Down Under is global warming. The previous Australian government, led by John Howard, joined US president George W. Bush in being a climate-change free rider: others would have to take responsibility for ensuring the planet's survival. Rudd campaigned on a promise to reverse that stance, but the failure of the climate-change talks in Copenhagen last December left his government in an awkward position.

Citizens should consider the legacy they leave to their children, part of which is financial debt; part of which is also environmental. How Australians vote in their coming election may be a harbinger of things to come. Let's hope they see through the rhetorical flourishes and personal foibles to the larger issues at stake.

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## Voices: Society

# Marital ideal won't survive blind fidelity

**Ross Douhat**

Here are some common arguments against gay marriage: marriage is an ancient institution that has always been defined as the union of one man and one woman, and we meddle with that definition at our peril. Lifelong heterosexual monogamy is natural; gay relationships are not. The nuclear family is the universal, time-tested path to raising children.

These have been losing arguments for decades now. And they were losing arguments again last week, when a judge in California ruled that laws defining marriage as a heterosexual union are unconstitutional and irrational.

These arguments have lost because they're wrong. What Americans think of as "traditional marriage" is not universal. The default family arrangement in many cultures, modern as well as ancient, has been polygamy, not monogamy. The default mode of child-rearing is often communal. Nor is lifelong heterosexual monogamy obviously natural. If "natural" is defined to mean "congruent with our biological instincts", it's arguably one of the more unnatural arrangements imaginable.

So what are gay marriage's opponents really defending, if not some universal, biologically inevitable institution? It's a particular vision of marriage, rooted in a particular tradition.

This ideal holds up the commitment to lifelong fidelity and support by two sexually different human beings as a uniquely admirable kind of relationship. It holds up the domestic life that can be created only by such unions, in which children grow up in intimate

contact with both of their biological parents, as a uniquely admirable approach to child-rearing. The point of this ideal is that lifelong heterosexual monogamy at its best can offer something distinctive and remarkable that makes it worthy of distinctive recognition and support.

Again, this is not how many cultures approach marriage. It's a particularly Western understanding. Or, at least, it was. Lately, it has come to co-exist with a less idealistic approach, defined by no-fault divorce, frequent out-of-wedlock births, and serial monogamy.

In this landscape, gay-marriage critics who fret about a slippery slope to polygamy miss the point. Americans already have a kind of postmodern polygamy available to them.

If this newer order vanquishes the older marital ideal, then gay marriage will become not only acceptable but morally necessary. The lifelong commitment of a gay couple is more impressive than the serial monogamy of straights. And a culture in which weddings are optional celebrations of romantic love has no business discriminating against the love of homosexuals.

But, if we accept this shift, we're giving up on one of the great ideas of Western civilisation: the celebration of lifelong heterosexual monogamy as a unique and indispensable estate. That ideal is still worth striving to preserve. And preserving it ultimately requires some public acknowledgment that heterosexual unions and gay relationships are different: similar in emotional commitment, but distinct in their challenges and potential fruit.

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