

Michael's T-shirt

Michael from England is very happy with his new purchase in Hong Kong – a T-shirt with Chinese characters 米高 (*mai gou*) on its front. Not having learnt any Chinese language, his connection to the “exotic” culture of this former colony in the Far East is now simply established by having his own Chinese name – a Chinese word in its own right, contrast to its official phonetic translation 邁克爾 (*mǐ kè ěr*) which is devised in Mandarin instead of Cantonese that is predominantly spoken in Hong Kong.

When an utterance appears in different languages, it shows beyond the relationship of translations. For example, the screenplay of Hong Kong movie blockbuster *Infernal Affairs* (無間道) was adapted in Hollywood as Academy Award winner *The Departed* (無間道風雲) which has been regarded as the extension of the original by many die hard Hong Kong Chinese fans. The almost duplicate of the Chinese title vividly reflects this market interest and the largely similar plot in the re-make despite the original filmmaker's Buddhist idea that is expressed in the Chinese title (and also the original English one) is no longer relevant to the Hollywood production. The good will of the Chinese “translator” has evolved from his/her knowledge across cultures and interpretation of the in-between value. The change of languages has activated a new meaning beyond its verbal appearance, which addresses our understanding of cultural differences.

For most Cantonese speakers who also read English in Hong Kong, “Michael as 米高” is such a straightforward equation that hardly creates any exotic value as Michael might have sensed when he bought his T-shirt in the souvenir shop – something faraway so close, like seeing yourself in the mirror as another person! It can be a wonder owing to curiosity, but also bewilderment possibly due to ignorance. Anyhow, here in Hong Kong we may easily overlook or forget such “amazement” from this cultural difference for being overwhelmed in the cliché of “East meets West” for too long. Of course there are also north and south, and many other areas in terms of culture but only Latin alphabets and Chinese characters are only familiar signs of languages in our mainstream (perhaps Japanese and Korean text also getting popular, at least visually). In front of Hebrew, Russian and Arabic, I am just ignorant. If I could have an Arabic name, I might get the same excitement as Michael did. However, it is rather personal.

* * *

Little Yiu Yiu's Uncle Mak

Five year-old Yiu Yiu left Hong Kong for the first time for a vacation in America with her parents. Standing in front of a fast-food restaurant, she points to the golden “M” arch and shouts, “Mom, they also have *mak dong nou!*” McDonald’s has become a “local” restaurant for many kids in Hong Kong. Even clown spokesman Ronald McDonald has been reincarnated as Uncle Mak Dong-nou!

But why could such a foreign popular brand become a local household name?

We all know Microsoft. It is the same Microsoft in French, German, Tagalog(widely-spoken in the Philippines) and Vietnamese but 微軟 in Chinese, მისოკრისილიკოვი in Georgian and माईकरोसॉफ्ट in Hindi....

Isn't English the international language? American diva Mariah Carey is called *Մրայա Քերի* in Armenian. Is it still pop? When the most familiar (international, trendy) name is written in a strange (ancient, primitive) language, is it still trendy and international? Will the image of thousands of consumers and fans behind the brand vanish with the unimaginable and unpronounceable name? Such a contrast indeed is not hidden but simply invisible forever or just a while in spite of its undeniable existence.

.... It is exactly the same Microsoft but I just won't tell. Is it my ignorance (perhaps arrogance as who cares)? Or, am I too innocent if I simply take it for granted? Maybe I'm both, or something in the grey area!

* * *

Wikipedia

Recently, I had so much fun in surfing the website of Wikipedia to search for those “familiar” names in “strange” languages.

Wikipedia is “the free encyclopedia that anyone can edit”. It “has approximately six million articles in 250 languages” but mainly in English, many in Chinese and other western European languages. I tried so many “global” names and not all returned with explanation in “strange” languages. It was a matter of luck! The

awesome contrast provokes regardless the veracity of the answer – just imagine seeing Spiderman in Maldives. How come people who speak Dhivehi, the dialect of Maldives need their own name for Spiderman?

* * *

If “米高” did not appear on the T-shirt, would Michael have the clue of his Chinese name that generate his pleasure? Somehow the T-shirt here has in common with painting: being an object of cultural seduction.