



Digital Commons@

Loyola Marymount University
LMU Loyola Law School

Asian and Asian American Studies Faculty
Works

Asian and Asian American Studies

1-2021

The Trouble with (the Lack of) Accents

Gladys Mac

Loyola Marymount University, Gladys.Mac@lmu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/aaas_fac



Part of the [Asian American Studies Commons](#), and the [Ethnic Studies Commons](#)

Digital Commons @ LMU & LLS Citation

Mac, Gladys, "The Trouble with (the Lack of) Accents" (2021). *Asian and Asian American Studies Faculty Works*. 50.

https://digitalcommons.lmu.edu/aaas_fac/50

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Asian and Asian American Studies at Digital Commons @ Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. It has been accepted for inclusion in Asian and Asian American Studies Faculty Works by an authorized administrator of Digital Commons@Loyola Marymount University and Loyola Law School. For more information, please contact digitalcommons@lmu.edu.



≡ MENU

ESSAYS

The Trouble with (the Lack of) Accents 5 min read

January 12, 2021 Gladys Mac

How accent reveals identity politics in Hong Kong cinema – **Gladys Mac**

In the Anglophone media, the incorporation of accents is an essential element to defining a time period, an ethnicity, a culture, or any other type of identity. While it may be difficult to imagine a James Bond with a non-British accent, it would be ridiculous if Queen Elizabeth II did not have a British accent in *The Crown*. Yet in the Sinophone world, accents are a much more complicated issue, making sound the most revolutionary technological change in Chinese cinematic history.

It is well known that there are numerous Chinese dialects, each region with a specific accent. For those who are overseas, these accents not only take on a dialectal flavor, but are also influenced by the local languages in which they speak. Dubbing over actors was a solution for the accent or dialect issue in the 1960s and 70s for cinema produced in Hong Kong and Taiwan, and is still the main solution for mainland Chinese films and television series

today. For those productions that chose not to dub over their actors, such as Ang Li's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000), the audio aspect of the film can turn out to be very distracting to an audience who understands Mandarin – forcefully directing their attention to the accented speeches of Michelle Yeoh of Malaysia and Chow Yun-fat of Hong Kong. While Hong Kong films and series that were exported to Southeast Asia used to be dubbed over in the local language, the practice of dubbing over accents for the local audience has fallen out of practice.

I single out Hong Kong productions since the former British colony has been a hub for Sinophone artists for more than half a century. Many pioneers of the Hong Kong entertainment industry had been Chinese refugees from Shanghai, who fled the Japanese invasion during the Sino-Japanese war. Many of Wong Kar-wai's films feature Shanghainese who remained in Hong Kong after the war. In *Days of Being Wild* (1990) and *In the Mood for Love* (2000), Rebecca Pan plays a Shanghainese woman in 1960s Hong Kong, speaking in Shanghainese or in Cantonese with a Shanghainese accent.

In more recent decades, Hong Kong has hosted a variety of contests, ranging from beauty pageants to singing competitions. These contests that recruit from an international overseas Chinese population have been one of the main reasons behind the diversity of Chineseness in the entertainment industry. Even without the beauty queens and aspiring singers, Hong Kong has been a magnet for those looking for work opportunities. Notable examples include Shu Qi from Taiwan, or Faye Wong and Jet Li from China. Asian American artists who could not find work in the US but achieved their goals in Asia include Coco Lee from California, and Maggie Q. from Hawaii.

The inclusion of accented speech in Hong Kong cinema and television series contributes to the region's reputation as a globalized city, hosting people from around the world. Yet these accents are especially problematic in period or costume pieces. English accents are definitely inappropriate for a premodern Chinese setting, such as Aimee Chan's role as a Qing princess in TVB's *The Confidant* (2012). Yet accents also evolve within the same spoken language over time. Cantonese spoken in the 1960s and 70s was very different from Hong Kong Cantonese today. Productions from that era are still widely available, and it is easy to hear the difference between generational accents.

While the presence of all sorts of different accents may be a problem, the lack of accents poses another issue. This usually happens with characters of Chinese ancestry from Southeast Asia, whose identities are only established through constantly reminding the audience of where they are from, yet the crucial element of a local accent is erased. For example, Julian Cheung's character in *The Leakers* (2018) is a Malaysian Chinese policeman who is partnered with a Hong Kong policeman for a joint mission. But Julian

Cheung does not deliver his lines with a Malaysian accent; he simply speaks as he usually does in other films and television series. The characters in TVB’s *Dead Wrong* (2016) are Vietnamese Chinese yet do not speak Cantonese with any Vietnamese accent. The film *Tracey* (2018) has a Singaporean character, Bong, who sports a Taiwanese accent when speaking Mandarin.

In films and shows where one actor incorporates a certain accent in their characterization while others speak without accent, the contrast is even more glaring. Anthony Wong Chau-sang is one of the few Hong Kong actors whose characters include dialect or accents. In *Ip Man: The Final Fight* (2013), Wong’s Ip Man speaks in Foshan Cantonese while other local Hong Kong characters do not, emphasizing his outsider status in the community. Yet in TVB’s *Lord of Shanghai* (2015), Wong uses a Shanghainese accent while others do not, despite the series being set in 1930s Shanghai.

The inclusion of accents in Hong Kong productions underscores the city’s multi-cultural, multi-lingual, multi-ethnic nature, but that is a one way street. It is possible for non-locals to adopt a Hong Kong identity on screen and be portrayed as part of an inclusive society, yet it is impossible for local actors to portray non-local characters without being labelled. Given the recent political upheaval in Hong Kong and the incorporation of the SAR into the Greater Bay Area, Hong Kong’s diversity and internationalism may no longer stand out in the midst of other Chinese cities that also boast the same qualities. ■

Header: Shanghainese and Hong Kong Cantonese clash in Wong Kar-Wai’s *In the Mood for Love*.

Share:



Published by Gladys Mac

Gladys Mac received her PhD from USC. She wrote her dissertation on Jin Yong’s fiction and its visual adaptations. Her research interests range from Asian popular culture to ancient history and everything in between. [View all posts by Gladys Mac](#)