

POLITICS AND THE DEAF IN HONG KONG

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Abstract

Many people in Hong Kong are feeling uneasy about the impending return of their country to mainland China on July 1, 1997. The political situation is of concern especially for the disabled who are dependent on government support and services to improve their daily lives. This paper reports particularly on the situation in Hong Kong for those who have hearing impairments. While the deaf community is small in number, it is at present enjoying a wide range of services from the Hong Kong government and its partners - the non-government organizations, various councils and hospital authorities. Will the educational and employment opportunities for the deaf in Hong Kong continue and increase under a new government? That is the unanswered question on everyone's mind. Using information collected through interviews and written materials, this paper will document what has already been achieved in terms of medical, educational and social services for the deaf and will discuss the implications of the political situation on future developments.

Introduction

In March 1996, a study tour was organized through the Hong Kong Economic and Trade Office in Tokyo for a group from International Christian University in Tokyo, Japan, to go on a fact-finding trip to Hong Kong. As part of a course on Fieldwork in Linguistics, this trip provided valuable educational experiences for all involved and moreover, raised social awareness and motivation for further research in sign linguistics and deaf studies.

Hong Kong as the destination for our fieldwork in linguistics proved to be propitious as both members of the deaf community and officials in the government departments dealing with the hearing impaired welcomed us and cooperated fully

with our study tour. Moreover, we were in Hong Kong during its last period as a British colony. It was thus possible not only to find out more about the situation of the deaf in Hong Kong but also to assess the political implications associated with the territory's impending return to mainland China on July 1, 1997. The political situation is of concern especially for the disabled who are dependent on government support and services to improve their daily lives. A question on everyone's mind is whether opportunities (in such areas as education and employment) for the deaf in Hong Kong will continue and increase under a new government. This paper reports first in general about the present government's rehabilitation programme for the disabled and then in particular about the current situation for the deaf community in Hong Kong. This work is based on a series of interviews conducted over a one-week period and on materials collected from visits to government and non-governmental organizations, associations for the deaf, sign language services, deaf schools and training facilities.

The Rehabilitation Programme in Hong Kong

Policies are formulated for the rehabilitation of all disabled persons by the Commissioner for Rehabilitation (under the Secretary for Health and Welfare) who works with a Rehabilitation Advisory Committee (which itself is composed of several sub-committees). Services are then provided by government departments such as that of Education, Health, Labour, and Social Welfare, along with Hospital and Housing Authorities, various councils and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). It seems clear from the *White Paper on Rehabilitation* (May 1995) that the Hong Kong government's objectives are threefold:

- (1) if possible, to prevent impairments by identifying and assessing disabilities, or if not, to maximize the potential of those with impairments or disabilities;
- (2) to meet the needs of people with a disability at the societal level, which in turn is dependent on:

(3) the promotion of public awareness and acceptance of persons with disabilities. The present government's commitment to helping the disabled is evident in their policies on rehabilitation and the resulting provision of services. The first *White Paper on Rehabilitation*, called 'Integrating the Disabled into the Community: A United Effort', was published in 1977 and provided a plan for the Rehabilitation Programme. In March 1992, the *Green Paper* was published which reaffirmed the Hong Kong government's commitment to improving rehabilitation services. Its contents are the basis of the 1995 *White Paper on Rehabilitation* with the title, 'Equal Opportunities and Full Participation: A Better Tomorrow For All'. Christopher Patten, the last governor of Hong Kong appointed by the government of British Prime Minister John Major, has been ambitious in realizing the targets which were set up in the 1992 *Green Paper* and which were revised and updated in the 1995 *White Paper*. Governor Patten wants all the residential facilities and day centres and hostels identified in the 1992 *Green Paper* to be completed by the end of 1997. Although only fifty per cent of the targets had been accomplished as of March 1996, the targets are expected to be met in full by mid 1997, which of course coincides with the end of the Governor's term in Hong Kong. Whether all the recommendations in the 1995 *White Paper* will be achieved by mid 1997 remains to be seen. At present, government, non-governmental organizations, self-help associations and the community as a whole all appear to be part of a growing movement in Hong Kong to realize the goal of full participation and equal opportunities for people with a disability.

The Hearing Impaired in Hong Kong

The term 'hearing impaired' is used in all government reports but I use the term 'deaf' interchangeably with 'hearing impaired' in this paper. In this case, no specific distinction is intended although I am fully aware that there are different degrees of hearing loss and that the term 'deaf' usually applies to those with a profound hearing impairment. As it is, the exact number of hearing impaired persons in Hong Kong

is unclear. The Health and Welfare Branch of the Rehabilitation Division maintains a Central Registry for Rehabilitation. However, this register is incomplete as the provision of records is on a voluntary basis. The number of people in 1994 with a disability (based on the data in the Central Registry for Rehabilitation) is estimated to be 264,000. Of this total, it is believed that 5.0% (13,200) are hearing impaired (*White Paper*, 1995: 14). The number of hearing impaired persons in Hong Kong in 1996 is undoubtedly higher than this figure suggests. In another document, the 1994 Rehabilitation Programme Plan Report (Appendix 1 of *Briefing on Services*), projections are given for the number of hearing impaired persons in Hong Kong for the years 1994 to 1998. Although the projections are organized according to age groups and the degree of hearing loss ranging from mild to profound, only the totals are given below:

Year	Projected Number of Hearing Impaired Persons
1994	37,838
1995	38,453
1996	39,178
1997	39,856
1998	40,839

The projections are a lot higher than the number of people who have actually registered their disability as a hearing impairment. Many people do not register themselves in the Central Registry for Rehabilitation for fear of discrimination, and the Commissioner for Rehabilitation added that not enough manpower is available to collect the data.

Medical, Educational and Social Services

While the deaf community is small in number, it is at present enjoying a wide

range of services. The government subsidizes medical, educational and social services which are, in turn, provided by NGOs, hospitals and educational facilities. What follows is a description of the services available for those who have hearing impairments, or who work or live with people with such impairments.

Medical rehabilitation

Medical rehabilitation is provided through three types of services:

- 1) The Hospital Authority's ENT (Ear, Nose, Throat) Service provides cochlear implants, ear mould fitting centres, and a speech therapy service. The speech therapy service will undoubtedly benefit from the trained graduates of the relatively new speech therapy degree programme at the University of Hong Kong. The university's Department of Speech and Hearing Sciences plans also to train audiologists locally and has just started a two-year Master of Science degree in Audiology in September 1996.
- 2) Audiological and Speech Therapy Services (run by the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf) supplement the existing government ENT service by providing audiological assessment, the selection and fitting of hearing devices, an aural rehabilitation programme, and a speech therapy service.
- 3) A Mobile Audiometric Screening Service (started by the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf) provides on-site screening and education for industrial workers who are exposed to a high level of industrial noise as well as for senior citizens who tend to have a higher incidence of hearing impairment.

Educational settings for hearing impaired children

Integration into the wider hearing community appears to be the main goal in the education of hearing impaired children. Depending on their ability and their needs, hearing impaired children are educated in the following school settings:

- 1) *Special Schools for the Deaf*

Children with profound and severe hearing loss can attend one of four aural-oral special schools for the deaf. A visit to the 'Hong Kong School for the Deaf

(which celebrated its 60th anniversary in 1995) gave an indication of the facilities available. At this particular school, students receive 14 years of schooling from ages 4 to 18 at the Preparatory, Primary and Secondary levels according to the curriculum arranged by the Education Department of the Hong Kong Government. They are taught to use residual hearing, lipreading, and speech. This school also provides individual hearing aids, speech trainers, group hearing aids, computer training and many activities such as sports, art and various special interest clubs with a view towards integrating its students into the hearing community. The Hong Kong School for the Deaf also has boarding facilities and provides a Supportive Remedial Service (SRS; explained below) for hearing impaired children in ordinary schools.

2) *Ordinary Schools and the Supportive Remedial Service (SRS)*

The SRS was started in 1989/90 to help those deaf students studying in primary classes of ordinary schools who were failing in the mainstream. These students are tutored in three basic subjects as well as speech and auditory training outside their school hours. After a three-year probation period, this service is now a permanent feature offered at three special schools for the deaf. Caritas Magdalene School was approached in 1994 to become involved at the junior secondary level (forms 1 to 3). In the future, the SRS may also be extended to support hearing impaired students in senior secondary classes and in post-secondary education.

3) *Ordinary Schools with Special Education Classes for Partially Hearing Children*

Students with moderately severe to profound hearing loss attend such classes in one government primary school (Li Cheng Uk) and two government secondary schools (Homantin and Clementi). Students are taught in small classes by special education teachers on academic topics but join hearing peers for subjects like Arts, Physical Education and Music. They also participate in extra-curricu-

lar activities with the rest of their fellow students.

4) *Ordinary Schools with Peripatetic Advisory Services*

The Audiological Services Section of the Education Department runs the Peripatetic Advisory Services to provide support and remedial education services on an individual basis to all school-age hearing impaired students in ordinary schools. Trained teachers also go to schools to advise other teachers on how to work with hearing impaired students.

Services for pre-schoolers

Since the acquisition of speech and language is considered to be an important educational goal, the Education Department issues hearing devices to maximize the use of residual hearing in hearing impaired pre-school and school-age children. The Education Department also maintains an Earmould Service which ensures the maximum performance of these hearing devices. Technical and audiological support is then given through a Visiting Audiological Service which since September 1987, has been providing students, parents and teachers in the four special schools with evaluations of hearing devices, counselling services, and guidance on maximizing the use of children's residual hearing. This service was extended in 1989 to partially hearing students attending special classes in ordinary schools.

The Audiological Services Section of the Education Department also stresses early intervention by offering voluntary screening programmes at maternal and childcare centres. Neonatal screening is planned for the future. At present, there is a Pre-school Advisory and Training Service (PATS) managed by the Education Department which offers parental guidance, auditory training, speech and language training, and placement recommendations. Pre-schoolers can be placed in Special Child Care Centres for the Hearing Impaired or in Early Education Training Centres which are subsidized by the Social Welfare Department. Placement is also possible in Integrated Nursery and Integrated Kindergarten Programmes. In addition, the PATS programme also goes out to schools, kindergartens and nurseries to advise teachers

and parents.

Education and training for adults

Since 1987, the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf has operated the Chinese version of the John Tracy Clinic (based in Los Angeles) Correspondence Course which is designed to help *parents with hearing impaired children* understand and develop skills to train their children at home. A Resource Centre for Parents with Hearing Impaired Children was also started in 1992 to give parents access to resources and expert advice on training their children. It was clear on a visit to the Bradbury Special Child Care Centre that parents are strongly encouraged to take part in their children's education. Parents are required to participate at the centre every week and also to attend a group training or morning exercise class once a month. They also have to go to monthly meetings for parents.

Adult education programmes, designed for *hearing impaired adults*, are offered by the Education Department, the Hong Kong Lutheran Social Service Cheung Ching Lutheran Centre for the Disabled, the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf and the Hong Kong Association of the Deaf. The Hong Kong Association of the Deaf, for example, provides employee retraining courses in computer and languages (English and Mandarin), sign language training, family education, and other interest classes.

Social rehabilitation

Four social and recreational centres exist at the moment to provide social and recreational activities for hearing impaired persons. Two - the Hong Kong Host Lions Centre and Lions Kowloon Centre - are operated by the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf. The Hong Kong Association of the Deaf runs the Choi Hung Centre and the Chinese YMCA operates the Y's Men's Centre for the Deaf. All centres provide drop-in facilities for their members, social and recreational group activities, special interest groups, outings, counselling, and so on. At the Choi Hung Centre, there was also a children's playroom for hearing and deaf children and sign language interpretation, training and promotion services. The Lions Kowloon Centre is considered to be a

multi-service centre as it provides casework and counselling services, social and recreational services, sign language interpretation (for job interviews, court hearings, marriage ceremonies, medical consultations, etc.), sign language training, audiological and technical services, adult education, family life education, and public education on rehabilitation.

Efforts of the Labour Department

The Selective Placement Division (SPD) of the Labour Department helps to find work for the disabled and to educate the public and employers on perceiving the disabled as valuable manpower. The SPD reports the highest employment rate for the hearing impaired. In 1995, more than 70% of hearing impaired registrants were placed in the workforce as production workers, typists, clerks, chefs, technicians, jewellery designers, and so on. The Hong Kong Association of the Deaf even offers sign language courses for *hearing supervisors*, and within the Labour Department, all placement officers take sign language courses from the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf.

Recent and future developments

In 1995, the Joint Council for the Physically and Mentally Disabled under the auspices of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (HKCSS) had a breakthrough in their ten-year battle for television captioning. The Joint Council meets each month to bring up issues concerning the education, health and social welfare, and daily living conditions of the disabled (which includes the deaf) and acts as a pressure group on relevant issues. Finally, in February 1996, the Council was pleased to have the promise of all stations in Hong Kong to provide television captioning.

An innovative project coordinated by the Hong Kong Society for the Deaf involves deaf people's rights to be able to send and receive information and communicate with ease. A donation from the Royal Hong Kong Jockey Club has been used in 1993 and 1994 to subsidize the purchase of fax machines for hearing impaired seniors and low income persons. There are now plans to apply for more funding so

that those who have been deaf from birth, elderly single persons and even schoolchildren (primary 5 and up) should have the use of a fax machine. It is intended for such technology to aid schoolchildren in remedial studies. With the increasing popularity of internet as an 'information highway' and of electronic mail, special schools for the deaf are all being equipped with computers so that hearing impaired children are acquiring keyboarding skills at a younger age.

Few deaf students are interested in academic studies as they believe that it is not possible for them to enter a university. The introduction in September 1995 of an Enhancement course for Secondary 5 students with hearing impairment (initiated by the Society for the Deaf) is changing the attitude and motivation of deaf students and their parents. The Enhancement course prepares students for post-secondary education through studies at the Caritas Institute for Further and Adult Education. In March 1996, we were informed that seven hearing impaired students are preparing after one year to enter university. They would be able to study Accounting or Business for two years in Caritas Francis Shi College and then study another two years to get a degree with London Polytechnic. The fight for access to tertiary education has begun. Subject to favourable evaluation results at the end of the three-year pilot project in 1998, the Education Department will consider providing a subvention for these courses - provided, of course, that the Education Department will remain much the same in 1998 as it is before the 1997 political change-over.

In terms of access facilities, these, too, are improving for the hearing impaired in Hong Kong. At Mass Transit Railway (MTR) stations, audio induction loops which help hearing-aid users have already been installed in all MTR public payphones and will also be available in ticket offices by December 1996. A visual aid system - composed of cards that can be pointed to for communicative purposes by those who can only sign - has been developed, and trials started in early 1996 to test the usefulness of these cards in facilitating communication at booking offices. A visual information system has been installed by the Kowloon-Canton Railway at

several major stations and the MTR has plans to install information displays at all underground station entrances in 1996 and at concourses and platforms of all stations by April 2000. Inductive loop systems have already been installed in most performing venues of the Urban Council and the Hong Kong Cultural Centre provides an infra-red system for hearing impaired persons.

Implications of the political situation and concluding remarks

The resources available in Hong Kong for the hearing impaired are impressive. Many of the services have only been in existence in the last few years and so are quite 'new'. Whether their novelty will impress the Chinese government as being essential once Hong Kong returns to mainland China remains to be seen. At the moment, the patron of the Hong Kong Council of Social Service (which unites the efforts of voluntary welfare organizations, service clubs, community groups and others with that of the government's policy-making and advisory committees) is Christopher Patten, the British Governor of Hong Kong who has played a prominent role in the implementation of many of the new services for the disabled population. The government officials interviewed tended to be reticent when faced with the question: "Will the opportunities for the deaf in Hong Kong in areas like education and employment continue and increase under a new government?". Speaking off the record, some of them replied that they did not think much will change in terms of rehabilitation services especially in the period immediately after the change-over. Moreover, it was pointed out that many of the social services are funded through donations and charity organizations such as the Community Chest (of which many NGOs are members). Thus the funds are in a sense from the pockets of the Hong Kong residents for their own community. The Chair of the Joint Council for the Physically and Mentally Disabled, Sister Theresa Chien, pointed out pragmatically that in periods when the economy has been good, China has always provided for the welfare of her disabled. In slow economic times, it is the lack of financial resources which has prevented

such actions.

Hong Kong has a reputation as Asia's financial and trade centre. If its wealth stays within the country, Hong Kong residents have no fears. If China claims any part of it, then the resources for Hong Kong's disabled community may be restricted. As all eyes around the world will be viewing with interest the events leading up to and after July 1st, 1997, it does not seem (at least in the opinion of this observer) to be in the best interest of China to make changes which will be perceived negatively to the rehabilitation programme and social services in Hong Kong. If something has to change in the immediate future, the change will be more likely in the direction of language rather than in the available governmental services. Many of the government officials interviewed, who speak Cantonese and English, were concerned about their need to learn Mandarin in the near future, and in the deaf preschools and schools, there was already discussion about introducing more Mandarin into the curriculum. Only time will tell whether the deaf in Hong Kong will face more opportunities or more challenges under a new government.

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香港における政治と聴覚障害者

〈要約〉

スーザン・クエイ

香港に住む人々の多くが、1997年7月1日の中国大陸返還という差し迫った状況を前にして不安を感じている。日々の生活水準の向上が政府の援助やサービスに依存している障害者にとっては特に、政治的状況は大きな関心事である。当論文は、香港における聴覚障害者の状況に特に焦点を当てた報告である。香港における聴覚障害者の社会は、その構成人数は少ないが、香港政府および政府と協力関係にある非政府組織やさまざまな協議会、また病院関係当局からの多岐にわたるサービスを享受している。新政府のもとでも香港の聴覚障害者の教育の機会や就業の機会は保持され、あるいは増やされていくのか。これは誰もが感じている疑問である。当論文では、インタビューやさまざまな印刷物を通して得た情報を用いて、聴覚障害者のための医学的、教育的、社会的サービスが既にどの程度達成されているかを立証し、今後の政治的状況が将来の発展にどのように関与してくるのかについて議論する。