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Multilingualism as a Mode of Reading

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In the context of my research, and my position as a researcher, I see multilingualism as a form of reading and critical practice. It entails effort to put together, or to juxtapose, texts written in different languages so as to bring to light different forms of invisible or visible relationships, connection, or cross-cultural encounters situated at specific historical and cultural moments. This practice also involves looking into the use of translated texts, as well as multilingual texts and paratexts, to consider the co-existence of different languages and cultural influences that shape both the form and the content of selected publications. This attempt to include, yet also look beyond, periodicals that target at bilingual or multilingual readers or those that treat the use of different linguistic features as symbols of modernity, cultural prestige, or cosmopolitan ideals (especially in colonial contexts) aims to uncover sources of materials or writings that might have gone unnoticed, or that might be marginalized due to their perceived distance from the dominant discourse, the valorized culture, or the mainstream literary marketplace at specific historical moments.

In my earlier research, I looked into how Dickensian texts were adapted, translated, and transferred from Britain to China in the early twentieth century. One area of inquiry was how Dickens's *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859), which was originally published in serialized form in *All the Year Round* in England, was repackaged, translated, and published in the bi-monthly political journal in China, *The Justice* (though the Chinese title, *Yong Yan*, actually meant 'commonplace words') in 1913–14 — that is, two years after the 1911 Chinese Revolution. Acts of reframing in this context occur on various levels: the transformation of the print context, translation and adaptation of the source texts, and the use of different cultural signifiers (such as the use of an English title and address, as well as Japanese and Chinese Republican calendars on the cover page) to indicate the multilingual and multicultural influences that shaped the journal, even though the publication itself was mainly written in Chinese.

From my reading of Dickens across cultures, to my latest research on publications in colonial Hong Kong and its literary and journalistic connections with China and Britain from 1890 to 1950, I have come to the realization that it is important not only to look into networks of relationship, circulation, and consumption, but also fissures, disruptions, and absences. For example, narratives published in English-language periodicals and newspapers in Hong Kong during the period frequently centred on British subjects and their way of life, a focus that undoubtedly reflected their intended readership. Yet this primary focus often led to the (near-)absence of the voices and representation of the Chinese subjects who featured in these descriptions of life in Hong Kong as well as people of other cultural and ethnical backgrounds. While these publications promote attempts by writers and journalists to develop an English literary culture that they believed could testify to the city's stature as a British crown colony,

what was frequently absent from their accounts was the effort by Hong Kong and Chinese writers to develop a literary culture that could capture their lived experience and understanding of the city. Thus, we can only get a sense of the different literary and cross-cultural currents that existed in Hong Kong during this period by investigating such writings and situating them against or alongside publications in English (and possibly other languages). Multilingualism in this sense, then, is a mode of reading that can hopefully shed new light on different forms of literary production, and the historical and cultural relationships that condition them.

Klaudia Hiu Yen Lee is an associate professor at the Department of English, City University of Hong Kong. Her research interests are nineteenth- and early twentieth-century literature and culture, spatiality, world literature, translation, and adaptation studies. She is the author of *Charles Dickens and China: Cross-Cultural Encounters, 1895–1915* (Routledge, 2017).