

**Doing Verbal Play:  
Creative Work of Cantonese Working Class Schoolboys in Hong Kong**

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*You want to know why I don't pay attention in English lessons? You really want to know? Okay, here's the reason: NO INTEREST!! It's so boring and difficult and I can never master it. But the society wants you to learn English! If you're no good in English, you're no good at finding a job!* (original in Cantonese; 14-year-old schoolboy, informal interview; from Lin, 1999, p. 407)

*... the major drama of resistance in schools is an effort on the part of students to bring their street-corner culture into the classroom. ... it is a fight against the erasure of their street-corner identities. ... students resist turning themselves into worker commodities in which their potential is evaluated only as future members of the labor force. At the same time, however, the images of success manufactured by the dominant culture seem out of reach for most of them.* (McLaren, 1998, p. 191)

## **1. Introduction**

Despite Hong Kong's international cosmopolitan appearance, the majority of its population is ethnic Chinese and Cantonese is the mother tongue of the majority. The British was a minority that had, however, constituted the privileged class of the society until July 1, 1997 when Hong Kong's sovereignty was returned to China and Hong Kong became a Special Administrative Region (SAR) of China. The English-conversant bilingual Chinese middle class has, however, remained the socioeconomically dominant group in Hong Kong and English is still the most important language of social mobility even in the post-1997, post-British-rule era. For instance, a 1998 survey on business corporations in Hong Kong found that the majority of business corporations said they would prefer employees with a good command of English to employees with a good command of Chinese (Sing Tao Jih Pao, May 21, 1998). Besides, English continues to be the medium of instruction in most universities and professional training programmes in Hong Kong.

The domination of English has gained renewed legitimacy in the post-British-rule era when any possible post-colonial critique of English dominance can be powerfully neutralized by the hegemonic discourses of global capitalism. The Hong Kong schoolchild is now expected by the official authorities to emerge from the school with fluency in both English and Putonghua (the national standard Chinese language, which is linguistically related but quite different from Cantonese, the native tongue of the majority of Hong Kong children). For instance, the most recent language education policy document released by the Hong Kong government ("Action plan to raise language

standards in Hong Kong”, January 2003) draws heavily on the hegemonic discourses of global capitalism. In this language education policy document, English is highlighted side by side with “Chinese”, which is taken to mean the standard national Chinese language rather than the local people’s native language, Cantonese. There is a double domination faced by the local people and schoolchildren. Cantonese, the local tongue can never be expected to be valued, not in education, nor in society, albeit always with an invisible taken-for-granted existence in the background. The global language of English and the national language of standard Chinese are placed at the top of the linguistic hierarchy constructed and legitimized mainly through the global capitalist discourses (e.g., Hong Kong serving as a bridge between China and the West in the global economy). Elsewhere in the policy document, employers’ demands are cited as the driving force for improving schoolchildren’s “language standards”, which refer to proficiencies in English and Putonghua. A labor production model of education is explicitly highlighted. The document also calls on universities to ensure the enforcement of a high English language requirement for university admission: Grade C or above in the GCE O-Level English examination or Band 6 in the International English Language Testing System (IELTS).

Yet, for the majority of working class children in Hong Kong, English remains something beyond their reach. Unlike their middle-class counterparts, they typically live in a lifeworld where few will (and can) speak or use English for any authentic communicative or sociocultural purposes. To most of them, English is little more than a difficult and boring school subject which, nonetheless, will have important consequences on their life chances. Many of them have an ambivalent, want-hate relationship with English. While they accept the socioeconomic fact that English is very important for their future prospects, they also readily believe that they are no good in English; for instance, in the words of a working class adolescent girl (G) to the ethnographic fieldworker (F) in Candlin, Lin and Lo’s study (2000, p. 33, original utterances in Cantonese):

F: Yes, yes, and you, do you have any aspiration, what do you want to do?

G: I want to be a teacher.

F: Teacher {chuckling}, Miss Chan {playfully addressing the girl as a teacher}, it’s good to be a teacher, it suits you well. At this moment it seems to suit you.

G: Don’t know if it will change in the future.

F: You have to be patient, you have to proceed gradually.

G: I have to meet the requirement, my English is poor.

The above exchange shows the working class adolescent girl’s lack of confidence in fulfilling her dream of becoming a teacher in the future because of her own self-image as someone with “poor English”. Her resigned acceptance of both the importance of English for her future and her poor status in terms of her English ability led to her indication of a lack of confidence in fulfilling her aspiration despite the fieldworker’s encouraging remarks. Such low self-esteem as a result of their sense of failure in mastering English makes English a subject highly imbued with working class students’ want-hate desires. The English classroom often becomes a site for their local struggles and oppositional practices (for detailed analysis of the societal and schooling contexts of their resistance practices, see Lin, 1996a, 1996b, 1997a, 1997b, 1997c, 1999, 2000).

The extreme boredom accompanying the often meaning-deprived, mechanical practices that are typical of an English classroom in a working class school (e.g., Classrooms B and C in the ethnographic study by Lin, 1999) adds to the need for the active creative work of students in their attempt to make life more bearable. Their recurrent remark to the researcher is that the lessons are so boring that they have to do something to "gaau-siu" (literally: "stir up laughter") or else they will be bored to death (Lin, 1996b). Similar to the observation made by Paul Willis of working class youths in Britain, there seems to be "work, even desperate work, in their play" (Willis, 1990, p. 2). Cantonese verbal play seems to be a kind of folk symbolic creative work and implicit ideological critique through mocking laughter and parodic language (Bakhtin, 1981) that these seemingly poorly literate children are constantly engaged in. Often simply dismissed as vulgar, uncooperative behaviour by teachers and educators, their verbal creativity has to date received little serious attention from mainstream educational studies and cultural studies in Hong Kong. It is the purpose of this paper to bring to the fore samples of the kind of creative work that these children are engaged in. The purpose is to show how they seem to work at being human, in an often alienating schooling institution, where it seems only through some meaning creation and human control in a grounded aesthetic (Willis, 1990) of verbal play can they re/find their creative capacities and identities as living, acting beings. In the following sections, we shall first briefly discuss the methodology used and then we shall look at some samples of the creative work of some working class schoolboys. The data has been taken from a larger ethnographic study of eight classrooms in seven schools (Lin, 1996b). The techniques of conversation analysis are used in the analysis of youth talk in the examples.

## **2. Understanding Youth Cultures Through Conversation Analysis of Youth Talk**

Conversation analysis (Sacks, 1992; Psathas, 1995; Silverman, 1998; ten Have, 1999) as a branch of discourse analysis has been famous for its fine-grained analysis of everyday talk in both ordinary and institutional settings. As an off-shoot of the linguistic turn in the humanities and social sciences, conversation analysis has its theoretical roots in Heidegger's phenomenology and Wittgenstein's ordinary language philosophy. It emphasizes the need to understand social action and human culture as co-constructed in the everyday, mundane, local interactions of social actors. It stresses the need to analyse the details of talk to uncover the co-construction of implicit interactional procedures through which social actors make sense of and to one another. Conversation analysis has been used to analyse media discourse, gender discourse, youth talk, youth subcultures and construction of identities (e.g., Shotter, 1993; Eder, 1995; Bell and Garrett, 1998; Grahame and Jardine, 1990; Antaki and Widdicombe, 1998; Widdicombe and Wooffitt, 1995). In the next section, the analytical techniques of conversation analysis will be drawn upon to conduct a fine-grained analysis of Cantonese working class students' talk in an English classroom in Hong Kong. The transcripts of the talk have, however, not followed the strict transcription conventions of conversation analysis so as to render them more readable to the general reader.

### 3. Doing Verbal Play in a Boring English Lesson

Data examples in this section are taken from Mr. Chan<sup>1</sup>'s class at the beginning of an English reading lesson. The school is located in a working class residential area. The reading passage is a story titled, "Tin Hau, Queen of Heaven", in the storybook "Chinese Myths", which the class uses for English reading. In the immediately preceding period, the students have just finished a dictation test. Many students are chatting and laughing with one another in their seats and do not quiet down until turn [459] in the transcript:

#### Example 1:

##### *The pre-reading phase:*

(English translations of Cantonese utterances are placed in <>.)

- T: Alright let's take a break.. then we'll do:: (1.5 seconds)  
Boy1: GWU JAI SYU:: <STORYBOOK::>! {spoken in Anglicized tone}  
T: (aah) story book..  
Boy2: Gwu jai syu <Storybook>! {spoken in Anglicized tone}  
Boy3: Gwu-jai-syu <Storybook>.  
T: Read.. storybook. SHH:::!! {Ss have now quieted down} Laah.. mh-hou king-gai aa <Okay.. don't chat>! SHH:::!! King-gai yiu faht-chaau gaa haa, faht-keih <Chatting will be punished by copying, standing>. (2 seconds)  
Yau-sik mh fan-jung laa <Let's take a break of five minutes>. Break. SHH!! (6 seconds) Ngoh aai neih jihng aa <I ask you to be quiet>!

*i. A preliminary description.* The teacher first announces that they will take a break and then something interesting happens: he continues to say, "then we'll do::" which is followed by a pause of 1.5 seconds. This is ambiguous: it can be at that moment hearable as a lapse of memory or as an invitation for a response from the students, i.e., leaving a blank for the students to fill in with what they are going to do. A boy (Boy1) grabs the chance to complete the teacher's sentence (which has been afforded by the fill-in-the-blank-type pause) and what he shouts out in a funny English tone from his seat (without raising his hand to self-nominate first, and without standing up while he shouts out his contribution) is even more interesting: "GWU JAI SYU!" (meaning "storybook"). "Storybook" is an English word that this boy may know well as this is not the first time they have had a "storybook" lesson. One can believe that it is well within his English vocabulary to have said "storybook" instead of "gwu jai syu". However, the boy's rendering of "gwu jai syu" seems to be a mocking way of speaking. It seems to mock the laughable stereotypical way in which an English-speaking person, or "Gwai-Lou" (a Cantonese slang word for foreigners) speaks Cantonese. This way of mocking and joking about Gwai-Lou's stereotypical accented way of speaking Cantonese has been common in popular Cantonese movies and television dramas in Hong Kong.

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<sup>1</sup>. All personal names are pseudonyms and all identifying details of the school and participants have been replaced.

However, nobody is heard to laugh after that remark by the boy; the lesson videotape shows that most other students have all the time been chatting with their neighbours and few seem to have paid any attention to the teacher or the boy. It is the teacher who seems to be responding to the boy's utterance by an acknowledgement particle "aah" and a reformulation of the boy's contribution into standard English: "storybook".

The camcorder microphone placed at a back corner of the classroom has picked up the voices of two boys following suit after the first boy's "GWU JAI SYU" remark and the teacher's reformulation. One boy (Boy2) uses the same Anglicized accent while the other (Boy3) uses the normal Cantonese tone.

These voices probably are not available to the teacher as the walkman-recorder carried by the teacher has not picked up any of these two echoing remarks of the two boys (Boy2 and Boy3). The teacher goes on to ask the students to be quiet, and they do quiet down for a short time.

*ii. Points of interest.*

First of all, the teacher explicitly announces that they are going to "do storybook" or "read storybook". He orients his students towards a clear recognition of what they are going to do: "doing, reading storybook" right from the beginning of the lesson. The next thing he does after announcing this lesson agenda is to write out ten reading comprehension questions on the blackboard. Then he asks the students to open the book and to turn to the right unit, and announces the title of the text. The reading task is made very conspicuous right at the beginning of the reading lesson. The students therefore should be oriented towards "doing and reading storybook".

However, the data seems to speak to the contrary. While the above discussion has shown that both the teacher and students in Mr. Chan's class explicitly recognize their lesson activity as "doing and reading storybook", most of the students are actually oriented towards talking about things of their own! The lesson video- and audio-tapes show that the majority of students in Mr. Chan's class are not attentive to the teacher at all. Most of the time, most students (e.g., those sitting in middle to back rows) are chatting with neighbours, producing a low white noise that is broken only for very short periods of time, e.g., after the teacher has asked them to be quiet or to stop talking. There is no unified participation framework in the classroom. Instead, the students are split into numerous more or less separate, simultaneous, small informal conversation groups, with the teacher and a small number of students near the teacher interacting on the front, public stage.

While secondary school students are officially supposed to speak in English in English language lessons in Hong Kong, the students in Mr. Chan's class always speak in Cantonese, whether privately or publicly, except when reading out from the English textbook, and when they read, they read haltingly, showing great difficulties in pronouncing many English words in the text. It seems that many students in Mr. Chan's class are neither willing to nor linguistically able to engage in a public, English dialogue

with the teacher. When some students are willing to participate in a public dialogue with the teacher, they do so in very unique ways.

For instance, the boy (Boy1) who shouts out "GWU JAI SYU" provides us with evidence that at least some students are willing to take the initiative to engage in a public dialogue with the teacher. It has been discussed above that we have reason to believe the boy has the ability to say the English word "storybook", which is officially normal and appropriate to say in this situation, but he chooses instead to formulate his public contribution in an off-beat way. He has self-selected and grabbed the public discourse slot (afforded by the teacher's 1.5 second pause) as an opportunity to slip in an utterance of his own choice, which does not entirely conform to the teacher's expectations. Although the teacher acknowledges it, he immediately reformulates it into an officially acceptable English word.

There are at least three different options from which the boy (Boy1) could have chosen: gwu-jai-syu, storybook, and "gwu jai syu". The first is the Cantonese word for "storybook" spoken in normal Cantonese accent. This is an officially unacceptable and inappropriate choice (because this is an English lesson): using it publicly would render him hearable as being blatantly uncooperative with the teacher and unwilling to speak English. However, this may render him hearable to other like-minded students as being "one of us". This may be seen as indicative of an insulated Cantonese sociocultural island that is opposed to the Chinese-English bilingual middle-class 'Mainland'. On the other hand, a Cantonese word does not seem to be the most suitable material to complete an English utterance.

The second option, "storybook", is officially the most acceptable one. Besides, it seems to be the most suitable material to complete an English utterance. However, using it would render the boy hearable to other students as too cooperative with the teacher and the official lesson agenda<sup>2</sup>.

The third option (actually, this is the option created by the boy himself), "gwu jai syu", a Cantonese word spoken in a stereotypical "Gwai-Lou-speaking-Cantonese" accent, seems to have the merits of both of the above options but not their shortcomings. Using it renders the boy hearable to the teacher not as blatantly uncooperative as the first option would. After all, "Tin Hau" (an Anglicized name of the Chinese Heaven-Queen, a word that both their teacher and English storybook use) is an entirely acceptable "English" word. The Anglicized intonation used by the boy when he speaks "gwu jai syu" also fits with the English intonation of the teacher's utterance and so can serve as an admissible candidate to seamlessly complete the teacher's English utterance.

On the other hand, he would not be hearable by other students as brown-nosing the teacher or being too cooperative with the lesson's official English-learning agenda

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<sup>2</sup>. This interpretation is based on my understanding of the students' culture through my informal contact and chatting with the students. A common phrase they use to describe a fellow student suspected of doing brown-nosing is, "bok mat aa!?", meaning "to gain what!?". The phrase is usually spoken disapprovingly to describe a fellow student who takes the initiative to speak English in class.

because after all, it is a Cantonese word: it seems that he is not really speaking Gwai-Lou's English; rather, he's mocking Gwai-Lou's Cantonese! This has the additional double effect of being funny and "turning the tables", that is, re-asserting the centrality of Cantonese in relation to English. (Lombardi [1996] has observed a similar phenomenon in Brazil: Portuguese-speaking Brazilians, who are not comfortable with the socioeconomic need to learn English, mock the poor Portuguese of English-speaking North Americans by playing on Brazilian pronunciations of English words). A similar playful mocking practice is commonly found in many of the popular Cantonese movies in the 1990s in Hong Kong, especially those by the famous comedy movie star Stephen Chow. Typically playing a working class underdog who is nevertheless streetwise, witty and verbally creative, Stephen Chow often engages in such mocking verbal play, creating verbal spectacles with comical effects that especially appeal to Cantonese working class audiences.

The reading text itself seems to have provided the boy with a source of creative discourse resources: the reading text is about a Chinese legend with Chinese characters. Normally these students talk about Chinese things in Cantonese, but this strange occasion has required them to talk about Chinese things in English, like a Gwai-Lou talking about Chinese things in their Anglicized Cantonese, e.g., using the Anglicized name, "Tin Hau", for the Chinese Heaven-Queen. This seems to be a good context to do a playful mocking of Gwai-Lou's poor Cantonese.

The absurdity of this situation is also something that may prompt a mocking. These students' English is limited and there is evidence that they do not know many of the words in the text. And yet, the content of the story is so boringly familiar that they feel that they do not really need to read the story to know what the story is about (there is some evidence of this in the later phases of the lesson). Some natural questions that they may ask in such a situation seem to be: Why on earth do I need to go through all this pain to read a story that I already know?! What is the point of reading a Chinese story in English? It may make some sense only if I were a Gwai-Lou learning about Chinese things, and Gee, I might just as well get some fun out of this boring and difficult situation by mocking the Gwai-Lou's way of speaking Cantonese! Another instance of this is seen in Boy2's utterance: another boy seemingly following the example of the first boy (Boy2) by echoing it shortly after him. There are two other similar instances found in the lesson.

It appears that some other students are engaged in a different kind of playful mocking. Before we can discuss some examples of this, we need to examine the kind of Initiation-Response-Feedback (IRF) discourse format (Sinclair and Coulthard, 1975; Heap, 1988) in Mr. Chan's class that has allowed students to do this different kind of verbal play (cf. Grahame & Jardine, 1990). Based on analysis of the larger data corpus from Mr. Chan's class (Lin, 1996b), we can characterize the typical IRF format used in Mr. Chan's class as having the expanded structural sequence shown below:

- a. Teacher-Initiation [First in English, then translated into Cantonese]
- b. Student-Response [in Cantonese]

c. Teacher-Feedback [in Cantonese and then in English]

Now, what is interesting is how some students make use of this IRF format to slip in their Cantonese verbal play (c.f. Grahame & Jardine, 1990). Let us look at the following example taken later on from the answer-checking phase in the same lesson.

**Example 2:**

***The answer-checking phase:***

Having given students ten minutes to read the text silently, Mr. Chan begins to engage the students in a process of co-constructing a certified lesson-knowledge-corpus. This process is carried out through the use of the IRF format (see above and Lin, 1996a), in very much the same way it has been used in the pre-reading phase (see Example 1 above). However, in this phase the questions to be asked by the teacher in the initiation slots are already known as a pre-given list, and the answers to be provided by the students in the response slots are also supposed to be pre-formulated (or pre-marked-out by students in their storybooks). So, it is not so much a discussion or "talking about" the storybook as it is "checking answers" to the pre-given questions. This is actually a recurrent practice in other lessons of this class and in many working classrooms in Hong Kong (e.g., checking answers to grammar exercises, vocabulary exercises, etc.).

Throughout this phase, the teacher highlights the need *to base one's answer on relevant parts in the text* by asking students where in the text they can find the answer to his question. The need to base one's answer (or to "find the answer") in the text is a recurrent concern of the teacher voiced in his recurrent prompts and follow-up questions such as "Where can you find it?", "Does the book really say so?", "Look at paragraph \_\_\_\_, line \_\_", etc. However, there are times when a bookish answer is very boring, especially when these students feel that this story of the Chinese Heaven-Queen is so familiarly boring (some evidence of this found in other parts of the transcript). And the pre-given set of factual questions has left so little room for imagination for these lively thirteen/fourteen-year-old boys. In the following excerpt from the same answer-checking phase, we find the creativity of the schoolboys bursting out in a niche that they exploit and capitalize on in an otherwise probably uninteresting IRF discourse sequence (to make the transcript easier to read, the original Cantonese utterances are omitted and only their English translations in are provided in <>; Ss refer to students; S1, S2, S3 refer to Student1, Student1, student3):

- T: <What happened>? .. Leih-Lohn-Mihng<sup>3</sup> (2 seconds) <when she answered her mum> (1 second) <her mum called her name, and when she answered her mum, what happened>?
- Leih: <Her old-man fell off to the (ground)>. {chuckling towards the end of his sentence}
- Ss: Haha! haha! haha! hahahaha! {other Ss laughing hilariously}
- T: <What>?! (2 seconds) <louder>! {speaking against a background of Ss' laughter}

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<sup>3</sup> This is the name of a student. The original name has been changed into a pseudo-name.

Chan: <Her old-man fell off to the street>! {chuckling}  
 S1: Hihihihik!! {laughing}  
 S2: <(Is there) a street>?  
 T: <Is there a street>? {T speaking in an amused tone; some students laugh}  
 Leih: <fell into the sea>  
 T: <Where did he fall into>? {quite amusingly}  
 Leih: <Sea that is>.  
 T: <Yes.. fell into the sea>.  
 S1: <fell off to the street> hahaha!  
 S2: <Her old-man fell off to the street>.  
 T: Right? (1 second) Her father dropped into the SEA!  
 S3: Hekhek! {laughing}  
 T: Right? (2 seconds) <in that manner died>. .. SHH! (1 second) <okay> ..  
 <finally> .. SHH! number ten ...

The teacher's question has been asked in English earlier, but no student response has been forthcoming, and the teacher is asking it again in Cantonese, and also specifically directs it to a student (Leih-Lohn-Mihng), ensuring that someone is going to answer it. Now, something interesting happens. Leih says something (the Cantonese word "louh-dauh" literally means "old-bean" and is a common colloquial, not very respectful word for "father") which rouses other students to hilarious laughter.

The boy (Leih) has exploited the Response slot to do something playful, to slip in a contribution that will turn the whole story into a comic-strip type of story, which they enjoy reading outside the classroom (based on what they told me when I chatted with them after school, and on their responses to questions about the kinds of extra-curricular reading they do in a questionnaire I gave them). In their most favourite comic strips, which have been translated into Cantonese-style-Chinese from Japanese, the characters usually do funny, impossible things, e.g., a boy changes into a girl when he falls into cold water and changes back to a boy when he's showered with hot water; or, the father of the boy changes into a big black bear when coming into contact with hot water, etc., and amusement and enjoyment come from the superimposing of impossible and unpredictable fantasy with the familiar, predictable, and boring mundane world. It seems that the boy (Leih) who provides this funny answer is a skillful story-teller with a ready audience, and this is reflected in the overwhelmingly positive response from his fellow students (i.e., their hilarious laughter, showing their great amusement derived from this twist of the story effected by his answer: her father fell off into the street (from a merchant ship amidst a stormy ocean)! His change in the plot will make a very funny and imaginative comic-strip type story. Besides, the boy seems also to be skillfully slipping in a euphemistic version of a taboo slang Cantonese word "puk-gaai!" (literally meaning "drop to the street"), which is used to curse others (can be translated as "drop dead!" or "go to hell!"). His fellow students' hilarious laughter seems to have also arisen from this implicit version of a taboo slang word being offered as an answer to the teacher's formal question.

The teacher cannot hide his own amusement but insists on the reading text as the authoritative basis for students' answers to the question. He challenges, "Go douh yauh gaai me?" (Is there a street?), and goes on to demand that the student give him a text-based answer, which he can acknowledge, reformulate into English, affirm and certify. Throughout the lesson the teacher has been demonstrating to his students that reading a storybook means extracting information from the text to answer a set of pre-given questions, and it seems there is little more you can do or play around with while reading a story text.

#### **4. Creative Work in an Alienating World**

The organization of the above reading lesson is not an isolated example. Similar examples can be found in other classes in my larger corpus of classroom data (Lin 1996b). The point of English reading lessons in many working class schools seems to be primarily one of practice in extracting prescribed information from texts. This seems to have followed naturally from the pragmatic emphasis of the school English curriculum and the way English reading comprehension is assessed in public examinations. English seems to be conceived as mainly for academic and job-related purposes in Hong Kong. The information-extraction approach to reading seems to dominate most English reading practices in school, even when the texts being read are stories and not a type of technical, academic or job-related manuals which might more typically require information extraction in many contexts. The schools thus seem to serve as training grounds to churn out graduates skilled in extracting specific information from English texts to accomplish prescribed tasks.

School children, however, might seize whatever opportunities they can find in the classroom to negotiate their own sense of the text, for instance, text not as an information-holder, but as a source of enjoyment. When the prescribed school text proves to be unimaginative or unengaging, they exercise their own creativity to recreate a new plot, to negotiate a comic type of story, which suits their taste. It seems that they are negotiating their own kind of creative literacy, in spite of its illegitimacy in the school context. There is lots of creative work in their verbal play.

While their verbal play seems to get them nowhere in terms of gaining the necessary linguistic capital to get a good job in the future, it does point to their creative, active response to an alienating, dehumanizing institution in which they find themselves trapped. While a typical mainstream adult comment on their behaviour is likely to be that of disapproval (e.g., "These students have given up on themselves; see how they waste their precious learning time to talk about nonsense!"), their response is far from that of passive self-abandonment. There seems to be an acute insight (albeit often an implicit one) on the part of these schoolboys: they seem to fully recognize their lack of any chances to fully master English (unlike their middle-class counterparts who have all kinds of familiar support to learn English) and to get any high-level jobs in the future; they seem to have a thorough sense of the kind of low-paying jobs that they will probably end up with after studying in their school, (which, like many other schools located in working class areas in Hong Kong, is labelled and stigmatized as "low-banding"). They seem to

want to make the best out of a no-win situation. They have to live with fun, and as creative beings, despite all these gloomy prospects implicitly built into their social position, which, as if they want to forget as best as they can through their active, creative verbal play. This radical transformation of reality is fun and tension-releasing, at least for the moment, and reflects an attempt to focus on the present, when the future is too gloomy to think of. In my informal chats with these schoolboys, they stroke me with an immense cynicism about the adult world and a refusal to talk about their future. One of their recurrent remarks is: it's so boring; we have to make fun ("gaau-siu")! There is work, even desperate work, in their fun-making. It is as if they were shouting this to us: "Hey, we're gonna live with dignity and fun no matter what!"

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