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**Japanese as “Safe Houses”:
An Ethnography of Adolescent Learners of Japanese in Hong Kong**

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Hong Kong has been a special administrative region of China since it was handed over from Britain in 1997. Despite its international tinge, the nearly 7.5 million people who live in this city are predominantly ethnic Chinese. As a geographically proximal country, Japan has a great influence on the leisure lives of people in Hong Kong. Along with food and popular culture including anime, comics, and computer games, Japan is one of the most popular travel destinations among Hongkongers. A large majority of residents have favorable views of Japanese people, according to a recent survey. Against this backdrop, Japanese is the most widely spoken foreign language among the city’s majority ethnic Chinese, apart from English, which is an official language of the region.

Educationally, Hong Kong is characterized by a grade-oriented, utilitarian, highly competitive culture and a direct link between academic credentials and social status. This is owing to the historical fact that most Hong Kong Chinese are refugees from mainland China and their descendants, who are traditionally encouraged to achieve material success and provide stability for their families. Schools in Hong Kong – tightly controlled by the city’s government through budget allocations and public examinations – have an enormous impact on adolescents’ lives, and those who cannot claim supremacy over their peers are subjected to powerful pressure and may develop a sense of inferiority. Under these conditions, youth suicides constitute a serious social problem in today’s Hong Kong.

Using an ethnographical methodology, this study thus analyzed the situation of adolescent learners of Japanese in relation to Hong Kong’s sociocultural contexts in order to understand whether learning Japanese as an elective foreign language may function as safe houses in and out of their schools where adolescent learners seek alternative identities that may neutralize academic pressure. To this aim, we observed three Japanese language classrooms at two private language institutes and one secondary school. Furthermore, we interviewed twelve adolescent participants to elicit their life stories, which centered not only on their learning Japanese but also on their use of social network services (SNSs) such as Facebook, Twitter and Instagram.

Our findings show that learning Japanese functioned as pedagogical safe houses in which adolescent learners could take shelter from the pressure of their school lives. Japanese is an elective subject in the public school-leaving examination and thus attained the status of a prestigious language in Hong Kong. Consequently, Japanese allowed those adolescent learners to adopt subversive identities to escape from pressure. Even so, learning Japanese may reflect Hong Kong’s mainstream competitive educational

culture. Through SNSs, adolescent learners of Japanese tended to vie with each other for language proficiency, cultural knowledge, and speed of obtaining new information.

As for pedagogical implications, we recommended turning a classroom into a community of practice in which learners (and the teacher) with different hobbies and interests can share their knowledge and skills with one another in a constructive way. At the same time, we invited teachers of Japanese to understand and respect individual learners' identities along with their sociocultural contexts, since we believe that our fundamental mission is to support learners' self-actualization through learning and using Japanese.

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