Genres of Symbolic Violence: Beauty Contest Discourse Practices in Hong Kong

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INTRODUCTION

Hong Kong had been a British colony for over 150 years. In 1997, its sovereignty was returned to China and it became a Special Administrative Region of China. It has a population of over 6.5 million people. The majority of the population are Cantonese-speaking Chinese who are largely immigrants or offspring of immigrants from the Guangdong Province of China mainly during the first half of the 20th century. In the 1960s and 1970s, Hong Kong changed from an agrarian fishing port to an export-oriented, labor-intensive industrial city. Most working class women were employed in factories in the manufacturing industry (e.g., textile, clothing, toys). Since the 1980s and 1990s, with the boom of China trade following the 'open door policy' of China, Hong Kong has gradually changed from a light-industry based, manufacturing economy to an economy primarily based on the re-export of products processed in China and on business and financial servicing for China (Ho, 1994). Into the 2000s, with the majority of manufacturing capitalists having re-located their factories from Hong Kong to China to capitalize on the cheap labor there, the manufacturing employment sector is rapidly dwindling and most working class men and women, who find it difficult to retrain themselves for the newly developing IT (Information Technology) economy, take jobs in the low-salary end of the service sector (e.g., manual workers, retail sales assistants, restaurant waiters and waitresses[1], receptionists, clerks, telephone operators).

In a sense, the most powerful public spheres in Hong Kong have been made accessible to both men and women. One can easily cite the first female Chief Secretary of the government administration, Mrs. Anson Chan, or the outspoken Legislative Councilor and business executive, Christine Loh as exemplars of 'neuih-keuhng-yahn'[2], literally meaning 'female-strong-person' (usually used with some negative connotations, implying a woman who is politically/economically successful but perhaps too aggressive or not feminine). It is worth mentioning that there are many more successful men in these public arenas, who have, however, never been referred to in the media as 'male-strong-person'.

Social activists in Hong Kong have been working toward getting their voices heard. The Association for the Advancement of Feminism (AAF) has been active in voicing, and researching on, women's issues in Hong Kong, for example, women's opportunities and problems in political participation (1985), sexism in TV advertisements (1993). Pressure Groups with a concern for factory workers' welfare have also been active in advocating better working conditions and terms for both male and female workers. The Equal Opportunities Committee has also been set up to address issues of inequalities based on gender, age, or disability.

It seems that when the issues of injustice concerned are more visible (e.g., sexual harassment, unequal pay for the same job), it is relatively less difficult to rally support or concern for them. However, when the issues of domination are not entirely explicit, or constituted in the form of apparently innocuous popular entertainment, it is much more difficult to rally support for the protest against them. One important example, which also forms the subject of this chapter, is found in the beauty contest discourse practices of the public media. Although the AAF has voiced strong protests against beauty contests in Hong Kong (see, e.g., *Ming Pao*, June 1, 1994), there has been little effect on the media's practices, nor has there been much public support for its cause. Beauty contests remain among those television programs that enjoy the highest viewing rates in Hong Kong (*South*

China Morning Post, February 4, 1996), and are invariably shown at prime times on weekend evenings. They are packaged and promoted as a type of family variety show and they are sponsored by commercials advertising products that range from cosmetics, leather accessories, camera films, travel agencies, air-conditioners, cars, furniture, to cooking oil, rice, and cough syrup.

In this chapter I analyze Hong Kong beauty contests, which are annually staged as popular entertainment shows on Hong Kong television, as social practices mediated by specific discourse genres within a community of practice. I draw on Scollon's (1998) maxims of stance and his notion of mediated discourse as social interaction to make sense of the beauty contests in Hong Kong by seeking answers to the following three questions: what is taking place, what are the relationships among the players on stage (i.e., what identities and voices are being constructed, claimed and ascribed to the different players), and what are the topics being used and negotiated in the process. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the role played by specific discourse genres in mediating acts of symbolic violence done to certain social groups in Hong Kong, which often consist of women but, sometimes, also men.

THE GROWING POPULAR ENTERTAINMENT CULTURE AND INDUSTRY IN HONG KONG

With Hong Kong's economic take-off since the 1970s, a vibrant and colorful Cantonese popular culture and a strong media entertainment industry have developed among the largely Cantonese-speaking population. Today, there are two major television companies, the Television Broadcasting Company (TVB) and the Asia Television Company (ATV), each operating a Cantonese channel and an English channel. The majority of Hong Kong families, especially working class families, who speak little English, tune in mostly to the Cantonese channels (Lin, 1996).

Since the early 1990s, Hong Kong has also witnessed the growing popularity of the 'infotainment' type of newspapers and weekly magazines (David C. S. Li, personal communication). Popular 'baat-gwaa jaahp-ji' (a popular Cantonese phrase referring to sensationalized, gossipy magazines) include *Next Magazine*, *Eastweek*, and *Oriental Sunday*. Popular newspapers include *Apple Daily* (published by the same publisher of *Next Magazine*) and *Oriental Daily* (published by the same publisher of *Oriental Sunday*). These magazines and newspapers are characterized by a highly colloquial, Cantonese style of written Chinese and a blending of entertainment with news, or an 'entertainization' of news or information. They are the popular reading materials available in most working class homes (Lin, 1996).

It is in this context that beauty contests have in recent years become increasingly publicized and sensationalized media and social events in Hong Kong. Each year, two highly publicized major beauty contests, Miss Hong Kong and Miss Asia, are staged by the two competing television companies TVB and ATV in May/June and August/September respectively[3]. They compete with each other in making their own beauty contest more sensational and attention-getting. Having evolved with this competition in sensationalism is a set of distinct discourse practices in both televised and print media. In the televised

media, beauty contest events can be seen to be organized via recognizable, specific, recurring discourse and activity structures. In the print media, beauty contests have served as topical anchors on which the infotainment type of newspapers and magazines churn out pages and pages of sensationalized stories and pictures of the contestants. To understand the beauty contest event, let us look at an example of a recurrent discourse genre found to be playing a central mediating role in beauty contests in Hong Kong.

AN EXAMPLE: THE 1992 MISS HONG KONG BEAUTY CONTEST

The 1992 Miss Hong Kong Beauty Contest was the 20th anniversary of the Miss Hong Kong Beauty Contest. TVB gave a lot of publicity to it and especially designed a glamorous slogan for that year's contest: "Faat-fong yaah joi gwong-mohng, yihn-dim syun-meih mahn-faa" ("Shining through two decades, kindling the beauty contest culture"). The slogan seems to conjure up associations of the beauty contest spirit with the Olympic Games spirit.

The 1992 Miss Hong Kong beauty contest began with a glamorous, magnificent Egyptian palace stage set-up. Jang Ji-Waih (Eric Tsang), a short, chubby, familiar TV and movie star, who has a well-established sleazy-guy screen image and has been the principal host in every Miss Hong Kong beauty contest in recent years, was costumed as the Egyptian Pharaoh and leisurely seated on the throne. Standing beside him and conversing with him was another male host, Jehng Daan-Seuih, a popular radio and TV talk show star, costumed as an Egyptian palace attendant. Excerpt 1 below was taken from the beginning of their conversations. They had been talking about the third host, Philip Chan, whom they referred to as 'Chahn sihng-seun' (Chief-Secretary Chan):

Excerpt 1[4]

1. Jang: Haih Laa, gong hoi Chahn sihng-seun, aah, yih-chihn heui hai ngoh-deih go chaan-gwun douh si choi gaa jaa!
   <Yeh, talking about Chief-Secretary Chan, oh, he used to taste food for me in the restaurant!>

2. Jehng: Haih aa! Haih aa!
   <Yeh! Yeh!>

3. Jang: Yih-gaa dim wui jouh-jo sihng-seun gum baa-bai ge?
   <Now how come he has become Chief-Secretary, with such a high rank?>

4. Jehng: O! Neih mh-gei-dak aah? Yan-waih heuih tuhng neih si choi si dak hou, yeuhng yeuhng choi tuhng neih si saai ne, yihn-ji-houh sin bei neih sihk, neih gok-dak hou-hou sihk, yyu-sih neih maih sing-jo heuih jouh sihng-seun lo!
   <Oh! You've forgotten? Because he did such a good job sampling food for you, tasting every dish for you before you ate, and you found the food so delicious, so you have promoted him to Chief-Secretary!>

5. Jang: Haih aa haih aa haih aa! Jeui-gahn heui gaau-gan mat-yeh?
   <Oh yeh yeh yeh! What's he up to these days?>

6. Jehng: Oh! Heuih gaau-gan go houh wuhn-yi aa! Haih syun sahp-yih sahn-sing neui aa!
   <Oh! He's organizing a fun game! He's selecting twelve sacred girls!>

7. Jang: Syun sing-neui? Hei-hei! {chuckling sleazily}
   <Selecting sacred girls? Hei-hei!>

8. Jehng: Haih aa!
   <Yeh!>

9. Jang: BAIH! Yih-chihn heuih bong ngoh si sung go wo! {in a worried tone}
   <OH DEAR! In the past he tasted food for me!>

10. Jehng: Haih aa! GO-GO si wahn gaa!
    <Yeh! EACH ONE he tasted first!>
11. Jang: Ngoh sihk di yeh heuih bong ngoh sihk sin go wo,=
    <Those things I ate he tasted first,>
12. =Jehng: Mh! Mouh-cho aa!
    <Mh! That's right!>
13. Jang: Gum yih gaa bong ngoh syun sing-neui maih... ai-yaah, mh-hou laa, faai-di
    giu saai di sing-neui cheuit-laih bei ngoh tai-haah sin! {in an anxious tone}
    **<But now he's selecting sacred girls for me... oh dear, oh no, hurry, go call all
    the sacred girls out for me to see first!>**
14. Jehng: Oh, Wohng-Seuhng cheng fong-sam, di sing-neui yih-ging yyuh-beih saai
    hai-douh gaa laa!
    <Oh, Your Majasty need not worry, all the sacred girls have been prepared[5]
    here already!>
15. Jang: Haih me?
    <Really?>
16. Jehng: Juhng-yiu heun neih hin bou tim aa!
    <Not only that, they're offering treasures to you!>
17. Jang: Aa? Hin-bou? Hei-hei! {chuckling sleazily}
    <Yes? Offering treasures? Hei-hei!>
18. Jehng: Ngoh-deih yauh cheng heuih-deih cheuit-leih sin laa houh-mh-houh aa?
    <Shall we invite them out first?>
19. Jang: Gum tai-haah hin me-eh bou bei ngoh laa, faai-di faai-di!
    <Okay, see what treasures they're offering to me, quick quick!>
20. Jehng: Yauh cheng.. sahp-yih sing-neui!
    <Would the twelve sacred girls come out to the stage!>
    {The background Egyptian Music started; three contestants in Egyptian costumes,
    each sitting on a bed-like carrier which was carried by 4 men in Egyptian soldier
    costumes, were carried out from the back stage to the left side of the front stage and
    placed in a line there. Then the music stopped. The first contestant stepped down
    from the first carrier, took her translucent silky scarf up to cover half of her face,
    smiling, walking towards the stage center where the Pharaoh-host was seated. As
    the contestant was walking towards the Pharaoh, she maintained her front largely
    facing the audience. While she was walking, Jehng said the following:}
21. Jehng: Yat-houh, Jeung Yuhk-Waah siu-je, fong-lihng yih-sahp-yih seui.
    <Number One, Miss Jeung Yuhk-Waah, her age is twenty-two.>
    {The contestant stopped in front of the standing microphone which was placed
    slightly to the right and a few steps in front of the throne. The Pharaoh-host leaned
    on the left side of his throne to get a better view of the contestant, who was basically
    facing the audience, but with her left side slightly slanting towards the direction of
    the Pharaoh. In this way, all of them were frontal to the audience[6].}
22. Jang: Aa! Jan-haih leng neui aa-haa!
    <Aa! Indeed a beautiful girl!>

    {The contestant then spoke into the standing microphone and started greeting the
    Pharaoh-host by saying, "Wohng-Seuhng, neih-hou" (meaning "Your Majesty,

how do you do?"). Then an Egyptian soldier carried some odd object (e.g., a green hat[7]) on a tray to the front stage and stood slightly to the left and behind the contestant. The Pharaoh asked what treasure she had to offer. Then the contestant said something auspicious about the object to the Pharaoh-host. The Pharaoh-host teased her a bit, usually challenging the logic of her words, but Jehng, the second male host usually rounded up the conversation by answering some of the harsh questions for her, and then thanking her and hurrying her to recede to the backstage. Then the second contestant stepped down from her carrier and walked to the microphone and carried out another similar conversation with the two male hosts. After the first three have finished, the music started again, and another three contestants were carried to the side stage, and there was the same sequence of events until all twelve contestants had made their appearance. Then one more woman with her face all covered under a scarf was being carried to the front stage. The Pharaoh queried whether there was one more sacred girl, but then he immediately remarked that he recognized the 'cylindrical body shape of this woman'. The woman (a short, slightly chubby, comedy TV star) stepped down from the carrier and scolded the Pharaoh for selecting sacred girls behind her--the Queen. There was immediate laughter from the live audience.}

In this dramatic way, the twelve contestants were introduced one by one to the Pharaoh-host. By staying frontal to the audience whether when walking or when conversing with the hosts, the contestants were at the same time presented to the TV audience and were meant for their clear and unobstructed gaze (Berger, 1972). The physical, social and discursive organization of the beauty contest show, or the 'spectacle' (Scollon, 1998), which is broadcast live to millions of households in Hong Kong, strongly induces particular spectator perspectives on, and interpretive frames of, the contestants (van Zoonen, 1994). In the following three sections, I shall analyze the spectacle from the perspective of the three maxims of stance, focusing on features of the discourse genre that mediates the actions of the players on stage, who are members of the community of practice engaged in the production of the spectacle (Scollon, 1998). In the concluding section, I shall discuss issues related to probable audience design as well as the range of possible social practices of the television audience (the 'watchers' [Scollon, 1998]) when the beauty contest is being shown on television.

What is Happening Here? (the Footing)[8]: Selecting Mistresses for and by the Emperor

Working from the methodological perspective proposed by Scollon (1998), the first important question to ask in an analysis of social interaction is: who has the power to define the situation or frame the communicative event and what is the situation so defined. The glamorous, magnificent Egyptian palace stage setup (with a real-life size golden Sphinx in the background) and the eye-dazzling golden Egyptian costumes of the hosts, the contestants, and the soldiers all help to create a luxurious, royal, magnificent setting that resembles the popular image of the golden palace of ancient Chinese emperors. It is instructive here to note that the earliest form of official beauty contests in ancient China took place in the emperor's palace, under the emperor's gaze. According to *Jin-Shu* (*The*

History of the Jin Dynasty, 265-420 A.D.), young beautiful virgins were selected from all over the country into the palace to await further selection by the emperor. The selected women were further ranked into different grades of concubines or maids to serve the emperor in his palace (Wong, 1994).

The glamorous scenario recreated on the stage for the 1992 Miss Hong Kong beauty contest, albeit an Egyptian one, is one easily recognizable to the Chinese audience as resembling the ancient Chinese emperor's golden palace. In addition, the Pharaoh-host is consistently addressed to as "Wohng-Seuhng", which is the Chinese way of addressing the emperor. The choice of this familiar Chinese address form for the Egyptian Pharaoh, instead of the proper translation of the title of Pharaoh, further predisposes the Hong Kong audience to associate or identify the Pharaoh-host with the traditional Chinese emperor.

The modern day Miss Hong Kong beauty contest was thus neatly superimposed onto the ancient Chinese practice of selecting second/third/fourth/... concubines for and by the Chinese emperor. The superimposing of the modern day beauty contest footing (Goffman, 1974, 1981) and a historical palace footing helps to define the situation as one of presenting concubine candidates to the Pharaoh-cum-Chinese-emperor-cum-beauty-contest-host (animated by Eric Tsang), who was himself the product of the superimposing of an ancient absolute power figure with a present-day sleazy guy image. The borrowing of an ancient Chinese practice familiar to the Hong Kong audience (i.e., palace selection of concubines for ancient Chinese emperors) and hybridizing it with both the ancient Egyptian palace setting and the modern day Hong Kong beauty contest setting, produce a spectacle which is polyvocally framed and ambivalent: it is at once ancient and modern, and at once Chinese (e.g., use of Chinese emperor address terms), exotic (Egyptian palace setting) and familiar (Hong Kong animators). Framed in this manner, the beauty contest can look entirely unproblematic, legitimate, or simply natural to the Hong Kong audience. After all, it is framed to resemble a well-established Chinese practice passed on from ancient times, and it is framed as a spectacular historical drama produced for entertainment and it cannot be for real (i.e., the beauty contestants are not really being selected to become concubines of the Pharaoh-cum-beauty-contest-host). The polyvocality and ambivalence of the frame thus contributes to the legitimization and naturalization of what is actually taking place (e.g., the subjection of the contestants to the sleazy and insulting remarks by the hosts) in the beauty contest spectacle being produced for the television audience.

The 'principal(s)' and 'author(s)' (Goffman, 1981) who frame this communicative event are likely to be the behind-stage producer(s) and script-writer(s) while the players on stage are more or less 'animators' of the script. The real-life beauty contestants are, however, cast in subordinate and submissive roles without much human dignity in relation to the all male beauty contest hosts. In the section below, we shall address the second methodological question: what are the relationships among the players on stage (i.e., what identities and voices are being constructed, claimed and ascribed to the different players?).

The Identities and Positioning of the Different Players on Stage:
Beauty Contestants as 'Fresh Dishes' for the Beauty Contest Hosts

The conversations between the Pharaoh-host and the court-attendant-host about the previous role of 'Chief Secretary Chan' as the emperor's food-taster and his present role in

selecting sacred girls (see Turns 1-14 in Excerpt 1 above) again superimpose the footing of sampling food onto the footing of selecting sacred girls. The conversations cleverly interweave the images of dishes and sacred girls, and superimpose the act of tasting/sampling food onto that of selecting women for the emperor. Anyone with some sociolinguistic competence in the Cantonese language will not fail to 'hear' between the lines of the conversations. In particular, the emphasis on who being the first one to taste the food of the Pharaoh (see turns 9-12) strongly suggests the corresponding traditional Chinese men's emphasis on being the first one to take away the virginity of a woman. This male-centric norm is crystallized in the familiar Chinese saying, 'yam tauh daahm tong', literally meaning 'to have the first mouthful of soup', referring to a man's act of taking the virginity of a woman. In turn 10, the court-attendant used and accentuated the classifier 'GO-GO', which can be a classifier for both women and dishes. He could have used other unequivocally inanimate classifiers (e.g., 'dihp-dihp'). His use of the equivocal classifier 'go-go', however, induces the audience to interpret dishes as a metaphor for women. The preference for this interpretation is further hinted at in turn 13 in which the Pharaoh-host expresses worries over leaving the sacred girls in the hands of his former food-taster, and hurries the court-attendant to get the sacred girls out for him to see <u>first</u>.

Can the beauty contestants position themselves differently and negotiate for themselves identities with more dignity than those assigned to them by the hosts? In the next section, we shall see how the hosts assign identities to the contestants and limit the room for negotiation of alternative identities by the contestants. This seems to be done by exercising their power to control the topic through the use of a three-part discourse format that resembles the initiation-response-feedback format found in many classroom discourses (Sinclair & Coulthard, 1975; Heap, 1985).

Control of Topic in the Discourse Sequence of
Question-Answer-Comment/Re-question

To see how the hosts control the topic, let us look at one typical conversation between a contestant and the male hosts during the introduction phase described above:

Excerpt 2
{The contestant was walking towards the microphone as Jehng said:}
1. Jehng: Gau-houh, waa, ne go hou-sihk aa, Jyu Huhng siu-je!=
   <Number Nine, wow! This one is delicious, Miss Jyu Huhng[9]>
2. =Jang: Waa, jyu-huhng?=
   <Wow! Pig's blood?>
3. =Jehng: Haahk, fong-lihng yih-sahp-saam seui.
   <Yeh, her age is twenty-three.>
   {The contestant stopped in front of the standing microphone and spoke into the mike, greeting the Pharaoh-host:}
4. Jyu: Wohng-Seuhng, neih hou.
   <Your Majasty, how do you do?>
5. Jang: Neih hou, neih hou. Yih-sahp-saam seui ge jyu-huhng ngoh meih sihk-gwo ha-ha.

<How do you do, how do you do? Twenty-three-year-old pig's blood I haven't eaten before.>

6. Jehng: Haih, neih seung sung mat-yeh bei Wohng-Seuhng aa?
   <Well, what do you want to offer to the Emperor?>
   {an Egyptian soldier carried a pair of straw sandals on a tray to the front stage}

7. Jyu: Chou-haaih.
   <Straw sandals.>

8. Jang: Ai-yaa?!
   <What?!>

9. Jehng: Yiu neih jeuk-chou[10] woh!
   <Wants you to flee!>

10. Jang: Wohng-Seuhng, yih-gaa tin-haah taai-pihng, dim-gaai yiu jeuk chou-haaih aa?=
    <The Emperor, now the country is peaceful, why do I need to wear straw sandals?>

11. =Jehng: Haih aak!
    <Right!>

12. Jyu: Wohng-Seuhng neigh mh-hou nau laa=
    <Your Majasty please don't be angry>

13. =Jang: Ngoh mouh nau aak.
    <I am not angry.>

14. Jyu: Ngoh yi-si ne haih juk neih 'chou'-jo wohng-hauh ji-hauh, fu-chai ho-yih guhng-'haaih'-baahk-sau aa maa.
    <What I meant was to wish that after you have 'married' your queen you two will 'live happily' ever after.>

15. Jang: Juhng minh-keuhng, chou-haaih, baai-jo go 'chou' jih ji-hauh jauh 'cho'-jo wohng-hauh ji-hauh ho-yih guhng-'haaih'-baahk-sau, jeung go 'haaih' jih baai hai hauh-mihn=
    <That makes even less sense: 'cho-haaih', you first placed the word 'cho', that is 'having married the queen, then living happily ever after', then placed the word 'haaih' at the back>[11]

16. =Jehng: Haih cheuhng-cheuhng-gau-gau aa maa.
    <Yes, that means ever-lasting.>

17. Jang: Gum cheuhng! Waa, gum neih mh-baai maaih tiuh sing?! {in an ironic tone}
    <That long! Hey, why didn't you also place a piece of string?!>

18. Jehng: Yauh yauh yauh, Wohng-Seuhng nau laak.
    <Yes, yes, yes, the Emperor is angry now.> {the last utterance seemed to be directed to the contestant}

19. Jang: Yauh sing ge chou-haaih gum maih-=
    <sandals with a string, they become[12] >

20. =Jehng: Jau jau jau.
    <Go go go.> {gesturing the contestant to recede to the backstage}

21. Jyu: Do-jeh. {The contestant walked to the backstage}
    <Thank you.>

22. Jehng: Ngoh-deih yauh-cheng sahp-yat houh ....
    <We'd like to invite Number Eleven ....>

By always occupying the question slot (e.g., turn 6) and the comment/re-question slot (e.g., turns 8-10) of the three-part discourse format of 'host question-contestant answer-host comment/re-question', the hosts exercise strong power to initiate (and thus determine) topics, to control topic change as well as to shape the contestants' answer to fit their own topic agenda.

The structure of the conversations between the other contestants and the two male hosts resembles the one exemplified in Except 2. The contestant is given speaking slots only to greet the emperor, to answer the hosts' questions about what to present to the emperor, to explain the auspicious meaning of the present, and to say thanks to the hosts, and then she is to recede to the backstage to make space for the next contestant to enter into another similar conversation with the male hosts. The Pharaoh-cum-emperor-host invariably finds fault with the logic of the contestant's explanation of the auspicious meaning of the present (done in the comment/re-question slot), as invariably an odd object is given to the contestant to offer as a present (e.g., a green hat, a pair of straw sandals, a white candle, etc.). The contestants all the time remain smiling and appeasing. For instance, as can be seen in Excerpt 2 above, in the conversation of 22 speaking turns, the contestant has only five speaking turns. The first (turn 4) and last (turn 21) are used to greet and to thank the host(s). The other three turns are used to introduce the present to the emperor (turn 7), to appease the emperor (turn 12), and to explain the auspicious meaning of the present (turn 14).

It can be seen that this treasure-offering introductory phase of the beauty contest has a peculiar social and discourse organization. The contestant is put into a difficult position where she was required to give a 'sensible' account (see the Pharaoh-host's criticism of the contestant's account in turn 15) for something insensible (the odd-object-as-a-present). There is a built-in structure in the activity and the discourse genre that makes the contestant easily open to the emperor-host's criticism regarding how sensible her account is. The court-attendant-host invariably rounds off the emperor-host's criticism and brings the conversation to an end to move on to another conversation with the next contestant. All the time, the contestants remain smiling and appeasing and after all this teasing by the emperor-host (e.g., turns 15, 17 in Excerpt 2) and patronizing by the attendant-host (e.g., turn 18, 20 in Excerpt 2), they invariably say thank you (to the hosts and/or to the television audience) and recede.

The limited space of this chapter does not permit further documentation and analysis of more examples from the 1992 Miss Hong Kong contest and from other beauty contests in recent years. Suffice it to say, that the visual and discursive texts offered to the TV audience by these beauty contest events seem to be variations on similar themes (see documentation by Ho, 1998). Similar discourse practices are also seen in these beauty contests[13] as well as the recent Mr. Hong Kong contests hosted by ATV. Invariably, the contestants have to go through the ordeal of being cast in subordinate roles without much dignity and are subjected to verbal teasing and insulting by the hosts. They are also increasingly asked to insult one another as a test of their skills to handle tricky situations (e.g., the host asks the contestants to state the shortcomings of other contestants). It seems that in the community of practice to which the hosts, producers, and script-writers belong, there is the well-established social practice of putting contestants through severe tests and trials in which the contestants are stripped of their basic human dignity. It also seems that if

the contestants can survive these tests with tactful skills, then they can become members of the community of practice to which these TV entertainers or spectacle-producers belong (e.g., the contestants who win the contest will obtain job contracts with the television company).

DISCOURSE PRACTICES AND SYMBOLIC VIOLENCE

Two important questions remain to be asked in this analysis: (a) is there an audience design behind the staging of the beauty contest spectacle, and (b) what are possible effects of the spectacle on the television audience?

Without interview data from the producers of the staged event, it is difficult to answer the first question. However, in view of the fact that the ultimate aim of the producers is to attract a large number of television viewers, who constitute the 'product' they sell to advertising agents (Scollon, 1998), it is not important what television viewers make of the show as long as they tune in to it. That might explain why the producers only seem to be concerned about making a show as spectacular, sensational and attention-getting as possible to attract a large audience. It does not matter to the producers whether the audience likes it, criticizes it, uses it as wall paper for some other on-going activities, or simply appropriates it as material for conversation topics with friends the next day. There can be a whole range of social practices associated with the show, and without ethnographic data on the watchers' social practices (Scollon, 1998), we cannot say for certain the effects of the show on the television audience.

However, the discourse practices that mediated the beauty contest spectacle seem to reflect the social practices not only of the television entertainers' community but, potentially, also of the society at large. In the beauty contest spectacle, a viewer can experience as natural, acceptable and legitimate the acts of teasing, insulting and denigrating contestants, who aspire to join the community of media stars. It does not matter whether the 'aspirant' (i.e., person aspiring to be a star) is male or female, although female aspirants are frequently positioned as passive sex objects to be consumed by powerful males (e.g., as fresh dishes to be tasted by the emperor and his entourage).

To the extent that such practices are offered as legitimate, acceptable and natural experiences, the practices are themselves acts of symbolic violence (Bourdieu, 1991). These practices project and assert a representation of the social world and the unequal relationships among different social actors in this world, and they project it not only as natural, acceptable and legitimate but also as innocuously funny and entertaining. If finding one's place and voice in this world and negotiating one's position in relation to others is a recurrent task in social interactions (Scollon, 1998), these beauty contest discourse practices seem to be both a symptomatic reflection of probably similar practices in certain sectors of our society and a powerful symbolic tool capable of shaping the ethos of our society.

NOTES

1. In recent years, there have been more and more woman immigrants from China working in this low-pay sector.
2. Cantonese names and utterances are transcribed in the Yale system.

3. Apart from the two major beauty contests, there are also a few other smaller-scale (in terms of the amount of publicity given to them by the media) beauty contests, e.g., Miss Air Hostess, Miss International Chinese, Miss Fitness, and recently and sensationally, Mr. Hong Kong.

4. See appendix for notes on transcription.

5. The Cantonese utterance "yih-ging yyuh-beih saai hai-douh gaa laa!" is equivocal; it is capable of either the active human or passive object interpretation, i.e., it can be interpreted as either "have prepared themselves here" or "have been prepared (as dishes by the cook) here".

6. "The audience" refers to both the audience in front of the stage and in front of the television screen. The live audience was most of the time not shown on the screen. It was included by the camera occasionally, e.g., when the contestants were being carried out from the back stage.

7. "The green hat" is a familiar Chinese symbol for "horns" in the Western sense. For example, when a wife is said to give a green hat to her husband to wear, it meant that she had an affair with somebody else and had cheated on her husband.

8. The terms 'footing' and 'frame' are used by Goffman (1974, 1981) to refer to the situated people's current definition, interpretation, or understanding, of the situation, of what is taking place.

9. The name of the contestant, Jyu Huhng, happens to have the same sounds as the Cantonese word, 'jyu-huhng', meaning 'pig's blood', which is a kind of Cantonese food.

10. 'Jeuk-cho' is a Cantonese slang word meaning 'to flee', usually used to describe criminals fleeing the police.

11. The Cantonese word for straw sandals is 'cho-haaih'. The first syllable 'cho' has the same sound as another Cantonese word meaning 'to marry', and 'haaih' has the same sound as another Cantonese word meaning 'to live harmoniously or happily together'.

12. Sandals with a string linking them in-between can be seen as resembling the underwear of women, and this seems to be what the Pharaoh-host is hinting at.

13. For instance, in the Miss Fitness Beauty Contest hosted by Hong Kong TVB in April 2000, the contestants are asked by the host (Eric Tsang) to use odd objects to describe themselves (e.g., washing board, pig's head, pork chop, salted egg, sausage, etc.). Again, the three-part discourse format enables the host to control the topic and tease the contestants about their answers.

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APPENDIX: NOTES ON TRANSCRIPTION

(1) Cantonese is transcribed using the Yale system. English translations of Cantonese utterances are bolded and placed in pointed brackets < > beneath the Cantonese utterances.

(2) The numeral preceding each turn is the speaking turn number.

(3) Pauses and gaps: A short pause is indicated by ".." and a longer one by "...".

(4) "...." appears at boundaries of the excerpt, indicating the untranscribed utterances.

(5) The latching of a second speaking turn to a preceding one is indicated by an equal sign "=", e.g.:

>>> Jang: Ngoh sihk di yeh heuih bong ngoh sihk sin go wo,=
>>> **<Those things I ate he tasted first,>**
>> =Jehng: Mh! Mouh-cho aa!
>>> **<Mh! That's right!>**

(6) Contextual information: Significant contextual information is given in curly brackets,
     e.g.:
     Jang: Syun sing-neui? Hei-hei! {chuckling sleazily}
          <Selecting sacred girls? Hei-hei!>
(7) Accentuation: Accentuated syllables are marked by capitalization, e.g.:
     Jehng: Haih aa! GO-GO si wahn gaa!
          <Yeh! EACH ONE he tasted first!>