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Advertising our links with Beijing

Since the Beijing massacre on June 4, relations between Hongkong and the mainland have soured considerably. Today, the reality of the "one country, two systems" concept remains very much alive in the minds of Hongkong people, while public condemnation of China's barbaric act has subsided as the territory returns to "business as usual".

In the immediate aftermath of the terrible events that took place in Tiananmen Square the support in Hongkong for the pro-democracy movement in Beijing was vociferously proclaimed - rallies, marches and speeches all demonstrated the outrage felt toward the Chinese government.

Yet only three months after that fateful day in June, Hongkong seems to have put aside its hatred of the Beijing regime in favour of a pragmatic approach to the circumstances it faces.

This is clearly demonstrated on our television screens where commercials have started to appear in Putonghua, the language of the People's Republic of China.

A Putonghua commercial for National television sets began shortly after June 4. In recent weeks an advertisement in Putonghua has been aired for 7-Up soft drinks.

Many local political pundits are now wondering whether this represents a trend as the ties between Hongkong and China grow closer in the run-up to 1997.

Advertising people disagree. They say using Putonghua is just a tactic to make the commercial "stand out from the crowd". They believe it will not become a trend,

Agnes Lam questions whether the emergence of advertisements in Putonghua on local Chinese-language television represents a trend toward closer ties between Hongkong and China in the run-up to 1997.

But some representatives of the advertising sector have stated that they would not be surprised to see commercials with mixed Cantonese and Putonghua in the near future as the Chinese official language becomes more accepted.

Hacric Law, art director of Shun Hing Advertising Company, said: "We do not have plans to produce more Putonghua commercials in the near future."

The company provides exclusive promotional services for Japan's National products, a popular brand both in Hongkong and China.

Mr Law said most of the National television commercials shown in Hongkong were produced in Japan. But the latest one was made by his company.

He explained: "The original plan was to have a copy of the commercial to be broadcast in China. So when we were informed to produce the commercials, I suggested we make a Putonghua version."

But the plan was shelved after the Chinese government imposed stringent restrictions on import goods early this year. So, the advertising company then re-examined the plan in May.

Mr Law recalled: "We went ahead with the idea of using Putonghua simply because it

But he did not think Putonghua commercials will develop into a trend.

"People may mix the language with Cantonese, in the same way as has been done with English. We are still far way from using Putonghua as a medium for communication," he said.

For the 7-Up commercial, the rational behind using Putonghua is quite different.

Jet Lam, associate creative director of Leo Burnett, said the original idea and material for the commercial came from the United States.

The commercial, which tells of an encounter between a French girl and the "7-Up guy", is produced in French.

Mr Lam said that when he was asked to convert the commercial for local broadcast he wanted to keep the original idea as much as possible. So he suggested using the original soundtrack, together with Chinese sub-titles.

But the Television and Entertainment Licensing Authority (TELA) advised that commercials made for the Chinese channels should be in Chinese.

"So we chose Putonghua - a language that can maintain the original concept of the commercial while making it stand out of from the crowd," said Mr Lam.

Mr Lam added that although Putonghua is quite popular in Hongkong, many advertisers would refrain from using it to promote their products.

"From the image point of view, many believe that Putonghua will downgrade the products because

the audience may tend to think that they are either made in China or Taiwan," he said.

But this problem does not exist with well-established brand names such as National and 7-Up because people know exactly where they come from.

Mr Lam said the fact that TELA allowed them to use Putonghua in commercials is an indicator that the language is becoming more popular.

TELA's chief entertainment standards control officer Ip Lup-sang said many commercials shown on the Chinese channels had incorporated foreign languages.

He said the licensing conditions state that commercials for the Chinese channels should be in Chinese so that the viewers receive the correct messages.

The rule has been relaxed in recent years because some of the imported products are better identified by using their English theme songs and their internationally recognised brand names.

Mr Ip said that when TELA was asked about screening commercials in Putonghua, it sought advice from the Attorney-General's office on the definition of Chinese.

"The opinion is that both Mandarin and Cantonese form the basis of the Chinese language," he said.

"Even some of the dialects such as Chiu Chow and Hakka are also regarded as Chinese."

Mr Ip said TELA has not received any more requests from advertisers wishing to televise commercials in Putonghua.