



ENDANGERED HONG KONG CULTURES AND DIALECTS

by Chan Ka-yan and Jennifer Kwok



Every Saturday morning, a group of middle-aged people sit quietly with open notebooks behind desks neatly arranged in rows. They listen to a teacher describing the vowels and grammatical structure of a language that is unfamiliar to most of us. They diligently jot notes and try to pronounce words one by one, as instructed by the teacher.

You may wonder what foreign language these adults have returned to the classroom to learn. In fact, they are learning the Teochew (also known as Chiu Chow) dialect as part of their search for the culture of their place of origin.

There are 15 students on the course, co-ordinated by the Hong Kong Baptist University and Teochew Merchants Mutual Assistance Society Limited. Most of them are in their 40s and 50s. The medium of instruction is Teochew, and most of the students are learning in order to communicate better with their elderly relatives and bosses.

Some admit they only became interested in learning about their culture as they grew older. They were not so eager to learn the dialect when they were young, even though it was commonly spoken by neighbours and family members. "At that time Hong Kong was a British colony, and I thought the dialect was outdated," Denise Khoe, one of the students says.

Khoe's comments go some way to explaining the diminishing use of traditional dialects in Hong Kong today. Traditional dialects such as Weitou spoken by New Territories people (known as Punti), Teochew by Chiu Chow people and Hakka by the Hakka or "Guest people", were once dominant within their respective communities in Hong Kong. But with Cantonese, English and now Putonghua prevailing as the official languages of Hong Kong, their significance has faded.

According to statistics from the Census and Statistics Department, the

number of people using Chinese dialects other than Cantonese and Putonghua as their usual language dropped by about 15 per cent between 1996 and 2006, from around 340,000 to about 290,000.

If the use of dialects in the age group of people in their 40s and 50s is low, their use among the younger generation is even lower. Few youngsters even bother to learn the dialects of their elders. Henry Wong, in his early 20s and studying medicine at The University of Hong Kong, is a rare exception. He is the youngest student in the Teochew class and says he is learning the dialect because he wants to know more about his ancestral town and his family.

"But when my friends learn that I am studying the Teochew dialect, they say it's worthless," he says.

His instructor, Hui Pak-kin, who has been teaching Teochew classes for 10 years, says the dialect is in decline in Hong Kong. It is his aim to preserve not just the language but also aspects of the culture, such as "Kung Fu Tea". Apart from teaching the dialect, Hui also prepares video clips introducing Teochew architecture and organizes field trips for students to experience the culture.

Besides what they learn in class, a few students also appreciate Teochew Opera. Sometimes after the Saturday class, they get together to visit Lau Fu Guang, the chief of the Teochew Opera Troupe, to play Teo music together. Lau says these student enthusiasts are the exception nowadays and that the popularity of this regional opera form is also in decline.

The performances, which are a form of ritual worship, were popular in the 1960s, especially in Wong Tai Sin and Kowloon City. Master Lau's troupe was a profitable business employing 300 Hong Kong actors and musicians.

However, with the fading popularity of Teochew opera, there are no new

Hong Kong performers and few of the old ones have remained in the industry. When the shows are staged, during the Hungry Ghost Festival, mainland actors and musicians have to be drafted in.

Besides, there are now fewer places available to stage the shows, even during the festival time. "Now we earn very little as fewer people have an interest in our performance," Lau sighs.

Still, at least Teochew culture is kept alive and is actively promoted by people like Hui and Lau and by a number of Teochew organizations and clan associations. Hoklo culture, on the other hand, does not have such an impressive array of backers.

Long before the arrival of the British, the ancestors of the Hoklo people emigrated to Hong Kong from places like Huizhou and Shanwei in Guangdong province. They mainly made their living by fishing on boats near areas such as San Mun Tsai, a fishing village near Tai Po, and Cheung Chau.

Most of them were resettled in housing estates in Tai Po and Aberdeen in the 1980s. Although their way of living has changed drastically, most Hoklo people, especially the middle aged, are still mindful of their traditional culture.



Jennifer Kwok

Denise Khoe comes well-prepared, with notes and files, for the Teochew class every Saturday morning.

Sandy So, a self-described post-70s Hoklo, always participates in traditional activities, such as Hoklo wedding ceremonies. When they lived on boats, family members would put on colourful Hoklo costumes and “rowed the dragon boat” in front of the bride’s home for the wedding party.

Even though they now live on land, they still follow a modified form of the custom. Now, they hold a paddle and symbolically row it all the way to the bride’s home on land.

So says many Hoklo customs still exist but this does not mean the culture can last. As people become more used to urban life after moving ashore, the customs have become simpler and parents do not instill the tradition in their children. “Some of the post-80s would think ‘rowing a dragon boat’ in public and putting up their hair in traditional buns is horrible,” she says.

Also, fewer Hoklo youngsters are speaking the dialect. So says most of them understand simple Hoklo but cannot speak it well. They have spoken Cantonese since childhood and communicate in Cantonese with friends in school. Neither do their parents teach or require them to learn Hoklo.

“Even when older people talk in the Hoklo dialect at home, young people just answer in Cantonese,” she says.

So Lai-Kwan, who describes herself as a post-80s Hoklo, does not speak in the Hoklo dialect. “It sounds bad,” she says.

The Hoklo in Hong Kong are not the only people in danger of losing their culture. Other dialects such as Weitou and Hakka face a similar threat.

“Punti” or local New Territories people with surnames like Tang, Hou and Liu moved to Hong Kong from Guangxi and Jiangxi from the Song Dynasty onwards. They spoke the Weitou dialect and farmed in areas of the New Territories such as Sheung Shui and Tai Po.

The Hakka were farmers from Guangdong, first recruited to Hong Kong to help cultivate farmland in the early Qing Dynasty. Later they either rented farmland to make a living from local people or cultivated farmland in remote valleys such as Sha Tau Kok.

Keen to help preserve these dialects, the Association for Conservation of Hong Kong Indigenous Languages was set up in 2008. Lau Chun-fat, the vice president of the association, is a Hakka. He and his friends often lament that dialects like Weitou and Hakka, which they were so attached to in childhood, are rarely spoken by the younger generation.

So, despite strong pressure and

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The instructor Hui Pak-kin describes a video clip to students.

discouragement from his relatives, he insisted on teaching his son and daughter Hakka when they were children. Lau thinks there is a stigma attached to local dialects. In the past, people always thought that those who spoke Hakka or Weitou must be uneducated.

“The problem of the diminishing local dialects is not really about children but their parents,” explains Lau.

Lau and his friends set up the association to help preserve the dialects. He knows it is an impossible task, but he feels he does not have a choice. Even if the dialects cannot be preserved as living and spoken languages, then at least they can be documented and archived. “It’s like making specimens and taking pictures of an animal before it becomes extinct,” says Lau.

He added, the association is looking for young Hakka and Weitou descendants, especially university students, to help with dialect preservation. They will organize courses to teach the dialects to people in their 20s and 30s. The hope

is they will become fluent and will, in turn, continue to pass on their ancestral tongue to their children.

Also, the association has been given \$100,000 in funding from the Lord Wilson Heritage Trust to build an online Hakka and Weitou Chinese characters’ pronunciation database to attract young people to learn more about these dialects.

One thing in Lau’s favour is that the Hakka are very proud of their heritage and identity.

“Hakka people have an old saying: ‘We should never lose our dialect even though we have to sacrifice our land,’” says Chang Song-hing, a research professor of the Department of Chinese Language and Literature at The Chinese University of Hong Kong (CUHK).

Chang, who is a Hoklo, says the Hakka are enthusiastic about preserving their culture. But he points out that it is hard to carry out research as many of the elderly who best know about their culture and dialects are illiterate.

However, Chang says there is great potential for dialect studies in Hong Kong. The CUHK has organised a few courses on Jiangxi dialects and a field trip to the region, which Chang says were popular with students. There are also some postgraduates working on Teochew dialects.

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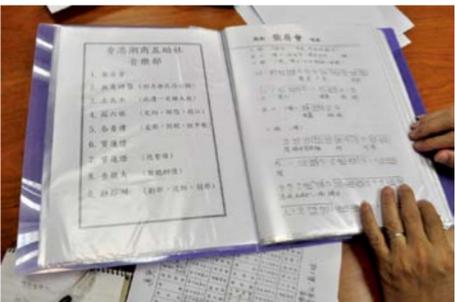
With a new generation of youngsters in Hong Kong and Guangzhou preparing to fight to preserve Cantonese language and culture against the encroachment of Putonghua, the spotlight will fall on other local dialects too: can they be sustained, or will they gradually be replaced by dominant languages?

Lau Chun-fat, the vice-president of the indigenous languages association, explains his mission with a metaphor. Hong Kong is like a garden, he says, and mainstream languages, like Cantonese, are like red roses. “But it would be too plain if there were only red roses all over this garden.”

“Some flowers have been cut off as buds, but the branches remain. I hope someone will grow these flowers again someday.”



Lau Chun-fat, the vice president of the local dialect preservation group, suggests local dialects can be passed down with the next generation’s involvement.



This is the music sheet for Teochew opera, consisting of several Teochew songs.



The above two photos show Sandy So and her family members demonstrating the Hoklo custom of “paddling” in front of the bride’s home wearing traditional wedding costumes.



The above two pictures are the display houses of Weitou (on the left hand side) and Hakka (on the right hand side).

