

Cantonese Preservation and the Ethnic Identity of Contemporary Hoa People in Vietnam

Tang Cheuk Fung Leo

Vietnamese Chinese (Hoa people) has settled in Vietnam for generations, and yet Cantonese is still widely used in their daily life. Cantonese being the ethnic language of Vietnamese Chinese in Vietnam is the result of the following reasons: First, Cantonese is the largest dialect group in the Vietnamese Chinese community. Second, Cantonese was the first dialect group settled in Vietnam. Third, the ideology of Cantonese is more conserve than other dialect groups. Fourth, the instrumental value of Cantonese is higher than other Chinese dialects. Being an ethnic minority and at a disadvantage in government policies, the preservation of Cantonese among ethnic Chinese in Vietnam deserves attention. The purpose of this study is to investigate the factors influencing the preservation of Cantonese among Vietnamese Chinese, examine the linkage between language preservation and ethnic identity, and look into the strategies Vietnamese Chinese may adopt to maintain their ethnic language in the future. Field study was conducted in Ho Chi Minh City during the summer of 2018. In-depth interviewing and participant observation were utilized as main data collecting methods, supplemented by a survey. A total of 24 interviewees participated in this study, in which half were male and half female, and the age range was between 20 to 82 years old.

There is a geographic difference in the popularity of Cantonese in Ho Chi Minh City; the language is more widely used in Districts 5, 6, 10 and 11 of Ho Chi Minh City, where Vietnamese Chinese are highly concentrated. The proficiency in Cantonese of Vietnamese Chinese is in decline along with generation, and code mixing is a common practice among Vietnamese Chinese youths. The diminution in instrumental value of

Cantonese was brought by the social transformation and policy development in Vietnam, the disruption of the Chinese education system, and the marginalization of local Chinese media. These factors influenced the opportunity for Vietnamese Chinese to learn Cantonese and their ability to use the language, formed the generational difference in the experiences of ethnic language learning and practice, and shaped the preservation of Cantonese.

Due to the complex historical background, Vietnamese Chinese developed multiple identities. According to the survey data, “Vietnamese Chinese” is the most identified identity, followed by “Vietnamese.” The definition and transformation of ethnic identity of Vietnamese Chinese are affected by intermarriage, social institutions, as well as the labelling of in-group and outgroup. Overall, Vietnamese Chinese have gradually formed a localized identity. This result supports the perspective of Shih (2017) and Chan (2018) that, in the case of Vietnamese Chinese, the conceptual framework of Chinese diaspora is no longer applicable.

Cantonese preservation is found to be positively related to the strength of identity of being Vietnamese Chinese. Most of the Vietnamese Chinese consider Cantonese as an important element of their ethnic culture. By practicing Cantonese, in-group solidarity and ethnic identity can be strengthened. Therefore, they take for granted that Vietnamese Chinese ought to use and preserve their ethnic language. However, there are some Vietnamese Chinese who identify themselves as Vietnamese Chinese but do not speak Cantonese. These people are called “Mất Gốc” by other members of the ethnic group.

In contemporary Vietnam, the social conditions that favorable for using Cantonese and the channels to teach and learn have gradually disappeared. Therefore, to maintain and preserve Cantonese in the Vietnamese Chinese community is far more difficult

than before. By summing up interviewees' thoughts and experiences, performing language transmission at home and sending children to Chinese language centers for formal Chinese education are the most efficient ways to ensure that the future generations will still be capable of using Cantonese and avoid ethnic language attrition.

Keywords: Hoa people, Vietnamese Chinese, Cantonese, ethnic language, language preservation, identity, minority.