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 “At that time Hong Kong was a British colony, and I thought the dialect was outdated,” Denise Khoe, one of the students says.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 has shrunk significantly in recent years. 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 life has changed drastically, most Hoklo people, especially the middle aged, are still mindful of their traditional culture.
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 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’ is horrible,” she says.

"Even when older people talk in the Hoklo dialect at home, young people in their 20s and 30s are not surprised,” says Lau Chun-fat. "They still follow a modified form of the Hoklo custom. Now, they hold a paddle and not a dragon boat in public and putting up their hair in Hoklo costumes and ‘rowed the dragon boat’ in front of the bride’s home."

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.

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

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.

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

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