

Language Choice of Teochew Chinese Students in Vinh Chau – Soc Trang Today



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ABSTRACT: The Teochew Chinese have established their presence in Vinh Chau (Soc Trang Province) for over three centuries, evolving into a dynamic community that values numerous cultural dimensions intrinsic to the Teochew heritage. Nonetheless, the simultaneous existence of the Vietnamese and Khmer populations introduces significant challenges to the maintenance of these traditional cultural values. This scholarly article is predicated on the theoretical framework that posits the interplay between language and culture as a catalyst for the metamorphosis of various cultures through mechanisms of cultural exchange and acculturation. Employing a qualitative research methodology that encompasses in-depth interviews along with a thorough examination of relevant documents, materials, and scholarly articles, this study seeks to elucidate the determinants that influence the language selection of the Teochew community in Vinh Chau, Soc Trang Province. Through this investigation, we aspire to analyze, assess, and propose strategic recommendations for the preservation and enhancement of the Teochew language within the broader Chinese cultural milieu.

KEYWORDS: Language Selection, Teochew, Vinh Chau, Soc Trang

I. INTRODUCTION

The Chinese demographic in Vietnam is categorized into five linguistic groups, recognized as the most populous, namely: Cantonese, Fujian, Chaozhou, Hainan, and Hakka, delineated by the linguistic characteristics they embody and the original cultural heritage they encapsulate. The Chaozhou populace is globally dispersed. Amidst the migratory movements prompted by warfare and societal upheaval in China, the Chaozhou Chinese sought alternative habitable locations for their communities. In the context of Vietnam, the Chaozhou individuals are predominantly located in the Southern Delta, particularly in urban centers such as Ho Chi Minh City, Dong Nai, Soc Trang, Bac Lieu, Tra Vinh, and Ca Mau. "The Chaozhou people, also referred to as the Tieu people, are a segment of the Han ethnic group inhabiting the Chaozhou or Chaoshan district of Guangdong province in contemporary China" ("The Chaozhou people," 2023). The article employs the designations: Chinese people, Tieu people, or Chaozhou people interchangeably to denote the Chaozhou Chinese populace residing in Vinh Chau, Soc Trang. The Teochew community can be found in diverse regions worldwide, particularly in areas where the Chinese have successfully settled during the migratory epoch following the "Resist the Qing and Restore the Ming" movement, subsequent to their departure from their ancestral lands to new territories. The Teochew cultural heritage and the Teochew language (Teochew language) face an imminent threat of obsolescence due to cultural exchanges and acculturative processes with their newfound environments. The Teochew community possesses the capacity to communicate in both Vietnamese and Khmer. The Chinese Teochew inhabitants are compelled to undergo transformation to assimilate into their new residential contexts, thereby rendering language as an essential communicative instrument; without it, the process of interaction becomes severely constrained. The Chinese populace must endeavor to safeguard their cultural identity while simultaneously acquiring new languages essential for conducting commerce, engaging in daily life, and ensuring their survival within the surrounding societal framework.

There exist numerous modalities through which individuals may convey information; however, the most effective and potent instrument of communication is undoubtedly language. Verbal expression represents a mode of communication, and it is through language that individuals are afforded the capability to comprehend one another. Linguistic evolution invariably correlates with cultural transformation and progression. The outcomes of communicative endeavors will inevitably shift in response to alterations in the sociocultural environment of a given community. The Chaozhou ethnic group, originating from China, migrated to Vietnam

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throughout historical developments. They are necessitated to adapt in order to achieve integration within the community they elect to inhabit. Within the context of national culture, language serves as a distinct component. If language, in conjunction with labor, contributes to the formation of individuals, then language, alongside labor, constitutes the foundation of all cultures (Tran Ngoc Them, 2014: 66). A contemporary issue that has emerged is that a significant proportion of young Chinese individuals (students) lack proficiency in their ethnic language. In familial settings, youth primarily possess knowledge of basic communicative phrases in their mother tongue (Tiec language), whereas in educational institutions, they predominantly acquire proficiency in Vietnamese (particularly in public schools). Only those families that opt to enroll their children in private Chinese educational institutions (such as Canh Thanh and Boi Thanh private schools) are afforded an academic curriculum that encompasses both Teec language and Vietnamese education. Nonetheless, the educational programs at private institutions necessitate substantial tuition fees, thus rendering them accessible primarily to families with sufficient resources who aspire for their children to attain academic advancement relative to preceding generations (attaining literacy and subsequently engaging in commerce with members of the Chinese or Taiwanese communities).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Research pertaining to the Chinese demographic in Vietnam must encompass contributions from scholars who have extensively examined this community, including figures such as Chau Thi Hai, Phan An. Presently, there exists a dearth of theses and dissertations in academic institutions, as well as scholarly articles relevant to the exploration of Chinese culture. For contemporary members of the Chinese community, the decision to preserve or transform various facets of social existence presents a formidable challenge. This is particularly evident in the realm of language, where cultural shifts pose significant obstacles to the maintenance of linguistic heritage. The scholarly work titled "Teaching Chinese Literature of the Trieu Chau Chinese in the Mekong Delta - a case study of Vinh Hai commune, Vinh Chau district, Soc Trang province" authored by Truong Anh Tien serves as an academic treatise focused on the acquisition of Chinese language skills among the Chinese population in Vinh Hai commune, Vinh Chau, Soc Trang. "The thesis aims to elucidate the factors and underlying causes that exert a decisive influence on the current state of Chinese literature education within the Trieu Chau Chinese community (in Vinh Hai). The decision of the Chinese community to engage in the study of Chinese language is motivated by the desire to sustain ethnic identity or may stem from practical considerations such as the utility of Chinese as a means for employment acquisition and livelihood support amidst the multifaceted influences of globalization" (Truong Anh Tien, 2017).

Truong Thuan Loi's thesis, titled "Cultural Awareness through Language Choice of the Chinese People of Chaozhou in Soc Trang," presents a wealth of valuable insights regarding the Chaozhou community. Drawing from the author's own heritage as a member of the Chaozhou ethnicity, coupled with a profound appreciation for the cultural traditions of his people, the work elucidates the historical origins of the Chaozhou populace and their migration to the southern region. The Chaozhou community residing in Soc Trang is currently recognized for having preserved the most significant elements of their cultural identity compared to Chaozhou groups in other geographical areas. Nevertheless, throughout the process of establishing their presence in this new locale, the Chaozhou Chinese encountered significant cultural exchanges and acculturation with pre-existing ethnic groups. Consequently, the author undertook a comprehensive investigation, employing interviews and analyses, into the Chaozhou people's decisions regarding the retention or abandonment, or a combination of both, of their native language as it pertains to the younger demographics. This examination enabled the author to propose several strategies aimed at addressing the challenges of sustaining the Chaozhou language within the Chaozhou community during an era characterized by vigorous cultural exchanges and acculturation (Truong Thuan Loi, 2022).

III. METHODOLOGIES

Vinh Chau Town is populated by approximately 170,000 individuals (Population in 2019: 38,574 households with 166,728 individuals). Among this population, the Chinese ethnic group comprises 6,469 households, totaling over 29,587 individuals (People's Committee of Vinh Chau Town, 2019: 1). In the early years of the nation's renovation, the government promulgated Directive No. 256-CP on October 11, 1986, issued by the Chairman of the Council of Ministers, addressing educational initiatives for the Chinese community, stating that "Children of the Chinese are educated and trained according to the common guidelines and goals for children of all ethnic groups. Chinese students study alongside students from other ethnic groups in general schools, professional secondary schools, vocational schools, and universities..." (Chairman of the Council of Ministers, 1986: 07). Presently, there exist educational institutions that provide instruction in the Teochew script and language to local residents; however, these institutions are predominantly private and lack governmental support. Vinh Chau is home to three private educational establishments: Canh Thanh Private Primary School, Tan Hung Private Primary School, and Boi Thanh Private Primary and Secondary School. "Boi Thanh Secondary School comprises 02 levels: 30 primary classes and 08 secondary classes" (Tran Tri Van,

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2022: 3). The Chinese high school curriculum at Boi Thanh School permits students to advance only up to grade 11, culminating in graduation with proficiency in the Teochew language. This article employs qualitative research methodologies, secondary data analysis, and synthesis of extant literature from prior scholars, alongside surveys and in-depth interviews, to comprehend the transformations and adaptations to new phenomena, particularly regarding the language and culture of the new environment. Furthermore, it investigates the challenges faced in preserving and sustaining one's native language within the contemporary context of globalization, thereby contributing to the enrichment of Vietnamese cultural characteristics, which are unified in diversity while still reflecting distinct identities.

IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

A. Educational environment as a rationale of the Teochew Chinese students' language choice

Dialect constitutes a linguistic system utilized by a specific demographic within a society, often delineated by geographical or social boundaries. In the context of China, Mandarin (Guānhuà) is employed as the official language, with Beijing Mandarin serving as the phonetic foundation for the standardized form of Chinese within the nation. Teochew represents a dialect within the broader Chinese cultural framework (the Chinese populace in Vietnam is categorized into five principal linguistic divisions owing to their diverse dialects); nevertheless, the majority of written expressions predominantly utilize Chinese characters. Consequently, for a period, Chinese communities in Vietnam adopted the But Dam method—essentially, due to linguistic disparities (although they all identify as Chinese, mutual intelligibility is hindered by dialectal variations), they resorted to Chinese characters for communication. The educational institutions that persist and function today are primarily sustained through the financial contributions of Chinese associations, philanthropists, and benefactors who have invested both labor and financial resources to enhance the infrastructure and provisions of these schools. Complementing this are the contributions from the community and families whose children are enrolled in these educational establishments. This collective effort facilitates the payment of educators' salaries, rewards for exemplary students, and scholarships for academically inclined yet economically disadvantaged learners. Such initiatives have significantly fostered a robust community spirit within Chinese cultural paradigms. The profound affection of the Chinese populace for their compatriots has played a pivotal role in the advancement of the Chinese community in Vinh Chau. The significance of language education within the family unit is paramount among the Chinese, as one salient rationale underpinning this practice is the ancestral imperative for cultural preservation subsequent to their migration as Northerners fleeing warfare. "My family is of limited means; consequently, it is imperative that children acquire the language of their forebears, which compels my uncle to mandate that my children learn the Teochew language" (Uncle L.V.T, born in 1965, farmer, Vinh Chau). When paternal and maternal grandparents, along with relatives, converse in Teochew, children are likely to adopt this linguistic habit and employ their ethnic language. Conversely, if familial interactions are conducted in Vietnamese, such a linguistic propensity is unlikely to develop. "From my perspective, if I initially utilize Teochew for responses or dialogue, I will fundamentally adhere to that practice. However, should one commence communication in Vietnamese, transitioning to Teochew will prove exceedingly challenging" (Mr. L.D.C, born in 1993, sales, Vinh Chau). Currently, the Chaozhou Chinese predominantly communicate in Vietnamese, adopting it as their principal language of daily life. "Their proficiency in Vietnamese and its usage surpass that of any other language, including their native tongue" (Dinh Lu Giang, 2017: 19). Within familial contexts, the use of Teochew is infrequent, while simultaneously, family members (parents) actively encourage their offspring to acquire proficiency in Mandarin Chinese should they wish to study the language, primarily due to its significance in securing future employment opportunities (as they will likely engage with Chinese individuals who converse in Mandarin).

"I engage in the bilingual study of Chinese and Vietnamese to enhance my prospective employment opportunities within Chinese or Vietnamese communities; moreover, I aspire to pursue higher education abroad in Taiwan subsequent to the completion of high school" (L.T.H.M, grade 12 student at Boi Thanh Private School, Vinh Chau). The Chinese language encompasses both oral and written forms, whereas speakers of Teochew dialect exhibit distinct spoken variations yet utilize Cantonese for written communication. "I am motivated to acquire my ethnic language alongside Vietnamese to safeguard my cultural heritage. Every member of my family communicates in Teochew, and my grandmother is entirely unfamiliar with Vietnamese" (L.T.H.H, grade 10 student).

In contemporary society, the majority of youth and children possess minimal or no proficiency in the Teochew language. This phenomenon can be attributed to the geographical distance of educational institutions offering Teochew language instruction, resulting in children being enrolled in state-operated kindergartens, where instruction is predominantly delivered by Vietnamese or Khmer educators. Private establishments that provide Teochew language education typically only offer instruction until the conclusion of primary education. Following this stage, students primarily interact with their Vietnamese and Khmer peers. Vietnamese remains the predominant medium of communication, and the educational curriculum is exclusively Vietnamese. Consequently, numerous children acquire the language but gradually cease to utilize it, consequently severing their cultural ties.

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This situation culminates in children maturing with a superficial understanding of their mother tongue. "Thus, within this generation, even individuals born in the 1990s did not utilize Teochew within the school context. In Vinh Hai commune, the linguistic transition appears to be notably slower, as children born in 2009 still reported utilizing Teochew within the academic environment" (Truong Thuan Loi, 2022: 73). Presently, only Canh Thanh and Boi Thanh private schools provide instruction across all educational levels. However, the associated tuition fees are relatively elevated due to the implementation of a bilingual curriculum. Upon entering high school, students are obliged to enroll in public educational institutions. Should they desire, their only option for private education remains limited to these institutions (Mr. H.D.B, born in 1950). Nonetheless, the scarcity of high schools in the vicinity necessitates that students commute to urban areas to attend Chinese language courses at either Canh Thanh or Boi Thanh private schools. Students are compelled to secure housing nearby due to the considerable distance from their residences, resulting in significant logistical challenges for both families and learners. Only those families residing in urban locales possess the means to facilitate bilingual education. Conversely, families located in remote areas encounter substantial barriers. While the acquisition of a language is feasible, the inability to further one's education at the tertiary level may lead to a scenario where individuals possess knowledge of a language yet lack the opportunity for practical application, ultimately resulting in the erosion of their linguistic abilities. This situation perpetuates a detrimental cycle concerning the pursuit of foreign language acquisition. Conversely, the foreign language that Teochew individuals typically learn within private or non-public educational settings is Teochew, whereas the majority of their interactions are with individuals proficient in Cantonese.

The populace of Southern China fortifies and nurtures their ethnic culture through two fundamental tenets: the familial lineage cultural tradition as dictated by the patriarchal line and the folk belief system encompassing deities such as Quan De, Thien Hau, and Bac De (Nguyen, 2019: 8). Nonetheless, in contemporary society, the younger generations exhibit a diminishing familiarity with their ethnic vernacular. While the elder demographic remains at home, the youth are compelled to engage in external employment, thereby necessitating the use of the lingua franca, Vietnamese, in lieu of their native tongue. The acquisition of the script and language pertaining to the Trieu Chau ethnic group has not garnered substantive investment or attention from governmental entities, relying instead on the autonomous efforts of individuals who cherish the Hoa ethnic identity and strive to preserve its cultural heritage. However, it is evident that the language and script of the Trieu people have not been adequately employed, leading to an inevitable risk of obsolescence.

Among the three ethnic communities residing in Vinh Chau today, Vietnamese remains the predominant language, as it serves as the primary medium for official documents and media communications. Although Soc Trang Television broadcasts programs in ethnic languages, the investment in such programs is limited, particularly in the realm of news reporting. Moreover, over half of Soc Trang's demographic is comprised of Khmer individuals, followed by Vietnamese and ultimately Chinese. It is evident that the Chinese constitute an ethnic minority within this societal framework, thereby rationalizing the predominance of Vietnamese and Khmer languages in daily communication. "The locality is characterized by a significant presence of ethnic minorities. The overall population within the area is 164,622 individuals. Among these, the Kinh ethnic group comprises 50,898 individuals, representing 28.93% of the total population; the Khmer ethnic group encompasses 86,204 individuals, accounting for 54.43%, while the Chinese ethnic group consists of 27,520 individuals, constituting 16.76%" (Tran Tri Van, 2022).

A considerable proportion of contemporary youth lacks proficiency in written Teochew, largely due to the infrequent use of the language following its initial instruction, which primarily occurred during primary education. In terms of oral communication, Teochew speakers continue to utilize the language for basic interactions; however, this is predominantly limited to fundamental conversational phrases. Presently, in Ho Chi Minh City, the Nghia An Association offers complimentary Teochew language classes to all interested parties. Nevertheless, our research indicates that the efficacy of these educational sessions is suboptimal for a multitude of reasons. The principal concern pertains to the underlying motivation for individuals to pursue this linguistic study. In the prevailing work environment, Teochew is not utilized, with Chinese predominantly manifesting in the Cantonese dialect. Consequently, learners often experience a deficiency in motivation and tend to become disheartened, as evidenced by the minimal enrollment numbers observed in these classes and the laxity in attendance. The impetus for the continuation and advancement of these classes is considerably low, necessitating the engagement and support of associations and governmental bodies for successful development.

In Vinh Chau, certain localities have initiated educational programs aimed at instructing individuals in the Teochew language; however, the sustainability of these programs predominantly relies on the contributions from private individuals, community associations, and the populace. As a result, a significant challenge arises for Teochew language classes, which are at risk of gradual extinction due to insufficient recognition and support from governmental authorities at all levels, including state efforts to enhance educational opportunities within ethnic minority communities throughout Vietnam. At present, families are enrolling their children in bilingual education schemes that encompass both Vietnamese and Chinese, driven by a shared objective of safeguarding Chinese cultural heritage. Nonetheless, the prevailing rationale expressed by families is articulated as follows: "Our

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aim is for them to acquire the language; once they complete their secondary education, we will facilitate their study in Taiwan. Consequently, there will be no necessity to continue learning the language, as whether they choose to remain in Taiwan for employment or return to Vietnam to work for Taiwanese or Chinese enterprises is equally acceptable" (Ms. T.M.A, born in 1979, housewife, Vinh Chau).

The mass educational approach directed towards the broader Chinese populace, and specifically the Teochew community, has resulted in the gradual abandonment of the Teochew language, leading to its diminishing presence and written form. In reality, it is imperative for the state to implement policies that incentivize ethnic minorities to sustain their cultural identity and enhance their cultural capital, rather than concentrating exclusively on education in Vietnamese.

Currently, all regions within the Vinh Chau district host communities of Teochew Chinese residents. Chinese associations are proactively engaged in assisting the Chinese population in their everyday lives while simultaneously working to preserve their cultural heritage. Notably, individual contributions from overseas Chinese have significantly aided the Vinh Chau Chinese community in advancing both their material and spiritual well-being. Recently, collective contributions from individuals, associations, and the community have exceeded 60 billion VND for the construction, restoration, and enhancement of Chinese cultural sites. The cultural heritage of the Chinese community has been, and continues to be, actively preserved. However, the predominant challenge lies in the fact that many young individuals remain unaware of the cultural traditions of their own ethnic group.

B. Lack of legal regulars as a rationale of the Teochew Chinese students' language choice

According to the Law on Cultural Heritage of 2013, Article 21, Chapter 3, it is stipulated that: The State is responsible for the protection and development of the spoken and written languages of Vietnamese ethnic groups through several measures, including: instructing government officials, civil servants, public employees, and military personnel engaged in ethnic minority regions in the languages of those minorities as required by their professional duties; educating ethnic minority students in their respective languages in accordance with the provisions of the Education Law; publishing literature and media, as well as producing radio, television, and theatrical programs in the languages of ethnic minorities" (National Assembly of the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, 2009).

Thus, while the legal framework concerning cultural heritage has been established, the execution of these legal provisions presents its own set of challenges. Presently, in Vinh Chau, private educational institutions founded by Chinese individuals and organizations are providing instruction in Chinese characters and cultural studies for Chinese children, whereas public primary and secondary educational institutions have yet to incorporate language instruction for ethnic minorities into their curricula.

The regular utilization of one or more languages facilitates the acquisition of those languages owing to the immersive practice context. Nonetheless, a distinction exists between oral and written forms of languages. The Chinese linguistic community is categorized into five principal groups as a result of this divergence. While spoken languages vary, they all employ a unified system of written communication, namely Chinese characters. Nevertheless, not every individual possesses the capacity to acquire a foreign language or an alternative language for learning purposes.

It is not inherently expected that the acquisition of a foreign language necessitates a practice environment. When learners are exposed to familiar phonetic pronunciations, they will inherently assimilate and comprehend that language. Thus, the process of learning a foreign language constitutes a habit that is cultivated over time.

The selection of a language is contingent upon the context; for instance, when individuals of Chinese descent return to their familial settings, the elder members predominantly communicate in Teochew, resulting in conversations primarily conducted in that dialect. Conversely, in social environments, educational institutions, or interactions characterized by a scarcity of Chinese speakers, communication necessitates the use of Vietnamese or Khmer.

The language that is most salient within a given context will be preferred. For instance, in a group or community where the majority speak Chinese Teochew, that language will be utilized, whereas in a community where Vietnamese predominates, Vietnamese will be employed to ensure comprehension, as conversing in Chinese may lead to misunderstandings. This underscores the functional essence of language at this juncture. The selection of language can be either spontaneous or systematic, and in the case study presented, both approaches exert specific influences.

Vietnamese serves as the medium of instruction in educational institutions, is utilized in governmental agencies, and is integral to everyday communication within these entities. Consequently, Vietnamese is the language employed in legal documentation. However, within the broadcasting of news programs by Soc Trang Television, as well as in newspapers and radio broadcasts, alongside Vietnamese, Chinese and Khmer are also utilized to ensure that the populace comprehends the content of announcements and news comprehensively.

V. CONCLUSIONS

The Chaozhou community in Vinh Chau, Soc Trang is progressively experiencing a decline in the use of their native language, as evidenced by the lack of interest among younger generations in acquiring their mother tongue for various reasons. Hence, the preservation of the Chaozhou (Tieu) ethnic language has become an increasingly pressing concern. The widespread use of Vietnamese by the populace is attributed to its status as the language of instruction and its employment in official documentation. Advantages are accompanied by challenges, notably that while Chinese and Khmer speakers comprehend Vietnamese, the reverse is not necessarily true, as many Vietnamese individuals lack proficiency in Chinese and Khmer. Particularly within governmental agencies, there appears to be minimal engagement from ethnic minorities in administrative roles, which has resulted in diminished focus on policies affecting these communities. The ongoing processes of cultural exchange and acculturation among ethnic groups have contributed to the gradual erosion and transformation of ethnic languages, necessitating support from local and national authorities to ensure equitable cultural development for minority groups. Simultaneously, it is crucial to foster the unique identities of each ethnic group within the contemporary context, thereby enhancing the collective identity of the 54 ethnic groups in Vietnam.

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