

Chaozhou-Shantou Dialect and Chaozhou Culture

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Abstract: Chaoshan dialect is an integral part of Chinese language, and the Chaoshan culture is an important branch of Chinese culture. The development of Chaoshan dialect is closely related to the culture of the Chaoshan people. This paper expounds its influence on the Chaoshan dialect from two aspects, namely, the excessive culture of the Chaoshan people and the food culture of the Chaoshan people, through the method of literature and field investigation, and shows that the more frequent and important things in a certain culture are, the more likely they are to be lexicalized or the higher the degree of lexicalization.

keywords: Chaoshan dialect; Teochew people; Culture

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1. Research Significance and Objectives

The Chaoshan dialect constitutes a significant branch of the Chinese language, while Chaoshan culture represents an important facet of Chinese civilization. The Chaoshan dialect and Chaoshan culture have mutually advanced and developed. As a living fossil for studying ancient Chinese and invaluable material for researching the phonetic history of the Chinese language (Lin Luen-lun, 2017), the Chaoshan dialect has long been valued by scholars of Chinese dialectology, phonology, and historical linguistics. Within its words and phrases, one can discern the accumulated essence of Chaozhou culture; even a simple sentence or word carries the sentiments of the Chaozhou people. Chaozhou people are scattered across the globe, and the Chaozhou dialect serves as a vital bond for their sense of identity. However, with the intensified promotion of Mandarin, the Chaozhou dialect now finds itself in a weakened, passive position. The younger generation can speak Mandarin but struggles to speak Chaozhou dialect fluently, making its preservation an urgent matter. This paper will focus on the Chaoshan region, exploring the close connection between the Chaoshan dialect and the overseas Chinese culture and culinary traditions within Chaoshan culture, aiming to better disseminate Chaoshan culture.

2. Conceptual Definitions

(1) Chaoshan dialect

Chaozhou dialect, also known as Chaozhou speech or Chaozhou vernacular, belongs to the Min Nan dialect family. It stands as one of China's most ancient and distinctive dialects today. Guo Moruo once remarked, "Chaozhou dialect preserves the most ancient Chinese elements of any dialect." Indeed, it retains numerous archaic Chinese features, earning widespread recognition as a "living fossil of ancient Chinese."

Broadly defined, Chaoshan dialect refers to the Min Nan dialect spoken across four cities in the eastern coastal region of Guangdong Province: Chaozhou, Jieyang, Shantou, and Shanwei. It is also used by some residents in Fengshun County, Meizhou City (specifically in Tangkeng Town, Liuhan Town, and Tangnan Town), as well as in

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overseas communities predominantly in Southeast Asia where Chaoshan people gather. Small pockets of Chaozhou-Shantou dialect are also spoken in border areas of Nanjing, Pinghe, and Zhao'an counties in Zhangzhou. Workers at ports, railways, mines, and state-owned farms in Hainan Province use Chaozhou-Shantou dialect.

Chaozhou-Shantou dialect is one of the surviving remnants of ancient Chinese language traceable to pre-Qin times before the Tang Dynasty, making it one of China's oldest official languages. Chaozhou dialect features 18 initials, 61 finals, and 8 tones. It preserves numerous archaic phonetics, ancient character pronunciations, historical vocabulary, and traditional tones absent in modern Mandarin (Putonghua), earning it the title "living fossil of ancient Chinese." This makes it of significant value in linguistic research. According to historical records, the Chaozhou dialect originated during the Qin and Han dynasties, took shape during the Tang and Song dynasties, and after the Ming dynasty, it completely diverged from Min dialects to become an independent sub-dialect.

Influenced by maritime culture, Chaozhou dialect features distinctive and intriguing tones. An amusing anecdote illustrates this: During the Cultural Revolution, a Chaozhou opera troupe traveled for a performance. The train car filled with Chaozhou dialect, alarming the attendant who urgently reported to the conductor that a group of Japanese passengers were aboard. This story reflects how, to outsiders, Chaozhou dialect sounds like a foreign language.

(2) Chaozhou culture

Chaozhou culture is the cultural heritage created by the people of Chaoshan. In his book *The Grand Culture of Chaoshan*, Mr. Du Songnian states: "Chaoshan culture is the distinctively regional culture created by Chaoshan people residing locally, those living in other parts of China and overseas, and those concerned with Chaoshan affairs. It falls under the broad category of popular culture, encompassing both material and spiritual culture. with its scope encompassing Chaozhou culture as a form of regional group culture." His formulation places 'regional' as a modifier, with the core emphasis on "group culture." This paper uses "Chaozhou diaspora culture" rather than "Chaozhou culture" precisely because the former denotes a broader scope than the latter. Chaozhou's unique historical context has led to a significant overseas Chaozhou diaspora, and these overseas Chaozhou people are an integral part of Chaozhou. Therefore, this paper employs a term with collective significance rather than one with geographical connotations.

3. The Culture of Overseas Migration in Chaoshan Dialect and Chaozhou Culture

The Chaoshan region is renowned as a homeland of overseas Chinese. Since the Ming and Qing dynasties, Chaoshan natives have continuously crossed oceans in search of livelihoods, resulting in overseas Chinese and ethnic Chinese of Chaoshan descent now numbering nearly as many as those residing locally. In the Chaoshan and southern Fujian regions, "fan" refers to Southeast Asia. "Guo fan" thus means "to go to Southeast Asia." While the history and customs of "guo fan" have faded into the past, the Chaoshan dialect preserves traces of the "red-headed ships" cutting through waves, as well as the interactions and influences between Chaoshan people and the populations of their host countries during their overseas journeys. When examining Chaozhou dialect terms influenced by "crossing the seas" culture, or studying the mutual linguistic influence between Chaozhou dialect and host countries resulting from Chaozhou migrants' overseas journeys, these cultural "sedimentary layers" reveal their profound significance.

(1) Examples of Chaozhou dialect terms related to "crossing the seas"

1) Mùzhī (目汁)

Chaozhou people refer to tears as "mùzhī." "Mùzhī liú" means to shed tears, with common colloquial expressions like "shuǐ gǔn mùzhī liú" (water boils, tears flow) and "mùzhī liú mùzhī dī" (tears flow, tears drip). Nowadays,

with advanced transportation—sailing by ship or flying by plane—the journey is over in the blink of an eye. Communication is also convenient, allowing one to report safety at any time. Therefore, whether going abroad for study, work, or travel, it is a joyous occasion. In the past, when transportation was primitive, those going overseas boarded wooden sailing ships. The journey was long, the sea voyage arduous and perilous, leaving families deeply anxious. When bidding farewell at the pier, tears would inevitably flow, yet separation was unavoidable—a scene of profound sorrow.

2) Making sweet rice cakes out of desperation

“Making sweet rice cakes out of desperation” is used to describe doing something out of sheer necessity. This colloquialism originated in Zhanglin during the Qing Dynasty. During the Qing Dynasty, Zhanglin was a renowned port. Residents of the Chaoshan region, struggling with poverty and unable to make ends meet, would board red-headed ships at Zhanglin Port bound for the South Seas Islands in search of livelihood. Among the shipowners was Cai Yan. On one occasion, he boarded his vessel to inspect the passengers and cargo. His mother had accompanied him to visit the ship. There, Cai's mother noticed that among the luggage of these overseas travelers were large chunks of sweet rice cakes (glutinous rice cakes). Some were even chewing on them with relish, which greatly puzzled her. In the Chaoshan region, ordinary households rarely made sweet rice cakes except during major holidays. Made from glutinous rice, sweet rice cakes were beyond the means of most families. Old Mrs. Cai inquired, “It's the quiet off-season now—how come everyone has sweet rice cakes?” When questioned, the passengers couldn't help but smile bitterly. One overseas traveler replied, “Madam, we had no choice but to pound these sweet rice cakes!” The others echoed his words. Mrs. Cai pressed, “How can you call eating sweet rice cakes ‘no choice?’” Cai Yan finally explained, “Each sea voyage takes one to two months if the winds are favorable. But if we encounter storms, it can stretch to over a month. Without provisions, how could we survive? Sweet rice cakes keep well. So we must prepare them as dry rations. Otherwise, if misfortune strikes, wouldn't they starve to death at sea? Eating sweet rice cakes during the voyage is truly a matter of necessity!” Upon hearing this, Cai's mother finally understood the hardship behind it and couldn't help but feel deeply moved. “Yes, it's out of necessity that we pound sweet rice cakes!” From then on, this phrase became a widely circulated proverb.

(2) Loanwords from host countries in chaoshan dialect

The economic, cultural, and daily interactions between Chaoshan overseas Chinese and host country residents are characterized by equality and friendship. The influence between Chaoshan dialect and host country languages is mutual, though the latter exerts a stronger impact. Overseas Chinese adapt to local customs, adopting native terms for currency units, measurements, regional specialties, and more. Some of these loanwords even find their way back to Chaoshan, becoming established in the local dialect.

4. Food Culture in Chaoshan Dialect and Chaozhou Culture

The Modern Chinese Dictionary defines “粥” (zhōu) as “a semi-liquid food made by boiling grains or grains with other ingredients.” Both Mandarin and Chaoshan dialects recognize congee as a food item, with similar ingredients and cooking methods. However, the Chaozhou dialect does not use the character “粥” to refer to this food; instead, it employs “糜” [mí]. The character “粥” is rarely used in Chaozhou dialect, and when occasionally employed, it describes foods from outside the region. So where lies the distinction between ‘粥’ and ‘糜’? According to annotations in Erya: Shiyan, “Porridge thickened to a paste is called ‘fei.’” Thus, the Chaozhou dialect's use of ‘mí’ is remarkably precise, aligning with local culinary customs. This connection stems largely from regional production and lifestyle habits. “Chaozhou experiences long summers and short winters, with hot, humid weather, making porridge a favored dish among the people of Chaoshan.” This highlights the significant role of mí in Chaozhou life, and this extra-linguistic importance also influences the creation and usage of linguistic symbols. Furthermore,

examining staple foods in detail, mī is the primary staple in the Chaozhou region, equivalent to rice or plain cooked rice in many rice-based areas of China. Therefore, as a general rule, it tends to be thicker in consistency. Unless under special circumstances, congee is generally not thin and does not serve as a soup component in meals. Based on the author's lived experience and research across northern and southern China, congee is indeed thicker than the porridge referred to in Mandarin. This corroborates the saying, "Thick porridge is called congee."

According to the Modern Chinese Dictionary, "糕" (gāo) refers to "food made from rice flour, wheat flour, etc., encompassing various types such as nian gao (rice cake), feng gao (honey cake), and cake." This definition reveals that the Mandarin term "糕" encompasses both fermented and non-fermented foods in its linguistic reality (note: nian gao is non-fermented, while feng gao and cake are fermented). In Chaozhou dialect, however, the usage of "糕" is narrower, typically referring only to unfermented pastries like mung bean cakes or cloud-flake cakes. A significant portion of the items covered by "糕" in Mandarin are instead denoted in Chaozhou dialect by '糕' and compound words derived from "糕". However, "糕" primarily denotes foods made from glutinous rice flour, which may be fermented or unfermented. Thus, when a food's primary ingredient is common Chaozhou grains like japonica rice or glutinous rice, the use of "糕" implicitly signifies this grain source without needing to specify it in the name. For instance, in Teochew dialect, "yeast cake" (酵糕) refers to a steamed rice cake made from japonica rice; "sweet cake" (甜糕) denotes a glutinous rice cake similar to nian gao. while "rice cake" or "red flour peach (cake)" refers to a food with glutinous rice filling and a wrapper made from japonica rice flour, not a cake made from cooked rice. In short, the qualifying elements here refer either to cooking method, flavor, appearance, or filling—none pertain to the grain-based raw material contained within the food. This is because the use of the character "糕" (gāo) implies that the default primary grain ingredient is rice flour. When Teochew dialect refers to similar foods made from wheat flour (i.e., ground wheat), they are typically called "mian guo" (面糕). That is, the character 'mian' (面) must be used to modify "guo" (糕), specifying its primary ingredient, to denote foods akin to what Mandarin terms as steamed sponge cakes.

Through searches in the CCL (Chinese Corpus of Modern Chinese), it is found that modern Chinese employs terms like "橙" (orange), "橙色" (orange color), "桔色" (tangerine color), "橙红" (orange-red), "橙黄" (orange-yellow), '桔红' (tangerine-red), and "桔黄" (tangerine-yellow) to denote orange and its various shades. In Teochew dialect, however, the corresponding terms are "柑红" (gān hóng, tangerine red) and '柑黄' (gān huáng, tangerine yellow). The character "橙" (chéng, orange) is only used when describing the color spectrum, while the other terms mentioned above do not exist in the vocabulary of this dialect. This reflects the dialect's linguistic reality. While all these color terms reference citrus fruits, the most common and renowned Rutaceae plant in Chaozhou is the mandarin orange, not the orange or tangerine.

The Chaozhou mandarin is a native species cultivated for over a millennium. Bang Qingluo's Ming Dynasty work *Miscellaneous Notes on Chaozhou* mentions: "Among Chaozhou fruits, the citrus tree yields the finest variety. Its flavor is sweet with a subtle fragrance, the flesh plump with few seeds, and the thick peel delicious. Two types exist, with the thick-skinned variety being especially prized." The Jiaqing-era *Chenghai County Annals* records: "The citrus fruit belongs to the tangerine family. The county boasts five varieties: snow citrus, banana citrus, milk citrus, pearl citrus, and honey barrel citrus. Guo Qingluo ranked the citrus fruit as the finest among Chaozhou fruits." Its cultivation and trade have developed into a local industry. In other words, compared to oranges and tangerines, the citrus fruit is an integral part of life for speakers of the Chaozhou dialect. Therefore, when this dialect requires an extralinguistic entity to construct color terms, "citrus" becomes the most fitting choice.

5. Conclusion

Cassirer also noted in his discussion that "the names appearing in human language cannot be interpreted in any such unchanging manner. They are not assigned to denote entities in a fixed sense, nor to refer to independently

existing entities; rather, they are determined by human interests and purposes. Yet these interests are not entirely arbitrary. These classifications cannot be found in arbitrarily constructed human language, but rather are based on certain recurring factors within our sensory experience. This implies that the more frequently and significantly something appears within a given culture, the more likely it is to be lexicalized or the higher its degree of lexicalization may be. The Chaoshan dialect is a significant branch of the Chinese language, and Chaoshan culture is a vital branch of Chinese culture. The Chaoshan dialect and Chaoshan culture mutually promote each other's development. Chaozhou culture is an integral part of Chinese culture. The splendid Chinese cultural heritage is ancient and rich in content, enjoying high esteem among the world's diverse cultures. Chinese culture encompasses the cultures of its various ethnic groups, sub-ethnic groups, regions, and thematic areas, with Chaozhou culture being one of its components. Studying the rich connotations and distinctive features of Chaozhou culture, and promoting its fine traditions, holds significant meaning and value for enriching the content of Chinese culture.

Today, the topic of preserving dialects sparks heated debate. Opponents often argue that dialects have become unnecessary, as their usage declines amid the widespread adoption of Mandarin. However, preserving dialects isn't about the dialects themselves, but the culture and history they embody. Just as museums preserve Ming and Qing dynasty bowls not for use, but for the historical imprint they carry. Each dialect reflects the distinct perspectives of its speakers in describing the world, embodying their wisdom, cultural heritage, and the ebb and flow of regional development. This immense diversity is profoundly valuable and deserves our protection.

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