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Concentrations:

Mathematics, Chinese Language and Culture

The subject of thesis (in 10 words or less):

Resisting Total Domination: Makings and Preservations of the Cantonese Identity



The Welsh have a saying that, “a nation without a language is a nation without a heart.” Although the individual components of languages are heavily influenced by the cultures from which they are created, languages themselves also play a similar role in shaping the identities of their cultures. There is a push-and-pull relationship that exists between politics and language. As someone once said to Max Weinreich in a discussion about the differences between dialects and languages, “a language is a dialect with an army and navy.” My proposed thesis topic is an examination of Cantonese Chinese and its history and impact on China as one of the few dialects that is potentially a threat against the unification that Mandarin aims for as China’s official and standard dialect. My thesis will be focused on three major themes; history, resistance, and the overseas presence.

To understand the political and cultural subtleties of a language, it is important to look into the history of the culture and see how the language has been shaped in its development and what the implications are. I will first explore the history of China and Chinese with attention to times when language policies were prevalent and understand the political and cultural situation surrounding these turning points in the development of Chinese. I will explore the rise of

Mandarin and the controversy and struggle it faced in becoming the standard and official dialect and the history and culture of Cantonese and its role in the shaping of the Cantonese identity.

Having established the issues of identity, I will examine the resistance against Mandarin as shown by the Cantonese population in the Guangdong province and Hong Kong. There is a sense of a sub-cultural identity manifested from each dialect that wants to be preserved. It is clear that coexistence alongside Mandarin is necessary for the continual survival of the various dialects, but there is a line between coexistence and a sort of predator-prey model that can occur if the government pushes too hard in its conquest to assert the importance of Mandarin. Cantonese, with a population base that is prevalent in many areas outside of China, is able to resist being written off as insignificant by the Chinese government in this grand scheme of Chinese.

The final part of my thesis will be an examination of the history and issues of the overseas Cantonese population, predominately in Chinatowns, where the spread and influence of Mandarin is not initiated by the Chinese government but rather through the work of society as the immigration levels from the Chinese speaking areas of Asia change.

The Chinese language family, con-

taining seven to thirteen different regional classifications, is a very broad branch in the Sino-Tibetan language family. In the field of linguistic anthropology, Chinese is frequently looked upon as an example of a language that has many different spoken dialects but a common written system which seems to unify them. This is usually contrasted with languages such as Urdu and Marathi which share a common spoken language but have different writing systems and for political reasons, do not acknowledge the other as a related language. With the instatement of Mandarin as the official dialect, there is a sense that Mandarin has become the representative dialect for the Chinese language. Regardless of how the Chinese language ‘should’ be classified, there is a distinct difference between how the Chinese people and foreigners view this issue. Those who speak a dialect other than Mandarin will be adamant in claiming that their dialect is also Chinese. Cantonese speakers are no exception. My thesis aims to explore the makings and preservations of the Cantonese identity.