



# “CHINESE RENAISSANCE”

The Vision of Applying Teochew Dialect  
to the Teaching of Ancient Chinese Language

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# **Renaissance of Chinese Culture: the Vision of Applying Teochew Dialect to the Teaching of Ancient Chinese Language**

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## **Abstract.**

Chinese people should hear the alarm. Our traditional culture is fading at a rapid rate, our identity being veiled and our confidence starting to dilute. It is the age for cultural invigoration, or Chinese Renaissance as it is named.

Truly, when we probe into the ancient Chinese education, it shows that many teenagers are resistant to engross themselves with this study given the heavy workload for learning and the inefficiency of teaching. It should be this novel proposal that will stop us from edging the cliff: incorporate Teochew Dialect into the ancient Chinese curriculum.

Such suggestion has provoked heated controversy, during which dissenters denounce it as a waste of resources, while exponents try hard to prove its feasibility. One of these advocators is Jingchang Zeng, a Chinese educator in Teochew region, who has carried an experiment into two local classes, one being taught with traditional methods while the other with the new proposal.

According to the final test results and numerous positive feedbacks from both students and teachers, the examination is unexpectedly successful. It deserves wide appreciation and real-world application.

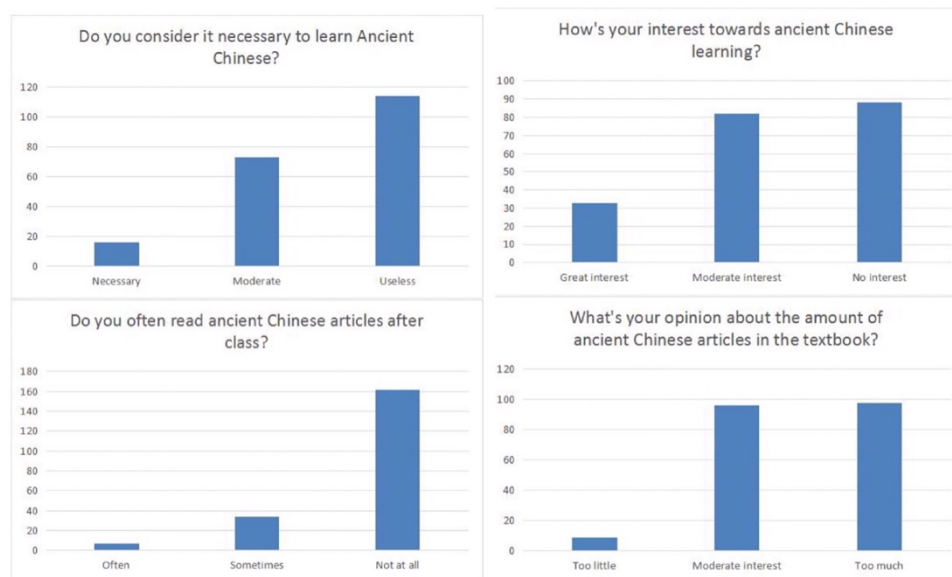
**Keywords:** Chinese Culture; ancient Chinese language; Teochew dialect; Chinese education.

## **Introduction**

In very recent years, "Preservation of Traditional Culture" and similar slogans have sprung up across China given the afraid of losing traditional culture. As students, we can feel this perilous situation in person through our experience at school. Being startled

by the complexity of ancient Chinese, teenaged students shrink back from their learning, and thus their own culture.

We found out that among 448 participants in our survey, only 13% of them regarded the study of ancient Chinese necessary or useful, yet 80% expressed no interest on ancient language. One student even wrote on his survey paper: “I don’t know why I have to suffer such ordeal.”



*The figure above shows the result of our survey*

Aware of the deterioration, teachers and experts have discussed for more than a decade to formulate appropriate solutions, yet none of them works. Like a flash splitting the dark, a novel proposal appeared: adding regional dialects could pave way for educational improvement. So far, though discussed by linguistics and teachers intensively, this new proposal is still swinging in the air, leaving a huge area of blankness for educators. Luckily by chance, we are acknowledged that Jingchang Zeng, a Chinese teacher in Teochew region, has conducted a successful experiment to examine the dialect-adding theory. If this application could be embraced in the real world, it would definitely solidify the proposal and end all the debates. Concerning the lack of public attention and wishing for the eradication of educational pitfalls, we thus formulate this research report to present this momentous teaching experiment, and the theory in general.

## **An Overview of Teochew Dialect (Brief History and Analysis):**

The experimental subject here is the Teochew dialect, an embodiment of the local long history.

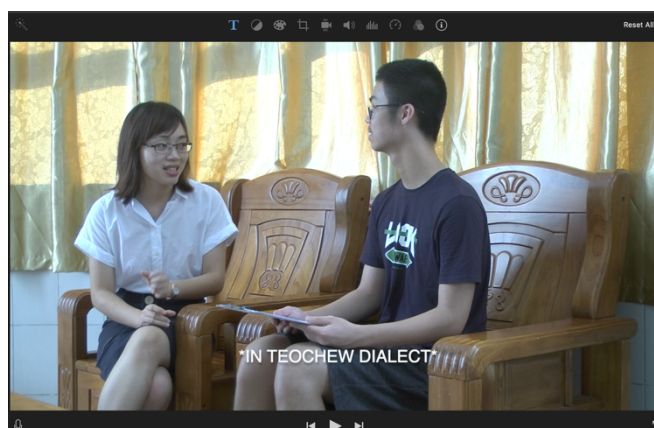
At approximately 400AD, in central China, a total of thirty million people migrated to the southern parts, bringing the orthodox ancient Chinese language along. Their language intertwined with the local one and thus created Teochew dialect. However, since those immigrants lived in a relatively isolated environment, their dialect still remained a great extent of overlapping with the vanished ancient Chinese language.

To further explore the connection between these two languages, we interviewed an experienced Teochew teacher named *Zhuangsheng Xiao* who taught ancient Chinese in Dongguan Middle School. She said Teochew dialect preserved various pronunciations, intonations and vocabularies from ancient Chinese language. For example, Teochew language shared the same nine intonations and the majority of monosyllables with the ancient one.

Despite the phonic similarity, our own research also shows that both languages have similar grammar. An example is that they would commonly use nouns as adverbials and verbs.

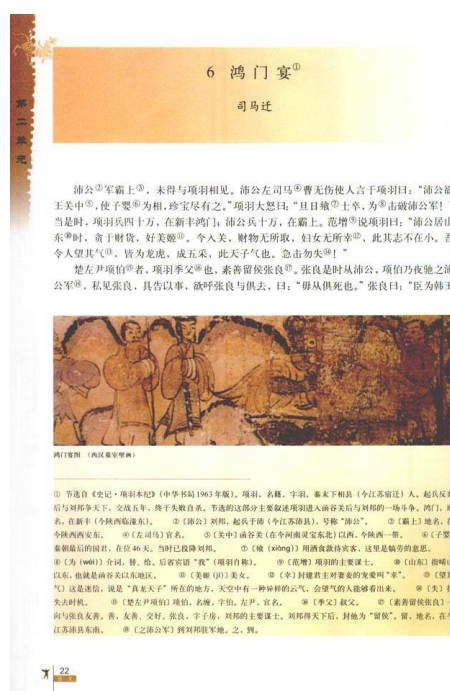
When asking whether Teochew language could assist the learning of ancient Chinese, the teacher answered affirmatively : yes, to a great extent. She used her own past experience to illustrate this. Since all the ancient text were written in ancient Chinese, reading them with Teochew dialect is much catchier than reading with mandarin (modern Chinese), helping the memorization and comprehension of the text. Moreover, the Teochew nursery rhymes which the teacher had heard from earliest childhood on had familiarized she with the ancient grammar and culture. More information could be found in the supplement.

Therefore, we seek for an educational application that integrates Teochew language with the ancient Chinese.



*A screenshot of our interview video. The teacher (on left) is singing a rhyme. She is going to say that learning ancient Chinese could benefit students' mind and morality. It serves the establishment of cultural confidence of Chinese people.*

## The Teaching Experiment



When we entered the classroom, the students were performing a famous ancient Chinese story “Feast at Hongman Gate” from textbook (see the figure on the left). Instead of using mandarin, the students use Teochew dialect to perform. The well-written script with catchy rhymes and the actors' detailed expression of emotions brought the whole class landed in the ancient world. Extraordinary engagement filled the classroom. At the exact moment the drama finished, students applauded, then raise up their hands,

stretching their arms so Mr.Zeng would call them to answer. (After class, we were informed that some grammar points taught earlier in class was included in the lines, and Mr. Zeng asked them to find them out.)

We expressed our marvel to Mr. Zeng after class, he enthusiastically told us his teaching experiment. For long, he had perceived the animosity of students and teachers towards ancient Chinese teaching. Knowing that Teochew dialect is most similar to vanished ancient Chinese, Zeng wanted to test out his hypothesis, especially under the circumstances which almost every student could speak Teochew dialect in his school.

To begin with, *Zeng* created a test on ancient Chinese for two classes, and the test result showed no significant difference between. Then he introduced Teochew dialect to one of his classes, while the another one stayed with regular teaching method.

At the end of the experiment, students took another test, and the experimental class performed noticeably better (6 points higher) than its regular counterparts. Notwithstanding that data is the most convincing, Zeng preferred in-class atmosphere as evidence. In regular class, the mood was the exact antithesis of the vim and vigor we observed. Students seldom actively answer the teacher's question. Homework was also completed in bad quality, and students can hardly complete the required previewing work. "If students are in such bad condition, it's normal for teacher to lose interest," Zeng implied, "that's why experimental class always keeps me exuberant and energetic."

Students also approved the new teaching method. The director of the in-class drama told us: "I suddenly realize that ancient Chinese is not that ancient, it actually lives with me everyday." Another student gave a more academic answer: "Finding source for practicing those arcane grammar was really difficult. But now, I gain some practice everyday from my own talking."

We also gathered some expertise opinion of the experiment. Lunlun Lin, an expert on Teochew dialect, replied us in e-mail, "The universal ineffectiveness of ancient Chinese teaching to inappropriate teaching material. Most of the textbook articles talk about politics, ambitions, travelling and so on, which somehow deviate from modern life and teenager's interest. On the contrary, Zeng's Teochew examples encompassed local fairy tales, children's folks and so on, successfully avoiding the mistake."

In our interview to her, Zhuangsheng Xiao, an experienced scholar on Chinese education, provided a broader perspective. She points out that the largest value of this solution lies in its radial effect. So many other fields benefits from the adoption. For

example, preservation of Teochew dialect itself will be fostered; documentation of local dramas, folklores etc will be urged; further linguistic research will be generated. “The potential of this reform is attractive, for it responds well to our preservation of traditional culture.”

## **Conclusion**

To accomplish the blueprint of Chinese Renaissance, it is important to emphasize the learning of ancient Chinese language. From this perspective, the introduction of regional dialect, which has a great extent of overlapping with the vanished ancient Chinese language, has a great potential to improve the educational efficiency. The proposal will be more feasible if the ancient Chinese teachers actively relate their regional dialect and traditional culture with the teaching content. With this national education, we expect for the enhancement of traditional cultures and ancient languages, which will eventually lead to the boosting of self-identity and confidence of Chinese people.

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