

# Chinese Identity Negotiation by Chinese Vietnamese Women in Cho Lon Community, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam through the Use of Chinese at Home<sup>1</sup>

**Ton Van Trang<sup>2</sup>**

**Hanoi National University** trangton75@gmail.com

## Abstract

This article summarizes a study of Chinese Vietnamese women's Chinese identity construction and negotiation through their speaking Chinese at home in the Cho Lon community of Ho Chi Minh City, which is widely known as the biggest Chinatown in Vietnam. The study found that social contexts, external cultural factors, and the concept of men's dominance over women influenced the spoken Chinese of three woman generations in Chinese Vietnamese families.

First-generation women used their spoken Chinese as a means of creating their awareness of being Chinese and negotiating between the Chinese identity inherited from their ancestors and the Vietnamese identity absorbed from Vietnamese society or from their husbands' being Vietnamese. However, second-generation women, who absorbed both old Chinese values and new Vietnamese values, used their spoken Chinese as a way of preserving their Chinese values and identity and disseminating them to younger

---

<sup>1</sup> This article is extracted from the Master's thesis titled "Chinese Identity of Chinese Vietnamese women in Cho Lon community, Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam" in the Mekong Studies Master Degree Programme, Faculty of Humanity and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University.

<sup>2</sup> The author wishes to thank the Center for Research on Plurality in the Mekong Region, Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences, Khon Kaen University, for support in the publishing of this article.

generations. Finally, the spoken Chinese of the third-generation women or new generation women at home reflects the significance of modern consumption.

**Keywords:** Chinese identity, Chinese Vietnamese women, Cho Lon community, Cantonese language

## บทคัดย่อ

บทความนี้มุ่งเน้นศึกษาการสร้างและการต่อรองอัตลักษณ์ความเป็นจีนผ่านการใช้ภาษาจีนในครอบครัวของสตรีชาวเวียดนามเชื้อสายจีนในชุมชนจ้อเลิ่น (Chợ Lớn) นครโฮจิมินห์ สาธารณรัฐสังคมนิยมเวียดนาม ซึ่งนับว่าเป็นชุมชนชาวจีนหรือจีนทาวน์ที่ใหญ่ที่สุดในประเทศเวียดนาม ผลการศึกษาพบว่า บริบททางสังคมและอิทธิพลของปัจจัยทางวัฒนธรรมภายนอก ตลอดจนแนวคิดเชิดชูชายเป็นใหญ่ ได้ส่งผลต่อการใช้ภาษาจีนของสตรีชาวจีนทั้ง 3 รุ่นในครอบครัว โดยกลุ่มหญิงรุ่นที่ 1 ได้ใช้การสื่อสารเป็นภาษาจีนเป็นช่องทางสร้างจิตสำนึกความเป็นจีนของตน รวมทั้งเป็นการต่อรองทางอัตลักษณ์ระหว่างความเป็นจีนที่สืบทอดกันมาจากบรรพบุรุษและความเป็นเวียดนามที่มีครอบงำอยู่ในสังคมภายนอก หรือความเป็นเวียดนามของสามี ส่วนสตรีจีนรุ่นที่ 2 เป็นรุ่นที่สืบทอดค่านิยมจีนเก่าและต้อนรับค่านิยมเวียดนามใหม่ ทำให้การใช้ภาษาจีนของพวกเขาได้รับความหมายใหม่ว่า เป็นช่องทางรักษาและถ่ายทอดค่านิยมจีนและความเป็นจีนให้กับบุตรหลาน ส่วนสตรีจีนรุ่นที่ 3 หรือกลุ่มหญิงชาวจีนรุ่นใหม่ การใช้ภาษาจีนในครอบครัวของพวกเขามีน้อยของการบริโภคความทันสมัย

**คำสำคัญ:** อัตลักษณ์ความเป็นจีน สตรีชาวเวียดนามเชื้อสายจีน ชุมชนจ้อเลิ่น ภาษาจีนกวางตุ้ง

## Introduction

When talking about the biggest Chinese community or Chinatown in Vietnam, people usually think of the Cho Lon (also written Cholon) community in Ho Chi Minh City (formerly known as Saigon) because of its large Chinese Vietnamese population. Most of the Chinese Vietnamese people residing there are of Chinese origin from southeast and southern China and are divided into various groups of spoken Chinese languages, including

Cantonese, Chaozhou, Hokkien, Hainan, and Hakka. Among these groups, the Cantonese group is the largest Chinese Vietnamese group, especially in District 5, which is considered to be the heart of the Cho Lon community.

Chinese Vietnamese people in Cho Lon immigrated to Vietnam hundreds of years ago, settling down to adapt to the culturally diverse Vietnamese society. Chinese culture, compared to the main Vietnamese culture in Vietnam, is regarded as one of the most exceptional ethnic minority cultures in this country. The Chinese Vietnamese people in Cho Lon, especially women, have experienced dramatic changes in their Chinese identity expression and negotiation process in the course of Vietnamese history. On the one hand, they have made great efforts in constructing their Chinese identity; on the other hand, they have engaged in negotiating their identities with Vietnamese society in order to preserve their Chinese identity amidst Vietnam's constant political changes.

Identity is sometimes used to refer to a sense of integration of the self, in which different aspects come together in a unified whole. "Social identity" refers specifically to those aspects of a person that are defined in terms of his or her group membership (Deaux, 2001: 1). Ethnicity is a central element of self-definition and becomes an important aspect of social identity. More common today is categorization on the basis of ethnicity, defined in terms of culture, language, and country of origin. The expression of social identities can fluctuate considerably in line with social, political, economic changes, and globalization (Barth, 1969 in Leepreecha, 2014). People are assumed to have multiple social identities, each of which may be characterized by distinct attributes and behaviors; thus we need to consider the ways in which people may shift from one identity to another. Moreover, identity negotiation is influenced by a variety of factors: the repertoire and importance

of social identities that a person has, the setting in which one is located, and the actions and influence of other people in those settings (Deaux, 2001: 9).

Therefore, if we assume that Chinese Vietnamese women residing in Cho Lon have multiple social identities, then we need to consider the ways in which these women may shift from one identity to another and the ways in which they respond to their environment and make choices that seem most appropriate to that setting. This article summarizes qualitative research on a group of Chinese Vietnamese women residing in Ward 7, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City as the target group. Field-trip results found that Chinese-identity construction by these women differed according to family types, of which are mainly two: the families with Chinese-origin husbands and Chinese-origin wives, and those with Vietnamese husbands and Chinese-origin wives (the former vastly outnumbers the latter).

## **The History of Cantonese Vietnamese People in Cho Lon community**

Waves of Chinese migration to Vietnam have occurred seven times in Vietnamese history, from 111 C.E. to the 19<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. for diverse reasons: the Han dynasty's invasion into the Nam Viet Kingdom (Vietnam at present) in 111, the Chinese people's escape from the Mongolian invasion in 1273, the Ming dynasty's maritime exploration and seaway expansion into the South China Sea in 1368, the Chinese Christians' escape from China's religious clampdown in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>3</sup> the Chinese people's escape from the war between the Ming and the Qing dynasties in 1679, and the Chinese people's escape from poverty in China in 1778.

<sup>3</sup> The latter prompted two Ming warlords, who were defeated, to lead their troops and families to seek asylum in Vietnam and set up a number of Minh Huong villages in southern Vietnam.

The Chinese diasporas have created a large Chinese population residing throughout Vietnam. However, the turning point in Chinese population relocation is said to have happened when the civil war between the Trinh and the Nguyen dynasties broke out in Vietnam in 1802. Chinese people residing in southern Vietnam, especially the Minh Huong Chinese people, had solid support for the Nguyen dynasty during the civil war. Consequently the dynasty's emperor, Gia Long, promoted many policies that allowed Minh Huong Chinese people to settle down and engage in trade, leading to increased Chinese immigration to southern Vietnam and formation of the largest Chinese community in Cho Lon, Ho Chi Minh City (formerly known as Saigon).

The study found that the identification of Chinese Vietnamese people in Cho Lon remains controversial. According to some historians, the Chinese Vietnamese people can be divided into two groups: the Minh Huong Chinese people, who were Ming dynasty citizens and used Vietnamese nationality, and the Qing Chinese people, who resided in Vietnam and used Chinese nationality (Nguyen Cam Thuy, 2000: 17). Others argue that the Chinese people can be divided into groups according to the Chinese language they speak. In the French colonial period, the Chinese population was split into various subgroups on the basis of their spoken Chinese languages, such as Cantonese, Chaozhou, Hokkien, Hainan, and Hakka. The controversy over Chinese Vietnamese people's identification is obviously demonstrated by the way the researchers referred to Chinese people, both Minh Huong people and Chinese-origin people, according to their spoken languages: Cantonese, Chaozhou Chinese, Hokkien, Hainan, and Hakka. The interviews with Chinese Vietnamese people residing in Cho Lon indicated that they preferred to be named according to their spoken languages.

The history of Cho Lon is directly connected to Vietnamese history, and the community is highly distinctive due to the political changes in southern Vietnam, Vietnamese policies regarding Chinese Vietnamese people, Chinese-identity preservation, and adjustment by the Chinese Vietnamese group and their interactions with outside groups. The historical research demonstrated that in the Nguyen dynasty, the Cho Lon community was called "Tai Ngon" or "Tin Gan" in Chinese pronunciation, but Vietnamese people pronounced these words as "Tai Ngon" and then as "Saigon" (Garnier, 1866: 83). When the French took control of Vietnam, they changed the name of Saigon to Cho Lon City (Vuong Hong Sen, 1991: 54). When Vietnam was split into two parts with the two different ruling systems, North Vietnam and South Vietnam in 1954, Cho Lon belonged to the Republic of Vietnam or South Vietnam and was a district of Saigon which was then South Vietnam's capital (VTV9, *Dai truyen hinh Vietnam*, 2012). When Vietnam was completely united in 1975 and officially named the Socialist Republic of Vietnam on September 2, 1976, the Vietnamese government issued a resolution changing the name of Saigon City to Ho Chi Minh City, which was one of five central cities in Vietnam, and divided it into various districts, wards or villages. At present, Ho Chi Minh City has 24 districts, 322 wards and villages (VTV9, *Dai Truyen hinh Vietnam*, 2012). Although the name Cho Lon is no longer written as one of the administrative places in the Vietnamese government's official documents, Cho Lon is more favored by Vietnamese people, especially Ho Chi Minh City residents to refer to the biggest Chinese community in Ho Chi Minh City. The name Cho Lon has been closely connected to the life and livelihood of the people in South Vietnam, particularly those who have lived in Ho Chi Minh City for a long time, and has become a historical name over the course of Vietnamese history.

Cho Lon at present is 22.26 square kilometers wide, covering District 5 (4.27 square kilometers), District 6 (7.14 square kilometers), District 10 (5.71 square kilometers) and District 11 (5.14 square kilometers). The heart of Cho Lon is widely known as District 5 and District 11 (Bo Thong tin va Truyen thong, 2012), and the community has a population of Chinese Vietnamese people accounting for approximately 4.13 percent of the city's population, and Cantonese Vietnamese people making up about 55.8 percent of the city's whole Chinese Vietnamese population (Bo Thong tin va Truyen thong, 2012). Noticeably, the Chinese Vietnamese people in Cho Lon reside centrally in District 11 and District 5 together with Vietnamese people.

The Chinese ethnic group in Cho Lon is divided into five main subgroups of spoken Chinese languages: Cantonese, Chaozhou, Hokkien, Hainan, and Hakka, among which the Cantonese have the largest population. The results of interviews with district officials in Ho Chi Minh City found that the city's Cantonese Chinese population amounts for 56.78 percent of the city's whole Chinese Vietnamese population, and Ward 7, District 5 which was the main research place of this research, has the district's third biggest Cantonese Chinese population amounting to 53.6 percent its whole Chinese Vietnamese population.

The results of research on Cantonese Vietnamese people's livelihood in Cho Lon demonstrate that this group has a great influence on most economic sectors in the community, especially in the areas of banking, industry, handicrafts, and Chinese family-inherited jobs, which are mainly selling and handicrafts. The Chinese Vietnamese people prefer doing such jobs as running family grocery shops and food shops; making various kinds of cakes; and making boats, pottery, joss papers, incenses, candles, and incense burners. Noticeably, the Cantonese Vietnamese in Cho Lon are

famous for cooking and for running a number of restaurants with various specialties. They tend to work for their family-run businesses and are not interested in working for state agencies or state-owned enterprises. Women are usually expected to do domestic chores and work as shopkeepers for their family-run business or do handiwork like making joss papers, cakes, and pottery with great care; men work outside the home, doing business transactions and meeting business partners.

In terms of family structure, the role of sons is emphasized in Cantonese Vietnamese families. A family without a son to maintain the family's surname is considered an unlucky family, which obviously demonstrates the deep influence of Confucianism on these people's thinking. In addition, sons, particularly the first son in the family, are supposed to take care of their parents; their wives, who are the first daughters-in-law in families, have the most important role in looking after their parents. Furthermore, sons also have advantages over daughters in terms of inherited property because the sons are usually given at least twice as much inherited property as the daughters, which results from the idea that sons are a family's real children and daughters are the other families' children.

As far as housing is concerned, the Chinese Vietnamese people's shop houses in Cho Lon are very popular. They were usually built in contiguous blocks and range from three to five stories in height with verandahs or balconies facing the streets, particularly in the area around Binh Tay market, which is widely recognized as a market of the Chinese Vietnamese people because of the limited amount land for housing there. Shop houses are used for both commercial and residential purposes. This is an important symbol of the livelihood of local Chinese Vietnamese people, especially the Cantonese Vietnamese families in Cho Lon. These families



tend to make the best use of the place they live to earn a living, making them very active members of their own residential community. The ground floor of a shop house is usually devoted to family businesses like small stores and clothing shops, while the upper floors are for residential purposes for the whole family and are sometimes also used for goods manufacturing. When the children get married and have their own family, the houses will be expanded in the back and more rooms will be built and connected to the main house from the back. Therefore, it is very interesting that those who live next door to these families are usually their relatives. In addition, furniture in these houses does not reflect the wealth of business owners but is really necessary and suitable for their daily life because these people have habits of saving money to do business rather than showing off their wealth.

### **The Use of the Chinese Language at Home: Chinese-identity Construction and Negotiation**

The Chinese language is a cultural indicator to acknowledge Chinese identity of the Chinese Vietnamese women in Cho Lon and is mostly used in most communications in Chinese Vietnamese families. Although the biggest Chinatown in Vietnam was first established more than 300 years ago, Chinese is still maintained in those families for their Chinese-identity reproduction, inheritance, and preservation.

Chinese is commonly classified as a sub-branch of the Sino-Tibetan language family. There are seven major varieties of Chinese, of which Mandarin is the major variety that is recognized as the *Putonghua*, or common language. Chinese refer to the six additional major language varieties other than Mandarin as “dialects,” or *fangyan*, which are categorized

based on geographical and linguistic-structural characteristics (Li, 1994). Despite the mutual unintelligibility among *fangyan*, the Chinese have generally been reluctant to call them different languages (Taylor & Taylor, 1995). Nevertheless, *fangyan* tend to function as markers of social group boundaries that identify different origins and social backgrounds among Chinese (Li, 1994). Seven *fangyan* are recognized by custom, although linguists typically make finer distinctions among these by using phonological and grammatical criteria. Norman (1988), for example, identifies 12 major, largely geographically-distributed Chinese dialects, which roughly correspond to a north-south distribution (Norman, 1988: 182-183). The seven traditional *fangyan* are Beifang Hua (Northern or Mandarin), which is the native language of over 70 percent of the Chinese mainland population, Wu, Xiang, Yue, Min, Hakka and Gan (Ramsey, 1987).

The Yue dialect, which includes Cantonese, is found mainly in Guang Dong the southernmost province of China. Large numbers of speakers can also be found in Overseas Chinese diasporas. Interestingly, a northeastern-dialect speaker and a southwestern-dialect speaker may have difficulty communicating except through the standard language. Spoken Chinese used in various localities in China differs enormously; for example, Cantonese people find it hard to understand Hokkien Chinese. Hakka Chinese bears a close resemblance to Mandarin, and Hakka people can understand Mandarin easily. Chaozhou Chinese and Hainan Chinese are classified in the same group with Hokkien Chinese because of their similarities in pronunciation; despite their different linguistic-structural characteristics, the speakers of these dialects can carry out their conversations without any difficulty.

Bauer & Benedict (1997) demonstrated that Cantonese is used primarily by people from Guang Dong province and Macau, and Chinese

people emigrating to Southeast Asian countries like those residing in Cho Lon. Cantonese is divided into the four dialects of Yuehai, Taishan, Gaoyan and Guinan, among which Yuehai is the most important dialect and is spoken in Guang Chou, Hong Kong and Macau. The Cantonese spoken in Guang Chou differs greatly from that spoken in Hong Kong, but is understandable there. The spoken Cantonese used in Hong Kong is combined with English words as English is the second language there.

Chinese Vietnamese women in Cho Lon simultaneously use three languages: Vietnamese, Cantonese, and their own group's spoken Chinese (like Hokkien, Hainan, and Chaozhou). Cantonese, which is spoken in Cho Lon, according to these women, bears a striking resemblance to that used in Hong Kong, as mentioned, differing mainly that Hong Kong Cantonese is mixed with a lot of English words. Moreover, Cho Lon Cantonese differs vastly from the Chinese used in Beijing, Mainland China, and is hardly understandable in Beijing. It is also a mixture of Cantonese and Vietnamese. The conversations of Chinese Vietnamese in Cho Lon usually are a mixture of Cantonese and Vietnamese. Interviews found that these women speak Chinese in their Chinese ethnic group and Vietnamese with other ethnic groups, depending on their communication partners.

However, their use of Chinese differs greatly according to the type of Chinese family they belong to: those with Chinese-origin husbands or Chinese-origin wives, and those with Vietnamese husbands and Chinese-origin wives.

A Chinese-origin family in Cho Lon is considered a smaller Chinese society as Chinese values, customs, traditions and cultures, particularly the Chinese language, are constantly maintained and preserved in the family. The field trip results show that the Chinese Vietnamese women's use of

spoken Chinese is their effort to preserve their families' Chinese traditions and customs. It varies from generation to generation in the families, including grandmothers, mothers, and daughters or in three groups of women, including elderly, middle-aged, and young women. In this research, the Chinese Vietnamese women in Cho Lon are divided into three groups or three family generations: (1) elderly women aged over 55 or the first generation in the family, (2) middle-aged women aged between 35 and 55 or the second generation in the family, and (3) young women aged under 35 or the third generation in the family.

### **Elderly Women's Use of Chinese**

Elderly Chinese Vietnamese women in Cho Lon have a strong awareness of preserving and passing down Chinese language to younger generations. I had the opportunity to talk to many and found that they were able to speak Chinese more fluently than Vietnamese. When they conversed with me in Vietnamese, some of them could understand most of what I was saying but found it hard to express themselves in Vietnamese, and so they used a mixture of Chinese and Vietnamese instead. Furthermore, from their intonation and pronunciation of Vietnamese, it was evident that Vietnamese was not their mother tongue. When I used some rather modern Vietnamese words or spoke quickly, the women found it harder to understand. Noticeably, these women usually spoke Cantonese with the rest of their families and spoke it very fluently.

Liu Hue An, aged 72, a Cantonese Vietnamese woman told me,  
*When I was small, I spoke only Cantonese and couldn't speak Vietnamese. People in my family spoke only Cantonese. As a woman, I didn't have a chance to communicate with people from*

*other groups and was allowed to socialize only with Chinese. I didn't have any school opportunities like men did. When I reached the marriage age, my parents found a man for me to marry and then I moved in with my husband's family, which is Cantonese. Family members spoke to one another in Cantonese. My family owned a shop selling building materials. Women in the family like me usually do the housework only. Meeting with partners was the duty of the men in the family. After the liberation of Vietnam in 1975, the government organized Vietnamese classes for Chinese Vietnamese people in Cho Lon, and I had to attend, but I was not at all interested. Now I can speak Vietnamese, but not well and I can't read or write it. I can read and write Cantonese because when I was small my grandmother and my mother taught me. My parents and parents-in-law always told me that we were living in Vietnam, but our origin was China, and that our offspring had to understand that their origin was China as well. As a mother, I had to teach my children about our being Chinese. (Liu Hue An, 2012)*

What Liu Hue An said demonstrates that during the period of Vietnam's division into North and South Vietnam, Chinese-origin women in Cho Lon had no communication and socialization with Vietnamese people or the society outside their families, and Chinese was the only language used in those families. Consequently the Chinese women were socialized only within the Chinese ethnic group. The majority of women restricted themselves to domestic chores and were deprived of the schooling opportunities granted to men. This is an obvious reflection of strong Confucian influence, especially the idea of male superiority, on the Chinese Vietnamese families in Cho Lon, which contributed to intense Chinese-identity preservation by the

first generation women in these families. However, shortly after the liberation of Vietnam in 1975, the Vietnamese government issued a policy promoting use of Vietnamese for minority ethnic groups, especially the Chinese Vietnamese in Cho Lon, and created more and more opportunities of integration into Vietnamese society for Chinese Vietnamese women. In fact, elderly Chinese Vietnamese women in Cho Lon apparently had little interest in studying Vietnamese because of their strong awareness of preserving being Chinese through their use of Chinese as the only language in the family and passing Chinese on to their offspring.

However, the use of Chinese by daughters-in-law in Chinese Vietnamese families with different spoken Chinese is the conflict of Chinese identity between these women and their in-laws. The results from interviews with Chinese Vietnamese wives with a different spoken Chinese from their in-laws found that their use of Chinese changed dramatically after liberation of Vietnam in 1975. This was rooted in political, social, and economic changes in this country. Shortly after the war ended, Vietnam was faced with numerous difficulties and challenges in building and developing a new country; the Vietnamese people, especially the Chinese in Cho Lon, struggled with poverty and difficulty in running their traditional Chinese businesses as Vietnamese policies were unlikely to facilitate the type of business and pay much attention to the Chinese society in Cho Lon. Their selling, hence, was difficult and was suspended over 10 years, prompting Chinese Vietnamese youngsters in Ho Chi Minh City to work in state-run factories like Vietnamese young people to earn their living and help to increase their family's income. This created opportunities to communicate and socialize with other groups of Chinese Vietnamese women who had been restricted to the Chinese Vietnamese, leading to these women's more diverse use of languages.

Their own spoken Chinese competed with other spoken Chinese languages and with Vietnamese, which is demonstrated by the comments of Phung Xu An, aged 61, a Hakka Chinese-origin woman who married a Cantonese man, as follows.

*I met my husband when we worked at a state-run footwear factory in Ho Chi Minh City in 1979 and when we got married, I moved to my husband's house.. When I was small and lived with my parents, I spoke only Hakka Chinese. When I was a girl and worked at the factory, I could speak a little Vietnamese with my Vietnamese workmates and understand it. Talking to my Chinese-origin workmates, if they were also of Hakka origin, was not a problem, but if they were of Cantonese, Hainan, Hokkien, Chaozhou origins, I spoke to them in Cantonese because most Chinese-origin people in Cho Lon could speak and understand a little Cantonese even though we were not of Cantonese origin. If they spoke Cantonese quickly, however, we found it hard to understand. It turns out that I myself can speak three languages, but I don't speak Vietnamese or Cantonese very well. In my husband's family, we talked to one another in Cantonese. I had to speak Cantonese as well. At first when I moved to my husband's house, my Cantonese was not very good, and my in-laws were not good at speaking my Hakka language. At that time, I had to learn Cantonese in the evening Cantonese classes in Cho Lon, but I learned mostly by myself. Little by little, my Cantonese became better. Now I can speak Cantonese naturally. My children speak Cantonese, too, but they can hardly speak my Hakka. Importantly, my parents-in-law wanted my children to learn Cantonese. It seems like they didn't want them to learn their mother's dialect. (Phung Xu An, 2012)*

Moreover, the use of Chinese in families with Chinese Vietnamese wives and Vietnamese husbands, especially Vietnamese husbands living with their spouse's family, is considered to be a culture clash between the women's being Chinese and their spouses' being Vietnamese. The research found that in the cases in which Chinese Vietnamese women married Vietnamese men and the husbands moved to their spouse's house, the wives had virtually no changes in their daily life after their marriage because they still lived in their parents' family and maintained the Chinese lifestyles of their family, particularly their use of Chinese. The people who had to make changes were their Vietnamese husbands as the men's culture, ethnicity, and lifestyle differed from those of their wives' families. However, these Chinese Vietnamese wives were still engaged in cultural negotiation between their being Chinese and their spouses being Vietnamese, which is demonstrated by code switching between them and the rest of their families. When the women conversed with their Chinese family members, they spoke Chinese, but they switched to Vietnamese when talking to their Vietnamese husbands and used a mixture of Vietnamese and Chinese when talking to a group of family members.

Furthermore, elderly Chinese Vietnamese women married to Vietnamese men emphasized maintaining the use of Chinese in the family and passing the language on to their offspring to preserve the Chinese identity that was inherited from their ancestors. Moreover, they expected it to be transferred to their offspring through identity negotiation between their Chinese identity and their spouses' Vietnamese identity amidst strong dominance of Vietnamese culture from the society outside. This is clearly proved by the story told by Quach Ky An, aged 68, a Cantonese-origin woman who married a former North Vietnamese soldier who had worked at



a state agency in District 5, living in Ho Chi Minh. After their marriage, her spouse moved to her Chinese family. Quach Ky An said:

*After my marriage, at first nothing in my daily life changed very much because I still lived in the old house and I still maintained my Chinese lifestyle like before. My husband had to adjust to living with my family but he still kept his Vietnamese identity. He was the person who made all the decisions in the family. As for the use of languages, I spoke Cantonese with my mother and my relatives and Vietnamese and simple Cantonese with my husband because he had lived with Cantonese people for a long time and could understand and speak a little Cantonese. But when I spoke Cantonese with him, he usually answered in Vietnamese. When he asked me in Vietnamese, I answered him in a mixture of Vietnamese and Cantonese. When talking in a group in the family or with guests, we spoke to the guests in Vietnamese if they were Vietnamese, and in Cantonese if they were Chinese Vietnamese. When my husband didn't understand something, I translated. As for my son, when he was small, he spent most of his time with my mother and me. We taught him Cantonese. At that time, talking to his mother, his grandmother, and even his father, he spoke Cantonese. But when he went to school, he spoke Vietnamese better than Cantonese. In the family, we had a rule that my children had to speak to me in Cantonese because I feared they would forget Cantonese. (Quach Ky An, 2012)*

In short, the first-generation women in Chinese Vietnamese families, including wives in Chinese Vietnamese families with the same or different spoken Chinese dialects and wives in Vietnamese families, made great efforts to construct their awareness of being Chinese through intense preservation

of Chinese identity. They did so through identity negotiation between their being Chinese, which was inherited from their ancestors, and the Vietnamese values that were dominant in the outside society or from their spouses' being Vietnamese by using Chinese in the family and by transferring their use of Chinese to their offspring.

### **Middle-aged Chinese Vietnamese Women's Use of Chinese**

Most middle-aged Chinese Vietnamese women, aged between 35 and 55, got married in the post-Vietnam liberation period, especially in *doi moi*, the period of dramatic political, economic, and cultural changes in Vietnamese society. At this time Chinese Vietnamese women in Cho Lon had much more access to Vietnamese society, and their use of Chinese in their spouses' families interestingly demonstrated the turning point of the mixture of Chinese and Vietnamese culture in the area of families.

I had many opportunities to talk to middle-aged Chinese Vietnamese women in Cho Lon and found that they could converse with Vietnamese people in Vietnamese easily and that they spoke Chinese or a mixture of Chinese and Vietnamese very fluently.

Cantonese-origin women married to Cantonese-origin men and living with their spouses' families are unlikely to be engaged in language negotiation in the communications between them and their in-laws, but are involved in language competition between their families' use of Chinese and the Vietnamese coming from the outside society to dominate their children's use of language in the family. These women felt they had a duty to preserve the use of Chinese in their families and to teach their offspring Chinese in order to compete with Vietnamese, which was predominant outside their

families. The study results demonstrate that the use of Chinese in the Chinese Vietnamese families is not only a communication tool among family members but also a highly effective way of preserving and transferring Chinese to Chinese offspring. As these women spent most of their day time earning a living and carrying out their duties as mothers and daughters-in-law, they had little time to teach their children Chinese. However, because of their strong awareness of being Chinese and their sense of duty in passing on their Chinese identity – especially language – to the next generation, they had to seek alternative ways to teach their children Chinese. Thus, they hired teachers of Cantonese to teach their children at home or they took their children to Chinese community activities to seek opportunities for themselves and their children to speak Chinese. Obviously, the duty of teaching offspring Chinese in the Chinese Vietnamese families is assigned to the women in the family. Wives who neglect Chinese teaching for children are considered by their husbands to be irresponsible in performing their duties as wives and mothers. This is clearly demonstrated by the story told by Dao Lien, aged 54, a Cantonese-origin woman married to a Cantonese-origin man.

*In my family, everyone has to speak Cantonese. My father-in-law is strict in forbidding Vietnamese to be spoken in our family and everyone used only Cantonese at home. During the day time, I am a merchant in Binh Tay market, talking to buyers and other sellers in the market in both Cantonese and Vietnamese. Generally, buyers are Vietnamese, so I speak Vietnamese to them. Getting home in the evening, I have to do housework and have little time to teach my kids Chinese. But luckily, when they were not old enough to go to school, they were home with their grandmother almost all day, and she taught them Cantonese. When they went to school, they*

*studied with Vietnamese kids and learned only Vietnamese. Sometimes they spoke Vietnamese, and when my husband heard that, he scolded me, saying, "How did you teach your kids, they forgot Chinese already," and telling our kids, "You are not allowed to speak Vietnamese at home, and if I hear you speaking it again I will slap you in the face." So, I had to hire teachers of Cantonese to teach my kids at home like other Chinese families in Cho Lon. Moreover, when I am at home, I try to speak to them in Cantonese, and when our community holds activities like Chinese opera performances, I usually take them there to find opportunities to speak Cantonese. (Dao Lien, 2012)*

As far as the use of Chinese by Chinese-origin wives in the spouses' Chinese Vietnamese families with different Chinese dialects is concerned, the difference in spoken languages affects Chinese-identity expression by the daughters-in-law, as in the case of Truong Ming, aged 47, a Cantonese-origin woman married to a Chaozhou-origin man. She said,

*At first, when I lived with my husband's family, I couldn't speak Chaozhou.. My husband and the rest of his family could speak Vietnamese and a little Cantonese with me. When they talked to one another, they spoke Chaozhou and sometimes I felt like I was an outsider. So, I had to learn Chaozhou in the evening classes held by the Association of Chaozhou-origin People. My father-in-law was one of the leaders of the 'Dang' Surname Association, so everyone in my husband's family had to help the association with preparations for its activities. At the activities, everybody communicated with one another in Chaozhou and I used it as well. I could understand Chaozhou better than I could speak it. When activities among*

*various groups of Chinese dialects were held, I joined and belonged to my husband's Chaozhou group, not my Cantonese-origin group. My family had a shop selling shoes in Binh Tay market. There I mostly spoke Cantonese and Vietnamese, and I spoke Chaozhou only when I was back with my husband's family. Later my husband, children and I moved from my husband's house to another house because my husband is not the eldest child in the family.<sup>4</sup> At home, I speak Cantonese to my kids and switch to Chaozhou Chinese when talking to my husband. Sometimes I speak a kind of a mixture of three languages – Chaozhou Chinese, Cantonese and Vietnamese. Among the three languages, my kids are the best at Vietnamese because they go to Vietnamese schools, Chaozhou Chinese comes second and then Cantonese comes last. They can speak a little Cantonese. (Truong Ming, 2012)*

Truong Ming's story demonstrates that under the traditional idea of men's superiority to women, middle-aged Chinese Vietnamese women who married Chinese-origin men with different Chinese dialects and lived with their spouses' families had to use the families' Chinese dialect in every communication with the rest of the family and others in various family activities. However, amidst the dominance of different Chinese dialects used in their husbands' family and the intervention of the Vietnamese language at work, these women are involved in language negotiation by creating occasions to use their own Chinese dialects and making good use of the opportunity to construct their distinct Chinese identity in their spouses'

<sup>4</sup> In the Chinese community in Cho Lon, Chinese-origin families still maintain the notion that the duty of taking care of parents belongs to the eldest son in the family and that the role of the eldest son's wife is to take care of her parents-in-law. Parents usually live with their eldest son's family.

families. If the women's being Chinese is analyzed only in the area of linguistics, their Chinese identity is likely to be a mixture of their own Chinese identity, their spouses' Chinese identity, and the outside society's Vietnamese identity. This is because their communications in their spouses' families are carried out on the basis of the interaction and the clash between three languages: these women's own Chinese dialects, their spouses' different Chinese dialects, and the outside society's Vietnamese.

In terms of the use of Chinese by middle-aged Chinese Vietnamese women married to Vietnamese men and living with the spouses' families, their use of Chinese is characterized by relatively strong Chinese-identity negotiation with their awareness of the importance and duty of preserving their Chinese identity and passing on it to their offspring. An example is the case of Huynh Tu Muoi, aged 45, the daughter of a Cantonese-origin father and a Vietnamese mother, married to a Vietnamese man who is the owner of a sweetmeat shop in Cho Lon. She said,

*When I was a little girl, though my mother was Vietnamese, everything in my family was Chinese. My mother also had to do everything according to Chinese traditions. Every communication in my family was in Cantonese, so my mother turned into a Chinese woman, too. My grandfather ordered everybody in our family to speak Cantonese and the children had to be taught Chinese values. But my mother had her Vietnamese identity as well. When I married a Vietnamese man, my own family didn't put any restrictions on me because my parents are in the same boat. Before my marriage, my grandfather and my father always told me that although we were living in Vietnam, we were Chinese and were supposed to keep being Chinese to pass on it to the next generation. After getting*

*married and moving into my husband's house, I had to adjust in many ways, like speaking Vietnamese in the family and I didn't have many opportunities to speak Chinese. So I spoke Cantonese in the market and joined Chinese-origin people's activities like Chinese opera performances.. When I had a child, I spoke Cantonese with him and taught him Cantonese, too. When my family moved out from my husband's extended family to a new house, I also spoke to my kids in Cantonese. Now they still speak Cantonese with me and I also take them to Cantonese classes in Cho Lon to help them read and write Cantonese well. (Huynh Tu Muoi, 2012)*

From the case of Huynh Tu Muoi and others, it is obvious that Chinese Vietnamese women who married men with different cultural backgrounds mainly come from families familiar with cross-cultural marriages. In addition, because of more open social attitudes towards the role of women and Vietnamese policies in favor of Chinese Vietnamese women's integration in Vietnamese society during the *doi moi* period, the Chinese Vietnamese women in Cho Lon had easier access to schooling and job opportunities than women from other ethnic groups in Ho Chi Minh City. They were also more sociable and active in joining an increasing number of community activities organized by their community and the city. However, it is their deeper participation and integration in the Vietnamese society that caused them a lot of worries that their Chinese culture would be lost or assimilated into Vietnamese culture. Therefore, middle-aged Chinese Vietnamese women, most of whom were born and grew up in Vietnam, were taught to have a strong awareness of being Chinese and to preserve their Chinese identity at an early age. The awareness of being Chinese was further strengthened for the Chinese Vietnamese women who married Vietnamese

men. This was obviously demonstrated by their identity negotiation through various ways of creating Chinese-speaking opportunities and transferring their Chinese language to their offspring.

In conclusion, the middle-aged Chinese Vietnamese women in Cho Lon are the generation that inherited old Chinese values and received new Vietnamese values. Because of the open-door or *doi moi* policy in Vietnam, the Chinese Vietnamese women, who had seemingly had no voice in their Chinese family and community, were stimulated to be more integrated into Vietnamese society. However, this deeper integration in the Vietnamese society resulted in new challenges to their being Chinese as they faced the risk of disappearance and assimilation into the dominant Vietnamese identity. Hence, these women, including those married to Chinese men and to Vietnamese men, experienced their awareness of being Chinese and preserving Chinese identity being awakened and consolidated through the efforts of elderly people in their families who emphasized the frequent use of Chinese. This created a new meaning of their use of Chinese: it is a way of preserving and passing on Chinese values and identity to their offspring.

### **Young Chinese Vietnamese Women's Use of Chinese**

Most young Chinese Vietnamese women aged under 35 were born and grew up in the post-*doi moi* period with Vietnam's rapid economic and cultural development and new cultural values coming into Vietnamese society from Western countries in the globalization era. These changes have had a strong impact on their lifestyle, which differs enormously from that of the first and the second generations in the Chinese-origin families in Cho Lon. Noticeably, these young women's preservation of their being Chinese is characterized by the new values of a modern society.



As far as these women's use of languages is concerned, they favored the use of a mixture of Vietnamese and Chinese, but more Vietnamese than Chinese. When young girls conversed in a group, they usually spoke Vietnamese and sometimes used some Chinese words in their expressions, but when they were at home, they spoke a mixture of Chinese and Vietnamese to elderly people. Their parents spoke to them in Chinese and they replied in Vietnamese. Notably, the teenagers could speak and understand Chinese but couldn't write and read Chinese characters. When I sat listening to a Hong Kong pop song together with some young Chinese Vietnamese girls, I asked them to translate the lyrics of the song into Vietnamese for me and I found that they found it hard to translate every sentence but still understood the main points. Duong Me Tuyet, aged 19, said to me,

*I go to school and speak Vietnamese most of the time. Coming back home, I speak to my parents in Cantonese, but I don't speak it very well. I like listening to Hong Kong pop songs 'cause I want to learn modern Cantonese, too. At home, we speak Cantonese that is not modern at all. I like speaking modern Hong Kong Cantonese much more. We like watching Hong Kong films and usually go to rent videos of original Hong Kong films which are not dubbed into Vietnamese to hear Cantonese. (Duong Me Tuyet, 2012)*

From the interviews with other young girls, I found that the Cantonese language that is spoken by Chinese Vietnamese people in Cho Lon is similar to the language that is used in Hong Kong, but is slightly different in pronunciation and vocabulary. Hong Kong Cantonese is mixed with a lot of English words. More interestingly, these teenagers liked using

Facebook<sup>5</sup> to communicate with their friends and they also used it as a tool to study Cantonese and exchange modern Cantonese words<sup>6</sup> and clips of Hong Kong pop songs, videos of Hong Kong films, and videos of teaching modern Cantonese. They preferred speaking the modern Cantonese language which is used in Hong Kong to show off their modernity.

Duong Ngoc Linh, aged 27, is a Cantonese-origin woman married to a Hainan-origin man. Her parents' family and her husband's family did not use the same Chinese dialect, leading to the diverse use of languages in her own family. Linh could not speak the Hainan Chinese dialect but could understand it a little, and the people in her spouse' family were very bad at Cantonese; therefore, the daughter-in-law conversed with the rest of her spouse' family in Vietnamese. When I asked Linh which language (her Cantonese language or her husband's Hainan Chinese language) she wanted her children to be good at, she answered,

*We are living in Vietnam, and my kids go to school which teaches every subject in Vietnamese. They speak Vietnamese most of the time. In my case, the use of Cantonese has decreased significantly compared to my parents' and grandparents' generations. I don't know what will happen, but actually I want my kids to be able to speak our Chinese whether it is Cantonese or Hainanese. (Duong Ngoc Linh, 2012)*

---

<sup>5</sup> Facebook is an online social networking service. After registering to use the site, users can create a user profile, add other users as "friends," exchange messages, post status updates and photos, share videos and receive notifications when others update their profiles. Additionally, users may join common-interest user groups, organized by workplace, school or college, or other characteristics, and categorize their friends into lists such as "People From Work" or "Close Friends."

<sup>6</sup> Modern Cantonese words are Cantonese words mixed with English words which are commonly used in Hong Kong.

Since the *doi moi* period, the Vietnamese government has issued policies promoting education for the Chinese Vietnamese ethnic minority group and facilitated its access to schooling and higher education opportunities at various levels. Most Chinese Vietnamese young people in Cho Lon complete Vietnam's compulsory education (from elementary to high school), and many of them complete tertiary education, including a master's degree and doctorate. They usually choose to major in Chinese, Chinese culture, foreign trade, business – fields that are helpful for their families' businesses. Opportunities have facilitated the increasing social interaction between the Chinese-origin young people and their Vietnamese friends and raised the dominance of Vietnamese over Chinese in these Chinese Vietnamese youngsters' use of languages.

In terms of Chinese Vietnamese young girls' use of Chinese, despite their efforts to maintain the use of Chinese at home to preserve their Chinese language and identity, the young women have shown a great interest in absorbing a modern Chinese identity by using the modern Cantonese that is commonly used in Hong Kong more than the so-called old Cantonese which is used in their family. Here strong influences of globalization and new cultural values coming into Vietnam from the West can be seen. These young women are also fond of imitating dress and make-up styles of Hong Kong movies stars, unlike most Vietnamese who like listening to Korean pop songs and copying Korean stars' dress and make up. Obviously, the use of languages by the Chinese Vietnamese young women at home reflects the significance of modern consumption and demonstrates their incomplete awareness of preserving Chinese in comparison with earlier generations.

In conclusion, the use of Chinese by the three generations in Chinese-origin families in Cho Lon demonstrates that Vietnam's social context

and the influences of external cultural factors have made a strong impact on the construction of Chinese identity awareness and negotiation of the Chinese language or negotiation of Chinese identity in varying ways. These factors include the Vietnamese open-door policies in favor of the Chinese Vietnamese women's deeper integration into Vietnamese society in the *doi moi* period, education-promotion policies for the Chinese Vietnamese ethnic minority group, and the influence of the idea that men are superior to women.

The first-generation women built their awareness of being Chinese on the foundation of intense preservation of their Chinese language and identity negotiation between their being Chinese, which was inherited from their ancestors, and the Vietnamese identity that is dominant in the external social world or that comes from their Vietnamese husbands by choosing to use and pass Chinese language on to their offspring in their families. The second-generation in the family is the generation that has inherited old Chinese values and received new Vietnamese values; their awareness of being Chinese and preserving Chinese identity was awakened and consolidated by elderly people in their families with a strong emphasis on the frequent use of Chinese, which created a new meaning of their use of Chinese, a way of preserving and passing on Chinese values and identity to their offspring. This generation's use of Chinese at home reflects the significance of modern consumption and demonstrates their incomplete awareness of preserving Chinese in comparison with the generations of their grandmothers and mothers. It is obvious that the Chinese Vietnamese women in Cho Lon have sought various methods of constructing their Chinese identity in the family, one of which is the use of Chinese at home. They have also successfully applied the strategy of choosing the Chinese values inherited from their ancestors to negotiate with their spouses' identities or the Vietnamese identity that is dominant in external society.

## **Conclusion**

Both Chinese society and Vietnamese society have been shaped by Confucianism and its influence remains immense. Confucius took the family as the model for all of society and as a patriarchal system. Women were taught the “three obediences”: In her youth, a woman must obey her father, as an adult, she must obey her husband, and in old age, she must obey her sons. The authority of the father figure extends to all those who are older. Like the father, older people were due respect and deference. Women were also educated on self-discipline, etiquette, relationships with in-laws, household management, humility, and chastity. The influence of Confucianism has played an important role in shaping the Chinese identity of Chinese women and Chinese-origin women in Chinese communities all over the world.

The political, social and economic changes in Vietnam and the influences of external cultural factors including Vietnamese policies aimed at facilitating Chinese Vietnamese women’s deeper integration into the Vietnamese society as well as the concept of men’s dominance over women have played a significant part in the various processes of building Chinese-identity awareness and Chinese negotiation or Chinese-identity negotiation of the three generations of women in Chinese Vietnamese families in Cho Lon. The first generation constructed their Chinese identity through intense preservation of their Chinese language and identity negotiation between their own Chinese identity and the Vietnamese identity of the external social or of their Vietnamese husbands by maintaining their use of Chinese at home and passing on it to their offspring. The second generation inherited old Chinese values and received new Vietnamese values, and their use of Chinese at home is attached to a new meaning of

Chinese-identity preservation and transference to the next generations. The third generation has identified their use of Chinese in terms of modernity consumption and expressed their incomplete awareness of preserving Chinese compared with the generations of their grandmothers and mothers. Because of their great efforts at Chinese-identity construction, the Chinese Vietnamese women residing in Cho Lon have succeeded in their strategy of choosing the Chinese values inherited from their ancestors to negotiate with their spouses' identities or the Vietnamese identity dominant in the external society. However, the key fact to keep in mind is that their success in Chinese-identity preservation has resulted from their pride, responsibility, and sense of duty in preserving their origin and has demonstrated the hidden strength of these women and the strength of cultures which help to characterize their Chinese identity.

In addition, the rising economic profile of China and the increasingly important role of Chinese as a major world language in the era of globalization have stirred a feeling of pride in their mother tongue among Overseas Chinese in general and Chinese Vietnamese people in Cho Lon in particular. It has considerably stimulated the use of Chinese in the Chinese community. Knowledge of the Chinese language has indeed acted as a powerful tool for Chinese-origin people to boost their paycheck or land a better job in an increasing number of enterprises and companies are run by Chinese people or Chinese Vietnamese people. This external factor also helps to foster the motivation among Chinese Vietnamese women to study Chinese.

The Chinese ethnic minority group has advantages over the other minority groups in Vietnam especially in terms of economic development and cultural preservation. They have succeeded in constructing and negotiating

their Chinese identity and values through concerted efforts amidst the dominant Vietnamese values in the external society.

## References

- Barth, F (1969). **Ethnic Groups and Boundaries: The Social Organization of Social Differences**. Bergen: Universitetsforlag and Boston: Little Brown and Co.
- Bauer, R.S. & Benedict, P.K. (1997). **Trends in Linguistics: Studies and Monographs 102**. New York: Mouton de Gruyter.
- Bo Thong tin va Truyen thong. (2012). **Dien tich, Dan so va Mat do Dan so Nam 2011 Phan theo Dia phuong**. (In Vietnamese) [The Localities' Area, Population and Population Density of the Year 2011]. Ha Noi: Van ban cua Bo thong tin va Truyen thong.
- Deaux, K. (2001). Social Identity. In J. Worrell (Ed.), **Encyclopedia of Women and Gender (Vol. 2)**. (pp. 1059-1067). San Diego, CA: Academic Press
- Garnier, Francis. (1866). Cholen. En **Annuaire de la Cochinchine française pour l'année 1866** (In French) [The Yearbook of French Colony's Northern Vietnam in 1866]. Saigon: Imprimerie imperial
- Leepreecha, Prasit. (2014). Krabuanthasana kan suksa chatipan sampan (in Thai) [Paradigms on Studies of Ethnicities]. **Journal of Mekong Societies**, 10 (3), 219-242.
- Li, W. (1994). **Three Generations, Two Languages, One Family: Language Choice and Language Shift in a Chinese Community in Britain**. Clevedon, UK: Multilingual Matters.

Nguyen Cam Thuy. (2000). **Dinh cu cua nguoi Hoa tren dat Nam Bo (tu the ky XVII den nam 1945.** (In Vietnamese) [The Settlement of the Chinese in South Vietnam (the 18<sup>th</sup> century to 1945)]. Thanh pho Ho Chi Minh: Nha xuất bản Khoa học Xã hội.

**Norman, Jerry** (1988), **Chinese.** Cambridge: Cambridge University Press  
 Ramsey, S. R. (1987). **The Languages of China.** Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Taylor, I., & Taylor, M. M. (1995). **Writing and Literacy in Chinese, Korean, and Japanese.** Philadelphia: John Benjamins.

VTV9, Dai Truyen hinh Viet Nam. (2012). **Sai Gon – Tp. Ho Chi Minh xua va nay: He thong hanh chinh Sai Gon xua.** (In Vietnamese) [Saigon – Ho Chi Minh City in the Past and at Present: The Administration System of Saigon in the Past]. Retrieved September 21, 2012, from: <http://www.vtv9.com.vn/news/topic/6092/si-gn-tp.-h-ch-minh-xa-v-nay-h-thng-hnh-chnh-si-gn-xa.vtv9>.

Vuong Hong Sen. (1991). **Sai Gon Nam Xua.** (In Vietnamese) [Saigon in the Past]. Thanh pho Ho Chi Minh: Nha xuất bản thanh pho Ho Chi Minh.

### **Interview**

Dao Lien. (2012, May 19). **Interview.** Citizen. Ward 7, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City.

Duong Me Tuyet. (2012, April 26). **Interview.** Citizen. Ward 7, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City.

Duong Ngoc Linh. (2012, May 25). **Interview.** Citizen. Ward 7, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City.

Huynh Tu Muoi. (2012, June 17). **Interview.** Citizen. Ward 7, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City.



- Liu Hue An. (2012, June 17). **Interview.** Citizen. Ward 7, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City.
- Phung Xu An. (2012, May 17). **Interview.** Citizen. Ward 7, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City.
- Quach Ky An. (2012, April 1). **Interview.** Citizen. Ward 7, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City.
- Truong Ming. (2012, June 26). **Interview.** Citizen. Ward 7, District 5, Ho Chi Minh City.

