# Lollipop or Firework – Language Identity Dilemma

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***Lianhe Zaobao,*** 4 May 2014

I recently attended a presentation on the relationship between mother tongue and motherland. The first of a series of public talks named *UnThinkTank,* it was jointly organised by the Chou Sing Chu Foundation and 10AM. The speaker was Chen Danqing, a Chinese artist who also does cultural reviews, who is well known for his sharp comments and subversive views.

I attended the session with high expectations. A few minutes into his speech, Mr Chen professed that he had come to a new understanding of the topic "Mother tongue, Motherland". He explained that upon his arrival in Singapore, he had been warned by his local friends about the sensitivity of the topic, telling him that he was stepping on a landmine, and that he had to be very careful with how he handles the topic, or he would hurt not only others, but also himself. He added that Singapore is a place that makes people tense. Mr Chen then stated that he had been educated by his friends, and that he now understands that the ethnic Chinese in Singapore are not referred to as "overseas Chinese", but "Chinese Singaporeans".

The fact that a cultural intellectual had been "warned" of the danger of speaking about language issues on his first trip to Singapore shows to some extent how locals cannot extricate themselves from the self-restrictions that they have placed on the topic.

Mr Chen's speech was based on his feelings and views on his mother tongue and motherland that stem from his personal life experiences. He pointed out that Chinese nationals have a strong concept of ancestry, which they use as a basis for language identity. Therefore, the average China citizen has emotional ties towards those of the same ancestry, race, and those from the same birthplaces and who bear the same surnames. In contrast, their concepts of "nation" and "mother tongue" are not strong. Applying this concept when examining the language environment, speakers of different regional languages in China who hail from different regions of China hold on tightly to their individual ancestries, ethnicities and languages, and remain emotionally rooted to this regardless of where they go in the world. Just like a lollipop with its strips spiralling outwards from the centre while staying firmly in place and rooted, its centripetal force pulls the strips towards a central concept of "ancestry", and not "national language" or "nation". Such a concept evidently goes against the nation-building ideology of countries that gained sovereignty after World War II, as well as that of immigrant nations. The governments of these countries must first establish a national identity for its citizens during the nation-building process, of which one method is to introduce the concept of a "national language". However, when the "national language" is different from the "mother tongue", the government must ensure that its citizens are first loyal towards the "national language", thereby leading to identity fragmentation.

Despite being the official "mother tongue" designated to Chinese Singaporeans, Mandarin was not the heritage language of most of the early Chinese immigrants in Singapore. Therefore, "mother tongue" took on a new concept, which was then promoted and became deeply ingrained. The Singaporean government instilled a "Singaporeans First" ideology in

citizens, which de-emphasised ancestry and culture in favour of national identity. This was precisely what Mr Chen had realised — Singaporeans of Chinese descent are not “overseas Chinese”, but “Chinese Singaporeans”.

Unlike the strips of the lollipop encircling tightly around its centre, the respective heritage languages of Singaporeans who have developed a strong sense of “nation” are like far-off points loosely connected to the centre, similar to the free-shooting sparks of a firework. The central point of connection is no longer that of a common “ancestry”, but that of a newborn “country”. Regardless of the country they settle in, Chinese with a strong sense of ancestry still identify themselves as “descendants of the dragon” (i.e., descendants of Chinese ancestry). They see other overseas Chinese as belonging to the same ancestry, race and culture as themselves, though not necessarily as belonging to the same nationality.

Mr Chen Danqing probably holds an American passport, but identifies himself first and foremost as a China citizen; therefore he finds it strange when others criticise him as a holder of an American passport. He does not have a problem with his own identity despite what others think, and so he does not let himself be affected by it, leaving it to those who are bothered to find a way out for and by themselves. This is how he manages his own fragmented identity.

Our dilemma in Singapore is that there are inevitably Chinese Singaporeans in the community who still have a strong sense of their common ancestry (while simultaneously embracing the concept of nation and official mother tongue). At the same time, there are many non-Mandarin-speaking Chinese Singaporeans who emphasise their national identity first, and dislike being associated and tied to an ancestral identity. Unlike their ancestors, they no longer like the limiting boundaries of ancestry, instead aspiring to be sparkling and free fireworks. Thus, feelings of unhappiness, hurt and grievances are bred, and complex feelings about ancestry and culture remain entangled and unresolved.

As mentioned by Mr Chen, the questions of whether we should speak our mother tongue, how much we should speak it, and to what extent we should speak it, are intricately linked to two issues — pride and sense of security.

The kind of symbolic values and emotions that a language bears for a speaker depends on the speakers’ life experiences and their interpretations. Some believe that the Chinese language is burdened with the humbling humiliation and stagnation of recent history. However, it is also undeniably filled with the richness, brilliance and wisdom stemming from 5,000 years of culture.

In our daily lives, everyone purposefully extracts the nutrients they need from a language to nourish their individual lives and identities, presenting different attitudes depending on different language environments. Therefore, those who can see the wisdom and richness of their mother tongue are proud to speak the language, as it gives them a feeling of pride and security. The mother tongue then becomes easy to learn and speak, and vice versa.

After narrating the literary life of his mentor-cum-contemporary, Muxin, Mr Chen commented that everyone suffers from language dilemmas — it all depends on how one manages it, or if one gives up on it. Where there is a will, there is a way; to him, both pride and security can be achieved when the language dilemma is handled skilfully.

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