

# Learning about Your Culture and Language Online: Shifting Language Ideologies of *Hoisan-wa* on the Internet (“I especially liked how you used the *thl-* sound.”)

Genevieve Y. Leung

*University of Pennsylvania*

This reflective paper explores some of the language ideologies on the Internet about *Hoisan-wa*, a variety of Cantonese. Through looking at three YouTube videos and users’ comments about them, findings demonstrate a shift in language beliefs about *Hoisan-wa* as being less of a “harsh-sounding language” to more of a public declaration of pride in being speakers or descendants of this language background. These findings have implications for community heritage language teaching as well as the teaching of different varieties of Chinese - not just standard varieties like Mandarin or Cantonese. The author shows why it is absolutely necessary to situate and recognize without erasure *Hoisan-wa* and other local languages within the arena of Chinese and how technology can aid in this process.

## Introduction

### *Author’s Stance*

I am always taken aback when I tell people in the U.S. I speak Cantonese<sup>1</sup> and it takes them several minutes to realize that Cantonese is not the same as Mandarin. Frankly, I do not know exactly why this misinformation exists in the age of supposed heightened awareness of multiculturalism and multilingualism, though it is very possible that the rise of Mandarin as a world language has started processes of leveling other varieties of Chinese for the up-and-coming variety (i.e., for now, Mandarin). While Mandarin might be China’s national language, the idea that all ethnically Chinese people speak one “Chinese” when multiple varieties of Chinese have existed for thousands of years is a fantasy of what people lump together as the “Chinese” language (DeFrancis, 1984; Hannas, 1997). “Chinese”-speaking people are immensely diverse even within communities in mainland China, Taiwan, Hong Kong, Macau, and overseas Chinese diaspora communities all over the world. Most people nod in acknowledgment when I tell them this, but I am always left with a lingering feeling that they still do not fully understand the linguistic situation at hand. People in the U.S., ethnically Chinese or not and perhaps conflating language with

ethnicity, still use the term “Chinese” as if it refers to one monolithic item. A simple corpus survey of major U.S. newspapers in the last 20 years evidences public confusion of “Chinese,” revealing the one-sided collocation mapping of “Mandarin” with “Chinese” and “language” but all other Chinese languages with “dialect.” Clearly Mandarin and China have risen in esteem in the world, but too few scholars have brought to light the issues and tensions among Chinese if the overemphasis of Mandarin continues to be left unchecked.

Since it sometimes feels like such an arduous process to explain the small sliver of my linguistic heritage that includes Cantonese, the linguistic bloodline passed down to me by my father, I do not usually mention that my linguistic repertoire also includes *Hoisan-wa* ( ),<sup>2</sup> generally regarded as a dialect or sub-variety of Cantonese. As explained by McCoy (1966), *Hoisan-wa* is recognized as being a language spoken in Taishan, China, which is part of the Szeyap (四邑) region, an area which also includes Kaiping ( ), Enping (恩平), and Xinhui ( ). In English, *Hoisan-wa* is also known as “Toisanese” or “Toishanese,” as it is called in Standard Cantonese, and “Taishanese,” as it is called in Modern Standard Mandarin.<sup>2</sup> *Hoisan-wa* is the language of my mother and maternal grandparents, the one language that my grandmother has been using for the last 92 years. A study by Szeto (2000) found that Cantonese and *Hoisan-wa* are around 70% mutually intelligible, but this statistic masks the stigma nearly all *Hoisan-wa* speakers have felt in their lifetime. The relationship between the two languages is described in William Poy Lee’s (2007) memoir of growing up as a *Hoisan-wa* speaker in San Francisco:

Because of Toisanese reverse cachet as a hillbillyish, coarse, down-in-the-delta variation of Big City Cantonese, there are no Toisanese novels, poems, or operas. There is no legacy of Toisan royals with ornate Toisan summer palaces. The prolific Shaw Brothers Studio of Hong Kong did not make movies in Toisanese. Bruce Lee never slipped into Toisanese. There are no Toisanese television series, and no Toisanese pride movement is clamoring for one. (p. 70)

The evaluative placement of *Hoisan-wa* as being linguistically less important than “Big City” Cantonese, spoken as an official language in Hong Kong, is one which deserves due consideration, since *Hoisan-wa* is actually a language variety very much entwined with U.S. history and immigration, a fact of which many are not aware.

### Theoretical Frameworks

This paper is informed by a language ideology framework and how these thoughts about language shape how speakers and communities come to understand and value (or devalue) what they speak. Kroskrity (2000) defines language ideologies as the views about language which benefit a specific group. Negative esteem in one’s language may lend itself to language loss, which Zepeda and Hill (1991) call an “intellectual catastrophe” (p. 135). Groups that do not benefit from dominant language ideologies are never completely disenfranchised, as it is always possible to challenge and contest those in power through counter-hegemonic language ideologies (Achugar, 2008).

At the same time, it is often not until users of a language feel their language is truly threatened do they mobilize with language maintenance efforts. Fishman (1991) calls these efforts of *reversing language shift* (RLS), a process which “requires reversing the tenor, the focus, the qualitative emphases of daily informal life--always the most difficult arenas in which to intervene” (p. 8). As these efforts often-times run counter to popular ideologies undertaken by those in society that have less implementational power, RLSers face harsh criticisms of being “backward looking (‘past-oriented’), conservative, change-resistant dinosaurs” (Fishman, 1991, p.386). Fishman counters this by saying,

Language is a prime boundary-marker and protector, because it not only implies and reflects core boundaries but because it constantly creates and legitimizes them as well. RLS seeks to avoid the dislocations that inevitably result from the destruction and substitution of core symbols, behaviors, boundaries and values, possible through it may be to come through such destruction and substitution with one’s phenomenological social identity intact. It is not change per se that is opposed by RLSers but changes in a core behavioral complex in which the language is generatively and regeneratively linked to the protected cultural core...For all of its fascination with change, much of the thoughtful West is also ‘past appreciative’. For all of their use of the past, most RLS movements and efforts are future-oriented. (p. 388)

Ethnolinguistic vitality, or group identity in multiethnic and multilingual settings, can serve as indicators in RLS efforts, focusing on the boundaries between and within ethnocultures. As Fishman (1991) explains,

Unfortunately, the symbolic link between a language and its traditionally associated ethnoculture is a sword that cuts both ways. For receding languages, the language is also symbolic of the process of receding, of the disadvantages popularly ascribed to a receding language, of the typicality of the life-style of those who hang on to a receding language after most others have shifted to a language of greater currency and, therefore, also to a language of seemingly greater advantage in status, income, social acceptance and social participation. (p. 23)

The idea of a language indexing backwardness is one that rings resonant for the case of *Hoisan-wa*, mapping onto beliefs that it sounds less refined than the languages of higher currency that it has come into contact with: first Cantonese and English, then Mandarin. The fact that English and now Mandarin both have been cited for gaining unprecedented esteem (Crystal, 2009; Hsiau, 2000; Snow, 2004) is reason enough to be cautious of neglecting other, equally present but not equally represented language varieties. Hence, I am viewing *Hoisan-wa* in the United States diachronically, using a language ideologies framework to look at Fishman’s concepts of RLS, language maintenance, and ethnolinguistic vitality.

#### *More than Just a “Harsh-Sounding” Language*

Presently, *Hoisan-wa* amongst the larger Chinese American community has the reputation for being a “rural” or “crude-sounding” language only spoken by “old

people in Chinatown.” These linguistic judgments are harsh, but they also reflect a history of suffering most *Hoisan-wa* speakers and/or their ancestors have experienced. Many of these people came from Taishan County in Guangdong province in Southern China, a port community where a great majority of the economy revolves around agriculture and farming. When agriculture alone could not support the people in the early and mid 1800s, they looked to other ways to making money. At the time, the U.S. was looking for unskilled laborers to work in the gold mines and to build the Transcontinental Railroad, and consequently tens of thousands of *Hoisan-wa* speaking people, mainly men at first, enlisted to work there, sending their incomes back to China to support their families. While conditions were harsh -- both in terms of physical conditions and in terms of racial discrimination--eventually women and families followed. With immigration exclusion specifically targeting ethnic Chinese, what actualized was a rather distinct wave of immigration where nearly all of the Chinese population in the U.S. between 1850s up until 1965, when the Immigration and Naturalization Act of 1965 was passed, were *Hoisan-wa* speakers or speakers of some variety of Cantonese. Lee’s (2007) description of the relevance of people of *Hoisan-wa* speaking backgrounds in the U.S. is worth quoting in full because it is not mentioned enough:

And yet most of the first Chinese American pioneers were Toisanese. Arriving in numbers in the 1850’s to join the California Gold Rush, we stayed to build the first transcontinental railroad from the West Coast, as Irish immigrants built it from the East. Grimly, we stuck it out through the 1880’s, a reign of terror of anti-Chinese legislation, antimiscegnation laws, race riots, lynchings, and torching of Chinatowns up and down the West Coast. The horror of life for California’s Chinese residents was so unrelenting that it gave rise to the then-popular expression “He didn’t have a Chinaman’s chance.” Beginning in the 1900’s, we eventually settled into an uneasy, institutionalized Jim Crow segregation within the surviving Chinatowns.

These Chinatowns prospered and became havens for later waves of Chinese immigrants: in the 1950’s, refugees like Mother fleeing from Communist China; in the 1960’s, refugees like Grandmother Chun, who had been stranded in Hong Kong after the 1949 Communist assumption of power; in the 1970’s, Mandarin-speaking Taiwanese and then ethnic Chinese Vietnamese boat people; and finally in the 1980’s and 1990’s, Mandarin-speaking mainland Chinese moving to America for freedom and opportunity.

Through all these periods, the sons and daughters of the original Chinese Americans, the Toisanese and Cantonese who built and maintained the Chinatowns, welcomed each wave of newcomers. These pioneers had not only built safe havens, but their children went on to become doctors, lawyers, decorated war veterans, US senators, a state governor, best-selling authors, movie stars, and Silicon Valley moguls. Their names are part of our culture: actors Anna May Wong, Bruce Lee, and Jason Scott-Lee; former governor Gary Locke of Washington state; and best-selling novelist Maxine Hong-Kingston. (p. 71)

The significance of *Hoisan-wa* speakers in the U.S. essentially laying down the foundations for other Chinese immigrants is never mentioned in the U.S. public sphere. There is no mention in U.S. history textbooks that the language spoken

by ethnic Chinese immigrants and Chinese Americans at the time spoke *Hoisan-wa* or even that they spoke its mother linguistic node, Cantonese. However, unlike Standard Cantonese, which receives some institutional support in the form of Cantonese-English bilingual education programs, *Hoisan-wa*, like many other less-recognized varieties of Chinese, receives absolutely no support institutionally, making its speakers especially vulnerable to language loss. Though Wiley (2008) mentions this same fate of language loss for non-Mandarin Chinese in the U.S. because heritage language programs are placing tremendous focus on Mandarin exclusively, he exempts Cantonese from this destiny because of its historically long standing in the U.S. and the perceived prestige of the Pearl River Delta region, where Cantonese is spoken in China; however, I argue that the situation for Cantonese, specifically for the case of *Hoisan-wa*, is more complex than this. It is *Hoisan-wa*, not simply “Cantonese,” that is the longest-standing variety of Chinese in the U.S., and no research has been done specifically targeting this Chinese American population of *Hoisan-wa* background and their language; this is precisely why it is important to further investigate this topic.

If we simply live in the fantasy of Chinese being some singular, static entity based on the current state of Chinese immigration and current affairs, then losing part of the history and legacy of *Hoisan-wa* speakers in the U.S. is inevitable. Irvine and Gal’s (2000) notion of *erasure* comes to mind when thinking about this potential loss, where “ideology, in simplifying the sociolinguistic field, renders some persons or activities (or sociolinguistic phenomena) invisible” (p. 38). Moreover, as Kroskrity (2001) notes,

[l]anguage ideology promotes “the language subordination process” which amounts to a program of linguistic mystification undertaken by dominant institutions designed to simultaneously valorize the standard language and other aspects of “mainstream culture” while devaluing the non-standard and its associated cultural forms. (p. 502)

*Hoisan-wa*, once a “mainstream” Chinese of the U.S., has been slowly reduced, first by Cantonese and now with the emergence of Mandarin. The mapping of a simplified notion of culture and language, or, as Irvine and Gal (2000) call *iconization*, which involves “the attribution of cause and immediate necessity to a connection...that may only be historical, contingent, or conventional” (p. 37), is not only dangerous, it is fundamentally irresponsible; this reflective paper is an attempt to keep *Hoisan-wa* seen and validated.

### “Harshness” Debunked

One of the reasons why people typify *Hoisan-wa* as sounding “harsh” is because it has a voiceless alveolar fricative [ɸ], often romanized as “thl” or “tl,” a sound not found in the sound inventories of either Cantonese or Mandarin. As this is a sound that requires forcing the breath through a partially obstructed passage in the vocal tract while pulling the tongue back to the alveolar ridge, it is not uncommon for Cantonese speakers to mock *Hoisan-wa* speech through the use of this sound, emitting salivary trajectories in the process. Historical linguists, however, suggest that this sound might be a relic of Middle or Old Chinese (Blench, 2006; Cheng, 1973).

There are also several other qualities of *Hoisan-wa* which point to its long linguistic life and survival, including tonal inflection for personhood as opposed to adding a lexical morpheme to the singular forms. That is, while Chinese like Mandarin and Cantonese add an additional character morpheme ( 你 and 我, respectively) to distinguish first person singular “I” (我) and first person plural “we” (我们 and 我们) *Hoisan-wa* does not add a character morpheme but inflects instead from a mid level tone to a low level one. As languages develop alongside each other, this type of tonal inflection is often replaced by non-tonal morphemes, which are particularly noticeable in younger varieties (I. Maddieson, personal communication, November, 2003). *Hoisan-wa* also uses the negation particle *mo4*, documented only in the older generation of speakers in Macau and Hong Kong (Kuong, 2008). These phonological and lexical peculiarities are precisely the reasons why people cast such negative judgments on *Hoisan-wa*. As Kroskrity (2001) states of African American English and other “nonstandard” languages, “Rather than being understood as linguistic differences, such perceived inadequacies are instead naturalized and hierarchized in a manner which replicates social hierarchy” (p. 503). The devaluing and subordination of *Hoisan-wa* can also be understood in terms of the perceived value of social capital attached to a so-called standard language, be it Standard Cantonese or Modern Standard Mandarin, “which is presented as universally available, is commodified and presented as the only resource which permits full participation in the capitalist economy and an improvement of one’s place in its political economic system” (Kroskrity, 2001, p. 503). As this process involves erasure and limiting access to participation, it is one that needs to be both questioned and reevaluated.

### *Finding Ways Around Neither Writing What You Speak Nor Speaking What You Write*

Through the lens of mutual unintelligibility, Cantonese and its related varieties are considered a language family separate from Mandarin, but enough overlap in phonology, intonation, grammar and script in particular, allow for the translating of Cantonese knowledge into assets for Mandarin learning; thus, many Cantonese-speaking learners of Mandarin can draw upon existing knowledge of characters and lexicon (though not necessarily phonology) in ways non-Chinese counterparts might not be able to access. Yet these elephant-in-the-room factors are largely quashed because “we usually do not speak of Chinese in the plural” since standard written Chinese, matching most closely to spoken Modern Standard Mandarin (MSM), overrides all oral varieties of Chinese (Ramsey, 1987, p. 17). In addition, the name for these varieties of Chinese, called 方言 (MSM: *fang-yān*), has long been erroneously translated as “dialect.” The meaning is better captured with the term “topolect” (Mair, 1991), referring to language groups (Chinese or otherwise) by topographic distribution; the mistranslation and linguistically irresponsible perpetuation of “dialect” without cultural and historical prefacing further solidifies the ideology that “[t]he language variety that has the higher social value is called a “Language”, and the language variety with the lower social value is called a “dialect” (Roy, 1987, p. 234).

Many might be aware that amongst Chinese, there are topolects for which there are no written equivalents to common words in spoken language (Mair, 1991). While language ideologies about these topolects often include the idea that



speakers are “from the countryside” or “backwards,” these mostly standard, spoken words come from varieties with both large and small populations of speakers, including words in Taiwanese, spoken by 70% of Taiwan as a first or additional language (Lin, 1999).

Cantonese in Hong Kong is a unique case in this regard because it has adopted a writing system, Written Cantonese, which incorporates a combination of phonetically-borrowed characters, distinctly “Cantonese” characters mostly incomprehensible to non-Cantonese users, as well as English. Though Written Cantonese is used mostly in the realm of advertisements, blogs and instant messaging, comic books and general entertainment magazines, it nevertheless is regarded as a legitimate language (in acceptable contexts) and reflects the identities and linguistic realities of Hong Kong people (Snow, 2004). Written Cantonese has also been regularized in use, especially by adolescents and post-adolescents, who utilize it most (Leung, 2009).

*Hoisan-wa* and other local varieties, however, are less fortunate than Cantonese in that they do not have a tradition which legitimizes their spoken forms to be used anywhere in print; nor do they get to hear their language sung in popular music broadcasted over public media. While oral tradition maintains local and indigenous languages in the home, this form of passing down history and tradition almost always stops if no input is placed to valorize the process (Hinton, 2003). Geertz (1973) notes that the social practice of oral tradition is important in that it reflects a culture’s frame of reference through use of traditional folk wisdom to solve conflicts; such intergenerational transmission of culture is undeniably valuable. *Hoisan-wa* is not nearing traditional definitions of extinction, as the official website of Taishan states, *Hoisan-wa* is still the local language of around 1 million Taishanese people in China, but this does not discount the fact that in the U.S., it is a language that is being lost by its speakers. This is definitely not an isolated occurrence; the rapid disappearance of language across generations of even close-knit immigrant enclave communities has been documented by numerous scholars, including Fishman (1991), Krashen (1996), and Tse (2000), just to name a few.

### *A Glimmer of Hope, Perhaps?*

As a variety that continues to exist despite the fact it does not have a standardized written form with which to disseminate and has such low esteem by many of its speakers and their children, one might wonder what efforts can be taken to advance this stagnating language to the next generation. What can Chinese Americans do to preserve and maintain the language of their heritage if they do not have ready access to a *Hoisan-wa* speaker? Where does someone who wants to start learning *Hoisan-wa* even begin? These have been questions I have been struggling with for the last eight years since my grandmother suffered a stroke. The thought of the possibility of not having access to *Hoisan-wa* any more is one that is quite frightening; it signals the possible terminal point in your linguistic family tree. As Pyoli (1998) states of ethnic groups facing similar fears of language loss, “Paradoxically, some kind of ethnic awakening does not seem to arise among the minorities until the terminal state of a language, when statistics already reflect the decline of minority-language speakers” (p. 129). For preservation purposes I began collecting linguistic and historical doc-

uments relating to *Hoisan-wa* as well as sound recordings of my grandmother's speech. At the time there were no live public media through which *Hoisan-wa* was used and propagated.

However, in 2005, a classmate who was from Taishan told me about a song being circulated on the Internet by *Hoisan-wa* speaking people called 台山好 *Hoisan Ho* [Hoisan is Great].<sup>3</sup> It is sung entirely in *Hoisan-wa* and reflects the way the language is actually spoken, not the way it is written in literary form, which is overwhelmingly how songs are sung in all varieties of Chinese. This is in stark contrast to Hong Kong Cantonese popular music, which is sung mostly using Standard Written Chinese – that is, Hong Kong singers would sing as they write but *not* how they speak to another person. What is more, because of the lewd lyrics which criticized the government, the creators and singers of the song were put in jail. I was told by my friend that this song was not one to learn *Hoisan-wa* from, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section.

### A Survey of Three Different Uses of Hoisan-wa on the Internet

Since the picking up of 台山好 *Hoisan Ho* by the *Hoisan-wa* speaking online community (and even by some people who do not speak it), the Internet has served as the arena where many *Hoisan-wa* speaking people young and old have uploaded videos or songs on YouTube of themselves using *Hoisan-wa*, explicitly noting that the rationale behind doing this was because there were not enough places to preserve and maintain their language. Visitors to these sites are also allowed to leave comments– thanking the contributors for keeping their language alive and even critiquing their accents for being dissimilar to their own family's. This observation matches with both McCoy (1966) and Yue-Hashimoto (1972), who note the phonological diversity of *Hoisan-wa* within Taishan, as even people just beyond the next mountain speak slightly different varieties.

The rest of this paper will be a description and discourse analysis of three examples where *Hoisan-wa* is used on the Internet: 1) in the song 台山好 *Hoisan Ho* [Hoisan is Great]; 2) in the YouTube song 菊花台 *Gukfa Hoi* [Crysanthemum Flower Bed]; and 3) in the YouTube video *Hoisan-wa hieng hiengli gousou thlimsieng* [Telling My Heart's Feelings to the People in my Ancestral Hometown using *Hoisan-wa*]. These three examples were found when I ran a search of *Hoisan-wa* on YouTube. What caught my attention was that the majority of the comments of the videos were very positive and that YouTube was serving as a place where dominant ideologies about *Hoisan-wa* could be contested. These Internet communities allow *Hoisan-wa* users to publicly reclaim their language and identity with other like-minded people, and, as such, build group membership and solidarity that is a key step in language maintenance, together forming a community of practice. Extending Lave and Wenger's (1991) concept of a community of practice, where a group of people share similar domains or interests, Schmidt (2007) describes bloggers as having a "community of blogging practice," and the same can be said of YouTube viewers, where one must embrace the community before feedback and the act of participation become relevant. By taking part in this community of practice, participants hold the potential of reversing language shift and not falling into



“ethnic ambivalence/evasion” as described by Phinney (1990), as cited in Tse (2000) as “a lack of interest in or concern with ethnicity or where views of ethnicity [are] based on opinions of others” (p. 187).

*Example 1: The song 台山好 Hoisan Ho*

The song, 台山好, was produced and sung in 2005 by a group called 民仔 *Min-doi*, loosely translated as “Citizen Guys.” As the lyrics depict, this song is a parody/social commentary of the conditions in which the singers were living, citing examples of government corruption and cruelty, pointing to the idea that Taishan, in fact, is not as great as the title suggests. (A full translation of the song can be found in the Appendix. The English translation is my own.) The song was circulated across the Internet and picked up by many overseas Chinese, Cantonese and *Hoisan-wa* speakers alike. When the local Chinese government caught hold of the song, it prohibited its distribution, and the song’s creators were imprisoned. Despite the government’s attempts to squash the song’s existence, copies of the mp3 were and are still being circulated, and the group’s imprisonment sparked outrage among diaspora Chinese online communities around the world.

Focusing on the text of the song, several points of interest emerge. The first is that because the lyrics are sung exactly as one would speak *Hoisan-wa*, not in Standard Written Chinese, there was the difficulty in writing out the lyrics of the song for others to read online. Running an online search, I found hundreds of sites that had posted lyrics for the song, with the words that had no written equivalent noted simply with an asterisk or an “X,” evidencing the song’s popularity and legitimization of *Hoisan-wa* as a language with which people were interested in connecting. Ultimately, it was Wikipedia that had the most complete set of lyrics, having filled in most of the words without written equivalent using phonetic borrowings. For example, “animal feed” in *Hoisan-wa*, which does not have a written equivalent, had the Chinese character 𩚑 (*thlam*) to stand for its homophone. Such stand-ins were not always in complete phonetic correspondence: “third-person plural” in *Hoisan-wa* had *nip* to stand for the sound *nek*, but the sound was discernible by context. These phonetic borrowings are reminiscent to how Written Cantonese is used, though Written Cantonese is more regularized because of the extended history of usage in print media.

There were only six words with no written equivalents that also did not have a character to stand in for them. These were noted with “I\*n” and were mostly vulgar words. On the Wikipedia site for the song lyrics, there is also a standard Written Chinese ( ) translation right beside the *Hoisan-wa* version, which could serve two purposes: to make non-*Hoisan-wa* speakers to feel included by being able to understand the lyrics and also to help *Hoisan-wa* speakers themselves clarify the meaning of the song if they had any uncertainties about the lyrics. This was the very first time I had seen *Hoisan-wa* written down with characters; the rhetoric about whether or not a local spoken language in China can be written down is generally that it is “impossible,” though if speakers were absolutely forced to write speech down verbatim, it usually is actually possible (V. Mair, personal communication, November 4, 2008). As exemplified in these song lyrics, it is clearly possible --with a translation even available to guide those who might be confused.

The lyrics might seem lewd, but they are poignant, relaying the story of returning to Taishan and witnessing the corruptness of law enforcement who “stop my car and take my money” and city officials, who seize poor Auntie’s property. English is used in the phrase “I just wanna let you know,” perhaps as a showing of modernity, to let “you” know, or to raise awareness about the social situation in Taishan. This aspect of modernity counters the language ideology that speakers of *Hoisan-wa* are backwards for speaking what they speak. There is also the sense that the situation is so terrible in China that everyone wants to leave Taishan, with “all the aunties and grandmas wanting to marry American guys.”

On the whole, this song is quite well-received on YouTube. A look at the comments section, which serves as both commentary on the video and metalinguistic commentary on the language, yields very insightful comments of praise and admonishment written both in Chinese and English. One viewer writes, “[I]m taishanese .. i just love this song... always listen to it .... great.” Another writes something similar in (simplified) Chinese, “我都系台山人。我在美国” [I am also a Taishanese person. I am in the U.S.]. Another person, clearly one who is not a *Hoisan-wa* speaker (and is probably a Hong Kong Cantonese speaker, evidenced by the use of Written Cantonese and traditional Chinese characters), writes, “???? -\_-^” [What kind of language is this that is so hard to listen to?????]. The emoticon of a dissatisfied face scratching its head and the language used to describe *Hoisan-wa* is similar to the rhetoric of many Chinese people’s views that *Hoisan-wa* is displeasing to the ear, almost as if the commenter is chastising its use of *Hoisan-wa* because its sounds are so repulsive. There was also commentary about the political astringency of China: “[S]o now taishan locks the person that is tellin the truth to jail...how sad =(“which demonstrates that what gets transmitted is not simply the song and lyrics– it is also the totality of the message and the government’s reaction to such an inflammatory song.

There were also comments that illustrate the value of such a rare song that speaks directly to *Hoisan-wa* speakers: “Finally a song I can ACTUALLY understand rather than Cantonese and Mandarin!” The implied statement here is that this viewer has been looking for a long time for a song that sings her Chinese, and “finally” it has come. This viewer shows awareness of the fact that society has not made a space for *Hoisan-wa* media, that there is a need for it, and that she has been looking for it. Another writes, “[C]an anyone tell me how to download this song???????? PLEASE TELL ME, my dad wants it.” This comment is telling; not only has this viewer shared the video with her father, exemplifying intergenerational dialogue about the song, but the father is so taken to it that he wants a copy himself, thus further circulating the song, its lyrics, and *Hoisan-wa* to a greater audience.

Though the friend who introduced me to the song told me it was not a song to learn *Hoisan-wa* from, these comments show that it is not necessarily the content that matters here; there is still much to learn from this song, linguistically or otherwise. What is important is that there is a forum and content for this group to discuss and share their experiences with and around *Hoisan-wa*. This ultimately leaves a wide opening for instilling and advancing pride in the language as well as room to create more *Hoisan-wa* media.

Example 2: The song 菊花台 *Gukfa Hoi* (MSM: *Guhua Tai*)

As mentioned earlier, most popular music in both Cantonese and Mandarin are sung in Standard Written Chinese. While it is possible for Cantonese and Mandarin pop singers to sing the same lyrics in their respective languages to the same melodies, this is not a common practice because the lyrics oftentimes do not rhyme the same way across the two languages (as should be expected--the languages are not the same).

Because of this, the next example of *Hoisan-wa* use on the Internet is one that some might consider creative because it is prescriptively not allowed. This example is of a *Hoisan-wa* speaker singing the popular Mandarin song by Taiwanese singer Jay Chou (周杰伦) called 菊花台 (MSM: *Guhua Tai*) using only *Hoisan-wa*. This rendition is novel in the way the singer has publicly broadcasted himself taking a song originally meant to be sung in a standard language and singing it in a local language. This act of *tropping* (Levi-Strauss, 1974; White, 1973) requires knowledge of normative language use in order to reappropriate language in deviant ways. The explicit choice to publicly trope on a Mandarin song by singing it in *Hoisan-wa* can be seen as reconstituting norms of use, pushing *Hoisan-wa* use forward to new domains (as discussed in Hornberger & King, 1996).

Like the YouTube video of the song 台山好, this song receives great praise. One listener lauds, "YOU ARE HECKA TIGHT THANK YOU FOR POSTING THIS. I was actually going to do this. I love songs sung in Hoisan. I especially liked how you used the thl- sound, because a lot of people take that sound out since they think it sounds too harsh. Hoisan Pride." The comment not only refutes folk ideology about *Hoisan-wa* being "harsh," it goes a step beyond to praise the use of the voiceless lateral fricative, the very sound that is usually scoffed at. This priding of such a unique feature internalizes it as a key marker of identity and group formation. The commenter ends with "Hoisan Pride," an act of solidarity. The singer writes a comment in response, "[I] don't mind if you make an attempt to sing this song.. the more people sing it in Hoi san Wah.. the better =) Who knows.. u might have a better voice than me hehe ^^." The ability to scaffold responses allows for group unity to foster. The singer calls for more people to take part in singing in *Hoisan-wa*, even jokingly jousting with the commenter to see who has "the better voice."

Note that the singer calls *Hoisan-wa* "Hoi san Wah"--this is indicative of the fact that he, like I am doing in this paper, is making the active choice to break from the norm of calling his language "Toisanese" or "Taishanese." He may be linguistically aware of the feeling that arises when one uses any of these two labels that start with a [t] sound; speakers of *Hoisan-wa* call their own language *Hoisan-wa*--it is only non-*Hoisan-wa* speakers who do not. Moreover, while there is no standardized romanization schemes for *Hoisan-wa*, this does not stop its speakers from romanizing how the language sounds to them; I use "wa," while this commenter uses "wah."

One other comment in this string reads, "Hearing hoisan wah songs are indeed a rare, but very much enjoyed, treat for me. Thanks so much." This comment echoes that of the person in Example 1 who "finally" found a song she could understand. The spelling of "hoisan wah" is being picked up by this listener as well. This person's comments show several facets of *Hoisan-wa* in use on the In-

ternet: that it is well-received, thought to be almost a linguistic godsend for which listeners are grateful, and, most importantly, that it has the immense potential of transforming negative ideologies about *Hoisan-wa* by its speakers and listeners into ones of pride and worth.

Example 3: YouTube User YanStevenUT's

*Hoisan-wa hieng hiengli*

*gousou thlimsieng [Telling My Heart's Feelings to the People in my Ancestral Hometown using Hoisan-wa]*

Perhaps the example most resembling oral tradition is that of YouTube user YanStevenUT's narratives in his video episode: . In this nearly 10-minute video, Yan Steven (self-identified with this name), a 60-something-year-old *Hoisan-wa* speaker who has lived and worked in Hong Kong, Singapore, and Taiwan before immigrating to the U.S., is sitting in a park in New York City. Aside from speaking *Hoisan-wa* he can also speak Cantonese, English, and even some Malay and Spanish. He notes he is making the effort to use *Hoisan-wa* to record the video because it is his mother tongue. He proceeds to tell his life story: he was sold by his mother in his village because his family did not have enough money, moving to Hong Kong and eventually the U.S., where he worked odd jobs in restaurants and laundromats before finally investing in property, which allowed him to make enough money to now live comfortably. Yan Steven ends his monologue with a phrase he calls the motto of his life: 先苦後甜 *sein fu hau hem* [first comes the bitter, then only afterwards, the sweet]—a very apt conclusion to his oral history.

Yan Steven's videos (he has 592 so far, most of which are recorded in both Cantonese and *Hoisan-wa*, sprinkling English in as well) range from his visits to Taishan and his conversations with shopkeepers and motorcycle drivers to teaching viewers how to cook Cantonese dishes. Many people address him with the honorific "Uncle" written in Chinese on his comments page, and like the other two examples, Yan Steven's comments page is filled with gratitude and praise for using *Hoisan-wa* in his videos and for sharing his history with the rest of the world, fueling the consumption of more of his videos.

Gumbrecht's (2004) notion of the transformative, life-altering potential of online blogs parallels that of these YouTube videos and the commentaries about them. Because Yan Steven uses both *Hoisan-wa* and English, viewers must know both linguistic codes to fully understand his videos. When both linguistic codes are recognized and understood, it is possible to connect with and publicly validate the content of the viewers' own experiences to Yan Steven's.

## Discussion

Does *Hoisan-wa* have the power to challenge language ideologies? In the most pessimistic view, *Hoisan-wa* is still hanging on to dear life, with occasional, vain zealots promoting the use of a "harsh-sounding" language by posting videos of themselves on YouTube. In a more optimistic and pragmatic view, *Hoisan-wa* is gaining positive momentum, spearheaded by speakers who care dearly about their language and heritage. As Hornberger and King (1996)

note, language revitalization is not always about bringing back the language as much as it is about pushing it forward to new domains; efforts can begin from the bottom up, propelled forward with the support of the speech community. It seems those members of the *Hoisan-wa* speech community, whose rich linguistic repertoires show *Hoisan-wa* existing alongside several other Chinese, are picking up fans and speed with each view of their videos and songs. The point is not that *Hoisan-wa* by itself should be promoted and learned in isolation; rather, practically speaking, we should explore how Cantonese and Mandarin can aid in the maintenance of *Hoisan-wa*. Furthermore, there is no reason that these three varieties cannot coexist and thrive together, each with distinct functions and value. For Chinese American families of *Hoisan-wa* backgrounds, it should be a source of great pride if their children's linguistic repertoires included *Hoisan-wa* alongside Cantonese and Mandarin. This act reflects not just an embracing of history but also of deliberate efforts to bring *Hoisan-wa* forward, placing it side by side with other Chinese that have joined it in the U.S., each variety having different meanings, uses, and emotions attached to them.

Some might argue that a YouTube and mp3 education of *Hoisan-wa* is not the same as or on par with a traditional classroom education; nonetheless it is still an education, as multiple ways of teaching, learning, and promoting funds of knowledge exist (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Moll, 1992). Public declaration of pride in one's language, despite negative dominant ideologies about it, might be the solid stepping stone *Hoisan-wa* needs for heightened efforts of revitalization amongst its younger speakers. It is difficult to fully describe the first time you see your language, which you felt was waning, being revived and reenergized in a way that reflects technological advances and the resilience of its speakers; it is a very hopeful kind of feeling.

As the Internet's reach is widely branching and its dissemination process quick, the examples provided in this paper have implications for community heritage language teaching and the teaching of different varieties of Chinese. First, it is evident that there is the need for the now very sought-after Mandarin language classrooms to be more inclusive and cognizant of the multiple varieties of Chinese that have always existed in U.S. There is a need for more critical approaches to the teaching of Chinese languages that more rigorously address the linguistic and cultural diversity which exists in Chinese diaspora communities. Again, Chinese languages do not have to be learned one at a time; it is very much a possibility--and a current reality for many--to learn multiple Chinese simultaneously.

The erroneous idea of there being one singular "Chinese," while politically alluring, should be responsibly expanded to explicitly acknowledge the plurality of Chinese. I echo Mair (1991) in calling for the need to be cautious when brandishing Sino-English terms, as it is necessary to examine linguistic differences and historicity instead of lumping varieties together and faulting seemingly aberrant sounds and words. Languages should be spoken without apology; *Hoisan-wa* is part of my repertoire of Chinese; as such, I am speaking out for it with the pride and emotion that it deserves from its speakers, just like the person who very movingly commented: "I especially liked how you used the thl- sound", slowly chipping away at the ideological "harshness" plaque that has been inhibiting *Hoisan-wa* for far too long.



*Acknowledgments*

I would like to thank Holly Link and Kathy Lee for their insightful and encouraging feedback as well as Dr. Betsy Rymes for her comments on an earlier draft of this paper. Much appreciation also goes to my mother, who patiently reviewed all the Hoisan-wa to English translations with me. All inadequacies are mine alone.

*Genevieve Leung is a Ph.D. candidate in Educational Linguistics at the University of Pennsylvania Graduate School of Education. Her research interests include Cantonese and Sze-Yap (particularly Hoisan-wa) language maintenance in the U.S. and the teaching of Cantonese as a heritage and foreign language.*

Email: [gleung@dolphin.upenn.edu](mailto:gleung@dolphin.upenn.edu)

**Notes**

<sup>1</sup>Due to my upbringing and the backgrounds of bilingual Cantonese teachers, the Cantonese I speak most resembles Hong Kong Standard Cantonese. Throughout this paper “Cantonese” will be cautiously used as a blanket term to refer to Standard Cantonese from both Hong Kong, Macau, and Guangzhou and includes all the language varieties of the regions.

<sup>2</sup>The romanization of *h* is something I have struggled with for a very long time. I have chosen to romanize *Hoisan-wa* as such because this is how it is pronounced by its speakers. Many refer to *Hoisan-wa* as “Toisanese,” with a voiceless alveolar plosive [t], indicative of how a Cantonese speaker – but not a *Hoisan-wa* speaker – would say it. Being a user of both varieties, and also having discussed this issue with younger speakers of *Hoisan-wa* in the U.S., I feel it is most fair to call *Hoisan-wa* in the way I am choosing, maintaining the glottal [h] sound. I also must admit that for the first 20 years of my life I used [t] instead of [h] in talking about this variety, and this custom is one that I am trying very hard to break, as it is a seemingly slight but ideologically-fraught marker of alliance. I am staying away from the Mandarin romanization “Taishanese.” I recognize that these choices break from traditional romanization schemes but am doing it because it makes *Hoisan-wa* visible and deemphasizes Cantonese and Mandarin. For standardized place locations in China only, I will maintain the Modern Standard Mandarin (MSM) romanization (e.g.: Taishan).

<sup>3</sup>All romanizations are in *Hoisan-wa* unless otherwise noted.

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## Appendix A: 台山好 lyrics with Standard Chinese and English translations

(Hoisan-wa)	(Standard Chinese)	English translation
	台山了，	I haven't been back to Hoisan in a long time
阿sir落班，	爽 ” 一把。	I wanted to hurry and go check it out Just then the traffic police got off of his shift
昂l*n昂l*n  I*n?	我了。	I don't know how it happened but I got caught by him “Fuck! Why aren't you going to suck my cock?”
阿sir	安全帽又不是安全套。	(I was caught because) I didn't wear a helmet, not because I didn't bring a condom Mr. Police, you fined me 200 dollars
r l*n		I was really pissed, smoking at the top of my head My eyes saw the sun that was quickly setting

		Auntie was preparing to pack up her vending stall
	的城管，	But however there was a group of vicious and mean city officials
ǎb		Who seized all of Auntie's family property from her
	ǎb	Why don't you stop being
	毒吧，	so malicious!
		Ah, she already doesn't have anything to eat, and you still choose to sweep up her lowly street vendor stall!
	狗了？	Has your conscience been fed to the dogs?
z	眼了！	Indeed, this is certainly unpleasant to the eye!
Stop my car and take my money,	Stop my car and take my money,	Stop my car and take my money,
Please don't let me say to you !	Please don't let me say to you 部。	Please don't let me say to you "your mother's stinking pussy."
What the fuck I am singing here ?	What the fuck I am singing here?	What the fuck I am singing here?



<p>I just wanna let you know, let you know.</p> <p>yeah</p>	<p>I just wanna let you know, let you know.</p> <p>yeah</p>	<p>I just wanna let you know, let you know.</p> <p>Hoisan is great, you can see the doctor only if you're rich, yeah</p>
<p>ž</p>	<p>摩托</p>	<p>Hoisan is great, every day the news is saying that the circumstances are so good</p> <p>Hoisan is great, so great that everyone has to get laid off and resort to finding a living by picking up guests by motorbike</p>
<p>žyeah</p>	<p>美佬, yeah</p>	<p>Hoisan is great, all the aunties and grandmas want to marry American guys, yeah</p>